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coalition to end
homelessness

hope has found a home

Youth Pathways In & Out of Homelessness a summary



COMMUNITY SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL
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Our sincerest gratitude to the youth who shared their experiences and stories with us, without your courage and insight, this project would not have been possible.

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To read the full report *Youth Pathways: In and Out of Homelessness in the Capital Region* go to www.victoriahomelessness.ca

Introduction

In the fall of 2014, we hosted 6 focus groups in different locations across Greater Victoria and talked to 33 individual youth who identified as experiencing or being at-risk of homelessness. We also surveyed 50 youth who gave us important information about the circumstances that led them to where they were. Our team also talked to 7 service providers who work with at-risk, unstably housed, and homeless youth.

The combined voices of youth and service providers pointed to a serious crisis in our region – young people are struggling to make it on their own while trying to get support through over-subscribed social services and programs; depending on inadequate income resources; and attempting to sustain housing in an expensive housing market. For youth between the ages of 19 to 24, the picture is dire. Youth previously in foster care “age-out,” and are discharged from the child welfare system with little to no supports, and are then expected to “make it on their own.” There are few services that directly serve this age bracket - they are expected to access adult-oriented services, which many youth we spoke to felt uncomfortable accessing.

What we heard during this study is consistent with the findings of two previous studies looking at youth homelessness in the region, in 2008 (Community Social Planning Council) and 2012 (Elliot Urban Planning). The consistency of the message is indicative of a lack of progress in addressing the issues that drive youth homelessness. Consequently, it is incumbent upon the community at large to respond more effectively and comprehensively to the concerns that youth threatened with homelessness in our community continue to raise.

Our study used a broad definition of youth: 13 to 24. We recognize that youth are diverse, and we recognize that acknowledging this diversity makes a difference when we talk about meeting their needs. Youth between the ages of 13 and 18 are at different developmental stages compared to youth 19 to 24. Youth also come from diverse backgrounds: Aboriginal youth live with the legacy of colonization, and the residential school system, and are over-represented in the child welfare system; LGBTQ youth, racialized youth, and youth struggling with mental health challenges and addictions also have their own unique needs based on their backgrounds and experiences. This diversity of experiences and needs must be considered when we talk about what kinds of policies and programs will work to prevent youth from experiencing homelessness.

Youth who filled in the questionnaire were¹:

- 23 identified as male, and 27 identified as female (they had a range of gender identities to choose from)
- 26% identified as Aboriginal, 74% identified as Caucasian, and 3% identified as being a Visible Minority²
- 20 youth were 13 and 18, and 30 youth were 19 and 24
- 29 youth were currently experiencing homelessness and had previous experiences with homelessness, and 15 youth had previous experience with homelessness³



¹ While the results of the questionnaire cannot be extrapolated to a larger population, the information presented here provides an important demographic picture of the youth who were experiencing or had recently experienced homelessness in our region. Some findings were suppressed due to low counts, particularly for the 13 to 15 years age category. Youth focus group participants, as well as youth who chose not to participate in the focus groups filled in the questionnaire.

² Youth were able to choose more than one option for how they self-identified their ethnicity, therefore, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

³ Other responses were suppressed for reasons of confidentiality and privacy.

Pathways into Homelessness

When we asked youth and service providers to describe youths' pathways to homelessness, the following themes emerged. Although described differently, there was almost complete consensus across youth and service providers for the reasons why youth experience homelessness.

The Pathways In Are:

- Family conflict and the breakdown of the child-parent relationship.
- Lack of job opportunities.
- Lack of Job skills and training opportunities while youth are in the school and/or in the child welfare system (care).
- Youth are unable to gain employment with no permanent address (no address, no job; no job, no address). Depending on their age, youth may also be required to obtain their parent's permission to work. This is not an option for many of the youth who participated in the study.
- Youth struggle to access income supports other than employment. Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) Youth Agreements (YAGs) are increasingly difficult to obtain.
- For Youth between 19 and 24, income assistance rates for singles are inadequate to cover the basic costs of living.
- The lack of affordable housing makes it extremely difficult for youth to find adequate and safe housing.
- Youth often have to choose from continuing with their education, and finding and maintaining employment because of the lack of appropriate levels of income and housing support.
- Inadequate supports for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system mean that some youth are discharged at the age of 19 into homelessness with little to no skills and supports to live independently.
- There is a serious lack of services for youth between the ages of 19 and 24. These youth often have no choice but to access adult oriented services where they feel unsafe and disconnected.



Pathways Out of Homelessness

The solutions presented here emerged from our conversations with youth and service providers.

Prevention

- Support prevention programs in schools: Engage school district boards in an initiative to address youth homelessness including the implementation of more life skills training in curriculum, ensure all schools are made aware of all available youth housing services and supports, focus on family reunification, and early identification of youth at-risk of homelessness. Build more links between students, school and the community. For instance, youth can create initiatives as part of their learning goals and requirements.
- Increase youth access to necessary supports and services: Increase public awareness about services that are available through the creation a centralized youth homelessness information hub for example, through a mobile-friendly website, and through leadership programs in schools.
- Work with the provincial government and service providers to ensure youth are not discharged into homelessness: Work with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, local service providers and funders to create policies, and build long-term supportive programs, that ensure youth are not discharged from institutional care into homelessness.

Emergency Response

- Ensure youth emergency shelter and crisis services are place-based:
 - a. Increase the number of housing outreach workers, and youth emergency shelters beds across the region so youth do not have to leave their home communities to access crisis supports.
 - b. Work with MCFD and local funders to recreate mobile supports (similar to the Y-Van, a mobile outreach unit that was cancelled in 2011) in order to outreach to the most marginalized and vulnerable youth. Consider facilitating partnerships for service delivery of mobile units between organizations such as the Youth Clinic, and AIDS Vancouver Island to ensure low-barrier services are developed based on harm-reduction principles.
- Increase detox and treatment beds for youth: Provide more youth-orientated detox and treatment services, and ensure transitions from detox to treatment are coordinated across provincial programs, and community services and supports.
- Build an emergency youth shelter in the West Shore: There is an urgent need to respond to the needs of youth experiencing homelessness in the West Shore as highlighted in this study and others (CSPC, 2008; Elliot, 2012). Work with provincial, regional and municipal governments and funders to address the absence of resources in the West Shore and create transitional housing options for youth.

Accommodations and Systems of Support

- Increase low-barrier housing options: Work with MCFD and local service providers to create more low-barrier, youth- orientated transitional housing across the region so that youth do not have to leave their home communities to access supports.
- Secure on-going funding for a youth housing workers to sustain long-term relationships: Work with local and provincial funders to provide long-term funding to ensure youth housing outreach workers continue to work with youth until they are fully adapted to living independently.
- Assist youth in building financial stability: Work with local funders and financial institutions to develop youth income supports such as matched savings programs to build up their financial stability.
- Develop a regional youth employment development system: Work with local employers, and employment support programs, to support vulnerable youth and youth with barriers to employment in accessing training and employment opportunities, and maintaining employment once secured.

On what's missing from school

"...they need to stop just thinking that kids only need to learn [...] social studies, or they need to learn about math, because really in the end that's not as important as learning life skills [...] Because they don't teach us nearly as many things as they should. And like, you just have to have the tough lessons of life... I think if they taught it more in school then we wouldn't have to go through as much as trauma or things like that."

The most powerful part of this study is the ideas and solutions that were shared by youth.

"Having like a person that you could phone and have somebody's direct line number instead of having to wait and talk to a one eight-hundred number where it's some random person at a random office somewhere within the province talking to you, and they don't know you. Like, there should be some sort of way to deal with people on a personal level."

"It's good to have a landing place where you don't have to worry about where you're going to sleep every night so that you can work on getting to a place where you learn to be more permanently. That's definitely a good step."

"You get to feel like you're an adult in your own home, but also you have a great support, from a supervisor, as well. Yeah, so you also feel like independent in a way, but fully supported at the same time."

On supported transitions and what it could look like

"...When I was fifteen, I didn't want to see her [service provider]. I didn't see her for two years. And, finally, I went and saw her and she totally opened up my eyes to like the things that I can get, in a way that- the help I can get. But it's just the fact that it took me two years to- well, it's the opening up part to somebody. Like when you go through homeless or anything like that, you build like a wall almost and you don't want to have it knocked down, so you don't trust people. So when someone, like [service provider] came into my life, I was like "No, not happening" and then one day I was like "Maybe" so I slowly let her in, and then doors were opening. And then I ended up in a good spot. It was just the fact of breaking down that wall sometimes is so hard. It took me two years to do it."

“... And they only let you stay for thirty days. I don't think that's much time to figure out [...]to find a roof to stay under, thirty days is not much time. Or to even like find a job, and then start working, and then it's like, you have to do so many things...”

“And like an information board- even if there was like- I think if there was a website that had, like, certain addresses, phone numbers, to all the different help for youth for homeless. All that. I think that would really help a lot. Because I mean, we do live in more of a technology world now, so it's like- I was like looking up online a lot, but I couldn't find much information for like free counseling and things like that. I couldn't really find anything. So yeah, I think that would be good. And then, like I said before, if they had more information at school for that too, where they could give out the website. That would really help.”

“Like, you just really need a place where you can actually promise kids a place, because I know many people are just like “Well, if you do this, we'll definitely help you find housing” and it does not help you at all. So...it'd be nice if like...if you were homeless, if you actually had a place that you could go. And like, no sixteen year old really wants to go to a shelter because there are crack heads there, and they're really dangerous people. And they're unsafe, like really unsafe. So they should have a place like that for teenagers.”

“... Not even giving them a time limit. Just sitting them down before they come into the shelter and just saying like “What's your plan when you're coming in here? Do you plan on getting a job? Do you plan on staying here two months? One month? A week? Three weeks?” and just basically asking them like their timeline, and if they have any plans. And if they don't, help them make plans. Don't just leave them to do it by themselves ...” - FG

On needing more support & information

“... I know with youth health care and stuff like that, I they have huge line ups for things like this. So, I feel I they should have another outreach program that kids can contact because if they're waiting to get in, then, there's nothing they can do in the meantime. So, you might as well give them something that they can do. Because otherwise they just feel like they're being ignored, and then ... they just go in the other direction.”

“... I don't think that the teenagers are using the supports ... Just because of how difficult they are to use, and most teenagers aren't just going to look up themselves all these things. They're going to want somebody to help them...”

thank you

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