



LEAVING HOME

Youth Homelessness in York Region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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under the guidance of Steve Gaetz

The sixty young people who shared their stories, experiences and wisdom – to help us better understand their pathways into homelessness and what would have made a difference.

This report contains not only the findings from the research project conducted in the summer of 2013, but a framework for action going forward. Knowledge has been mobilized from within Canada and internationally, it has been drawn from academic partners, community groups and agencies and individuals. It has spanned sectors and geography.

The release of this report is the beginning of the next phase of the journey to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness in York Region. You are invited to be part of the journey.

November 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In York Region, there is a growing awareness of the problem of youth homelessness. In the past many people saw it as a ‘big city’ problem, more likely to occur in places like downtown Toronto or Vancouver. But we now know from research that the factors that drive youth to become homeless are not isolated in big cities, but are also present in urban, suburban and rural areas. This is most certainly true of York Region. The question then becomes, what do we do about it?

York Region is a large and growing urban area with over one million residents. In York Region, there are a range of public, non-profit and charitable programs, systems and services that serve low-income and homeless individuals and families. There is also a regional government, as well as nine municipalities. While there are a number of service providers in the region doing great work, the problem of youth homelessness continues. Too many young people have to leave the community because they and their families are not getting the supports they need. When a young person leaves their community and moves to the streets of Toronto or another big city, the consequences can be dire. Health worsens and the risk of victimization and exploitation increases, making it harder and harder to escape homelessness.

The good news is that across York Region many people are recognizing the need to approach things differently, since the current response does not meet the needs of young people and families in crisis, or provide services that prevent crises.

This report is the culmination of a community engagement process designed to raise awareness of youth homelessness and potential solutions, and to inspire progressive change. Led by United Way York Region and supported by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, the goal of this initiative is the development of a more coordinated and integrated systems response to youth homelessness, one designed to support families and help young people stay in their communities, stay in school, and grow into an adulthood characterized by happiness, well-being and opportunity.

This collaboration shed light on the fact that more information about the nature and scope of youth homelessness in York Region was necessary. There was a need for a deeper understanding of both the conditions that produce and sustain youth homelessness, as well as the range of supports that young people access.

The result was the roll out of an intensive research project over the summer of 2013. Interviews were conducted with 60 young people from York Region who had experienced homelessness, as well as a number of service providers. This report presents the findings from this research and concludes by bringing lessons learned from other jurisdictions together with key findings from our research. Key recommendations are also presented. All are intended to inspire and contribute to a broader conversation about the problem of youth homelessness so that young people and their families get the supports they need to avoid this undesirable outcome.

The factors that drive youth to become homeless are not isolated in big cities, but are also present in urban, suburban and rural areas.

RESEARCH ON YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN YORK REGION: KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from this research project highlight a number of issues that increase our understanding of the nature of youth homelessness in the region, both in terms of its causes and conditions. Much of this is consistent with established research knowledge regarding young people who experience homelessness, underlining the degree to which we must recognize that the factors that produce youth homelessness exist in every community. The research points to the specific challenges that York Region faces in addressing this problem. At the same time, key findings help point the way to solutions.

PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS —

Contrary to some popular misconceptions, very few young people leave home and become homeless for frivolous reasons. A combination of individual/relational problems (conflict with family, mental health or addictions issues on the part of either the young person or other family members, involvement with the law) intersects with structural problems (lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing) to create the conditions for homelessness. For some young people, difficult transitions from care (child protection) or from the criminal justice system result in homelessness. The important point is that each person's pathway into homelessness is unique and complex. Moreover, this research demonstrates that homelessness for young people in York Region is rarely a 'one-off' event with linear causes and effects, but is more adequately described as a process. The vast majority of youth in this sample moved in and out of homelessness with a great deal of fluidity and experienced multiple barriers well before and after any particular episode of homelessness.

Our research shows that for some youth, there were multiple missed opportunities for intervention. In some cases a youth may have avoided homelessness had their family received increased supports to address conflict or abuse. Some youth may have benefited from increased support from their school. For other youth, better access to mental health services and addictions treatment may have prevented them from leaving home.

FAMILY CONFLICT —

At the center of most youth homelessness is conflict within the family. This conflict can result from a range of factors, some having to do with the broader family, others having to do with the young person in question. In this study, 92% of participants reported that conflict with parents or caregivers was a factor that contributed to their eventual homelessness, and 72% said this was a major cause.

In addition, almost 60% reported either physical or sexual abuse as being a contributing factor leading to their eventual homelessness and 21.7% identified it as a major factor.

At the center of most youth homelessness is conflict within the family.

YOUTHFUL AGE —

The average age at which participants left home for the first time was 15.83, with a median age of 16. A key finding is that 44.4% of participants first experienced homelessness at age 15 or younger. The implications of this are significant, as we know from research that those who leave home at a very young age tend to fare worse over the long run. In terms of solutions, it suggests the need to design interventions that catch kids when they are in school and before they become homeless.

REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES —

In our sample, some sub-populations of young people were under-represented, while others were over-represented. Contrary to the established literature on youth homelessness, young people who are sexual minorities (LGBTQ), as well as ethno-racial minorities were underrepresented in our research. Only 23% of participants identified as a ‘visible minority’ compared to 37% in the general population of York Region. Similarly, only 8.2% of participants identified as LGBTQ, whereas research in large urban centers consistently finds that 25-40% of homeless youth identify this way.

This may suggest that these groups are not accessing services (as we interviewed young people at service sites), and that there is a need to find out more about the pathways into homelessness for minority youth. This was not the case for Aboriginal youth who make up 4.3% of the general population, but were overrepresented in this sample at a rate of 14.8%.

INADEQUATE HOUSING —

Perhaps not surprising for most people in the region, one of the barriers youth experiencing homelessness face in moving forward with their lives is the inability to access affordable housing. Low-cost housing in the region is in short supply, and the vacancy rate for rental housing is low. As a result, young people who are living independently find it challenging to find accommodation. An outcome is that they stay temporarily with friends, in homeless shelters or leave the region altogether. Young people also reported facing discrimination from landlords based on their age or if they were on income assistance.

ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT —

Compounding the housing problem is the fact that young people have difficulty obtaining and maintaining employment that pays a living wage. For young people with low education and skill levels, the types of employment that are usually available are part-time, seasonal and precarious





labour with low wages and no benefits. In this study, only 12 young people, or 19.7%, reported current employment. Of those that were employed, few were engaged in jobs with any long-term prospects.

EDUCATION —

While the high school drop out rate in Canada is now below 9%, for the young people in this study, the rate was approximately 70%. In fact, 21% had only completed grade 9 or lower. Less than 30% reported currently attending school. For some, the process of disengagement began before they left home. For others, the experience of becoming homeless – and the dislocation from their communities – led them to drop out. Given the centrality of educational attainment to important outcomes later in life (including employment, health and well-being) enhancing access to education for this population should be a priority.

MENTAL HEALTH —

For anyone who works with young people – and in particular, those who are homeless – concerns about mental health and wellness are difficult to ignore. Young people in this study reported frequent bouts of anxiety and depression. For instance, when asked if they experienced feelings of depression in the past 30 days, three-quarters said they did several times a week, and nearly 40% reported experiencing these feelings daily. Similarly, nearly 60% reported feeling lonely at least once a week, and 71.7% reported difficulties sleeping. A large number had attempted suicide as well, with 14.8% having done this prior to becoming homeless, and 8.2% once homeless. A few youth (under 10%) experienced more serious mental health difficulties, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, youth were less likely to receive support for these struggles once they left home, and several young people reported experiencing difficulties accessing mental health services, despite a desire to do so.

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES OR SPECIAL NEEDS —

Disabilities can create barriers to educational engagement and achievement, as well as access to programs and services. Research in Canada has found that approximately 20% of young people between the ages of five and fourteen have a chronic disability, 22% have a learning disability and 14% have a speech disorder (Statistics Canada, 2008). Undiagnosed learning disabilities can also be the source of family conflict, because the disengagement from school that sometimes results in being misinterpreted as a behavioural issue or a lack of motivation. In our study, the percentage of youth who cited diagnoses of ADHD (28.3%) or other learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (5%), is higher than the Canadian average. Many young people felt their needs in this area had not been fully addressed. These figures do not take account of young people with undiagnosed learning disabilities.

SUBSTANCE USE —

The use of substances, both legal and illegal, is common amongst adolescents and young adults. This is also the case amongst youth experiencing homelessness, particularly in regards to tobacco, marijuana and alcohol use. For many, but not all, substance use can be highly problematic and addictions can ensue. It needs to be pointed out that while many young people already have addictions when they become homeless, problematic substance use is also an outcome of the trauma and difficulties young people face while homeless. Young people in this study demonstrated higher rates of substance use, and a minority identified their use as problematic. For instance, seventeen participants, or 28.3%, indicated substance use was an *‘important’* or *‘very important’* factor related to their leaving home.

Effective responses to this issue should be based on evidence. While across Canada many mainstream services, as well as those in the youth homelessness sector, embrace an ‘abstinence only’ model, there is considerable evidence that harm reduction models are more effective and should be incorporated into responses to youth homelessness.

SERVICE USE —

Shelters are operating at capacity and many of the youth interviewed had recurring shelter stays. In addition, some youth had exhausted the maximum number of nights allowable in a particular shelter, leaving these youth in a holding pattern, waiting to get back into the shelter. This suggests that too many youth in York Region are relying on emergency services and become stuck in a cycle of homelessness. A positive development is that new contracts with shelters in the region stipulate that individuals cannot be discharged into homelessness. This is a very progressive and supportive move. Youth using various services were more likely to find the experience positive when they forged strong connections with staff.

For some youth, shelters – along with transitional units and drop-ins – were the only access points for support services. Youth were often not aware of other support services within the community. This may mean that young people who are not in contact with shelters, transitional units or drop-in centers are not accessing the supports they need.

Service providers identified two recurring barriers that young people face in accessing service in York Region: geography and a lack of knowledge of and clarity about how to access services. The region is not sufficiently covered by public transportation to allow ease of travel between youth services. Moreover, service providers reported long wait times for services and expressed frustration at having to refer youth outside of York Region due to the lack of local services. Youth who leave the region run the risk of becoming disconnected from positive support networks, including service staff, friends and family, and wait lists can be so long that staff lose contact with youth, thus diminishing their opportunity to provide assistance.

SYSTEM INTEGRATION —

In York Region, there has been a notable effort by individual service providers to improve the level of coordination between community organizations and mainstream services. However, stakeholders throughout the region have expressed concern that these efforts fall short. Our findings reveal that both service providers and youth are left to individually navigate a fragmented system. The ability of services providers to do so is dependent largely on their interpersonal relationships, knowledge of services and a great deal of personal commitment to supporting youth in need.

DEVELOPING A RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Across Canada, communities are recognizing that the current response to homelessness – one that focuses for the most part on emergency services – is inadequate. There is a growing sense that we need to move from simply managing the problem, to actually preventing homelessness, and for those who experience this crisis, helping them rapidly move into accommodation with necessary supports.

In York Region, there is also a building momentum for change. The question is then, what can be done differently? In moving towards a more integrated model, York Region can benefit from extensive research and practical examples from elsewhere in the world and adapt these learnings to develop an effective, humane and “Made in York Region” response to youth homelessness. Below are key elements of such a response.

PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The goal of prevention is of course to stop young people from becoming homeless in the first place. This involves:

I. Primary prevention -

This means working upstream to address factors that increase the risk of youth homelessness, by addressing broader structural issues such as poverty, family violence and neglect for instance. Primary prevention also involves working with: a) protective factors, b) families to address conflict and enhance support, and c) the education system to ensure that teachers, counsellors and other adults are able to identify young people at risk and to mobilize effective interventions. The latter point about working with schools is particularly important, given how young many people are when they become homeless. Additionally, virtually all young people attend school at one point or another, and the adults they encounter there (teachers, coaches, counsellors etc.) may be aware that something is not right, but not know what to do. There are excellent examples from the UK and Australia of effective responses to youth homelessness that are integrated into schools.

II. Systems prevention -

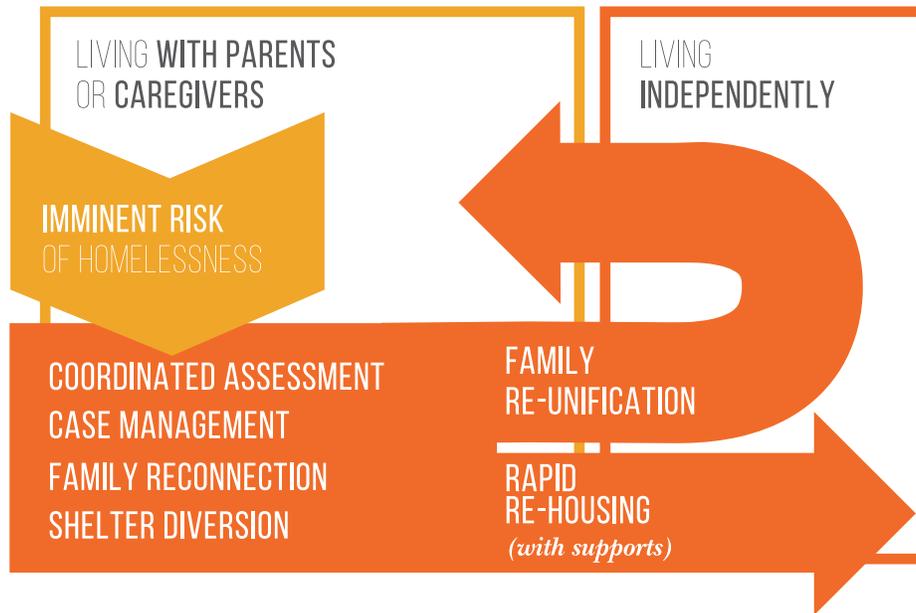
This means stopping the flow of young people from institutional care into homelessness. The research on youth homelessness in York Region demonstrates that many young people had some sort of engagement with either child protection services in the past, or with the criminal justice system. Inadequate support for young people either transitioning from child protection services or leaving detention means that many fall into homelessness. While both child protection services and youth criminal justice are largely the purview of higher levels of government, there are ways of providing community based services and supports that more effectively respond to the needs of young people leaving care.

III. Early Intervention -

This means placing special attention on early intervention with the goal of helping young people remain ‘in place’ – that is remain in community where their natural connections and supports are. Early intervention strategies are designed to address the immediate risk of homelessness by ensuring that young people and their families get access to necessary supports before homelessness occurs. It also means providing those who do become homeless with immediate supports to ensure their time spent homeless is not prolonged.

The diagram below identifies four key and interrelated early intervention strategies that together are designed to help young people stay in place. This supports, where possible, the reconciliation of relationships enabling young people to move back in with family member or caregivers, and where this is not possible (for other reasons including safety), to help them move into independent (and supported) accommodation in a safe and planned way.

FIGURE 1 *Models of Accommodation*



SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN THEY ARE HOMELESS

A successful strategy to address youth homelessness moves beyond the provision of emergency services. The research suggests that a successful and effective framework starts with accommodation and supports that are built around the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult. We cannot take for granted that models developed for adults will work well for young people. Following from this, the goal should be to ensure that young people avoid emergency shelters, and where this is not possible, to ensure that their stay be short, so as to avoid greater risk of prolonged homelessness.

The diverse needs of young people, determined in part by age and experience, require an equally diverse range of housing options. One must consider the extent and kinds of supports a young person might need, in addition to providing

access to stable housing. A more comprehensive model of accommodation and supports based on existing literature about effective practices should be built upon the following pillars:

- *Housing support*
- *Health and well-being*
- *Complementary supports, including life skills*
- *Education, employment and training*
- *Youth engagement*

A successful strategy to address youth homelessness moves beyond the provision of emergency services

HOW DO WE GET THERE? AN INTEGRATED SYSTEMS RESPONSE.

For York Region, adopting a plan to end youth homelessness will invariably mean doing things differently. Communities across Canada are becoming more and more interested in developing strategic and coordinated plans to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness as part of their broader homelessness strategies. We are learning much about how to plan and implement successful strategies. Below are key elements that should be part of a plan.

1. Develop a plan

The first step in preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness is to devise and implement a plan or strategy. The plan should be *inclusive* in its process, be *strategic* in its objectives, set real and measurable targets for *change*, be clear to all stakeholders and lead to *real changes* in young people's lives.

2. Create an integrated system response

Youth homelessness is a 'fusion policy' issue in that it involves many different parts of government, including health, education, child and family services, housing and social services, and corrections, for instance. In other words, youth homelessness cannot be solved by the homelessness sector alone. An integrated systems response means that programs, services and service delivery systems are organized at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of a young person. A "system of care" approach means that the services in the system are designed and coordinated to meet the needs of the young person, rather than having the young person fit the program.

The plan should be inclusive in its process, be strategic in its objectives, set real and measurable targets for change, be clear to all stakeholders and lead to real changes in young people's lives.

3. Facilitate active, strategic and coordinated engagement by all levels of government, including interdepartmental collaboration

It is important that all levels of government – not just within the region, but the province, as well - work together to align policy and funding to support an end to youth homelessness. The federal government renewed the Homelessness Partnering Strategy in 2013, with a new emphasis on Housing First. In Ontario, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing funds service managers to coordinate housing and homelessness initiatives at the municipal level. The new poverty reduction strategy "Realizing our Potential" also articulates a plan to end homelessness, which will support local initiatives. Aligning these initiatives with a strategic response to youth homelessness will be important.

4. Adopt a positive youth development orientation

Effective models of support for young people are based on an understanding of the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. A Positive Youth Development approach should be adopted broadly, focusing on the assets and protective factors necessary to support healthy development and transitions to adulthood. Young people should also be engaged as active partners in developing solutions to youth homelessness.

5. Incorporate research, data gathering and information sharing

Evidence matters. Research, data gathering and information sharing support the planning, implementation and evaluation of effective, evidence based solutions.

The process to address youth homelessness in York Region has already begun. There is a real opportunity for York Region to emerge as a national leader in this area, by adapting learnings from elsewhere and creating innovative new possibilities to change the lives of many young people and families in the community. The goal should be to help young people develop into adults whose lives are characterized by opportunity, well-being, engagement and support. This is where the people of York Region can make a difference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Part 1: Building Capacity and Readiness

- 1.1 Develop a working group/round table to address youth homelessness
- 1.2 Raise public awareness about youth homelessness
- 1.3 Engage young people in the planning and implementation of solutions

Part 2: Planning an end to youth homelessness

- 2.1. Develop a comprehensive plan to end Youth Homelessness in York Region
- 2.2. Engage key organizations to support planning
- 2.3. Engage the Province in the development of the provincial strategy to end youth homelessness

Part 3: Implement strategic initiatives to address youth homelessness

- 3.1. Engage the York Region District School Board and the York Catholic District School Board in a youth homelessness prevention / early intervention initiative
- 3.2. Support the use of harm reduction approaches when working with young people who have or are at risk of experiencing homelessness
- 3.3. Develop a region-wide program to support families that are struggling with instability and youth homelessness
- 3.4. Increase young people's access to necessary supports and services
- 3.5. Develop and implement research and data strategy to support plan
- 3.6. Implement anti-discrimination framework