

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN ON YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Introduction

Environmental Scan on Youth Homelessness is a comprehensive examination of youth homelessness across Canada. Its purpose is to provide the following information:

- an overview of the homeless youth population, including their shelter situation;
- the primary housing and support issues related to homeless youth;
- recent and upcoming Canadian initiatives including publications, reports and projects on youth homelessness;
- names of agencies and key resource people working in the field; and
- types of effective housing interventions that have benefited homeless youth.

Unlike other Canadian studies of homelessness, *Environmental Scan on Youth Homelessness* focuses primarily on youth between 16 and 24 years of age. To date, most studies of homelessness have considered a particular city or region. This report is national in scope and provides detailed information about youth homelessness in every province, the Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut.

Research Program**Methodology**

The report was researched in two steps. The first step was a review of the existing Canadian literature on youth homelessness and the preparation of an annotated bibliography. The second step consisted of interviews with close to 60 key informants across the country, including representatives from all levels of government and front-line community agencies.

To better define the homeless youth population, the report adopts two terms used by the United Nations: (i) the “absolutely homeless” and (ii) the “relatively homeless.” The

absolutely homeless are youth who live outdoors and in abandoned buildings, as well as those who use emergency shelters or hostels.

The relatively homeless are those who live in unsafe, inadequate or insecure housing, or who pay too much of their income for rent. Relatively homeless youth include those who rent hotel or motel rooms by the month, or who temporarily stay with friends or relatives (couch surfing). They are also called the “invisible homeless.”

Findings**Profile of homeless youth**

Throughout the country, homeless youth have the same general characteristics: exposure to physical violence, mental health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual abuse and conflicts with the law. They are often isolated with no family ties and few friends. Many have been raised in foster homes, have a lack of education and skills, and suffer from poor physical health. While the majority of homeless youth are male, the number of young women who are homeless is growing.

Homelessness is a significant problem among Aboriginal youth. This group is over-represented in the homeless population, particularly in Vancouver, Edmonton, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto and Ottawa. For example, in Ottawa Aboriginal youth make up 18% of the population of homeless male youth and 19% of homeless female youth, yet only 1.5% of the population of Ottawa is of Aboriginal cultural background.



Some key informants confirmed that gay and lesbian youth are also at risk of ending up on the street because their families often reject them. Like Aboriginal youth, they avoid using some of the shelters because they fear discrimination. In some cities, youth avoid adult shelters, feeling unsafe around adults with behavioural or mental health problems.

Many homeless youth survive on a day-to-day basis by couch surfing, or they may live in overcrowded or unsuitable housing. Other survival strategies include pooling resources to rent accommodation, staying at emergency shelters, or sleeping outside or in abandoned buildings. A significant number of homeless youth become involved in illegal activities such as selling drugs, shoplifting and prostitution.

The lifestyle of homeless youth puts their health at risk; and the longer a person is homeless, the worse his or her health becomes. In Quebec, Toronto and the prairies, HIV/AIDS as well as Hepatitis B and C are concerns, while in Montréal and Toronto, suicide is a serious issue. Other medical concerns of homeless youth include tuberculosis, problems with their feet, scabies, dental problems, sexually transmitted diseases and viral infections.

In Toronto, about half of the young women on the streets become pregnant at some point. Further, anecdotal evidence indicates there are more than 300 births a year, and more than 10% of these babies die.

Exposure to violence and theft is common hazard among homeless youth. A study of Montréal street youth done in 1998 found the mortality rates among males was 9 times higher than it was for the general youth population of Quebec. For females, it was 31 times higher.

The number of homeless youth

While an accurate count of homeless youth was difficult to determine, a number of key informants in major centres provided population statistics gathered as part of their local studies.

In Halifax, for example, 300 youth were said to have used a youth drop-in centre between April 1st July 31st 2000. In Montréal 4.6% or 380 users of shelters in 1996-97 were under 18 years of age, and 34.3% or 2,855 persons were between 18 and 29. The proportion of youth using services such as day centres and soup kitchens was similar, although the numbers were higher: 3.6% (720 people) under 18 and 27.3% (5,450 persons) for those 18 to 29.

In the City of Toronto, it is estimated that 6,000 youth (age 15-24) stayed in emergency shelters in 1999. In addition, some 6,200 children (14 years of age and under) have already experienced homelessness within a family situation, which may be a precursor to youth homelessness in the future. In the Region of Peel (west of Toronto), the emergency shelter served a total of 395 youth in 1999-2000. In Ottawa, more than 500 youth were served in emergency shelters in 2000.

In Edmonton, the Youth Emergency Shelter served 640 youth between July 1999 and June 2000. In Calgary, a one-night count of people using homeless shelters and on the downtown streets identified 265 youth between the ages of 13 and 24 (20% of the total homeless counted). A study (March, 2000) in Saskatoon identified between 250-300 street youth and runaways, and estimates for Regina are similar.

In Vancouver, a study undertaken over the course of two and one-half weeks in May 2000 suggests that there were an average of 205 youth age 25 and under experiencing some form of homelessness in the Downtown South and West End areas of Vancouver. However, this estimate did not include youth in the Downtown Eastside and is not accepted as accurate by all service providers.

Causes of youth homelessness

The report also investigates the causes of youth homelessness. It cites family breakdown, a lack of affordable housing and increasing poverty as major factors contributing to the problem. Many youth cannot live at home for a variety of reasons including family violence. One Toronto study indicated that more than 70% of youth on the streets leave home because of physical or sexual abuse.

A lack of affordable housing is seen as part of the problem in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. In New Brunswick, where poverty is an issue, few new subsidized housing units have been built in the last 10 years, and there is no supportive housing. The poor condition of the existing housing stock contributes to youth homelessness in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Saskatoon, Regina and Winnipeg.

Increasing poverty is a significant cause of youth homelessness, as is the poor economy in various parts of Canada. In rural communities in Atlantic Canada, increasing numbers of young people facing economic pressures are moving to urban centres such as Halifax and then westward to Montréal and Toronto. When they arrive in these cities, youth often find themselves without resources and can easily become homeless.

A lack of job readiness, education or experience also contributes to youth homelessness. The vast majority of homeless youth have not completed high school. In Ottawa and Toronto, that number ranges between 63% and 90%.

Gaps in child welfare and protection services for youth who are 16 years of age and older is another contributing factor in most regions. When young people leave the child protection system, they often live on the streets. Many youth who are 16 and 17 years old are not eligible for income assistance. In many provinces, the eligibility criteria for income assistance for youth who are under 18 make it difficult for them to collect benefits. In Quebec, youth under the age of 18 are eligible for income assistance only if they have a dependent child.

Gaps in social services also exist for those with mental health problems, addictions and dual diagnoses. Addictions are a serious concern among homeless youth, and increasing drug use has been reported in many major centres including the Northwest Territories.

Initiatives to address youth homelessness

In December 1999, the federal government announced a \$753 million contribution between 2000 and 2003 to help alleviate the problem of homelessness. This allocation provides funding for the following initiatives:

- \$305 million for the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI);
- \$59 million targeted to youth under Canada's Youth Employment Strategy. Sixty-six projects have been funded that provide opportunities for homeless youth to gain work experience and develop life skills.
- \$59 million for the Urban Aboriginal Strategy;
- \$43 million in additional funding for the Shelter Enhancement Program over four years and an expansion of the program to include shelters and second-stage housing for youth. Under this program, 104 emergency shelters and second-stage housing projects have received assistance from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Several of these projects involved renovating shelters for homeless youth.
- \$268 million for the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP) and related programs over four years. As part of the RRAP funding, 42 new and existing projects targeting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness have received assistance. Some of this funding for renovating existing shelters or converting non-residential buildings to residential use was targeted specifically for homeless youth.

SCPI has been effective in initiating a program to collectively discuss homelessness. It has helped communities develop a plan to identify needs and develop strategies to address the problem. A number of initiatives have been implemented under SCPI funding. These include the following:

- increasing shelter capacity for youth;
- providing staff for an emergency youth shelter to assist youth and refer them to other existing community services to help them make the transition to more stable accommodations;
- establishing safe second-stage housing for young women in the survival sex trade;
- offering a place of refuge for youth;
- providing outreach services;
- hiring a youth worker to provide housing assistance, information and linkages to youth aged 16-24; and
- researching youth homelessness.

In addition, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, through Project Development Funding loans, mortgage insurance and grants from Homegrown Solutions, has provided assistance for homeless youth. A variety of other programs and services across the country also help develop housing options for this group.

Implications for the housing industry and social service agencies

Environmental Scan on Youth Homelessness identifies a number of expanded and additional programs and services that could help alleviate youth homelessness. They include more affordable housing, and a range of additional housing options such as emergency shelters, transition housing and supported housing.

There is growing interest in programs that offer youth a full range of housing choices linked with support programs, such as lifeskills and pre-employment training. For example, the Region of Peel has embarked on an initiative to provide a continuum of housing options, including emergency short-term shelter beds, transitional housing and independent living. This program will help youth with lifeskills, employment opportunities and the opportunity to address a variety of issues related to physical and mental health, substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, and personal safety.

Other suggestions for supporting homeless youth include improved access to income assistance, access to the child welfare system for 16 year olds, more mental health services, treatment for addictions, alternative schooling options and initiatives to help youth find jobs.

Family mediation, conflict resolution, strategies to help youth remain in school, more recreation centres, and more support to families and children are also recommended as part of the continuum of supports for helping homeless youth.

Environmental Scan on Youth Homelessness is a startling snapshot of youth homelessness and its effects on communities across the country. By examining its characteristics and causes, as well as the interventions that are proving effective, the report offers an unvarnished yet hopeful look at one of Canada's major social problems.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the National Housing Act, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research report.

To find more Research Highlights plus a wide variety of information products, visit our Website at

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