

# 16 Resilient Outcome: Academic Engagement by Youth with Histories of Homelessness<sup>1</sup>

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Youth homelessness is a concern across Canada. Unlike other groups within the homeless population, homeless youth may not be visible on the street or in shelters. Homeless youth commonly ‘couch surf’ back and forth between the homes of various friends, or live in otherwise crowded, unaffordable, or unsuitable housing. Those who do access shelter services may not be forthcoming about their age (Canada Mortgage and Housing Association, 2001). While we do know that in Ottawa, approximately 400 youth aged 16 to 19 used an emergency shelter in 2010, making up 6% of the overall shelter population, these numbers are surely an underestimate (Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa, 2011). In the United States, where more comprehensive national data are available, yearly estimates of youth homelessness are staggering. Research indicates there are between 1.6 and 1.7 million homeless youth aged 12 to 17 in a given year (Burt, 2007). For older youth, aged 18 to 19, annual homelessness estimates are between 80,000 and 170,000.

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1. This book chapter is based upon a previously published paper, Hyman, S. Aubry, T., Klodawsky, F. (Published Online First: March 30, 2010). Resilient educational outcomes: Participation in school by youth with histories of homelessness. *Journal of Youth and Society*. doi: 10.1177/0044118X10365354. The original paper is updated and published here with permission from *Youth and Society*.

Most homeless youth do not have a high school diploma. In Ottawa and Toronto between 63% and 90% of homeless youth have not graduated from high school despite being of age to have done so (Canada Mortgage and Housing Association, 2001). Lack of a high school education, alongside a history of homelessness, places youth at risk of long-term social exclusion (Commander et al., 2002; Grigsby et al., 1990; Wurzbacher et al., 1991; Zlotnick et al., 1999). Without a high school diploma, youth are more likely to experience unemployment or under-employment, and as a result, poverty during their adult lives. A consistent finding of the Labour Force Survey conducted in Canada is that quality of life improves with increased education (Statistics Canada, 2007). A high school diploma is a critical first step when it comes to ensuring that youth have access to continuing education opportunities (such as college or university), which increase future employability (Bowlby, 2005).

Attending high school is a generally accepted standard for adolescents living in Canada. Expectations that youth attend school are reflected in legislation; Canada requires high school enrolment until the age of at least 16 in all provinces. The provinces of New Brunswick and Ontario require high school enrolment until the age of 18 (New Brunswick Department of Education Services, 1998; Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation, 2006). Not only is a high school education considered the norm, increasingly so is post-secondary education. As Baker has described, our current society encourages a "pervasive culture of education," where formal credentials are given social value and status, and are recognized in the labour market (2011:10). While it is now common for young people to live at home well past their teen years, and to continue to rely on their parents for financial, material, and emotional supports, homeless youth are frequently left to do it all on their own (Chau & Gawliuk, 2009). It is not surprising then, that homeless youth report fewer plans for post-secondary education than do youth who have never been homeless (Rafferty et al., 2004).

There are numerous barriers that make it difficult for homeless youth to remain in school, or to return to school following a period of absence. One such barrier is the transient nature of homelessness itself, which leads to interruptions in schooling, and lost classroom time due to moving and enrolling in and adjusting to a new school (Murphy, 2011). For homeless youth living in shelters, conditions within the shelter environment may also pose a barrier to education, depending on whether the shelter is close to schools, as well as factors such as crowdedness, privacy, and the ability to leave behind belongings during the day (Buckner, 2008). Further barriers may be related to experiences of family separation and conflict, involvement with child protection agencies, and mental health issues arising from the multiple stressful life events that are often associated with unstable housing (Hernandez et al., 2006; Masten et al., 1993).

## Predicting Educational Outcomes among Youth Who are Homeless

Considering the scope of youth homelessness, and the many barriers facing homeless youth when it comes to staying in school, it is clear that a problem exists. One line of research focuses on factors protecting homeless youth from dropping out of school. In other words, the focus turns to an examination of “resilience” with respect to school participation, that is, staying in school despite the experience of homelessness. Luthar et al., defined resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (2000:543). This view of resilience includes two main parts: the presence of a risk or threat, and normal developmental outcomes despite the risk or threat (Luthar et al., 2000). In the context of examining academic resilience for youth who are homeless, the risk or threat would be the experience of homelessness, while the normal/resilient outcome is participation in school.

In a study of resilience, Hines, Wyatt and Merdinger (2005) considered attending college or university to be a sign of academic resilience among a group of 14 former foster youth. The authors conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with the youth to try to understand what factors might contribute to the positive outcome of attending college or university. Results indicated that feeling able to make conscious changes for oneself, having a flexible and adaptable self-image (i.e. feeling as though it is possible to be whoever one wants to be at a given time), and being goal-oriented and persistent were associated with resilient educational outcomes. Further, relationships with parental figures were important, as was involvement in supportive systems (such as the education system and foster care), which provided opportunities to form relationships with safe and supportive adults (Hines et al., 2005).

Other research has focused on the factors that predict negative academic outcomes, such as poor achievement or dropping out of school, rather than the predictors of resilient outcomes. In their study, Rafferty et al., (2004) found that housing instability and extreme poverty were two factors that predicted negative academic outcomes. These authors observed that being held back a year in school (“failing”), academic under-achievement, and school dropout were all more common for youth living in poverty, whether homeless or housed. The authors of the study reported that academic achievement is shaped by ongoing interactions between a young person’s housing situation and their experiences in school.

Both the study by Hines et al., (2005) and the study by Rafferty et al., (2004) illustrate an ecological perspective on youth homelessness. Put simply, ecological thinking considers the multiple levels of a person’s environment

(family, school, community, society) that affect individual-level outcomes. As Tickett and Rowe (2012) describe, ecological approaches involve looking beyond the individual, and instead adopting a broader perspective that focuses on the influence of various factors in the individual's environment. According to Nooe and Patterson (2010), taking an ecological perspective is a way of ensuring a complete view of the complex issue of homelessness.

## The Present Study

The present study builds upon previous research in the field. Using an ecological perspective, we examined academic resilience among youth who have experienced homelessness. At the beginning of the study, all of the youth participants were homeless. Homelessness thus represented the risk or threat required in the definition of resilience (Masten, 2001). Educational engagement (that is, participation in school at the two-year follow-up point) was the sign of positive adaptation, or resilience, examined in this study (Masten, 2001). Ultimately, this research was intended to explain how some adolescents with histories of homelessness are able to participate in school (showing academic resilience), despite their difficult circumstances.

In order to identify predictors of participation in school, we examined predictive factors at multiple levels: individual, social, and community. This multi-level approach is consistent with an ecological perspective. The choice of which factors to examine was based on existing research in the fields of resilience, high school dropout, and youth homelessness. At the *individual* level, the predictors of academic resilience that we investigated were:<sup>2</sup> a) longer duration of re-housing, b) higher levels of empowerment, c) higher levels of active coping, and d) gender<sup>3</sup>. At the *social* level, the potential predictors of academic resilience that we examined were a) having a positive mentor, b) having larger social networks, and c) reporting higher levels of satisfaction with social support. Finally, at the *community* level, the potential predictor of academic resilience that we examined was greater use of supportive community services.

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2. Descriptions of how each predictor was defined are in the *Measures* section of this chapter.
  3. Gender was included as a predictor of interest because previous studies had identified that some sub-groups of vulnerable male youth are at greater risk of high school dropout than female youth (Greene & Winters, 2006). We wished to examine whether this finding held true for homeless male youth in our study.

## Method<sup>4</sup>

### Participants

The study was conducted as part of a larger research initiative, known as the *Panel Study on Homelessness in Ottawa* (Aubry et al., 2003). The objective of the *Panel Study* was to examine people's pathways into and out of homelessness. This was achieved by identifying groups of people who were homeless and then following them for a period of two years to track how their housing status and life circumstances changed over time. The present study is based only on the *Panel Study* data that was collected specifically from youth participants.

To be eligible for the study, youth participants had to be between the ages of 16-19 at the beginning of the study, be homeless at the outset of the study (i.e., not have a permanent place in which to live), and not be a new parent at any point in the study<sup>5</sup>. We refer to the beginning of the study as Time 1. During this time, the initial round of interviews with participants was conducted. The follow-up to these initial interviews took place with the same youth participants approximately two years later, and is referred to as Time 2. The final sample of participants for the present study was made up of 82 youth (45 males, 37 females).<sup>6</sup>

### Measures

The self-report measures used in the study were well established in previous studies, and were supplemented by a small number of single-item questions, such as those asking about school attendance. Education items at Time 1 were: "Are you still in school" (Yes or No), "Approximately how many hours per week are you attending school?" (#), "Is it part-time or full-time?" and "What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?" At Time 2 this series of questions was asked again, with an introductory question "Have you gone to school or taken any courses since our last interview, about two years ago?" (Yes or No).

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4. Detailed Methods for the study are presented elsewhere (Hyman, Aubry & Klodawsky, 2010).
  5. Youth with children less than four years old at the end of the study were excluded because we expected that the experience of new parenthood would significantly change their developmental paths, making them a unique sub-group that could not be readily included alongside other youth in this study.
  6. At Time 1, 157 youth were interviewed (79 males, 78 females). At Time 2, 99 youth were interviewed (49 males, 50 females). Thus 63% of the original Time 1 sample was retained at Time 2. A total of 17 of these 99 youth were excluded from the present study because they had children less than four years old at the time of the Time 2 interview. The only significant difference found between respondents at Time 2 and non-respondents at Time 2 was in terms of age, such that respondents tended to be younger at Time 1 than non-respondents. No significant differences were found between respondents and non-respondents on any other variables of interest, including gender, educational status, mental health status, or empowerment.

**Duration of Re-housing.** At Time 2, participants in the study were asked to describe all of the places they had lived between Time 1 and Time 2. Duration of re-housing was determined by adding up the total number of consecutive days a youth had spent housed leading up to the Time 2 interview, based on the dates they indicated they had come and gone from various addresses. Consecutive days housed (as opposed to non-continuous days housed and unhoused) was counted for the purpose of establishing “housing stability” of the youth. It was assumed that a period of 90 days of continuous housing reflects some permanency, as rent has been paid for three full consecutive months.

**Active Coping.** At Time 2, participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with different items measuring active coping, such as “I’ve been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I’m in” (Carver, 1997).

**Empowerment.** At both Time 1 and Time 2, participant empowerment was measured by assessing the degree to which participants felt in control of their life situation<sup>7</sup>. Examples of items on the empowerment scale are “I generally accomplish what I set out to do,” and “People are limited only by what they think possible.”

**Presence of a Positive Mentor Relationship.** At Time 2, participants were asked whether or not they had a positive mentor in their lives. For the purposes of the study, a positive mentor is defined as “an adult who is older than you, who has had more experience than you, and who has taken a special interest in you” (Klaw et al., 2003:226).

**Social Support.** Social support was measured at both Time 1 and Time 2. The size of participating youths’ social networks was measured (N), as well as their satisfaction with the support received from the people within the network (S)<sup>8</sup>. Participants were asked to list who provided them with five distinct types of social support, with N being the average number of different individuals listed. For each of these five types of support, S was measured by asking participants “How satisfied are you with this level of support?”

**Social Service Use.** To measure their level of social service use over the course of the study, participants at Time 2 were shown a list of different types of social and community services, and asked how frequently they used each one over the past two years (Aubry et al., 2007). Types of services listed included homeless

7. The 15-item version of the measure of empowerment created by Rogers, Chamberlin, Langer, Ellison and Crean, (1997) was used. Response alternatives range from “*Strongly Disagree*” (1) to “*Strongly Agree*” (4).

8. The 5-item Social Support Questionnaire created by Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason (1983) was used.

shelters, community resource and health centres, addictions programs, crisis counseling, religious organizations, housing services, drop-ins, First Nations/Inuit/Métis organizations, supportive housing services, legal services, disability organizations, and food banks. A total score was created by adding up the frequency of each participant's self-described use of these services.

## Procedures

Research methods used in the study were approved by the Research Ethics Board for the Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ottawa. Participants for the study were recruited from two emergency shelters serving male and female youth, a single men's shelter, a drop-in centre for youth, and a social service agency that helps homeless youth return to their families if they wish to do so. Staff at these agencies who were familiar with the *Panel Study* and with the youth using their services invited potential participants (who satisfied the previously described eligibility criteria) to meet with a member of the research team if they were interested in participating in the study. After providing informed consent, participants were interviewed in a private area in the emergency shelter or drop-in centre. Youth were paid \$20 for their participation in the Time 1 interview, which lasted about 80 minutes.

To facilitate eventual follow-up with a Time 2 interview, youth were asked at the Time 1 interview to provide contact information on as many individuals in their social and care-providing networks as possible. E-mail addresses were useful in tracking youth over time, as many of them had free online accounts that they checked regularly.

Youth were invited for follow-up interviews approximately two years after the first interview. These Time 2 interviews were conducted at a secure and private location in community agencies near to where participants were living at the time. Participants were paid \$30 for Time 2 interviews, which lasted approximately 90 minutes.

## Results

The results of the present study are organized into two sections. The first section contains results that describe the housing and educational situations of youth over the course of the two years of the study. The second section provides an overview of the results from the statistical analysis computed to determine which of the individual, social, and community factors predicted whether or not youth were participating in school at the follow-up interview<sup>9</sup>.

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9. For a more detailed description of prediction model testing and results, please see Hyman, Aubry & Klodawsky (2010).

## Housing and Educational Status

Of the 82 youth in the study, 65 (79.3%) were living in stable housing at the Time 2 follow-up interview. Stable housing was defined as living in a residence for which they paid rent, and had lived in for 90 days or longer. Significantly fewer male (71.1%) than female (89.2%) respondents reported living in stable housing at Time 2. In terms of duration, male respondents had been re-housed for significantly fewer days on average (348.58 days) than female respondents (430.70 days) at Time 2.

A minority of youth reported participating in school at Time 1 (34 participants; 22%), and at Time 2 (28 participants; 34%). At Time 2, the highest level of completed education for the majority of participants was grade 9 and 10 (completed by 53% of participants). Considerably fewer youth had completed grade 11 (22%). Ten percent of youth reported grade 8 as their highest level of educational attainment, 5% reported completing high school with a diploma as their highest attainment, and 4% reported completing high school without diploma (i.e. earning a high school equivalency certificate) as their highest attainment. Six percent had some post-secondary education (e.g. at a community college, trade school, or university) as their highest level of attainment. There were more than twice as many female youth as male youth participating in school at Time 2.

## Testing the Model of Predictors

The main purpose of the present study was to identify which factors (at individual, social, and community levels) predicted academic resilience (i.e. participation in school at Time 2) for youth with histories of homelessness. As described previously, the individual-level factors of interest that we examined were duration of re-housing, active coping, empowerment, and gender. The social-level factors were the presence of a positive mentor, size of social network, and satisfaction with social network. The community-level factor was use of social services. Empowerment, size of social network, and satisfaction with social network were also measured at both Time 1 and Time 2.<sup>10</sup>

To determine how well each of the factors predicted academic resilience, the factors were entered as variables in a statistical model, and the model's ability to predict educational outcomes was tested. Based on the outcomes of these tests, it was possible to determine which factors were significant predictors of school attendance. Two models were created and tested, the second of which measured changes

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10. For a description of the mean scores and standard deviations on each of these factors, please see Hyman, Aubry & Klodawsky (2010).



in scores from Time 1 to Time 2. Results from that model are described here<sup>11</sup>.

The tests confirmed that both duration of re-housing and gender were significant predictors of participation in school at Time 2, such that youth who were housed for longer durations of time, and youth who were female, were more likely to participate in school. In addition, change in satisfaction with social support between Time 1 and 2 was also a significant predictor of participation in school at Time 2. Youth who were participating in school at Time 2 showed no change in satisfaction with social support over the course of the study. In contrast, youth who were not participating in school at Time 2 reported an increase in satisfaction with their social support over the course of the study. The factors of empowerment, active coping, having a positive mentor, size of social network, and social service use did not emerge as significant predictors of school participation.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to gain an understanding of how a small proportion of youth do manage to participate in school (demonstrating academic resilience), despite experiencing the adverse circumstances of homelessness. Understanding the factors that contribute to academic resilience is important. If we are aware of the specific factors that promote participation in school for some homeless youth, we may be able to design programs and policies that provide these supports for all homeless youth. Finding ways to increase the school attendance of homeless youth is critical, given that educational achievement is so closely tied to future employability and quality of life (Bowlby, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2007).

In our examination of academic resilience in homeless youth, we adopted an ecological perspective, meaning that we considered factors at the individual, social, and community levels. The factors that we chose to investigate at each of these levels were drawn from previous research into resilience and youth homelessness. Only a handful of the factors that we investigated were shown to significantly predict whether or not youth would be participating in school by the end of the study. However, we believe it is important for future research to continue to examine youth homelessness ecologically, whenever possible. Toro, Dworsky and Fowler (2007) research supports an ecological perspective, and cautioned against focusing on individual problems that contribute to or sustain youth homelessness. To do so is to risk stigmatizing homeless youth by holding them responsible for vulnerabilities and difficult life events that they have not chosen for themselves.

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11. Statistically the analysis involved running two sequential logistic regressions, with variables entered into the regression equation in three blocks – individual-level variables, social-level variables, and community-level variables.

In discussing the results of the present study, we will begin by exploring the three factors that were found to be significant predictors of school participation among the youth in the study, as well as those factors that were not found to be significant predictors. After discussing these findings, we will explore the various program and policy implications that could follow from this research.

### Individual Predictors of Participating in School

**Gender.** An important contribution of the study was the finding that gender played a significant role in predicting educational engagement within our sample of youth with histories of homelessness. This finding builds upon previous research that has shown that male youth experience significant barriers to participation in school. Male youth are reported to have less positive school experiences, are more likely to be disciplined, are more frequently held back a grade or more in school, and are more likely to dropout (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). A study conducted with housed adolescents demonstrated that some groups of male youth (such as youth of certain ethnic minority groups) are at a higher risk of high school dropout than female youth and reported a substantial “gender gap in graduation rates with female youth being more likely to graduate than male youth (Greene & Winters, 2006:1). Similarly, our results indicate that when followed over time, female youth with histories of homelessness were more likely to participate in educational programs than were male youth.

We do not debate that both female youth and male youth who are homeless are vulnerable to high school dropout and social exclusion, and that special efforts are required to engage all youth with histories of homelessness in continuing their education, particularly once their housing situation becomes stabilized. However, given the findings of past research, and now our own, it appears clear that male youth with histories of homelessness will require additional efforts to involve them in school.

It is possible that some male youth did not participate in school because they are out working. Little is known about the working conditions of male youth with histories of homelessness. Further information regarding the specific factors that lead male youth with histories of homelessness to drop out of school, as well as an understanding of the relationship between homelessness, employment, and education for male youth is required. Early entry into the workforce would be expected to limit the future work opportunities and economic mobility of these youth if they do not return to school or receive additional training.

**Duration of Re-housing.** Longer durations of re-housing were also found to predict participation in school at the follow-up interview for the youth in our

study. This is to be expected, given that the uncertainty and lack of structure associated with being homeless would clearly make it difficult to attend school on a regular basis. It is logical that the security provided by stable housing liberates youth to focus their energy and resources on stabilizing other areas of their life, such as education. Previous research has also established that homeless youth who become housed experience positive educational outcomes. In a study conducted by Hong and Piescher (2012), homeless youth who received supportive housing stayed in the same school for longer, attended school more regularly, and improved their academic performance, compared to homeless youth who did not receive supportive housing.

Research demonstrating that disengagement and social exclusion can arise from prolonged homelessness is also consistent with the findings of the present study. In Grigsby et al.'s (1990) research, social isolation, which deepened with duration of homelessness, was related to outcomes of increased vulnerability and distress. Votta and Manion (2004) also found homeless youth to be at risk of disengagement coping (using a passive coping style, such as escape or inaction), as well as poor mental health, and thoughts of suicide. The emotional suffering associated with homelessness, as documented by these studies, would be expected to contribute to limited school participation, as was found in the present study. It is useful to consider this broader social and psychological context as it relates to the difficulties in school participation that were demonstrated by youth in the present study.

Considering the important role that housing has been shown to play in promoting participation in school, educational programs and policies meant to engage homeless youth in school cannot ignore the fact that youth need to become stably housed if they are to be expected to attend school. As such, housing assistance must be provided alongside any educational program offered to homeless youth. Strong partnerships and inter-agency task forces and study teams need to be developed between schools and housing agencies, so that youth receive integrated assistance in the important areas of both education and housing (Stronge, 1993). The link between education and housing will be revisited later in the chapter.

**Empowerment and Active Coping.** Despite the findings in the resilience literature, which suggested that the internal resources of personal empowerment and active coping would protect homeless youth from negative outcomes, these two factors were not found to be significant predictors of educational resilience in our study. It is well known that these two factors are assets, helping vulnerable young people to adapt positively to challenging circumstances. However, it may be that these factors are more important in facilitating other tasks, which were not assessed as outcomes in the present study, such as regaining stable

housing, entering the workforce, or overcoming mental health challenges.

## Social Predictors of Participating in School

**Changes in Satisfaction with Social Support.** Youth who were participating in school at the end of the study reported no change in their levels of satisfaction with their social support over the course of the study, while those youth not participating in school experienced increases in their levels of satisfaction. This is a surprising finding. However, it is important to note that in the present study, the average social support satisfaction for both groups (youth participating in school and youth not participating school) is relatively high, suggesting that youth in the study are generally satisfied with the social support they are receiving from people involved in their lives, regardless of school status.

**Size of Social Support Network.** No relationship was found between school participation and youths' reports on the size of their social network. This suggests that it is not the number of people in a social network, but rather, the quality of the support received that mattered most to youth in the study.

**Presence of a Positive Mentor.** The lack of a relationship between having a positive mentor and participating in school at follow-up is surprising. We suspect mentorship was a non-significant predictor of educational participation at follow-up because youth were still involved in the same social networks formed when they were homeless. The study period of two years may not have been enough time for new mentors to influence and support youth's participation in school.

## Community Predictor of Participating in School

**Social service use.** Social service use did approach statistical significance as a predictor. The relationship suggested that greater use of social services was associated with not being in school. A reasonable interpretation of this relationship is that youth who are in school experience greater stability, and have less of a need for social services. Although ultimately the relationship between social service use and participation in school was not statistically significant, this may have been due to a lack of statistical power in the present study, given its relatively small sample size. Future researchers would do well to conduct a further examination of the role of social service use in school participation.

## Implications for Program and Policy Development

**Education.** In response to the school difficulties experienced by a large majority of homeless youth, the government of the United States created the Stewart

B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (renamed the McKinney-Vento Act in 2000). This is a federal initiative that authorizes and funds programs to improve homelessness services, including the education of homeless youth (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006). McKinney-Vento schooling initiatives set out to extend existing efforts to decrease barriers and to facilitate school access and academic integration of homeless young people.

In Canada there are not yet any federally initiated educational programs for homeless youth that would compare to those supported through the McKinney-Vento Act in the United States. We believe that this needs to change. The educational needs of homeless youth must be targeted at both the program and policy levels in Canada in a way that is similar to the McKinney-Vento Act. Federal initiatives that provide resources and infrastructure to develop and improve programs are critical. As argued by Klodawsky, Aubry and Farrell (2006), the current political climate in Canada has left a gap in funding and programs aimed at providing care to youth. Defining youth homelessness as simply an economic and employment issue risks under-serving, or misjudging the scope of services needed for this vulnerable population.

To create sustainable change, governments need to adapt a humane and realistic perspective that acknowledges the complexity of the issues of homelessness, school dropout, social exclusion and poverty among youth. A holistic long-term approach to addressing youth homelessness and school dropout, which targets, in an integrated manner, a host of youth services such as child welfare, secondary and post-secondary education, social and community services, and housing, is required.

Improvement to educational programs for homeless youth was a topic of interest explored through the *Youthworks* project, carried out by the nationwide Raising the Roof (2009) organization in Canada. *Youthworks* is an initiative aimed at examining the experiences of “street involved” youth, consulting with experts in the field of youth homelessness, and creating solutions towards ending youth homelessness. Based on this extensive research, nine recommendations were made about how best to support youth transitioning from homelessness to housing. One recommendation included providing non-traditional educational opportunities that target and support youth who have dropped out of school. Youth interviewed through the *Youthworks* program knew that their future employment would be limited without a high school diploma. Youth did express a wish to return to school, but described barriers to doing so, such as the need to earn money to get by (Evenson & Barr, 2009). Flexibility and outreach were therefore identified as important elements of educational programs for homeless and street-involved youth. Flexibility denotes services and supports that are aligned with the unique needs of individual youth. Outreach characterizes programs that facilitate engagement by bringing services to

the youth, as opposed to requiring youth to come to the service.

Consistent with these findings, we believe it is essential to provide a variety of youth-friendly educational programs that adapt to youths' individual needs, and which are made visible, available, and non-threatening to homeless youth. Educators need to be aware of the complex issue of youth homelessness, so that early interventions can be made. Active outreach to youth who show signs of being homeless or at risk of homelessness (such as poor attendance, frequent moves to new schools, and child-welfare involvement) is necessary to engage youth in programs. Useful programs for homeless youth may include special education or alternative education approaches that accommodate the gaps in knowledge and learning typical of youth whose schooling experiences have been disrupted by homelessness.

A flexible attendance policy to accommodate the schedules of youth who are employed would be helpful, so that youth who need to work to support themselves are not excluded from the school environment or punished for needing to work. To minimize disruptions in classroom time for homeless youth enrolling in a new school, youth should be admitted into a school even if their necessary documentation (such as birth certificates and immunization records) is not immediately available. This is a practice that has been adopted under the McKinney-Vento Act, in addition to providing funding for student transportation, so that homeless youth who have moved can continue to attend their original school whenever possible (Larson & Meehan, 2011). Reducing barriers to education for homeless youth is necessary to encourage youth to return to and stay in school. Implementing youth-friendly educational programs represents a valuable first step.

When asked about important program features, formerly homeless youth involved in a Toronto-based housing initiative emphasized the role of service providers, which in the case of schools, includes teachers, school administrators, and support personnel. Youth in the study stated that it was necessary for service providers to be caring, friendly, persistent, reliable, and prompt, and to provide outreach (Raine & Marcellin, 2007). These recommendations are especially valid because they were generated by youth themselves. We maintain that it is important to involve youth with lived experiences of homelessness in the planning, development, and delivery of educational programs. Promising provincial initiatives (Children's Mental Health of Ontario, 2007) such as the New Mentality, a Youth Engagement Project, exist specifically for the purpose of meaningfully recruiting the expertise of young people to advocate for their own needs within mental health, child welfare, and other systems. This type of collaborative approach would be extremely useful in an educational context, in which teachers could work closely with homeless youth to design and provide programs that best suit youth's self-declared needs.

**Housing.** Results from the present study showed that once youth were in a stable housing situation, they were more likely to participate in school. This finding lends support to a Housing First approach. Housing First programs originated in New York as an alternative to moving mentally ill, homeless adults through stages from transitional housing to independent living, with each new step requiring that they follow various treatment plans and protocols (Tsemberis et al., 2004). Housing First is based on the belief that people should be given access to housing free of any conditions. Housing and treatment are regarded as separate, and keeping housing does not depend on accessing or remaining in treatment. Individuals are provided with rent supplements and housing subsidies that allow them to obtain housing in the private rental market. In addition to becoming housed earlier, individuals in Housing First programs report feeling a greater sense of choice over their circumstances, and have proven able to maintain their independent housing over time (Tsemberis et al., 2004). In order to implement Housing First programs for youth, inter-agency partnerships between providers of youth services are required to create a sustainable plan that takes into consideration the developmental needs of youth and legal aspects of renting property to youth. Given that youth are able to receive other social and community resources and benefits, including housing among the services available must also be possible. Careful planning, including feasibility studies, program evaluation, and sustained government support are essential to developing a pertinent and effective Housing First approach for youth.

A keynote address from a conference titled *Partners Solving Youth Homelessness* spoke to the need for a prompt, permanent, universally accessible, national affordable housing strategy (Kothari, 2008 in Evenson & Barr, 2009). The Housing First model could be such a strategy. Housing First for homeless youth would move youth away from transitional housing by providing them with independent, stable housing as quickly as possible. This would make it easier for youth to return to school quickly, which would result in a less disrupted developmental path. A combination of both housing and support focused on developing educational and career goals may be particularly relevant for assisting youth as they transition from homelessness back into the education system.

Toro et al., (2007) have summarized a recent initiative geared towards decreasing homelessness among youth leaving the child welfare system in the United States. The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program ensures that funds are designated specifically for housing youth aged 18 to 21. Early findings indicate that youth engaged in programs receiving these funds were less likely to become homeless and more likely to go to college or university (Burt, 2007; Toro et al., 2007). Similar programs that take the causes of youth homelessness into consideration and quickly provide housing, particularly

for youth who have been homeless for a long time, may effectively prevent a pattern of homelessness that threatens to continue into adulthood.

## Future Research

The present research represents one of the only studies that has focused on school attendance among youth who have experienced homelessness in Canada. Further research on this issue is needed. Moreover, we recommend that future research continue to examine resilience in homeless youth using an ecological model that takes into account multiple aspects of youth environments. Another recommendation for future research is to design studies with a longer follow-up period and multiple follow-up assessments, which would enable a more thorough investigation of how youth exit homelessness, and how their development unfolds over time. Involving homeless youth in the development of interview questions is recommended, as youth are the ideal candidates to point out the issues that affect them (Children's Mental Health Ontario, 2007).

The reality that a majority of homeless youth do eventually become housed has been observed at a national level in the United States (Burt, 2007). This finding was repeated in our sample of youth who were followed for a two-year period. Yet despite these positive housing outcomes, only a minority of our sample of youth was participating in school at the two-year follow-up. It would also be useful to examine at which point in their exit from homelessness it becomes relevant and realistic to focus on education. Results of our study suggest that activities focused on the future, such as participating in school, are best started after youth have attained stable housing.

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