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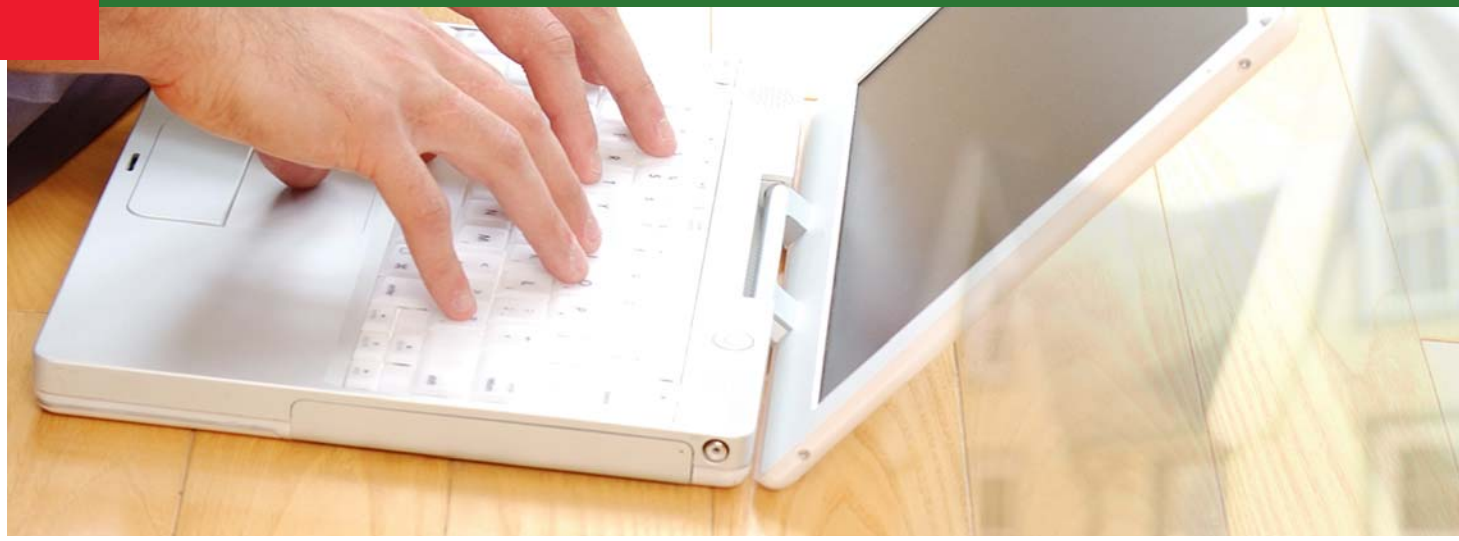

# Transferability of the "Safe in the City" Approach to Youth Homelessness Prevention in Canada

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# The transferability of the *Safe in the City* approach to youth homelessness prevention in Canada

**Final Report**

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**December 2005**

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December 2005

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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# THE TRANSFERABILITY OF THE "SAFE IN THE CITY" APPROACH TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IN CANADA

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study was to examine the transferability of Safe in the City (SITC), based in London, England, to the Canadian context. SITC was set up in 1998 by the Peabody Trust and Centrepoint, a charity working with homeless and socially excluded youth. The goals of SITC were to help young people stay safely at home; find alternative options for young people who cannot remain safely at home; and develop the life skills and employability of young people to enable them to make a smooth transition to independent lifestyles.

SITC was of particular interest for a number of reasons

- The project was undertaken by a non-governmental organization (NGO).
- The initiative was geographically based—targeting neighbourhoods that had been identified as especially vulnerable to production of youth homelessness.
- The initiative made use of existing resources, building on what existed in the neighbourhood and strengthening coordination between organizations.

However, a major change occurred in the course of this research project – the ending of SITC after six years of operation. Nonetheless, it was decided to proceed with the research, since the essence of the initiative remained unchanged and the lessons could still be applicable to the Canadian context. The project was slightly enlarged to review another similar project, Safe Moves, also based in England and still in operation.

## FINDINGS

### Safe in the City

SITC operated in eight London boroughs identified according to an index of deprivation. Recognizing that preventing homelessness needed to tackle the multiple factors that lead to homelessness, a "cluster" scheme was developed. To ensure that young people received all the services they needed, clusters joined up separate agencies that delivered services. The three elements of the intervention, common to all cluster schemes, were:

- Family support: based on the belief that the best place for a youth was with the family until they were ready to make a planned and safe move (unless the home was unsafe because of violence or abuse); this aspect of the work included family mediation and resolution of crisis situations.
- Personal development: this work included improving self-esteem, communication and independent living skills.
- Skills and employability: tailored learning plans were developed to help young people improve their chances of finding and keeping employment.

While the clusters were coordinated centrally by SITC, one of the cluster agencies acted as lead partner and coordinator locally, responsible for building referral routes as well as developing referral agreements and strategic links to ensure that they were part of "localized delivery." A "gatekeeping" tool was developed to identify whether a youth was eligible for services from the cluster scheme.

*Safe in the City: Gatekeeping Tool*

To be eligible for services, youth had to have at least two of the following risks:
1. Ever run away from home
2. Family in severe or chronic poverty
3. Excluded or at risk of exclusion from school
4. Problems at home
5. Disrupted home history

SITC stopped operations in 2004 when the major source of funding ended. A number of key informants from agencies that had participated in the cluster schemes were interviewed about the impact of SITC. Key informants generally had a positive view and some partner agencies planned to incorporate the SITC approach, expand their mandate to include work that had been undertaken by other partners in the cluster, or continue the partnerships.

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An evaluation of the experiences of youth who had participated in SITC, undertaken by Centrepoint and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, revealed that the family support work was highly beneficial and that the personal development aspect of the scheme had helped the youth. There was also an impact on housing stability: some who had left home went back, while others, still at home, stated that they were now less likely to run away.

## Safe Moves

The SITC model was adapted by the Foyer Federation in its Safe Moves project, which began in 2002 as an 18-month pilot in four locations, two urban and two rural, with a modest total budget of £300,000. The objective was to explore the cluster model in a different context, including a large geographical area. Youth 13–19 were targeted and a package of three core services was offered: life skills training, family mediation and support, and peer mentoring. Support to independent accommodation was available if needed.

An evaluation of the pilot revealed that, as with SITC, while the goal of preventing youth homelessness was understood by all the partners, transforming this into specific objectives was sometimes challenging. Safe Moves has become a permanent program and new projects are being developed in various locations.

## The transferability of Safe in the City

There are a number of key lessons from SITC that could be applicable to the Canadian situation.

- *The cluster model*
  The advantage of the cluster model was that it identified key elements that were necessary to prevent homelessness: family mediation, personal development, and skills and education. The emphasis was to provide a seamless service to help youth gain access to all these facets of the program, while responding to their "service fatigue." However, the program was expensive—both financially (in part related to the need to support a central office that had research and policy activities) and in terms of time to coordinate the work. The annual SITC budget averaged £275,000 a year per cluster (about $550,000 in Canadian currency). The Safe Moves project demonstrates that a more modest approach can work, although more resources at the start-up phase and more national coordination and exchange between various programs are desirable.

- *Localized application*
  By being based in local communities or boroughs, SITC was able to bring together local partners, often those who had credibility in the community and could more easily attract the youth. A localized approach also allowed SITC to recognize and adapt to the needs of particular situations, such as significant proportions of ethnic and minority youth.

- *Understanding of homelessness prevention*
  Both SITC and Safe Moves were confronted with having to understand and share with partners what homelessness "prevention" meant and how this knowledge could be translated into action. In both instances this proved to be a challenge in the initial phases of the work but also appears to be one of the lasting legacies of SITC. Key informants spoke of a deeper understanding of the influences leading to homelessness and the need for a holistic approach and integrated services.

- *The assessment/gatekeeping tool*
  One of the most useful components of the SITC approach was the development and application of an assessment tool based on risk factors for homelessness to evaluate whether a young person was eligible for services. The assessment tool also helped identify agencies better suited to deal with youth who were not eligible for SITC.

### Canadian Initiatives

When Canadian key informants were asked about initiatives that dealt with prevention of youth homelessness, either in terms of research, national initiatives or local projects, few were identified. Part of the difficulty may reflect the complexity of youth homelessness prevention and the fact that initiatives can be wide-ranging (e.g., family support, help in the transition out of care) and may not be identified as dealing with homelessness per se. This also may reflect the lack of knowledge and understanding of homelessness prevention, similar to the experiences of SITC and Safe Moves in the initial phases as partners struggled with understanding what homelessness prevention would look like.

Three categories of Canadian programs were identified:

- holistic programs that offer a range of services to youth that can include counselling, community work, residential services and independent living skills,
- projects that address the needs of specific groups, e.g., ethnic groups or gay/lesbian/ bisexual/transgendered youth, and
- family reconnection.

### Implementing youth homelessness prevention: The challenges

The SITC and Safe Moves initiatives as well as research identify a number of challenges in undertaking a youth homelessness prevention project.

- *Prevention as a priority and demonstration of benefits*
  Some U.K. key informants stated that one of the challenges in implementing prevention programs was the difficulty of demonstrating that prevention works. It requires that people invest in the long term, since it can take years before there is empirical evidence of impact.

- *Labels and stigma*
  One of the issues that arises in undertaking work to prevent youth homelessness is that of labelling the initiative as homelessness prevention. Youth have been found to resist the term homeless and may not use services labelled as such. Any initiative that would undertake youth homelessness prevention would need to carefully consider how it is labelled. Related to this might be where it is physically located. While there might be advantages to being located in services or facilities for homeless youth (thereby reaching those who may be "trying out" street life), others who avoid the label or might be in an earlier stage of the process might not be reached.

- *Negative past experiences*
  Key informants from SITC spoke of "service fatigue" among some youth who had been exposed to other interventions and the ensuing challenge of demonstrating that their project was different. Research indicates that this attitude is frequent. One of the key elements that seems to have helped SITC overcome service fatigue was the relationship that key workers could establish with the youth. Success with youth who initially used the program led to an increase in word-of-mouth and self-referrals, attesting to the need for a long-term commitment on the part of funders and developers of programs.

**Implementing youth homelessness prevention: Existing strengths**

A number of factors, inherent to the youth themselves as well as the capacity of Canadian community organizations, are positive elements in implementing youth homelessness prevention.

- *The optimism and resilience of youth*
  While there are difficulties with using the term homeless, and resistance on the part of youth to be identified as such, some of the resistance also reflects strengths: not using homelessness services can be seen as a sign of refusing to adopt an identity that is negative and highly stigmatized while maintaining a sense of self and self-respect. In many instances, youths see their homelessness as transitory, a stage in the process of independence. Youth are also optimistic; research reveals that they express hope for the future and believe that their situations will change. Studies reveal that youth often felt there was no alternative to the street and the decision to leave home was one that affirmed their capacity and control over the situation. Support that is given to youth would need to acknowledge that their situation is temporary and that they have strengths and power.

- *The process of becoming homeless can take time*
  The sociological concept of a homeless "career" could be integrated into prevention work. The early stages of the "push" towards the street have been shown to last a significant period of time. During the contemplation stage, in which the youth realizes that the situation they are in is no longer tenable, they will inform themselves about survival strategies and undertake trial periods. This is an optimal time to give them information about their options.

- *The experience of Canadian community organizations*
  Numerous Canadian studies, project descriptions and best practices, as well as the impetus provided by the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) to develop homelessness plans, have resulted in a strong capacity on the part of community organizations to work collaboratively and to build networks to pull together a wide range of services necessary to deal with complex problems. In many ways, some of the work required to set up clusters (as in SITC) or partnerships (as in Safe Moves) has been accomplished already.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has revealed that the issue of homeless youth in Canada is not very different from that in other countries. The causes, the characteristics, and the behaviour patterns all seem to be similar, as is the need to find strategies to prevent the occurrence of homelessness. While there are strong indications that structural factors play an important role in the development of homelessness and that universal measures are the most effective response, the focus of this study has been on a more targeted response to one specific group.

The SITC model is one that could be adapted to the Canadian context although the Safe Moves adaptation, with lower costs, might be more sustainable. However, there are challenges to implementation of such a program. The first is the need for acknowledgment and support from governments. There is a danger that Canadians slide into a situation where homelessness is considered an unavoidable component of present-day society. There needs to be a commitment to the idea that this is not inevitable and that means can be found to prevent its occurrence. For example, it may be worth examining the approach and the impact of the *2002 Homeless Act* in the U.K. which requires that prevention be included in homelessness plans. A review of Canadian local plans to incorporate homelessness prevention would be useful.

The other major challenge is the need for more research in areas that are required to support prevention. There is a need for

- *Better understanding of pathways and risk factors for Canadian youth*
  While a few recent Canadian studies have undertaken this type of analysis, this is still relatively little understood. In order to assess risk and implement prevention programs, there is a need for information about where homeless young people come from: without an understanding of neighbourhoods where risk is higher, broad prevention programs that take family, school and social networks into account cannot be put into place.

- *Better understanding of family reconnection and support/mediation*
  Relatively little is known about family reconnection and findings from existing studies can be contradictory. There is a need to understand the impact of family reunification and situations under which this is desirable and those where such measures may not be sustainable, or may even put youth into further danger. It would be important to know the views of front-line services about family support and mediation, including obstacles or dangers that they might see from initiatives that take a more interventionist approach. Related to this are policies and programs around runaway youth, including the protocol with parents.
- *Asking youth what would have helped*
  Finally, there is a need to know from homeless youth what would have helped them when they first contemplated leaving home or left home. Canadian research is increasingly giving "voice" to homeless persons and, in this case, policy and programs would greatly benefit from the hard-earned wisdom of homeless youth. Furthermore, the perspective of families and parents about the supports that were or are needed would be invaluable in developing a prevention strategy.

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LE POINT EN RECHERCHE

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# PEUT-ON APPLIQUER LA DÉMARCHE « SAFE IN THE CITY » À LA PRÉVENTION DE L'ITINÉRANCE CHEZ LES JEUNES AU CANADA ?

## INTRODUCTION

L'objectif de cette étude était d'examiner la possibilité d'appliquer au contexte canadien la démarche *Safe in the City* (SITC) employée à Londres (Angleterre). SITC a été mis sur pied en 1998 par le Peabody Trust et Centrepoint, une organisation caritative qui vient en aide aux jeunes sans-abri et à ceux qui souffrent d'exclusion sociale. SITC avait pour objectifs d'aider les jeunes à demeurer en toute sécurité à la maison, de trouver des solutions de rechange pour les jeunes qui ne pouvaient demeurer en toute sécurité à la maison et de faire en sorte que les jeunes acquièrent les connaissances élémentaires et l'aptitude au travail qui allaient leur permettre de passer sans heurt à l'autonomie.

SITC était particulièrement intéressant pour un certain nombre de raisons :

- Le projet a été lancé par une organisation non gouvernementale (ONG).
- L'initiative était axée sur une région géographique, puisqu'elle visait des quartiers donnés comme étant particulièrement propices à l'itinérance chez les jeunes.
- L'initiative utilisait des ressources existantes, s'appuyant sur les organismes déjà présents dans les quartiers et renforçant la coordination entre les organismes.

Cependant, un changement majeur est survenu au cours de cette étude, soit la fin de SITC après six années de fonctionnement. Malgré cela, on a décidé de réaliser le projet de recherche, étant donné que l'essence de l'initiative demeurait la même et que les leçons pouvaient s'appliquer au contexte canadien. On a étendu un peu la portée du projet afin d'inclure une autre initiative semblable, *Safe Moves*, issue elle aussi de l'Angleterre et toujours en activité.

## CONSTATATIONS

### *Safe in the City*

SITC couvrait huit quartiers de Londres, désignés au moyen d'un indice de privation. Étant donné que la prévention de l'itinérance passe par la résolution des multiples facteurs qui y mènent, on a adopté un plan axé sur des groupes de services. Pour garantir aux jeunes tous les services qu'il leur fallait, on a réuni en groupes les services d'organismes distincts. Les trois éléments de l'intervention qui se retrouvaient dans tous les groupes de services étaient les suivants :

- Soutien à la famille : Cet élément s'appuyait sur la conviction selon laquelle le meilleur milieu de vie pour un jeune est son foyer familial, jusqu'à ce qu'il ait planifié un départ qui se fera en toute sécurité (à moins que le foyer familial ne soit pas sûr en raison de la violence ou des abus); cet aspect du travail englobait la médiation familiale et la résolution des situations de crise.
- Développement personnel : Ce travail comprenait l'amélioration de l'estime de soi, de la communication et des aptitudes nécessaires à l'autonomie.
- Compétences et aptitudes au travail : On a établi des plans d'apprentissage adaptés pour aider les jeunes à rehausser leurs chances de trouver et de garder un emploi.

C'est SITC qui assumait de façon centralisée la coordination des groupes de services, mais l'un des organismes offrant les services jouait le rôle prépondérant et assumait la coordination locale. À ce titre, il lui incombait d'établir un réseau d'aiguillage, de conclure des ententes et de tisser des liens stratégiques afin de veiller à leur intégration dans la prestation localisée des services. On a conçu un outil de contrôle servant à déterminer l'admissibilité des jeunes aux services faisant partie des groupes de services.

**Outil de contrôle pour les services *Safe in the City***

Pour avoir droit aux services, les jeunes doivent présenter au moins deux des facteurs de risque suivants :
1. Avoir fugué au moins une fois
2. Issu d'une famille d'extrême pauvreté ou de pauvreté chronique
3. Exclu ou à risque de devenir exclu de l'école
4. Problèmes à la maison
5. Antécédents de perturbation familiale

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SITC a mis fin à ses activités en 2004, quand sa principale source de financement s'est tarie. On a interrogé un certain nombre de spécialistes des organismes ayant participé à l'offre des groupes de services au sujet des incidences de SITC. Les spécialistes avaient une opinion généralement favorable et certains organismes partenaires prévoyaient intégrer la démarche SITC, élargir leur mandat de manière à inclure le travail entrepris par d'autres partenaires dans les groupes de services ou poursuivre les partenariats établis.

Une évaluation des expériences des jeunes ayant participé à SITC, réalisée par Centrepoint et la Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a révélé que le travail de soutien familial avait été très bénéfique et que l'aspect du plan lié au développement personnel avait aidé les jeunes. On a aussi constaté un effet sur la stabilité : certains des jeunes qui avaient quitté le foyer familial y étaient revenus, et d'autres, toujours à la maison, ont affirmé qu'ils risquaient moins de fuguer.

### *Safe Moves*

La Foyer Federation a adapté le modèle SITC pour son projet *Safe Moves*, lancé en 2002 sous la forme d'un projet pilote d'une durée de 18 mois, en quatre endroits, dont deux secteurs urbains et deux secteurs ruraux, au moyen d'un budget modeste de £300 000. Son objectif était d'explorer le modèle des groupes de services dans un contexte différent, notamment dans une vaste région géographique. Le projet s'adressait aux jeunes de 13 à 19 ans, et un ensemble de trois services de base était offert : apprentissage de l'autonomie fonctionnelle, médiation et soutien à la famille, et mentorat sous la forme de jumelage avec d'autres jeunes. Le soutien au logement indépendant était aussi offert au besoin.

Une évaluation du projet pilote a révélé que, comme pour SITC, tous les partenaires comprenaient le but de prévenir l'itinérance chez les jeunes, mais trouvaient parfois difficile de convertir ce but en objectifs précis. *Safe Moves* est devenu un programme permanent, et de nouveaux projets voient le jour en divers endroits.

## Possibilité d'appliquer ailleurs la démarche *Safe in the City*

Un certain nombre de leçons clés tirées de SITC pourraient s'appliquer à la situation canadienne.

- *Le modèle des groupes de services*
  L'avantage du modèle des groupes de services était qu'il précisait les éléments clés nécessaires à la prévention de l'itinérance : la médiation familiale, le développement personnel et les compétences et l'instruction. On mettait l'accent sur la prestation d'un service intégré dont le but était d'aider les jeunes à bénéficier de toutes les facettes du programme tout en répondant à la lassitude qu'ils éprouvaient par rapport aux services offerts. Cependant, le programme était coûteux, tant sur le plan financier (en partie parce qu'il fallait soutenir un bureau central où se déroulaient des activités de recherche et d'élaboration de politiques) que sur le plan du temps requis pour coordonner le travail. Le budget annuel de SITC était en moyenne de £275 000 par année par groupe de services (environ 550 000 $ canadiens). Le projet *Safe Moves* démontre qu'une démarche plus modeste peut fonctionner, mais qu'il est préférable d'avoir plus de ressources à l'étape du démarrage, et davantage de coordination et d'échanges à l'échelle nationale entre les divers programmes.

- *Application localisée*
  Parce qu'il était basé dans les collectivités locales ou les quartiers, SITC a pu réunir les partenaires locaux, notamment ceux qui jouissaient de crédibilité au sein de la collectivité et qui pouvaient attirer davantage les jeunes. Une démarche localisée a aussi permis à SITC de reconnaître les besoins liés à des situations particulières et à s'y adapter, par exemple, les proportions importantes de jeunes membres de groupes ethniques et minoritaires.

- *Compréhension de la prévention de l'itinérance*
  SITC et *Safe Moves* ont dû s'attarder à comprendre, et à faire comprendre aux partenaires, ce que signifie la « prévention » de l'itinérance, puis déterminer des moyens de passer à l'action. Dans les deux cas, cette tâche s'est révélée difficile aux étapes initiales du travail, mais semble faire partie de ce qu'il restera longtemps de SITC. Les spécialistes ont parlé d'une compréhension plus approfondie des influences qui mènent à l'itinérance et de la nécessité d'adopter une démarche globale et des services intégrés.

- *Outil d'évaluation et de contrôle*
  L'un des éléments les plus utiles de la démarche SITC a été la conception et la mise en œuvre d'un outil d'évaluation s'appuyant sur les facteurs de risque d'itinérance pour déterminer si un jeune est admissible aux services. L'outil d'évaluation a aussi contribué à repérer les organismes pouvant le mieux répondre aux besoins des jeunes qui n'étaient pas admissibles au SITC.

## Initiatives canadiennes

Les spécialistes canadiens, interrogés au sujet des initiatives qui servent à prévenir l'itinérance chez les jeunes, que ce soit sous la forme de recherches, d'initiatives nationales ou de projets locaux, en ont signalé très peu. Une part de la difficulté est peut-être liée à la complexité de la prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes et au fait que les initiatives peuvent être étendues (soutien aux familles, aide à la transition vers l'autonomie) et ne pas être données comme étant précisément liées à l'itinérance en soi. C'est aussi, peut-être, le reflet de lacunes dans les connaissances et la compréhension de l'itinérance aux étapes initiales, comme pour SITC et *Safe Moves*, alors que les partenaires s'efforçaient de comprendre de quoi serait faite la prévention de l'itinérance.

Trois catégories de programmes canadiens ont été relevées

- programmes globaux offrant un éventail de services pouvant englober le counselling, le travail communautaire, les services résidentiels et les aptitudes nécessaires à l'autonomie

- projets répondant aux besoins de groupes particuliers, par exemple, les groupes ethniques ou les jeunes gais, lesbiennes, bisexuels ou transgenres

- rétablissement des liens familiaux

**Mise en œuvre de la prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes : les défis**

Les initiatives SITC et *Safe Moves*, de même que les recherches réalisées, font ressortir un certain nombre de difficultés liées au lancement d'un projet de prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes.

- *La prévention en priorité, et la démonstration des bienfaits*
  Certains spécialistes du R.-U. ont affirmé que l'un des défis que présente la mise en œuvre de programmes de prévention réside dans la difficulté de démontrer que la prévention est efficace. Il faut un investissement à long terme, car la preuve empirique des effets n'arrive parfois que des années plus tard.

- *Étiquettes et stigmates*
  Une partie de la difficulté qui accompagne les efforts de prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes réside dans le fait que l'on attribue à l'initiative l'étiquette de prévention de l'itinérance. On a constaté que des jeunes résistent aux termes « itinérance » et « sans-abri » et pourraient ne pas recourir à des services portant cette étiquette. Il faut examiner attentivement la façon d'étiqueter toute initiative s'attaquant à la prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes. L'emplacement matériel des lieux est un facteur connexe. Offrir les services là où se trouvent des services ou installations à l'intention des jeunes sans-abri peut présenter des avantages (car ils atteindraient ceux qui « tentent l'expérience » la vie dans la rue), mais ceux qui évitent cette étiquette ou en sont aux toutes premières étapes du processus pourraient ne pas être atteints.

- *Expériences négatives vécues dans le passé*
  Les spécialistes de SITC ont parlé de la lassitude que certains jeunes éprouvaient devant les services offerts après avoir été exposés à d'autres interventions, et de la difficulté à faire valoir que ce projet était différent. La recherche indique que cette attitude est courante. L'un des principaux éléments qui semblent avoir aidé SITC à surmonter cette lassitude à l'égard des services offerts était la relation que les travailleurs clés pouvaient établir avec les jeunes. Les succès remportés avec les jeunes qui avaient initialement utilisé le programme ont mené à une augmentation du bouche-à-oreille et de l'accès sans aiguillage, ce qui confirme la nécessité d'un engagement à long terme de la part des organismes de financement et des concepteurs des programmes.

**Mise en œuvre de la prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes : points forts existants**

Un certain nombre de facteurs inhérents aux jeunes et à la capacité des organismes communautaires canadiens sont des éléments positifs pour la mise en œuvre de mesures de prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes.

- *L'optimisme et la capacité d'adaptation des jeunes*
  L'emploi des termes « itinérance » et « sans-abri » s'accompagne de difficultés et suscite de la résistance de la part des jeunes à s'identifier à cette notion, mais une part de la résistance est aussi le reflet d'un point fort : le fait de ne pas utiliser des services à l'intention des sans-abri peut être perçu comme le refus d'adopter une étiquette vue comme étant négative et source de stigmates, et comme l'affirmation de l'estime de soi. Dans de nombreux cas, les jeunes voient leur itinérance comme transitoire, comme une étape du processus qui les mènera à l'autonomie. Les jeunes sont aussi optimistes. La recherche révèle qu'ils expriment de l'espoir pour l'avenir et croient que leur situation changera. Les études démontrent que les jeunes estimaient souvent ne pas avoir d'autre solution que la rue, et trouvaient que leur décision de quitter la maison était l'affirmation de leur capacité et de leur contrôle de la situation. Le soutien offert aux jeunes doit reconnaître que leur situation est temporaire et qu'ils ont des forces et du pouvoir.

- *Le chemin menant à l'itinérance peut être long*
  Le concept sociologique du sans-abri « de carrière » pourrait être intégré dans le travail de prévention. On a constaté que les étapes initiales de la « poussée » vers la rue peuvent durer longtemps. À l'étape de la contemplation, quand le jeune constate que sa situation est intenable, il s'informe des stratégies de survie et entreprend des périodes d'essai. Il s'agit de la meilleure période pour lui donner de l'information sur ses options.

- *L'expérience des organismes communautaires canadiens*
  Les nombreuses études canadiennes, descriptions de projets et pratiques exemplaires, ainsi que l'impulsion donnée par l'Initiative nationale pour les sans-abri (INSA) à l'élaboration de plans visant à contrer l'itinérance ont fait en sorte que les organismes communautaires ont acquis une excellente capacité à travailler en collaboration et à réunir un vaste éventail de services nécessaires à la résolution des problèmes complexes. De bien des façons, une part du travail nécessaire pour établir des groupes de services (comme SITC) ou des partenariats (comme *Safe Moves*) a déjà été accomplie.

## CONCLUSIONS ET RECHERCHES ENCORE REQUISES

Cette étude a révélé que le problème de l'itinérance chez les jeunes au Canada n'est pas très différent des autres pays. Les causes, les caractéristiques et les comportements apparaissent tous semblables, tout comme la nécessité de trouver des stratégies qui préviendront les cas d'itinérance. Beaucoup de renseignements donnent à conclure que les facteurs d'ordre structural jouent un rôle important dans l'itinérance et que les mesures universelles sont les plus efficaces, mais la présente étude s'est davantage penchée sur une réponse plus adaptée à un groupe particulier.

Le modèle SITC pourrait être adapté au contexte canadien, mais une adaptation du modèle *Safe Moves*, moins coûteux, pourrait être plus durable. Cependant, la mise en œuvre d'un tel programme s'accompagne de difficultés. La première réside dans la nécessité d'obtenir la reconnaissance et le soutien des gouvernements. Au Canada, on risque d'en venir à estimer l'itinérance comme un élément inévitable de la société contemporaine. Il faut que l'on se convainque du fait que

cette situation n'est pas inévitable et qu'il existe des moyens de la prévenir. Par exemple, il vaudrait peut-être la peine d'examiner la démarche et l'incidence de la *Homeless Act* (*loi sur l'itinérance*) édictée en 2002 au Royaume-Uni. Cette loi exige que la prévention fasse partie des plans relatifs à l'itinérance. Il serait utile de revoir les plans locaux canadiens afin d'y intégrer la prévention de l'itinérance.

L'autre problème de taille réside dans la nécessité de mener d'autres recherches sur des aspects qui soutiennent la prévention. Ce qui suit est nécessaire.

- *Mieux comprendre les cheminements et les facteurs de risque chez les jeunes Canadiens*
  On a bien entrepris quelques études canadiennes qui font ce type d'analyse, mais c'est un aspect relativement mal compris. Pour évaluer les risques et mettre en œuvre des programmes de prévention, il faut de l'information sur l'origine des jeunes sans-abri : on ne peut mettre en place des programmes généraux de prévention tenant compte des réseaux familiaux, scolaires et sociaux sans une compréhension des secteurs où les risques sont plus élevés.

- *Mieux comprendre le rétablissement des liens familiaux et les méthodes de soutien et de médiation*
  On en sait relativement peu sur le rétablissement des liens familiaux et les constatations des études qui ont été réalisées peuvent être contradictoires. Il faut comprendre l'incidence de la réunification familiale, ainsi que les situations où elle est souhaitable, et celles où elle ne serait pas durable et où elle pourrait même augmenter les risques pour le jeune. Il serait important de connaître les opinions des services de première ligne au sujet du soutien familial et de la médiation, y compris les obstacles et les risques que les initiatives plus interventionnistes peuvent comporter à leur point de vue. Sont liés à ces interventions les politiques et programmes visant les jeunes fugueurs, y compris le protocole à suivre avec les parents.

- *Interroger les jeunes sur ce qui aurait fonctionné*
  Enfin, il faut s'enquérir auprès des jeunes sans-abri de ce qui les aurait aidé quand ils ont initialement envisagé de quitter le foyer familial ou quand ils l'ont fait. De plus en plus, la recherche au Canada donne une « voix » aux sans-abri et, dans le cas qui nous intéresse, les politiques et les programmes ne pourraient que bénéficier de la sagesse durement acquise par les jeunes sans-abri. De plus, la perspective des familles et des parents sur les mécanismes de soutien qu'il leur aurait fallu, ou qu'il leur faut, serait précieuse pour la conception d'une stratégie de prévention.

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## Table of Contents

## 1. Introduction

The objectives of this study were to examine the transferability of Safe in the City (SITC), based in London, England, to the Canadian context.

SITC was set up in 1998 by the Peabody Trust and Centrepoint, a charity working with homeless and socially excluded youth. Based on an analysis of factors leading to homelessness among youth in London, a program of intervention was undertaken in eight London boroughs from which many homeless youth had come. Building on the strengths of local organisations, SITC brokered partnerships with service providers in each of the boroughs to deliver services to help youth tackle problems at home, in school, and in their personal lives[1].

SITC was of particular interest for a number of reasons:

- The project was undertaken by a non-governmental organisation (NGO).
- The initiative was geographically based – targeting neighbourhoods that had been identified as especially vulnerable to production of youth homelessness.
- The initiative made use of existing resources, building on what existed in the neighbourhood and strengthening co-ordination between organisations.

However, a major change occurred in the course of this research project – the ending of SITC after six years of operation. Nonetheless, it was decided to proceed with the research project, since the essence of the initiative remained unchanged and the lessons could still be applicable to the Canadian context. The project was slightly enlarged to review another similar project, Safe Moves, also based in England but in smaller (non-London) areas and still in operation. The study confronted further challenges in identifying and reviewing the state of homelessness prevention in Canada – few projects were identified as such in a scan of major cities and in interviews with key informants.

This report will present the results of this study in seven sections. Chapter 2 presents a review of research and the literature on causes of youth homelessness, while Chapter 3 focuses on prevention. These two chapters situate the SITC project in terms of research and theory. Chapter 4 presents SITC while the focus of Chapter 5 is Safe Moves. Chapter 6 examines the transferability of SITC to the Canadian context, including a scan of initiatives dealing with youth homelessness prevention in Canada as well as an overview of challenges and strengths in the implementation of such initiatives. Conclusions and areas for further study are presented in Chapter 7. A bibliography (Appendix A) and a list of persons interviewed (Appendix B) are presented at the end of the report.

The methodology used in this study includes a review of the literature, interviews with key informants in Canada and in England (both in person and by telephone) and a review of documents provided by key informants. Most of the interviews were carried out in 2004.

[1] An overview of this initiative was presented in Serge 2002.

## 2. Youth homelessness

### *2.1 Causes of youth homelessness*

The causes of homelessness are generally seen as being a combination of structural and individual factors, reflecting the multiple processes that lead to homelessness. Structural factors can be economic, such as loss of manufacturing jobs and decreases in real wages; policy such as a weakened social safety net; and demographic, for example, smaller households and more single parents (Daly 1996). Individual causes are related to personal "failings" such as addictions or mental health problems. Important to the interaction of structural and personal causes are proximate factors or "triggers", such as family and social support networks that can palliate some of the effects of structural factors or can push a person into homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al. 2000; Avramov 1999).

While structural factors are thought to play a lesser role in youth homelessness, there is general acknowledgment that poverty and high unemployment can form a critical backdrop to youth homelessness. For example, economic restructuring may affect youth disproportionately hard (Baron 2001) or financial constraints may result in parents being unable to support youth beyond a certain age or help them set up independent households (Avramov 1998; Koegel, Melamid, and Burnam 1995).

Research in the US reveals that, "Youth consistently report family conflict as the primary reason for their homelessness" (Robertson and Toro 1998). This conflict can stem from relationships with stepparents, sexual activity, sexual orientation, school problems, and alcohol and drug use (Robertson and Toro 1998; Mallon 1999). Many youth have lived apart from parents during childhood or placed in foster care, institutional settings or with other relatives (Serge, Eberle, Goldberg, Sullivan, and Dudding 2002; Robertson and Toro 1998; Koegel, Melamid and Burnam 1995). The backgrounds of homeless youth are also characterized by violence and abuse (Cauce et al. 2000).

A survey of international research concluded, "almost without exception runaway and homeless youngsters come from severely disturbed families expressing high levels of child abuse, neglect and family crisis" (Randall and Brown 2001). This is confirmed in European studies: for example, in Belgium, research has identified risk factors for youth homelessness as problematic family backgrounds and histories of care and institutionalization (FEANTSA 2004a). Research in the UK has found that parents of homeless youth had problems of abuse, alcohol, drugs or mental health that caused youth to leave (Randall and Brown 2001).

Some research has revealed that the manner in which the youth leaves the family can be determinant in outcomes – especially if the youth leaves home in an unplanned manner (MacLean, Embry and Cauce 1999; Hutson and Liddiard 1994). Research would indicate that youth homelessness often starts at an early age, with a series of intermediate stages such as returns to the parental home, living with relatives or friends, living alone or in hostels (Anderson 2001).

### *2.2 Pathways and risk factors*

More recent work on homelessness has moved from identification of causes of homelessness to pathways analysis, which helps understand the "complexity of the economic and social processes that create and sustain homelessness" (Anderson 2001). This more multifaceted and dynamic approach is incorporated in the use of "triggers" to understand homelessness. "There is no one single cause, no one single structural factor or personality flaw. In fact, it is not even the triggers themselves that result in homelessness or rooflessness. It is the interaction between triggers, life events, the political or legislative climate of the day, the individual's reaction and interaction with their circumstances and time that together contribute to homelessness."(Ravenhill 2005)

Smith (2004) has categorised the risks of youth homelessness into two major risk factors that have been applied to the UK - biographical and social risk. Biographical risk includes poverty, family structure, education, health and work. In the UK, it has been found that there is a higher risk associated with factors such as not living with two birth parents, living in a reconstituted family, moving a number of times, violence in the family, and exclusion from school. Social risk refers to the social context of a society, which can include social exclusion or social inequalities as well as moral order. Thus, while changes in family stability may explain individual homelessness, changes to the youth labour market and the right to governmental benefits explain "the rise in youth homelessness in the UK, and why young people who had to leave home could not live independently"(Smith 2004). Moral order includes "patterns of family obligation" and responsibility for youth. Research in the UK has revealed that parents are more likely to feel that young people over 16 are no longer parents' obligation (e.g. they are more prepared to ask that they leave if there is conflict with a new partner), while state support for this age group, including housing, has been reduced. Smith also observes that there appears to be little understanding on the part of government of the "current shape of family life" and that there has been an assumption that any shortfall in living standards because of reduced or withdrawn support of young people by government would be made up by parents – which would not appear to be the case in many instances.

### *2.3 Canadian studies*

Perhaps reflecting the relative newness of the phenomenon, the research on homeless youth in Canada, when compared to that in the US or the UK, is not as abundant – especially pan-Canadian studies. Part of the difficulty may be related to the lack of a universal definition of homelessness (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005), a consistent age range for youth, especially as it is applied across various provincial and federal jurisdictions (CS/RESORS 2001), as well as the difficulties in capturing a population that is often "hidden" (Kraus, Eberle, and Serge 2001).

Many studies are regional and descriptive. These reveal Canadian homeless youth to have similar backgrounds to those in the US or the UK, including:

- Families where there is divorce, single parents, and reconstituted families (e.g. Kraus, Eberle, and Serge 2001; Poirier et al. 1999; Pollock 1998);

- Physical and/or sexual abuse (e.g. Novac, Serge, Eberle and Brown 2002; Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force 1999; Hagan and McCarthy 1997);
- Poverty and unemployment (e.g. Poirier et al. 1999; Hagan and McCarthy 1997);
- Violence and family conflict (e.g. Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Bisson 1989);
- Drugs and alcoholism (e.g. Poirier et al. 1999); and
- Frequent moves, upheaval and experience with foster families or group homes (e.g. Serge et al. 2002; Poirier et al. 1999; Hagan and McCarthy 1997).

Youth who are homeless also share similar characteristics to their American and European, notably British, counterparts:

- Over-representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth (e.g. Kraus et al. 2001);
- Poor health, mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, greater risk of HIV/AIDS, suicide and pregnancy (e.g. Novac et al. 2002; Karabanow 2002; CS/RESORS 2001; Direction de la santé publique 1998);
- Low educational attainment (e.g. Miller et al. 2004); and
- The younger the group, the greater the proportion of young women (e.g. Novac et al. 2002; Hagan et McCarthy 1997; Caputo et al. 1997; Régie régionale de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal-Centre 1993).

Canadian research also has revealed an over-representation of aboriginal youth (e.g. Kraus et al. 2001; Beavis, Klos, Carter, and Douchant 1997) and those with refugee/immigrant status (e.g. Karabanow 2002).

Some Canadian studies have linked the profile of homeless youth to causal structural factors. For example in a study of the history of two shelters in Ontario, Karabanow (2002) noted that since the 1990s clients were likely to be "characterized by mental health issues, behavioural problems (aggressive and violent), drug and alcohol dependency, previous CAS [Children's Aid Society] involvement, and/or refugee/immigrant status" rather than the "tough, hard-core street kid/runaway/throwaway". He states that many of these changes can be attributed to the loss of supports such as community mental health centres, group homes and safe houses. A study of street youth in Winnipeg concludes, "At the heart of youth homelessness are larger issues of poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, gaps in social services, family violence, social isolation and a myriad of other social problems. These problems are not unique to street-involved youth; rather, they affect all marginalized and oppressed groups." (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005)

Canadian studies also have focused on survival of youth while they are homeless. Youth are found to survive through panhandling, prostitution, and criminal activities such as selling drugs (e.g. Novac et al. 2002; CS/RESORS 2001). However, it has been noted that Canadian municipalities are increasingly criminalizing some of the more benign activities such as squeegee or panhandling, without offering other methods to meet basic needs. In a context of erosion of many of the safety nets, this serves to further marginalize youth (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005).

### *2.4 Canadian studies of risk of homelessness*

As noted above, the focus of Canadian studies has primarily been defining youth homelessness – the numbers and their characteristics, including health needs/problems – and exploration of lives and activities, including survival strategies. This observation is echoed in Caputo et al. (1997), who find that there is a sizeable body of research on characteristics and experiences of street youth, but little work taking a comprehensive perspective on antecedent risk factors; factors that help youth get off the street; and the "the implications of antecedents and transition factors for developing effective intervention strategies" (Caputo et al. 1997). If prevention of homeless is a priority, conceptualising homelessness in terms of risks and pathways allows that not only the background of homeless youth (i.e. those characteristics that are identified as "causes") be taken into account but also it begins to build an understanding of the triggers and the process of becoming homelessness. From a policy and program perspective, this conceptualisation is more useful: it has been proposed that preventive strategies should focus on risk factors and trigger points (Fitzpatrick et al. 2000).

It should be noted that the Canadian situation is not greatly different from that elsewhere. For example, a recent editorial on youth homelessness in the Journal of Adolescence states, "While it is clear that these young people are a vulnerable group, pathways in and out of homelessness are little understood, nor are the family, community, or public sector contributions to homelessness."(Editors 2005) A few studies have attempted this type of analysis, including that of Caputo et al. (1997) as well as Karabanow (forthcoming) Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock (2005) and Karabanow (2004).

For example, a recent study of homeless youth in Winnipeg (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005), presents homelessness as a product of youth disconnecting from systems of support – family, school and community. The study reveals that youth all felt that they had no alternative when they left home and that there was not other way of resolving conflict. Caputo et al. (1997) interviewed seventy youth who have successfully transitioned off the street from all regions in Canada. The study examines the experiences of the youth before becoming homeless. These include conflict with parents, both that arising from "rejection of family values" and more serious conflict that included some form of abuse, as well as school difficulties, including not fitting in. Youth were asked what could have helped them at that time to avoid becoming street involved. Like the Winnipeg study, the researchers find that many of the youth felt that nothing would have helped them, suggesting "that the street may have been seen by these young people as the only viable option available to them at the time" this being especially true for those in abusive and dangerous home situations (Caputo et al. 1997). This observation is similar to that in a study of homeless and at-risk youth in Calgary and Lethbridge, where youth, while finding street life difficult, nonetheless found it preferable to the life they had left (Miller et al. 2004).

However, some youth in the Caputo study did state that help for their families or personal support might have improved their situation. The study concludes that the findings suggest that there are opportunities for positive interventions with young people before

they go on the street, especially interventions that address personal needs and feelings of isolation and marginalisation (Caputo et al. 1997).

## 3. Homelessness prevention[2]

### *3.1 Approaches to prevention*

If homelessness is understood to be a convergence of trends, ranging from structural factors (e.g. the growth in low-paid, part-time employment or policy gaps in the social safety net) to individual risk factors (e.g. poverty, abuse, drug or alcohol misuse) then interventions to prevent homelessness will reflect this breadth and complexity. Prevention programs have been classified as universal (available to the entire population), selected (for those belonging to a group at risk) or indicated (those at risk due to individual characteristics - Shinn and Baumohl 1999). A similar categorization of initiatives is suggested by the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) in undertaking an overview of European initiatives dealing with homelessness prevention. Several levels of intervention are identified: strategic governmental responses to tackle underlying causes based on "key causal domains"; prevention aimed at groups/individuals at risk because of specific causal domains; and pre-emption of personal crisis such as relationship/marital crisis (FEANTSA 2004a).

At one end of the spectrum of possible interventions is action on structural factors. An analysis of European levels of poverty, long-term unemployment, the proportion of social housing in the total housing stock and the proportion of the national population using services for homeless persons, came to the conclusion that countries that focused antipoverty measures on minimum subsistence and emergency assistance for homelessness while reducing expenditures on housing supply, witnessed a persistence of homelessness (Daly 1999). On the other hand, the "generally generous model of provision", distinguished by "generous cash benefits; a widespread network of social services; citizenship or residence as a fairly widespread criterion governing access to services and cash benefits", as those in Nordic countries, was found to have a preventative effect on homelessness (Daly 1999).

An American analysis comes to a similar conclusion: "prevention programs that directly assist at-risk families and individuals could be strengthened if supplemented by a variety of more general macro-level policies and by changes in laws and regulations…. these resources and undertaking other more macro-level strategies will.... ultimately reduce the need for these interventions by simultaneously attacking the root causes of homelessness" (Lindblom 1997). The most important intervention, it is proposed, is to increase the incomes of the extreme poor, "from which virtually all or our nation's homeless and at risk come" (Lindblom 1997).

A more targeted approach is difficult because identification of risk factors is problematical – often information is outdated and correlates of homelessness may be based on data that reflect a particular context (Shinn and Baumohl 1999). Homelessness

[2] It should be noted that the discussion deals with the prevention of first time homelessness and not the prevention of the reoccurrence of homelessness. The latter would include measures such as giving access to affordable and suitable housing, with or without supports, to persons who have been homeless.

is a complex issue and as "most unwanted phenomena…. ambiguously defined, multiply caused, questionably responsive to interventions and difficult to assess…"(Shinn et al. 2001). Furthermore, " …prevention involves predicting the future. To determine whether an intervention is successful, we much know the likelihood that the unwanted will occur, so that we may compare this likelihood with the actual outcome following intervention." (Shinn and Baumohl 1999)

A review of European prevention measures finds that,

> Very few countries in Europe have developed specific policy programmes dedicated to the prevention of homelessness. As a result, there is little research or general information available on this topic. Clearly a lack of sufficient information and knowledge about the changing pathways into homelessness has impeded the development of an understanding on how to prevent homelessness in EU Member States. For both governments and NGOs, determining where prevention of homelessness should start or end is difficult and is often used as an excuse to avoid funding programmes or research on prevention. Understanding why and how people become homeless is key to creating and implementing policies – or facilitating access to rights – that prevent people from experiencing homelessness. (FEANTSA 2004 p. 4)

A number of countries take a broad approach to prevention. In France, Spain and Denmark, for example, emphasis has been placed on elaborate social security systems and rights to prevent loss of homes. In France homelessness prevention is placed in the broader context of preventing social exclusion, especially through access to a range of social rights such as housing, health, work, dignity, etc. (FEANTSA 2004a). Nonetheless measures have been undertaken to deal with preventing persons and households from becoming homeless. Early intervention, that is targeting those who are at risk but don't yet have a housing problem, includes services such as negotiation with landlords, or services at known "risk points" such as when persons leave care, prisons or the armed forces (FEANTSA 2004a).

Another level of intervention is at a crisis or "trigger" point – events known to provoke homelessness. These include eviction, abandonment or family/relationship disputes. Some of the most well known programs are those that aim to prevent evictions. The evaluation of a pilot rent bank in the City of Toronto (LaPointe and Welch 1998) found that it had been successful in meeting its goals, including preventing evictions of low-income families headed by women and that 71 percent of clients' housing situations were improved six months after the loans had been provided.

### *3.2 The role of housing*

Housing is considered by many to be a key factor in preventing homelessness. Countries such as Ireland, Austria and Finland put emphasis on this factor. For example, in Finland, the National Programme for Reducing Homelessness has a housing focus and an emphasis on producing the type of housing that could be targeted to homeless persons, including small urban apartments for single persons (FEANTSA 2004a). In Sweden, the

economic policy includes not only full employment for men and women and a universal insurance system, but also a well-developed public housing system which allows everyone to live in "good, reasonably priced accommodation and in a stimulating and secure environment" (FEANTSA 2004a).

Studies in the United States demonstrate the merits of affordable housing in preventing homelessness. One overview of research concludes that, "every study that has looked has found that affordable, usually subsidised housing, prevents homelessness more effectively than anything else. This is true for all groups of poor people, including those with severe and persistent mental illness and/or substance abuse." (Shinn and Baumohl 1999)

### *3.3 Prevention of youth homelessness*

While prevention for adults is linked to dealing with a broad range of issues such as housing, employment, and income, for youth part of the problem is that many are not ready for independent living and problems with families are a major precipitating cause of homelessness. While housing is important, research has found that prevention for youth is "about the support structures for young people at risk that start where young people start – the problems they face at home, at school, and in the world at large" (Safe in the City 2000).

Initiatives targeting youth can be at the "universal" level – for example a number of initiatives based in schools deal with preparation for independent living. Others can target youth who are at risk – this can include youth who are experiencing difficulties with families, are at risk of dropping out of school, or can be targeted at neighbourhoods where the likelihood of social exclusion and poverty are high. Targeted measures also focus on specific categories of youth who are especially vulnerable to homelessness such as those leaving care or young offenders.

#### 3.3.1 Universal initiatives

Initiatives to prevent youth homelessness on a "universal" basis often revolve around education. For example, the Irish Homelessness Strategy includes measures to prevent educational disadvantage. "There are strong links between poor educational achievement and leaving school without certification, on the one hand, and subsequent unemployment, under-employment and potential drift into homelessness on the other." (Government of Ireland 2002) These measures include children at the pre-school level who may be at risk of social disadvantage, through primary and secondary school levels with the objective of increasing overall retention levels.

In England the Connexions program has similar ends. Focussing on youth 13 to 19 the program is an integrated service, with partnerships between governmental departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Advice and guidance is offered to help youth make a smooth transition to adulthood and working life. A feature of the program is that youth are offered a personal adviser to give information, advice or referrals.

A group that has been of particular concern are NEETs - Not in Education, Employment or Training.

In Scotland a range of leaving home educational materials has been developed in conjunction with youth who have been affected by homelessness. The "Streets Ahead" program includes lesson plans for schools, leaflets, and a helpline. A third of Scottish schools have the package and NGOs train teachers to use them. The information offers help in thinking about independent living (e.g. how to find a place, how to determine if one can afford it), discussion of issues specific to certain groups (e.g. single parents, gay/lesbian/transgendered, ethnic minority), as well as what to do in the case of an emergency (e.g. ranging from finding shelter with friends and relatives to how to sleep rough safely). The program also includes reaching out to youth, especially those not in school, in other settings including through a website (www.leavinghome.info).

### 3.3.2 Targeted initiatives

The recognition of risk factors for youth homelessness has lead to initiatives that deal specifically with certain groups of youth. One of the groups that is often targeted is youth coming out of the child welfare system. For example, Ireland has developed an aftercare protocol within its Youth Homelessness Strategy that includes designating a person to provide after care support, preparation of a overall after care plan that includes addressing issues such as the role of the key worker, accommodation, education/training, employment, financial support and other support such as counselling (Government of Ireland 2002). In the US the Foster Youth Connection of Los Angeles County is a program whereby current and former foster youths assist foster youths to make the transition to independent living through help lines, support groups, promoting public awareness, etc. (Lindblom 1997).

Other initiatives target specific situations that are known to precipitate homelessness. Many of these revolve around family relationships and conflict. In Australia the Youth Homelessness Pilot Project found that "family relations approaches can lead to positive family relationship outcomes for significant proportions of both young people and families" (Australia Department of Family and Community Services 1998). The project offered early intervention for families to re-engage young people before leaving home or shortly thereafter, using strategies such as counselling, mediation, practical support, parent support groups, and information and skills development courses for young people and parents. Priority was directed to people aged 12 to 18 who were vulnerable to homelessness or had recently become homeless, and to their families. At the same time Australia set up a Reconnect program for people 12 to 18 who were homeless or at risk. The program focused on helping increase links to family, work, education, training and the community (Australian Government, Department of Family and Community Services website). Other examples of this type of approach include the Family Mediation service in Birmingham, UK, which takes referrals from young people who want help in developing better relationships with their families. The project looks to not only help people stay at home but also to maintain good relationships when they move out, since it has been found that youth have a better chance of successful independent living if they

have a good relationship with family and peers that they grew up with (FEANTSA 2004b).

Accepted wisdom about family reconnection for youth who are homeless or at risk is evolving. In reviewing approaches to youth homelessness one study found that "Many of the homeless people interviewed for this study wished family disputes had been resolved rather than running away from them. Indeed, such a response can be the first link in a chain of such events, where a pattern is established of leaving accommodation whenever problems arise. Providing too easy access to accommodation might actually help to entrench family estrangement…Some agencies argued that, for 16- to 19-year-olds, the provision of accommodation away from their families or from care should be the last, rather than the first, response." (Randall and Brown 1999)

Part of the reason for reconnection to family stems from evidence that would indicate that intervention in the early stages is most effective in preventing entrenched homelessness. Thus in Australia it was found that interventions were most effective while the young person was still at home or in the first week of leaving home. The process of entrenchment would appear to occur rapidly once the young person has moved into a shelter for they "tend to only meet other hostel residents. They are likely to become detached from their previous social support networks and to become involved in what has been called the homelessness circuit or subculture. It has been argued that young people can then develop an identity as a homeless person that can make resettlement more difficult" (Crane et al. 1996).

Canadian studies have come to similar conclusions. For example, Caputo et al. (1997) develop a model of "out-of-the-mainstream youth" that intersects measurement of involvement in the street lifestyle and time spent on the street. The first measure can include illegal activities such as stealing to meet basic needs as well as other elements such as participation in high-risk sexual activities and drugs. A continuum is proposed with "curbsiders", or youth who spend considerable time on the street but have a home connection, and "entrenched street youth" who live in "extremely marginal situations" and are extensively involved in street life. Becoming more involved in street lifestyle means cutting ties with mainstream society, making intervention more difficult (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005; Caputo et al. 1997)

### 3.3.3 The rights and interventionist approaches

Two overall approaches are suggested in guiding the response of agencies to homeless or at-risk youth: the rights approach and the interventionist approach. In the first case youth are treated as fully autonomous adults, entitled to make their own decisions and the agency responds to their demands for services, accepts their decision to leave the parental home, and helps them secure emergency and longer term housing while offering support for needs. In the second approach the youth is treated as in "a transitional stage from childhood to adulthood" needing guidance if not control. All support needs are assessed, not just the presenting problem, and all accommodation options are assessed with a preference to a return to the parental home or that of another relative until the youth is ready to leave in a planned manner (Randall and Brown 2001).

# 4. Safe in the City

## *4.1 Project background*

The Safe in the City (SITC) project was set up in 1998 following a successful bid to the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funds (i.e. non re-occurring) by the Peabody Trust and Centrepoint, a charity working with homeless and socially excluded youth. A total of £6M was allocated for the six-year period. The project was conceived as action-research, with considerable effort put into the monitoring of the process, an element that eventually caused some of the difficulties of the post-SRB funded period.

The goals of the project were to:

- Help young people stay safely at home;
- Find alternative options for young people who cannot remain safely at home; and
- Develop the life-skills and employability of young people to enable them to make a smooth transition to independent lifestyles. (SITC 1999)

Two major studies were undertaken in the initial phases of the project. The first was an analysis of risk factors associated with homelessness, while the second was an examination of lessons learned from other prevention agencies working with at-risk youth.

### 4.1.1 The analysis of risk

The initial stage of the work included a study of the vulnerability to and causes of homelessness of young persons in London and the development of a composite measure of risk (SITC 1999). Interviews were carried out with 195 young people who were homeless and had grown up in London, and 155 young people living in deprived neighbourhoods. Information was gathered about the last home of homeless youth, a groundbreaking approach, since most geographical information about homelessness recorded only the location where they were found at the moment of the study. The comparison of the results of the two groups of youth allowed development of two measures of risk: by home area and by personal qualities.

The home neighbourhoods of homeless respondents were compared to all London wards according to a number of factors, including percentage of single parents, levels of unemployment, lack of basic amenities, proportion of 17-year olds not in full time education. The results revealed that homeless young people came disproportionately from “highly deprived” neighbourhoods (SITC 1999). By comparing young people who had become homeless to those who lived in the same neighbourhoods, it was possible to identify personal factors that made people prone to homelessness. A number of factors were identified:

- Poverty – those who had become homeless were far more likely to have been poor when compared to young people from the same deprived neighbourhood. For

example, they were more likely to have shared a bedroom, lived in a household with no car, and less likely to be in a two-earner household.

- Family disruption – homeless youth were more likely to have experienced family disruption at an early age, living with stepparents, relatives, foster parents.
- Household friction – many homeless youth cited conflict as a reason for leaving, including arguments and hitting. Homeless youth were also less likely to report that they got on well with their mothers.
- School – homeless youth were more likely to have been excluded from school.
- Risk behaviour – while both groups of youth reported similar risky behaviour (e.g. experimenting with drugs), there was a significant difference in risky behaviour on the part of parents: homeless youth were more likely to report that their parents' behaviour included verbal or physical abuse, drinking, drugs, and mental health problems.

### 4.1.2 An index of risks

The information from the initial research yielded a series of risk factors for homelessness. These were then used to build an index of risk factors from variables that could be independently measured.

| *Risk factors* | *Score* |
|---|---|
| Moved house twice or more from age 11 years | 2 |
| Young mother – aged under 25 at birth of 1st child | 1 |
| Lives with step-parent | 1 |
| Lives with foster parent or with relative | 2 |
| Shared room at 12 years | 1 |
| Lives in rented accommodation | 1 |
| No car in the household | 1 |
| Excluded from school | 1 |
| Others: | |
| ▪ Household known to be violent | 2 |
| ▪ Young person staying away from home before age 16 years | 2 |

*Source: SITC 1999 p.5*

### 4.1.3 Services needed

Youth were also asked what services would be useful. A large proportion, six out of ten, had experience with voluntary services, including careers help, social workers, and teachers. Young people who had parents that posed a high risk to them were more likely to have gone to "advice" services. When asked what kind of help would be useful, three areas of their lives were identified – housing, personal support, and education and training. Some youths also wanted advice on governmental benefits and drugs and alcohol. Specific services that youth found potentially very useful included a project for runaways, a place to cool off or family respite, support in family dispute, skills training, as well as counsellors. In many instances the support for these services was as strong among youth who were not homeless as those who were (e.g. support in family disputes was seen as very useful by 44 percent of non-homeless youth and 41 percent of homeless

youth). However, three services, family respite centres, projects for runaways, and more skills training, were strongly endorsed by homeless youth.

Finally, when homeless youth were asked what would they have liked to have changed in their backgrounds, most stated a stable family or getting along with parents and to have been better educated.

The initial report recommended that those at risk should be identified before the age of 14 years. Three sites were identified for this:

- Schools, especially those with high rates of exclusion. The report noted that while half of all homeless young people had spoken to teachers, only a quarter had found this helpful. It was recommended that an independent service would be appropriate;
- Voluntary advice services that should target younger age groups. It was felt that every school should have notices and referrals to such services;
- Careers services, many youths had used these and found them useful.

#### 4.1.4 Lessons from other early intervention projects

A further study (SITC 2000) sought to identify key lessons from existing early intervention programs for young people at risk. Having identified risk factors for homelessness, SITC sought to learn how these could be put into operation. Staff and users of sixteen agencies working with at-risk youth (12 to 18) and delivering services such as family crisis, counselling, and mentoring were interviewed.

Most of the agencies had targeted programs and used indicators to identify risk such as home or school area, race or ethnicity, and household income. However, these were seen as a starting point and were too broad to identify individual risk. Other indicators were used for individual risk:

- Observable indicators such as disruptive behaviour in school or a sense that "things are not quite right", such as behavioural problems, being bullied at school, truancy, low self-esteem, poor mental health, lack of career interest, and underachievement.
- Information from schools about home life, including frequent moves or being in care.
- Contact by youth or being "well known" by statutory services such as police, social services, and welfare services.
- Self-referrals through a drop-in service.

Engaging young people also was an area that was explored. Young people were found to engage in a service for two main reasons – they wanted help with a problem or they wanted to have fun. However, some youth, although targeted as being at risk, may not consider that they have a problem and reaching these youths was a challenge.

A number of methods were identified to engage youth:

- Fun: services used means such as having photos of previous trips or activities, circulating posters and pamphlets about forthcoming activities, or finding out what youth wanted to do and incorporating this into the program.
- Help with a problem: for youth who recognised that they had a problem, the agency had to show that it understood their needs and explain how it would meet them.
- A package of incentives: some agencies would present a multitude of activities and services such as free or low cost trips, support, payment for work and public recognition.
- Persistency: some youth would resist no matter what the incentives and persistence seemed to pay off in terms of take-up rates.
- First impressions: the first contact was critical and factors such as a warm welcome, listening, making things easy (e.g. little bureaucracy, no waiting list, being able to see any worker, avoiding long journeys), as well as understanding what deters young people were deemed important.
- Keeping things clear: comprehensive information from the beginning so that young people knew whether the service would meet their needs, when and how to contact staff, restrictions on use of services, confidentiality policies, and behaviour that was expected of them.

Attention was also given to engaging minority youth through means such as employing workers representing the ethnic and racial make-up of the community, actively targeting those youths, using interpreters and monitoring publications to ensure that these groups were represented.

The resources needed by the youth and offered by the agencies were examined. These were divided into two broad categories: personal resources that include skills, knowledge, confidence; and social or external resources that include support from families, school, peers, the community and other agencies. Programs were found to help develop personal resources by:

- Helping youth develop confidence by trying out new activities and assuming responsibilities in a supportive environment;
- Being able to influence decisions and shape their environment within the agency and outside;
- Exploring current and future options and the outcome of choices;
- Developing strategies to help interact with families and peers; and
- Developing skills for a transition to adulthood, including finding work, accommodation, and budgeting.

External resources included the family. Critical factors that were found to help young people feel that it was safe for the agency to work with their families included clear boundaries (i.e. youth feeling they had control over the process and that the extent of the involvement was understood), a confidentiality contract, knowing that the youth's needs

took precedence, and an understanding of the benefits of family involvement. Other factors deemed important were that if the youth did not want family involvement, alternative services were available and made known, and that a respite period might be useful in times of acute family crisis. It was also acknowledged that in some instances living independently might be the only solution and that the services should offer support to help young people into independent living, including efforts to maintain some family links, as long as the young person was not put at risk. Schools were recognised as being a unique place to link with youth, using external agencies within the schools to offer support.

Finally, the experience of other agencies underlined a number of key elements. The relationship between staff and the youth was deemed to be "at the heart of a successful programme." Holistic approaches and support as long as needed were critical.

The report concluded with the observation that "homelessness is not inevitable" but that programs to address the needs of youth at risk needed to be "flexible, responsive and persistent…that starts where young people start, and works in their environment" (SITC 2000). Emphasis also was placed on the value of a multi-agency approach since no single approach or agency can solve the problems: "interconnected causes demand interconnected solutions" (Safe in the City 2000).

### *4.2 Structure and operation*

#### 4.2.1 The cluster scheme and evolution of SITC

SITC undertook work in eight London boroughs identified according to an index of deprivation and reflecting multiple levels of need. Recognising that prevention needed to tackle the multiple factors that lead to homelessness, a "cluster" scheme was developed and launched in 2001. To ensure that young people received all the services they needed, clusters joined up three to four separate agencies that delivered services. Most of the partner agencies were providers of training or youth or family support agencies; only a few specialized in housing or homelessness.

While the clusters were co-ordinated centrally by SITC, one of the cluster agencies acted as lead partner and co-ordinator, responsible for building referral routes as well as developing referral agreements and strategic links to ensure that they were part of "localized delivery". They were also charged with ensuring that services would be seamless. Workers from the various agencies were usually seconded to the cluster or undertook their regular work under the new cluster management structure. Each cluster had seven to eight workers and each cluster dealt with 80-100 youths annually.

A key worker was assigned to each youth. The key worker was responsible for the person and introduced them to the various elements in the cluster. A program was tailored to the needs of the youth, with the goal of producing immediate benefits such as improved family relations.

The three elements of the intervention, common to all cluster schemes, were:

- Family support: based on the belief that the best place for a youth was with the family until they were ready to make a planned and safe move (unless the home was unsafe because of violence or abuse) this aspect of the work included family mediation and resolution of crisis situations. Family work also consisted of enabling parents, carers and youth to resolve conflicts and tension before they became a crisis and youth left home or were asked to leave.
- Personal development: this work included improving self-esteem, communication and independent living skills.
- Skills and employability: tailored learning plans were developed to help young people improve their chances of finding and keeping employment.

Other elements were brought to SITC. For example, in 2002 a user consultation group, Voice in the City, was set up to consult and involve service users in program development. Additional funding in 2002 also permitted the development of a framework to improve co-ordination of young runaways services in four east London boroughs. A protocol framework for the runaway project was piloted for a few months and transferred to another agency when SITC ended.

### 4.2.2 Budget

The average budget of a cluster was £275,000/year (ranging from £245,000 to £310,000). Half of the budget was provided directly by SITC through the SRB funds, while the other half was raised by SITC and the cluster agencies - managed by SITC centrally. Funding sources included funding for particular work such as skills and employability or for particular areas, as well as trusts, local authorities, and corporate grants.

### 4.2.3 Assessment and eligibility

Assessment of youth was based on risk factors that had been identified in the 1999 study and was undertaken by the lead agency. To be eligible for services from the cluster scheme, at least two of the following risks had to be present:

1. Young person has ever run away from home
2. Family in severe or chronic poverty (e.g. parents have been out of work and on income support or sickness benefits for 6 months or more).
3. Young person excluded or at risk of exclusion from school (e.g. truant more than twice a month)
4. There are problems at home (e.g. poor relationship with parents; parents can't cope due to mental health or addiction problems; young person has frequent serious arguments with parents, especially if violence involved).
5. Disrupted home history (e.g. moved home frequently, or spent periods with different carers).

*Safe in the City: Gatekeeping Tool*

If the youth was deemed ineligible they were referred on to another agency.

### 4.2.4 Outreach and referral routes

A major challenge in the initial stages of the SITC clusters was becoming known in the community and receiving referrals to its services. This was less of a problem for well-established agencies that were credible and known but some clusters found that they needed to reach out to social service agencies and to schools in the initial phases. One informant suggested that having a local champion to bring together local capacity was the ideal situation. It was found that clusters were more easily embedded into the communities when the Local Authority was the lead.

However, the need to generate referrals appears to have been short-lived and by the second year people knew about SITC, often through word-of-mouth. Youth were found to be good at self-referral and identifying themselves as being at risk.

Specific efforts were made to reach out to ethnic communities – an important component of some of the boroughs. For example, it was noted that in Tower Hamlets, where 80 percent of the population was Bangladeshi, most of the young people initially using SITC were white. A Bangladeshi male and female were hired to undertake outreach work in the community. The number of Bangladeshi youth increased since they now felt that someone understood their background. However, some youth did not want to deal with counsellors from their own ethnic community, fearing that their parents or the community would find out that they had sought help.

### 4.2.5 Labeling or "branding" of SITC

An early challenge was confusion and misunderstanding stemming from the goal of "homelessness prevention"; often "homelessness" was understood as "hostels" or related services for people on the street. Eventually it was decided that using the term "homelessness prevention" only confused the issue and the work and presentation of the project began to focus on specific issues such as "staying safe", how to deal with bullying or gang involvement, and strategies for parents and youth on how to deal with each other.

Most agencies continued to work under their own names but some clusters adopted a new joint name (e.g. Spectrum, Triangle), which became the identifiers of the project. A few situations arose where there was conflict about logos, identification of organisations, and how much prominence to give to SITC. According to one key informant from a participating agency, youth did not see themselves as involved in SITC but rather they were working with the individual agencies in the cluster, although the informant noted that the "seamless" aspect of the work was highly successful.

### 4.2.6 Challenges

Some of the difficulties and challenges in implementing the SITC model stemmed from the structure that had been put into place (i.e. a central office and local lead organisations), working in partnership at the local level, and indirect lines of authority. Interviews with key informants revealed that some agencies felt that the management

structures did not allow enough local management power. For example, while co-ordinators and lead partners were responsible for local delivery, they were unable to enforce solutions if there were performance or management problems with a worker from a partner agency. Although SITC had the contractual power in such situations, they often did not have the more immediate relationship or understanding needed to implement changes.

Workers also sometimes felt they had two masters – SITC with its specific goals, and managers of their own agency, who might have a different vision. Flagging problems to SITC became complex because of the multiple levels of authority and responsibility. These issues seem to not have been resolved while SITC was operating. One key informant felt that the long-term impact of the SITC hierarchical structure would have resulted in "disempowering" local agencies.

The change in "culture" for some agencies proved to be a challenge. This resulted in part from the necessity of close collaboration and the fear on the part of some agencies that they would loose their identities if they became part of a cluster. Differing approaches to issues such as family support also caused some friction. One informant stated that the young people could easily sense when partnerships worked.

### *4.3 The demise of SITC and impact of the cluster schemes*

SITC ended abruptly in early 2004; a surprise and source of bitterness for some of the partner agencies. Many seemed unprepared for the ending; for example, the 2004 business plan of one partner agency had included SITC. While the SRB six-year funding was known to be coming to an end, plans were also underway in various clusters to find alternative sources of funding.

#### 4.3.1 Reasons for not continuing

A major financial hurdle for any continuation of SITC appears to be the action-research nature of the initiative. Knowledge gained from the clusters was used to inform and develop policy and research, which could then be disseminated to the public and government. A central office, with about ten staff, had been operating throughout the project. It had been planned that when the SRB funding came to an end, part of the funds raised by the various clusters would be sent to the SITC central office. Some funders, especially those operating on a local or borough level, questioned sending money out of the neighbourhoods. A similar concern was expressed by key informants: one informant suggested that while the cluster scheme was "brilliant", SITC should have tapered off and let the clusters become independent.

Furthermore, the clusters were found to be costly, both financially and in terms of time to co-ordinate the work. A number of key informants who had been involved in the clusters also mentioned the relatively low caseload; in some clusters only about 50 youth were dealt with each year. One key informant noted, "In hindsight, this was a very expensive program". Nonetheless, many key informants from partner agencies expressed their

support for the work of SITC, and had hoped to continue but the financial structure and requirement of sending funds back, proved to be a deterrent.

### 4.3.2 Key informant perceptions

Key informants from agencies that continued to work in a number of boroughs were interviewed to find out how they saw their work with SITC and how they might incorporate some of the approach used.

Most participants in the cluster schemes interviewed had a positive view of SITC. In one case, an agency working in the schools found that being able to focus on working with parents was generally positive, noting however that some parents found the school itself to be the problem and efforts were made to meet outside, for example in parents' homes. The gatekeeping criteria that had been used by SITC were especially appreciated; agencies knew who should be targeted and if the young person did not meet the criteria, the process of review and referrals helped identify agencies that were better suited to deal with the person. Key informants also appreciated working as a team and the opportunity to exchange about the work, although some noted that good communication demanded constant effort.

When asked about the impact of SITC, one informant based in a school agency noted improved school attendance and greater parental involvement. In another borough key informants stated that in spite of the fact that 90 percent of youth who came onto the scheme wanted to leave home, in the end only 14 actually left.

In terms of lasting impact on the agencies, one key informant stated that not only had prevention been incorporated into the homelessness strategy as required by the central government[3], but there was also a heightened sensitivity to the issue of prevention of youth homeless and that they planned to incorporate elements of the SITC approach into their work. Another key informant of a Local Authority spoke of concerns about the rate of abandonment by youth of their temporary accommodation; for example, eleven out of twelve young persons who are housed on one estate are no longer there a year later. The Local Authority had come to the conclusion that once temporary housing was given, all leverage in working with the youth and engaging them in finding longer term solutions, was gone. The experience with SITC had taught them that there was a need for a more holistic approach to delivery of services and they had recognised that there was a need to change the way that statutory services (i.e. housing) are delivered: the approach towards young people and accommodation should be, "if you want housing, we can get you housing but we'd rather work with you around getting work, training, and other needs". The Local Authority felt that it had become more sensitive to early intervention and planned to include a home worker in the homeless strategy to deal with at-risk youth and child protection issues.

Other partner agencies also planned to continue some of the work of SITC or incorporate the approach. For example, two Local Authorities in boroughs that had been part of SITC

[3] Since 2002 the Homelessness Act requires that local authority homelessness strategies include prevention.

were planning to work with Centrepoint to ensure local delivery of services, consult with young people and volunteer agencies, and develop common assessment frameworks to identify early warning signs. Some partner agencies have expanded their mandate to include work that had been undertaken by the other partners in the cluster, while in one borough two of the agencies planned to continue their partnership work. However, not all partner agencies had the means to continue the SITC approach; for example, one partner based in schools had limited funding and because of other priorities, it would not be able to carry on the work. Centrepoint, the sponsor of SITC, planned to use the knowledge gained from SITC in ongoing prevention work. The requirement that homelessness plans incorporate prevention was an opportunity to use the knowledge gained from SITC and offer support in developing the prevention plans and brokering partnerships. Interestingly the term "cluster" has been deemed "jargonistic"; instead "partnership" is to be used.

### *4.4 Evaluation of SITC*

Centrepoint and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation undertook an evaluation of the experiences of participants in 2002/3 (Dickens and Woodfield 2004). Youth from four clusters who had participated in the program were interviewed and asked about their referral, how they viewed the program and its impact on their lives.

#### 4.4.1 Referral process

The findings from interviews with the 41 participants revealed that attitudes towards the program were influenced by the source of the referral, the youth's expectations, previous experiences with other interventions, and their outlook or "world view".

Some young persons felt that they were referred as punishment or to make them behave – from parents or from others such as educational staff or social workers. Youth were more likely to be positive if they felt that they had been consulted and their opinions had been taken into account. The youth also needed to feel that "the referral had been well intentioned; for example, that their parents had made the referral because they wanted to 'make up' with the young person and they were willing to accept some responsibility for recent problems". It was also found that in the case of the few self-referrals, the attitude towards the program was "particularly positive and optimistic", reflecting that the youth had already "bought into" the program. In one case, a young person had come to the program because a friend had said that the personal development part was "fun" and she wanted to join the organised activities.

Some youths who were already involved with other services, were reluctant to become engaged in SITC and showed signs of "service fatigue" and felt that this would be "more of the same". Poor experiences in the past with service agencies also made youth reluctant to become involved. Others who had experienced more positive interventions were optimistic; for example in one case a youth hoped that they would receive counselling that had been discontinued by another agency.

The attitude to the program was also found to be an influence on whether the youth were ready to make changes around the reasons for the referral or whether, as some felt, school

exclusion or conflict at home were normal for "people like them". For some, school exclusion was a status symbol.

### 4.4.2 The SITC experience

The evaluation found that most of the youths were not aware of the structure of the clusters or that they were part of SITC, leading to the conclusion that the goal of a seamless service was met. However, in one cluster, based in a school, the youths had not expected to deal with family issues and found this aspect intrusive, "belittling" and unwelcome.

The first and main point of contact with the program was key – if the contact was negative or if the main element (e.g. employability) was disliked, this perception was likely to carry over to the whole program.

Programs that were tailored to individual needs were viewed more positively, compared to one cluster that seemed to have a "one-size-fits-all" package. A personalized program also had an impact on youth who had low expectations and presumed that the program would be "like school" or that they would be forced to talk about issues or participate in activities that they did not want. A personalized approach made them feel more consulted and involved in the process, and it was seen as less intimidating. This was also one of the ways to overcome a perception that the youth's problems were "normal" or "just what you did": individualized services "encouraged young people to look more closely at themselves and question their behaviour and attitudes".

A close relationship with a key worker was important. Regular meetings, listening and offering a range of support (e.g. family, friends, education) as well as going for meals and shopping, were factors that lead to positive experiences. The youth referred to "feeling valued", feeling that there was a "personal interest in their welfare", and having an objective person to talk about problems or crises. The success of the intervention was also found to be dependent on the ability to change low self-esteem and self-perception. In many cases, some of the feelings of hopelessness followed significant trauma such as death or the breakdown of parents' relationships.

### 4.4.3 Impact on youth

The various components of the program were reviewed. The family support work was felt to have been highly beneficial. For some the situation at home improved because of the program, while others felt more capable of coping with their family situation. Some of the positive changes at home occurred because parents or carers had changed as a result of their own involvement in the scheme. Some of these changes were attributed directly to the program, while others stemmed from other changes such as the youth no longer being involved in crime or being more positive about school or employment. The presence of the key worker was often critical in helping the youth deal with the home situation.

The personal development aspect of the scheme was seen as helping youth with anger management, dealing with others, confidence, valuing themselves and their futures, and linking consequences to actions. Youth also felt that they had become more sensitive to others, better understood the impact of their words and actions on others, and had better communication skills. Some youth had cut back on drug or alcohol use and self-harming behaviour, although these changes were not necessarily seen as resulting from the program but more as a consequence of better home situations, support from the key worker or being in a more supportive environment. Positive attitudes also stemmed from the skills and employment element, although again, often changes were attributed more to combined factors, such as key worker relationships.

There was also an impact on housing stability. About half of the youth interviewed had unstable housing histories or had run away from home. For some who were living away from home, involvement in the scheme helped them go back. Others, still at home, stated that they were now less likely to run away. One person who did leave home thought that the program had a positive impact on the housing situation, for she was able to negotiate her move out and was made aware of housing options.

### 4.4.4 Conclusion

The evaluation assessed the impact of SITC on the risk of homelessness. The evaluation found that, "the programme's impact varied, with some young people making significant progress and others more moderate. No young people's situations deteriorated during their involvement with the program". SITC was felt to be making "significant" progress towards achieving its goals and that given that "as an early intervention programme, its impact would increase over time".

A number of elements of good practice, based on the SITC experience, were identified:

- The intervention is more effective if the support is flexible and tailored to individual needs, rather giving youth the entire "project experience"
- An initial focus on emotional issues, such as family difficulties or emotional turmoil, is more effective, as is using family work or the support of a key worker to deal with these issues.
- A close relationship with a key worker seems to be critical in changing attitudes, including beginning to question negative peer group attitudes and beliefs.
- In some cases dealing with the emotional issues and family problems is sufficient to engender other changes, in other cases subsequent interventions can be undertaken once the groundwork is laid.
- One-to-one interventions and "reasonable availability" including having the youth understand that the key worker is part of a team, is important. This also includes making the young person aware of the various components from the beginning and continuing to make this information available.

## 5. Safe Moves

While the ending of SITC represents a loss in terms of ongoing initiatives that deal with youth homelessness prevention, its ending also permits an analysis of its legacy and impact. As discussed above, key informant interviews revealed that the structure of SITC and the clusters was not to be replicated in London; it was felt to be expensive and time-consuming. Some informants did describe that there was an impact on their approach to the work of their agencies or to their understanding of homelessness prevention, but at the time of the interviews, it was still too early to see how this would be translated into action.

However, the model was adapted by the Foyer Federation in its Safe Moves project and before looking at the transferability of SITC to the Canadian situation, it was felt that it would be pertinent to briefly review this initiative. Information was gathered from published documentation as well as interviews and information provided by a key informant.

The Safe Moves project began in 2002 as an 18-month pilot, sponsored by the Foyer Federation, the largest network of integrated housing and education and training opportunities for youth 16-25 in the UK, and Connexions[4]. The pilot project was funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

The pilot projects were outside of London in four locations; two urban and two rural. The objective was to explore the cluster model in a different context, including a large geographical area. London was avoided both because of the expense of the city and because SITC was still in operation. A part-time national co-ordinator supported the pilot projects and local steering groups were set up to oversee the development of each pilot.

Youth 13-19 were targeted and a package of three core services was offered: life-skills training, family mediation and support, and peer mentoring. Support to independent accommodation was available if needed. The peer mentoring emerged from the Foyer Federation's experience with homeless youth who would say, "If I had known then what I know now…but it would have to come from someone like me". Still in its early days when an evaluation was undertaken, the peer mentoring is now considered one of the big success stories of Safe Moves.

An evaluation of the pilot revealed that, as with SITC, while the goal of preventing youth homelessness was understood by all the partners, transforming this into specific objectives was sometimes challenging. "It was clear that many agencies were used to operating within a framework of crisis intervention and providing reactive services and were unused to a focus on prevention." (Quilgars et al. 2004) Partner agencies had to

[4] Connexions, a government support service, was a partner of SITC in some clusters. It brings together services to support to young people, 13 to 19, through Personal Advisers and can include help with careers, in-depth support for learning difficulties as well as referrals to other services for issues such as drug abuse, sexual health and homelessness. Work is undertaken in schools, colleges, community centres and through out-reach.

develop new ways of thinking and needed clear direction both at the national and local levels. Help was also needed in identifying youth at risk of homelessness; it was found that Safe Moves staff had to first educate themselves and then partner agencies about this. At the time of the evaluation, assessment procedures were still being developed at the local level. Other challenges to Safe Moves included that of "cultural" differences between partner agencies and the need for good communication between them – echoing some of the experiences of SITC. Overall, the model was found to be complex and structures took longer to establish than had been anticipated. There was need for flexibility and creative thinking to adapt to the various local situations.

Some of the difficulties encountered in the pilot phase included retention of peer mentors (although recruitment does not appear to be a problem), trying to develop a nationally accredited life-skills program, and finding family mediation services, especially in rural areas. Safe Moves found itself undertaking this work directly in some instances. The original intent had been a model similar to SITC with workers acting as brokers for local services; however, because of low levels of service provision in some pilot areas, co-ordinators sometimes took a more "hands-on" role and supported young people directly.

Results from the evaluation also suggested that local consultation might have increased local ownership of the project in some areas. A needs analysis would have been a useful tool, as would integration of the projects into local homelessness strategies.

Over the 18-month period, 152 youth used Safe Moves services, out of a total of 170 referrals. The referrals came from Connexions, social services departments and local authority housing departments. Self-referrals increased with time. While the project focused on homelessness prevention, only 45 percent of the youth was still living at home, others were with friends, relatives, in foyers or supported accommodation. Over half had run away from home and 40 percent had experienced homelessness.

When interviewed, the youth felt that their lives had improved since they had become involved in Safe Moves. This included helping the youth stay at home, improving relationships with parents, and help in moving to independent accommodation. Youth also felt that they had more control over their lives.

The pilot project cost £300,000 or £35,000 – £47,000/pilot (excluding in-kind costs from agencies). However, one of the key lessons from the pilot project was that it needed to be better resourced and longer lead times were required to develop services locally.

Safe Moves has become a permanent program and new projects are being developed in various locations; about 40 agencies have expressed an interest in the program. Connexions continues to be involved, although government delivery of programs to youth is being restructured.[5] One change to Safe Moves will be that the age range will be

[5] Every Child Matters: Change for Children is the new government initiative for children and young people to age 19. Every local authority is expected to team up with partners, through children's trusts, over the next few years to identify and act on what works best for children and youth. Children's trusts will bring together

lowered to 13-16 year olds. This is in part a reflection of the age group that was being referred in the pilot projects – as the programme progressed, the typical age fell – as well as the fact that most youth start to run away at 13-15 years.

all services for children and young people in an area, underpinned by the Children Act 2004, with a responsibility of improving outcomes for all children and youth.

# 6. The transferability of Safe in the City

As Chapter 2 demonstrates, the situation of Canadian homeless youth does not seem to very different from that of homeless youth elsewhere, including the UK. The problem of homelessness among Canadian youth is of concern and the causes, both structural and individual, are as evident in Canada as elsewhere.

However, in a scan of the literature and interviews with key Canadian informants, involved in policy, research and practice, very few initiatives similar to SITC or Safe Moves were identified. These will be presented below. This will be followed by an overview of the broader contexts of Canada and the UK in terms of legislation and understanding of prevention, as well as issues that arise in instituting a homelessness prevention program. However, the key lessons from SITC should be noted first.

## *6.1 Key lessons from SITC*

### 6.1.1 The cluster model

The advantage of the cluster model was that it identified key elements that were necessary to prevent homelessness: family mediation, personal development, and skills and education. The emphasis was to provide a seamless service to help youth gain access to all of these facets of the program, while responding to their "service fatigue".

However, the program was expensive - both financially and in terms of time to co-ordinate the work. The annual SITC cluster budget averaged £275,000/ year (about $550,000 in Canadian currency) and some key informants felt that the large sums of money ultimately were a deterrent to the sustainability of SITC. Some admitted that the prime motivator for some partners was the availability of the funding.

The Safe Moves project does demonstrate that a more modest approach is possible to a cluster scheme, although there is acknowledgment that more resources at the start-up phase and more national co-ordination and exchange between various programs is desirable. The SITC model seems to have been costly to a large extent because the action-research component required a central office and the inability to redesign the program when the initial funding had ended. Some key informants felt that once the cluster was up and running, funding was secure, outputs and outcomes were clear, and monitoring arrangements were in place, a central office was no longer necessary. (It should be noted that some key informants noted that many of the SRB projects that were very generously funded did not continue, and it is proposed that this may be due to the inability to find matching sums on a sustainable basis.)

### 6.1.2 Localized application

By being based in local communities or boroughs, SITC was able to bring together local partners, often those who had credibility in the community and could more easily attract

the youth. A localized approach also allowed SITC to recognize and adapt to the needs of particular situations, such as significant proportions of ethnic and minority youth.

#### 6.1.3 Understanding of homelessness prevention

Both SITC and Safe Moves were confronted with having to understand and share with partners what homelessness "prevention" meant and how this knowledge could be translated into action. In both instances this proved to be a challenge in the initial phases of the work but also appears to be one of the lasting legacies of SITC; key informants spoke of a deeper understanding of the influences leading to homelessness and the need for a holistic approach.

#### 6.1.4 The assessment/gatekeeping tool

One of the most useful components of the SITC approach was the development and application of an assessment tool based on risk factors for homelessness to evaluate whether a young person was eligible for services. The assessment tool also helped identify agencies better suited to deal with youth who were not eligible for SITC.

### *6.2 Canadian Initiatives*

While numerous plans to address homelessness mention prevention activity, most Canadian initiatives focus primarily on dealing with persons who are homeless or in some instances at a pre-homeless crisis point. These prevention projects deal primarily with housing issues and eviction prevention (e.g. rent banks).

When Canadian key informants were asked about initiatives of which they were aware that dealt with prevention of youth homelessness, either in terms of research, national initiatives or local projects, very few were identified. Part of the difficulty may reflect the complexity of youth homelessness prevention and the fact that initiatives can be wide-ranging (e.g. family support, help in the transition out of care) and may not be identified as dealing with homelessness per se. This also may reflect the lack of knowledge and understanding of homelessness prevention – similar to the experiences of SITC and Safe Moves in the initial phases as partners struggled with understanding what homelessness prevention would look like.

When asked about homelessness prevention some key informants spoke about social policy issues such as access to benefits or application of the UN convention of the rights of the child. For some, prevention included education, such as "sensitising" youth in schools to homelessness or making the wider public aware of youth homelessness and counteracting myths (e.g. the government is taking care of them or that they can go back to their families). Some key informants spoke of "issue fatigue" and the expectation that when facilities for homeless persons, such as shelters, were put into place there was public expectation that the problem would go away.

### 6.2.1 Holistic programs

A number of broad-based projects were identified.[6] In Toronto, Youthlink offers a range of services to youth 12-24 years and their families/caregivers with a mission to support vulnerable youth in making positive life choices. The services include counselling, community work, residential services and resources for street youth. For example the Family Support Program offers counselling, service co-ordination, advocacy and education for youth, aged 12 to 21 years, who have developmental disabilities and are living at home with their families. The Youthlink Inner City project in downtown Toronto offers support for street involved youth. The ultimate goal of the program is to support youth to disengage from life on the streets and to stabilize their lives. Finally, a Community Team in Scarborough provides prevention and early intervention programs to youth and their families or caregivers through school and community-based initiatives in areas identified as high need. Some of the issues addressed include abuse (emotional, physical, sexual), family conflict, homelessness and violence.

Another holistic project offering integrated youth services is Pacific Community Resources in Vancouver. One of the components, the Broadway Youth Resource Centre, is a one-stop centre with social, health and lifeskills support for at-risk youth 10 to 24 years. A family counselling program is available to at-risk families referred by the Ministry of Children and Family Development. There is also a special educational program for high need youth in grade 8 to 10, an emergency residential program for children 5 to 12, an independent living skills program, supportive housing, and employment programs.

*Freiner la marginalisation* in Montreal explicitly targeted at-risk youth. Undertaken by the Montreal public health board (Direction de la santé publique de Montréal-Centre), it set up a partnership of community organisations, institutions, and universities, and focused on youth who were in the process of exclusion. The project was short-lived; it operated from 2000-2002 and ended when funding ran out.

### 6.2.2 Specific groups

Some projects were identified that dealt with specific populations. For example, the Hispanic Development Council in Toronto has undertaken work on preventing youth crime and helping keep families together. A handbook, *How to…* has been produced to help parents recognise when their children are becoming involved in street gangs, experimenting with or using alcohol or drugs as well as offering help in dealing with difficult behaviour, adolescent dating and relationships, and legal issues. There also is an explicit homelessness prevention program that seeks to intervene in crisis situations such as domestic violence, youth being thrown out of the home or the youth leaving home. A similar project is being undertaken in the Southeast Asian community in Toronto.

[6] It should be noted that the examples presented are not exhaustive – the scope of this research project did not permit a complete scan of potential initiatives.

Research indicates that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and transgendered youth are over-represented among homeless youth. SOY (Supporting Our Youth) in Toronto, which is unique in North America, supports this group aged 14-25 years old. A mentoring program connects youth to safe, out, adult 'mentors' who can help guide the youth through issues of identity and sexuality. There is no mediation with parents although this can be offered informally. The goal is to help the youth find a sense of belonging and community. There is a housing mentoring program that offers affordable supportive housing with an adult mentor.

#### 6.2.3 Family reconnection

Eva's Place Family Reconnect Pilot Project was begun in 2001 with funding from the federal Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI). The project stems from work with homeless youth and listening to them. Many youth were found to continue to speak of their families or they carried pictures of them – attesting to the importance of this relationship. The goal of the project is to help the youth reconnect with their families. For some this can mean going back to living at home while for others, the contact will consist of being in contact or visiting from time to time.

The project tries to respond quickly and with flexibility. The family (parent or any other relative) is contacted only upon the youth's approval. There is no time limit for the support work that is offered and it can range from advocacy to referrals.

### *6.3 Legislative and policy context*

Analysis of legislation that touches on youth and risk factors for homelessness is beyond the scope of this research. It should be noted, however that considerable work and effort have been expended in areas such as the child welfare system and young offenders, as well as skills and education. There is no doubt that the political structure and jurisdictional/constitutional issues have a considerable impact in the ability of different governments and levels of government to deal with wide-ranging issues such as youth homelessness prevention.

That being said, and understanding the difference in responsibility and power of the British government versus the Canadian federal government, it is clear that the priorities and language used in the two countries when it comes to homelessness prevention is very different. Key informants in the UK emphasised that the Homelessness Act was absolutely essential as leverage for action and formed an important backdrop to initiatives.

In the UK, front-line responsibility for helping homeless people falls to local authorities. This goes back to the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act in 1977, the Housing Act in 1996 and the Homelessness Act in 2002. Local Authorities have the responsibility to house those who are homeless and in "priority need" (i.e. households with children, 16 and 17-year olds, those who are vulnerable as a result of their age, people fleeing violence and those at risk because of institutionalization or poor health).

One of the changes brought by the 2002 Homelessness Act was that local housing authorities were charged with formulating a homelessness strategy. The Act defines "homelessness strategy" and the first component specified in defining "strategy" is "preventing homelessness in their district" (Homelessness Act 2002). Similarly a Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate within the ODPM has been charged with a number of responsibilities and the first noted is that of promoting homelessness prevention (National Audit Office 2005).

In Canada, federal recognition of homelessness as an issue only came in 1999 with the institution of the three-year National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), renewed for another three-year period in 2003. Two broad objectives are identified for the NHI: development of a "comprehensive continuum of supports to help homeless Canadians move out of the cycle of homelessness and prevent those at-risk from falling into homelessness" and ensuring the "sustainable capacity of communities to address homelessness". The first objective of the NHI is to be accomplished by "providing communities with the tools to develop a range of interventions to stabilize the living arrangements of homeless individuals and families - encouraging self-sufficiency where possible - and prevent those at-risk from falling into homelessness" while the second is to be achieved through "community leadership and broadening ownership, by the public, non-profit and private sectors, on the issue of homelessness in Canada" (NHI website). Local communities have been supported in developing homelessness plans through the NHI.

The NHI set goals for the second round of funding. The goals to be met by March 31, 2006 include: "enhanced supports and services available to meet the needs of homeless individuals and families and those at-risk of homelessness" which is to be accomplished through improved living conditions and help to access and maintain secure accommodation; increased knowledge and understanding of homelessness; and broader engagement of partners (NHI website).

Homelessness prevention is stated as an objective, but not highlighted or emphasised, rather it is part of a continuum (generally seen as beginning with outreach, shelter, and emergency services). A scan of projects funded through the NHI seems to reveal that prevention projects, especially for youth, are not highly represented or that the approach is one that takes for granted their independence. For example, in announcing a program to address the needs of homeless and at-risk youth that comprised transitional housing and support, an official is quoted as stating that the project will not only respond to the immediate need for shelter, but also will provide troubled youth with the tools they need to live independently. While the project was very needed in a community lacking youth shelters, the only model that seems to be offered is moving youth to independent living. Nonetheless there appear to be some projects that deal with youth homelessness prevention (e.g. Maison des jeunes Défi-Ados in Lévis, Quebec) but generally when prevention is mentioned in a NHI-funded project, it is more likely to refer to elements such as giving food to street people or preventing eviction.

As stated at the beginning of this section, it is beyond the scope of this project to undertake a thorough analysis and comparison of the leadership in homelessness prevention offered by the Canadian and British governments. However, the Canadian

initiative does not seem to clearly define homelessness prevention as an objective. As the early work of SITC and Safe Moves illustrates, education about prevention and how this is put into practice is a considerable challenge, even in a context where prevention is a political priority. This understanding appears to be far from complete in Canada.

### *6.4 Implementing youth homelessness prevention: the challenges*

Beyond the issue of political context, the SITC and Safe Moves initiatives as well as research raise a number of challenges in undertaking a youth prevention project.

#### 6.4.1 Prevention as a priority and demonstration of benefits

Some UK key informants stated that one of the challenges in implementing prevention programs was the difficulty of demonstrating that prevention works. It requires that people invest in the long-term since it can take years before there is empirical evidence of impact.

It has been proposed that prevention programs are introduced only under the most difficult conditions and that interest in such measures only appears "when the costs for service exceed their capacity to fund or their expectation about the success of the service to reduce demand. Prevention becomes a tacit as well as overt admission that present services are insufficient or inadequate to meet the long term needs." (Garber 1992) Other conditions for instituting preventative measures are in situations such as AIDS. "Unless the condition to be corrected or prevented could affect everyone in the country, and is sufficiently catastrophic in its effect, there is not a great likelihood that more generalized preventative measures will be introduced." (Garber 1992)

However, evaluating programs appears to be critical. As noted above, one of the difficulties is evaluating the success in avoiding an occurrence, especially if it is not certain that the event would have occurred. Evaluations of prevention are also need to assess long-term impact and require an understanding of "complex causal processes underlying program impact"(Marsh and Cramer 1992). Credibility is also important (Heiner 1992) including the need for independent research (Garber 1992).

The Safe Moves evaluation concludes with an examination of the costs of the initiative compared to the alternatives. The overall cost of Safe Moves ranged between £500 and £1,400 per client across the four projects with an average of £1,000. The alternatives for older teenagers (16-17) include a hostel bed (the average weekly cost is £400), applying of local authority homelessness help (processing a local authority homelessness application is £650), while a failed tenancy costs £2,800. For younger people (13-15) foster care costs an average of £593/week (Quilgars, et al. 2004).

The situation in Canada is not catastrophic and in most communities, services are meeting needs (albeit often under great pressure); two of the conditions suggested as rationales for undertaking prevention programs. However, the cost factor is persuasive – while the Safe Moves data is applicable to the UK, Canadian costs are undoubtedly similar.

(A related issue, pertinent to both cost and demonstration of effectiveness, is the dilemma illustrated by SITC costs. The model was deemed unsustainable in part because of the high central office costs, yet this component of SITC was established and responsible for the monitoring, evaluation, and policy work – a critical factor in promoting prevention.)

### 6.4.2 Labels and stigma

One of the issues that arises in undertaking work to prevent youth homelessness is that of labelling the initiative as *homelessness* prevention. Youth have been found to resist the term homeless and may not use services labelled as such, for example shelters or day centres (Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force 1999; Reid, P. and H. Klee 1999).

Part of this is related to the stigma attached to the term. Research in Austria found that "To label a person as homeless means to socially exclude him/her… homeless people often did not turn to homeless services for fear to be labelled as homeless by doing so. This particularly is true for young persons and women" (FEANTSA 2004c). Similarly, in Ireland, Focus Ireland, that works with homeless persons finds that "People who are without a home find the label 'homeless' difficult to accept. They feel the stigma of homelessness very acutely and they feel that the word 'homeless' carries much of that stigma with it. The word they use themselves to describe their period of homelessness is 'out': 'When I was out', 'We were out for nearly a year'." These terms are not only deemed "less offensive" but they also refer to the temporary nature of the situation, "it suggests … that they have a home somewhere that they eventually be able to go back to, or that they have some chance of making a new home for themselves some day" (Focus Ireland). A study of young women living in shelters found that they were more inclined to describe themselves as "houseless" (Stephen 2000) whereas children living in a shelter feared that peers would find out and they would then be ridiculed (DeForge et al. 2001).

Street youth have been found to distance themselves from other homeless persons. Miller et al. (2004) report that homeless youth "felt alienated from the rest of the homeless population. They repeatedly made distinctions between themselves and older homeless people. They believe that their own situation was temporary compared to others in the shelter." This observation has been repeated in other studies; often homeless persons draw distinctions between themselves and others, distancing themselves from the "traditional homeless identity" (Osborne 2002), as well as institutions that serve them (Christian, Armitage, and Abrams 2003).

This distancing may be a way for people to "protect their personal identity, that is identity as an individual" (Christian and Abrams 2003), suggesting that the term homeless is highly charged on a personal level, strongly linked to the idea of family (i.e. the parental home, the marital home), if not human identity. "Deprived of all the aspects of his home, man itself would be deprived of himself, of his humanity. This essentially means the homeless are deprived of their humanity" (Olufemi 2002).

Some element of perception, if not stigma, may be attached to the term runaway as well. Dr. Joan Smith, from London Metropolitan University, undertaking research on youth

homelessness in the UK, is finding that youth perception and language about running away is variable and distinctions are subtle. Thus staying with friends for a few days is not seen as "running away", rather this is "staying away". For these youths running away reflects a different state of mind and emotions such as anger.

Any initiative that would undertake youth homelessness prevention would need to carefully consider how it is labelled. Related to this might be where it is physically located. While there might be advantages to being located in services or facilities for homeless youth (thereby reaching those who may be "trying out" street life), others who avoid the label or might be in an earlier stage of the process may be ignored.

#### 6.4.3 Negative past experiences

Key informants from SITC spoke of "service fatigue" among some youth who had been exposed to other interventions and the ensuing challenge of demonstrating that their project was different. Research indicates that this attitude is frequent. For example, one study found that, "A barrier to change…. was the youths' fear of accessing services, of taking a more proactive course of action, or of making fundamental changes in their lives. The youths described negative experiences they had had with service providers which contributed to their fears. After not being helped more than once, their fears only increased." (Miller et al. 2004)

This would appear to be common among other categories of homeless persons. In assessing attitudes towards institutional authority, "Homelessness research suggests that homeless people often characterize their engagement with institutional systems negatively…They reject the formal institutions of authority, such as the law, policy and rule makers, often because those institutions have let them down, or constrain them in ways that inhibit their identity." (Christian and Abrams 2003)

One of the key elements that seems to have helped SITC overcome service fatigue was the relationship that key workers could establish with the youth. Success with youth who initially used the program led to an increase of word-of-mouth and self-referrals, attesting to the need for a long-term commitment on the part of funders and developers of programs.

### *6.5 Implementing youth homelessness prevention: existing strengths*

A number of factors, inherent to the youth themselves as well as the capacity of Canadian community organisation, are positive elements to implementing youth homelessness prevention.

#### 6.5.1 The optimism and resilience of youth

Section 6.4.2 discussed some of the difficulties of using the term homeless and resistance on the part of youth to be identified as such. While this can be seen as a challenge to undertaking a prevention program (or at least requiring care in labelling an initiative), some of the resistance also reflects strengths: not using homelessness services can be

seen as a sign of refusing to adopt an identity that is negative and highly stigmatized while maintaining a sense of self and self respect (Osborne 2002).

In many instances, youths see their homelessness as transitory; a stage in the process of independence. One study of homeless youth found that, "They all believed that their homelessness was temporary and that they had the capacity to change their situations in time." (Miller et al. 2004) Homeless youth in a Winnipeg study felt that while there had been no alternative to leaving home, a few felt that they could go back after a "cooling off" period (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005). Furthermore, "In some cases, youths expressed a desire for a secure and happy home life, but because of conflict at home, they had become very independent – out of necessity rather than desire." (Miller et al. 2004)

Youth were also "significantly optimistic. Many discussed feelings of stress and despair, but at the same time they expressed hope for the future and belief that their situations would change. Their resilience was reflected in comments about taking responsibility for themselves and adapting to their situation. Most significantly they expressed determination." (Miller et al. 2004) Closely related to the optimism of youth is their resilience. As one study notes, street youth are "remarkably resilient…On a base level, simply the fact that these young people made the bold move to escape troubled and dangerous living arrangements attests to such strengths and motivations." (Karabanow 2004 p.4)

Building on this would mean that the support that is given to youth acknowledges that their situation is temporary and that they have strengths and power. Studies reveal often youth felt there was no alternative to the street and that the decision to leave home was one that affirmed their capacity and control over the situation. In one study, youth in telling their stories did not portray themselves as victims, rather they saw themselves as survivors and agents who were in control of their lives (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005). Miller et al. (2004) conclude their study with the suggestion that there is a need to build on youth's optimism, including development of peer networks, mobilization and support their interest in education and employment and support ties to families, including extended families and "families of choice".

### 6.5.2 The process of becoming homeless can take time

Karabanow (2004) in his study of Canadian and Guatemalan street youth applies the sociological concept of "careers" to homeless youth. These stages include the pre-stages, contemplation, "crossing the invitational edge", reworking one's image and for some, exiting street life. The pre-stages consist of the "push" towards the street, comprising factors such as family dysfunction and abuse. Karabanow's research reveals that the contemplation phase can last a significant period of time. Youth will inform themselves about survival strategies and undertake trial periods. "This experimentation of sorts with street life can be considered a critical test which informs the contemplation phase." (Karabanow 2004 p. 50) If the image of street life is positive and appears to be a way to escape abuse, school or family difficulties, the youth will most likely move onto the next stage. If street life is seen negatively, then the contemplation stage may be prolonged and the youth may look for other solutions, such as talking to parents or teachers.

This career model of the move into homelessness is potentially a powerful concept that could be integrated into prevention work. The contemplation stage is clearly an optimal point of intervention as the youth realises that the situation in which they find themselves is no longer tenable, and solutions must be found. This is underlined in other research (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005; Miller et al. 2004; Caputo et al. 1997), where homeless youth emphasised that they felt they had no option other than to leave home and go onto the street. This also underlines the need to give youth information about what their options might be (if these do in fact exist). Clearly, youth gather information informally during the contemplation stage on survival strategies. Perhaps if information and services were also available about alternatives to homelessness, more youth might be spared the experience.

### 6.5.3 The experience of Canadian community organisations

Finally, numerous Canadian studies, project descriptions and best practices, as well as the impetus provided by NHI to develop homelessness plans have resulted in a strong capacity on the part of community organisations to work collaboratively and to build networks to pull together a wide range of services necessary to deal with complex problems. In many ways some of the work required to set up clusters as in SITC or partnerships as in Safe Moves, has been accomplished already. Projects also have successfully dealt with issues of differing “cultures” and approaches in setting up partnerships (e.g. Ottawa Inner City Health Project in Kraus et al. 2005). There is a strong foundation to undertake such an initiative.

# 7. Conclusions and further research

## *7.1 Conclusions*

This study has revealed that the issue of homeless youth in Canada is not very different from that in other countries. The causes, the characteristics, and the behaviour patterns all seem to be similar - as is the need to find strategies to prevent its occurrence. There are strong indications that structural factors play an important role in the development of homelessness and universal measures are the most effective response. However, this study has not focused on the highly charged political debate about the erosion of the Canadian social safety net and the downloading of responsibility onto the local and community sectors and its impact on the creation of homelessness (e.g. Murray 2004). Instead the focus has been on a more targeted response to one specific group.

The SITC model is one that could be adapted to the Canadian context although the Safe Moves adaptation, with lower costs, might be more sustainable. The issue of sustainability would appear to be particularly pertinent – start-up of projects takes time as does establishing referral routes to the project, so a long-term vision seems critical.

However, there are challenges to implementation of such a program. The first is the need for acknowledgement and support from governments. There is a danger that Canadians slide into a situation where homelessness is considered an unavoidable component of present-day society. There needs to be a commitment to the idea that this is not inevitable and that means can be found to prevent its occurrence. For example, it may be worth examining the approach and the impact of the 2002 Homeless Act in the UK that requires prevention be included in homelessness plans. A review of Canadian local plans to incorporate consideration of homelessness prevention would be useful.

The other major challenge is the need for more research in areas that are required to support prevention.

## *7.2 Further research*

While Canadian research has been highly effective in identifying causes of youth homelessness and its impact in terms of life-style, and physical and mental health, there are a number of areas where research is still needed.

### 7.2.1 Better understanding of pathways and risk factors

As noted above, the focus of Canadian studies has primarily been defining youth homelessness – the numbers and their characteristics, including health needs/problems – and exploration of lives and activities, including survival strategies. Generally when prevention is considered in the context of youth homelessness, the homeless status is taken for granted and prevention will refer to health measures (e.g. prevention of

HIV/AIDS or pregnancy). Thus, a recent gap analysis of Canadian research on youth homelessness identifies fifteen areas where there is need for further research (CS/RESORS 2001). Only one deals with the situation of youth before they became homeless (analysis by gender and Aboriginal ancestry of family physical and sexual abuse), while all the other identified needs focus on the situation of youth who are already homeless. This is not to refute the need for this research; however the need to better understand how to prevent youth from becoming homeless is not featured.

A similar observation is put forward by Caputo et al. 1997, who find that there is a sizeable body of research on characteristics and experiences of street youth, but little work taking a comprehensive perspective on antecedent risk factors; factors that help youth get off the street; and the "the implications of antecedents and transition factors for developing effective intervention strategies" (Caputo et al. 1997).

While the distinction might seem minor, the conceptualising of the causes of homelessness is static; the causal factors are a backdrop to the situation of homelessness. A pathways or careers approach is more dynamic, allowing intervention along the pathway to be envisaged.

A few recent Canadian studies have undertaken this type of analysis, including that of Caputo et al. (1997) as well as Karabanow (forthcoming and 2004) and Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock (2005). A study of homeless youth in Winnipeg, presents homelessness as a product of youth disconnecting from systems of support – family, school and community. It is suggested that, "Interventions that strengthen the connection between youth and one or more of these systems may have the potential to preclude street involvement." (Wingert, Higgitt, and Ristock 2005)

Closely related to development of a pathways or careers approach is the need to identify risk of homelessness among youth. Some of this information might well flow from research on pathways, but other information, such as number of moves or violent arguments in the home, are not data that are readily available, and means to identify such problems would need exploration.

Finally, in order to assess risk and implement prevention programs, there is need for information about where homeless young people come from. Without an understanding of neighbourhoods where risk is higher, broad prevention programs that take family, school and social networks into account, cannot be put into place.

### 7.2.2 Better understanding of family reconnection and support/mediation

Relatively little is known about family reconnection and findings from existing studies can be contradictory. For example, Safyer et al. (2004) state that "Some studies have found that youths reunified with their parents after using shelter services have better short-term outcomes such as increased self-esteem than those placed in other living situations…However, without directly attending to the reasons why the youth ran away from home, reunification may eventually fail…. the positive outcomes detected 6 weeks after leaving the shelter had largely abated 6 months later." An exploratory study of 61

youth who had run away and their parents, leads the authors to conclude that, "Focusing efforts on family reunification may not be an appropriate or effective treatment plan for some of these families. The kinds and magnitude of the presenting problems, the parent-child perceptual discrepancies, and the failure of many parents to take some culpability for problems or be part of the change efforts raises serious concerns about such intervention plans." (Safyer et al. 2004) There is need to understand the impact of family reunification and situations under which this is desirable and those where such measures may not be sustainable, or may even put youth into further danger.

Services dealing with homeless or at-risk youth may also have what may be concerns or perhaps prejudices about family reconnection that would be worth exploring, including favouring a rights approach that accepts the youths' decision to leave the parental home and offers support to help them become independent. It would be important to know the views of front-line services about family support and mediation, including obstacles and/or dangers that they might see from initiatives that might take a more interventionist approach.

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Related to this are policies and programs around runaway youth, including the protocol with parents. Research into homeless youth consistently finds that they will run away a number of times before they finally leave; this is clearly a potentially critical period for intervention (and part of the contemplation phase described above).

### 7.2.3 Asking youth what would have helped

Finally, there is a need to know from homeless youth what would have helped them when they first contemplated leaving home or left home. Canadian research is increasingly giving "voice" to homeless persons, and in this case, policy and programs would greatly benefit from the hard-earned wisdom of homeless youth. Furthermore, the perspective of families and parents about the supports that were/are needed would be invaluable in developing a prevention strategy.

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SITC partners

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John O'Malley, Assistant Director – Housing, London Borough of Greenwich

Yvonne Pick, DePaul Trust and SITC Programme Manager

Steve Sipple, Head of Youth Services, Tower Hamlets

Cath Sylvester, Homelessness Officer, Tower Hamlets

Frank Weekes, Project Manager, NCH Families First

Others

Rob Burkitt, National Project Manager, Safe Moves (by telephone)

Michael Duggin, Policy Officer, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Andy McCullough, Policy Associate, Children's Society, prevention and runaways expert

Dr Joan Smith, London Metropolitan University and author of *Taking Risks*

### *Canada*

Nancy Abrams, Eva's Place Family Reconnect Pilot Project Toronto

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Norma Drolet, SCPI co-ordinator Régie régionale de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal

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