



# The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness

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*Edited by: Amanda Buchnea*

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## How to Cite

Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & Dej, E. (2018). *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness*. A. Buchnea (Ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

ISBN: 978-1-77355-026-8

## Acknowledgements

The Roadmap builds upon the insights and wisdom of young people with lived experience of homelessness who participated in [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#). The authors would like to thank these young people for lending their voices to this work. We hope their insights will guide policy and practice reform across the country.

This report also draws from the conceptual framing and scholarship of [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#) and [Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness](#). This report also builds upon the evidence reviewed in [Youth Homelessness Prevention: An International Review of Evidence](#). The recommendations in this report build upon those within several policy briefs and reports published by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. We wish to thank the authors of these documents for their insights, and hope this report will amplify the impact of their work.

The authors wish to thank the many scholars, advocates, and community members who provided feedback on earlier drafts of the Roadmap, including: Dr. Naomi Nichols, Jayne Malenfant, Jonathan Robart, Duncan Farthing-Nichol, Dr. Peter Mackie, Dr. David MacKenzie, Dr. Patrick Fowler, Luke Reid, Carol Howes, Dr. Amanda Noble, Julia Huys, and Mary Birdsell. We would specifically like to thank the [National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness](#), whose thoughtful insights throughout the development of this Roadmap were critical to the final report.

This research was made possible through financial support provided by The Home Depot Canada Foundation (THDCF). More than a funder, THDCF has emerged as a national leader on youth homelessness in Canada. THDCF invests in local communities and organizations across the country, and has become a powerful leader for change in efforts to re-imagine our response to youth homelessness and foster prevention-focused solutions.

Finally, we would like to extend our deep thanks to the COH and AWH team members who assisted in the production and design of this document: Allyson Marsolais, Amanda Buchnea, Niveen Saleh, Dylan Ostetto, Adriel McPherson, Lindsay McRae, Pardis Pahlavanlu, and Malaika Taylor.

The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness is also part of the [Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab](#) project. Phase One of this project is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Youth Employment Strategy. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.



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## FOREWARD

*The time has come to shift the way we address the problem of youth homelessness. This means a shift from simply managing the crisis, to focusing more on prevention, keeping families intact, and helping those who are homeless (or at imminent risk) find their way back into stable housing with necessary supports to enable them to maintain and sustain their housing, participate in school, and foster health and wellness.*

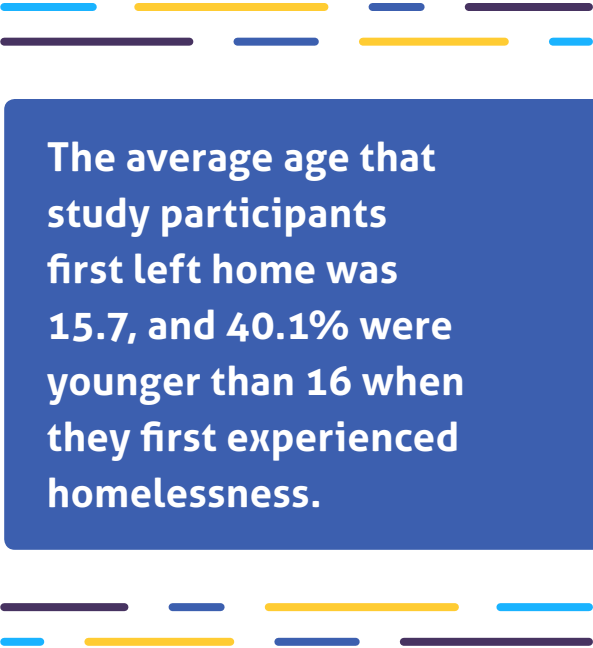
This shift in approach calls for a change in policy and practice that will require policymakers and practitioners to think about and do their work differently. One of the main barriers to [making the shift](#) to prevention is that up until now we have not had a shared language concerning prevention. *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* is designed to give us a way to think and talk about prevention. It answers the following fundamental questions:

**What is youth homelessness prevention? What is NOT youth homelessness prevention? Why does youth homelessness prevention matter?**

Prior to 2015, the national organizations in Canada that focus on housing and homelessness partnered on a number of important initiatives concerning youth homelessness, but by and large, activities and resources were not strategically aligned for maximum impact on the issue. At the same time, community-based organizations across the country were providing critical emergency services to young people experiencing homelessness, but there were very few, small pockets of activity centered on prevention. At the end of 2015, we launched a new national coalition called A Way Home Canada designed to take a Collective Impact approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Founding members include the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Raising the Roof, the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, the Canadian Housing & Renewal Association, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, and Egale Human Rights Trust, as well as strategic funding partners, such as the Catherine Donnelly Foundation and The Home Depot Canada Foundation.



In 2016, as part of our work as a coalition, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada released the findings from [Without a Home](#), the largest national study on youth homelessness ever conducted in Canada. The results are staggering and point to the need to prevent young people from ever experiencing homelessness. The average age that study participants first left home was 15.7, and 40.1% were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness. In addition, 75.9% of respondents had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness already in their young lives. In terms of education, 53.2% of young people experiencing homelessness drop out of school compared with the Canadian average of less than 9%. Importantly, the research also revealed that a high percentage of homeless youth report being tested for a learning disability (50%) or ADHD (41%). Such learning disabilities are amongst the most significant factors contributing to school disengagement for those who have dropped out. A hopeful statistic is that of those young people that dropped out, 73.9% would like to return to school at some time.



**The average age that study participants first left home was 15.7, and 40.1% were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness.**

Given these shocking statistics, much of our work as a coalition is focused on supporting communities and all levels of government to work across the systems that drive young people into homelessness to develop comprehensive 'community' or 'systems' plans that focus on prevention and [Housing First for Youth](#).

That means either preventing young people from becoming homeless in the first place, or if they do, because bad things will always happen, getting them stably housed with all the supports they need to thrive and prevent them from ever becoming homeless again.

**It's important to stress the Collective Impact approach to working across the systems that drive young people into homelessness, as for far too long we've asked the service provider community to bear the full weight of this crisis.**

Service providers alone cannot prevent and end youth homelessness. A critical part of all of this work is elevating the voices of youth with lived experience to ensure their experiences, needs, and desires are reflected in policy and practice. We also want to highlight the critical role for Indigenous leadership and voice in doing this difficult Collective Impact work. Collective Impact necessitates that we integrate important Indigenous Teachings into everything we do as well.

Truth, love, respect, humility, wisdom, and courage are all required to work together to ensure we really can stop the flow of young people into homelessness. We must recognize the interdependence that exists between those who experience, care about, and respond to youth homelessness, and let that empower us to act together as a community.

**This work also necessitates taking a human rights approach. Homelessness impacts the ability of youth to enjoy their sanctioned human rights, and as such, all Canadians have a responsibility to respond to this crisis.**

As communities and orders of government begin to make the shift to prevention, we must be open to making mistakes and then learning from those mistakes so we can evolve the work and ensure the best possible outcomes for young people and their families. This means we must let the outcomes we seek drive the service models, and continue to learn, adapt, grow, and repeat. Most of all, we must be bold in order to ensure that every young person in Canada gets what you and I would want for our own children – safety, stability, and all the supports they need to thrive.

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***Melanie Redman, A Way Home Canada***

***Dr. Stephen Gaetz, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness***

# 1 INTRODUCTION

It is time to consider a different approach to addressing youth homelessness.

*Historically, communities and governments in Canada and the United States have relied heavily on emergency services and crisis responses to support young people who are homeless. Communities use a range of crisis supports and interventions, including emergency shelters, day programs, and other services, such as law enforcement, which typically do not form a cohesive system. Other communities severely lack formal youth services or supports to respond to crises, pushing youth to seek help outside of their home communities.*

There has been a movement in recent years to focus investment and efforts on helping individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and substantial mental health needs to exit homelessness, in particular through Housing First. Prevention is still largely an afterthought, and in some cases it has been actively fought against.

*While the **language** of homelessness prevention is sometimes used in policy circles in North America, it is rarely well-conceptualized and has not been a priority in most jurisdictions.*

As Culhane and colleagues (2011) point out, this means that our response to homelessness has for the most part focused on helping people *after* they have already lost their housing. This has led to “a situation that Lindblom (1991) warned about nearly [30] years ago, one in which an absence of a prevention-oriented policy framework would lead to the institutionalization of homelessness” (Culhane et al., 2011, p. 295).

*Youth homelessness will never come to an end unless we change our focus to stopping the flow of young people into homelessness in the first place.*

In this report, the case is made that the imbalance of investment in crisis intervention over prevention is highly problematic, especially for the well-being of the young people affected by youth homelessness. While emergency supports are both necessary and well-meaning, they do little to effectively prevent, reduce, or end youths’ experiences of homelessness. Relying on a crisis response is not only ineffective, but expensive, with the annual cost to the economy estimated to be \$7B (Gaetz et al., 2013). The downstream costs to public systems, and due to wasted youth opportunity, illustrate the need to shift our approach to youth homelessness. The shift to prevention, however, requires the development of a solid framework that provides conceptual clarity and direction.

Communities wanting to adopt a prevention approach need effective prevention program areas and interventions that can be tailored to local needs. A key challenge that impedes progress is that while there is a rich body of knowledge about the causes and conditions of youth homelessness, much less is known about how to prevent it, and how to produce better outcomes for youth who have experienced homelessness.

*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* helps to fill this gap in our knowledge. It is designed to help service providers, policy makers, communities, advocates, and researchers better understand the meaning of youth homelessness prevention through the provision of a clear definition and a common language for policy and practice. The *Roadmap* offers guidance on the following:

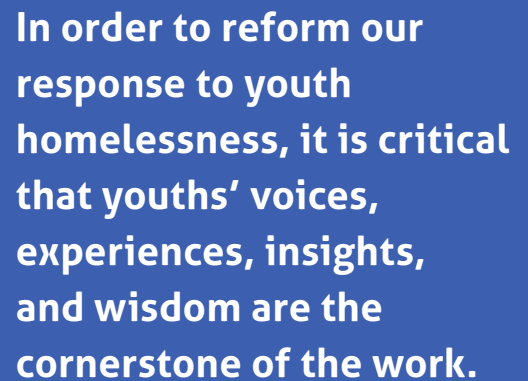
- **What is youth homelessness prevention, and what is it not?**
- **Who is responsible for youth homelessness prevention?**
- **What are systems approaches to prevention?**
- **What program areas and interventions exist?**
- **What is the evidence for youth homelessness prevention?**

*The Roadmap* aims to function as a useful guide to the critical role that prevention should play in a comprehensive systems response to youth homelessness, detailing evidence-based and informed program areas that will help communities and governments to implement plans to prevent and end youth homelessness.

## The Roadmap - How Did We Get Here?

*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* has been several years in the making. It builds on the definition and framework of homelessness prevention first presented in [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#) (Gaetz & DeJ, 2017). The *Roadmap* is also the outcome of several years of scanning and reviewing domestic and international examples of prevention policy and practice. A literature review on youth homelessness prevention was conducted, examining peer-reviewed academic research and the grey literature, in order to assess the evidence base for prevention (see [Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence](#) (Schwan et al., 2018b)).

Finally, the *Roadmap* has been directly informed by consultations with youth who have experienced homelessness across Canada. In order to reform our response to youth homelessness, it is critical that youths' voices, experiences, insights, and wisdom are the cornerstone of the work. Between July 2017 and January 2018, A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness consulted with youth across Canada to ask what it would have taken to prevent their homelessness, as well as what programs, policies, services, and supports are needed to prevent youth homelessness in Canada. Their valuable insights challenge our current thinking and point to a new approach that more effectively helps young people *before* they end up on the streets. The results of this consultation are found in the report [What Would It Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (Schwan et al., 2018a), and quotes from that consultation are used throughout *The Roadmap*.



**In order to reform our response to youth homelessness, it is critical that youths' voices, experiences, insights, and wisdom are the cornerstone of the work.**

## 2

**MAKING THE CASE****Why we need to prioritize the prevention of youth homelessness**

*Age matters when understanding and responding to youth homelessness. While adults and youth who are homeless experience some of the same challenges – lack of affordable housing, systems failures in healthcare and corrections, for instance – there are factors unique to the experiences and circumstances of youth.*

As identified in the [Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness](#), there are several reasons why youth homelessness differs from adult homelessness (Gaetz, 2016):

- Unlike the majority of homeless adults, young people often leave homes in which they are typically dependent on adult caregivers (economically, socially, and otherwise).
- Youth, in the process of transitioning toward adulthood, may not have yet acquired personal, social, and life skills that make independent living possible or appropriate.
- Many young people are in the throes of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Youth tend to seek, access, and respond to services and supports differently than other individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Young people often avoid the homeless-serving system out of fear of authorities, or because they fear violence or discrimination.
- In some cases, there are no services to access. This is particularly true for young people under the age of 16.
- The age at which one is legally considered a child or adult is not consistent across jurisdictions and policy areas, which sometimes results in barriers to accessing services and supports, and can also create problems for continuity of care.

Youth homelessness is not just about a loss of stable housing, but a loss of a home in which young people are embedded in dependent relationships. When young people are cut off from natural supports and social relations with caregivers, family, friends, and community, their experience of adolescence is interrupted. As a result, young people who are homeless face barriers to transitioning into adulthood in a secure and supported way.

A shift to the prevention of youth homelessness is needed given that the current response does not meet the needs of young people. Moreover, the status quo represents a contravention of the human rights of young people in Canada.

In order to effectively prevent youth homelessness, a better understanding of the dynamics of youth homelessness, as well as its causes and conditions, are required.

## Defining Youth Homelessness

*“Youth homelessness” refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe, or consistent residence.*

*(Gaetz, 2016, p.1)*

Youth homelessness, as a social problem, is the outcome of societal failures to adequately provide young people and their families with the necessary supports to access and maintain safe, secure housing and move forward with their lives. The overwhelming majority of young people who experience homelessness do not choose to be, nor wish to be. Research points to the fact that the sustained experience of homelessness is often negative, unhealthy, unsafe, traumatizing, and stressful.

For youth, homelessness not only includes sleeping rough or in emergency shelters, but a range of precarious housing and shelter circumstances. The different degrees of homelessness and housing insecurity that young people may face are laid out in the [Canadian Definition of Homelessness](#) and include:

- 1) **“Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;
- 2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence;
- 3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, and finally,
- 4) **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards” (Gaetz et al., 2012, p. 1).

An important aspect of youth homelessness is that young people have a greater likelihood of being part of the 'hidden homeless' population (see 'Provisionally Accommodated').

That is, they may couchsurf, staying temporarily with friends or relatives because they cannot go home, and may not seek out services designed to support people who are homeless. Some youth may technically be housed (e.g., living with caregivers) but lack a meaningful sense of home because their living situation is abusive, unsafe, unsupportive, and/or inherently precarious. These young people would be considered "at risk" of homelessness.

In defining youth homelessness, it is also important to consider the diversity of the population. The *Without a Home* study (Gaetz et al., 2016) identifies the following characteristics of the Canadian population of youth who experience homelessness:

- **Gender** - Males make up 58% of the youth homeless population compared to 36% who identify as female, with an additional 6% identifying as transgender or gender non-binary.
- **Indigenous youth** make up 30.6% of the youth homeless population, whereas Indigenous peoples account for less than 5% of the Canadian population (Gaetz et al., 2016), a finding consistent with previous research (Baskin, 2007; 2013; Brown et al., 2007a; Segart, 2012).
- **LGBTQ2S+** (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and/or Two-Spirit) youth account for 30% of the youth homelessness population (Gaetz et al., 2016). Family rejection, inadequate social services, institutional erasure, homophobic and transphobic violence, and discrimination in shelters and housing programs make it difficult for LGBTQ2S+ youth to secure safe and affirming places to live (Abramovich, 2016; Choi et al., 2015; Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013; Durso & Gates, 2012).
- Youth who are **racial minorities** make up 17.4% of the youth homeless population, and **newcomer youth** about 10% (Ratnam, Fitzpatrick, & Thang, 2013), with one quarter having arrived in Canada within the past five years (see also Smith et al., 2017; Ratnam et al., 2018).

The intersections between different experiences of discrimination and exclusion mean some youth are marginalized not only by their homelessness, but also due to racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia (Galabuzi, 2016; Heinze & Horn, 2014; Hunting, Grace, & Hankivsky, 2015; Macdonald, 2015).



## The Causes of Youth Homelessness

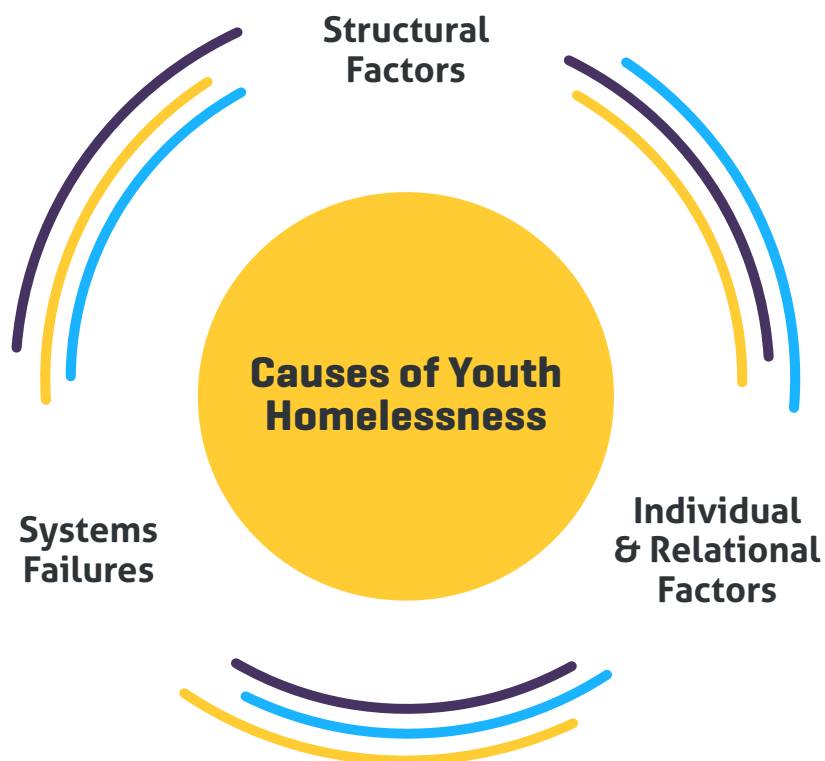
*In order to prevent something from happening, you need to first understand what causes it.*

**For many young people, the route into homelessness is neither linear, nor experienced as a single event. Youth homelessness is usually the result of multiple, cumulative factors.**

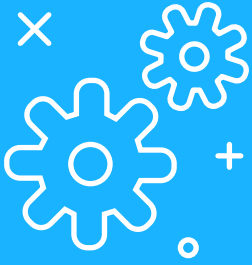
Youth are likely to experience multiple family ruptures and multiple episodes of living outside the home. It is often not until after extensive periods of housing precarity and family or relationship breakdown that youth find themselves in emergency shelters or in places not suitable for human habitation (e.g., sleeping outdoors, on rooftops, in abandoned buildings).

The social-ecological model positions youth homelessness as the outcome of a complex and intricate interplay between three domains: **structural factors**, **systems failures**, and **individual and relational factors** (Gaetz et al., 2013a; Gaetz, 2014c). At a population and community level, structural factors and systems failures can put youth and their families at risk of homelessness by shaping the opportunities available to them, and the barriers they encounter. Individual and relational factors (e.g., health challenges, intimate partner violence, brain injuries) have profound effects on young people's lives, the challenges they face, their well-being, and their responses to adversity, which in some cases contribute to an increased risk of homelessness.

*Structural, systems, and individual factors interact and articulate in ways that powerfully drive youths' experiences of marginalization and homelessness.*



## STRUCTURAL FACTORS



### **Structural factors include economic, systemic, and societal issues that affect outcomes and opportunities for young people and their families (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 18).**

Because these factors occur at a societal level, young people cannot control these factors, and they have limited ability to change them. Structural factors not only affect people experiencing homelessness, but much larger segments of the population. Key structural factors that contribute to homelessness include social and economic conditions like poverty, violence, inadequate education, underemployment, and lack of affordable housing. Other contributing factors include discrimination in the form of homophobia, transphobia, racism, and bullying. Ongoing racism and the experience of colonialism are at the core of experiences of homelessness for many Indigenous youth and their families. These structural factors not only contribute to housing precarity for individuals and their families, but can manifest at the community level as well.

## SYSTEMS FAILURES



### **System failures refer to situations where inadequate public policy and/or service delivery contribute to the likelihood that a young person will become homeless.**

Some young people become homeless after slipping through the cracks of the institutions and systems they interact with (such as child protection, physical and mental healthcare, or juvenile justice). These institutions and systems are not responding effectively to meet the needs of young people and their families, especially in crisis situations. Silos and gaps, the erosion of Canada's social safety net, and lack of transparency of public institutions and services cause young people and their families to have difficulties connecting with supports. Further, the "Siloing of services, funding, and data impedes collaboration and undermines the ability of communities and government to take an integrated systems approach to complex social problems" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 20).

In some cases, the mandate and structure of public systems and programs fail young people when they transition from those systems, resulting in a high risk of homelessness. Young people that have been taken into care by the government are at increased risk of becoming homeless when foster or group home placements break down, leaving them without a place to live. Similarly, young people may become homeless when they choose to leave their placement and/or have been discharged from care (e.g., for non-compliance) without having a permanent place to stay lined up, or a plan for acquiring permanent housing (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2013; Goldstein et al., 2012; Lemon Osterling & Hines, 2006; Karabanow, 2004; Nichols, 2013; 2015; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Serge et al., 2002). Discharging young people from public systems without adequate planning and ongoing supports increases their risk of homelessness

## When asked about what caused their homelessness, young people will typically cite individual and relational factors.

While these are important and felt most personally, it is worth pointing out that structural and systemic factors generally produce the conditions under which personal/interpersonal crises result in homelessness.

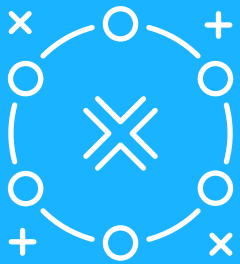
A main cause of youth homelessness is breakdown in close relationships or conflict within the home. Adverse childhood experiences can be a significant contributing factor to homelessness, when youth are forced to leave unsafe, abusive, neglectful or otherwise untenable living situations (Gaetz et al., 2016; Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2002; Karabanow, 2004; 2013; Rew, et al., 2001; Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Van den Bree et al., 2009).

Identity-based conflict, after a young person comes out LGBTQ2S+ for example, can also contribute to youth homelessness (Abramovich, 2013; Abramovich & Shelton, 2018; Choi et al., 2015; Keuroghlian, et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2017). Some young people may leave home because of disengagement with school and criminal involvement. Leaving home early may also be linked to the effects of learning disabilities or mental health and addictions issues experienced by young people themselves, or someone in their household (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005; Baker-Collins, 2013; Karabanow, 2004; McEwan & Sapolsky, 1995; Sokolowski, et al., 2013). These individual and relational factors can be part of a young person's experience whether they live in urban, small town, or rural settings.

## Recognizing the complex interplay between these factors helps us understand *why* youth become homeless, *why particular* youth experience greater risk, and *where* we should target our preventative efforts.

By better understanding the risks and causes of homelessness, we have a starting place to explore the legislation, policies, and practices that can contribute to the prevention of youth homelessness.

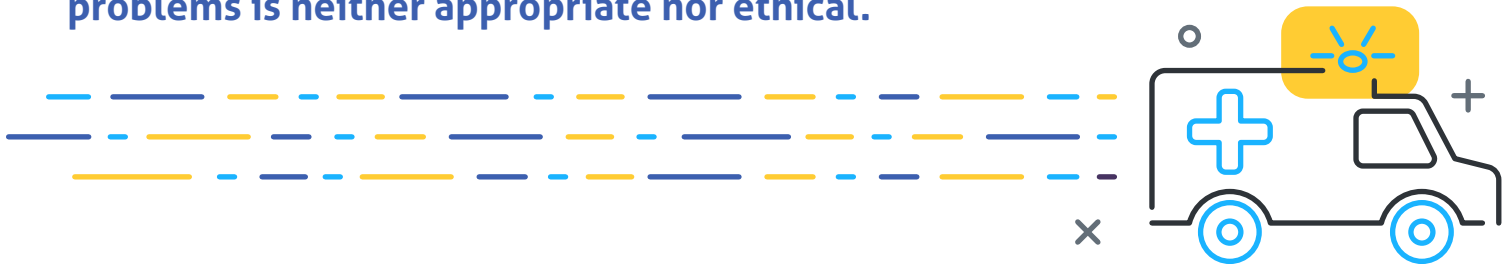
### INDIVIDUAL & RELATIONAL FACTORS



## Is The Current Approach to Youth Homelessness Good Enough?

In Canada, the main response to youth homelessness, if any at all, is the provision of a range of emergency services and supports. However, young people often cannot access these services until they are 16 or 18. Law enforcement are also often called upon to respond to activities that are resultant of youths' experiences of homelessness, such as loitering, sleeping in public spaces, or panhandling. The criminalization of homelessness is misguided and counterproductive to addressing the root causes and needs of youth, and instead causes further harm and barriers to exiting homelessness.

**While emergency services meet some of youths' immediate needs and are often well-meaning, relying on a crisis response to youths' presenting problems is neither appropriate nor ethical.**



There is a growing body of research that attests to the need to focus on the prevention of youth homelessness. Key things to consider include:

### **1) Early age of first experience of homelessness.**

The [Without a Home](#) study (Gaetz, et al., 2016) identified that 40% of young people who were homeless had their first experience of leaving home before they were 16 years old. Compared to other youth experiencing homelessness, these young people had much worse childhood experiences (e.g., exposure to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as bullying), greater housing instability (including multiple episodes of homelessness), and more acute mental health challenges.

### **2) A high percentage of homeless youth were involved with child protection services.**

Less than 0.5% of Canadians are involved with child protection as children or youth. Amongst youth experiencing homelessness, the figure is 58%, with 47% reporting being apprehended and having a history of placements in foster care or group homes. For many young people, homelessness is an outcome of poor and unsupported transitions from care. This is a problem we can address if we focus on identifying young people leaving care who are at greatest risk of homelessness, and provide them with the supports they need.

### **3. Homeless youth are more likely to be victims of crime.**

While young people who experience homelessness are often depicted as delinquent and criminal, the sad reality is that they are exponentially more likely to be victims of crime than young people who are housed (Gaetz et al., 2010; O'Grady et al., 2011). Young people who are homeless report extraordinarily high levels of physical and sexual assault. For instance, in both the [Without a Home](#) (2016) study and *Surviving Crime and Violence* (2011), 38% of young women reported experiencing a sexual assault in the previous 12 months.

### **4. Young people are vulnerable to criminal exploitation.**

When young people become homeless they are targets for exploitation by employers, landlords, and others (Gaetz, 2002). Being vulnerable and easily identifiable, young people are often recruited into dangerous and demeaning sexual activities, including sex trafficking. Covenant House International's recent 10-city study identified that one in five youth were trafficked, in most cases for sexual purposes (Murphy, 2016).

### **5. Mental health problems become more acute once on the streets.**

Many young people who wind up homeless had traumatizing childhood experiences of violence and abuse. Once on the streets, the exposure to crime, violence, and exploitation can exacerbate the situation, leading to worsening mental health, and substance use to cope. In terms of mental health, the [Without a Home](#) study found that 85.4% of the youth sample fell in the 'high symptom/distress' category, meaning that they would require something between inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care levels if they were housed. Across the sample, 42% reported at least one suicide attempt, and 35% reported at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization. Compared to other youth experiencing homelessness, this group is three times more likely to be in the higher acuity mental health risk group.

### **6. Remaining in school is challenging once youth become homeless.**

Completing high school has a significant impact not only on labour force participation, but also on health, well-being, interactions with the justice system, and the need for government benefits. Due to improvements in education and the changing job market, less than 9% of Canadians fail to complete high school, and many go on to university or college. For youth experiencing homelessness, however, the dropout rate is 53% and 51% are not currently involved in any formal education, employment, or training.

## **7. The prolonged experience of youth homelessness undermines housing stability and wellness, even if young people exit homelessness.**

Many young people who experience homelessness are able to escape and avoid returning to the street. Others – particularly those with adverse childhood experiences and a history of housing instability – may become stuck in homelessness with negative and long-lasting consequences. The [Without a Home](#) study identified that 22% were episodically homeless (repeated episodes over a 3 year period), and 21% were chronically homeless (continuously homeless for a year or more). Entrenchment in street culture makes exiting homelessness more challenging over time (Karabanow, 2004; 2008; Schwan et al., 2018a).

**“If you are sleeping outside, in the middle of - like, why does it have to get THAT BAD before you qualify for help that you could have used like a year ago?”**

**Edmonton Youth**

## **8. Without proper support, the homeless youth of today may become the chronically homeless adults of tomorrow.**

Effectively addressing youth homelessness will have a long-term impact on the scale and scope of the larger problem of adult homelessness. Research tells us that many adults who are homeless had their first experience when they were young (Baker-Collins, 2013). Emerging data from the 2018 Point in Time counts suggest that in many communities, over 50% percent of homeless adults had their first experience before the age of 25.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Victoria, 55.8% \(Hardman, 2018\); Peterborough, 58% \(Vink, 2018\); Niagara, 53% \(Nickel, 2018\), and; Regina, 74% \(Docherty, 2018\).](#)

## This data points to some important conclusions:

**First**, we are waiting far too long to intervene and assist young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, particularly when their first experience occurs before age 16.

**Second**, experiencing homelessness for any length of time can have a devastating impact on the health, safety, mental health, and well-being of young people.

**Third**, some young people experiencing homelessness - particularly Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S youth, newcomer youth, and young women - experience the additional burden of ongoing discrimination, as well as bias-based violence and exclusion.

**Fourth**, emergency responses on their own do not prevent homelessness, nor do they necessarily help youth exit homelessness rapidly. Relying on crisis interventions is not an effective or adequate solution to the problem of youth homelessness, and young people cannot and should not be expected to “bootstrap” themselves out of homelessness.

**Fifth**, our public systems are failing to prevent young people from entering homelessness. For example, youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to have child welfare involvement than the general population (Nichols et al., 2017). It is clear that we are missing many opportunities to prevent youth homelessness within public systems.

**Finally**, people with lived experience of youth homelessness strongly profess the need to shift from crisis response to a focus on prevention and sustainable exits from homelessness. In a recent national consultation conducted by the COH and AWH, youth spoke strongly about the need to focus efforts on prevention, and that “by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn youth to hardship and trauma, we actually ensure it” (Schwan et al., 2018a, p. 122).

**The time has come to shift to a proactive, rather than reactive, response to the problem of youth homelessness.**

## 3 THE PREVENTION OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

### What It Is, What It Isn't, and Who is Responsible

*While most people understand that the prevention of homelessness is generally a good thing, it is not always clear what homelessness prevention entails.*

In order to address the lack of definitional clarity, the COH released [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#). The Definition of Homelessness Prevention and accompanying Typology are complementary features of the *Framework*, designed to inform the legislation, policies, collaborative practices, and interventions that reduce the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness.

### Defining Youth Homelessness Prevention

Despite broad political and community-based interest in youth homelessness prevention, there has been lack of clarity about what it entails. We offer the following definition of youth homelessness prevention:

***Youth homelessness prevention refers to policies, practices, and interventions that either (1) reduce the likelihood that a young person will experience homelessness, or (2) provide youth experiencing homelessness with the necessary supports to stabilize their housing, improve their wellbeing, connect with community, and avoid re-entry into homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention thus necessitates the immediate provision of housing and supports for youth experiencing homelessness, or the immediate protection of housing, with supports, for youth at risk of homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention must be applied using a rights-based approach and address the unique needs of developing adolescents and young adults.***



This definition is adapted from Gaetz and DeJ's (2017) broader [definition of homelessness prevention](#), drawing into focus policies and practices that are responsive to the distinct challenges that young people face. In implementing youth homelessness prevention, governments and communities should seek out evidence-based and promising interventions and policies that are both developmentally and individually tailored.

To determine what the prevention of youth homelessness might look like in practice, it is useful to consider how other fields think about and operationalize prevention. Public health has provided the most robust conceptualizations of prevention, specifying that the overarching goal of prevention is to minimize harm to individuals or communities through lowering the risk and outcomes of disease, illness, and injury. This is done by identifying risk and protective factors, and putting in place structural and universal interventions (e.g., mass immunization, clean water supplies, public education), as well as targeted interventions for those deemed to be at higher or more imminent risk. Adapting the public health model of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, we can consider homelessness prevention as follows:

### **Primary Prevention**

means 'working upstream' to address structural and systems factors that contribute to family breakdown and housing precarity for young people. For instance, primary homelessness prevention can include population-based strategies to address poverty reduction, the lack of affordable housing, interpersonal violence, access to education, and anti-discrimination. The primary prevention of youth homelessness also includes systems prevention, which means working with public systems to stop the flow of young people from child protection, healthcare, and corrections into homelessness.

### **Secondary Prevention**

refers to a range of targeted strategies to quickly support youth who are either at imminent risk of homelessness, or who have recently experienced homelessness. Secondary strategies should work quickly to help young people to either retain their housing (with their families, natural supports, or independently), or quickly rehouse them into permanent and stable accommodation that is affordable, safe, and appropriate. The goal of secondary prevention efforts is to help young people stay in place and connected to schools or other supports, and to strengthen family and natural supports to enhance assets and resilience. Schools, primary care providers, and community programs are some of the many partners that can help identify youth at risk and quickly broker access to supports.

### **Tertiary Prevention**

involves supporting young people who experience homelessness to exit quickly, access housing, and receive appropriate supports. It means ensuring that young people are able to obtain housing that is safe, affordable, and adequate, and that they have the supports they need to enhance their well-being and social inclusion, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will become homeless again. A key tertiary prevention intervention for youth experiencing homelessness is the [Housing First for Youth](#) program model (HF4Y), which adapts Housing First to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults.

## What Youth Homelessness Prevention is Not

The definition above articulates what youth homelessness prevention is, but also what it is *not*.

*All youth homelessness prevention interventions must include either “(1) the immediate provision of housing and supports to youth experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, or (2) the immediate **protection** of housing, with supports, for youth at risk of homelessness” (Schwan et al., 2018b, p. 9).*

While we know many emergency services and supports prevent many of the most negative consequences of youth homelessness, such as starvation or exposure to extreme weather, these interventions cannot be viewed as homelessness prevention because they do not directly (or indirectly) prevent the *occurrence* of homelessness.

Similarly, the term ‘prevention’ is sometimes used to describe interventions that may, in the long run, contribute to housing stability. Such interventions might include life skills and employment training, addictions supports, and trauma-informed care. While these supports are highly valuable, life-saving, and critically important to improving overall quality of life, they cannot be considered prevention unless they also provide *immediate access to housing*. If a young person remains in an ongoing state of homelessness within a program or service, with no immediate prospect of exiting, these interventions should not be considered prevention. At its core, youth homelessness prevention is a housing-led response.

**“We just need more partnerships and collaboration with the levels of government. Working with non-profits and social services and people that experience it. And developers. Just reminding the government that it’s not just one ministry’s issue to deal with housing—it’s all of them. Like, from the collective earlier this year, we went to a meeting and we were just telling them that, “Hey...Children and Youth and Government Care, it’s not just the Ministry of Children and Family Development...it’s not just their guardians. It’s like all of you guys! It’s the BC government, it’s the Ministry of Health, and Education, and Environment, and Transportation. Like, it’s all of you guys.”**

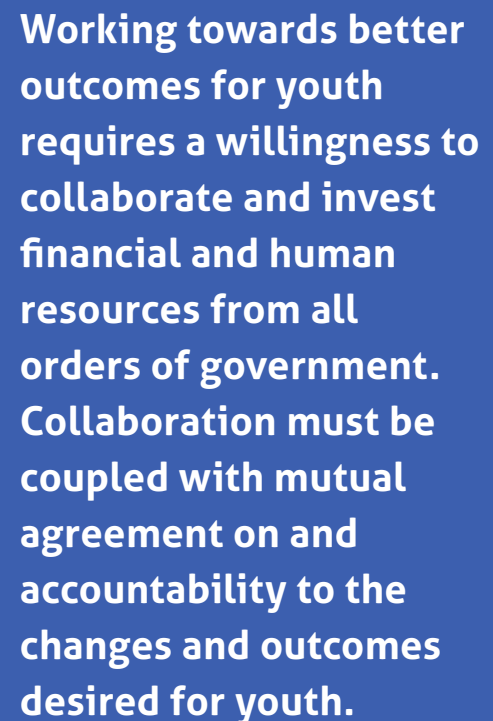
**Vancouver Youth**

## Who is Responsible for Youth Homelessness Prevention?

In Canada, the response to youth homelessness is typically provided by a range of non-profit services at the local level (the homelessness sector), with municipalities and other orders of government providing funding and creating public policy frameworks.

**While community-based delivery of many prevention supports is necessary in order to meet local needs, youth homelessness prevention will not be effective and scalable without proper investment and policy frameworks to support the work. Taking prevention to scale will require leadership from the federal and provincial/territorial governments.**

“As a ‘fusion policy’ issue, homelessness touches on many of the responsibilities of senior levels of government, including healthcare, housing, corrections and criminal justice, child and family services and supports, community services, income supports, education, employment and training, etc.” (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 41). As such, successful youth homelessness prevention strategies will require deeper collaboration across ministries and departments, and the assumption of responsibility for homelessness prevention in ministries that in the past may have not included youth homelessness as a part of their mandates. Working towards better outcomes for youth requires a willingness to collaborate and invest financial and human resources from all orders of government. Collaboration must be coupled with mutual agreement on and accountability to the changes and outcomes desired for youth. Each related sector and order of government must recognize the impact their work has on the outcomes young people experience, both negative and positive. The prevention of youth homelessness and other manifestations of poverty and exclusion is a shared responsibility, and questions about who “owns” the youth homelessness portfolio are, therefore, moot.



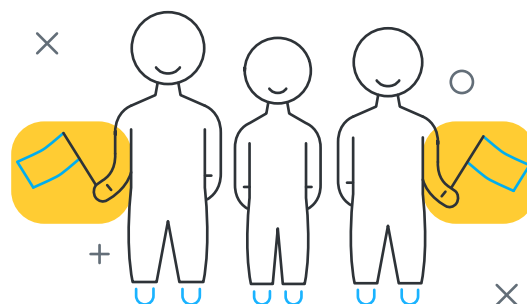
**Working towards better outcomes for youth requires a willingness to collaborate and invest financial and human resources from all orders of government. Collaboration must be coupled with mutual agreement on and accountability to the changes and outcomes desired for youth.**

**All sectors and orders of government are responsible for preventing youth homelessness, though they may play very different roles.**

Federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments must share the responsibility to provide the legislative and policy frameworks and funding to support homelessness prevention. The education system, homelessness sector, and other non-profit or community-based services will play key roles in helping marginalized and socially excluded youth to get the supports they require.

## A Human Rights Approach To Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness prevention work must be grounded in the fundamental human rights of young people in Canada. Canada is a signatory to a number of international human rights agreements that define rights relevant to homeless youth, including:



- Right to adequate standard of living
- Right to adequate housing
- Right to adequate food
- Right to work
- Right to health
- Right to education
- Right to personal security & privacy
- Right of equal access to justice
- Right to assembly
- Right to freedom of expression
- Right to life

*(Canada Without Poverty & A Way Home Canada, 2016)*

**That youth homelessness exists in Canada, and that we allow young people to remain trapped in homelessness, represents a *denial* of basic human rights. As a human rights violation, youth homelessness must be remedied.**

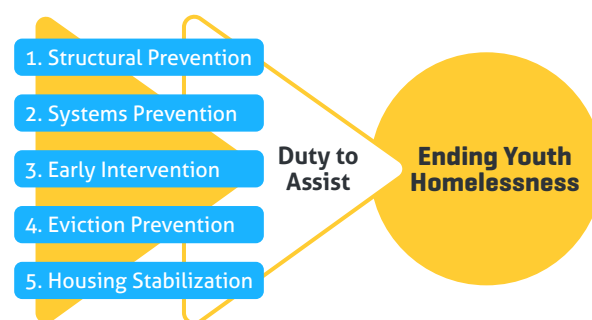
Practically, this means that policies, laws, and strategies aimed at youth homelessness must be grounded in human rights at all stages of development, implementation, and evaluation. Upholding human rights requires a paradigm shift, so that instead of creating and relying upon laws that punish youth and their families, all orders of government urgently recognize the systemic causes of youth homelessness and provide legal protections from discrimination and inequity. This invariably adds to the need for a shift from a crisis response to preventing and ending homelessness.

## 4 TYPOLOGY OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

What can we do to prevent youth homelessness?  
What does prevention look like in practice?

*The report, A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention, helps to outline the range of activities that constitute homelessness prevention through the inclusion of a typology.*

This typology identifies five categories of homelessness prevention in Canada, which align with primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. The ultimate goal of all prevention interventions is to stabilize housing, improve health and wellbeing, promote social inclusion, and contribute to better long-term outcomes. This typology is adapted in the *Roadmap* to organize our understanding of the prevention of youth homelessness.



### Homelessness Prevention Typology

- 1) Structural Prevention:** Legislation, policy, and investment to address risks of homelessness and increase social equality. Examples include: legislating housing as a human right, adhering to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, poverty reduction strategies, and income supports.
- 2) Systems Prevention:** Breaking barriers and enhancing access to services and supports. This includes transition supports for those leaving public institutions, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, and child protection systems.
- 3) Early Intervention:** Strategies designed to act early and address the risk of homelessness, as well as provide crisis intervention to those who have recently experienced homelessness. Examples include: effective outreach, coordinated intake and assessment, client-centered case management, and shelter diversion.
- 4) Eviction Prevention:** A type of early intervention, programs designed to keep people stably housed and help them avoid eviction. Examples include: landlord/tenant mediation, rental assistance, emergency financial assistance, and legal advice and representation.
- 5) Housing Stabilization:** Supporting people who have experienced homelessness to find and maintain housing. This includes Housing First and supports to enhance health and well-being, education and employment, and social inclusion.

The five categories of the typology work in concert to prevent homelessness. These approaches span upstream efforts focused on structural prevention, to systems approaches that improve experiences in public institutions, to early interventions and housing stabilization efforts that reduce the risk of homelessness and prevent young people from cycling back into homelessness.

## Duty to Assist – A Rights-Based Approach

**In consideration of the human rights of young people, the *Roadmap* adds an additional legislative strategy: Duty to Assist.**

Duty to Assist combines a statutory responsibility to help youth at risk with an obligation to ensure that adults in the lives of young people are able to provide supports to help youth avoid homelessness, or direct them to services and supports that can do so. Duty to Assist is an integrated systems response to homelessness, involving homelessness services and public systems' responses, early intervention approaches, and models of accommodation and support that lead to better outcomes for vulnerable youth. While not yet in existence in Canada, it is a model that should be aspired to. In section 5 of the *Roadmap*, **Duty to Assist: Taking a Rights-Based Approach**, an integrated approach to prevention is explored, drawing on existing legislation from Wales (Mackie, 2015; Mackie et al., 2017) to examine how a rights-based response to youth homelessness could be crafted in Canada.

Implementing a statutory Duty to Assist means that there is a **legal duty** to ensure that young people are provided with information, advice, and housing-led supports to avoid an experience of homelessness, or to make that experience as brief as possible. This statutory duty is not met by referring a young person to an emergency shelter or other homelessness services, but requires ending the person's experience of homelessness or stabilizing their housing.

In the following sections, the homelessness prevention typology is used to explore the range of policies, strategies, interventions, and practices that can help prevent youth homelessness in Canada. Each case takes into consideration both what is known from research and practice, and where there are gaps in knowledge and evidence. This review of evidence and promising practices can provide practical support for governments and communities. Where they exist, solid, practical examples are provided, which can be adapted and implemented by government and communities.



# The Roadmap for the Prevention of YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

## 1 STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

- > Poverty reduction
- > Increasing the availability of affordable housing
- > Addressing inequity and discrimination
- > Structural prevention of homelessness for Indigenous youth
- > Breaking the link between youth homelessness, migration, and displacement
- > Promoting social inclusion for all youth
- > Preventing and reducing adverse childhood experiences
- > Youth homelessness prevention legislation and policy

## 3 EARLY INTERVENTION

PROGRAM AREAS	SYSTEM OF CARE
> Enhancing family & natural supports	> Integrated services, integrated systems
> School-based early intervention	> Coordinated entry
> Shelter diversion	> Case management
> Housing-led supports	
> Preventing sexual exploitation & trafficking	

## 5 HOUSING STABILIZATION

- > Housing supports
- > Health and well-being
- > Access to income & education
- > Complementary supports
- > Social inclusion

## 6 DUTY TO ASSIST

- > A rights-based approach
- > A legal duty to make reasonable efforts to end a young person's homelessness or stabilize their housing
- > Young people provided with information, advice, and housing-led supports
- > Provincial / territorial legislation, delivered at the community level
- > Youth have a place to access supports
- > Adults have a place to refer young people to

## 4 EVICTION PREVENTION

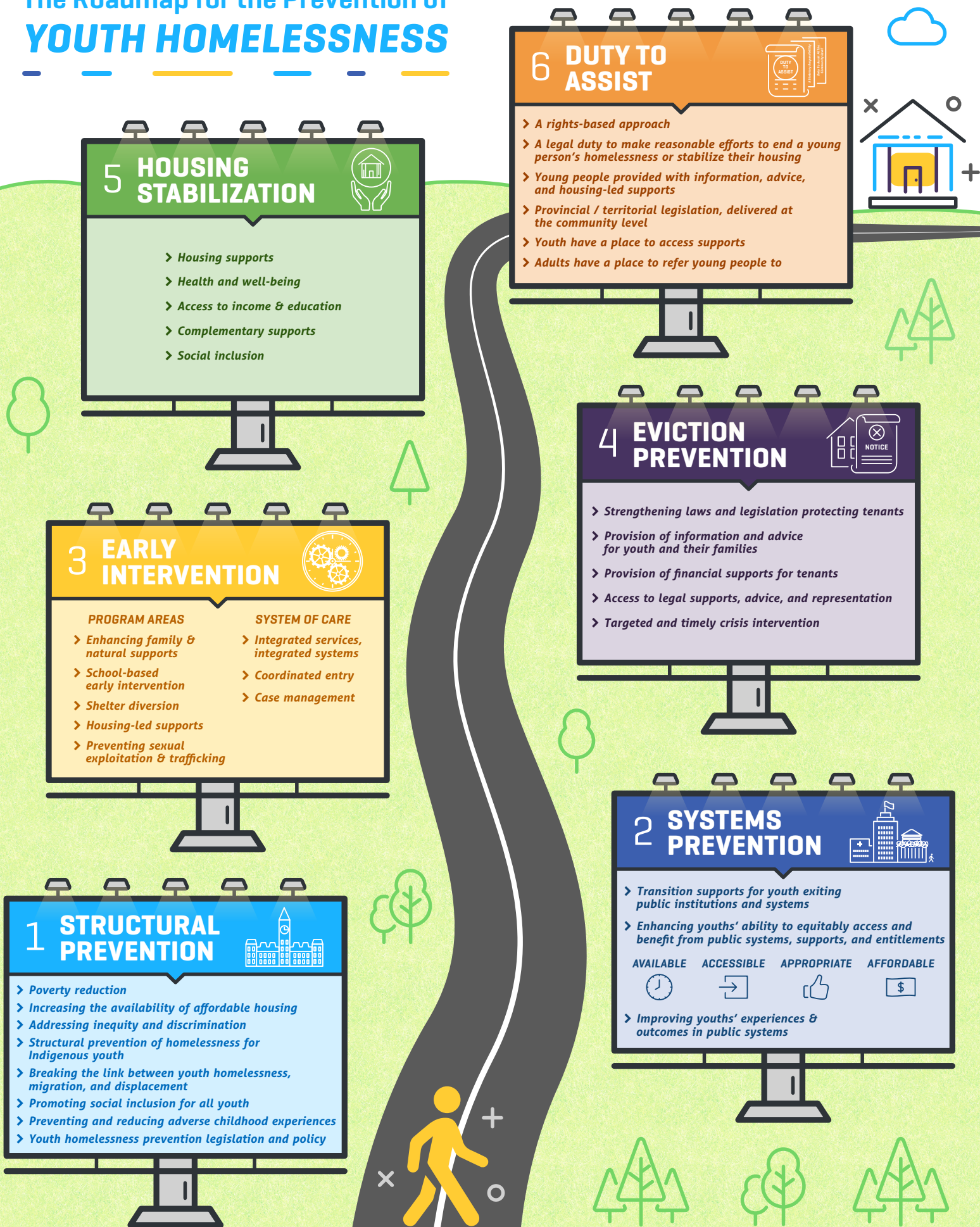
- > Strengthening laws and legislation protecting tenants
- > Provision of information and advice for youth and their families
- > Provision of financial supports for tenants
- > Access to legal supports, advice, and representation
- > Targeted and timely crisis intervention

## 2 SYSTEMS PREVENTION

- > Transition supports for youth exiting public institutions and systems
- > Enhancing youths' ability to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements

AVAILABLE	ACCESSIBLE	APPROPRIATE	AFFORDABLE

- > Improving youths' experiences & outcomes in public systems



## Structural Prevention:

*Working Upstream to Address Underlying Causes of Youth Homelessness*



*Some of the key drivers of youth homelessness are embedded within the arrangement of society's structures and institutions. Such arrangements shape how the housing market is regulated, wealth is redistributed, our cities are designed, and resources and power are allocated in Canadian society.*

These arrangements can contribute to housing precarity and homelessness for some young people, and can contribute to the relational dynamics that precede youth homelessness. Because these factors originate at the societal level, young people and their families have more limited ability or opportunity to change structural factors.

In order to prevent youth homelessness, we must address the broad social, economic, and political factors that contribute to housing precarity and social exclusion. By doing so, we reduce the risk that any young person will become homeless. This is the work of structural prevention.

## Defining Structural Prevention

Gaetz and Dej (2017) state that "Structural prevention addresses structural and systemic factors that contribute to housing precarity and social exclusion, exposing some individuals and families to a greater risk of homelessness" (p. 47). Structural prevention interventions can be universal (aimed at the entire population), or be targeted toward at specific groups who face a higher risk of homelessness (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth (Gaetz et al., 2016)). Structural prevention typically involves public policy, legislation, and interventions that increase housing stability, economic security, and social inclusion. Examples include raising the rates of social assistance, lowering the cost of public transportation, or ensuring access to appropriate and affordable housing and healthcare. Gaetz and Dej (2017) note, "such programs' policies and legislation are rarely titled 'homelessness prevention' (and may not even explicitly reference it), but will have the outcome of building assets and reducing the risk that someone will fall into homelessness" (p. 47).



## Why Structural Prevention?

Research has shown that structural factors such as the lack of affordable housing, poverty, and discrimination are causes of homelessness for young people (Baskin, 2007; Gaetz, 2014; Nooe & Patterson, 2010). In fact, some research indicates that low incomes and housing market dynamics are the two key determinants of homelessness for both families and individuals (Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne, 2011; Quigley & Raphael, 2002). In Canada, major increases in homelessness in the 1980's and 1990's have been traced to massive divestments from affordable housing and reduced spending on social and health supports, effectively 'de-housing' many individuals who were housed at one time (Hulchanski, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2014d).

**Research has shown that the countries with the lowest rates of homelessness, including Denmark and Finland, have typically made substantial investments in affordable housing (O'Sullivan, 2017).**

Fortunately, there is evidence that structural changes can reduce homelessness. Countries with poverty reduction strategies and robust welfare states often have lower rates of both homelessness and child poverty (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007; Olsson & Nordfeldt, 2008). Research has shown that the countries with the lowest rates of homelessness, including Denmark and Finland, have typically made substantial investments in affordable housing (O'Sullivan, 2017). Such data suggests the efficacy of structural prevention for reducing risk factors at the population level -- efforts that can be combined with other prevention efforts (e.g., early intervention) to assist those at imminent risk of homelessness.

## Who is Responsible for Structural Prevention?

**The vast majority of structural prevention policies, investments, and interventions lie outside of the domain of the homelessness sector.**

Structural prevention involves social and economic policy, practice, and legislative change within public institutions and systems, such as housing, healthcare, justice, and education. While the homelessness sector has historically been tasked with addressing the consequences of structural and systems failures, it is not within the sector's locus of control to implement many of the structural changes will prevent youth homelessness. Structural prevention efforts require shared leadership, investment, and action between many government ministries and departments within each order of government, some of which may not have previously had an explicit a role in homelessness prevention. It also means that the majority of funding provided to the homelessness sector should remain committed to ensuring that those experiencing homelessness, or at immediate risk of homelessness, are able to quickly and effectively access the services, supports, and housing they need to avoid or exit homelessness.

While structural prevention is a critical component of youth homelessness prevention, there are challenges to implementing and evaluating structural prevention efforts. These include high costs, challenges to targeting interventions, and difficulty measuring direct or indirect effects of such interventions (Shinn, Baumohl, & Hopper, 2001).

**It is critical that we pursue structural change knowing that many of these efforts may take a long time to implement, and may only occur with the persistent, concerted effort of many individuals and groups. While pursuing these long-term structural changes, other evidence-based interventions can immediately help prevent youth homelessness.**

## Key Forms of Structural Prevention

Structural prevention takes many forms, and can be targeted to individuals, families, communities, or the entire population. Because the structural factors that drive homelessness are often intersecting and mutually reinforcing, it is important that multiple forms of structural prevention are deployed simultaneously. The good news is that structural prevention in one area may trigger positive effects in other areas. For example, increases to social assistance rates can improve individuals' and families' access to affordable housing by bringing market rent within reach, and possibly decreasing the overall demand for deeply affordable social housing units.

### This section outlines 8 key forms of structural youth homelessness prevention:

- 1) Poverty Reduction
- 2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing
- 3) Addressing Inequity and Discrimination
- 4) Structural Prevention of Homelessness for Indigenous Youth
- 5) Breaking the Link Between Youth Homelessness, Migration, and Displacement
- 6) Promoting Social Inclusion for All Youth
- 7) Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences
- 8) Youth Homelessness Prevention Legislation & Policy

## 1) Poverty Reduction

### Despite being a wealthy country, 1 in 7 people in Canada live in poverty

*(Canada Without Poverty, 2017).*

Poverty undermines the health and well-being of young people, contributing to poor educational outcomes, social exclusion, violence, and early home leaving (Ayllon, 2015; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; McAra & McVie, 2016; Pantazis, Gordon, & Levitas, 2006). Research has shown that poverty and homelessness are strongly correlated (Embleton et al., 2016). While poverty does not cause every low-income youth to become homeless, it does mean that some youth and their families are only one illness, one accident, one job loss, or one paycheque away from living on the streets. In addition, extreme poverty puts pressure on families that can produce financial stress, which in turn can destabilize relationships, lead to conflict, and affect mechanisms to cope with crisis or challenges (Banovcinova et al., 2014; Wadsworth & Berger, 2006).

**Lack of income is the basis of poverty, meaning that when people experience poverty they lack the income needed to meet their basic needs.**

The goal of poverty reduction is to ensure that all families and young people have the income they need to meet their basic needs and obtain safe, secure, and permanent housing, thereby contributing to homelessness prevention.

**“Especially recently, I’ve had to choose a lot between, like, getting functional clothing that isn’t torn to shit and being able to buy food.”**

**Vancouver Youth**

#### Strategies for reducing poverty in Canada include:

- (1) Increasing the availability of permanent, secure, living-wage employment;
- (2) increasing social assistance rates, and access to social assistance supports; and
- (3) implementing more progressive taxation to better support low-income earners.

Policy tools and legislation that can support these strategies might include:

- Amending provincial/territorial social assistance policies to enable young people to access income supports when living independently.
- Reducing the cost of child care in Canada through strategies such as provincial/territorial funding to support the operation of licenced child care facilities, rather than leaving fees and operational support to be determined by the market ([Macdonald & Friendly, 2017](#)).
- Implementing provincial/territorial policies that ensure minimum wages are [living wages](#), meaning that minimum-wage jobs enable individuals and families to afford housing, food, transportation, healthcare, childcare, and other basic necessities within their communities.
- Amending the Employment Insurance eligibility criteria to ensure youth who have been working non-standard jobs are able to access EI benefits ([Expert Panel on Youth Employment, 2017](#)).
- Reinstating minimum national standards for income assistance in all provinces and territories ([Dignity for All, 2017](#)).

As we seek to reduce poverty in Canada, we must particularly focus on dramatically increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous Peoples, [one quarter of whom](#) live in poverty (Citizens for Public Justice, 2011). This must involve tackling the structural and systemic barriers to employment for Indigenous youth, including discriminatory hiring practices and inequitable access to education.

## 2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing

Research from around the world has shown that a lack of safe, affordable housing is a key cause of homelessness (Brisson & Covert, 2015; Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne, 2011; Poppe & Gale, 2018). Canada has a critical shortage of affordable housing (Gaetz et al., 2014d), and national studies indicate that 18% of low-income families in Canada are living in extreme core housing need (Londerville & Steele, 2014).

**“They should force the developers to make some affordable housing [...] not just the luxury condos. It needs to be proportionate. You can’t take away affordable housing and not put something to compensate what you’re taking away from the community.”**

**Toronto Youth**

Living in unaffordable, poor quality, or overcrowded housing increases nutritional vulnerability for children and youth (Krieger & Higgins, 2002), negatively impacts school attendance (Simpson & Fowler, 1994), contributes to health problems (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), and can lead to child welfare involvement (Nichols et al., 2017). Once on their own, many young people also find it difficult to access affordable housing, often due to lack of financial supports and low-paying jobs (Gaetz, 2014).

Fortunately, research indicates that investments in affordable housing can assist in reducing homelessness (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2017; Pleace, Teller, & Quilgars, 2011). Access to affordable housing has been shown to improve the health outcomes of vulnerable infants and children (Sandel et al., 2016), as well as improve school engagement and achievement (Lubell & Brennan, 2007; Schwartz, 2011).

### **There are two main strategies that increase the availability of affordable housing:**

- (1) Investment in the creation, repair, and maintenance of public/social housing stock; and*
- (2) Cash assistance to prevent housing loss or assist individuals in obtaining market housing they would otherwise be unable to afford (Parsell & Marston, 2012).*

The availability of affordable housing can be supported and youth homelessness prevented by:

- Expanding the availability of housing subsidies for youth and their families (Rog & Buckner, 2007; Shinn et al., 2001). Some studies have demonstrated that subsidizing housing costs for very low-income people has the strongest effect on lowering homelessness rates in comparison to other types of interventions (Quigley, Raphael, & Smolensky, 2001).
- Creating a range of affordable housing models targeted to youth to meet their diverse needs. Finland, for example, has developed a unique youth-specific housing system (operated by the [Finnish Youth Housing Association](#)) that provides housing to young people transitioning to independence between the ages of 18-29 (Pleace et al., 2015).
- Establishing and expanding eviction prevention programs and services that offer a range of interventions and supports, including financial supports, legal advice and representation, landlord mediation, and case management supports (Holl, van den Dries, & Wolf, 2016).

## Practice Spotlight: Community Land Trusts

Rapid gentrification and development remains a key challenge to ensuring housing remains affordable in some urban centres. The [Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust](#) (PNLT) developed a 'community land trust' in response to these changing neighbourhood dynamics in Toronto's Parkdale community. A community land trust is a "non-profit organization that obtains land (through either purchase or donation) and holds it in perpetuity for the community. A unique mechanism of the CLT model is that it separates the ownership of the land (owned by the CLT) from the ownership of the buildings on that land ... This dual ownership structure allows a CLT to maintain a level of affordability by taking land out of the real estate market" (Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust, 2015, p.2). [Hogan's Alley Land Trust](#) in Vancouver is another excellent example of a community land trust in action.

### 3) Addressing Inequity and Discrimination

Inequity and discrimination can contribute to a risk of homelessness for young people and their families. Ageism, sexism, racism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, cissexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression cause particular groups of youth to face disproportionate challenges when obtaining housing, employment, healthcare, social services, and good-quality education. Discrimination and inequity manifest at both the individual level (e.g., when a landlord will not rent to a young person because of their religion), and at the community level (e.g., when there is limited healthcare services available in a socio-economically depressed area). Structural and systemic inequity and discrimination deny young people their fundamental human rights, at times including their right to life.

#### INEQUITY

Instances of avoidable injustice or unfairness experienced by individuals or groups.

#### DISCRIMINATION

The unjust or prejudicial treatment of people on the basis of their identity/identities or personal characteristics, including on the grounds of race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, religion, immigration status, or other identities.

**“In my experience, when people find out, ‘Oh, you’re disabled,’ they don’t really want to hire you because they have to make all these other expenses on the company and therefore, ‘you’re going to be more of a hassle than a help to my company. So, I can’t hire you.’”**

**St. John’s Youth**

## **Youth homelessness prevention must be grounded in equity and anti-discrimination work – both at the structural level and within public systems and sectors.**

This type of prevention work reduces the risk that discrimination or inequity would contribute to homelessness for any youth, as well as for youth from groups that systemically experience inequity and discrimination, such as young women, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and Indigenous youth.

At a policy level, this work can begin with the identification and elimination of federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal policies, laws, and protocols that directly or indirectly discriminate against youth or their families, including on the basis of housing status (Schwan et al., 2018a). Policy tools and programmatic interventions that may assist in this task include:

- The enforcement of anti-discrimination laws in both private and public systems, including by disciplining and fining employers, landlords, agencies, and organizations for discriminatory policies and practices ([OHCHR, 2017](#)).
- The implementation of policies and legislation that ensure swift and equitable access to justice and remedies for all youth who have experienced discrimination or inequity ([OHCHR, 2017](#)).
- Ensuring that our education systems proactively focus on equity and anti-discrimination within their policies, curricula, teacher education and training, hiring, and supports for students.
- Investigation and elimination of police practices that profile, target, and criminalize young people who are poor or experiencing homelessness (O’Grady, Gaetz, & Buccieri, 2011).
- Government policies that ensure municipalities and provinces/territories only fund services and programs whose policies and practices are inclusive of all groups accessing services (e.g, LGBTQ2S+ youth) and who employ inclusionary hiring practices (Abramovich, 2016; Schwan et al., 2018a).



## 4) Structural Prevention of Homelessness for Indigenous Youth

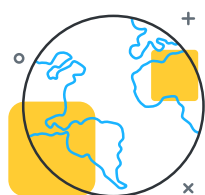
Indigenous youth are significantly overrepresented in youth homeless populations across Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016), as well as within criminal justice and child protection systems ([Statistics Canada, 2018](#)). Indigenous women and girls are [three times more likely](#) to be victims of violent crimes, and half of children in foster care are Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2018). This is the direct result of centuries of colonization and racism that have attempted to erase Indigenous social, economic, and governance systems, as well as Indigenous family structures, spiritual practices, and cultural traditions. This has resulted in severe disadvantage, poverty, dislocation, and intergenerational trauma for Indigenous youth and their families. These factors contribute to the disproportionate risk of homelessness that many Indigenous young people face (Patrick, 2014; Thistle, 2017). Against all odds, Indigenous youth report higher rates of resiliency than other groups of youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016).

**It is critical that we understand Indigenous homelessness as involving the historic and ongoing disruption of 'All My Relations' within Indigenous communities (Thistle, 2017).**

The [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](#) articulates that Indigenous homelessness involves more than 'houselessness,' but includes isolation from "relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities" (Thistle, 2017, p. 6). In order to effectively prevent homelessness for Indigenous youth, we must address the roots and layered effects of all [12 Dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness](#), including "spiritual disconnection homelessness," "cultural disintegration and loss homelessness," and "nowhere to go homelessness" (Thistle, 2017).

**"Indigenous homelessness has been incorrectly understood by settlers as being without a structure of habitation or being roofless (Somerville, 1992), when Indigenous homelessness is also about being without All My Relations. Being without a physical structure is only a symptom of the root causes of Indigenous homelessness, which are being without healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships (Christensen, 2013)."**

**(Thistle, 2017, p. 16)**



EARTH



LAND



STORIES



PLANTS



ANIMALS



As part of this work, it is particularly critical that we implement the [Calls to Action](#) articulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, including those that concern youth and particularly Indigenous youth and families involved with the child welfare system. The inequity experienced by Indigenous youth in the child welfare system was acknowledged in a [landmark ruling](#) by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in 2016, which ruled that the federal government discriminates against Indigenous children on-reserve by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services that exist elsewhere. [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada - A Proposal for Action](#) (2017) outlines some key government actions that need to be taken in this area, including recommending that the Government of Canada “provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection” (p. 14).

### **Strategies to support the structural prevention of homelessness for Indigenous youth might include:**

- Immediate government action to address the epidemic of violence towards Indigenous women and girls, informed by the [National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#);
- Protection of Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination, self-governance, and autonomy in all domains of society, enshrined in law and policy;
- Public system transformation to ensure Indigenous Peoples are treated respectfully, fairly, equitably, and with cultural sensitivity in all Canadian institutions and systems, including the child welfare system, and;
- Investments in programs, supports, and services that can best support the education, health, wellbeing, self-determination, spirituality, and community connection of Indigenous youth (Sauvé et al., 2018).

**Young experts who participated in the [What Would it Take?](#) (2018) study called for several important interventions they felt would help prevent homelessness for Indigenous youth, including:**

- The adoption of a national strategy to prevent and end homelessness for Indigenous youth.
- Investments in the creation of cultural centres and Friendship Centres for Indigenous youth and their communities, with a view to creating opportunities for Indigenous youth to participate in cultural journeys, learn about their culture and heritage, connect with peers, learn from Elders, and access traditional medicines and healing practices.
- Free counselling, family mediation, and mental health supports for survivors of residential schools and their families, including within the foster care system.

**“Even when you can’t connect to family, you should still have access to culture.”**

**Vancouver Youth**

## 5) Breaking the Link between Youth Homelessness, Migration, and Displacement

Experiences of migration and displacement can contribute to the risk of homelessness for some families and young people. When moving from their home countries or communities, by choice or by force, young people may struggle to access housing, social services, education, employment, and healthcare in their new context (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; [CAMH & CASC](#), 2014; Preston et al., 2009; Ratnam et al., 2018). Recent research indicates that 31.4% of new immigrants and refugees in Canada live in poverty (Citizens for Public Justice, 2017), and 10.1% of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada were born in another country (Gaetz et al., 2016). Studies also indicate that one quarter of newcomer youth experiencing homelessness arrived in Canada within the past five years (Ratnam et al., 2018). The [Without a Home](#) study found that newcomer youth were more likely than other groups to have multiple experiences of homelessness (64.3%), and other studies have demonstrated an overrepresentation of newcomer youth in hidden homeless populations (Preston et al., 2011).

Newcomer youth face unique challenges in securing stable housing and the protection of their human rights. [Hidden in Our Midst](#) (2014), a study focused on the experiences of newcomer youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto, revealed that young people faced challenges such as:

- “Differences in parent and child expectations around the practice of religious and cultural values in Canada;
- Challenges living with a host family in Canada;
- Racism when seeking housing and employment;
- Different cultural expectations and understanding of what constitute physical abuse and acceptable forms of child discipline; and
- Fear of shaming their parents by leaving home or seeking service supports.”

*(Ratnam et al., 2018, p. 113)*

**Both public systems and the youth homelessness sector must be responsive to the unique experiences of newcomer youth, ensuring systems change is implemented with cultural humility (Ratnam et al., 2018), and through the meaningful participation, inclusion, and leadership of newcomer youth themselves.**

More broadly, it is critical to understand the connections between youth homelessness, migration, and displacement, the causes of which are multiple and varied. Millions of young people are forced to migrate each year for reasons including war and conflict, occupation, economic destabilization, colonization, human rights violations, or to flee persecution ([United Nations](#), 2013). Climate change powerfully contributes to the natural disasters that are driving migration in some parts of the world (Crate & Nuttall, 2009). Forces of development and gentrification also dislocate people from their communities and livelihoods (Kennelly & Watt, 2011), and many Indigenous communities in Canada continue to be forced to migrate as a result of environmental destruction and resource extraction projects (Thistle, 2017).

**These complex linkages between youth homelessness, migration, and displacement require action in three areas:**

- 1)** Policy reform to ensure newcomers have equitable access to healthcare, social services, housing, justice, and education;
- 2)** Investment in targeted supports and services for newcomer youth and their families, including people who have precarious legal status; and
- 3)** International and domestic policy reform to address the structural drivers that contribute to forced migration (e.g., conflict, colonization, climate change).

This work can be supported by policies and investments such as:

- The adoption of 'sanctuary city' policies within all Canadian cities, which "provide access to municipal services without fear of detection, detention, or deportation, for residents without full immigration status and/or without full status documents from the federal government" ([Canadian Labour Congress](#), 2018). This should include the adoption of 'sanctuary school' policies in Canadian schools in order to ensure equitable access to education for youth with precarious legal status.
- Targeted investment to expand settlement services for newcomer youth (age 13 – 24) to ensure these young people and their families have access to robust services and supports, including legal supports ([CAMH & CASC](#), 2014).
- The expansion of rent subsidies and housing vouchers for newcomer youth, in addition to investment in rent-geared-to-income, subsidized, and co-op housing for newcomer youth ([CAMH & CASC](#), 2014).
- Investment in green energy alternatives and the curbing of fossil fuel extraction within Canada, which contributes to the displacement of communities domestically and the global displacement of peoples due to climate change.
- Amendments to immigration detention practices that may keep children, young people, and their families or caregivers detained for unreasonable lengths of time, and often fail to assist individuals transitioning from immigration detention centres (thereby contributing to their risk of homelessness) (e.g., [Canadian Council for Refugees](#), 2017).

## 6) Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences

Research has consistently identified family conflict and abuse as direct or indirect causes of youth homelessness (Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2014). Youth who are homeless are more likely to have experienced significant childhood adversity such as sexual abuse, parental neglect, household substance abuse, and exposure to physical violence (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2016; McMorris et al., 2002; Rew et al., 2001; Tyler & Bersani, 2008). These challenges are commonly referred to as “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs) and are an important [social determinant of health](#). The [What Would it Take?](#) study demonstrated that youth who are homeless also experience ACEs within public systems (e.g., foster care).

**“This is real. We did not choose our parents to be drug addicts and kick us out at 12. That wasn’t our choice. We’re human. We’re doing the best we can with what we have. Maybe don’t look at us this way. Look at us like potential successful people that will provide for your future children, and support us.”**

**Calgary Youth**

**Given the connections between homelessness and childhood adversity, preventing ACEs is an important component of youth homelessness prevention.**

What occurs in the first 1,000 days of a person’s life powerfully impacts their development and well-being over the life course (Leroy et al., 2014). Research has shown that ACEs can have long-lasting effects on brain development, social development, and decision-making (Baker-Collins, 2013; Sokolowski et al., 2013). This is evident in homeless youth populations, with [national data](#) indicating that young people who experience childhood adversity before becoming homeless are more likely to attempt suicide, experience poorer mental health, and have a lower quality of life than youth who did not have these experiences (Kidd et al., 2017). Given the connections between homelessness and childhood adversity, preventing ACEs is an important component of youth homelessness prevention. Some studies support the efficacy of family-based interventions, such as parent education programs (Oral et al., 2016) and home visit programs (Neger & Prinz, 2015), but we also know that adversity can be reduced by building healthy communities and ensuring that families well-supported and have the resources they need to thrive (Biglan, Ryzin, & Hawkins, 2017).

## The prevention of ACEs might include interventions such as:

- Low-cost or free family mediation and counselling to families facing housing precarity and other challenges. Evidence-based models, such as ecologically based family therapy, have been shown to improve family relations (Cully, Wu, & Slesnick, 2018; Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005).
- The expansion of evidence-based violence prevention programs that aim to develop safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between children and their parents or caregivers. The World Health Organization (2010) identifies [four types](#) of these programs for which there is evidence: parenting programs (e.g., the [Positive Parenting Program](#)); parent and child programs (e.g., [Early Head Start](#)); social support groups (e.g., [Parents Anonymous](#)); and media interventions (e.g., the television series “Families”).
- The implementation of ACE screening methods within primary healthcare settings and the education system in order to support rapid responses to ACEs, such as the screening tool implemented as part of the [Geelong Project](#) in Australia.
- Expanded early childhood education programs, particularly for youth from low-income families and neighbourhoods (McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2001).
- Maternal healthcare and parenting supports for new parents who face socio-economic challenges, health, or addiction challenges, or are parenting a child who has health, mental health, or addiction challenges (Cutts et al., 2018). There is a particular need for supports for young parents.

**“If you do become homeless, um, it’s a really surreal feeling, really, like intellectually, like emotionally, like you’re really unstable ... once you become homeless, it doesn’t quite register, like, click right away, right? You’re tired, I want to go home, but I don’t have a home. Where am I supposed to go, right?”**

**Edmonton Youth**

## 7) Promoting Social Inclusion for All Youth

Social exclusion refers to the experiences and circumstances by which particular people are shut out of society's social, economic, political, and cultural institutions (Byrne, 1999; Mandianapour, 1998). This may happen when youth:

- Face barriers to staying in school (e.g., needing to work to support their family)
- Are unable to participate in community activities (e.g., activities that are inaccessible to youth with disabilities)
- Feel unsafe or discriminated against in healthcare settings (e.g., because of their gender presentation)

Social exclusion can result in social isolation, restricted access to opportunities, and more narrow life choices (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). Some of the key contributors to social exclusion for youth experiencing homelessness include: inadequate housing, lack of income, education disengagement, compromised health, weak social capital, chaotic lives, and interrupted adolescence (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). This exclusion can be so complete that youth have no one to turn to when they become homeless (Schwan et al., 2018a).

### **Promoting social inclusion can involve many forms of structural change (e.g., poverty reduction), as well as targeted approaches to increase inclusivity within communities and neighbourhoods.**


This can be supported by:

- Providing safe, confidential, and culturally-sensitive programming and supports for youth who are experiencing exclusion on the basis of their identities (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth), substance use, mental health or disability challenges, engagement in criminalized activities (e.g., drug dealing), or affiliations (e.g., gang affiliation).
- Providing opportunities for young people to become more involved in politics and political decision-making, ensuring that youth who face barriers to involvement (e.g., language barriers, disabilities) are effectively supported and included.
- Eliminate 'zero tolerance' policies in schools that function to remove youth from mainstream educational institutions and contribute to their criminal justice involvement, sometimes referred to as the 'school-to-prison pipeline' ([Heitzeg, 2009](#)).


## 8) Youth Homelessness Prevention Legislation & Policy

Legislation and social policy can guide, strengthen, enforce, and defend structural prevention efforts. As explained in [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#) (Gaetz & Dej, 2017), “government legislation and policy can and should play an important role in (a) identifying and addressing the drivers of homelessness, (b) setting out government responsibilities, goals, and objectives, (c) providing policy and funding context to support local communities, and (d) articulating how different government departments work together towards that end” (p. 52).

Important examples of international legislation that target the prevention of homelessness include England’s [Homelessness Reduction Act](#) (2017); the [Housing \(Wales\) Act](#) (2014); Washington State’s [Homeless Youth Prevention and Protection Act](#) (2015); and Ireland’s National [Homeless Prevention Strategy](#) (2002). Though research on the effects of these is preliminary, evaluations of the Housing (Wales) Act (2014) suggest that the legislation has resulted in a reduction of the number of people experiencing homelessness, including youth (Mackie, Thomas, & Bibbings, 2017). As we move towards youth homelessness prevention in Canada, it is essential to learn from other countries that have been implementing and evaluating the efficacy of prevention efforts. Particular attention should be given to how prevention policies and legislation are impacting youth, and how these approaches can be best adapted in the Canadian context. For example, Section 5 of this report examines how to adapt Duty to Assist legislation from other countries, such as Wales, into the Canadian context.



**By almost any measure, youth homelessness is a violation of youths’ human rights, and must be responded to as such.**



Whatever form it takes, Canadian youth homelessness prevention policy and legislation must be grounded in human rights. As outlined in [Youth Rights, Right Now](#) (2016), Canada is signatory on numerous international treaties outlining young people’s human rights to housing, education, health, food, and an adequate standard of living. These treaties include the OHCHR [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). By almost any measure, youth homelessness is a violation of youths’ human rights, and must be responded to as such. As we move toward implementing the right to housing in Canada, announced as part of the [National Housing Strategy](#), it is essential that advocates push for the entrenchment of specific, legislated obligations and accountabilities across all orders of government to uphold this right.

## Conclusion

In order to be maximally effective, youth homelessness prevention should tackle the underlying structural factors that put young people at risk of homelessness, such as poverty, colonization, insufficient health supports, and lack of affordable housing. These factors primarily originate in societal structures and systems, such as the labour market economy, housing market, education systems, and democratic institutions. Structural prevention is not the sole responsibility of the homelessness sector, and government investments in community-based homelessness initiatives should not be used to address structural issues that create risk of homelessness. Rather, structural prevention requires public sector innovation and transformation, bold political leadership, and substantial investments in Canada's social safety net. Addressing youth homelessness is a 'fusion policy' issue, needing both public will and ongoing collaboration across all orders of government and public systems.



**Structural prevention is not the sole responsibility of the homelessness sector, and government investments in community-based homelessness initiatives should not be used to address structural issues that create risk of homelessness. Rather, structural prevention requires public sector innovation and transformation, bold political leadership, and substantial investments in Canada's social safety net.**





## Systems Prevention:



### *How Public Systems Can be Reformed to Prevent Youth Homelessness*



*There is now a better understanding of the ways in which public systems (e.g., criminal justice, child welfare, healthcare, education) are implicated in young people's pathways into homelessness. Negative experiences, system gaps, silos, barriers to supports, and insufficient or underfunded services can all increase a young person's risk of homelessness*

Moreover, many young people who are in the care of public systems, such as child protection, are not adequately supported when they transition out of care. Public systems issues can also make it difficult for young people to exit homelessness, particularly in the context of structural issues, such as limited affordable housing. In fact, many young people in Canada trace their homelessness back to systems failures, and identify systems change as the most effective form of youth homelessness prevention (Schwan et al., 2018a).

Youth homelessness prevention must involve restructuring our systems to work in ways that *decrease* a young person's likelihood of becoming homeless, and *increase* their chances of health, safety, self-determination, education, meaningful employment, belonging, and housing stability. In order to be effective, youth homelessness prevention must address the "institutional and systems failures that either indirectly or directly contribute to the risk of homelessness" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 44). This is the work of systems prevention.

## Defining Systems Prevention


Systems prevention of youth homelessness involves identifying and addressing policies, programs, and practices within public systems that create barriers to young people's access to supports, and which expose young people to the risk of homelessness.

It is critical that each public system actively seek to support youth in acquiring and maintaining stable housing. Each interaction with a teacher, doctor, coach, or counsellor is an opportunity to identify when a youth is at risk of homelessness, and leverage that interaction to produce better housing outcomes for young people. This means that preventing youth homelessness is a shared responsibility across all public systems.


## What is Unique About Systems Prevention for Youth?

The public systems youth engage with, and the ways in which they are positioned within those systems, is unique. Firstly, some public systems are designed and mandated to meet the needs of children and youth as they progress through various developmental stages (e.g., secondary and post-secondary school, child welfare, the juvenile justice system). Additionally, some systems provide services or supports that are universal, regardless of a person's age, but may also offer supports or services targeted at young people (e.g., emergency medical care facilities that employ youth-focused social workers). Systems prevention must address the unique ways in which these different systems may be contributing to housing precarity homelessness for young people.

Across many public systems, age thresholds are key determinants of which services, supports, programs, and entitlements are available to youth. Being under 16 can mean a young person is unable to access mental health supports, get on a waitlist for youth housing, or access rent subsidies. Similarly, once a youth in care turns 18, they may be quickly removed from foster care and transitioned into a world in which they have drastically different legal, financial, and personal responsibilities. While these age markers are socially constructed and largely arbitrary, they profoundly shape *what* supports and programs young people can access, *how* they access them, and *what* entitlements and rights they have within them. This means that systems prevention for youth not only differs from adults, it may also look very different from youth to youth, depending on age and other factors.



**While these age markers are socially constructed and largely arbitrary, they profoundly shape *what* supports and programs young people can access, *how* they access them, and *what* entitlements and rights they have within them. This means that systems prevention for youth not only differs from adults, it may also look very different from youth to youth, depending on age and other factors.**



## Key Forms of Systems Prevention

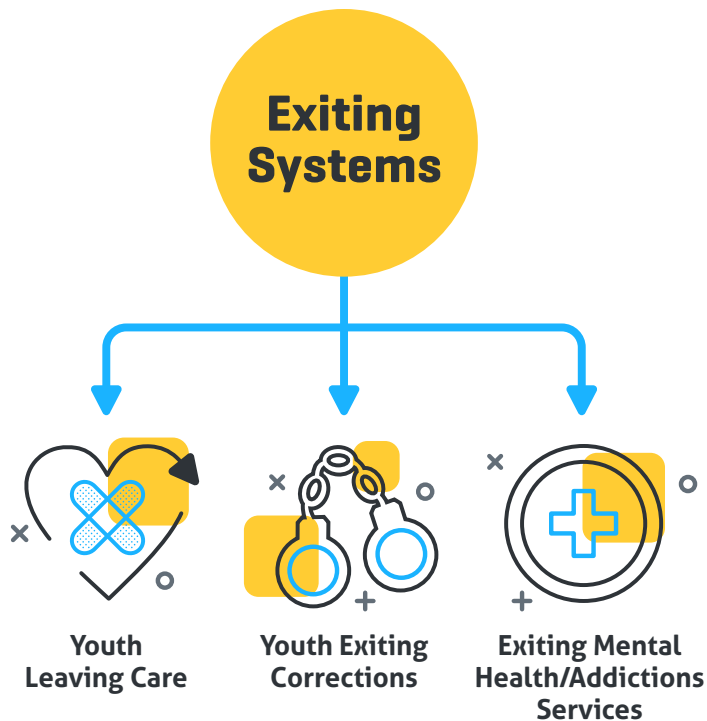
### The systems prevention of youth homelessness involves three primary domains:

- 1) **Transition supports for youth exiting public institutions and systems, including for youth leaving care, corrections, and healthcare or mental healthcare settings.**
- 2) **Enhancing youths' ability to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements, which can be achieved by improving "The Four 'A's": access, availability, affordability, and appropriateness.**
- 3) **Improving youths' experiences and outcomes in public systems, including by:**
  - Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems;
  - Embedding youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination in public systems;
  - Responding to abuse and neglect in public systems; and
  - Addressing silos and gaps within and between government funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.

This section will detail some of the key actions that can be taken to implement systems prevention. Youth homelessness prevention strategies should employ all three forms of systems prevention simultaneously in order to be maximally effective.

### 1) Transition Supports for Youth Exiting Public Institutions and Systems

Research has consistently shown that transitions from public institutions or systems are common pathways into homelessness for young people (Gaetz et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2017). After leaving care, corrections, immigration detention, or inpatient health or mental health services, young people often struggle to find affordable and appropriate housing. They may also struggle to reintegrate into community, reconnect with social supports, and re-engage with education, employment, or training. These transitions mark key opportunities to prevent youth homelessness. This section identifies tools and strategies to facilitate effective transitions from public institutions and systems for youth, detailing the transitional supports needed to ensure youth can thrive in their communities.



**"For me, there's nothing that could've [prevented me from becoming homeless], because starting out I was already in the foster care system, and when I left the foster care system they gave me two garbage bags and told me to get the hell out."**

**Montreal Youth**

### ***Supports for youth leaving care***

National and international research has shown that youth who were taken into care by government child welfare systems – including foster care, group homes, and youth custodial centres – are overrepresented in homeless youth populations (Gaetz et al., 2016; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Lemon Osterling & Hines, 2006). Studies have shown that transitions from care particularly contribute to homelessness, as well as poor health, education, and employment outcomes (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Perez & Romo, 2011).

Findings from the [Without a Home](#) study (2016) revealed that over half of currently homeless youth in Canada had a history of child welfare involvement. Factors that contribute to difficult transitions include: inadequate education, poor health and mental health, limited social supports, and limited financial resources – all of which most young people rely on when moving into adulthood (Courtney & Huerig, 2005).

Research indicates that housing stability can be improved through flexible subsidised, transitional, and supportive housing options for Youth following transitions from care, in combination with education and employment assistance, healthcare, and life skills training (Courtney & Huerig, 2005; Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009).

There are many innovative examples of practices, policy, and legislation that make these transitions easier for young people, including:

- [The After Care Guarantee](#) (Europe) – An 'After Care Guarantee' is being piloted in several European countries. Each program ensures that young people leaving care have access to housing, education, as well as employment and training supports. Each young person is provided with an 'aftercare worker' from age 16 to 24 to help ensure they successfully transition to independent living.
- Barnardo's [Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework](#) (England) - This framework holds promise for promoting housing stability among care leavers. The model includes five key stages young people move through: (1) preparing for the reality of the housing options, (2) planning accommodation and support options with youth, (3) reducing housing crisis, (4) accessing housing and support as needed, and (5) accessing and successfully managing independent living and support options.
- [First Place for Youth](#) (Oakland, California) – Based on the Housing First model, First Place offers several programs for youth transitioning from care. My First Place, for example, provides housing, education, and employment supports in five California communities to young people who have aged out of foster care (ages 18-24). Other First Place programs that support education, wellbeing, and social integration for youth leaving care include Steps to Success, First Foundation, and First Steps Community Centre. A similar adaptation of Housing First has been implemented in Lethbridge, Alberta. Woodgreen also operates a demonstration site in Toronto that offers [Housing First for Youth Leaving Care](#) within the intensive research and evaluation project, [Making the Shift](#).
- [Staying Put Scotland](#) (Scotland) – The 'Continuing Care' law in Scotland allows young people to remain in care until the age of 21, and provides youth who leave care between the ages of 16 and 21 with access to an 'aftercare package.' This package includes information on suitable accommodations rights, access to education, and additional supports they can take advantage of until the age of 26. Rather than shaping the transition process around age or legal status, Staying Put Scotland is committed to graduated transitions and seeks to meet the individual needs of care leavers.
- [Model Reforms to Child Protection](#) (United States) - The American Bar Association has produced examples of laws that can be adapted at the national level to better support young people's transitions from care.

Many of these models require more than child protection legal reform, but rely on functional partnerships between child welfare services, multiple government agencies and departments, and community-based youth-serving practitioners. In addition to these models and practice examples, research demonstrates that connections to others, reconnection with family, and access to a range of supports can improve long-term housing outcomes for youth exiting care (Kidd et al., 2017; Slesnick et al., 2017).

**Youth leaving corrections or immigration detention face enormous difficulty accessing housing, particularly when they lack the support of services or caring adults who can help them navigate the housing market (Wylie, 2014).**

### ***Supports for youth leaving corrections and immigration detention***

Youth leaving corrections or immigration detention face enormous difficulty accessing housing, particularly when they lack the support of services or caring adults who can help them navigate the housing market (Wylie, 2014). Young people with criminal records often experience difficulty obtaining rental housing (Mendes et al., 2014) and employment (Van der Geest et al., 2016), forcing some youth to return to crime in order to meet their basic needs. As a result, youth leaving corrections are at risk of getting caught in a 'revolving door', cycling between homelessness, reoffending, and re-entering the criminal justice system (Metraux & Culhane, 2006).

### **Research has identified some strategies that can improve the housing stability of youth transitioning from the criminal justice system, including:**

- Reconnecting youth with family and natural supports, which can be facilitated through care management from well-trained professionals (Mares & Jordan, 2012).
- Upon entry into corrections, planning for youths' transitions out (Menon et al., 1995), supported by solid case management while in custody (Nichols et al., 2017).
- Addressing the underlying causes of offending behaviours (e.g., mental health challenges, trauma, family conflict, lack of education or employment) in order to prevent recidivism.
- Effectively coordinating supports and services post-discharge to ensure young people do not 'fall through the cracks' (St. Basils, 2017).

St. Basil's [Youth Justice Accommodation Pathway](#) is an excellent example of how a proactive approach to discharge planning can be built into the corrections system. As new interventions and programs for young people leaving corrections are developed and identified, these should build on existing evidence-supported models and programs, such as the [Foyer Model](#), [Housing First for Youth](#), [Transitional Housing](#), Family Reconnect, and [employment programs](#). A by-product of efforts to reduce homelessness among youth leaving corrections may also be reduced crime and improved public safety in Canadian communities.

There has been limited research on how to best stabilize housing for youth transitioning from immigration detention centres, and few models exist in the literature. Future research, advocacy, and practice in this area is critical to ensuring young newcomers are provided with every opportunity to thrive following detention.

### ***Supports for youth leaving healthcare and mental health settings***

Youth homelessness has been linked to unsupported transitions from healthcare and mental health settings, including psychiatric wards, hospitals, and rehabilitation centres (Backer, Howard, & Moran, 2007). Remarkably, one study found that amongst adolescents discharged from psychiatric residential treatment, one-third experienced homelessness after discharge (Embry et al., 2000).

### **Studies indicate that when people are discharged without access to appropriate, affordable housing, the conditions that led them to inpatient care often worsen.**

Without housing, young people may be forced to stay in homeless shelters, which are often not equipped or suitable spaces for recovery (Forchuk et al., 2006). While research has demonstrated the efficacy of Critical Time Interventions and transitional housing and supports for adults (Forchuk et al., 2006), there has been limited research on effective models for youth. Future research is needed to determine what models, programs, and interventions can best support youth transitioning from health and mental health institutions.

*Critical Time Intervention (CTI) is an “empirically supported, time-limited case management model designed to prevent homelessness in people with mental illness following discharge from hospitals, shelters, prisons and other institutions. This transitional period is one in which people often have difficulty re-establishing themselves in stable housing with access to needed supports. CTI works in two main ways: by providing emotional and practical support during the critical time of transition and by strengthening the individual’s long-term ties to services, family, and friends.”*

*(Centre for the Advancement of Critical Time Intervention, 2009, p.1)*



## ***Preventing Early School Leaving***

While transition supports typically concern youth's exits from institutions in which they are *residing* and are responsible for their *care* (e.g., foster care), we also know that leaving other institutional settings can be difficult as well. Leaving school can be a challenging transition for any young person, and can be especially difficult when school leaving occurs early, is unsupported, or is undesired (e.g., school expulsion).

A pan-Canadian study demonstrated that among youth experiencing homelessness in Canada, 53.2% had dropped out of school, compared to a national average of 9% (Gaetz et al., 2016). This rate is alarming, given that youth who drop out of school have shorter life expectancies (Montez et al., 2012), often experience social exclusion (Liljedahl et al., 2013), and are less likely to secure stable employment (Gaetz et al., 2013). While [Without a Home](#) revealed that 50.5% of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada are not enrolled in employment, education, or training, 73.9% indicated they would like to return to school one day.

As part of systems prevention, preventing early school leaving should be a priority. The education system should be structured to support and accommodate the enormous challenges some young students face, including housing precarity.

## ***Transition Supports Across Systems – The case for 'zero discharge into homelessness' policies***

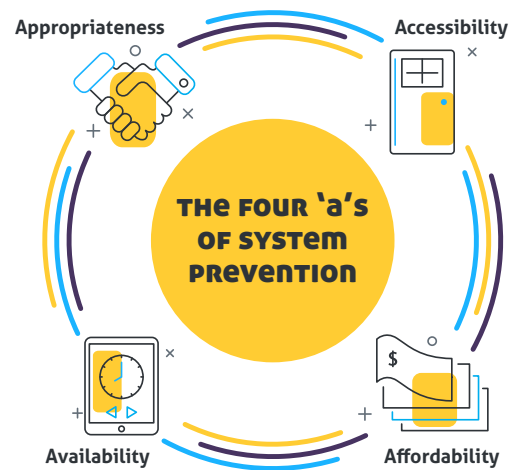
**The goal of all systems should be to adopt 'zero discharge into homelessness' policies across all institutions, agencies, and settings.** According to Gaetz and Dej (2016), key elements of all transition supports and transitional planning should include:

- "A robust policy, funding, and operational framework to ensure that all individuals in such institutional contexts have access to reintegration and transitional supports. This is not a targeted homelessness prevention strategy, per se, but rather one that focuses on successful outcomes for those leaving public institutions.
- Reforming systems to take account of changing demographic and economic circumstances. For instance, expanding the age mandate of child protection services and support.
- A statutory requirement that all relevant public institutions identify those at risk of homelessness upon discharge, and ensure that individuals have access to additional services and supports that facilitate social inclusion and access to housing. This requires:
  - » Various government ministries and departments to expand their mandate and responsibility beyond their legally required period (for instance, prisons and hospitals do not currently have responsibility for individuals after they are discharged).
  - » Collaboration and cooperation between different departments, systems, and sectors to provide supports to individuals at risk of homelessness.
  - » Engagement with, and funding for, community-based services to provide transitional case management supports, and in some cases 'aftercare' (e.g., income, social and health supports, system navigation) once individuals and families leave the system." (p. 61-62)



## 2) Enhancing Youths' Ability to Equitably Access and Benefit from Public Systems, Supports, and Entitlements

A key component of youth homelessness prevention is ensuring that all young people are able to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements. This can take four primary forms, called "The Four 'a's" of system prevention: availability, access, affordability, and appropriateness.



### Availability

**Lack of available services and supports contributes to poverty, poorer health outcomes, poorer educational outcomes, and other disadvantages that put some young people and their families at risk of homelessness.**

Research and advocates have shown that the quality of services and supports not only vary geographically, but some communities have fewer supports and services available to them. For example, research has demonstrated that on-reserve child welfare services, education, housing, social services, and healthcare are systematically underfunded and thus less available to residents ([Auditor General of Canada, 2018](#)). The National Council of Welfare (2009) has also documented that Indigenous housing is [disproportionally substandard and inadequate](#), in comparison to non-Indigenous housing.

Improving the availability of public supports, services, programs, and entitlements is a critical component of systems prevention. Strategies for increasing the availability of supports include:

- Ensuring equitable funding for on-reserve housing, education, healthcare, social services, and other public services and supports.
- Increasing the availability of low-cost childcare in all communities across Canada.
- Ensuring youth in poor, rural, and remote areas are able to access the same quality of education that is available to youth in wealthier communities.

## Access

**Access to public supports, services, programs, and entitlements is often a key factor in determining whether a young person will end up on the streets. The *What Would it Take?* report revealed that many young people explicitly link their homelessness to the challenges they faced trying to receive support from public systems (Schwan et al., 2018a).**

Key access issues include:

- Lack of knowledge about existing services, supports, or programs;
- Mobility and transportation challenges;
- Lack of accommodations for youth with disabilities or chronic health issues;
- Language barriers;
- Long waitlists, and;
- Discriminatory behaviour on the part of public system professionals.

**“We advocate for an increased understanding on the part of service providers and social services in general, that youth will break rules, not always return to curfew, not make it to every appointment set for them, and they will not necessarily abstain from drugs, sex, or crime. This is not because young people are bad and undeserving, but because they have learned to trust and answer only to themselves; in short, because they have had to learn to survive.”**

**Building Bridges: Perspectives on Youth Homelessness from First Nations, Inuit, Metis, Newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ Youth in Ottawa**

Rules, policies, practices, and procedures in public systems can also make it difficult for young people to access supports. Such rules may:

- Prevent youth without ID (e.g., birth certificate, health card) from accessing a service;
- Require that youth follow strict rules in order to access services, supports, or housing;
- Prevent youth from accessing a service because of their age;
- Require that youth abstain from substance use in order to receive services, supports, or housing, or;
- Prevent youth from accessing housing or services because they do not meet a particular qualifying criteria to be considered homeless (e.g., not 'sleeping rough').

Improving access requires a multi-pronged approach in all public systems, built on a rigorous review of how policies and practices create access barriers for some youth and their families.

Good strategies include:

- Providing 'system navigators' for youth and their families.
- Providing low-barrier, community-based health and mental health services, such as [Jigsaw](#) (Ireland) and [Headspace](#) (Australia).
- Removing financial barriers for services, such as providing free and timely legal counsel for young people through legal aid clinics or other services.
- Improving outreach and public knowledge about available services and supports, including by positioning information in high-traffic locations.
- Removing 'zero tolerance' policies (e.g., for substance use, theft) in schools, shelters, group homes, and other institutions in which youth are engaged.

**"To access BC housing or any youth rent subsidies, you have to be homeless for a minimum of six months before they'll even look at you. Six months is a long time. And there's no need for any youth to go through that just to get a house. Cause some of them can make it through that time period, but some can't."**

**Vancouver Youth**

## Affordability

A key challenge for many young people across Canada is the cost of services and supports that would help them stabilize their housing, health, education, or relationships with others. While some communities provide important free services (e.g., system navigation for newcomers, mental healthcare services), these may have long waitlists and/or have prohibitive eligibility criteria. In the absence of these supports, poor families and youth may be forced to choose between paying the rent, purchasing medication, buying mobility devices (e.g., wheelchair), or purchasing food.

People in poverty are often forced to make difficult choices and risk the loss of housing in order to remain in school, meet their healthcare needs, manage a chronic illness or disability, or support a family member.

By making essential services and supports affordable to all people in Canada, public systems can play an important role in poverty reduction and youth homelessness prevention. There are numerous policy levers that can increase affordability:

- Expanding universal coverage of prescription drugs
- Including sanitary products and products for incontinence under universal healthcare coverage
- Increasing the availability of free mental health services in all Canadian communities, particularly those that are underserved
- Implementing universal childcare across Canada
- Expanding the range of supports, services, and devices covered under provincial/territorial disability support programs

**“I don’t know any homeless youth who are able to pay for their own prescriptions. But they’re constantly being told by doctors, ‘Okay, what you need to do is you need to go and get a prescription and then you need to go and get it filled because you’re going to die if you don’t take this drug.’ Well, okay. Where do they go to get that prescription filled if they’re broke?”**

**Calgary Youth**

## Appropriateness

While youth and their families may be able to access public services or supports, these supports may not always be *appropriate*. Services or supports do not always adequately account for a youth's needs, unique circumstances or background, developmental stage, or self-identified priorities or goals.

Inappropriate services may be ineffective at decreasing the risk of homelessness for youth, or at worst, can be harmful and cause youth and their families to distrust public systems and professionals.

All public systems should strive towards providing age-appropriate supports that are culturally appropriate and grounded in a commitment to anti-oppression and positive youth development. Research demonstrates a particular need for public systems to offer Indigenous-focused services and supports that are culturally sensitive and embed Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices, and Indigenous leadership and self-determination at every level. Substantial funding, professional training, and changes to organizational governance structures are needed across all public systems in order to dismantle these colonial practices and provide appropriate services to Indigenous youth and their families.

Similarly, newcomers may experience public system services as insensitive to their cultural, religious, or spiritual beliefs and practices, and some communities may prefer to disengage from these supports as a result. In order to improve equitable access to these supports, public system administrators and professionals must make concerted efforts to work with newcomer communities in redesigning services and supports that will be more welcoming, appropriate, and helpful to newcomers in Canada.

**"Its very difficult living in the south, away from home, because a lot of these services that you're accessing, there's no cultural sensitivity. I think that it's important that, you're seeing it more now, that they do hire Inuit to specifically work with the Inuit clients. But when I moved here seven years ago there wasn't anything like that and it made it that much harder."**

**Young Inuit Woman**  
**[Building Bridges: Perspectives on Youth Homelessness from First Nations, Inuit, Metis, Newcomer, And LGBTQ2S+ Youth in Ottawa]**

### 3) Improving Youths' Experiences & Outcomes in Public Systems

Young people's experiences within public systems, and the outcomes associated with those experiences, influence their risk of homelessness. While stably housed youth may have positive experiences with public systems, many youth experiencing homelessness report repeated negative experiences in the healthcare, criminal justice, education, immigration, and child welfare systems. Research shows that these difficulties often compound over time, harming youth and trapping them in cycles of poverty and marginalization (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016).

This section examines ways to improve youths' experiences and outcomes in public systems. While this work ranges considerably, there are four key areas of action that should be included in this type of systems prevention:

- Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems;
- Embedding youth voice and self-determination in public systems;
- Effectively preventing and responding to abuse and neglect in public systems, and;
- Addressing silos and gaps within and between government-funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.

#### ***Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems***

Discrimination and inequity in public systems exist at both the community level and the practice level. Particular communities experience profound inequities in public service availability and quality (e.g., Wilson & Cardwell, 2012). Discriminatory practices by public systems professionals contribute to the marginalization, exclusion, and poverty of youth as well. There are systems prevention interventions that can address both levels of discrimination and inequity.

*While stably housed youth may have positive experiences with public systems, many youth experiencing homelessness report repeated negative experiences in the healthcare, criminal justice, education, immigration, and child welfare systems. Research shows that these difficulties often compound over time, harming youth and trapping them in cycles of poverty and marginalization (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016).*

At the community level, systems prevention can seek to ensure equal protection of legal and human rights across all communities. These systems changes need to occur alongside measures that prevent discriminatory behaviours and practices within various contexts, such as classrooms, hospitals, and social assistance offices. Research has shown links between housing precarity and discrimination by professionals in healthcare, social services, education, housing, and the immigration system (e.g., Abramovich, 2012; Baskin, 2007; Christiani et al., 2008; Milburn et al., 2010). A key finding of *What Would it Take?* (Schwan et al., 2018a) is that some youth directly attribute their homelessness to the discriminatory behaviour of public systems professionals. Youth focus groups revealed that:

- “Youth were stigmatized by teachers for their mental health issues.
- Youth were kicked out of services because of their sexuality or gender expression.
- Youth were ignored when they said their home or building was unsafe.” (p. 8)

These findings demonstrate the urgent need to identify and dismantle discriminatory and inequitable practices and behaviours within public systems. Steps toward anti-discrimination and equitable service provision include:

- Education, training, resources, and supports on equity, anti-oppression, cultural sensitivity, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and anti-colonialism for all frontline and managerial staff within public systems serving youth (see Abramovich, 2016; Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012).
- Accountability mechanisms to support anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, solutions- and equity-oriented practices among frontline staff in public systems.
- Safe and accessible pathways through which young people can report discrimination or inequity within any public system.
- Redress mechanisms that are prompt, impartial, equitable, and ultimately account to youth themselves (Schwan et al., 2018a).

## PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

One mechanism through which experiences of discrimination can be addressed is through the legal system. Unfortunately, access to legal supports for youth who are poor, marginalized, or homeless remains limited. An innovative example of legal supports for youth who are homeless is [Street Youth Legal Services](#) (SYLS), run by Justice for Children and Youth in Toronto, ON. SYLS “provides legal information, advice, referrals and representation to street-involved youth through workshops and individual consultations.”



**“I have friends that are in foster homes or group homes and stuff and I hear about how the staff in these group homes or the resources...they’re not able to access properly, or their social workers or whatever aren’t helping them properly, and it’s always based on race.”**

**Vancouver Youth**



## ***Embedding youth voice and self-determination in public systems***

Compared to adults, young people often have more limited self-determination within public systems. This is, in part, due to dominant social and cultural beliefs about youths' capacity, maturity, or abilities. In many systems youth are given fewer opportunities to exert personal choice (e.g., when making medical decisions) or are unable to access services or supports without the permission of others (e.g., addiction services that require parental permission).

Some youth, such as youth with disabilities, face particularly strong resistance when they try to assert choices, especially if those choices do not align with system professionals' expectations, assessments, or beliefs. Limiting client choice and self-determination has deep historical roots in social work and other professional practice in Canada. The residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in care highlight the violent and systematic suppression of the rights of Indigenous youth.

While many public systems in Canada provide platforms for children and youth to inform policies and practices, youth experiencing homelessness report having limited control over their lives within public systems (Schwan et al., 2018a). For example, youth report few opportunities to:

- Inform what kinds of supports or services they receive, what those supports look like, or the duration of those supports;
- Shape how public system professionals respond to the difficulties they face (e.g., how teachers respond to disclosures of sexual assault);
- Determine where they live, with whom they live, or the kind of housing they live in;
- Control what information is collected about them, or how that information is shared, and;
- Access remedies if their views or experiences are ignored, discounted, or silenced by public system professionals.

**“Rights can only be respected, protected, and fulfilled when they are recognized in law, with institutions dedicated to ensuring the accountability of the state – both to the international community and to rights-holders themselves.”**

***Youth Rights, Right Now***

## Research has shown that a young person’s sense of personal control within social service settings directly impacts housing stability (Slesnick et al., 2017).

If we want public systems to contribute to better outcomes for young people, we must respect and protect *youths’ right to choose what is best for themselves*, while accounting for their age and developmental stage. To do this, we must tackle the ways in which public systems may silence, marginalize, or criminalize youths’ choices. This is part of a commitment to the human rights of all children and youth. One of the core four principles of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) is “respect for the views of the child,” with Article 12 assuring “the views of the child be given due weight” in all matters that concern them. As a signatory on the UNCRC, Canada has an obligation to uphold this commitment.

Embedding youth’s right to self-determination within public system policies and practices may require a cultural shift within some institutions, as well as the implementation of legislation and policies that ensure public system professionals are accountable to upholding the rights of youth. The [Housing First for Youth model](#) (HF4Y) provides an excellent example of how youth choice and voice can be implemented within a public system.

**“Everybody thought I was lying. I was in an abusive home and everyone thought I was fine every day. My life was terrible for all these years ... And the Ministry should take care of all these kids because my life was ruined. The Ministry wouldn’t help.”**

**Vancouver Youth**

### ***Effectively preventing and responding to abuse & neglect in public systems***

In addition to histories of family conflict or abuse, youth who are homeless may also experience abuse or neglect *within* public systems.

For example, some studies demonstrate high levels of abuse, violence, and neglect within foster homes and group homes (including sexual violence and sex trafficking) (e.g., Euser et al., 2014; O’Brien et al., 2017; Riebschleger et al., 2015).

Research has also shown that youth within the juvenile justice system are often exposed to violence or the risk of violence (Beck et al., 2013; Mendel, 2011).

Youth in these situations may have limited access to alternative housing options, reliable social supports, access to legal advice or representation, and avenues to pursue effective remedies. These experiences may contribute to mental health and addictions challenges, trauma, social exclusion, and disengagement from education and employment – all factors that increase risk of homelessness. Effectively preventing and responding to abuse and neglect in public systems is a critical component of systems prevention.

### Strategies that may prevent abuse and neglect within public systems include:

- Improved screening mechanisms to identify and respond to abuse and neglect within foster care homes, group homes, juvenile detention centres, and other facilities or institutions;
- Free and accessible mental health, addictions, and family mediation supports for foster families and carers within the child welfare system (Brown et al., 2007b);
- Training in trauma-informed practices for all frontline workers and carers in the criminal justice and child welfare systems, and;
- Improved legal supports for youth who have been victims of violence, crime, and neglect within public systems (Estrada & Marksamer, 2006).

Further upstream, preventing young people from entering the criminal justice or the child welfare systems in the first place circumvents possible experiences of abuse and neglect within these systems. [Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence](#) outlines evidence-based interventions for preventing entry into both systems, as well as research on preventing youth in care from entering the criminal justice system.

**“Also, the Ministry [of Children and Youth services] having better trust in what disabled people are saying that are happening at home because ... the Ministry will go in and investigate but, like, if the kid’s disabled, they’ll always take the parent’s words over it [abuse]. And I know that that’s not just me. Like, lots of people I know who had diagnoses would just get ignored because they had a diagnosis.”**

**Vancouver Youth**


## Conclusion

Research has revealed that public systems, such as healthcare, education, and criminal justice, significantly influence young people's risk of homelessness, both positively and negatively. In consultations with youth across the country, young people felt that "systems change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most effective" (Schwan et al., 2018a, p. 9). This underscores just how critical systems prevention is in a comprehensive approach to youth homelessness prevention. It is time to retool and reimagine public systems as agents of youth homelessness prevention.


Critical to this is dramatically improving young people's experiences within, and transitions out of, public systems. A key finding from [What Would it Take?](#) (Schwan et al., 2018a) was the frequency with which youth experiencing homelessness felt traumatized, marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated against in their interactions with public system professionals, including child welfare workers, social workers, teachers, police officers, and others.

**We believe youth. We also believe systems professionals want to do better. This means that we must provide frontline system staff with the tools, resources, training, and supports to meaningfully support the wellbeing, inclusion, and success of the young people they serve.**

With improved understandings of how public systems contribute to or exacerbate youth homelessness, systems can be restructured to work together for youth. Policy silos were designed to provide conceptual and practical ease, efficiency, and clarity for policy development and assigning responsibility. However, in practice, the siloed nature of public governance fails to be person-centred and responsive. Our current approach does not account for the complex policy issues that cut across policy areas. Both public and non-profit service providers are forced to find ad hoc, piecemeal, and often inefficient workarounds to respond to youth falling into homelessness. Systems navigation should not be the responsibility of a young person at-risk of homelessness. It is incumbent upon the public systems to mould and adapt to the needs, rights, and desires of young people. In doing so, young people across the country have a greater chance at sustaining long-term housing stability, wellness, and social inclusion.



**It is time to retool and reimagine public systems as agents of youth homelessness prevention.**



## Early Intervention:



### *Targeted Supports for Young People At Risk of Homelessness*



*In the [What Would it Take?](#) study (Schwan et al., 2018a), young people were able to pinpoint the critical junctures where intervention would have prevented their homelessness. Caring adults, such as teachers, coaches, and neighbours, may hear about youths' struggles or notice changes in their behaviour, but not know how to connect them to supports.*

Service providers, in efforts to prioritize high volumes of clients, may have eligibility criteria that require people to be on the streets for a minimum length of time before being able to receive support. Failure to immediately respond to youths' needs puts them at increased risk of trauma, violence, victimization, and chronic adult homelessness. Requiring youths' situations to worsen, or for them to become more deeply entrenched in homelessness to access services and supports, is unethical and causes the need for more intensive and long-term interventions than responding to early signs of distress.

**Youth homelessness prevention requires policy and program interventions that identify signs of distress and rapidly take action to provide or connect youth and their families with support. This is the work of early intervention.**

## Defining Early Intervention

Gaetz and Dej (2017) describe early intervention as “policies, practices, and interventions that help individuals and families who are at extreme risk of, or who have recently experienced, homelessness obtain the supports needed to retain their current housing or rapidly access new and appropriate housing” (p. 44). Similarly, early intervention strategies for youth focuses on rapidly meeting the physical, emotional, material, interpersonal, social, and educational needs of young people who are at imminent risk of, or who have just become, homeless. Early intervention includes a range of community-based program interventions, and systems-level policies, to provide young people and their families with supports and enhance their resilience in order to reduce the potential for long-term negative outcomes.

**Youth and their families should receive assistance to navigate systems, assert their rights, and access the supports they are eligible for.**

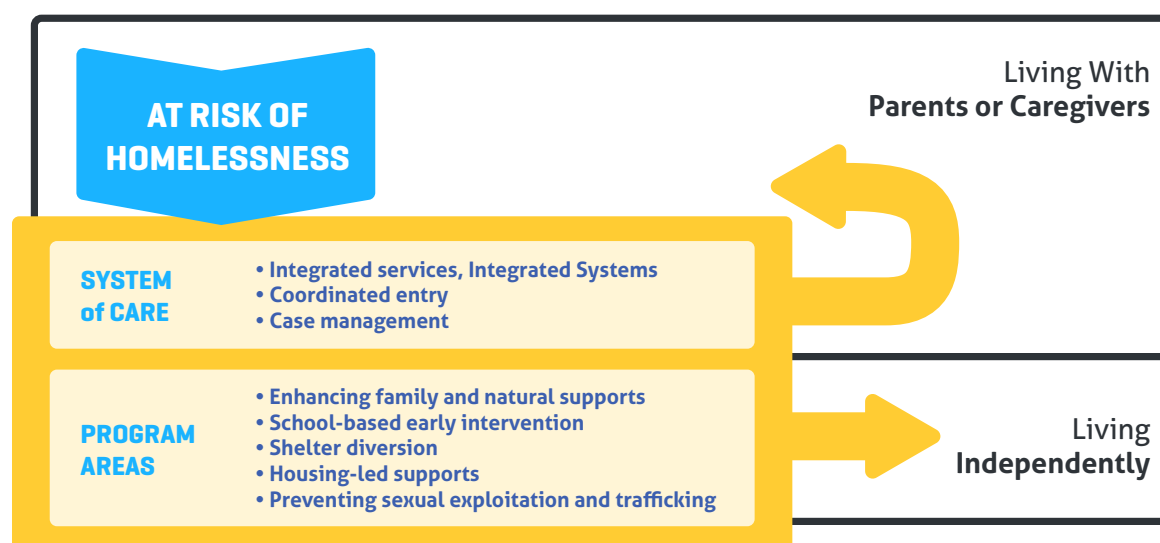
Young people may receive individual and family supports to return home or move into new accommodations in a safe and planned way. The range of supports they require align with those discussed in *Section V – Housing Stabilization*. Early intervention also includes providing “local temporary housing solutions if people lose their housing so that they are able to maintain natural supports (friends and relatives) and local connections to institutions that they are currently engaged in (e.g., health care, education, community services)” (p. 44). A positive youth development orientation must guide service delivery, and includes the use of strengths-based assessment tools. Early intervention strategies strengthen adolescents’ protective factors by enhancing engagement with school, nurturing family and natural supports, and building their problem-solving, conflict resolution, and life skills.

## Why Early Intervention?

When addressing any health or social issue, it is important to intervene as early as possible to reduce negative outcomes. The factors that contribute to housing and family instability can arise early in life, and many youth first become homeless in early adolescence.

For instance, the [Without a Home](#) study found that over 40% of currently homeless youth had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 16 (Gaetz et al., 2016). Early episodes of homelessness may go undetected by authorities if youth are couch surfing, and in other cases caring adults such as teachers, instructors, coaches, and neighbours may know something is wrong, but do not know how to intervene. Beyond engaging child protection services, most communities lack effective systems to address the needs of young people and their families when in crisis. Community strategies to address homelessness generally do little or nothing to support young people who experience homelessness before the age of 16, with shelters and day programs often only available to those 16 and older. Ending youth homelessness, and reducing the likelihood of chronic homelessness in adulthood, requires investment in early intervention.

**FIGURE 1: EARLY INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK**



## Who is Responsible for Early Intervention? Creating A System of Care

A 'system of care' ideally needs to be in place to implement effective early intervention. Originating in children's mental health and addictions sectors, a System of Care is defined as "an adaptive network of structures, processes, and relationships grounded in system of care values and principles that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families with access to and availability of necessary services and supports across administrative and funding jurisdictions" (Hodges et al., 2006, p. 3). A System of Care, then, is a client-centred approach to systems integration involving coordination of services designed to ensure that young people (and their families) get timely and appropriate access to the supports they need.

**A System of Care, then, is a client-centred approach to systems integration involving coordination of services designed to ensure that young people (and their families) get timely and appropriate access to the supports they need.**

At the local level this means more than just service integration within the homelessness sector, but effective and seamless partnerships between youth serving organizations and mainstream institutions and services. In other words, communities must work towards an integrated systems response involving coordination at every level, including policy, intake, service delivery, and client outcomes tracking. The best integrated service models are client-focused and driven with supports designed to ensure that the needs of young people (and potentially their families) are met in a timely and respectful way. To create a complete early intervention system of care, and before exploring early intervention program areas, there are a number of factors to consider that can be grouped into the following categories:

### Early Intervention System of Care

- **Integrated Services, Integrated Systems**
- **Coordinated Entry**
- **Case Management**



**At the community level, programs and services that serve young people who experience homelessness<sup>2</sup> must work collaboratively to facilitate improved client flow, data sharing, referrals, and planning. Integrating services may cause a major shift for many community agencies that are accustomed to operating autonomously from others.**

## **a) Integrated Services, Integrated Systems**

Integral to systems of care is the integration of service planning, coordination, and service delivery management at the sector, agency, and program levels, in order to create client-centred pathways that allow young people to access the services they need (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016).

At the community level, programs and services that serve young people who experience homelessness<sup>2</sup> must work collaboratively to facilitate improved client flow, data sharing, referrals, and planning. Integrating services may cause a major shift for many community agencies that are accustomed to operating autonomously from others. Communities and funders may initially be resistant to the idea of integration because of the change in practice and objectives that may be required.

An excellent example of local service integration is the [Street Youth Planning Collaborative](#) in Hamilton, where the range of street youth-serving agencies actively collaborate to meet the needs of young people through collective planning, and integrated service delivery to ensure young people have their needs met by an appropriate, seamless, and comprehensive range of services.

A system of care requires more than just service integration within the homelessness sector, but the integration of the many systems that youth interact with. Systems integration involves engaging with and convening a range of public institutions and systems, including healthcare, education, employment, family support services, and the justice system, to identify and support young people at risk of homelessness. The principles of Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Harwood, 2014; Cabaj & Weaver, 2016) provide guidance on how to achieve systems integration. In particular, communities need strong leadership and a backbone organization to coordinate and keep the work progressing.

Implementing a system of care approach has the potential to change the experience for young people who are facing challenges at home and in the community. "Rather than just contacting an agency or organization, a young person is engaging a system in which their needs are assessed, underlying issues are identified and plans are put in place to support them and their families. All of this is done with a client-centered focus, so that they are in charge of determining their needs and where they need to go" (Gaetz, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> In thinking about homelessness services that young people access, we need to remember that many adult-focused services also serve young people.

## b) Coordinated Entry

Coordinated Entry is key to both systems integration and implementing early intervention program areas for young people at risk of homelessness. **The intent of coordinated entry is to create a standardized process for intake, assessment, and referral.** Accessibility should be an important consideration for coordinated entry. There should be as few barriers as possible for accessing support, with a 'no wrong door' approach, so young people are able to connect with and access the supports they need in a way that is timely, seamless, streamlined, and effective from the perspective of the young person, their family, and/or the referring adult. A major barrier for young people in accessing supports is that they may be required to leave their neighbourhoods to get the help they need. Ideally there should be multiple points of entry in a system of care, including face to face contact at different agencies, call or text, and web-based applications. Where possible, an outreach approach should be employed where young people can meet a support worker at a place of their choosing.

**"A lot of agencies work independently from one another, and they can do external referrals, but a lot of them don't in larger communities. And there should be provincially set standards, where agencies and social services work together to be able to fill in those gaps that they're missing."**

**Youth Rights, Right Now**

**The key to making coordinated entry work is to employ it as a system-wide process with common points of entry (through community hubs, a dedicated assessment facility, phone or web-based access, or emergency services), a common assessment, and a data management system that allows for some data-sharing and referral.**

It needs to be both visible and easily accessible, so that young people and/or their families are aware of and able to access help and support when they need it. To effectively address the needs of youth, coordinated entry systems should be youth-focused, and ideally be separated from similar adult systems, although this may be a challenge in some contexts. The reason for having dedicated youth coordinated entry is that young people may feel safer with a separate access point, operated by staff specializing in youth who can conduct youth-based assessments, and have knowledge of appropriate resources.

Key aspects of Coordinated Entry include: a) Standardized Intake and Assessment, b) Triage, Referral, and Prioritization, and c) Data Management.

## Standardized Intake and Assessment

In practical terms, a coordinated intake system enables young people at risk of homelessness to seek help through a central portal, and become registered in the system. A standardized intake and assessment system ensures all young people seeking support go through the same process regardless of where or how they present or access services. Standardized intake facilitates systems coordination, and decreases the number of times youth are required to tell their story, which can be emotionally difficult or result in stigmatization.

Young people may access coordinated entry on their own, at the behest of their families, or through referral by other meaningful adults in their life. Ideally communities should have a “no wrong door” approach whereby intake is standardized but there are multiple entry points, and depending on the community, coordinated entry can be accessed by phone, through the internet, or in-person at an agency or service hub.

Depending on the situation, young people are often assessed with a short screening tool to understand basic and immediate needs. A more comprehensive assessment may follow, which is used to determine the needs of youth, program eligibility, and priority setting. Screening and assessment should take into account factors that contribute to risk and resilience, changes in acuity, and the role parents, caregivers, community and environment play in the young person’s development. Tools used for screening and assessment should also be youth -centred and -specific, and standardized, and should not become a barrier to access or solely rely on measuring housing need or risk. Tools should reflect the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural needs and strengths of developing young people.

### The best assessment tools for youth are strengths-based, not only assessing risks, but assets and resilience.



The [Youth Assessment Prioritization](#) tool, (which includes both a “screener” and a more extensive assessment tool) is a good example of a tool that helps in understanding underlying problems, risk of longer-term homelessness, and is a useful aid in prioritization. The YAP tool is strengths-based, evidence-informed, and relies on the knowledge of both the young person and the worker.

It is important to note that no single assessment tool can do everything. The first assessment, combined with the judgment of the caseworker, may indicate a need for deeper assessments using established tools to identify conditions such as brain injury, developmental delays, FASD, or other disabling conditions.

## ***Triage, Referral, and Prioritization***

Based on assessment, young people should be triaged to appropriate services and supports. Those who are identified as having the most complex and severe service needs, or who are most vulnerable can then be prioritized for specific programs, including [Housing First for Youth](#). It is important in a prevention-focused system that:

- Everything should be done to stabilize housing and prevent a worsening of the situation;
- Place-based shelter diversion strategies should assist young people to stay in place, and remain connected to school, friends, and other natural supports;
- Access to mainstream services and supports is facilitated, and;
- Young people have a say in what services and supports they are offered.

## ***Data Management***

A necessary requirement for early intervention is a comprehensive data management system that allows agencies and communities to track client flow, support system integration, and measure the impact of prevention interventions. In Canada, [HIFIS](#) is the most commonly used data management system. For service providers, data management systems enhance their ability to collect and manage relevant data regarding clients, including not only their personal characteristics, but also service utilization. This works most effectively with a data-sharing agreement and platform. While respecting privacy, data-sharing means that young people can be tracked as they move through the system, and that they do not have to repeat an intensive, and potentially intrusive, intake every time they encounter a service.

**While respecting privacy, data-sharing means that young people can be tracked as they move through the system, and that they do not have to repeat an intensive, and potentially intrusive, intake every time they encounter a service.**

The benefits of integrated data are many. First, it can support the alignment of program philosophies, activities, and outcomes across the sector. Second, it can contribute to enhanced collaboration, systems integration, and rethinking how to collectively respond to the problem of youth homelessness through Collective Impact. Third, and most importantly, it can potentially lead to better outcomes for youth, by improving access to services that are most appropriate, enabling more effective flow through the system, and holding the sector accountable to shared outcomes.

## Putting in place rigorous procedures for obtaining informed consent and data-sharing, communities can track individual progress in real-time.

Some communities use approaches such as 'by-name' lists to assist with prioritization for Housing First, for instance, and helping track the reduction of homelessness. In some cases, where young people fear for their personal safety or have privacy concerns because of their involvement in illegal activities, they may be uncomfortable having their names on a shared database. Service providers and case managers should be responsive to these concerns and help protect youths' privacy in cases where youth may be put at greater risk of harm if their information is disclosed with systems, such as criminal justice. Well-designed data management systems should thoughtfully and adequately take into account privacy and security concerns, and ensure youth consent and choice. Taking such an approach may assist in reassuring young people that their rights are being protected, and that data collection and referrals are intended to enhance access to the supports and fulfillment of their goals.

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### c) Case Management

Early intervention means providing young people with support without coercion. Young people who are struggling should not be expected to solve all of their problems on their own and 'bootstrap' themselves out of crisis. Youth-focused case management is a well-established approach to supporting young people with complex needs and/or who are in crisis.

There are different approaches to case management, which need to be tailored to the needs of the young person (Milaney, 2011a; Morse, 1998). Depending on their underlying issues and needs, case management may involve short-term crisis counselling or it may be more intensive and longer-term. Key here is that young people need supports for as long as it takes to help them transition to adulthood, independence, and well-being. Once again, supports offered must be conducted from a strengths-based Positive Youth Development and life skills-building orientation – this approach must guide every interaction with young people.

Good case management requires a willingness on the part of the young person to participate, and building a potentially therapeutic relationship may take time. In a review of case management as a key component of strategies to end homelessness, Milaney (2012) identified it as a strengths-based team approach with six key dimensions:

- 1) **Collaboration and cooperation:** A true team approach, involving several people with different backgrounds, skills and areas of expertise;
- 2) **Right matching of services:** Person-centered and based on the complexity of need;
- 3) **Contextual case management:** Interventions must appropriately account for age, ability, culture, gender and sexual orientation. In addition, an understanding of broader structural factors and personal history (of violence, sexual abuse, or assault, for instance) must underlie strategies and modes of engagement;
- 4) **The right kind of engagement:** Building a strong relationship based on respectful encounters, openness, listening skills, non-judgmental attitudes, and advocacy;
- 5) **Coordinated and well-managed system:** Integrating interventions into the broader system of care, and;
- 6) **Evaluation for success:** The ongoing and consistent assessment of case managed supports.

Many young people can best be supported through a case management approach where the case worker has the overall responsibility for care and support, and also acts as a broker to help young people access services and supports. When delivered within a system of care, case management can appropriately match young people to programs and services based on their identified needs.

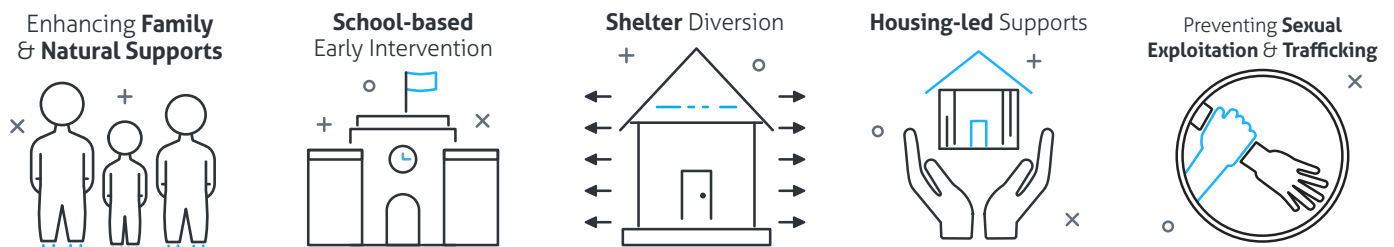
## Key Forms of Early Intervention

*An important feature of most early intervention programs is that they are place-based. When young people are forced to leave their communities because they are homeless, they not only lose their family and home, but also their community and potentially a web of natural supports, friends, and meaningful adults (neighbours, teachers, coaches, counselors, etc.).*

The key components of the System of Care described above are essential for early intervention prevention strategies to be effective. An important feature of most early intervention programs is that they are place-based. When young people are forced to leave their communities because they are homeless, they not only lose their family and home, but also their community and potentially a web of natural supports, friends, and meaningful adults (neighbours, teachers, coaches, counselors, etc.). The best early intervention strategies are designed to bring services and supports directly to young people (and their families), so that they remain embedded in their system of natural supports, continue to attend school, and can move forward in a safe and supported way.



### EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM AREAS



The program areas described below - and the program models and interventions that allow us to get there - are all evidence-based and have been implemented in one form or another in communities across the country. While there are clear design characteristics to each of these program areas, they should not be thought of in isolation, but as mutually reinforcing and with the potential for integration within a system of care. Elements of one program area – for instance, enhancing family and natural supports – are likely present within and across most examples of early intervention. Just as with other system of care approaches where there is some degree of service integration, the different program areas of early intervention intersect in terms of program elements, services offered, and sites where young people find support.



## Five key forms of early intervention are detailed in this section:

- 1) Enhancing Family and Natural Supports
- 2) School-Based Early Intervention
- 3) Shelter Diversion
- 4) Housing-Led Supports
- 5) Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

**"My trauma led me down a wrong path, and I didn't know that I had ... places where I could go to access help for that. And my family didn't know how to support me with my mental health. So they ended up giving up on me because they didn't know... how. And they didn't have... anyone show them or teach them how to take care of someone with those circumstances."**  
**Kamloops Youth**

## 1) Enhancing Family and Natural Supports

Family and Natural Supports (FNS)<sup>3</sup> is a program model area focused on strengthening relationships between vulnerable young people and their families, friends, and meaningful adults in their lives, including neighbours, teachers, coaches, co-workers and other relationships or associations that comprise their social network. In acknowledging the variation in types of family living arrangements and structure, we should follow the lead of young people in defining who is their family. In discussing natural supports we are not necessarily referring to those people for whom there is a biological relationship but rather other adults who may play a role in the young person's life, such as teachers, coaches, neighbours, etc. Such relationships are potentially more stable and long lasting than professional supports.

FNS can help break the cycle of homelessness through a focused and client-centred set of supports that help young people, and in many cases their families, navigate interpersonal difficulties and conflict. FNS program supports are designed to build assets and resilience amongst young people by helping them mediate conflicts, make good decisions, strengthen relationships and attachments, and nurture a broader range of natural supports. All of this is directed toward helping young people to stay in school and/or access training and employment, and to stay in their communities until they are ready to leave.

**As a prevention intervention, FNS helps young people remain 'in place' in their communities, where they can continue in school and stay connected to natural supports.** For young people who have experienced homelessness, FNS is a key housing stabilization strategy that prevents the recurrence of homelessness and helps them move forward with their lives in a safe and supported way. The goal is not that the young person remains in an unsafe household, but rather that they can continue to draw support from family members that are safe and stable.

<sup>3</sup> Note: The content of this section is drawn largely (with permission) from the following documents: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness & A Way Home Canada (2017) Family and Natural Supports Program Model Framework V. 1.0.

While on the surface FNS makes sense, it often runs counter to the way emergency supports are offered to young people who experience homelessness. Many young people may be fleeing abuse, and as a result, the family is framed as the 'problem' to be avoided and left behind.

**The underlying ethos of a FNS approach is that family and the support of caring adults is important to almost everyone, can be an asset that enhances young people's quality of life, and gives youth a sense of belonging, identity, security, self-esteem, and someone to rely on when problems emerge.**

A truly effective response to youth homelessness must consider how bolstering natural supports and helping reconcile damaged relationships can help young people avoid homelessness. "For many, if not most street youth, family does matter in some way, and ... addressing family issues can help young people move into adulthood in a healthier way, and potentially move out of homelessness" (Winland et al., 2011). While we know that many young people seek out homeless services because of experiences of abuse in the home, Justin Sage-Passant points out that "We need to be cautious about saying that they are homeless because of an 'abusive family'. When we say youth are coming from an 'abusive family,' we are implicating a lot of people. There may be one or two relationships that can be seen as abusive, but there could be other relationships in the family that are healthy and supportive" (Sage-Passant, 2018).

Family reconnection may be especially important for Indigenous youth, whose ability to maintain and strengthen ties with their families, kin, and communities is key to their well-being, as well as broader reconciliation. What actually constitutes 'family' is variable, based on individual experience (growing up with grandparents, for instance) and cultural contexts. Doing FNS work requires consulting with the young person about whom they identify as family.

Young people in the throes of adolescent development, and generally dependent on adults (both within and outside the family), can significantly benefit from stabilizing and enhancing connections with meaningful adults. This is particularly crucial for young people experiencing family conflict and other challenges that place them at risk of homelessness. Enhancing connections and strengthening relationships is also important for families who are struggling with children and teens and may not know what to do or who to turn to for help.

### ***Core Principles of Family and Natural Supports Programs***

- 1)** Connection first: Right to service with no preconditions
- 2)** Youth choice, youth voice and self-determination
- 3)** Positive youth development and wellness orientation
- 4)** Individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits
- 5)** Social inclusion and community integration
- 6)** Valuing families and natural supports

An effective community response to youth homelessness should NOT view FNS as an 'add on' service or program. Rather, it should be a core community-based initiative that ensures that supports are offered to all young individuals who experience or are at risk of homelessness.

## ***How Do FNS Programs Work?***

If we know that a young person is homeless or at risk, it is important to determine whether and how conflicts between the young person and their family, friends, and other adults may be creating the context where the young person can no longer stay at home. Interventions that strengthen family relationships through reunification, counselling, or mediation may be the service and support that a young person needs to prevent them from experiencing homelessness. Ideally, if we can work with young people prior to homelessness – and especially before they leave their communities – we have a good chance of ensuring that they can stay in place, remain in school, strengthen important relationships, and ultimately avoid becoming homeless.

Enhancing family and natural supports is a key early intervention strategy that should be structured into the emergency services we provide young people who experience homelessness. FNS works best when communities take a systems approach, and where there are clear processes in place that help young people, their families and other caring adults become aware of and able to access supports. Youth and families are referred to a [Family and National Supports](#) program through: 1) a school official, 2) a community service provider, 3) self-referral (including by parents, caregivers, or other family members), 4) welfare or child protection authority, 5) help line, 6) a community or homeless-serving agency, or 7) a community hub.

Enhancing FNS is also an important strategy for supporting young people who have already experienced homelessness, and/or have left care (child protection). When young people come into contact with emergency services, one of the first questions to ask is whether enhancing FNS might mitigate or shorten their experience of homelessness. For those who are already homeless – including chronically homeless youth – strengthening FNS can be an important asset when young people exit homelessness, helping enhance housing stabilization.

FNS work is conducted by trained case managers who have expertise not only working with young people, but also their families. Case managers may provide individual and family counselling, family mediation, systems navigation, referrals to other agencies and services, psychiatric assessments, psychological assessments for learning disabilities, as well as accompaniment and advocacy assistance. It is most effective when it is a housing-led approach, and the goal is to support young people 'in place' so that they retain their current housing, or if that is not possible or safe, find and maintain new housing.

Social inclusion and school engagement are built through stronger family and natural supports, less conflict, and enhancing personal assets and resilience. A key component of the FNS programs is that young people will be encouraged and supported to stay in school, build employable skills, and access the labour market. The [Making the Shift - Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab](#) (A Way Home Canada/Canadian Observatory on Homelessness) is currently engaged in program development and conducting research and evaluation on a series of FNS projects in eight Canadian cities in Alberta and Ontario.

## 2) School-Based Early Intervention

School-based early intervention programs seek to identify young people who are at risk of homelessness, dropping out of school, or other significant negative circumstances, and connect them with supports to reduce these risks, strengthen families, and to keep youth in place.

Effective school-based prevention requires a coordinated and strategic systems approach, and must necessarily engage, include, and mandate action from public and private educational institutions and systems, government departments, the homelessness sector, and broader community-based agencies.

**“Almost everyone has, like, the one teacher that they really trusted and liked, or the one school counsellor that was cool and not scary. So it would be nice if just they got this basic training and also like, signs to look out for. And like, how to approach a student and be like, ‘hey, you know, how’s everything at home, everything going okay?’**

**Vancouver Youth**

### ***Why Do Schools Matter?***

Virtually every young person who becomes homeless was once in school. Moreover, there was likely an adult in their life – a teacher, a counselor, a coach – who knew something was wrong, but did not know what to do.

### **Educators are often the first adults outside of the family to suspect or become aware of underlying problems that may lead to youth homelessness.**

Teachers are often able to identify young people at risk because of bullying; educational disengagement; signs of abuse, trauma, and/or family conflict; or sudden changes in behaviour or educational performance. Teachers, however, often lack the knowledge, resources, and supports to intervene.

Keeping young people engaged in school pays dividends for the youth themselves, their families, and their communities. This is especially true of young people who experience, or are at risk of homelessness. By providing place-based supports that align with enhancing natural supports (family, friends, community), we increase the likelihood a young person will thrive. At the same time, we reduce the probability that a young person will leave their community in search of supports, and become mired in homelessness.

School-based early interventions have been a core feature of youth homelessness prevention in many countries. Australia is without a doubt the leader in this field of work. Examples of school-based programs include a) Information and Awareness, b) Reconnect, and c) The Upstream Project.

## a) Information and Awareness Programs

In many countries there are programs offered in schools designed to provide information about homelessness, help people identify risks (both students and teachers), and inform them of available supports if ever they are in crisis. These programs can also serve the purpose of being an early warning system that cause young people and their families to report a need for support. The presence of agencies in schools also provides teachers with key points of contact when they suspect something is wrong.

In a review of preventive strategies in the UK, Quilgars et al. (2008) argued that such programs provide a means to:

- Increase young people’s awareness of the experience of being homeless and dispel myths about the availability of social housing;
- Challenge stereotypes about homeless people, particularly regarding their culpability;
- Educate young people about the range of housing options available to them after leaving home and raise awareness of the help available;
- Emphasize young people’s responsibilities with regard to housing, and;
- Teach conflict resolution skills that may be applied within and beyond the home and school.

Research suggests that these kinds of early intervention programs are generally well-received and highly effective (Quilgars et al., 2008). They are particularly well-received when there is a peer-educator component to the work.

**“Educating teachers, principals, guidance counselors ... to what kinds of services are available and how to access those, in case they see a child, like, a student, literally falling asleep every day in the middle of class. Because, you know, in my case, I didn’t have anywhere to go, but I sure as hell wasn’t missing out on school, you know. I was working every day, I was going to school every day—I just didn’t have a place to sleep. The most that they could do for me, regarding the teachers, was give me a little extra food from the cafeteria or, you know, let me take a break from gym class so I could go and have a nap somewhere else. That’s really the best that teachers are going to be able to do for students that are put into a situation like that. Things have got to change a little bit.”**

**Edmonton Youth**

The [Schools Training and Mentoring Project](#) (STaMP), operated by St. Basils in Birmingham (UK), targets older teens, and includes workshops on the 'harsh realities' of being homeless. The STaMP program also provides school staff with robust assessment tools to help them make a determination of someone's risk of homelessness. When they identify someone deemed to be at risk, they are able to refer the young person to the STaMP project, where the young person will be linked to a trained, well-supported peer mentor who has direct experience of homelessness. When a mentoring relationship is established and nourished, the mentor can help the young person assess their options and make links to appropriate resources.

In the United States, [Safe Place](#) is a national youth outreach program that has been operating for over 35 years. It focuses on educating young people about the dangers of life on the streets, and also provides access to immediate help, supports, and interventions for young people who are at imminent risk of homelessness. The 'safe place' sign helps identify Safe Place locations, which are typically distributed to community locations that are accessible to young people, such as schools, fire stations, libraries, grocery and convenience stores, public transit, YMCAs, and other appropriate public buildings. When a young person goes to a Safe Place and makes contact with an employee, they are provided with a quiet comfortable place to wait while a Safe Place agency is contacted. Trained volunteer and paid staff meet the young person and help them access counselling, supports, a place to stay or other resources, depending on their needs. Once a plan is in place, the family will be contacted, and efforts are made to provide families with help and professional referrals. Young people find out about Safe Place through presentations in schools, word of mouth, social media and public service announcements. For more information:

<http://nationalsafeplace.org/>.

The curriculum modules focus on enhancing a wide range of life and relationship skills, such as "communication, anger management, stress reduction, community responsibility, using community resources, goal-setting, and considering consequences of running away and substance use" (Pergamit et al., 2016, p. 67). While the curriculum has been piloted and implemented in various school and community-based settings, it has not to date been fully evaluated. For more information, go to: [California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare](#).

The [Let's Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum](#) is a 14-module curriculum for youth developed by the United States government's National Runaway Safeline. It is designed for young people who may be struggling with a number of issues and contemplating running away from home. Guiding the curriculum are six key principles of trauma-informed care:

- 1) Safety
- 2) Trustworthiness and transparency
- 3) Peer support
- 4) Collaboration and mutuality
- 5) Empowerment, voice, and choice
- 6) Cultural, historical, and gender issues



## b) Reconnect Programs

Reconnect programs are school-community partnerships designed to provide young people at risk of homelessness with supports to address underlying issues. Reconnect programs are place-based interventions, which involve collaboration between community-based organizations specializing in supporting young people and their families, and local schools. At risk youth are connected to community-based case managers, and are offered a range of supports including information, systems navigation, referrals, and housing supports, if necessary. Two examples of such programs are the nationally-funded [Reconnect program](#) in Australia, and the community-based [Youth Reconnect](#) program in Canada.

### ***Reconnect (Australia)***

In the 1990s when youth homelessness began to increase, the Australian government decided that rather than invest widely in emergency shelters and services, a better option was to focus on prevention, with schools being the obvious site for the work. The [Reconnect](#) program was launched in 1999 by the Australian federal government, and operates over 100 programs in communities across Australia, with some specializing in supporting sub-populations such as Indigenous, LGBTQ, and newcomer and refugee youth.

The goals of Reconnect are to:

- Link schools to a range of community-based supports that can help young people and their families;
- Raise students' and teachers' awareness of the causes and conditions of youth homelessness, and the kinds of supports that are available;
- Identify and work with young people who are 'at risk' of, or are experiencing homelessness (including couch surfing) to help them stabilize their living situation, and;
- Improve young people's level of engagement with family, employment, education, and training in their local community (Australian Government, 2013: [Reconnect](#)).

**Reconnect is an excellent example of an early intervention strategy embedded in an integrated community system of care, working across institutional jurisdictions to provide young people who become homeless or are at risk of homelessness with supports to stay at home, or find alternative supported living arrangements.**

The Reconnect program targets young people aged 12-18, and their families, who are at risk of homelessness, or who have recently become homeless (including young people who are couchsurfing). While schools are sites for identifying youth, the services and supports of Reconnect are provided through a network of community-based early intervention services specializing in working with youth that share the goal of assisting young people to stabilize their current living situations, as well as improve their level of engagement and attachments within their community (Australian Government, 2009).



## The service delivery model of Australia's Reconnect program includes:

*"A focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a 'toolbox' of approaches that include counselling, mediation and practical support; and collaboration with other service providers. As well as providing assistance to individual young people and their families, Reconnect services also provide group programs, undertake community development projects and work with other agencies to increase the broader service system's capacity to intervene early in youth homelessness." (Australian Government, 2003, p. 8)*

The Reconnect program emphasizes accessibility, a client-centered orientation, and a holistic approach to service delivery. It has been extensively evaluated (Evans & Shaver, 2001; Australian Government, 2003; 2013), and a comprehensive review by the Australian government (2003) identified the following positive and sustainable outcomes for young people and their families, including improvements in:

- The stability of young people's living situations;
- Young people's reported ability to manage family conflict, with sustained improvement over time;
- Parents' capacity to manage conflict;
- Communication within families;
- Young people's attitudes to school;
- Young people's engagement with education and employment, and;
- Young people's engagement with community.

The Australian government has a number of [resources](#) available to support implementation, including operational guidelines and evaluation studies.

## Youth Reconnect (Canada)

Youth Reconnect is an early intervention shelter diversion program originally developed in Southern Ontario's Niagara Region as a partnership between schools and the RAFT emergency shelter in St. Catharines. The program mirrors the Reconnect program in many ways, but was not a product of government. Rather, this was a community-led innovation that came about when the RAFT recognized that their 'at-capacity' emergency shelter for youth could not continue to expand to meet the need. Recognizing that many of the youth who arrived at the shelter came from small towns and rural areas surrounding St. Catharines, it made more sense to implement an outreach program designed to help youth at risk of homelessness stay in their communities by providing young people and their families with place-based supports so as to avoid the unwelcome situation where a young person is forced to leave and move to the city, where a downward spiral may ensue.

RAFT's [Youth Reconnect](#) initiative "helps clients' access resources and increases their self-sufficiency, by assisting adolescents to maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community."



*"Youth Reconnect provides advocacy, life skills training, one-on-one mentoring, emergency hostel access, family reunification, and community integration. Provided in partnership with other social service agencies, initiative focuses on helping clients to live independently and reduce high-risk behaviours while maintaining school attendance" (RAFT, 2014, p.1).*

The [RAFT Youth Reconnect](#) program specifically targets young people between the ages of 16 and 19, though other youth reconnect programs could expand their age mandate. Teachers, coaches, and counsellors identify young people they believe to be struggling, and offer them the opportunity to meet up with a Youth Reconnect worker. An important feature of Youth Reconnect is that young people are also able to access supports through self- or family referral, or referral by service providers, such as healthcare providers, community workers, employment workers, and help line staff/volunteers.

Once connected, the young person is then met by a Reconnect worker at a place of the youth's choosing and together they assess issues and needs and help develop a community-based plan of action to draw on local supports, enhance protective factors, reduce risk, and stay in school. As a client-centered intervention, the services the young person receives will differ depending on individual circumstances and needs. If crisis housing is needed, youth are transported to one of the local hostels on a temporary basis until arrangements are made for them to move back into their community.

### Typical program interventions include:

- 1) Helping youth remain in schools, whenever possible, by securing living arrangements;
- 2) Working directly with individual schools and school boards to develop plans for youth returning to school after dropping out, or creating education plans to help at-risk youth remain in school;
- 3) Connecting youth with financial support programs and stable housing to ensure they are able to continue with their education;
- 4) Securing affordable housing and a stabilized income by reducing access barriers, and providing advocacy when needed;
- 5) Linking youth to specialized services (i.e, mental health, addictions, family counselling), as required, and;
- 6) Directly assisting youth to develop a social safety net to support them in the future, and to help them as they move forward from the program.

As a place-based support, the goal is to increase assets and self-sufficiency so that young people are able to stay in place. "By creating a localized support network and keeping youth within their home communities, the youth reconnect initiative is able to help youth remain connected to their communities, with the support they need, instead of forcing youth to relocate to a larger urban area, where they are more susceptible to engaging in high risk behaviours" (Niagara Resource Service for Youth, 2012, p. 2). Keeping young people in place is intended to reduce their exposure to a range of risks that come with entrenchment in homelessness including addictions, trauma, crime, and sexual exploitation.

The youth Reconnect support worker should employ a Positive Youth Development approach by letting the young person define their needs, being flexible, and providing wraparound support for the youth. This type of work is not best-suited for typical 9 to 5 work days, as staff have to be ready to provide on-call supports when and where their clients need it. Ideally, a small team of youth Reconnect support workers can more sustainably cover longer hours to be flexible to meet youths' needs.

Youth exit the program of their own volition and when they are ready. There is a "no discharge" policy, unless they reach a certain age (generally 24 years old) and can no longer qualify as youth. In these instances, referrals are made to adult services. After leaving the YR program, workers check in with youth periodically to ensure they are still housed and engaged in either school or work. These check-ins are designed to be the "lightest touch" possible – the worker is not looking to have a long-term connection. The goal for the worker is to strengthen the youth person's permanent relationships so their professional support is no longer required. The [Making the Shift - Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab](#) (A Way Home Canada/Canadian Observatory on Homelessness) is currently conducting research and evaluation on a Youth Reconnect project in Hamilton, Ontario.

### **Youth Reconnect Demonstration Project**

As part of the Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada are conducting a demonstration project on the Youth Reconnect Program in Hamilton, Ontario in partnership with Good Shepherd Youth Services and the Hamilton Street Youth Planning Collaborative. Early results from the demonstration project are compelling.

"The Youth Reconnect Program has provided Good Shepherd Youth Services the opportunity to be a driving force in a shift from a crisis response to youth homelessness towards a focus on prevention and community and family reunification. Making the Shift has encouraged this by allowing interventions to take place at a younger age (as early as 13), in creative ways (working with youth and families in whichever way works for them) and encouraging community based interventions."

- Loretta Hill-Finamore, Good Shepherd, Hamilton, ON

### **c) The Upstream Project (TUP) & The Geelong Project (TGP)**

The Upstream Project (TUP), which originated as the [The Geelong Project](#) (TGP) in Australia, represents the next stage in the evolution of school-based early intervention programs. It employs a 'Community of Schools and Services' (COSS) model of early intervention for young people who are at-risk of disengaging from school, becoming homeless, and entering the justice system.



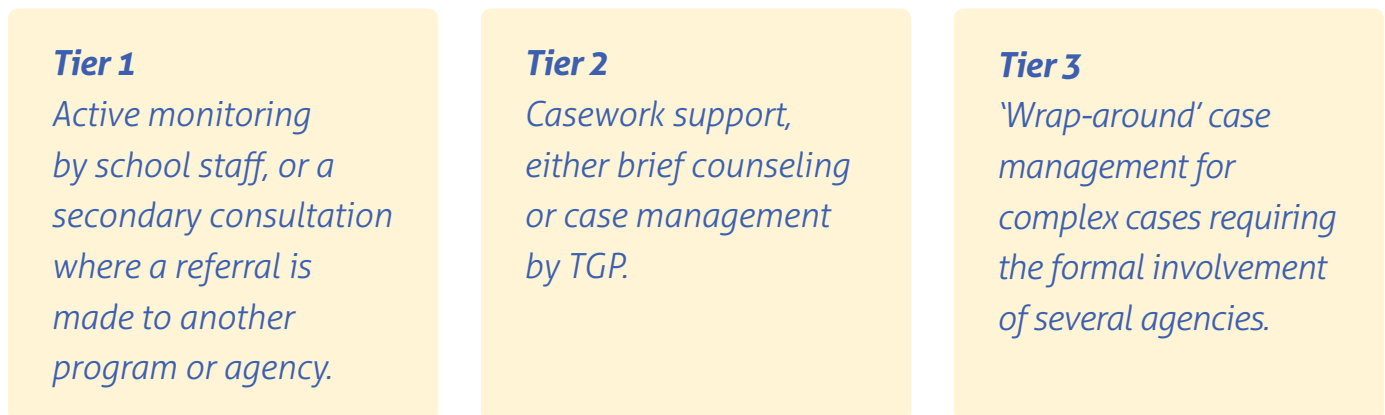
*"The strength in this model of the 'Community of Schools and Services' is that it engages and **integrates the work of all of the key people** and providers that together can make the difference in helping to re-engage the young person with school, family and community."*  
(The Geelong Project, (n.d.), p. 1)

## How the Geelong Project Works

TGP is innovative because it integrates and delivers early intervention services through systems and service delivery development and reform. **What makes it unique is the method of identifying young people at risk. It begins with the Student Needs Survey (SNS), an evidence-based assessment tool that looks at both youths' risks and assets.** Recognizing that problems can emerge at a young age, every student in the school completes the survey, beginning in junior/intermediate school. The results are compared with knowledge and observations obtained about students from other sources, including teachers and counselors. While the Reconnect program relies on the ability of teachers and other adults to identify youth at risk, the TGP approach of assessment combined with staff knowledge can go much further in flagging young people who may not be presenting their vulnerability in overt ways.

**Once young people are identified, TGP uses a flexible service delivery model based on a three-tiers of response, with Tier 1 offering the least extensive and intensive case management and intervention, and Tier 3 the most.**

**FIGURE 2: THE GEELONG PROJECT SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL**



The tiers are tied to the needs of individual students, and are underpinned by youth-focused, family-centered approaches. It is not crisis-oriented, but rather is intended to support young people and families over a longer period of time. Based on evolving needs, young people can seamlessly 'step up – step down' from one level of support to another.

[This tiered approach](#) is considered the "foundation for effective and multi-disciplinary service responses to the range of needs in the at-risk population. [...] This model supports young people, their families, their schools and communities to address issues that left unresolved lead to youth homelessness and disengagement from education" (The Geelong Project, (n.d.), p. 1).

The Geelong Project’s Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model is place-based, focusing on bringing together people and resources in a given community to impact rates of homelessness and early school leaving. Partners in the project are committed to transforming the system from the ‘bottom up.’

Through Collective Impact, all of the partners in the COSS model commit to looking beyond their own individual program or organizational mandates to take responsibility for all young people in their community.

**FIGURE 3: THE COSS MODEL**



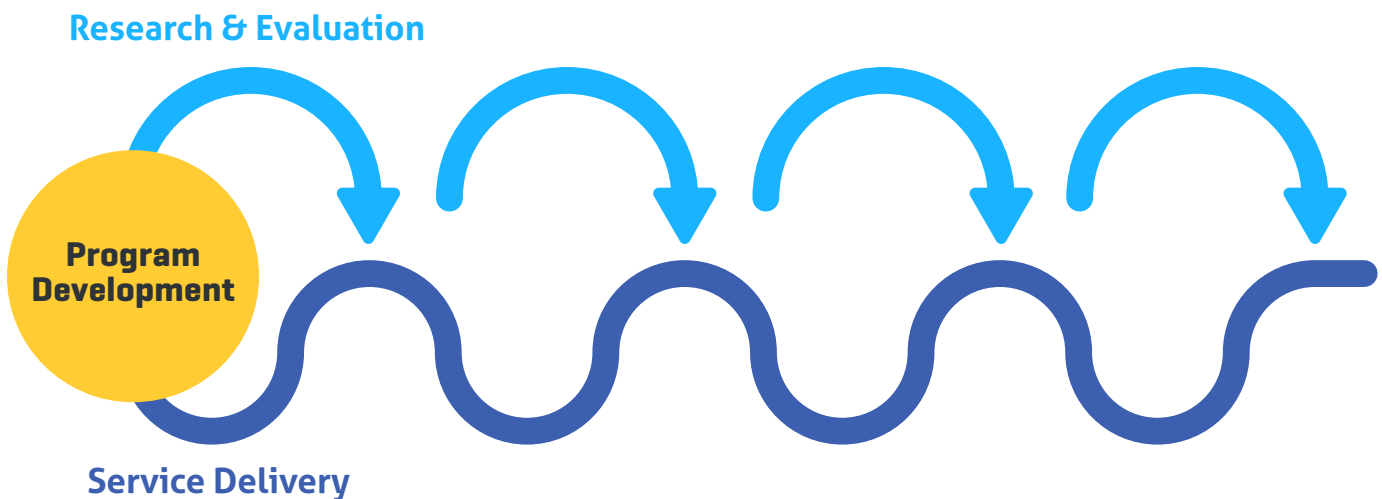
In Australia, TGP has been extensively evaluated, with a focus on measuring individual outcomes, such as specific positive changes in the attitudes, behaviours, knowledge and skills, relationships, and functioning at home and school, that lead to staying in school and the family home.

## Research to Action

It is important to note that central to the development of The Geelong Project in Australia has been the focus on building a strong evidence base, where rigorous research and evaluation are at the centre of the work. Research is not seen as separate from practice, but rather as embedded within it.

As part of the research to action cycle, knowledge and learning gained through the analysis of data should routinely be used to ensure fidelity to the program model and the continuous improvement of service delivery, and to contribute to community learning and systems transformation. TPG cannot be implemented without fully integrating the work of the university research partner into practice.

**FIGURE 4: ITERATIVE RESEARCH TO ACTION CYCLE**



## The Upstream International Living Lab

The success of The Geelong Project in Australia has led to international interest in adapting the model in other countries, including Canada. The decision to 'rename' the project Upstream came as a result of this work. The *Upstream International Living Lab* is an international social research and development consortium involving university and service partners from Australia, Canada, the United States, and Wales. The core work of this international consortium is to take what originated as The Geelong Project in Australia and facilitate its adaptation and implementation within each of the participating countries. As this work moves forwards, host countries will be supported to implement demonstration projects involving fulsome program evaluation. Going forward the consortium will focus its work on the design, implementation, and study of program and policy interventions that foster systems change resulting in the prevention of youth homelessness.

**THE  
UPSTREAM  
INTERNATIONAL  
LIVING LAB**



### 3) Shelter Diversion

Shelter diversion refers to efforts that support young people and their families in order to reduce the likelihood that youth will need to stay in emergency shelters. This means redefining the very role of such shelters. Traditionally, shelters provide crisis support for people experiencing homelessness in the form of a place to sleep, food, and potentially other supports to meet basic needs.

Shelter diversion retools emergency services, including shelters and day programs, to provide young people with better options in the community and alternatives to intake into shelters. The goal is not just to decrease the number of young people entering emergency shelters, but to also keep them in place in their communities, connected to family and/or natural supports. It is an asset-building approach designed to address the underlying issues that put young people at risk of homelessness.

With this new mandate for shelters, emergency shelters will play different, yet incredibly important roles in the efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness. The key work at first point of contact shifts from facilitating intake into the shelter, to doing whatever it takes to help the young person avoid shelter stays and quickly find appropriate and safe housing options. Emergency shelter stays are only to be the last resort when all other options are exhausted or used to temporarily fill a gap in accommodation until more permanent and stable housing is secured.

A retooled and repurposed emergency sector goes hand in hand with a commitment to end homelessness, and will:

- Ensure that all people who come into contact with the homelessness sector are assessed and provided with supports to either return home or move into housing with appropriate supports as quickly as possible;
- Adopt a client-centered case management approach for individuals and families that enter the system, and ensure they are tracked as they navigate their way out of the system;
- Fund and reward service providers for focusing on prevention and rapid rehousing as a service priority, and make the goal of emergency services a shorter experience of homelessness, and;
- Ensure systems of care are in place so shelter providers are able to implement successful diversion programs.

**“There aren’t really any programs to help at-risk youth kids before they’re homeless. It’s only once you’re homeless.”**

**Calgary Youth**

In Canada, the homelessness sector is often isolated or disconnected from both the places young people come from and where they want to go. With shelter diversion, emergency shelters are not separate from either preventive approaches or strategies that help people move into stable housing. Shelter diversion programs become mechanisms for emergency shelters and services to facilitate prevention and rapid rehousing, and to help people move into and maintain independent living. The program model gives emergency shelters an active role in the reduction of the number and length of shelter stays, and connecting youth with effective supports that help them to stay in place, stabilize housing, enhance family and natural supports, and stay engaged in school and/or work.

### ***Shelter Diversion in Action***

In the Region of Waterloo, a youth homelessness shelter diversion program and tool has been piloted and is currently being expanded in the City of Cambridge, Ontario, at a youth emergency shelter - [Argus Residence for Young People](#). The program pilot project “demonstrated the potential for an emergency shelter to prevent youth homelessness and reduce the need for shelter by asking key questions, providing information and increasing attachment to family and natural supports. The pilot was facilitated from one shelter location and did not require additional resources to implement” (Eva Vlasov, Executive Director, Argus Residence for Young People, personal communication, 2018).

*“The goal of this work is to support sustainable change in referral practice and decrease the number of youth entering the emergency shelter system unnecessarily.”  
(Eva Vlasov, personal communication)*

As a promising practice, Argus Residence for Young People have developed and implemented a Youth Homelessness Prevention and Diversion Tool that outlines how coordinated prevention, intake, and assessment work, and the role of shelter workers in this process. The Diversion Tool was developed to “guide practitioners through the steps of a diversion conversation, tailored to 18 referral categories.” Guided by the philosophy of [Housing First for Youth](#), the program model offers supports consistent with the early intervention strategies that would be offered through youth reconnect, including enhancing family and natural supports, providing information, systems navigation, and referrals to other services and supports, including for mental health and addictions. The team of prevention and diversion workers work collaboratively and in a solution-focused way to assist youth to return home when it is safe to do so, or find alternative housing. This may involve interim housing in the short term while more permanent housing is being arranged.

Early results from the pilot program are promising, showing prevention and diversion as having an immediate and significant impact. From April 1st, 2015 to March 31st, 2016, Argus’ shelter program provided 6,211 bed nights over a 12-month period. In 2016/17, bed nights reduced to 2,206 over the same period, representing a 64% decrease. In 2016-17, 607 youth aged 16-24 accessed the emergency shelter system in Waterloo Region, which represented a 22% decrease from the 776 youth served within the same period in the previous year (Housing Stability Data Summary, 2016-2017).

While this may seem like it runs counter to the concept of the emergency shelter, it actually redefines the role of emergency shelters and shelter workers in a more positive way. If every emergency youth shelter was reoriented to focus on homelessness prevention, there could be a massive reduction in youth homelessness, and better outcomes for youth, including a reduction in chronic homelessness. Within shelters, prevention and diversion workers would become part of the shelter team, with more favourable staff ratios allowing for better supports for young people significant, complex needs who are still in the emergency system.

## 4) Housing-Led Supports

In many cases when young people are kicked out or run away from home, they stay with friends or family who commit to take them in on a temporary basis. In other cases, young people have nowhere else to go. In order to avoid winding up having to move a great distance for services, and as an alternative to emergency shelters, there are housing-led models of early intervention for both short-term accommodations (Host Homes), and longer-term permanent solutions (Rapid Rehousing).

### a) Host Homes

[Host Homes](#) programs are community-based interventions providing short-term accommodations and supports for young people who have run away and/or cannot return to their homes. They are designed to provide young people and their families with short-term community-based supports, with the goal of keeping young people 'in place'.

The accommodation is not an emergency shelter, but rather a community member's home. This form of shelter diversion is important because Host Homes are local and programs provide community-based case management, enabling young people to stay in their communities, remain in school, and stay connected to their families and natural supports. In some cases, the stay may be short and case management light, if young people or their families simply need a 'time out'. In other cases, where the situation is more complex, the level of support will increase. If youth are unable to return home or if it is not safe, arrangements are made to support the young person to move into age-appropriate accommodation in a safe and planned way.

**If every emergency youth shelter was reoriented to focus on homelessness prevention, there could be a massive reduction in youth homelessness, and better outcomes for youth, including a reduction in chronic homelessness. Within shelters, prevention and diversion workers would become part of the shelter team, with more favourable staff ratios allowing for better supports for young people significant, complex needs who are still in the emergency system.**

Host Homes offer a great way of getting community members involved in solutions to youth homelessness. Individuals and families that have a spare room are recruited into the Host Homes program. They are carefully screened, then provided with training and resources to support the young people who will be staying with them. Information about youth homelessness and the Host Homes program is provided to schools, community centres, health care providers, and others who are in contact with young people who may be at risk of homelessness. While providing encouragement and support, the 'hosts' are not responsible for case management and therapeutic support.

In a Host Homes program, young people who run away or are kicked out and who cannot find alternative accommodation are immediately connected with a host individual or family in their community. They are escorted to the home, introduced to the family, and provided with food and toiletries. The young person may want to be alone, or they may want to engage with the host. The next day, case management begins. Young people undergo an assessment to determine risks and assets, and the factors that led to their homelessness. As a youth-centred intervention, they are offered a range of supports, which may include family reconnection/mediation, and/or help finding suitable accommodation in their community.

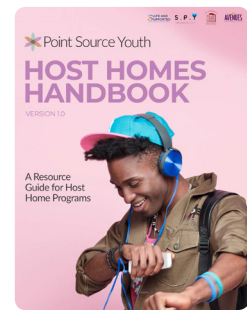


Host Homes are relatively new to Canada, but there are solid examples from other countries that we can learn from. [Nightstop \(Depaul, UK\)](#) is perhaps the most extensive and well-known Host Homes program, and operates in 40 communities with over 500 volunteers in the United Kingdom. It provides community-based supports for young people aged 16-25, who are able to stay with an adult or family for up to three weeks. In 2014, 13,500 bed nights were provided to young people. Breakfast and dinner is provided, along with toiletries and a private bedroom.

Nightstop was evaluated in 2011 (Insley, 2011) and has been identified as a promising model of shelter diversion for young people at risk of homelessness (Thompson, 2014). The evaluation found that "after staying at Nightstop, 21% returned to their families, 36% moved into supported housing, 14% obtained private accommodation, 11% moved into social housing and 14% moved in with a friend" (Insley (2011) cited in Gaetz, 2013, p. 58). The Nightstop model is being brought to Canada by 360° Kids in York Region, Ontario.

In recent years, there has been an expansion of host homes programs for youth in the United States (Washington State Department of Commerce, 2017). [Point Source Youth](#) has played an important role in developing and implementing a range of Host Homes programs, as well as programs to enhance Family and Natural supports, and Rapid Rehousing, which are designed to support LGBTQ2S+ youth. Their [website](#) has a range of resources to assist those interested in establishing Host Homes programs.

Point Source Youth recently released its [Host Homes Handbook](#), an excellent and extensive resource that includes information on how to set a program up, the host and youth application process, training, and a budget template.



## b) Rapid Rehousing

Rapid Rehousing is an intervention designed to help young people who left home and for safety reasons have no immediate prospect of returning home. Through Rapid Rehousing, young people gain quick access to housing, ideally within 30 days or less of experiencing homelessness. Based on the age and developmental needs of young people, this housing may include moving in with other family members, or obtaining single or shared accommodation. Steeped in the philosophy of [Housing First for Youth](#), this approach is ideal for young people who demonstrate stronger assets and do not necessarily have the complex needs or vulnerability to be prioritized for HF4Y.

Rapid Rehousing began in the United States as an approach for adults, and was grown and enhanced by federal investments through the [Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program](#) in 2009. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) notes that the “fundamental goal of rapid re-housing is to reduce the amount of time a person is homeless” (USICH & HUD, 2014). USICH also notes that that “rapid re-housing is not designed to comprehensively address a recipient’s overall service needs or poverty” (USICH & HUD, 2014). Rapid Rehousing is defined by three core components:

- Housing Identification;
- Rent and move-in assistance, and;
- Rapid rehousing case management and services.

There have been concerted efforts to adapt the Rapid Rehousing approach to address youth homelessness (Mitchell, 2017). The [National Network for Youth \(2014\)](#) identifies the following **six overall goals of youth-centric Rapid Rehousing**:

- 1) The ultimate goal is to obtain and/or retain permanent housing.
- 2) Intermediate goals are designed to achieve milestones that are set to allow a youth to successfully gain the life skills necessary to obtain or retain permanent housing.
- 3) Program participants have input and final decision for all goals, actions steps and timelines.
- 4) Action steps to achieve goals are clear, simple-to-understand, measurable and can be accomplished within a relatively short period of time.
- 5) Case manager and/or participant responsibility is designated for each action step.
- 6) A target date is set for completion (or review) of the steps and the overall plan.

While there is emerging evidence for the effectiveness of Rapid Rehousing for families and veterans (Burt et al., 2016; Cunningham et al., 2016; Cunningham & Batko, 2018; Gubits et al., 2013; 2015), published program evaluation data on Rapid Rehousing for youth is unavailable to date. However, Point Source Youth is currently evaluating its program by tracking youth over two years using a mixed methods approach with qualitative interviews and a data instrument on a 3 month cycle, measuring changes across six modalities: housing, income, education, mental health, physical health, and social connections.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) has resources on Rapid Rehousing ([Rapid Re-Housing toolkit](#), [Performance Benchmarks and Program Standards](#), and a [Performance Evaluation and Improvement toolkit](#)) and there is a report available on [How to Adapt Coordinated Entry and Rapid Re-housing for Youth Homelessness](#).

## 5) Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

In recent years there has been an increased focus on preventing the sexual exploitation and trafficking of youth, both within and outside of the homelessness sector. Research demonstrates the youth often face sexual violence and exploitation on the streets, both within Canada and abroad (Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013; Sethi, 2007; Tyler et al., 2004). For example, the [Without a Home](#) study found that amongst youth experiencing homelessness in Canada, 37% of young women and 41% of transgender and non-binary youth had experienced sexual assault over the previous 12 months (Gaetz et al., 2016, p. 11).

Recent research indicates that many youth who are homeless also experience sex trafficking (Clawson et al., 2009; Hodge & Lietz, 2007; Murphy, 2017; Raphael & Shapiro, 2002; Wolfe et al., 2018). A 10-city study on youth homelessness in the United States, for example, found that 19% of young people had experienced some type of human trafficking, of which sex trafficking was the most common (Murphy et al., 2017).

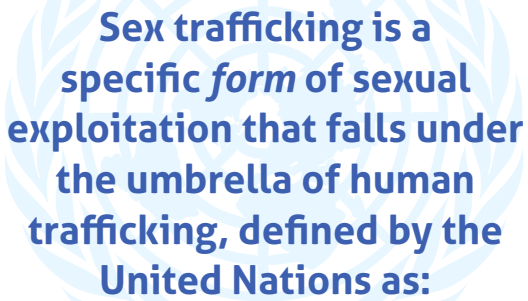
It is time to adopt a *preventative* approach to the sexual exploitation and trafficking of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. As we do this work, it is critical that we look to the wisdom and leadership of Indigenous communities, who have long been implementing community-based responses to the profound settler-colonial violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls (Kaye, 2017).

### Defining Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

To prevent sexual exploitation and trafficking amongst youth experiencing homelessness, we must first define our terms. **Sexual exploitation** can be defined as:

“An act or acts committed through non-consensual abuse or exploitation of another person’s sexuality for the purpose of sexual gratification, financial gain, personal benefit or advantage, or any other non-legitimate purpose” (Swathmore College, 2017). This includes acts such as the non-consensual distribution of sexual or nude images, as well as inducing incapacitation in order to facilitate non-consensual sexual activity.





**Sex trafficking is a specific form of sexual exploitation that falls under the umbrella of human trafficking, defined by the United Nations as:**

*“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person” (United Nations, 2000, p.1).*

While related, sex trafficking and sexual exploitation differ from survival sex. **Survival sex** refers to instances in which individuals “have traded sex acts (including prostitution, stripping, pornography, etc.) to meet the basic needs of survival (i.e., food, shelter, etc.) without the overt force, fraud, or coercion of a trafficker, but who felt that their circumstances left little or no other option” (Covenant House, 2013, p. 7).

Sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and survival sex are each distinct from **sex work**, which refers to the consensual exchange of sexual services for money or goods. Sex work and sex trafficking differ in that the latter necessarily involves coercion and control (Sethi, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

## Sexual Violence & Colonialism

Sexual violence, exploitation, and sex trafficking in Canada are inseparable from historical and contemporary forms of colonialism. Indigenous women and girls face significantly higher rates of sexual violence compared to any other group in Canada (Boyce, 2016). In order to tackle this overrepresentation, we need to dismantle the systemic causes of all forms of violence experienced by Indigenous peoples, including specifically Indigenous women, girls, LGBTQ2SA+ identifying people, and non-binary people. Indigenous-led and community-controlled preventative responses are critical to making this happen. In implementing preventative responses, it is essential that government institutions and systems are held accountable to respecting the human rights, leadership, and sovereignty of Indigenous communities.

<sup>4</sup>Absent coercion and control, the buying and selling of sex is not illegal and is not necessarily exploitive. Many activists and advocates argue that sex work is a legitimate, valuable, and important form of labour in Canadian society ([Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform](#), 2018).

## Preventing Sex Trafficking Involvement

Young people experiencing sex trafficking are necessarily experiencing homelessness, even if they are 'housed' (based on the [Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness](#)). Youth homelessness prevention must include targeted efforts to prevent sex trafficking for both housed and unhoused youth, as well as effective approaches to stabilize youths' housing once they exit a trafficking situation. Given the profound trauma and violence facing these young people, there is an urgent need to design our social services and preventative interventions to address this flagrant human rights violation.

Existing interventions cut across all types of prevention and have included legislative change, public awareness campaigns, criminal justice reform, and the implementation of program areas and community-based partnerships (e.g., between healthcare, social services, and police services) aimed at effective emergency responses.

Within the homelessness sector, a majority of preventative efforts have focused on early intervention and housing stabilization for youth experiencing or exiting sex trafficking situations. While evidence and approaches to prevention are still emerging domestically and internationally, existing practices suggest some critical components that should be included in a preventative approach to sex trafficking:

- 1) Preventing sex trafficking recruitment and sexual exploitation within homeless services.
- 2) Cross-sectoral partnerships and coordination to support a timely and coordinated response.
- 3) Trauma-informed programming, counselling, and services to support young people recovering from experiences of sex trafficking or exploitation.
- 4) Housing stabilization interventions for youth with histories of sex trafficking involvement to address the unique challenges these young people face.
- 5) Fostering relationships with family and natural supports in order to prevent sex trafficking victimization, and to stabilize youth exiting sex trafficking circumstances.
- 6) Upstream preventative actions to reduce the prevalence and occurrence of sex trafficking.

### **1) Preventing sex trafficking recruitment and sexual exploitation within homeless services.**

Youth experiencing homelessness are often targeted for sexual exploitation and sex trafficking recruitment in public spaces (e.g., bus stations). What is less well-known is that youth are also actively recruited from within youth-serving agencies (e.g., shelters, drop-ins). That young people may be receiving life-saving services and supports in the same service contexts in which they are lured into sex trafficking is a contradiction that must be prepared for within the homelessness sector, and within other public and private system contexts as well (e.g., schools, group homes, rehab centres).

Preventing sexual exploitation and trafficking in emergency-focused homelessness services is a critical component of youth homelessness prevention. Preventive interventions must understand and address the complexity of youth experiencing homelessness, who may be victims of sex trafficking or exploitation themselves, being forced to recruit other youth into sex trafficking (see Covenant House, 2017).

#### **Prevention in these contexts should include:**

- Training for frontline staff and senior personnel on the characteristics and dynamics of sex trafficking recruitment and luring, and strategies to effectively address the recruitment of young people within these contexts. Such efforts should include education on how young people can identify and manage sex trafficking recruitment efforts, including within the context of intimate partner relationships.
- Free and confidential legal supports, advice, and representation offered to young people experiencing homelessness. These supports can be offered within emergency-focused social service contexts, as well as through outreach efforts.

**“Operating in a shelter setting means there is always the danger of people utilizing services in order to lure vulnerable residents, particularly if they are aware there is a specialized program for survivors of sex trafficking. This danger can come from residents in the shelter, participants in the specialized programming itself and people who loiter outside”**

**[Covenant House Toronto, 2017, p.22]**

## **2) *Cross-sectoral partnerships and coordination to support a timely and coordinated response.***

Researchers and professionals have suggested that because of the complex challenges facing the survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking, it is critical to bring together multidisciplinary teams that span social services, law enforcement, medical services, and others (Clawson & Dutch, 2007; Covenant House Toronto, 2017; Hodge & Lietz, 2007; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017).

Research has specifically identified the need for increased collaboration and coordination across agencies serving survivors of trafficking (Clawson & Dutch, 2007; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). A good example of this collaboration in action is the Crisis Intervention Response Team in Toronto, which brings together shelters, mental health services, law enforcement, Indigenous-serving organizations, and other youth-serving organizations in order to coordinate service delivery for survivors of sex trafficking. As part of these efforts, the Team implemented a 24-hour emergency response team and protocol, as well as a coordinated referral system (including medical and legal).

## **3) *Trauma-informed programming, counselling, and services to support young people recovering from experiences of sex trafficking or exploitation.***

Researchers, advocates, and professionals have emphasized the need for trauma-informed supports and services for youth exiting sex trafficking circumstances (Carter, 2016; Covenant House Toronto, 2017), as well as those experiencing sexual exploitation. As explained by Covenant House Toronto (2017), “working from a trauma-informed perspective means being sensitive to their trauma, understanding behaviours (e.g. anger, substance use) as occurring as a result of this trauma, understanding their triggers, and avoiding re-traumatization” (p. 21).

## **4) *Housing stabilization interventions for youth with histories of sex trafficking involvement to address the unique challenges these young people face.***

Youth experiencing homelessness and sex trafficking involvement often need extensive, longer-term, trauma-informed services to support their safety, health, wellbeing, housing stability, and social inclusion. Housing stabilization supports should be deeply integrated and respond immediately when a young person is able to exit their circumstance (Covenant House Toronto, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2018). [Covenant House Toronto](#), for example, offers a suite of services, including [The Rogers Home](#), a 2-year transitional housing program offering wraparound support services. These services include: advocacy and system navigation, legal supports and court preparation, supports for immigration issues, and mentoring and peer support (Covenant House Toronto, 2017). Housing stabilization efforts for Indigenous youth exiting sex trafficking should also be able to access culturally-sensitive and appropriate services and supports, such as traditional healthcare services and support from Elders (Sethi, 2010).

### **5) Fostering relationships with family and natural supports in order to prevent sex trafficking victimization, and to stabilize youth exiting sex trafficking circumstances.**

Research suggests that strong family and natural supports connections can operate as a protective factor against sex trafficking recruitment and involvement (Wolfe et al., 2018). The Field Centre for Children’s Policy, Practice, & Research (2018) recommends that practitioners:

*“Identify and foster emotional attachments for vulnerable children and youth with both family members and other caring adults, including natural mentorship initiatives, to help connect at-risk youth with caring adults in their lives. Early identification of and facilitation of such relationships can serve to both prevent youth from becoming victimized and to provide a resource should they end up needing support and assistance” (p. 54).*

Studies also indicate that a majority of young people experiencing sex trafficking in Canada have been recruited domestically, and in many cases locally (RCMP, 2013). This means that many young people who exit sex trafficking may have family, friends, or other natural supports that may be able to assist in housing stabilization and social inclusion. Opportunities for Indigenous youth to be connected or reconnected with their community, culture, Elders, or family are also critical.

### **6) Upstream preventative actions to reduce the prevalence and occurrence of sex trafficking.**

Profound structural and systemic challenges make it difficult to prevent trafficking at a societal level. We know that sex trafficking is a highly lucrative form of organized crime, with some studies indicating that Canadian traffickers receive an average financial gain of \$280,000 for every trafficking victim they exploit (CISC, 2008, p. 5). Disrupting this “big business” is a critical compliment to early intervention and housing stabilization efforts, requiring legislative and policy change to ensure our public systems do not inadvertently assist in the commission of these crimes. Upstream efforts include:

- Implementing policies and practices that prevent the recruitment of youth from the child welfare system into sex trafficking (see Wolfe et al., 2018);
- Collaboration and coordination between Indigenous communities and the Canadian government to develop local and regional Indigenous-led responses to the sex trafficking of Indigenous girls and women (see [Sethi, 2010](#));
- Amendments to the Criminal Code of Canada to better support and protect survivors of sex trafficking (see [Barrett & Shaw, 2013](#)), and;
- Broad educational campaigns on sex trafficking, implemented through in-school presentations, online prevention/educational programs, training programs for relevant professionals (e.g., shelter staff, hotel staff, etc.), and parent and educator forums (see Covenant House Toronto, 2017).

## ***Forced & Exploitative Labour***

In addition to sex trafficking, there are other forms of forced labour and exploitative labour that youth experiencing homelessness are subjected to. By definition, any young person being forced to work against their will and under threat of punishment (e.g., threat of deportation, violence, separation from child) is experiencing homelessness, even if they are 'housed' (based on the [Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness](#)). These labour conditions are sometimes referred to as 'labour trafficking,' and a [study on youth experiencing homelessness in New Orleans](#) found that 25% of youth had experienced exploitative and/or exceedingly dangerous labour conditions, and that 19% had experienced wage theft (Murphy et al., 2015). Preventative interventions in this area are critical, requiring structural change, system reform (e.g., immigration reform to better support youth with precarious legal status), and early interventions in public systems and the homelessness sector. Further research, action, and policy reform in this area is needed.

## **Conclusion**

Across Canada, we must focus on intervening quickly and effectively when young people are at risk of homelessness, rather than waiting until they are in crisis. We must dispel the idea that youth can pull themselves out of homelessness without some level of intervention. Successfully avoiding or exiting homelessness requires a fulsome range of supports, interventions, and options for youth. Fortunately, research from around the world is validating the efficacy of many early intervention policies, program areas, and practices, which have proven their value within community responses to youth homelessness, and have shaped coordinated plans or strategies aimed at shifting the trajectory of young people's lives.

Early intervention strategies should be enhanced to keep young people 'in place' in their communities, where they can receive support from friends, family, and other natural supports. These early intervention efforts can divert young people from entering emergency shelters and mainstream homelessness services, help them stay in school, improve their wellness and social inclusion, and help repair difficult relationships with family or other natural supports, if safe, appropriate, and desired by the young person.

As the evidence base grows, we must focus on building capacity within existing systems that serve youth who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homelessness. As part of this change process, we need to continue to invest in the important emergency-focused services that are part of our youth homelessness system until such a time that prevention efforts lead to a dramatic reduction in the numbers of youth experiencing homelessness crises. At the same time, we must reimagine the roles of emergency shelters and their staff.

**We embark on this difficult work with a commitment to young people to provide help earlier, to respect their rights and expressed desires, to improve their long-term health and wellbeing, and to centre our practices on the desired outcomes we want for any young person.**

## IV Eviction Prevention



*Eviction remains a key driver of homelessness for young people in Canada and around the world. Eviction involves landlord-initiated efforts or action to forcibly remove a tenant from a rental property, either formally or informally (Desmond & Kimbro, 2015).*

In Canada, youth under 30 are twice as likely to be evicted, particularly when they are on social assistance, and/or are newcomers, single women, or lead single-parent families (Acacia, 2006). While not every young person who experiences an eviction will become homeless, these experiences increase a young person's risk of becoming homeless (Holl, van den Dries, & Wolf, 2016).

Eviction is not simply an event, but the outcome of a process defined by provincial or territorial landlord/tenant legislation. There are various points along the eviction pathway where intervention could help a young person avoid losing their home. Unfortunately, because young people often do not know their rights, understand the process, may be intimidated, or are unaware that there are supports available, they may wait too long into the process to seek help. Some may simply cut short the process by leaving their housing prior to getting assistance or receiving a formal eviction order.

**Preventing unnecessary housing loss is essential to ensuring better outcomes for young people and preventing homelessness. This is the work of eviction prevention.**

### Defining Eviction Prevention

Eviction prevention refers to any program, policy, intervention, or strategy aimed at keeping young people or their families in their home with security and tenure, thereby preventing them from entering into homelessness (Gaetz & Dej, 2016; Poppe & Gale, 2018). Evictions prevention is thus a form of both early intervention and housing stabilisation for young people.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>While eviction prevention is a form of early intervention, and thus fits within the approaches outline in Section III, it is explored separately within the typology given its significance as a form of housing stabilization and its established prominence as a form of homelessness prevention.



**“Places are expensive, so you need a job, of course, when you’re young, cause anything with a one bedroom is 6, 7, 800 dollars. It’s ridiculous. So you need roommates. And I lived with some people who weren’t necessarily the best people ever. And we got evicted. A LOT. I’d go and find someone else to live with, and we got evicted. So I ended up trying to find a place to live, and no one would rent to me because I have three evictions in the past, for things - they don’t know what happened - but they look down at me and say ‘no thanks.’ So I didn’t live anywhere, because, no matter what, nobody would rent to me at all.”**

**Calgary Youth**

While we often imagine that a youth’s pathway into homelessness begins with leaving or being forced out of an adult-led household, research shows that many youth live independently and experience eviction before becoming homeless (Zivanovix et al., 2016). In fact, the [Without a Home](#) study found that among Canadian youth experiencing homelessness, the most recent housing situation for a number of youth included: “living in their own place” (14.5%); “living with a romantic partner” (8.7%); and “someone else’s place (not parents)” (15.1%) (Gaetz et al., 2016).

Many young people face profound difficulties accessing and maintaining rental housing. In a 2002 Canadian study, over half of the sample of youth experiencing homelessness reported serious problems with landlords, and 41% reported at least one eviction. The most commonly cited reasons included: parties and noise complaints (38.7%); rent arrears (24.5%); abusive landlord (16%); and property damage (10%) (Gaetz et al., 2002). When youth are financially or otherwise dependent upon living with a partner or friends, their vulnerability to eviction can increase, especially if they are not listed on the lease. Youth who engage in survival sex, or are being trafficked, experience profound housing precarity and are vulnerable to being kicked out, moved, or evicted with little warning, few alternatives, and limited legal recourse. Eviction is also an equity issue, meaning that youth from particular communities or with particular backgrounds (e.g., newcomer youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth) are more likely to be evicted, and as a result are more likely to experience profoundly negative consequences.

While some young people with strong family connections and natural supports may be able to return home or find other accommodations when things go wrong, this is not the case for everyone. Without proper supports and services, some young people will experience homelessness, an outcome that can often be avoided with proper and timely supports, as well as supportive policy and legislation.

## What is Unique About Eviction Prevention for Youth?

The relationship between age, housing precarity, and risk of eviction is important to consider when developing youth-specific eviction prevention efforts. Research indicates that young people face unique challenges to accessing rental housing, maintaining rental housing, and avoiding eviction.

**“I know years ago when I was looking for, like, market housing... As soon as I said I had income assistance they were like, ‘No.’ There’s such a stigma around it.”**

**Vancouver Youth**

Once young people are on their own, many face profound difficulties accessing rental housing. Their youthful age means that most lack experience in obtaining rental housing (including signing leases), and many lack certain prerequisites (e.g., a good credit rating, references) to obtain housing in the first place.

Young people often find it difficult to obtain the funds needed to pay for first and last months’ rent up front, in addition to the damage deposits that some landlords require (Schwan et al., 2018a). These difficulties are compounded by the considerable age-based barriers<sup>6</sup> and discrimination youth face in the rental housing market.

Youth often lack the earning power to obtain and sustain housing, and because of the precarity of their work, may be vulnerable to losing their housing. While some youth may scrape by on minimum wage, illegal rent increases, cuts to social assistance, or unexpected health or mental healthcare costs can mean rent becomes unaffordable and youth are evicted. These experiences of eviction in turn make it difficult for youth to find alternative rental housing, given that many landlords may screen for histories of eviction.

Additional challenges to maintaining rental housing for youth include navigating the complexities of living with multiple roommates, roommates’ behaviour or refusal to pay rent, rental unit takeovers, and a lack of necessary life skills. [The What Would it Take?](#) study (Schwan et al., 2018a) indicated that many Canadian youth who become homeless felt that they were inadequately prepared to maintain their rental unit and lacked the life skills (e.g., budgeting, cooking) they needed to thrive on their own.

**Youth-specific approaches to eviction prevention are needed, in addition to broader interventions that aim to prevent eviction and foreclosure for families with children and youth (including youth-led families).**

<sup>6</sup>In some jurisdictions, landlords cannot get insurance for a property where none of the tenants are over the age of 18.

## Key Forms of Eviction Prevention

Multiple forms of eviction prevention should be available, accessible, affordable, and appropriate for all young people and their families. Communities also need to be particularly attentive to the challenges faced by youth with particular identities, backgrounds, and experiences when implementing eviction prevention initiatives. For example, youth who are undocumented are more likely to face illegal evictions and may struggle to access legal supports due to language barriers or fear of deportation. An intersectional approach should be used to ensure these and other youth groups are provided with supports and services they deserve.

**There are five forms of eviction prevention that should be part of any youth homelessness prevention strategy:**

- 1) Strengthening Laws and Legislation Protecting Tenants
- 2) Provision of Information and Advice for Youth and Their Families
- 3) Provision of Financial Supports for Tenants
- 4) Access to Legal Supports, Advice, and Representation
- 5) Targeted and Timely Crisis Intervention

### 1) Strengthening Laws and Legislation Protecting Tenants

Evictions are primarily governed through provincial and territorial legislation. Landlord/tenant legislation outlines the legal circumstances under which a tenant may be evicted and a lease may be terminated. When effectively enforced, strong laws and legislation protecting renters can function as a form of homelessness prevention for youth and their families.

**“I know I’ve been rejected by multiple places just because of my age.”**

**Vancouver Youth**

**Any eviction prevention strategy should include the strengthening of laws and legislation that protect the rights of tenants, in addition to strengthening the mechanisms that hold landlords accountable when they are discriminatory, abusive, or behave unlawfully towards their tenants.** Given that many Canadian youth who are homeless report experiencing landlord discrimination on the basis of age and other factors (Schwan et al., 2018a), there is a clear need to strengthen policy and legislation that tackles age-based discrimination in the rental housing market. Rent control legislation – which protects tenants from excessive rent increases by limiting the amount landlords can raise rents per year – is another legislative tool to reduce the likelihood of evictions and financially-driven housing loss universally.

**Housing advice involves an assessment that may then help individuals identify sources of financial support, access landlord mediation, and learn their rights and options.**

*(Gaetz & DeJ, 2017, p.75)*

## **2) Provision of Information and Advice for Young People and Their Families**

It is critical that young people are able to access timely, accurate advice and information about rental housing issues and tenancy rights. Most young people will not be knowledgeable about their rights as tenants, and in the case of eviction proceedings, may not understand the process well enough to protect their own interests.

Information and advice for young people and their families can take two key forms: a) Universal Educational Programs and Resources, and b) Targeted Information and Professional Advice in Times of Crisis.

### ***a) Universal Educational Programs & Resources***

Broad educational campaigns, programs, and resources on rental housing issues are needed not just for young people, but for families, social service providers, healthcare providers, educators, and landlords. Many young people go to teachers, coaches, doctors, or other trusted adults when they or their families are struggling with tenancy issues (Schwan et al., 2018a). This means that while broad educational programs and resources should target young people, regardless of circumstance, they should also target:

- Private market landlords and social housing landlords, who have a legal obligation to respect and must be familiar with the rights of youth tenants;
- Teachers and staff at schools, who can support students to learn about their tenant rights;
- Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, who can help direct youth to organizations and agencies who can provide housing and legal advice, and;
- Staff and professionals in youth-serving social service settings, who can support youth to identify and respond to tenancy issues.

Resources should be youth-focused and highly accessible. In other words, young people need to know the information is there, and be able to access and understand it when needed. This requires making information available in plain language, multiple languages, as well as ensuring youth with disabilities or youth who have more limited literacy are able to access the same quality of information.

Universal, school-based education can be a mechanism for ensuring all youth have foundational knowledge on youths' tenancy rights, legal rights, and human rights. Youth-friendly general educational resources, such as web or app-based information platforms, may also help increase access to this critical knowledge. Broad public awareness campaigns (e.g., signs in bus stops) may also be a pathway for all members of the public to learn about their rights and responsibilities.

### ***b) Targeted Information & Professional Advice for Youth and Their Families***

**Young people whose tenancy is at imminent risk need often need immediate access to information and advice. This may include counselling, case management, and/or legal advice, in order to remain in the unit or quickly transition to a safe and appropriate alternative.**

As part of a system of care approach, this advice should identify "the root problems jeopardizing one's tenancy. Individuals may need support with budgeting, accessing benefits, managing debt, or other challenges" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 75). Young people may need targeted advice or support on how to find appropriate housing, how to maintain a unit (e.g., cleaning), financial management (e.g., budgeting, banking), managing conflict with partners or roommates, and developing relationships with neighbours and community who can provide support if things go wrong. Particular youth (e.g., young people fleeing violence) will need additional targeted advice and information in times of crisis.

## **3) Provision of Financial Supports for Tenants**

Many young people and their families are evicted or lose their homes simply because they cannot afford their rent or mortgage payments. This can happen for many reasons: an unexpected job loss, change in family composition (e.g., having to caretake an ill parent or grandparent), or a roommate being unable to pay rent. There is a strong evidence base for the efficacy of financial supports in preventing evictions (Poppe & Gale, 2018), though very little of this research has investigated youth's experiences of these supports.

**There are two key financial support programs that can reduce the risk of eviction for youth and families: Rental Assistance or Supplements, and Emergency Financial Assistance (Gaetz & Dej, 2017).**

### **RENTAL ASSISTANCE OR SUPPLEMENTS**

Rent supplements or rental assistance includes cash or housing vouchers that are provided to individuals or families struggling to afford their rent. These supports may be portable or may be tied to a particular housing program, and may be provided for months or years, depending on the program.

### **EMERGENCY FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

Emergency financial assistance is offered to tenants who are behind on their rent and are facing eviction. This can take the form of "emergency grants or loans, such as those provided by Rent Banks" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 77).

In targeting these programs to youth, it is essential that supports are *highly accessible* (e.g., are well advertised and have few bureaucratic barriers), *timely* (e.g., youth can access them quickly when unexpected crises emerge), *equity-based* (e.g., do not discriminate on the basis of age), *portable* (e.g., allow youth to move between houses and communities), *sufficient* (e.g., allow youth to pay for rent and meet other needs), and *grounded in youth choice* (e.g., allow for youth to change their minds about their housing circumstance). In particular, it is important that we do not require youth to experience homelessness before gaining access to these supports.

#### 4) Access to Legal Supports, Advice, and Representation

Defined by landlord/tenant legislation, the evictions process is somewhat linear, with points along the way where legal support could be of great assistance to a young person facing eviction. Legal supports can include provision of legal information and advice, representation for tenants at tribunal hearings, as well as support for tenants in the case of civil suits or other legal challenges resulting from their tenancy (Gaetz & DeJ, 2017, p. 76).

**Eviction prevention requires ensuring youth and their families access legal supports and representation quickly and effectively.**

In some jurisdictions, tenants can access free legal support, advice, and representation through legal aid or Community Legal Clinics. There may also be Tenant Duty Counsel in courts, landlord and tenant boards, or other administrative tribunals, which are composed of “lawyers and community legal workers who can give basic advice, help work out settlements with landlords, review and fill out some forms and documents and help tenants at hearings, especially related to eviction” ([City of Toronto](#), 2016, p. 8).

**Eviction prevention requires ensuring youth and their families access legal supports and representation quickly and effectively.** Broad public awareness campaigns on the availability of legal supports are needed, and it is critical that social service providers, teachers, doctors, and other adults in youths’ lives are able to refer youth to available legal supports in their community. The legal needs of youth are further explored in the following conversation with Poverty and Tenant Rights Lawyer, Jonathan Robart.

## Youth Eviction Prevention in Practice: A Conversation with Lawyer Jonathan Robart

Jonathan Robart is a lawyer who provides legal advice, support, and representation to people facing eviction in Toronto, including young people under the age of 25. He supports tenants who qualify for legal aid services based on a financial threshold guideline in Ontario, and represents them at eviction proceedings. Robart suggests that many young people are particularly vulnerable because many do not understand the process, and as a result may wait too long before they access support. He explains, "If someone falls behind on rent, there are legal and non-legal tools available for tenants, but the ultimate effectiveness of these tools depends on how soon they come to my door" (Robart, J., 2018, personal communication). "Many youth do not know about/are unable to access these supports before it's too late," Robart reports.

Robart explains that evictions may also be compounded by mental health challenges and other difficulties. Providing an example, Robart explains, "I worked with a young individual, who was under the age of twenty who had been raised by their grandmother. When she died, the individual sank into a deep depression and eventually, everything unravelled. The individual eventually lost their rent subsidy because of the physical problems associated with their depression and an inability to navigate very complex reporting requirements for rent subsidies in social housing. This resulted in this individual being served with an eviction notice and an imminent eviction hearing. When this individual was at imminent risk of eviction, they sought assistance from me at the last minute. We managed to preserve the tenancy and avoid eviction, but just barely."

*"The mental health piece is central to this predicament, and it is very hard to recover from that without support, not to mention to navigate a burdensome rental subsidy process while in the depths of a depression. A young person in that situation may not be able to access services quickly enough, nor are they necessarily aware of available services. Without access to legal services and representation, there is a very good chance this individual would have been homeless."  
(Robart, J., 2018, personal communication)*





## 5) Targeted and Timely Crisis Intervention

Forms of crisis intervention that are critical for youth and families facing immediate housing crises include:

- Assessment of risk
- Provision of information on rights and process
- Counselling
- System navigation
- Case management
- Landlord liaison, conflict resolution, and mediation
- Help accessing income and employment

A number of eviction prevention programs combine many of these elements, providing financial, housing, and case management supports to individuals and families in need. Emerging research has demonstrated the efficacy of these models for families with children and youth (Goodman, Messeri, & O'Flaherty's, 2016; Hill et al., 2002; Rolston et al., 2013). For example, Goodman, Messeri, and O'Flaherty's (2016) conducted an evaluation of [Homebase](#), a US-based multi-method intervention for families facing evictions, and found that the intervention independently contributed to an estimated 5% - 11% reduction in New York City shelter stays.

The screening and referral of young people and families at risk of eviction or foreclosure is an important preventative measure. Research has shown that evictions can be reduced when housing systems of care implement 'alarm systems' or 'trip wires' that flag families or individuals in need of immediate support (Allen, 2006; Crane & Warnes, 2000; Phinney et al., 2007; Salize et al., 2006). Landlord liaison, conflict resolution, and mediation may also be particularly important for young people, most of whom face a considerable power differential with their landlord based on their age.

**The screening and referral of young people and families at risk of eviction or foreclosure is an important preventative measure. Research has shown that evictions can be reduced when housing systems of care implement 'alarm systems' or 'trip wires' that flag families or individuals in need of immediate support.**



**Burt and colleagues (2007) argue that an intervention must be *effective* at stopping people from becoming homeless, and also *efficient* by targeting help to people who would otherwise become homeless without it. The more complex of the two is efficiency, or getting the right services to the right people at the right time.**

## Effective and Efficient Eviction Prevention

Research has identified that the most effective early intervention strategies, including eviction prevention, should be targeted (Burt et al., 2007; Culhane et al., 2011; Parsell & Martson, 2012; Shinn et al., 2013; 2017). Burt and colleagues (2007) argue that an intervention must be *effective* at stopping people from becoming homeless, and also *efficient* by targeting help to people who would otherwise become homeless without it. The more complex of the two is efficiency, or getting the right services to the right people at the right time. One of the challenges identified by Shinn and colleagues (2013) is that families who obtained support were those who self-identified and sought support. This suggests that a key challenge in delivering effective and efficient eviction prevention interventions is: (a) identifying families and youth in greatest need, and (b) implementing mechanisms so that these families and young people in crisis are made aware of supports and provided with reasonable access to these supports.

Working with [HomeBase Prevention](#) in New York City, Shinn and colleagues (2013) developed and tested an effective screening tool to identify and support households facing eviction. Their results demonstrated that the most effective outcomes were interventions for households that were in the highest risk category. Unfortunately, no body of research to date has identified how such interventions might work with youth, or how they might be adapted for youth.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

A NY-based, randomized control trial study (Seron et al., 2001) evaluated the effect of legal assistance, advice, and representation on eviction. While low-income tenants were standing in line at New York City's Housing Court to respond to a court order regarding non-payment of rent, participants were recruited into the study. Participants were randomly assigned to the treatment group (which received legal advice or representation) or control group (no legal supports). The treatment group received either legal assistance from a paralegal, advice from an attorney, or full representation. The results were dramatic:

- Tenants who received legal advice and supports were significantly less likely to receive an eviction warrant (24% compared to 44% in the control group).
- Legal representation in court significantly lowered eviction warrants for represented tenants (10% compared to 44% in the control group).

While the study did not explore the specific benefit of these supports for youth, these findings suggest legal advice and representation is a critical component of eviction prevention.

## Conclusion

Eviction prevention is a critical piece of early intervention efforts. Young people face profound challenges in private housing markets, and many youth experiencing homelessness across Canada report histories of evictions (Gaetz et al., 2002; 2016). Fortunately, there is a growing evidence base supporting eviction prevention.

According to an [international review of evidence](#), “the immediate provision of concrete resources (i.e., housing, financial support) is most effective at preventing evictions for individuals and families, including youth-led families and families with children and youth” (Schwan et al., 2018b, p. 45). Research has demonstrated the particular efficacy of “(1) financial supports for tenants; (2) legal supports, advice, and representation; and (3) comprehensive financial, housing, health, mediation, and case management supports” (Schwan et al., 2018b, p. 45).

**What we know is that a relentless approach is needed to support youth that have been housed, employing every method possible to ensure that do not lose that housing.**

Unfortunately, there is limited analysis of eviction prevention interventions for young people. **What we know is that a relentless approach is needed to support youth that have been housed, employing every method possible to ensure that they do not lose that housing.** Critical to this is ensuring young people have the supports they need, including legal supports, healthcare and employment supports, as well as family mediation and counselling supports. The accessibility, affordability, availability, and appropriateness of these supports is crucial to making evictions prevention interventions effective for young people. With these supports in place, young people have a much greater chance of maintaining their housing, or relocating to safe, appropriate, and stable housing.

## V Housing Stabilization for Youth Who Have Exited Homelessness



*Housing stabilization is central in any effort to help someone exit homelessness permanently, and is often an important goal in policy, service delivery, and practice. In North America, it is often framed as the key – and in many cases only – performance indicator that defines the outcome of strategies to end homelessness.*

Despite being a core measure of how we assess 'successful exits' from homelessness, "the concept of housing stability remains poorly defined and conceptualized, and to date there are no standard measures" (Frederick et al., 2014, p. 965).

Unfortunately, we make a number of untested assumptions about the outcomes for young people who exit homelessness and obtain housing, especially when long-term trajectories are not tracked. For instance, there is little evidence or understanding of what happens when young people exit homelessness and do not come in contact with the local service system again within the first year after being housed. Did they return home to family? Have they been drawn into criminal activities, or been victims of crimes, including human trafficking? Have they moved? Are they avoiding the system because it was not helpful? Are they still alive?

These unanswered questions suggest that the binary 'housed/not housed' is an insufficient indicator of success in addressing youth homelessness. When we aggregate data with 'housed/not housed' as the key performance indicator at the community level, can we really make the claim that progress is being made to end homelessness or achieve 'functional zero'?

**In addition to ensuring young people exit homelessness quickly and do not cycle back into homelessness, communities must also provide the resources and supports to ensure improved long-term, positive outcomes in the areas of health and well-being, education and employment, life skills, and social inclusion. This is the work of housing stabilization.**

## Defining Housing Stabilization

A form of tertiary prevention, housing stabilization involves assisting young people who have already experienced homelessness and housing precarity to exit that situation as quickly as possible, with the necessary supports in place to ensure they do not cycle back into homelessness again. In addition to assisting youth to achieve housing stability, housing stabilization seeks to improve outcomes in other areas of young people's lives, including health, well-being, social inclusion, educational achievement, and employment. Housing stabilization is also a goal of early intervention.

## Why Does Housing Stabilization Matter?

While many young people who experience homelessness are able to resolve the situation and return to housing (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Milburn et al., 2009), little is known about the long-term housing trajectories of these youth (Braciszewski et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2014; Karabanow, 2004; 2010). Conversely, for young people who experience prolonged exposure to homelessness, there is considerable evidence attesting to the profound negative consequences for health, safety, and well-being (Zeger et al., 2008; Kulick et al., 2011; Boivan et al., 2005; Roy et al., 2004; Kidd & Kral, 2002; McKay, 2009; Kirst & Erickson, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2010). So what happens to these youth when they are able to exit homelessness into housing?

**The results of the limited research that has been done on youths' housing trajectories is compelling, but not in a positive way.**

Prolonged experience of homelessness may continue to undermine housing stability and wellness even if young people exit homelessness, as many will continue to grapple with trauma and other mental health challenges, addictions, and extreme poverty.

**Simply being housed is not a positive indicator of well-being, nor a strong predictor of healthy living, safety, labour force participation, or social inclusion.**

Several Canadian studies point to this conclusion. Kozloff et al. (2016), in an analysis of data from the *At Home/Chez Soi* study, found that for young adults aged 18-24 receiving the Pathways model of Housing First, housing outcomes were similar to the adult cohort but results for quality of life indicators (e.g., social integration, engagement in employment) were not so positive. A study in Toronto and Halifax by Kidd, Karabanow, and colleagues followed 51 young people for 12 months as they transitioned from homelessness (Kidd et al., 2016; Karabanow et al., 2018). The study showed that while young people demonstrated high levels of commitment, they also faced significant structural barriers resulting in social isolation, challenges in maintaining housing stability, and finding employment. There was great variability in mental health and quality of life, and after a year many experienced a significant decline in hope.

Karabanow (2008), in a qualitative study involving interviews with 128 young people and 50 service providers in six Canadian cities, found that for most youth, the pathway off the streets was a non-linear process that presented many challenges. Karabanow and colleagues (2010) identified that the more embedded in street life one is, and the stronger bonds one has with street-involved peers, the more likely a young person's ability and desire to exit street life and integrate into mainstream society is undermined. Thulien et al. (2017) in Toronto describes in detail the factors that undermine housing stability and well-being, including the lack of affordable housing, limited social capital, inadequate education, and limited labour force participation. This led to poverty-level income, an inability to formulate long range plans, ongoing feelings of *outsiderness*, and the constant fear of becoming homeless again.

International research produces similar results. Mayock and colleagues (2008; 2010; 2011; 2013; 2014) have conducted considerable research on transitions in Dublin, Ireland, including a qualitative study tracking the housing trajectories of 40 young people over six years. While almost all young people who exited homelessness returned to education or vocational training, most young people identified significant challenges including financial hardship and difficulty establishing positive social relationships. Few were able to maintain independent housing, with most either moving back home or into transitional housing. It should be noted that family support was a positive predictive factor for maintaining independent living. Mayock and colleagues also highlight the importance of supporting rapid exits from homelessness, finding that "Those young people who 'got out' early were likely to 'stay out', even if a number did return to homelessness temporarily for a period" (Mayock & Corr, 2013, p. 65).

The factors that predict housing stability and well-being are variable. An Australian study by Milburn et al. (2009) using the [Risk Amplification and Abatement Model](#) (RAAM) found that ongoing contact with negative socialising agents undermines housing stability, while contact with more positive social relations produced a more stabilizing outcome. Similar to Mayock, school engagement and support from family, particularly maternal support, were important factors enhancing housing stability.

**Karabanow (2008; 2010) identified that successful exits from the streets involved much more than pragmatic factors, such as finding housing as well as changing routines and relationships, but also involved important emotional and spiritual shifts, including a move away from the identity of being a 'homeless youth.'**

Roy et al. (2011), in a large-scale quantitative study in Montreal (n=365), indicated that youth who had completed high school, were engaged in employment, and who had sought mental health support were 40 to 50% more likely to achieve stability than other study participants. The authors suggest that efforts to enhance housing stabilization and prevent chronic homelessness, "should not only target individual impairments but also build on services that foster social connections among youth" (Roy et al., 2016, p. 7). Karabanow (2008; 2010) identified that successful exits from the streets involved much more than pragmatic factors, such as finding housing as well as changing routines and relationships, but also involved important emotional and spiritual shifts, including a move away from the identity of being a 'homeless youth.' A study in Ohio by Slesznick et al. (2007) identified that the more connections participants had at baseline with mainstream social systems including healthcare, education, and medical care, the fewer days they spent homeless.

Finally, we need to consider how the youthful age of many who experience homelessness may impact on housing stability. Stabilising housing and living conditions can be extremely difficult for youth once they exit homelessness, in part because of the tumultuous developmental age and stage they are at in the life course (Gaetz et al., 2013; Kidd et al., 2016). Many of these youth face the responsibilities of independence before they have accumulated the necessary skills, experiences, and psychosocial resources to undertake this transition (Crane et al., 2014; Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). Indeed, youth experiencing homelessness often lack the resources and social supports needed to build the skills necessary for independent living (Milburn et al., 2009; Mayock, Corr, & O'Sullivan, 2011; Tevendale, Comulada, & Lightfoot, 2011). Housing stabilization interventions are, therefore, critical to help youth transition off the streets and prevent re-entry into homelessness.

**Many of these youth face the responsibilities of independence before they have accumulated the necessary skills, experiences, and psychosocial resources to undertake this transition.**



## Supporting Housing Stability Through A Focus On Well-Being

The review of research suggests that to achieve housing stabilization for youth and young adults who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness, it is necessary to consider a broader range of outcomes beyond housing status, which focus more on well-being, building assets, strengthening resilience, and enhancing social inclusion. These outcomes should guide the models of service delivery and supports.

There are existing models of accommodation and support intended to enhance life skills, promote healing, help build assets, and improve quality of life. Some incorporate housing as part of the model of support, such as transitional housing program the Foyer (Gaetz et al., 2012). Another example is the [Housing First for Youth](#) program model developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada (Gaetz, 2014a, b; 2017). This adaptation of Housing First to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults is currently undergoing rigorous evaluation in three countries, with three demonstration sites in Canada.

Other interventions such as the Housing Outreach Program - Collaboration (HOP-C) are designed to complement and stabilize a broad array of housing arrangements through youth-focussed and co-designed transitional case management, mental health, and peer support intervention (Kidd et al., 2016; Karabanow et al., 2018). HOP-C provides seamless and integrated transitional case management, mental health intervention, and peer support – all building out from a dynamic process of youth engagement. While HOP-C is showing promising results, additional research in smaller community contexts centres will enhance our knowledge of its application in different settings.

**The level and kinds of support that are needed to stabilize housing will vary, depending on identified needs as well as the desires of the young person. Many youth will require a range of supports and case management to retain their housing, while others will have minimal need for additional supports beyond help accessing housing.**

Youth choice and self-determination are essential for determining the length and intensity of services (Crane et al., 2014), and evidence suggests that supports should be sustained or accessible well after youth access housing. Therapeutic relationships between young people and trusted professionals are critical to achieving housing stability (Kidd et al., 2014).

Determining the needs of young people is therefore a priority. Effective and strengths-based assessment tools such as the Youth Assessment Prioritization (YAP) Tool, which includes both a “screener” and a more extensive assessment tool, can be used for this purpose. Unlike many other assessment tools, the YAP tool is strengths-based, evidence informed, and relies on the knowledge of both the young person and the worker to make an assessment. The YAP tool has been field tested in Canada and is currently being validated by the University of Ottawa.

Coordinated supports for youth must also be considered, including supports for those in under-resourced rural and remote areas where services may be difficult to access (Farrin, Dollard, & Cheers, 2005; Skott-Myhre, Raby, & Nikolaou, 2008). Further, it is important that young people are able to reconnect with services they previously withdrew from, without facing consequences (Vitopoulos et al., 2017). This may be critical given evidence that a young person’s sense of personal control in service delivery directly impacts housing stability (Slesnick et al., 2017).

## Key Forms of Housing Stabilization

A comprehensive framework identifying the range and kinds of supports that can contribute to housing stabilization has been described as part of the [Housing First for Youth](#) (HF4Y) program model (Gaetz, 2014; 2017). [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#) (Gaetz, 2017) outlines a broader range of supports than is typically associated with Housing First targeting adults, because it is designed to address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. In addition, a key goal of HF4Y is not simply to help young people become independently housed, but to be supported through a successful transition into adulthood, independence, and well-being. This has implications for service delivery program costs, case management approach, caseloads, and the length of time a young person should be supported. The outcome of this approach is currently being evaluated as part of the [Making the Shift](#) project, using methodologies similar to those that were employed as part of the *At Home/Chez Soi* project.

**FIGURE 5: AREAS OF SUPPORTS TO ENHANCE HOUSING STABILIZATION (HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH)**



Figure 5 summarizes the range of supports that enhance housing stabilization, based on the [Housing First for Youth](#) framework. Below is a more in-depth examination of this framework of supports.

## 1) Housing Supports

While many young people who have experienced homelessness manage to find housing on their own, including returning to live with family members, others will need more intensive and ongoing housing support. This support may be short term and crisis-based, or for some youth, ongoing and possibly permanent.

In some cases, housing supports are provided by a separate housing worker, but can also be the responsibility of a case worker. Incorporating housing supports into casework can be a route to deepening the therapeutic relationship and helping youth who may not be easily engaged to connect with other kinds of supports.

### Key areas of supports include:

- 1) **Help in obtaining housing** – Support searching for and obtaining housing that is safe, affordable, and appropriate, with a spectrum of housing options offered in order to best meet the needs of diverse young people.
- 2) **Housing retention** – Helping young people learn how to take care of and maintain housing, pay rent on time, develop good relations with landlords and neighbours, or deal with friends and roommates.
- 3) **Rent supplements** – Many young people will lack the earning power to pay market rent, and may need rent supplements, which should be geared toward income to ensure that youth pay no more than 30% of their income on rent.
- 4) **Access to start-up home furnishings and appliances** – Ensuring that youth have adequate furnishings to make their place of living a functioning home.
- 5) **Support when things go wrong** – A “zero discharge into homelessness” philosophy, so that housing stability and crisis management, rather than arbitrary time limits, are the focus of intervention.
- 6) **Eviction prevention support** – Legal, professional, and informational assistance to prevent housing loss due to eviction.
- 7) **Aftercare** – Continued contact with support workers that can quickly respond if problems arise.

The most significant success factor in housing stabilisation interventions, and the first step of support, is access to safe, affordable, appropriate housing (Kidd et al., 2014). A lack of housing options promotes young people’s cycling through contact with systems such as shelter, justice, and substance use treatment (Vitopoulos et al., 2017). Schwan et al., (2018b) in their review of [evidence for youth homelessness prevention](#), remarked that in their consultation with international homelessness experts, a resounding theme was that time-limited supports, often associated with transitional housing programs, become a barrier to housing stabilization. They also emphasized “the need to ensure youth have choice and voice in addressing their housing needs” (Schwan et al., 2018, p. 48).

## 2) Supports for Health and Well-Being

The [core principles of Housing First for Youth](#) clarify the kinds of health and well-being supports that should be provided to by young people. Developing adolescents and young adults have age-specific needs, and the experience of homelessness may have had a profoundly negative impact on well-being. Housing stabilization requires that attention be paid to youths' physical and mental health needs, and more generally to their well-being. Housing stabilization case management should incorporate a recovery-orientation based on trauma-informed care. Interventions should be person-centred, and strengths-based, taking into account the developmental needs of young people, as well as their assets within a positive youth development context. Support services should respond to the diverse needs identified by each individual (Kidd et al., 2014). The range of supports identified here are considered in terms of how they enhance well-being, mitigate the effects of mental health and addictions challenges, improve quality of life and foster self-sufficiency.

### The range of housing supports include:

- 1) Access to health care** – Obtaining good primary care is important for a population that may not have had access to it in the past, particularly for individuals with ongoing health challenges and disabilities (Kulick et al., 2011). Access to diagnostic testing is also important, as many individuals may have disabilities or conditions for which they can receive additional supports (Macdonald, 2015).
- 2) Mental health supports** – A large percentage of young people who experience homelessness also endure considerable mental health challenges (Kidd, 2013; Kidd et al., 2018; Gaetz et al., 2016). Research by Kidd et al. (2016) shows that even a year post-homelessness, many young people still have poor mental health and quality of life - putting at them risk for re-entry into homelessness. Such findings demonstrate the need for ongoing health and well-being supports once young people are stably housed, including systems navigation strategies to help youth to quickly access supports when things go wrong. Others youth may suffer from undiagnosed developmental delays, brain injury, or other disabling conditions. As part of a system of care, such individuals should be supported to access assessments and suitable interventions, if required.
- 3) Trauma-informed care** – Many people who become homeless often have experienced trauma either prior to becoming homeless or once they are on the streets. It is, therefore, essential that those providing supports practice trauma-informed care, in which there is acknowledgement of traumatic experiences, and an understanding that the experience of trauma can be paralyzing, can affect behavior and decision-making, and can lead to addictions (Kirst et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2005; Fallo & Harris 2005).

**4) Harm reduction support** – Some young people who have experienced homelessness will need ongoing support to deal with substance use problems and addictions. Harm reduction is a humane, client-centred and evidence-based approach to working with people with addictions, and such supports should help people retain their housing; reduce the risk of harms to themselves, people close to them, and the community; and help them become more engaged with education, training, employment, and other meaningful activities (Kirst et al., 2011; 2013; Gaetz, 2015). Harm reduction and substance use supports as part of housing stabilization interventions have been found to stabilize housing and improve mental health (Kreindler & Coodin, 2010). Powell et al. (2016) also found evidence for the efficacy of these approaches to housing stabilization for LGBTQ2S+ identifying young people.

**5) Enhancing personal safety** – Many youth experience physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse prior to being homeless. Once on the streets, they are exponentially more likely to be victims of crime (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Two recent studies of youth homelessness in ten cities identified that almost one fifth were victims of human trafficking (mostly sex trafficking) (Murphy, 2017). When young people leave the streets, they may continue to be victims of criminal exploitation, including [home takeovers](#). Enhancing the personal safety of young people by ensuring that they have access to housing that is safe, are protected from exploitation, and build resilience and strategies to avoid such exploitation, is a key component of wellness supports.

**6) Food security** – For young people, a good diet is important for proper growth and development. Without enough food or the right kinds of food, our health is compromised and our ability to get things done is undermined. The surest way to guarantee food security is to ensure young people have an adequate source of income (Tarasuk et al., 2009; 2013).

**7) Promoting healthy sexuality** – Sexual health is a central feature of physical, emotional, and social health and well-being that influences individuals of all ages. Unfortunately, many young people with lived experience of homelessness have been exposed to physical and sexual abuse at a young age. Furthermore, young people who remain homeless for extended periods of time are exposed to early sexual activity, exploitation, including pressure to exchange sex for food, shelter, money, or companionship, and a greater risk of sexual assault (Milburn et al., 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Finally, youth who self-identify as LGBTQ2S+ may face additional challenges in their transition to adulthood. It is important that services are sensitive to the diverse sexualities and gender expressions of youth by providing safe, welcoming, and gender-appropriate services.

**“I’m just trying to say that, if you’re hungry or something, older dudes are going to take advantage of you when you’re younger. And then you have all these drugs in you and you’re only 14 ... And the way he looked at you - you’re just a little girl, and you don’t know what to do. And you’re hooked on drugs now.”**

**Calgary Youth**

### 3) Access to Income and Education

Inadequate education, income, and employment are well-established risk factors contributing to people cycling in and out of homelessness. All of these are linked, and can increase future risk of homelessness. There is an extensive body of research that analyzes the costs to the individual and society over the course of a lifetime of failure to complete high school (Hankivsky, 2009; Levin, 2005; Levin et al., 2007). "Directly or indirectly, high school non-completion has enormous fiscal implications in terms of expenditures on health, social services and programs, education, employment, criminality, and lower economic productivity" (Hankivsky, 2009, p. 9).

Supporting both those at risk, as well as formerly homeless young people, to earn an income and obtain an education is key to addressing housing stability in the long term.

- 1) **Educational engagement and achievement** – Many of those who experience homelessness have failed to complete high school, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage in the labour market. The [Without a Home](#) study (Gaetz et al., 2016) found that 53% of the participants had dropped out of high school (compared to the national average of less than 9%), and 50% were not currently in employment, education, or training. This is not necessarily a result of young people rejecting school. Research has found that many youth aspire to reconnect with education, but housing instability gets in the way (Day & Paul, 2007; Gaetz et al., 2016). Research on family homelessness indicates that Critical Time Interventions<sup>7</sup> are showing efficacy at improving educational engagement for children and youth (Shinn et al., 2015). For young people who are interested, there should be supports for (re)engagement with school.
- 2) **Employment training** – Some individuals who are homeless have a weak history of employment, or do not have specialized skills to compete in an increasingly skilled labour market. These youth can benefit from training and skills development that will support them to attain the jobs they desire. Social enterprise models and youth employment programs that offer appropriate supports to prepare youth for the working world show promise for improving young people's ability to find gainful and personally fulfilling employment.
- 3) **Income and employment** – Some youth may not be interested in formal education and training, and would rather access employment immediately. Other youth, due to illness, injury, or other forms of incapacitation, may not be easily employable in the short-, medium- or long-term, and may need income supports. Additionally, low wage jobs and the high cost of housing and other basic needs will cause some young people to need income supports to keep them out of poverty and homelessness. In addition to access to minimum wage employment and employment training, having access to income supports and housing subsidies has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of youths' housing stability (Frederick et al., 2014; Kidd et al., 2014; Rog & Buckner, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> [Critical Time Intervention \(CTI\)](#) is an "empirically supported, time-limited case management model designed to prevent homelessness in people with mental illness following discharge from hospitals, shelters, prisons and other institutions. This transitional period is one in which people often have difficulty re-establishing themselves in stable housing with access to needed supports. CTI works in two main ways: by providing emotional and practical support during the critical time of transition and by strengthening the individual's long-term ties to services, family, and friends" (Centre for the Advancement of Critical Time Intervention, 2009, p.1).

## 4) Complementary Supports

There are a number of other supports that facilitate housing stabilization and help individuals and families improve their quality of life, connect with community, and potentially achieve self-sufficiency:

- 1) Life skills** – For those with little experience of independent living or stable housing, life skills training, mentoring, and individual support that focuses on the enhancement of self-care and life skills should be made available.
- 2) Advocacy** – Clients may face challenges in advocating for their own rights and access to services and supports because of language barriers, stigma, and discrimination. Individuals may also be reluctant to enter certain institutional settings such as hospitals or mental health facilities because of past negative or traumatic experiences. In such cases, service providers can offer advice, support, advocacy, and transportation to assist people.
- 3) System navigation** – Providing support to navigate complex systems is essential for ensuring that formerly homeless young people and their families are able to work their way through systems and get access to the services and supports they need and are entitled to.
- 4) Peer support** – Having someone who has lived similar experiences talk and support you through challenging situations is often very important for individuals who are marginalized or who have experienced trauma in service settings. The [At Home/Chez Soi project](#) and other Housing First efforts have demonstrated that peer supports enhance housing stabilization (Nelson et al., 2016).
- 5) Parenting Support** – Some young people who are at risk of, or who experience homelessness are also parents. They may need support in developing parenting skills and/or enabling the return of children that may have been taken into care.
- 6) Legal advice and representation** – Administrative, civil, and criminal legal barriers can have an impact on youths' access to benefits, education, employment, housing, treatment, and other services. Such barriers can present hard stops to housing stabilization, frustrating the efforts of youth as well as the providers who serve them, and ultimately getting in the way of successful and sustained exits from homelessness. Regardless of what the legal barrier may be, the reality is that only a lawyer or the court can remove legal barriers, which underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to assisting youth experiencing homelessness.



## 5) Enhancing Social Inclusion

Key to the well-being of any person is their ability to nurture positive relationships with others, connect to communities, and become involved in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling. This is particularly crucial given that many young people who are homeless report having strained relationships friends, family, or carers (Crane et al., 2014).

Enhancing social inclusion is particularly complex and deeply involved work. The [At Home/Chez Soi study](#) found that for their largely adult cohort, the Housing First approach did not show promising results on social inclusion. Limited evidence exists on effective strategies for increasing social inclusion amongst youth within housing stabilization programs. This is possibly because longitudinal data in this area is rare. Discussions with young people (Slesnick et al., 2017; Schwan et al., 2018a; Thistle, 2017), and longitudinal studies on youth (Kidd et al., 2016) indicate that housing stability is greatly improved when youth are able to connect with others, reconnect with family, and access to a range of sustainable supports. Gains in youths' community integration and quality of life can take time for young people to develop. One follow-up study (Kidd et al., 2016) found that after a year of being housed, young people did not experience significant gains in community integration and quality of life, demonstrating the need for longer-term social inclusion supports for youth.

### Efforts to support the social inclusion of youth who have experienced homelessness should include:

- 1) **Developing and strengthening healthy social relationships and connections** – Young people should be supported in developing positive relationships with peers, community members, employers, colleagues, landlords, and others in their community.
- 2) **Enhancing family and natural supports** – Families can be an important source of ongoing support for people throughout the entire life cycle. Youth in particular require healthy and permanent relationships with caring adults as they transition into adulthood. Reconnection and reunification with family for formerly homeless young people is an important intervention that can contribute to their longer term housing stability (Winland et al., 2011). Drawing attention to the importance of strengthening family and natural supports, Braciszewski and colleagues' (2016) longitudinal study of 243 homeless adolescents concluded that youth exiting homelessness are "often able to achieve stable housing quickly and with long-term security, generally in their parents' homes" (p. 6), suggesting the importance of family reunification strategies and tailored family-based interventions to promote housing stability. The [Making the Shift](#) project is currently conducting demonstration projects on how to effectively do this work.

- 3) **Community engagement and integration** – The opportunity to engage with communities of choice, whether people and institutions in the local neighbourhood, or making cultural connections, is also important to well-being. Important research by Naomi Thulien and colleagues (2018) demonstrate that once young people are housed, they often lack opportunities to extend their social networks and have “very little access to the informal knowledge commonly passed between friends and family regarding how to get ahead in life” (p. 95). These findings suggest the need for greater investments in community engagement and integration efforts, including through programs that facilitate the development of social capital (e.g., mentorship programs) and meaningful opportunities for young people to expand their social networks (Thulien et al., 2018).
- 4) **Cultural connection** – Cultural and spiritual connections are important for many people, and if desired, young people should be supported to engage in cultural and spiritual traditions. This is particularly important for Indigenous youth who, as a result of the intergenerational experience of colonialism and trauma, may have estranged relationships with their culture and community.
- 5) **Engagement in meaningful activities** – People should be provided with the opportunity to pursue their interests and participate in meaningful activities such as arts, sports, or volunteering, in order to learn new skills, develop relationships, and socialize.



**Thulien and colleagues’ study (2018) on formerly homeless young people found that: “The participants’ challenge was not in merely maintaining a home with meager resources, but doing so amid constant reminders that they were in a lower socioeconomic position – poor, undereducated, and inadequately employed. Chronic precarity permeated every aspect of participants’ lives, from maintaining a home to developing fragile new identities as self-sufficient adults. This precarity threatened to destroy their belief that they were the masters of their own destinies” (p.96-97).**



## Considering Housing Stabilization for Indigenous Youth

One of the consequences of historical and ongoing colonization and discrimination in Canada is that Indigenous peoples, who make up 4.5% of the Canadian population, are significantly over-represented in homeless populations (Segaert, 2012), making up 30% of the national youth homelessness population (Gaetz et al., 2016). Dr. Suzanne Stewart and others (Monette et al., 2009; Stewart, 2016, 2018; Walker, 2008) have identified multiple barriers faced by Indigenous peoples in accessing housing that is safe, affordable, and appropriate, which include “poverty, lack of access to culturally appropriate social services and housing, literacy issues, discrimination, addiction, mental health problems, and intergenerational trauma resulting from experiences with residential schools and the child welfare system. Systemic racism affects access to housing and supports” (Stewart, 2018, p. 89).

Mainstream/colonial thinking about the nature of homelessness is insufficient to describe the experience of homelessness among Indigenous youth. The [Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada](#) (Thistle, 2017) contends that for Indigenous peoples, homelessness is much more than the lack of a house, but is an undermining of ‘All My Relations’, which is the connection and unity to all things, including culture, land, and people. Homelessness for Indigenous peoples is also an experience of isolation from “relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities” (Thistle, 2017, p.6). For Indigenous youth, solutions to homelessness will not only require housing, but facilitating improved well-being, cultural connection, and opportunities for healing.

**“Colonization, like if that didn’t happen, I feel I would be so good.”**

**Vancouver Youth**

To best support Indigenous youth to exit homelessness in a sustainable way, it is important to acknowledge and address past and present tensions between Western individualist approaches to health and well-being, and more holistic Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, focusing on cultural connections, relationships, and community. Colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and separation from family and community can leave Indigenous youth with a sense of dislocation and alienation from their culture and ways of knowing, which can be exacerbated by homelessness. The ability to connect to culture, communities, and traditional practices, when desired, is important for healing among Indigenous youth.

While the range of services and supports outlined in the sections above are applicable to Indigenous youth, it is possible to adapt and infuse them with Indigenous ways of knowing to make them more culturally relevant. Duran (2007) refers to hybrid approaches to therapy and healing, bringing together the knowledge, techniques, and practices that reflect both Indigenous and mainstream approaches. Stewart suggests that “(h)ybridism allows the practitioner and the client to jointly explore the client’s identity, culture, and worldview in order to clarify the client’s needs and determine the appropriate interventions for facilitating healing” (Stewart, 2018, p. 96).

Whether looking at youth homelessness prevention or housing stabilization, Indigenous peoples must have a leadership role in the design and implementation of solutions, to ensure culturally appropriate housing and supports are made available to Indigenous youth. Interventions must be infused with traditional knowledge, and account for the impacts of colonialism and intergenerational trauma that continue to impact young people. Embracing the importance of cultural connection and Indigenous ways of knowing as part of housing stabilization not only advances better and more inclusive outcomes for Indigenous youth, but can also potentially inform how we work with all young people at risk of or who experience homelessness.

## Conclusion

Youth’s path out of homelessness and into housing is mired with adversity. It is incumbent upon us to design interventions that make this path as easy to traverse as possible, providing young people with meaningful supports that extend beyond the provision of four walls and a roof. In order to do this, we need to invest in not just in a range of affordable housing models, but supports for social inclusion, well-being and health, identity development, and opportunities for education, employment, and training.

Once housed, the work begins to repair, reconnect, and rebuild, implementing supports that can assist a young person’s transition to adulthood. This requires that we take on a new level of organizational preparedness, strategy, and commitment to young people. Stability depends on how we engage young people and what support we wrap around them (e.g., mental health, addiction, family reconnection, trauma-informed care, and community connection). It is time to provide youth exiting homelessness with all of the supports they need to maintain that housing long term.

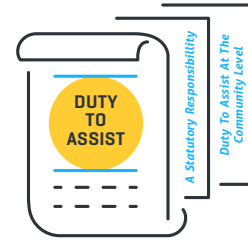
**It is time to think about successful housing stabilization as more than just having a place to live.**



## 5

**DUTY TO ASSIST**

## Taking a Rights-Based Approach



*If the prevention of youth homelessness is to be grounded in a human rights approach, we must consider the positive obligations of governments and communities to ensure the rights of youth are protected. The fulfilment of young people's social and economic rights must include legal and practical mechanisms to seek assistance and redress in the event that their rights are violated (or soon will be). Currently, there largely is no protocol or legal requirement to assist youth in distress outside of the child welfare context.*

Duty to Assist also helps us resolve the contradiction between a human rights based approach to resolving homelessness, and the more narrow prioritization of chronic and high acuity (and mostly adult) populations that is dominant in North America.

**Preventing youth homelessness requires that young people be assured of a process to gain immediate access to housing and supports to remedy the risk or experience of homelessness.**

In practical terms, this means that higher levels of government provide a policy and funding framework for homelessness prevention, and provide communities with necessary resources and supports to enable them to fulfill the requirement of providing information, advice, and assistance to young people under the age of 25 who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This is the work of Duty to Assist.

## Defining A Duty To Assist

A Duty to Assist means there is a statutory obligation, or a **legal duty**, requiring that local authorities make reasonable efforts<sup>8</sup> to end the person's homelessness or stabilize their housing. This means ensuring that young people under 25 are provided with information, advice, and housing-led supports to avoid an experience of homelessness, or to make that experience as brief as possible.

A rights-based approach to youth homelessness, Duty to Assist is legally enforceable and judiciable, providing a young person with the opportunity for legal recourse if the state fails to take reasonable steps to prevent their homelessness. Duty to Assist legislation identifies and articulates jurisdictional responsibilities within and between different orders of government in order to make their best effort to ensure any young person who is referred for assistance (including through self-referral) is provided with the appropriate supports, information, and advice to remain housed, or quickly become re-housed.

This statutory duty is **not** met by referring a young person to an emergency shelter or other homelessness services that do not proactively prevent their homelessness or help them exit homelessness rapidly and in a sustained way.

## An International Example of A Duty To Assist: Wales

The concept of Duty to Assist has been put in practice in Europe with the [Housing \(Wales\) Act of 2014](#), articulated a comprehensive and rights-based approach to homelessness prevention (it should be noted that the Welsh legislation applies to all people at risk of homelessness, and does not specifically target youth). Central to this legislation is a requirement that local authorities (municipal government) have a duty to provide information, advice, assistance, and navigation supports to people seeking help, and a "duty to help to prevent an applicant from becoming homeless" (section 66) if a person or family is: a) threatened with homelessness, and b) eligible for help. In addition to ensuring that there are funded early intervention programs in place, this strategy stresses a systems-based approach to collaboration. Practically, this means local authorities are directed to "cooperate with other public authorities, non-profit and voluntary organizations, and other individuals and providers to ensure services are in place to meet the needs of particular groups who are deemed to be at higher risk of homelessness" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 52).

A preliminary evaluation of the impact of the Welsh legislation has demonstrated positive results in that services have been "successfully reoriented towards prevention, creating a more supportive environment, reducing the number of people in temporary accommodation and decreasing the number who remain homeless after seeking help" (Mackie et al., 2017, p. 81).

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<sup>8</sup>We define reasonable efforts as involving due diligence and care in finding effective, appropriate, housing-led services and supports to meet the needs of the young person and their family, taking into account the age and developmental stage of the young person, and the availability of supports in the local community.

**How can Canadian governments effectively utilize legislation and a systems approach as a tool to prevent youth homelessness? Are such learnings transferrable to the Canadian context given the complex division of responsibilities and resources between different orders of government? The answer is that the experience of Wales can be drawn upon to build a 'Made in Canada' Duty to Assist strategy.**

How can Canadian governments effectively utilize legislation and a systems approach as a tool to prevent youth homelessness? Are such learnings transferrable to the Canadian context given the complex division of responsibilities and resources between different orders of government? The answer is that the experience of Wales can be drawn upon to build a 'Made in Canada' Duty to Assist strategy.

The sections below illustrate how Canadian governments can put in place Duty to Assist legislation as a cornerstone of a prevention-based response to youth homelessness. It is best built upon the five elements of the Typology for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness. It can also act as a catalyst for systems integration at the community level. Such a policy direction can break open the silos of the ministries and departments that, while often driving young people into homelessness, must also be part of the solutions.

## 1) Establishing a Statutory Duty to Assist

Duty to Assist legislation makes homelessness prevention a statutory responsibility with defined roles for all orders of government. In practical terms and in the Canadian context, this means that:

- 1) The Government of Canada is responsible for defining and enforcing the rights of Canadians to housing, and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Additionally, through Reaching Home, Canada's Homelessness Strategy, the Government of Canada can create an enabling environment for community entities to: i) include youth strategies within community systems plans, ii) implement systems of coordinated entry (with special provisions for youth), and iii) implement youth-focused prevention interventions. Through its Social Innovation and Social Finance agenda, the Government of Canada can support Duty to Assist demonstration projects (involving social R&D) in order to develop the knowledge and evidence base, and advance our understanding of implementation.



- 2) Provincial and Territorial (P/T) governments are responsible for passing and enforcing Duty to Assist legislation, and impose the Duty to Assist on municipalities (constitutionally, P/T's are the order of government that defines municipal duties). Provinces and territories design the Duty to Assist responsibilities of municipalities, define roles for different ministries, and provide a policy and funding framework to support this work at the municipal level.
- 3) Municipal governments, working with the local homelessness sector,<sup>9</sup> are responsible for the coordination and delivery of Duty to Assist. Young people at risk of, or who are experiencing homelessness, will make contact with the local homelessness authority (through coordinated entry, discussed below). Following the Welsh model, P/T legislation should define the responsibilities of municipalities/community entities, and specify "the minimum set of interventions that local authorities must have in place ... and local authorities are expected to consider the most appropriate intervention(s) for each person" (Mackie, 2017, p. 86). **It is recommended that supports must be offered within 14 days of the young person presenting for help.**

### The Duty to Assist can result in four different outcomes:

- i) A young person's homelessness is *prevented* if they are at risk of homelessness;
- ii) If prevention efforts are not successful, a young person's homelessness is *relieved*;
- iii) If a young person is currently homeless but did not access prevention support previously, their homelessness is *relieved*;
- iv) A young person is offered referral or assistance but refuses (young people should have the right to change their mind at any time, and refusal of help does not discharge the state of its ongoing duty to assist).

In the latter case, Duty to Assist requires that local government offer the necessary supports (including reasonable steps to access housing) in order to remedy this situation. Any person at risk of or experiencing youth homelessness is assisted by this duty. All efforts must be designed to account for the specific needs of developing adolescents and young adults.

<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that in Canada, the federal government has defined "community entities" as the coordinating bodies for local responses to homelessness. In some cases this is the municipal government, in other cases it is a third party organization (Calgary and Edmonton are good examples). In the latter case, municipalities will be directed to collaborate with third party community entities to implement Duty to Assist.

Finally, given the history of colonialism and the resultant over-representation of Indigenous children and youth both in homeless populations (Gaetz et al., 2016) and in child protection (Blackstock, 2011), engagement and collaboration must also include Indigenous leadership and communities in a nation-to-nation relationship. An effective Duty to Assist policy will need to identify and resource responsibility across each of these jurisdictions.

## Why focus on youth homelessness?

The Welsh legislation is designed to support all people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, regardless of age. This too should be the long term goal of Canadian policy. A compelling case can be made for a structured, phased approach to implementation, beginning with a targeted focus on youth homelessness. First, our knowledge base regarding youth homelessness prevention is well established and growing, and there is momentum in this area in Canada. Second, there are complexities in addressing youth homelessness that don't exist within the adult population that need to be worked out (e.g., jurisdictional issues based on age, the challenge of supporting youth under 16, for instance). Third, it is now becoming clear that if we want to tackle chronic homelessness amongst adults, there is a compelling case for focusing on youth homelessness. Recent Point-in-Time counts in Canada are showing that a majority of people who are currently homeless had their first experience before they were 25, and many before they were 18.<sup>10</sup> The [Without a Home](#) study demonstrated that 40% of youth currently experiencing homeless had their first experience before the age of 16. If we better support our youth, we can have a long term, sustainable impact on the broader problem of homelessness.

## Considerations for Policy and Program Design

Implementing a statutory Duty to Assist in Canada requires the following key elements and considerations in terms of policy and program design:

### **1) Policy**

Duty to Assist legislation would signal a shift in policy direction on homelessness from a considerable investment in the crisis response, to one that prioritizes the prevention of homelessness and reorienting systems, services, and funding.

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<sup>10</sup>[Victoria, 55.8% \(Hardman, 2018\); Peterborough, 58% \(Vink, 2018\); Niagara, 53% \(Nickel, 2018\), and; Regina, 74% \(Docherty, 2018\).](#)

As a statutory responsibility that enshrines a universal right to homelessness prevention, a Duty to Assist will include the following:

- **Rights-based approach** – The rights protected under a Duty to Assist are not only human rights, but legal rights.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the right to housing and supports would be enforceable and judiciable, providing a young person with the opportunity for legal recourse if there was a failure to take reasonable steps to prevent their homelessness.
- **Age mandate** – The Duty to Assist applies to young people aged 13-24, consistent with the [Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness](#). Provincial and territorial legislation regarding children and youth may already define at what age young people can access supports independently of parents, or who is responsible to for addressing the needs of young people at risk under the age of 16 (such as child protection authorities). Therefore, considerations will have to be made to align existing legislation to ensure that young people can access appropriate supports of their choosing.<sup>12</sup>
- **Obligation to act** – Upon presentation to the organization/entity locally coordinating the Duty to Assist, state actors are obliged to act within 14 days<sup>13</sup> in order to provide assistance in the form of not just information, but the offer of housing-led support and/or referral.
- **Youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination** – As a rights-based, client-centred approach, Duty to Assist emphasizes youth choice regarding the range of supports offered. Choices are best made when young people have been provided with sufficient information to make an informed decision on the appropriate options available to them. In supporting youth choice, one also needs to consider age and cognitive functioning (e.g., FASD, developmental delays, and/or brain injury) and how this may impact decision-making. A young person turning down options presented to them does not discharge provider responsibility to continue to find ways to support the youth. Young people must also be supported and respected when they change their mind regarding the kinds of support or housing they want. It is critical that in all instances, the design and implementation of Duty to Assist does not operate coercively or punitively, and that young people’s right to choice and self-determination is the cornerstone of this legislation in policy and practice.

<sup>11</sup> The rights guaranteed to young people under international conventions that Canada is a signatory to are outlined in the report [Youth Rights, Right Now](#). It should also be noted that the Government of Canada’s National Housing Strategy also declares housing as a right, and special measures must be in place to ensure that the rights of young people are protected.

<sup>12</sup> This is important, considering that some young people at risk of homelessness, or who are experiencing homelessness at a young age may already be in the care of child protection authorities, but may be fleeing such care.

<sup>13</sup> In the Welsh legislation the obligation to act is 60 days. Because of the vulnerability of young people, we recommend 14 days.

- **Reconciling different duties to assist** – Different mainstream services may have similar duties to report or assist, including health, justice and child protection, for instance. In child protection legislation, there typically already exists a duty to assist and an obligation to report in cases of suspected abuse and neglect. A Duty to Assist youth homelessness prevention policy should not be confused with similar directives outlined in child protection, for instance. As such, Duty to Assist policy and practice should clarify the circumstances under which reporting and assistance involves child protection or other systems, programs, and services, to avoid confusion and systems dumping (i.e., merely transferring youth from one system to another).
- **Addressing the needs of Indigenous youth** – In alignment with the [Calls to Action](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, all Duty to Assist efforts must strive to be equitably applied to Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, without service disparities. Indigenous youth should be able to obtain culturally appropriate, Indigenous-led housing and supports. Assistance must be based on a respect for traditional knowledge, cultural traditions and practices, and account for the impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities, including intergenerational trauma. Taking into consideration the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](#), young people who are identified as being culturally disconnected from their Indigenous heritage should be offered opportunities and supports for cultural reconnection.

Implementation of Duty to Assist raises the issue of the need for nation-to-nation negotiations on how this can be co-developed with Indigenous communities. A Duty to Assist must be responsive and accountable to Indigenous governance and Indigenous forms of restorative justice. Indigenous-led approaches to Duty to Assist can foster not just place-based interventions, but culturally engaged community-based interventions.

- **Quality Assurance** – Duty to Assist legislation must be backed up by measures to ensure full access to support, quality services, opportunities for client feedback and input, and a demonstration of impact. This includes clarity regarding a determination of when the Duty to Assist has been met. In the Welsh legislation, there are three main ways that the Duty is met: “homelessness is relieved (accommodation is available for at least 6 months), homelessness is unsuccessfully relieved (having taken steps to help, no solution is found within 56 days), or some ‘other’ reason (either an offer is refused or they fail to cooperate)” (Mackie et al., 2017, p. 87). A Canadian Duty to Assist should assess more than whether a young person has been successfully housed or not, including other quality of life measures that will have an impact on their risk of becoming homeless in the future. Young people need to have a say in whether the offer of support is reasonable, appropriate, and desirable, given their circumstances. Duty to Assist must be focused on truly preventing homelessness, rather than merely deferring homelessness.

All of this is best assured through the appointment of a regulator/ombudsperson for homelessness services, who will be charged with ensuring that providers are in fact recognizing and practicing their duty to assist in a way consistent with the letter and intent of the duty legislation.

As part of quality assurance, there must be mechanisms in place so that youth can appeal to the ombudsperson or pursue legal action if there is evidence that “reasonable efforts” have not been made. In such cases, each youth should have the right to independent legal representation before any decision maker, as well as a clear and empowered role in their own cases or complaints. It is critical that these redress mechanisms are timely, equitable, free, highly accessible, and youth-friendly.

## 2) Program Design

In designing a Duty to Assist program, the following components should be considered essential for the delivery of preventive supports at the local level:

- **Duty to Refer** – While a Duty to Assist is a statutory responsibility, there needs to be a process in place whereby adults who engage with young people make a reasonable determination as to whether and/or how a young person is at risk of homelessness. This can be a challenge because youth homelessness is often hidden, and many young people experience repeated bouts of homelessness before they ever come in contact with emergency supports.

### MEANINGFUL ADULTS MAY INCLUDE:

*Teachers*

*Coaches*

*Instructors*

*Doctors or Nurses*

*Counsellors*

*Community or Social Workers*

Having said this, it is possible, and even likely, that meaningful adults in the lives of young people may become aware that something is wrong. This may be due to changes in behaviour, or upon learning that a young person is 'couch surfing', for instance. Meaningful adults include people who, because of their role or profession, work directly with young people and in some cases are acting 'in loco parentis' (latin for "in the place of a parent"). This refers to the legal responsibility of a person or organization to take on some of the functions and responsibilities of a parent.

Currently, teachers, instructors, coaches, employment workers, community workers, or others<sup>14</sup> may suspect a young person is at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Many adults in such positions will not know what to do; they may not have the knowledge, capacity, or access to resources to directly assist a young person who is at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. A Duty to Assist - with appropriate referral processes and systems of support - will give them the means to support young people and get them the help they need. The responsibility to support and refer can be defined through professional standards, and augmented through professional development and training.

A **Duty to Refer** means that in these situations, and with the consent of the young person, a referral is made to an appropriate agency, care provider, professional (medical, legal), helpline, or other appropriate support – ideally through a coordinated entry system. When young people present at homelessness services, including both within the adult and youth systems, there is a similar Duty to Assist (or refer) to wider and more appropriate supports in cases where the shelter in question does not practice shelter diversion.

<sup>14</sup> Other circumstances where adults are in positions of authority regarding young people will need to be considered as well. For instance, private landlords should be required to report when filing a notice of eviction.

- **Housing-led supports** – Assistance should always be housing-led. In other words, referring a young person to an emergency shelter or other homelessness service that offers minimal supports to rehouse the young person will **not** count as having provided assistance or completion of a duty to assist, if it does not end the person’s homelessness or stabilize their housing. This does not necessarily mean the elimination of shelters, as there will always be a need for the crisis response. Rather, in the long run it means retooling the emergency sector to support prevention and rehousing.
- **Client-centred supports** – The supports offered to young people through Duty to Assist must be client-centered, whereby the choice of young people as to whether they want help and what supports they need is respected (consistent with the core principles of [Housing First for Youth](#)). The offer of assistance must be accepted by the young person before contact with supports proceeds.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, supports, including housing, must be individualized, strengths-based, and allow young people to change their mind without fear of negative consequences. The Duty to Assist legislation must not be used coercively in policy or practice.
- **Engaging Families and other Natural Supports** – Consideration of the needs of both young people and their families drive the case management process. Addressing family conflict and strengthening family (as defined by the youth) and natural supports will have positive longer-term consequences and reduce the risk of simply delaying homelessness. However, the first response should not be to remove the young person from their home, or sever ties with family or caregivers, unless there is an imminent risk to the safety of the young person or other family members.
- **Quality of service** – To support Duty to Assist, there needs to be early intervention-based prevention services in place that ensure access is timely, and that services are individualized, persistent, and delivered under a Positive Youth Development orientation (European Commission, 2013).
- **Supporting young people who do not wish to or are not able to engage** – In designing policy, programs, and interventions, there must be a special consideration of the needs and experiences of particularly marginalized groups who may be reluctant to accept assistance (for reasons such as previous negative interactions with police, public systems, or people in positions of authority). Groups that may be hesitant to accept assistance include young people who are experiencing marginalization or criminalization due to:
  - » Experiences of human trafficking or sexual exploitation;
  - » Sex trade involvement;
  - » Discrimination, including LGBTQ2S+ youth, gender non-binary youth, racialized youth, Indigenous youth, and others;
  - » Precarious legal status (e.g., youth whose visa ran out);
  - » Intimate partner, familial violence, or violence experienced while in the child welfare system;
  - » Gang involvement or fleeing gang violence, or;
  - » Fleeing criminal charges.

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<sup>15</sup> The exception is if there is evidence of abuse and/or the young person threatens to harm themselves or others. In such cases, existing duty to report legislation (e.g., child protection, health) will override the young person’s right to refuse help.

In supporting youth in these situations, then, it is imperative that youth have the power to say yes or no to referrals or supports offered, particularly if they fear that assistance or intervention will increase their risk of surveillance, result in criminalization, or otherwise put them in even greater jeopardy.

More broadly, it is critical that the progressive realization of Duty to Assist adopts a particular focus on addressing the structural and system factors that make it more difficult for some youth to take advantage of the supports offered through Duty to Assist. For example, particular immigration policies may create fear of deportation amongst newcomer or refugee youth, making it difficult for these young people to actualize their rights as entailed in Duty to Assist. Upstream efforts to address system and structural factors can thus assist in democratizing access to Duty to Assist and ensuring equitable access to this right.

- **Unconditional support** – The offer of assistance cannot come with conditions such as abstinence, engagement in education or employment, or participation in programming.
- **Equitable provision of Duty to Assist** – There must be a commitment to the equitable provision of this Duty to Assist, with efforts to ensure barriers to benefitting from this legislation are minimized as much as possible. This can be done through broad structural and systems prevention efforts (e.g., amendments to sex trafficking laws, equitable systems funding on First Nations reserves), and through accountability mechanisms established throughout the System of Care. The ombudsperson appointed in each province/territory is responsible for ensuring the equitable implementation of Duty to Assist across municipalities.
- **Emphasis on place-based supports** – There is a need to ensure that as much as possible, supports are place-based and that young people are not forced to leave their communities to receive services due to lack of available supports. In other words, government and public systems must be funded and coordinated in such a way to ensure young people have access to appropriate supports in their home community.

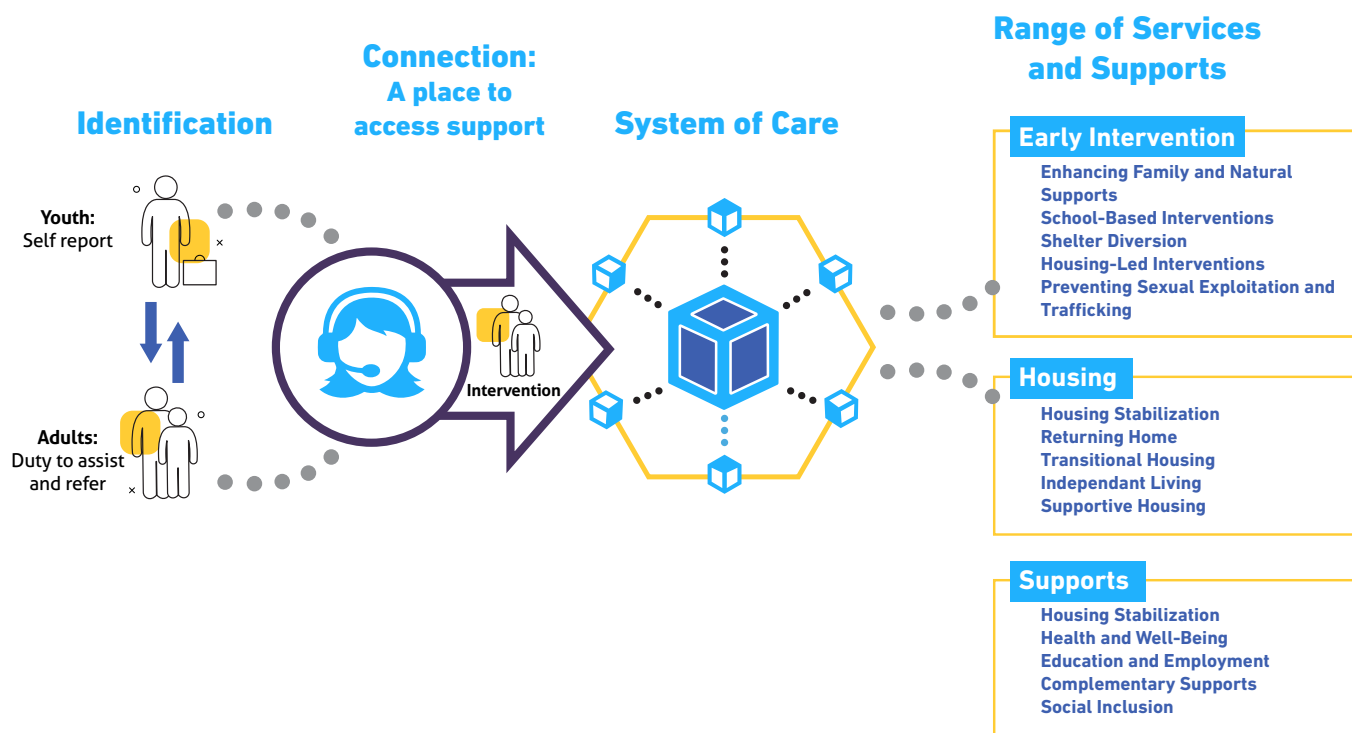


## 2) How Duty to Assist works at the Community Level

Implementing Duty to Assist will undoubtedly require an investment of resources, cross-ministerial responsibility and mandate, and potentially several years of systems work at the community level to ensure prevention-focused systems to support young people are fully in place and well-functioning before Duty to Assist becomes a requirement.

With a legal responsibility for a Duty to Assist defined, and an investment in preparing communities to have systems and supports in place to enable implementation, an important question to ask is: how this would work at the community level? What happens between the point where the need for help is identified, and actual supports are delivered? The diagram below illustrates how Duty to Assist might work in practice.

**FIGURE 6: DUTY TO ASSIST PROCESS**



## 1) Identification

There are two main routes through which a young person at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness can be identified as needing assistance:

- **Self-referral** – Young people may seek assistance themselves and should be able to access services and supports on their own. Young people may also seek assistance and support from adults in meaningful roles whom they are already in contact with or can easily access, or through centralized systems of assistance, such as helplines or coordinated entry systems. To facilitate youths' self-referral for Duty to Assist, young people need to know that help is out there and that the help will be useful.
- **Adult referral** – Adults in meaningful roles who are aware of, or who suspect a young person is in need of assistance, should offer help. If the required support is beyond the scope of the adult in question, they have a Duty to Refer the young person to others who can help. This must be done with the knowledge and informed consent of the young person, so that they will not fear that bringing forward their concerns will get them ensnared in a system they are trying to avoid.

## 2) Connection: A Place to Access Support

A Duty to Assist will have no impact if those who make the determination that a young person is at risk have no place to refer to for assistance. A visible, accessible overarching system needs to be in place to handle referrals, triage, and ensure young people get the supports and housing they need. The pathway to supports involves the following:

- **Visibility** – A person needs to know help is available before they can access supports. With a good communications strategy, all people implicated in Duty to Assist, including young people, their families, community members, and those working with youth, must be made aware that there is someone they can contact. There are different ways of doing this, including 211 helplines, children helplines, mobile apps such as HelpSeeker, and coordinated entry programs organized as part of the local response to homelessness. Social marketing campaigns could help increase knowledge about where to seek support.
- **Coordinated Entry** – Coordinated entry is key to both system integration and early intervention models for young people at risk of homelessness. Many communities that implement systems plans to address homelessness employ 'coordinated entry' to create a standardized process for intake, assessment, and referral. Access to coordinated entry can be through a call centre, or a young person can also go in person to organizations that are part of the coordinated entry system. Supporting coordinated entry should be a community-wide data management system that allows the community to track the young person and the supports they are receiving. The intent of coordinated entry is to create a standardized process for intake, assessing a young person's current situation, the nature of their needs, and the services they currently receive and may require in the future.

Coordinated entry systems should include:

- » Standardized intake and assessment (using youth-specific assessment tools that are strengths-based)
- » Triage, prioritization, and referral
- » Data management systems

- **Case management** – At intake, a young person is then referred to, and connected with, a support worker who has sufficient experience and expertise to support the youth and address the underlying issue that is making them vulnerable to homelessness. This is when the intervention begins. The young person meets (in person or through the use of technology), and a personalized plan is developed and implemented.

Based on the needs of the young person and their family, appropriate case management and support should be provided. This might involve simply short-term support in terms of information provision, referral, and system navigation, or it may involve more intensive, longer-term supports. The case worker will be responsible for developing a personalized, youth-driven plan for the youth and their family.

In providing an intervention, key considerations include:

- **Taking Reasonable Steps** - The institution, organization, and personnel mandated to offer assistance must take action involving steps that an objective and reasonable person would undertake to address and remedy the situation in the best interests of, knowledge of, and approval of the young person in question. This is their duty. The notion of 'reasonable steps' also identifies that in real world contexts there may be limitations to the outcomes that can be delivered through a Duty to Assist. For instance, a Duty to Assist cannot mandate a guaranteed end to a young person's homelessness. This is because young people may not choose to accept support, or may choose not to accept the specific supports or housing offered to them. Young people may refuse supports for any number of (legitimate) reasons, for instance because the young person does not consider the options offered to be reasonable or appropriate, or feels that the options may in fact endanger them. Refusing support cannot be the outcome of poor service delivery or barriers to access. Overt and/or subtle efforts to dissuade young people from accessing supports are to be avoided, and accountability measures must ensure this doesn't happen. In such cases where there is a refusal to accept supports, a Duty to Assist cannot be discharged, as a young person has the right to change their mind, and/or may request assistance again.

Given the challenging nature of a refusal by a young person to cooperate or accept supports, it will be important to research and evaluate the experiences of young people in order to understand why this happens, and what can be done to improve service delivery and support. Research and evaluation will also help us identify with more precision what kinds of steps are considered to be reasonable.

- **Accessibility** – It is important that young people are able to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports and entitlements. A Duty to Assist mandate means that supports – including the outward facing coordinated entry system – must follow the “Four ‘A’s” of system prevention: availability, access, affordability, and appropriateness. There should be as few barriers as possible for accessing support, with a ‘no wrong door’ approach. Any young person should be able to connect with and access the supports they need in a way that is timely, seamless, and effective from the perspective of the young person and their family. Given the over-representation of some sub-populations of youth experiencing homelessness, accessibility also means implementing an equity framework designed to meet the needs of LGBTQ2S+ youth, Indigenous youth, and other youth groups experiencing additional forms of exclusion.



- **Response tied to housing need** – Young people who are at risk of homelessness need support to maintain their current housing, or if that is not possible or advisable, to find alternative housing that is safe appropriate and affordable. For young people who have recently experienced homelessness, the goal is to help them return home (with supports) or find an alternative. Young people who are currently homeless (including chronically homeless youth) are also entitled to support from Duty to Assist, and should be assisted through a range of housing-led interventions, including [Housing First for Youth](#).
- **Timeliness** - Given what we know about the negative consequences of prolonged exposure to homelessness for young people, assistance must be timely and appropriate. Providers should be required to offer assistance in the form of referrals and planning within 14 days. If young people are without housing, they should reasonably be offered housing within 60 days.

### **3) System of Care to Provide Supports**

**It is through the system of care that a young person receives support, services are provided, and personalized plans are developed and implemented.** Young people will be introduced to a youth worker with sufficient experience and expertise to support the youth, address their needs, and assist them in navigating systems to get additional support when needed.

A well-functioning community response to youth homelessness requires a 'system of care.' This is an approach to systems integration that is client-centred and ensures that young people get access to the services and systems they need in a timely and appropriate way. A system of care ideally needs to be in place to implement a Duty to Assist.

Originating in children's mental health and addictions sectors, a System of Care is defined as "an adaptive network of structures, processes, and relationships grounded in system of care values and principles that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families with access to and availability of necessary services and supports across administrative and funding jurisdictions" (Hodges et al., 2006, p. 3). A system of care, then, is a client-centred approach to systems integration involving coordination of services designed to ensure that young people (and their families) get timely and appropriate access to the supports they need.

At the local level, a system of care requires more than just service integration within the homelessness sector, but integration of the many systems that youth interact with. Systems integration involves engaging with and convening a range of public institutions and systems, including healthcare, education, employment, family support services, and the justice system, to identify and support young people at risk of homelessness. The principles of Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Harwood, 2014; Cabaj & Weaver, 2016) provide guidance on how to achieve systems integration. In particular, communities need strong leadership and a backbone organization to coordinate and keep the work progressing.

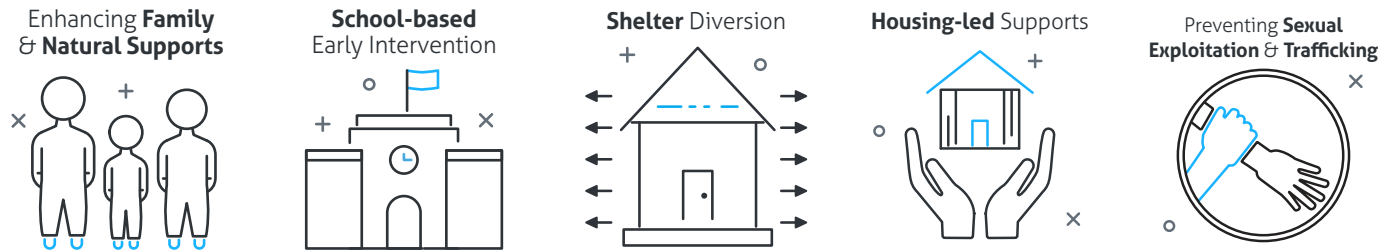
**A system of care, then, is a client-centred approach to systems integration involving coordination of services designed to ensure that young people (and their families) get timely and appropriate access to the supports they need.**

### **4) Range of Services and Supports**

For Duty to Assist to work, there must be in place a range of prevention-focused early intervention programs and systems of support. In addition, the key components of the system of care described above are essential for early intervention prevention strategies on youth homelessness to be effective.

In the [Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) (Section III), a range of early intervention program areas are discussed, all of which could support a Duty to Assist.

Key early intervention program areas describe in the *Roadmap* include:



Early intervention program models: a) nurture and/or restore **Family and Natural supports**; b) are **Youth-driven**; c) are responsive to **Cultural and Linguistic differences**, and d) are **Place-based**. When young people are forced to leave their communities because they are homeless, they not only lose their family and home, but also their community and potentially a web of natural supports, friends, and meaningful adults (neighbours, teachers, coaches, counselors, etc.).

The most effective early intervention strategies are designed to bring services and supports directly to young people (and their families), so that they remain embedded in their system of natural supports, continue to attend school, and can move forward in a safe and supported way.

The program areas described below are all evidence-based, and have been implemented in one form another in communities across the country. While there are clear design characteristics to each of these program models, they should not be thought of in isolation, but as mutually reinforcing and with the potential for integration within a system of care. Elements of one program model – for instance, enhancing family and natural supports – are likely present within and across most examples of early intervention. Just as with other system of care approaches where there is some degree of service integration, the different program models of early intervention intersect in terms of program elements, services offered, and sites where young people find support.

### **Supports linked to Outcomes**

The kinds of services and supports to be provided to the young person should be based on an assessment of needs and the presenting problems. More than this, however, a broader understanding of the needs of developing adolescents and young adults should drive the services and supports. The service delivery model and outcomes framework for [Housing First for Youth](#) (described in [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#), Section V – Housing Stabilization) provides a good overview of the kinds of supports that can build assets and resilience, enhance social inclusion, contribute to health and well-being, and overall help young people transition to adulthood.

## Areas of support include:



### 1) HOUSING STABILITY

- > Obtaining housing
- > Maintaining housing
- > Enhancing knowledge and skills regarding housing and independent living
- > Reducing stays in emergency shelters



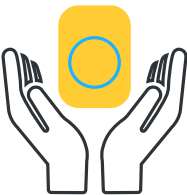
### 2) HEALTH & WELL-BEING

- > Enhanced access to services and supports
- > Improved health
- > Food security
- > Improved mental health
- > Reduced harms related to substance use
- > Enhanced personal safety
- > Improved self-esteem
- > Healthier sexual health practices
- > Enhanced resilience



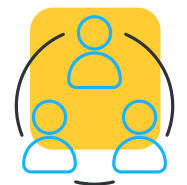
### 3) EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

- > Established goals for education and employment
- > Enhanced participation in education
- > Enhanced educational achievement
- > Enhanced participation in training
- > Enhanced labour force participation
- > Improved financial security



### 4) COMPLEMENTRY SUPPORTS

- > Established personal goals
- > Improved life skills
- > Increase access to necessary non-medical services
- > Addressing legal and justice issues



### 5) SOCIAL INCLUSION

- > Building of natural supports
- > Enhancing family connections
- > Enhancing connections to communities of young person's choice
- > Strengthening cultural engagement and participation
- > Engagement in meaningful activities



### 3) Getting Ready: What needs to be in place to implement a Duty to Assist?

Addressing youth homelessness and homelessness at large requires all governments to collaborate and take responsibility. While provincial/territorial and federal orders of government should be responsible for legislation, policy, and most of the funding<sup>16</sup> for Duty to Assist, it is at the community level that much of the work is operationalized and experienced by young people.

A key challenge in implementing a Duty to Assist in Canada is that few communities/municipalities are currently in a position to assume responsibility and implement a Duty to Assist. Prevention-based systems are not yet in place to refer young people or to provide necessary supports.

**Change Management and the Progressive Realization of a Duty to Assist** – Managing change is inherently challenging. A place to begin is to acknowledge that establishing a Duty to Assist requires significant changes in terms of policy, practice, and funding at the community level and within higher orders of government. Rather than imagining a sudden shift in policy and practice, it is more reasonable to think about how we can move towards the progressive realization of Duty to Assist.

Before a Duty to Assist can be established as a statutory responsibility, a first phase of systems transformation must necessarily take place before the second phase of legislation and implementation can take place. A necessary requirement of Phase 1 systems transformation is that community responses to homelessness be retooled to focus on prevention. Legislation alone will not fix the problem of youth homelessness, or ensure that young people receive the supports they need, if those supports do not currently exist in practice. Experience from Wales shows that it is at the implementation stage where key challenges emerge. This suggests that there needs to be appropriate time and investment in designing and implementing prevention supports, and communities must have effective monitoring and regulation regimes in place to ensure people are getting the supports they need. “Whilst a legal right to homelessness prevention assistance is an effective driver of change, without attention to implementation and the quality of services being offered, legislation cannot realize its full potential impact” (Mackie, et al., 2017, p. 81). In Wales, there were several years of program design and implementation, as well as significant investments, prior to the implementation of legislation requiring a Duty to Assist.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be pointed out that currently in the Canadian context, some policy development and funding is generated at the municipal/local level.

In legislating a Duty to Assist, provincial and territorial governments, as well as the Government of Canada, must support communities to take on the responsibility of a Duty to Assist through:

- **Community systems plans and systems integration** – Only a small number of communities in Canada have clear youth homelessness strategies (ideally as part of broader community plans), and fewer still have ones that truly support a prevention response. Communities will need to be supported to plan and implement such strategies. In fact, a Duty to Assist agenda would mandate a youth-focused community systems planning process and its implementation.

The best community plans are 'systems plans', which focus on systems integration in their design and which support the system of care. Integral to systems of care is the integration of service planning, coordination, and service delivery management at the sector, agency, and program levels, in order to create client-centred pathways that allow young people to access the services they need (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016). In other words, communities must work towards an integrated systems response involving coordination at every level, including policy, intake, service delivery, and client outcomes tracking. The best integrated service models are client-focused and driven with supports designed to ensure that the needs of young people, and potentially their families, are met in a timely and respectful way.

Triage, systems navigation, and case management depend on the presence of integrated systems at the local level. This would require detailed systems mapping to identify what services and supports are in the community. This means not just the homelessness sector, but other mainstream public institutions and services, as well as private service providers (counsellors, psychiatrists, etc.). Both mainstream services and those supporting young people who are homeless are connected to allow for seamless service delivery and rapid access. In some cases where fear of engagement with the justice system is a deterrent for young people to seek or accept support, systems interface<sup>17</sup> rather than integration is what is needed.

Within [Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy](#), the Federal government has indicated its expectation that communities implement youth-specific systems plans within their broader homelessness systems plans. The [A Way Home: Youth Homelessness Community Planning Toolkit](#) is an excellent resource to support communities in their efforts.

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<sup>17</sup>An integrated system is where programs and services operate 'as one' in a seamless and collaborative way, whereas interface suggests defined limits to collaboration, in areas such as data sharing and access to information, for instance.

- **Retooling the sector** – The community response to youth homelessness must be oriented to prevention, with federal and provincial/territorial orders of government providing the funding, policy and legislative frameworks to support a Duty to Assist. This also means retooling the youth homelessness sector so that they can support the prevention of youth homelessness. The valuable skills of people in emergency services who have expertise working with youth can - through program redesign, training, and support - be redirected within a system to support housing-led preventive efforts and early intervention.
- **Investment in early intervention prevention initiatives** – A minimum set of interventions must be established, and based on an assessment of whether a young person is: a) currently homeless with no promising prospect of returning home to live with caregivers; b) at imminent risk of homelessness, and c) at risk, but not imminently. The intervention strategies outlined in this report offer concrete examples of what this would look like at the local level, including:
  - » Enhancing family and natural supports
  - » School-based early intervention
  - » Shelter Diversion (an important touch point of Duty to Assist)
  - » Housing-led supports
  - » Preventing sexual exploitation and trafficking
  - » Eviction prevention
  - » Housing First for Youth
- **Addressing housing affordability for youth and their families** – The lack of affordable housing in many communities presents a challenge for young people with low earning potential who can no longer remain living with caregivers. For families, it may also be a significant stressor that contributes to family conflict and instability. Communities will need at their disposal public funds for a range of supportive housing options for youth, as well as eviction prevention. The new Canada Housing Benefit should be designed so that it does not have requirements that exclude youth who are no longer able to live with caregivers.
- **Mobilizing mainstream institutional responsibility** – Many young people become homeless after leaving or being discharged from public institutions. This includes:
  - » Young people leaving care (foster care or group homes);
  - » Young people leaving correctional facilities (adult or juvenile), regardless of whether they are convicted or held on remand, and;
  - » Young people leaving hospital or community mental health services as an inpatient after receiving medical and/or mental health treatment.

Well-designed Duty to Assist legislation would outline the responsibility and specific obligations of such public institutions, bearing in mind the different jurisdictional responsibilities, and variances in programs/services and age cut offs.

As part of a Duty to Assist, mainstream institutions will have to dedicate resources for transition supports, which may already exist in some cases. This is necessary to assess the risk of homelessness for those young people leaving such institutions, including their direct access to housing, the strength of family and natural supports, and the need for specific services and supports upon leaving. Mainstream institutions would be required to put plans in place, offer assistance, and track young people. Those young people who refuse assistance at first would have a right to change their minds and access supports at a later date.

- **Accommodation for contextual and geographical variation** – The implementation of Duty to Assist will have to account for the considerable variation in institutional services and supports that exist across communities. This includes differences between urban and small town/rural areas, where there may be a lack of infrastructure to support young people and their families. Innovative solutions are needed to ensure that access to assistance is universal regardless of where youth live. While these contexts can present particular challenges, there are examples of rural youth homelessness prevention work being done in Canada.<sup>18</sup> This is an area where provincial and territorial governments have a key role and responsibility.
- **Piloting A Duty to Assist** – Before provincial/territorial governments can move towards Phase 2 – Legislation and Implementation, it makes sense to invest in pilot projects where selected communities become Duty to Assist 'Living Labs'. Small and medium sized communities would be ideal for this kind of experimentation, as the level of systems complexity is more manageable. Communities would have to demonstrate readiness through having in place:
  - » Community systems planning with a youth stream
  - » Coordinated entry system
  - » Advanced service integration
  - » Advanced system integration, including service mapping
  - » Prevention interventions
  - » Housing First for Youth

One route to enabling municipalities to implement a Duty to Assist is for a city to become established as a Charter City. This would enable municipalities to define their approach to homelessness in a unique way, and provide them with the flexibility to implement reforms, spending responsibilities, and raise additional revenue to support their efforts. Partnering with universities to intensively conduct research and evaluation (process and outcomes) would generate an opportunity to test and learn from an experiment in Duty to Assist.

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<sup>18</sup> Lanark County and Niagara Region in Ontario are both good examples.

## Conclusion

Any serious and comprehensive effort to prevent and end youth homelessness must ensure that all young people who are at risk of homelessness have access to housing, services, and supports that are age appropriate and delivered in a timely and effective way. Welsh prevention legislation that mandates a 'Duty to Assist' has proven to be successful in reducing the inflow of individuals and families into homelessness. **Adapting Duty to Assist to address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults in Canada would enshrine a rights-based approach to addressing youth homelessness. Indeed, a statutory responsibility to provide information, advice, and concrete assistance to young people under the age of 25 who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness will not only stop the inflow, but will produce much better outcomes for young people and their families.** Such assistance must be immediate, accessible, appropriate, and responsive to youths' human rights and expressed desires for their life.

As part of this work, articulations of clear responsibility at the federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal levels are critical. The degree of course correction required for Duty to Assist would not only bring departments across government into closer alignment, but would pinpoint which areas within government would have the responsibility for these actions.

Finally, a Duty to Assist must be accompanied by other reforms that address primary prevention. In this report, the sections on Structural Prevention and Systems Prevention clearly articulate changes necessary to provide better supports for young people and their families, and ways we can stop the flow of young people into homelessness from mainstream institutional contexts (child protection, justice and health, for instance).

**Implementing a Duty to Assist in Canada is a necessary and achievable goal. Getting there will require systems transformation and a willingness to change the status quo. This will necessarily take work, heart, and political courage, and if successful, it will radically transform the outcomes and life trajectories for vulnerable youth in Canada.**

## 6 CONCLUSION

Prevention is essential to ending youth homelessness in Canada, and is the collective responsibility of all those directly and indirectly involved in young people's lives.

*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness offers policymakers, community organizers, researchers, and frontline workers a conceptual framework for prevention, and concrete examples of how to put prevention into practice. This report aims to assist in reimagining our response to youth homelessness in Canada, offering a clear understanding of what youth homelessness prevention is, what it's not, and why it's important.*

**Young people called for a sweeping shift to rights-based prevention and early intervention. This requires communities and governments to adopt innovative models for programs and practice, as well as make significant policy and systems change.**

The approach we take to addressing youth homelessness must be proactive, rather than reactive, given that research consistently shows that even a brief experience of homelessness is extremely harmful (Gaetz et al., 2016). The good news is there are strong examples of youth homelessness prevention in policy and practice, both in Canada and abroad.

**As promising prevention interventions are pursued, researched, and scaled more deeply and widely, our understanding of the path forward grows. We can no longer ignore the opportunities we have for implementing preventative policies and practices across Canada.**

A shift to prevention will require systems change, and systems change is difficult work. Across Canada, youth with lived experience of homelessness emphasized that system change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most effective (Schwan et al., 2018a). These youth were very clear – we are waiting too long to intervene when a young person is at risk or experiencing homelessness. Young people called for a sweeping shift to rights-based prevention and early intervention. This requires communities and governments to adopt innovative models for programs and practice, as well as make significant policy and systems change. Multiple public systems, sectors, and all orders of government are implicated in this shift. Effective implementation of a systems-wide prevention approach requires deep, meaningful collaboration in order to create a System of Care to support young people and ensure they receive the supports they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives.

Youth homelessness prevention must be driven not only by community and societal-level outcomes, but also by the positive outcomes we want to see for any young person. These outcomes are broader than whether a young person has been successfully housed or not, and must include other quality of life measures that will have an impact on their risk of becoming homeless in the future. We must ensure young people have access to supports and resources that also improve their health and well-being, education and employment, life skills, and social inclusion.

Youth homelessness prevention must also take into account and actively respond to the needs of developing adolescents at different ages and stages, ensuring youth are provided with opportunities to shape the supports they receive. From design through to evaluation, youth must be enabled to have their voice drive service provision and policy change. Processes must be in place to create feedback loops that listen and respond to youths' experiences interacting with public, private, and non-profit systems and sectors, with the goal of continued improvement. Within any prevention-based approach, a human rights lens must be applied. The [Youth Rights! Right Now! Ending Youth Homelessness: A Human Rights Guide](#) suggests that we look beyond the physical needs of homeless youth to their social, economic, and political rights to be recognized as equal citizens with a right to dignity and full participation.

**From design through to evaluation, youth must be enabled to have their voice drive service provision and policy change. Processes must be in place to create feedback loops that listen and respond to youths' experiences interacting with public, private, and non-profit systems and sectors, with the goal of continued improvement.**

With new opportunities federally, including the new homelessness strategy Reaching Home, and increasing local desire for better outcomes for youth, the timing is optimal to pursue targeted, measurable strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness.

Resources, such as this *Roadmap* and the [Youth Homelessness Community Planning Toolkit](#) (Turner, 2016), provide Canadian communities and governments with the frameworks, tools, and step-by-step guides to start on the path toward ending youth homelessness. By utilizing these resources and tapping into learnings from other communities and provinces, communities can go further, faster.



As part of this work, an effective community plan/strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness should:

- Include a statement of guiding principles and core values;
- Engage the necessary players from the community, all levels of government, and the non-profit and private sectors to work toward real reductions in homelessness;
- Collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders, including funders, governments, service providers (mainstream as well as homeless-serving organizations), and those affected by homelessness (via Collective Impact);
- Articulate necessary actions at the service, local, and government levels;
- Involve young people in planning, delivery, and evaluation;
- Articulate clear goals and objectives, timelines, responsibilities, benchmarks, and measurable targets;
- Outline the resources needed for implementation, including projected budgets and cost-savings;
- Provide direction on implementation actions and governance options to move actions forward;
- Lead to real changes in young people's lives in implementation; and
- Position itself as a 'living plan,' renewed on an ongoing basis to ensure relevance and progress is maintained.

[\*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness\*](#) is put forward with the intention of beginning a broader, national conversation on what youth homelessness prevention could look like.

It cannot be considered the final word on the subject, but rather a way to frame future conversations, discussions, and decisions. In the coming years we anticipate that our conceptual framing will evolve. In Canada, we need people to take up the issue of youth homelessness prevention across the country; to hone and sharpen our thinking about what works. Each sector, order of government, community, practitioner, and caring individual must make the commitment to wholeheartedly and relentlessly pursue this new vision for young people in Canada, aligning their collective strengths, knowledge, and resources to move from vision to reality. Allowing the status quo to remain is a choice, whether active or passive.

**We can end youth homelessness, if we choose to.**

## 7 RECOMMENDATIONS<sup>19</sup>

The following recommendations are intended to guide investments, policy development, and community implementation of youth homelessness prevention.

*They are grounded in a review of the evidence-base, consultation with experts with lived experience of youth homelessness, and consultations with international experts in youth homelessness. They aim to build on the expressed need and community momentum we see across Canada.*

### Our recommendations are directed at:

- The Government of Canada
- Provinces and Territories
- Provincial/Territorial Ministries & Departments (e.g., Education, Child Welfare, Corrections)
- The Youth Homelessness Sector
- Communities
- Funders

For expanded recommendations, including targeted recommendations for provincial/territorial Ministries and Departments, see the [Appendix](#).

While no one government has full autonomy to lead action in all of these areas, our recommendations reflect a comprehensive and collaborative approach to youth homelessness prevention in Canada. In implementing these recommendations, all levels of government should prioritise consultation with people with lived experience of youth homelessness. Youth have a fundamental right to be engaged in decisions that affect them and should be supported to actualize that right.

<sup>19</sup>These recommendations draw from and build upon recommendations identified in multiple reports, including: [Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#); [Mental Health Care for Homeless Youth: A Proposal for Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Leadership, Coordination, and Targeted Investment](#); [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#); [Opportunity Knocks: Prioritizing Canada's Most Vulnerable Youth](#); [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#); [Funding Services for Homeless Youth in Canada: Review & Recommendations](#); and [Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence](#). We wish to thank all authors of these documents for their insights, and hope this document will extend the impact of their work.

## Government of Canada

1) Within implementation of the *National Housing Strategy*, ensure the housing needs of *all* youth and their families are adequately addressed and resourced. To do so, the Government of Canada should:

- Dramatically increase the availability, affordability, and adequacy of housing in Indigenous communities and on reserves across Canada (including rural and remote Indigenous communities), enabling youth and their families to remain in their home communities (if they so desire).
- Work with provinces, territories, and communities to increase the availability and portability of the Canada Housing Benefit to best meet the needs of youth and families at risk of homelessness.
- Address affordability challenges for youth and their families using multiple policy tools, including rent subsidies, the building of social housing, increased regulation of development and speculation, and the protection of existing affordable rental housing units.
- Encourage the creation of youth-focused social housing stock, as well as investments to support communities to implement youth-focused models of housing, such as [Housing First for Youth](#).
- Invest in innovative, evidence-based housing models and approaches that serve diverse youth at risk or experiencing homelessness, including through the [CMHC Affordable Housing Innovation Fund](#).
- Support provinces/territories to amend or remove housing policies or laws that create barriers to youth accessing housing in the private market or public system.

## 2) Within implementation of *Reaching Home - Canada's Homelessness Strategy*, the Government of Canada should:

- Support communities to align their prevention-based efforts with the program areas and models identified within the *Roadmap*. A range of alignment efforts should be employed (see the [Appendix](#)), including:
  - » Identifying and advancing program interventions that focus specifically on intervening well before a young person experiences homelessness, and supporting youth to exit homelessness as rapidly as possible and in a sustainable way.
  - » Identifying and advancing policies and practices that proactively address the unique needs of particular populations, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, young women, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
  - » Prioritizing investment in innovative, outcomes-based solutions to youth homelessness, drawing on international and domestic evidence-based approaches, practices, and policies.
  - » Meaningfully involve people with lived experience of youth homelessness in the creation and monitoring of prevention-based efforts, compensating them for their work.
  - » Developing an evaluation framework for frontline services to assess their progress towards youth homelessness prevention.
  - » Ensuring that in writing program directives for Reaching Home, the unique needs of young people are acknowledged and addressed.
  
- Facilitate cross-ministerial engagement to align federal youth policies (e.g., the [Youth Employment Strategy](#), the forthcoming [Youth Policy](#), [Youth Justice Services](#)) under the typology articulated within the *Roadmap*.
  - » Alignment efforts should include opportunities for co-funded investments through programs supported by Employment and Social Development Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services Canada, the Department of Justice, Health Canada, Status of Women Canada, and other relevant ministries and departments.
  - » Establish a cross-departmental fund for youth which emphasizes a collaborative outcomes-based approach to these pooled funds. These funds should promote flexibility, aligned outcome targets, integrated policy alignment, and foster innovation across the prevention continuum.

- Apply a youth-focused, cross-systems assessment and screening tool within the [Homeless Individuals and Families Information System](#), in order to identify, assess, and respond to the needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
  - » Prioritization of youth must be determined separate from adult prioritization within coordinated entry and collaborative planning tables to ensure timely interventions for youth.
  - » The goal of this tool should be the early identification of homelessness risk amongst youth and their families, thus providing the opportunity to intervene before youth become homeless.
  - » Integration of this tool, across various public system contexts (e.g., primary healthcare, schools) must be accompanied by mechanisms to ensure that identified youth are immediately connected to appropriate services and supports (as well as the benefits and resources they are entitled to).
- Through a formal Federal/Provincial/Territorial agreement, incentivise provinces and territories to implement strategies to prevent youth homelessness by addressing:
  - » The delivery of the Duty to Assist legislation which is enforced by provinces and territories and distinguishes the responsibilities, policy, and funding framework to support this work at the municipal level.
  - » The need for harmonized data across provinces, territories, and the federal government to better inform and strengthen outcomes, facilitate cross-government partnerships, and capture data for unaccompanied youth (ages 13 - 24).
  - » The various system pathways that lead to youth homelessness, as well as the system gaps and barriers to supports that increase a young person's risk of homelessness.
- Address the overwhelming number of people who first experience homelessness as a youth, (based on what we have learned from the national Point-in-Time count data), through deliberate prioritization of prevention-based initiatives within communities.
- Work with Indigenous communities to develop and implement a focused homelessness prevention strategy for Indigenous youth and their families, supported by targeted investments sufficient to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in homeless populations.
- Develop a national research agenda on youth homelessness in order to advance a cross-systems focus on youth homelessness prevention, organised according to the prevention typology identified in the *Roadmap*.
- Implement an independent review process to assess progress towards ending youth homelessness in Canada.

### 3) Within implementation of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, the Government of Canada should:

- Advance and implement housing as a human right for all youth, regardless of citizenship status.
  - » Leverage the [UN General Comment No. 21 - Children in Street Situations](#) long-term international strategy that emphasizes a child rights approach and addresses both prevention and response in line with the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).
- Eliminate all policies, laws, and protocols that directly or indirectly discriminate against youth or their families on the basis of their housing status.
- Provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection, as outlined in the [Calls to Actions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) and [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness: A Proposal for Action](#).
- Revise the [Youth Criminal Justice Act](#)'s judicial measures and sentencing to ensure a focus on the decriminalization of youth experiencing homelessness, and that courts follow the directive that judges must consider the youth's ability to pay before a fine is levied.
- Implement amendments to the [Criminal Code of Canada's legislation on sex trafficking](#) in order to better identify, support, and protect survivors of sex trafficking across Canada. Amendments should include, but are not limited to:
  - » Adding a provision that provides immediate immunity to minors who commit non-violent offenses as a direct result of being trafficked.
  - » Adding a provision allowing survivors to vacate prior convictions for non-violent offenses that directly resulted from being trafficked.
  - » Adding a clause that prohibits knowingly patronizing a victim of sex trafficking.
  - » Adding a clause that requires convicted traffickers to pay restitution to the victim, and to forfeit real or personal property or wealth used in or gained from human trafficking activities.\*

\* Recommendations drawn from Barrett, N. A. & Shaw, M. J. (2013). *Laws to Combat Sex Trafficking: An Overview of International, National, Provincial, and municipal Laws and their Enforcement*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Women's Foundation.

## Provinces/Territories<sup>20</sup>

An investment in youth homelessness prevention will pay long term dividends for Canadian provinces and territories. Preventing youth homelessness will not simply result in fewer people experiencing homelessness, but will also contribute to reductions in poverty across Canada. Ministries and departments across all orders of government play integral roles in this collective response. The recommendations below are expanded in greater detail in the Appendix, including for:

- [Ministries of Housing](#)
- [Ministries of Children and Youth](#)
- [Ministries Responsible for Income Supports](#)
- [Ministries of Health](#)
- [Ministries of Justice](#)
- [Ministries of Education](#)

In order to support the prevention of youth homelessness, provinces and territories should:

- 1) Implement a provincial/territorial strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness, supported by a targeted investment.
- 2) Embed youth homelessness prevention within provincial/territorial poverty reduction strategies, ensuring that the strategy provides the social and material supports to reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with youth.
- 3) In liaison with the federal government, establish provincial/territorial service standards in the area of youth homelessness, which in turn can be tracked to inform funding decisions.
- 4) Prioritize and support systems planning and integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. As part of this systems integration, all provincial/territorial ministries and departments should be mandated to identify their roles and responsibilities in addressing youth homelessness.
- 5) Invest in provincial/territorial knowledge development and data management specific to youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems approach to youth homelessness prevention.

<sup>20</sup> Recommendations in this section have been primarily drawn from [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (2018).



- 6) Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to assess how the prevention of youth homelessness can be improved across systems, including through integration (where appropriate) and improved access to services, supports, and housing for youth and their families.
- 7) Meaningfully involve people with lived experience of youth homelessness in the creation and monitoring of prevention-based efforts, compensating them for their work.
- 8) Create provincial/territorial housing and shelter standards that meet the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, developed in partnership with youth and Indigenous communities.
- 9) Pass and enforce youth homelessness prevention legislation enshrining a Duty to Assist. Such legislation should:
  - » Assign responsibility for Duty to Assist to municipal governments/community entities and define their roles and responsibilities.
  - » Define eligibility for young people between the age of 13-24.
  - » Define the obligation to act as requiring the offer of assistance within 14 days and to resolve the housing situation (if necessary) within 60 days.
  - » Reconcile the youth homelessness Duty to Assist with other duties to assist (within child protection or education, for instance).
  - » Address quality assurance and establish a provincial ombudsperson who will be responsible for Duty to Assist.
  - » Ensure municipalities and communities have the time, resources, and capacity to put in place prevention interventions to support Duty to Assist.
  - » Ensure municipalities and communities are funded to do this work.
  - » Evaluate the effectiveness of Duty to Assist.

## The Youth Homeless Serving Sector

- 1) Work with cross-systems stakeholders, municipalities, youth with lived experience, and other stakeholders to develop and implement regional and community-based plans to prevent and end youth homelessness. These plans should align with existing poverty reduction plans, as well as plans to end homelessness writ large, utilizing knowledge in the sector to ensure that the diverse needs of youth are met.
- 2) Embed a focus on prevention, in alignment with the *Roadmap*, within the existing youth homelessness services and supports. As part of these efforts, existing agencies and organisations serving youth who are homeless should be supported to implement evidence-based prevention interventions for youth, including family mediation and reunification, systems navigation, rapid exits from homelessness, and supports that enable youth to remain in their communities and school.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> [Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence](#) (2018).

- 3) Ground all interventions, supports, and services for youth experiencing homelessness in a human rights approach and the principles of [Housing First for Youth](#), as outlined in [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#).
- 4) Adopt a youth-focused, cross-systems assessment and screening tool that identifies, assesses, and responds to the needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness by:
  - » Prioritizing youth separately from adult prioritization within coordinated entry and collaborative planning tables to ensure timely interventions for youth.
  - » Using this tool to identify youth at risk of homelessness early, thus providing the opportunity to intervene before a young person or their family become homeless.
- 5) Systematically identify and abolish any policies, protocols, or practices within homeless serving agencies or organizations that:
  - » Create barriers to youth accessing services and supports within the youth homelessness sector. This should include altering or abolishing policies that require youth to:
    - Be homeless for a specified period of time before receiving help,
    - Meet a particular acuity standard in order to access services and supports,
    - Obtain parental permission in order to access services and supports,
    - Possess identity documents,
    - Engage in programming, education, or employment in order to receive supports, services, or benefits, or
    - Be 16 years of age or older in order to access services and supports.
  - » Discriminate against youth on the basis of their identity or life experiences. Services must meet the needs of diverse youth experiencing homelessness, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
    - Provide ongoing training, education, and accountability measures for all staff on anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and positive youth development approaches.
- 6) Through systems integration provide highly integrated, 'one-stop,' barrier-free services to youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, in collaboration with other systems and sectors. Rather than have a singular point of access, this integrated system should adopt a 'no wrong door' approach.
- 7) Ensure within every community, young people are able to access a continuum of supports and services that are guided by a 'harm reduction' philosophy whereby young people are able to choose from a range of supports (including abstinence only environments) based on their needs, desires, and where they are at. Staff in all services should be trained to support youth's self-determination with respect to their preferred supports, and all young people should be able to access high quality supports irrespective of their use of substances.

- 8) Work with a range of sectors (e.g., healthcare, education) to dramatically increase public awareness of available services for young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Efforts should seek to ensure every young person is aware of available supports and services in their community.
- 9) Meaningfully involve people with lived experience of youth homelessness in the creation and monitoring of prevention-based efforts, compensating them for their work.
- 10) Actively seek to prevent sexual exploitation and sex trafficking recruitment within all youth-serving homeless services and programs. This should include education on the characteristics and dynamics of sex trafficking recruitment and luring for frontline staff, senior personnel, and youth themselves. Young people should be provided with education on how to identify and manage sex trafficking recruitment efforts, including within the context of intimate partner relationships.
- 11) Invest in the implementation of early intervention and housing stabilization efforts to prevent sexual exploitation and trafficking amongst youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

## Municipal Governments and Communities

- 1) Develop and implement a community-level strategy or plan to prevent and end youth homelessness with ambitious targets, aligned with complementary investment.
- 2) Prioritize and support systems planning and integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
- 3) Meaningfully involve people with lived experience of youth homelessness in the creation and monitoring of prevention-based efforts, compensating them for their work.
- 4) In reflecting on practice and programmatic responses to youth homelessness as articulated in the community-level strategy, community organizations should ensure prevention-based activities exist within the continuum of supports provided to youth.
- 5) Implement a Duty to Assist, including through:
  - » Coordination and delivery of services
  - » Alignment with coordinated access systems
  - » A communications strategy that ensures young people and adults are aware that assistance is available
  - » Working with mainstream services including education, child protection, health authorities, police, and the justice system to develop an integrated systems response to support Duty to Assist
  - » Ensuring prevention-based interventions are in place to support the work
  - » Implementation and enforcement of quality assurance

## Funders [Foundations, Community Entities]

- 1) Increase comfort levels with funding pilot projects to not only contribute to a growing evidence-base, but support innovative practice at the community level. To make the most of these pilots, funders should mandate precise evaluation.
- 2) Provide program funding to service organizations for a minimum of three years to allow for concentrated program development, establishment of robust program evaluation and data measures, and adequate time to report on program successes.
- 3) Develop granting streams that support activities across the *Roadmap's* prevention continuum, building a foundation for delivering and sustaining effective prevention-based practice.

## 8

## APPENDIX

## Expanded Recommendations

## Government Of Canada

Within implementation of Reaching Home - Canada's Homelessness Strategy, the Government of Canada should:

- 1) Support communities to align their prevention-based efforts with the program areas and models identified within the *Roadmap*. A range of alignment efforts should be employed, including:
  - » Identifying and advancing program interventions that focus specifically on intervening well before a young person experiences homelessness and supporting youth to exit homelessness as rapidly as possible.
  - » Identifying and advancing policies and practices that proactively address the unique needs of particular populations deemed to be at greater risk of homelessness, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
  - » Prioritizing investment in innovative, outcomes-based solutions to youth homelessness, drawing on international and domestic evidence-based approaches, practices, and policies. Prevention-based investments should follow a 'patient capital, patient investing, patient granting' philosophy.
  - » Meaningfully involving people with lived experience of youth homelessness in the creation and monitoring the development and implementation of prevention-based efforts, compensating them for their work.
  - » Developing an evaluation framework for frontline services to assess their progress towards youth homelessness prevention.
- 2) Facilitate cross-ministerial engagement to align federal youth policies (e.g., the [Youth Employment Strategy](#), the forthcoming Youth Strategy, Youth Justice Services) under the typology articulated within the *Roadmap*.
  - » Alignment efforts should include opportunities for co-funded investments through programs supported by Employment and Social Development Canada, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Department of Justice, Health Canada, Status of Women Canada, and other relevant ministries and departments

- » Establish a cross-departmental fund for youth which emphasizes a collaborative outcomes-based approach to these pooled funds. These funds should promote flexibility, aligned outcome targets, integrated policy alignment, and foster innovation across the prevention continuum. These investments should follow a 'patient capital, patient investing, patient granting' philosophy.
  - » Foster meaningful youth engagement in all federal policy development, planning, and implementation processes related to preventing youth homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.
- 3)** Apply a youth-focused, cross-systems assessment and screening tool within the [Homeless Individuals and Families Information System](#), in order to identify, assess, and respond to the needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- » Prioritization of youth must be determined separate from adult prioritization within coordinated entry and collaborative planning tables to ensure timely and appropriate interventions for youth are actioned.
  - » The goal of this tool should be the early identification of homelessness risk amongst youth and their families, thus providing the opportunity to intervene before youth become homeless.
  - » Integration of this tool, across various public system contexts (e.g., primary healthcare, schools), must be accompanied by mechanisms to ensure that identified youth are immediately connected to appropriate services and supports (as well as the benefits and resources they are entitled to).
- 4)** Through a formal Federal/Provincial/Territorial agreement, incentivise provinces and territories to implement strategies to prevent youth homelessness by addressing:
- » The delivery of the Duty to Assist legislation which is enforced by provinces and territories and distinguishes the responsibilities, policy, and funding framework to support this work at the municipal level.
  - » The need for harmonized data across provinces, territories, and the federal government to better inform and strengthen outcomes, facilitate cross-government partnerships, and capture data for unaccompanied youth (ages 13 - 24).
  - » The various system pathways that lead to youth homelessness, as well as the system gaps and barriers to supports that increase a young person's risk of homelessness.
- 5)** Address the overwhelming number of people who first experience homelessness as a youth, identified through the national Point-in-Time count data, through deliberate prioritization of prevention-based initiatives within communities.
- 6)** Work with Indigenous communities to develop and implement a focused homelessness prevention strategy for Indigenous youth and their families, supported by targeted investments sufficient to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in homeless populations.

- 7) Develop a national research agenda on youth homelessness in order to advance a cross-systems focus on youth homelessness prevention, organised according to the prevention typology identified in the *Roadmap*.
- 8) Implement an independent review process to assess progress towards ending youth homelessness in Canada.

## Provinces/Territories<sup>22</sup>

- 1) Implement a provincial/territorial strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness, supported by a targeted investment.
- 2) Embed youth homelessness prevention within provincial/territorial poverty reduction strategies, ensuring that the strategy provides the social and material supports to reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with youth.
- 3) In liaison with the federal government, establish provincial/territorial service standards in the area of youth homelessness, which in turn can be tracked to inform funding decisions.
- 4) Prioritize and support systems planning and integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. As part of this systems integration, all provincial/territorial ministries and departments should be mandated to identify their roles and responsibilities in addressing youth homelessness. This can be achieved through:
  - » Requiring that all ministries and departments adopt a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to supporting youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
  - » The development and employment of a standardized assessment tool that can be used across systems to assist in determining homelessness risk for youth.
  - » Collaboration across departments, ministries, and sectors by establishing inter-ministerial planning tables to coordinate activities within government and hold each ministry accountable for the roles they play in outcomes for youth.
  - » The promotion of strategic partnerships between youth-serving organizations and agencies, schools, health care providers, child protection services, law enforcement, and other institutions which interact with young people.
  - » Collaboration with communities to rapidly divert youth from homelessness and create rapid pathways out of homelessness for youth.

<sup>22</sup> Recommendations in this section have been primarily drawn from [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (2018).



- 5) Invest in provincial/territorial knowledge development and data management specific to youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems approach to youth homelessness prevention. This should include the establishment of:
  - » A provincial/territorial approach to gathering comparable data by establishing common and consistent data collection and data sharing methods, in partnership with the federal government.
  - » Information sharing agreements with youth-serving organizations to facilitate improved systems integration (where appropriate).
- 6) Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to assess how the prevention of youth homelessness can be improved across systems, including through integration (where appropriate) and improved access to services, supports, and housing for youth and their families. This should include:
  - » Ongoing jurisdictional reviews to ensure provincial/territorial legislation and policy does not become a barrier to accessing services and supports for youth experiencing homelessness (e.g., age cut offs that deny services and supports to young people based on the assumption that they are currently in the care of parents or guardians).
  - » That facilitators/program staff are mindful of participants' wishes regarding the need to obtain parental/caregiver permission in order to access health, mental health, and addiction services, supports, and programs.
- 7) Meaningfully involve people with lived experience of youth homelessness in the creation and monitoring the development and implementation of prevention-based efforts, compensating them for their work.
- 8) Create provincial/territorial housing and shelter standards that meet the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, developed in partnership with youth and Indigenous communities.

## Provincial/Territorial Departments & Ministries<sup>23</sup>

### Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Housing

- 1) Increase the availability of affordable housing and rent subsidies in all communities, including for young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Ensure young people have equitable access to rent subsidies and are not screened out of supports on the basis of age.

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<sup>23</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, recommendations in this section have been primarily drawn from [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (2018).

- 2) Provide investments to support the implementation of youth-focused, evidence-based models of housing, such as [Housing First for Youth](#), Host Homes, and the Foyer. These models should be grounded in principles of youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination. As part of these investments, front-line services should be required to report on how implementation of these models addresses the needs of youth experiencing multiple challenges and disadvantages.<sup>24</sup>
- 3) Invest in the development and expansion of low-income rent subsidy program for families and individuals experiencing housing precarity and other challenges (e.g., health difficulties, disability), implemented with comprehensive housing, mediation, health, and case management supports. This program should be highly accessible and immediately responsive to need (i.e., 7 days/week, 365 days/year).
- 4) Develop, invest in, and implement evidence-based eviction prevention interventions to support young people and their families. Interventions should be highly accessible, immediate, and adequately financed to ensure all youth and families facing eviction are provided the supports they need to avoid homelessness.
- 5) Collaborate with the federal government and Indigenous communities to improve the availability and affordability of housing for Indigenous Peoples in all communities, supported by sufficient investments to ensure all Indigenous Peoples can access affordable, safe, and adequate housing.

## Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Children and Youth

- 1) Ensure young people in the child welfare system experience safe, appropriate, and stable housing, as outlined in [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#).<sup>25</sup> All ministries should seek to promote out-of-home-placement stability for youth in the child welfare system.
- 2) Implement 'zero discharge into homelessness' policies within health and social services contexts serving youth, recognising that public system discharge is a key contributor to youth homelessness. As part of this work, all young people leaving healthcare or social service institutions should be engaged early and often in planning processes that address their housing stability and necessary wrap-around supports. These policies should be accompanied by sufficient investment to ensure the provision of financial supports to youth post-discharge, if needed.
- 3) Identify opportunities for collaboration and improved service coordination between the child welfare system and other ministries and departments (for instance, between education, child and family services, and health and justice).
- 4) Champion and implement youth-friendly models of harm reduction within care placements (e.g., foster care, group homes) and post-care (e.g., post-care transitional housing) that focus on reducing risk or harmful effects associated with substance use and other behaviours.

<sup>24</sup> [Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence](#) (2018).

<sup>25</sup> [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#) (2017).

- 5) Create aftercare provision that commits to the provision of ongoing support (as needed) to youth in care until the age of 25, provided through existing youth-serving providers. Any care guarantee should be evaluated annually to assess its efficacy at improving housing stability for youth post-care. It should also:
- » Provide highly accessible systems navigation supports upon entry into care until the age of 25, provided by an After Care Worker.
  - » Ensure discharge planning processes which engage youth early and often, and centre on providing youth with a range of housing options post-care, including family reunification. Planning should explicitly address employment, education, health and mental health, life skills, and social inclusion, and connection with family, friends, and community post-care.
  - » Offer a guarantee to housing that is safe, appropriate, and affordable for all young people leaving care, up to the age of 25, guided by the principles of youth choice, youth voice, and youths' right to self-determination.
  - » Provide financial supports (e.g., rent subsidies, social assistance) that are highly accessible and sufficient for youth to meet their basic needs.
- 6) Review all child welfare policies and practices to ensure that supports and services equitably and adequately meet the needs of youth from equity-seeking groups and youth facing multiple challenges, including mental health challenges, disabilities, precarious citizenship status, and criminal justice involvement.
- 7) Given the overrepresentation of Indigenous and POC youth in the child welfare system, all ministries must recognize and concretely address the structural racism that drives the removal of children of colour and Indigenous children from their homes and into state care, in turn increasing the likelihood that they will experience homelessness. To that end, all ministries must support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection, as outlined in the [Calls to Actions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) and [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness: A Proposal for Action](#).
- 8) Implement policies and practices that prevent the recruitment of youth from the child welfare system into sex trafficking circumstances, including the recruitment of youth who have exited the child welfare system.

## Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Education<sup>26</sup>

- 1) Convene and/or participate in cross-ministerial planning tables in order to better coordinate supports, services, and educational attainment for young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

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<sup>26</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, these recommendations have been primarily drawn from [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (2018).

- 2) Mandate that all school boards support early intervention strategies to prevent youth homelessness, in collaboration with community organizations. The foundation of these interventions should be partnerships between schools, healthcare, mental health supports, and community-based social services, with a focus on:
  - » The early identification of housing precarity and other issues for young people through effective screening mechanisms, which could build of good examples from the Geelong Project or Youth Assessment and Prioritization Tool examples highlighted in this evidence review;
  - » Preventing early school leaving due to housing precarity or other issues;
  - » Family mediation, counselling, outreach, and reunification (if appropriate); and
  - » Highly accessible, low-barrier, trauma-informed supports and services for young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
  
- 3) Require that all school boards adopt policies, protocols, and practices to support the educational attainment and engagement of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. This should include:
  - » Reviewing policies and procedures to ensure they do not create barriers to education for precariously housed youth.
  - » Mandating that all elementary and secondary schools implement innovative, flexible, and evidence-based programming and/or curriculum to ensure youth at risk of homelessness are able to remain engaged and enrolled in school.
  - » A strong commitment to providing alternatives to suspending or expelling students, particularly in cases in which young people are forced to engage in subaltern forms of work in order to make ends meet (e.g., drug dealing, sex work), or are struggling with mental health or addiction issues.
  - » The provision of rapid pathways through which students can challenge suspensions, expulsions, and experiences of inequity and discrimination within the school system.
  - » Adoption of a harm reduction approach in all schools.
  
- 4) Mandate that all elementary and secondary schools offer mental health services within the school, provided by highly trained professionals. This work should:
  - » Be supported by targeted investments sufficient to meet the needs of all students.
  - » Enable all children and youth to self-refer to mental health services, and ensure access to services is not predicated on caregiver permission and does not require that caregiver(s) be informed.
  - » Require that mental health professionals are trained in anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and employ a positive youth development approach.
  - » Ensure mental health professionals are given an appropriate caseload in order to effectively support all students under their care, and that all schools are provided with a sufficient number of professionals relative to school size.
  - » Ensure that students are accurately screened for mental health challenges, disabilities, and learning needs.

- 5) Provide ongoing education and training for teachers and school staff on how to support students at risk of homelessness, experiencing homelessness, or facing other challenges in their lives (e.g., abuse, neglect, mental health challenges). This should include:
  - » Training on anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and empathy.
  - » Training on how to identify abuse and neglect among students, and how best to support and refer students experiencing abuse and neglect.
  - » Education on available services and supports for youth in the community, and how to best connect students to these supports.
- 6) Develop targeted curriculum, courses, programs, and/or workshops that prepare young people for independent, healthy lives. This should include education on:
  - » Healthy relationships, abuse, self-esteem, and sexual consent.
  - » Young people’s human and legal rights, including access to legal supports.
  - » Life skills (e.g., paying bills and taxes, cooking, budgeting).
- 7) Implement educational campaigns in schools focused on sex trafficking prevention, including education on how young people can identify and manage sex trafficking recruitment efforts. To do this work, school boards should be supported to partner with community-based social services addressing sexual exploitation in the community.

## Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Justice<sup>27</sup>

- 1) Ensure youth being discharged from the criminal justice system are engaged in planning processes early and often, providing youth with a range of housing options following incarceration. Planning should explicitly address employment, education, health and mental health, life skills, and social inclusion and connection with family, friends, and community post-care.
  - » Family and community reconnection or reunification efforts, where possible, desired, and appropriate, should be imbedded within a suite of options for youth transitioning from justice systems.<sup>28</sup>
- 2) Review existing youth justice policies to determine how these policies, in writing or in practice, contribute to housing precarity or homelessness for young people.
  - » Amendments, if required, should provide youth with alternatives to incarceration, remove minimum sentencing policies and zero tolerance policies for youth, and provide mechanisms through which the courts can take into consideration childhood experiences of trauma, violence, and neglect during sentencing.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, these recommendations have been primarily drawn from [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (2018).

<sup>28</sup> [Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence](#) (2018).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

- 3) Provide youth-centred education and advocacy on legal and human rights, coupled with tools and pathways to access legal supports when their rights are violated. Legal representatives should be qualified to provide legal support for the numerous issues this population often faces (e.g., unlawful eviction, workplace discrimination, sexual violence) and should employ a human rights approach.
- 4) In sentencing young people who have experienced homelessness or poverty, judges and juries must take into consideration the socio-economic context within which the crime was committed. Alternatives to incarceration should be considered, particularly when young people engage in non-violent criminal activities in order to survive (e.g., robbery).
- 5) Restorative justice approaches must be considered in response to all Indigenous young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.
- 6) Increase the enforcement of laws against domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sex trafficking, ensuring that survivors of this violence are provided with swift access to justice and safety. As part of this work, provide immunity to minors who commit non-violent offenses as a direct result of being trafficked.
- 7) Ensure restorative justice approaches are considered in response to all Indigenous young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.
- 8) Collaborate with all youth-serving sectors and systems to create a safety strategy to reduce the risk of criminal victimization of youth who are homeless, establishing special mechanisms to address victimization committed by police and organized criminal organizations.
- 9) Abolish all laws that criminalize survival sex among young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

## **Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Income Supports**

- 1) Increase and simplify income assistance for youth-led and low-income families, including through improved maternity allowances, child care subsidies, and subsidies for families with children who have disabilities and/or mental health challenges.<sup>30</sup>
- 2) Increase income supports for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, ensuring these amounts are livable and enable these community members to meaningfully participate in civic life and their communities.
- 3) Conduct a review of income assistance for youth-led and low-income families to determine if financial support provided by government is sufficient to prevent youth and family homelessness.<sup>31</sup>
- 4) Implement policies and mechanisms to ensure that people who are transitioning between different forms of income supports are provided with income during the transition.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Health<sup>32</sup>

- 1) Prioritize and support systems integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to address the health and mental health needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. To do so, Ministries must:
  - » Invest in the provision of coordinated and integrated mental health and health supports and services at the community level, as outlined in *Mental Health Care for Homeless Youth: A Proposal for Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Leadership, Coordination, and Targeted Investment*.
  - » Work across departments, ministries, and sectors by establishing inter-ministerial planning tables to coordinate activities within government and hold each ministry accountable for the roles they play in the health and mental health outcomes of youth experiencing homelessness. Led by provincial/territorial Ministries of Health, the mandate of these tables should be to ensure that no young person slips through the cracks.
- 2) Work with communities to ensure that a harm reduction approach is embedded within schools and all youth-serving organizations, agencies, programs, and initiatives.
- 3) Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to accessing health and mental health supports for youth at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. Remove or alter identified barriers to accessing care, including cost, discrimination, citizenship, proof of identity, and other factors. Meaningfully involve youth with lived experience of homelessness in these reviews and the development of alternative health and mental health care delivery mechanisms (e.g., mobile health clinics, community health hubs).
- 4) Collaborate with communities to create rapid care access pathways for homeless youth and their families with severe health and mental health needs.
- 5) Develop and invest in capacity building initiatives which support medical professionals to better meet the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. These initiatives should span from community service direct care levels through to mainstream service domains (e.g., emergency rooms, first responders, etc.).
- 6) Expand the availability of youth-specific mental health and addictions supports and services, including youth-specific rehabilitation centres. Targeted investments should be made to increase the availability of mental health and addictions services in communities that often lack these services, including rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

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<sup>32</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, recommendations in this section have been primarily drawn from [What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) (2018).



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