

Building Bridges

Perspectives on youth homelessness from First Nations, Inuit and Métis, Newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ youth in Ottawa

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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Project Description.....	4
Literature Review.....	5
Methodology.....	10
Main Findings and Recommendations.....	12
Conclusion.....	22
Bibliography.....	23

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We hear you.



Introduction

In the capital city of one of the wealthiest countries in the world, young people ought not to be living on the streets, engaging in sex work to survive, and becoming enmeshed in drug cultures and illegal activities that put them at even greater risk of harm and violence.

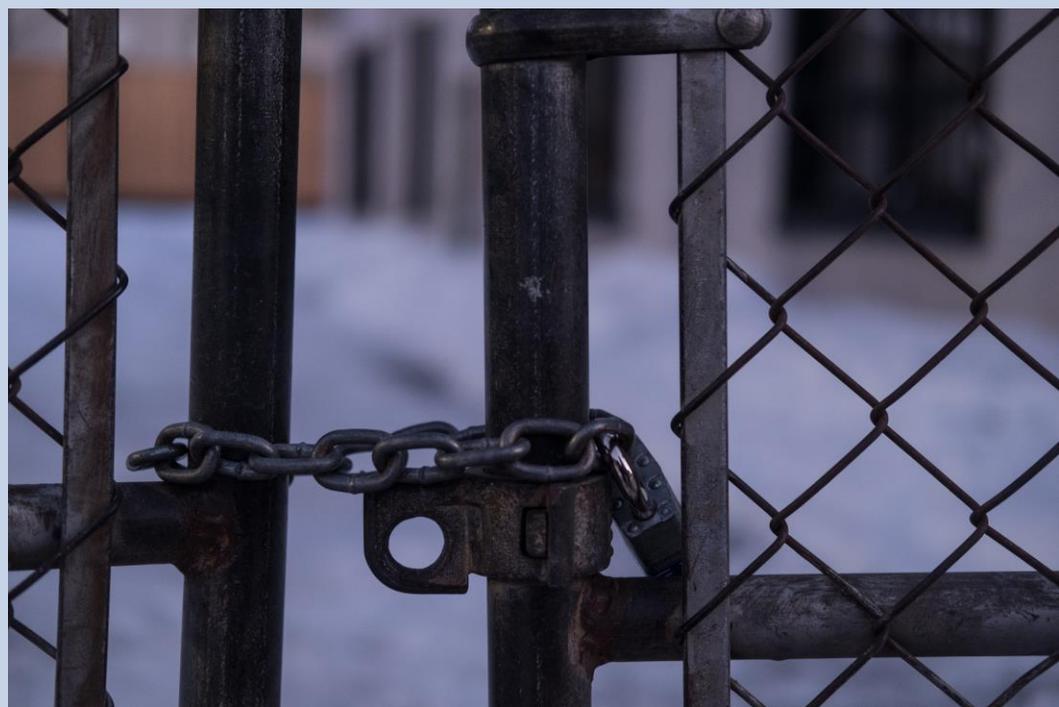
This report details Ottawa's unremitting reality where youth are being exposed to these risks and more, through a process that *creates* their homelessness. Youth homelessness is not inevitable. . One can see how the youth are 'created' as homeless simply by looking at the most haunting and recurring theme, that which is echoed throughout the many first-hand accounts from youth documented in this report: *points of failure*. In each of the young lives described are numerous points at which a school, agency, detention facility, household, adult etc. had one or more opportunities to positively impact the young person's life. At a quick glance, it may seem that these young people are an anomaly, a minority that flew under the radar, but this is false. They had many points of contact with people and organizations that had the power and knowledge to help them; and yet they were not helped. These points of contact became points of failure, which were then repeated through other encounters youth had with adult systems. This is why we use the language of "creating" and "recreating" young people to be homeless.

This report advocates for a wake-up call, not a meandering diffusion of awareness. There is no time for that. This is a call to action: to stop allowing and encouraging youth homelessness within our cities; to prevent young girls from contentious living where they are created as easy targets for sexual abuse; to stop putting transgender youth in places where they are subjected to bullying segregation, abuse and without even the medical assistance they may require; to stop typecasting First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth as lost causes and sticking them in shelters where their cultures are unknown, unrecognized and inaccessible to them; to stop ignoring the increased risks specific to identifying as a newcomer in Canada; to stop ignoring the need for safe spaces, for greater availability and visibility of programs and supports for LGBTQ2S+, newcomer, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and all homeless youth

It is clear that current responses to youth homelessness should be more flexible, in order to go beyond how a young person looks on paper, or sounds in meetings, even to go against so-called 'common sense' at times. We advocate for an increased understanding on the part of service providers and social services in general, that youth will break rules, not always return to curfew, not make it to every appointment set for them, and they will not necessarily abstain from drugs, sex, or crime. This is not because young people are bad and undeserving, but because they have learned to trust and answer only to themselves; in short, because they have had to learn to survive.

It is important that the whole of society, from large systems that regulate schools, jails and social programs, down to each individual themselves must be aware of how they are connected to the pervasive problem of youth homelessness. This crisis is not a failure of the youth, it is a failure of the system, the whole. Thus it is not enough to scold the parents—who may be just as under-equipped to deal with their children as the system is to help the parents and children—it is not enough to blame schools for brushing this problem aside, and it is not enough to expand the number of beds in shelters. The whole system needs to be reworked in such a way that it finally works together, in a fluent and well connected manner, in which youth are aware of services offered, and can access them without obstacle or discrimination, in safety. The following recommendations need to be met, because the effects of youth homelessness—when not deadly—last a lifetime.

If we cannot, as a society, ensure that all youth, across all demographics, have access to safe housing, with the unique supports that they require, then we are a failed society; the recommendations here are possible, and they are plausible, and they are long overdue.



Project Description

In its 2016 community consultation, AWHO spoke with over 70 youth with lived experience of homelessness as well as 50 agencies working with youth dealing with homelessness. Knowing that nothing can be decided about youth without their input, AWHO put its seven Youth Liaisons at the center of the data collection and analysis process through a participatory community based research approach. The five major findings outlined in The Opportunity Project: Telling a New Story About Youth Homelessness in Ottawa, support Housing First for Youth principles as follows:

1. Immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements.

Drastically increase options for housing that is affordable - by increasing opportunities to access affordable market rental housing for young people through housing subsidies, by increasing the availability of affordable units dedicated to youth, and by increasing income through income support programs.

2. Youth choice and self-determination. Housing First is a rights-based, client centered approach that emphasizes client choice in terms of housing and supports.

Effective implementation of housing as a human right for homeless and at-risk youth, that prioritizes financial stability, and in turn housing stability, through consistent, understanding, and flexible responses from municipal and provincial programs.

3. Positive youth development orientation: Practice is not simply focused on meeting basic needs, but on supporting a young person's transition to adulthood.

Homeless and at-risk youth need a variety of resources focused on supporting their development into adulthood, including connection and access to opportunities for education, employment, and life skills development.

4. Individualized and client driven supports.

Youth require a streamlined service referral process between agencies to ensure every youth retains consistent support as needed and requested by them. Youth also require increased access to supports outside of the downtown core, with a particular emphasis on school-based assessment and early intervention in order to meet youth where they are at.

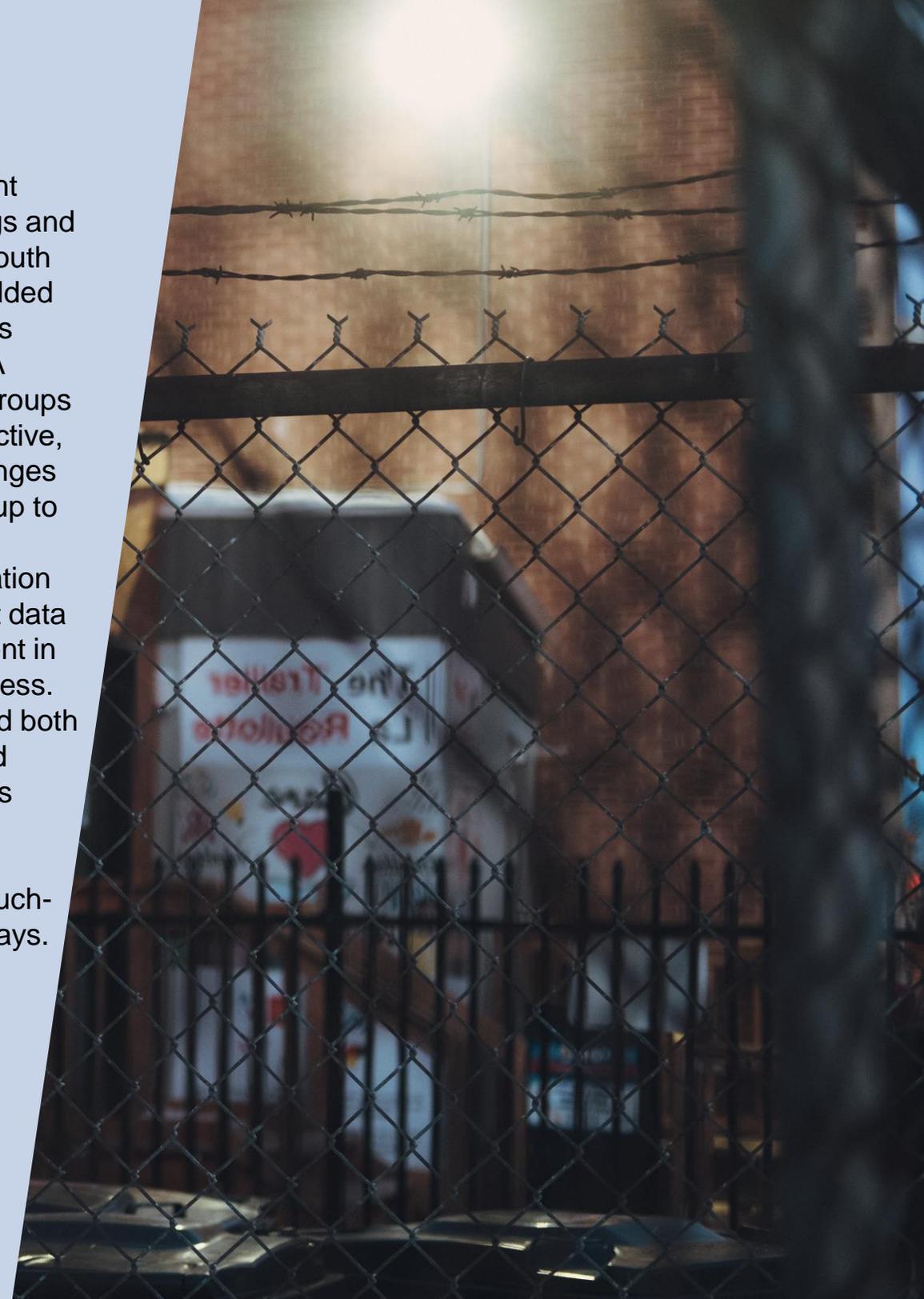
5. Social and Community Integration. Long-term housing stability for youth depends upon breaking social isolation and providing opportunities for participation in meaningful activities.

Youth who are homeless and at risk of homelessness require support in gaining access to social and recreational community engagement that can enable their long-term mental and physical well-being.

While these initial findings and recommendations have been key in guiding the sector's work since our 2016 launch, we realized we had not collected sufficient data from youth who identify as First Nations, Inuit, Métis LGBTQ2S+ or newcomers. We therefore launched a second phase of consultations to speak with these populations, because their overrepresentation in youth homelessness must be addressed. For this work to be genuine and youth-driven, three new young people with lived experience of homelessness have been hired and trained as Research Liaisons, from these over-represented but under-served demographics.

Literature Review

The literature review conducted by Research Assistant Justin Langille has helped to contextualise our findings and recommendations among the broader landscape of youth homelessness in Canada. The significant findings yielded by this scan will be broken down below into categories relative to the subpopulations we have worked with. A significant additional general finding is that the age groups qualifying as “youth”, from a service provision perspective, vary greatly. The common age of youth in Canada ranges from 12-24, but many youth services cater to people up to the age of 30 (Patrick, 2014). We also know that approximately 20% of the Canadian homeless population are young people (Gaetz et al. 2014). As well, recent data shows that people who have experienced maltreatment in their childhood face higher risks of hidden homelessness. For instance, 25% of Canadians who had experienced both physical and sexual violence before the age of 15 had reported at least one episode of hidden homelessness (Rodrigue 2016). This data is highly pertinent for the groups we have worked with, for they very often had experienced childhood maltreatment and reported couch-surfing and rough-sleeping more often than shelter stays.



First Nations Inuit & Métis Youth

Before discussing the data collected about First Nations, Inuit and Métis young people, we wish to emphasize the resilience and survivorship of these communities despite centuries of attempts at colonial eradication and assimilation. Unsurprisingly however, Canada's assimilatory and systemically racist practices are to be held responsible for the intergenerational trauma at play in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. One of these lasting effects is that "Aboriginal housing is substandard and inadequate at rates disproportionate to that experienced by the non- Aboriginal population" (National Council of Welfare 2009). First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, and youth in particular, are also overrepresented in the homeless population both at a local and national scale. In our city, Ottawa, while First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples only represent 2% of the population, they make up 18% of homeless young men and 19% of homeless young women (CMHC 2001; National Council of Welfare 2009). Nationally, "30.6 % of Canadian youth in shelters identify as Indigenous" (Gaetz et al. 2016).

Other than the higher risk of being precariously housed or homeless, the often hidden nature of First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth homelessness has been flagged by experts. First Nations, Inuit and Métis people were indeed found to be more than twice as likely to experience hidden homelessness than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Rodrigue 2016). The disengagement found with the mainstream system, and the preference to connect in other ways, could be attributed to the lack of responsiveness to the cultural concepts of "home" that differ from its western construct.

This may be in part why Ontarian First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth prefer culturally specific programs, regardless of these being "criticized for being holistic solution to Indigenous youth homelessness" (Baskyn 2013). Colonizing structures and intergenerational trauma are also in play. For instance, "many reports and publications by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers view the child welfare system as a strong arm of colonization" (Bennett et al., 2005; Blackstock, 2009; First Nations Child and Family Task Force, 1993; Trocme et al., 2004; Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007 in Baskyn 2013).

There is a pressing need to work in closer collaboration with First Nations, Inuit and Métis leaders to ensure the basic human right of safe and stable housing is met for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. Let us remind ourselves that "Canada's Aboriginal population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the total population, often lives with extended family and is frequently changing residences within cities and in and out of cities more than the general population", indicating the need to act rapidly to prevent and end homelessness amongst First Nations, Inuit and Métis young people (National Council of Welfare 2009).

Inuit Youth

While little data could be found to specifically enumerate Inuit youth homelessness, we know that the Inuit population is also a very fast-growing one, showing Canada's youngest median age, at 22 years of age, as opposed to 40 for non First Nations, Inuit and Métis Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Even more so than the First Nations and Métis population, Inuit people have also been widely disconnected from their lands since the 1980s (Makivik Corporation 2012). Indeed, over one in five (22%) Inuit did not live in Inuit Nunangat in 2006. Among this group, over three quarters (76%) were settled in urban areas. According to the 2006 Census, the Ottawa-Gatineau region is the urban center where the most Inuit people live (725), followed by Yellowknife (640), Edmonton (590), Montréal (570), and Winnipeg (355).

A trans-generational housing crisis, mainly consisting of overcrowding and underfunding can explain this massive migration (Beavis, Klos, Carter, & Douchant, 1997; Kishigami, 2006; Knotsch and Kinnon 2011). In 2001, 40% of Inuit people were living in spaces exceeding one person per room, while this was only the case for 4% of the general Canadian population (Inuit Tapirit Kanatami 2016a). While Inuit people demonstrate the highest need for safe and stable housing, their small number as a demographic often mean chronic underfunding, since funding is allocated by population size (National Council of Welfare 2009).

This need for further housing funds was clear in some Inuit youths' accounts of inaccessible adequate housing units. Overcrowded families, homelessness, couch-surfing, and extremely precarious housing, comprising violence, were among the reported results of the shortage of single units as well as the long waiting lists (Inuit Tapirit Kanatami 2016b). Besides tolerating these living conditions or removing themselves from their culture and language in search of housing and services in cities, Inuit youth experience a severe suicide crisis, with rates 10 times higher than those experienced by other Canadians (Canada, 2006 in Schwan and Lightman 2015). This staggering reality, must be understood within the broader context of systemic racism, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism that has aggressively and systematically removed Inuit people from their connection to the land, culture and community.

LGBTQ2S+ Youth

Another subpopulation of young people who are homeless that we have consulted with is that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, two-spirited and other non heterosexual or cisgender youth. As a whole, this group makes up 29.5% of Canadian youth who are homeless; 1.8 % also specifically identify as transgender and 2.5% as non-binary (Gaetz et al. 2016). Other estimates of the proportion of LGBTQ2S+ youth amongst the homeless youth population range from 25% to 40%, a heavy contrast with the approximated 5% to 10% they represent amongst the wider Canadian population (Josephson and Wright, 2000; Abramovich 2012).

Beyond greater risk of homelessness, there is also plenty of evidence accounting for this group's longer episodes of homelessness than those experienced by their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013 in Abramovich 2016). Research shows that placement in group homes, couch-surfing and absolute homelessness occur at very young ages, as the majority (67%) of first experiences of homelessness of adults identifying as LGBTQ2S+ took place between the ages of 12 and 18 (The FTM Safer Shelter Project Research Team 2012). Homophobia and transphobia also put LGBTQ2S+ youth at greater risk of experiencing violence and discrimination (Abramovich 2015). Measures recommended to address this include specially dedicated safe spaces and services for these young people, stricter policies and more discussions and trainings to ban homophobia and transphobia from existing services (Abramovich 2016).



Newcomer Youth

The last subpopulation of youth facing a greater risk of homelessness are newcomer youth. Shelter counts indicate that 28.2 % of youth accessing beds identify as members of racialized communities and that 10.1% immigrated to Canada (Gaetz et al. 2016). These numbers, however, are highly likely to undercount the number of homeless newcomers, for research indicates that they have a tendency to access services less than their other Canadian peers, and are over-represented in the 'hidden homelessness' population (Yonge Street Mission in Abramovich 2012; Greenberg & Matinez-Reyes, n.d.; Fiedler, Schurman, & Hyndman, 2006; Preston et al. 2011; CAMH/Children's Aid Society of Toronto 2014).

Although one study found that almost half of their young newcomer participants made use of Ontario Works (provincial welfare system) as their main source of income (CAMH/Children's Aid Society of Toronto 2014), it was generally found that this group of young people indeed tend to access informal networks far more than public services. One of the main factors raised to explain this invisibility is the fear of 'shaming' their family by becoming a "burden on the system" if they publicly ask for help (Greenberg & Martinez-Reyes, 2010; Springer et al., 2006). A surprising two thirds of newcomer youth expressed a preference to access services from their family doctor or a walk-in clinic, likely to enhance discretion (CAMH/Children's Aid Society of Toronto 2014).

Another experience, specific to this subpopulation is the nature of the family conflicts that often lead to their homelessness. Some young people mentioned resistance to arranged marriage, challenges living with a host family, tensions around religion and culture, conflicting perceptions on what consists of abuse or appropriate discipline as well as low-income and poverty as factors leading to their homelessness (CAMH/Children's Aid Society of Toronto 2014). As a last distinct aspect of newcomer youth homelessness, there is also evidence that demonstrates a shorter average length of homelessness episodes and transitions into housing occur quicker than their non-immigrant counterparts (Yonge Street Mission in Abramovich 2012).

These different patterns of homelessness and ways to engage with the system have led experts to call for more specialized services for this population (Abramovich 2012). Research indicates that the needs expressed by newcomer youth, in addition to safe and stable housing, include access to clothing, culturally appropriate services assisting them in finding balance between their family's values and their Canadian peers' values, mental health services as well as recreational programs (Anisef and Murphy Kilbride 2008).

This second phase of AWHO's community consultation has been conducted in partnership with Carleton University's Sociology and Anthropology Department, under the supervision of Dr. Jackie Kennelly, and with the assistance of graduate student Justin Langille. The participatory community based research approach used for this project yielded primarily qualitative data.

Youth Research Liaisons

Three Research Liaisons, all with lived experiences of homelessness and identifying with the sub-populations consulted, were hired, trained and paid to conduct this process.

These peers' involvement has been invaluable, for they have:

- Co-created the questions to be asked during consultation
- Undergone training to conduct research interviews from a peer perspective
- Participated as subjects in a focus group
- Recruited participants within their networks
- Conducted interviews with these youth
- Analyzed the collected data along with the researchers and the Project Manager, identifying emerging themes
- Shaped the key findings and recommendations found in this report
- Collaborated with another Youth Liaison and AWHO staff on the writing of the report

Throughout this process, the Research Liaisons benefited from regular check-ins with the researchers, such as debriefing after interviews. Once the final draft of the report was completed, it underwent a final review by the Aboriginal Community Advisory Board.

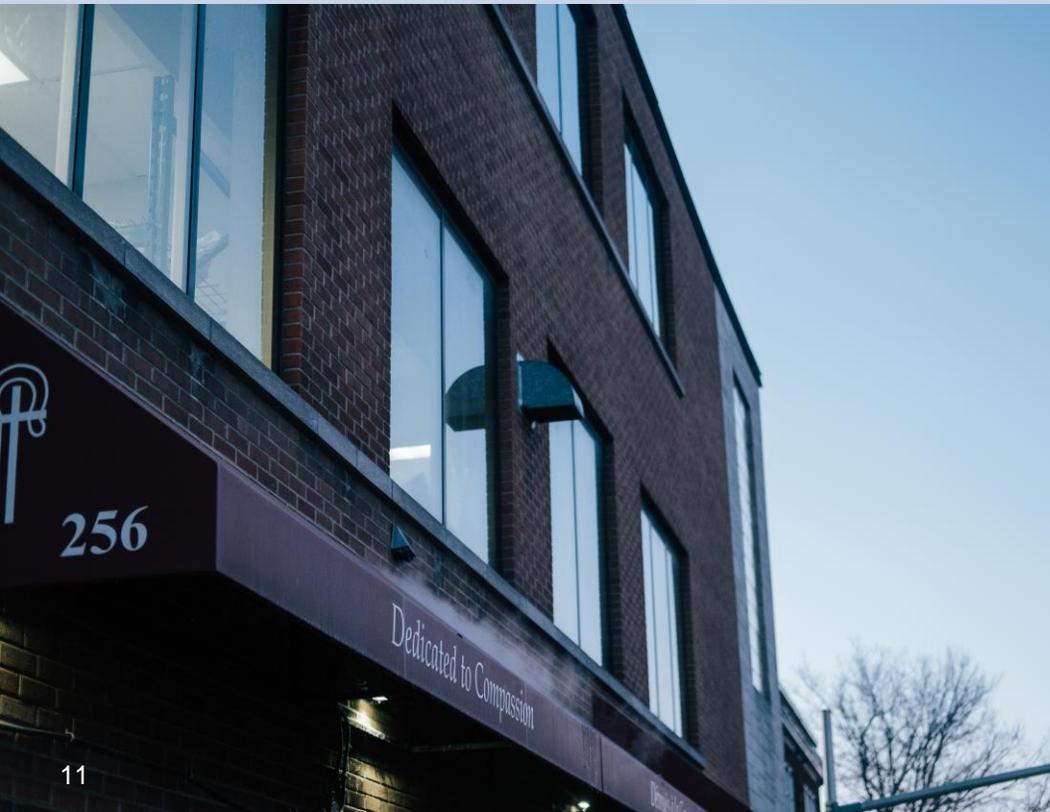
The Research Liaisons made every effort to connect with a diverse group of people who could effectively share rich experiences representative of their groups. However, we must clarify the limitations inherent to the research sample. Firstly, almost half of the participants were over 25 years of age and, for the most part, sharing their past experiences of homelessness. This is due to the request that the Research Liaisons recruit participants within their personal networks. Therefore we may have less concentrated data on the current state of youth homelessness in Ottawa; however, this aspect of our research sample does allow us to compare present and past issues. For example, the study found that youth service providers have greatly improved at appropriately responding to LGBTQ2S+ youths' needs, based on the comparison of negative experiences that took place some 5 years ago to the generally very positive feedback received from current users. Other aspects of our sample that we must remain mindful of in order to adequately inform the sector's work are the small numbers of newcomer youth and young men we have spoken to.

Participants

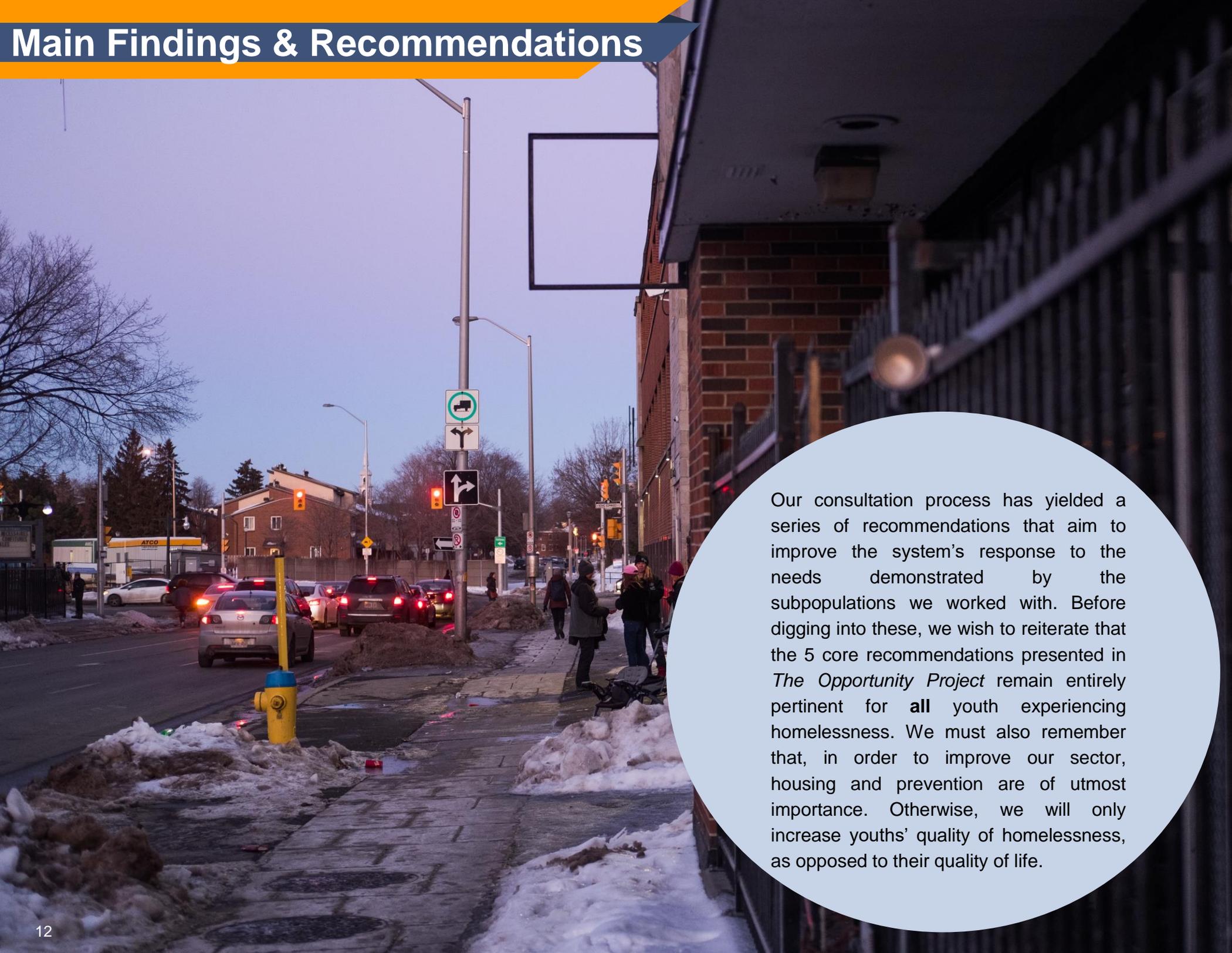
In total, 23 youth have participated in this second phase of AWHO's consultation. Two of the Research Liaisons, along with another youth, first responded to the consultation questions in a focus group format, while the remaining 20 young people were interviewed individually or in groups, in spaces of their choice. Participants were compensated with \$20 per interview, which lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the length of their responses. Participants were also offered to complete a non-mandatory demographic survey, which yielded most of the quantitative data found below.

Of the 23 participants:

- 7 identified as First Nations, Inuit or Métis.
- 13 identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, two-spirited or otherwise non-heterosexual or non-cisgender.
- 5 identified as newcomers.
- 6 reported an intersection of at least two of these identity components.
- 4 identified with none of these identity components.
- At the time of interviews, 3 were still homeless, 8 were precariously housed and 12 were currently stably housed.
- 15 identified as women.
- 4 identified as men.
- 4 identified otherwise, such as gender neutral, questioning or within the binary genders after a transition.
- 13 were 25 or under and 10 were over 25.
- 16 reported a disability. Most were mental health illnesses, however some were physical or learning disabilities.
- 12 had not yet completed high school, 11 had, and of those, 9 had begun or completed college, university or another form of postsecondary education.
- Although none of the participants reported being in care, 7 mentioned some involvement with the Children's Aid Society. Firstly, 2 youth explained how they refused to be placed with CAS, either by turning down a counsellor's offer to refer them or by lying to the investigators. 2 other youth, recently kicked-out, reported being denied services because they were 16 and 15, which at the time meant they had aged out or were about to. Lastly, 2 young women had their child taken into care, while 1 was able to keep her child thanks to the presence of a kin acting as a support.



Main Findings & Recommendations



Our consultation process has yielded a series of recommendations that aim to improve the system's response to the needs demonstrated by the subpopulations we worked with. Before digging into these, we wish to reiterate that the 5 core recommendations presented in *The Opportunity Project* remain entirely pertinent for **all** youth experiencing homelessness. We must also remember that, in order to improve our sector, housing and prevention are of utmost importance. Otherwise, we will only increase youths' quality of homelessness, as opposed to their quality of life.

General Recommendations

Youth respect

A substantial portion of the youth we spoke to were disengaged with services or reluctant to fully trust them, often due to past negative experiences or bad reputation.

Youth service providers should be supporting youth by building positive relationships and enabling youth to pursue goals they deem valuable to their own individual growth and development. Aside from acknowledging and respecting where youth are at, recognizing that people move through change at different stages, services must honor young peoples' resilience and survivorship.

Communication

Many youth expressed not knowing where to turn for help when in crisis, and would sometimes access adult services due to their greater visibility. For example, one participant, got caught stealing underwear because she was unaware of other options.

Youth services must be more visible and accessible, beyond a website, a phone number and some referrals. We've heard plenty of suggestions, such as having clear and simple lists in phone booths, or other public spaces. The outreach workers who distribute food, water, socks and other items on the streets could also provide information on other available services. Police officers should also be trained to deliver this information, for many youth had encounters with officers before entering the system. Lastly, we've heard a lot about what could be improved in schools, and will further develop these suggestions in a later recommendation section.

Peer Supporters

As previously mentioned, many of the youth we spoke to were a part of the hidden homelessness population and felt somewhat disconnected from the system. Furthermore, we were surprised to hear that these young people often did not think they were homeless. As long as people had a place to lay their head at night, whether that was a couch or a church basement, they thought they were fine and would not identify as a part of this stigmatized population. Therefore, they would not access some services that could have been beneficial to them, and in turn, were not recorded in the overall youth homelessness numbers. We also noticed stigma against front line workers, who had a reputation of being judgmental, or only there for a paycheck, which is in many cases false and unfortunately scares off some youth.

We therefore recommend that capacity for Peer Supporters, young and with lived experience of homelessness, be built within agencies. We believe that these positions are crucial to establish trust with youth and link them to the appropriate services. Aside from connecting youth to services, Peer Supporters could help them build a fuller support system and informally assist them in developing life skills. These positions need to be made accessible for people with lived experience regardless of their security clearance, or lack of letters after their name. Furthermore, Peer Supporters, who attended the school of life, must be valued and properly compensated. Gift cards and honorarium are not enough. Other positions could also be made available for these previously homeless young adults, whose street-acquired knowledge is as valuable as a degree when it comes to genuinely and appropriately guiding their peers.

“I’ve been in hospital five times and made two suicide attempts and am heavily medicated. I have four mental health diagnoses. I’m on disability and I’m homeless and I don’t have a psychiatrist.”

-Young woman describing the lack of mental health support she experienced

Accessible mental health support

Service providers must be trained to approach homeless youth with a trauma informed perspective that respects where they are at and makes existing options for mental health support as accessible as possible. Likewise, youth shouldn’t have to be “ready” for help. Services, again, must meet youth where they are at. Denying help to a young person fails them and deepens their often already existing distrust in the system. Additionally, there should be increased resources to create capacity for new mental health services.

School Support

Several youth reported that although their homelessness, or risk thereof, was known or predicted by their high school staff, no concrete help or useful referrals were consistently made, mostly because schools were ill equipped to know what to do. We also heard of amazing teachers personally dedicated to help some of the young people we spoke to. They would go out of their way to do what they could, without following any apparent guidelines or protocol.

All schools should establish consistent protocol to detect and manage cases of homelessness among students. Teachers and other school staff must be trained to recognize factors leading to homelessness as well as services available, to be equipped to make referrals. “Education to educators” is how one participant summed it up. Another youth suggested that career path and life skills classes in high school should also introduce homelessness prevention and housing supports. This would help youth be aware of the issue, the risk factors and the options available to themselves or their peers.

“People who say we’re spending too much [on social assistance], I think just haven’t had experience of needing help as much.”

-Young woman addressing the stigma placed on social assistance recipients

Public Financial Resources for Youth

The Ontario Government should revise Ontario Works policy with a human right to housing focus to increase rental amounts for homeless youth, remove requirement for parental approval for youth aged 16-17 to receive social assistance and ensure that rental amounts remain available to youth when there is a change in residence. Additionally, OW workers should receive specialized training to optimize support for at-risk and homeless youth. Furthermore, to eliminate barriers in accessing post-secondary education, the Ontario government should pursue an alternative protocol that would allow youth to apply for OSAP independently of parents, in order for their income, or lack thereof, to be taken into consideration when allocating bursaries or loans. Although it is currently possible for youth to claim being estranged from their parents, this is a complicated process that, once again, leaves it up to the youth to complete the administrative foot work.

“But it’s like, I was also spending my money on food and other things like that. And it’s like when it came down to it I just didn’t have enough money for everything.”

-Young woman describing how she lost her 450\$ to 500\$ apartment while receiving a 600\$ OW cheque

Housing

Participants reported facing discrimination when they attempted accessing regular market rent. According to them, people are discriminated against for their age, if they don't work or go to school, if they're on social assistance and if they don't look presentable. The options other than regular market rent, although cheaper, were described as difficult to access due to waiting lists, paperwork and rules. Furthermore, once housed in subsidized units or other forms of affordable housing, or having found reasonably affordable rental market units on their own, participants overwhelmingly reported on the deplorable conditions they lived in: general poor condition of the unit (e.g. mold, subject to flooding), household pests such as bed bugs or cockroaches, violence, home invasions, break-ins, theft, general neglect of police services when they were urgently required on site, drug use and/or sale in the building while youth were trying to stay clean. These conditions, making housing neither safe nor stable, were factors leading to some youths' relapses into homelessness.

Education should be provided by the City of Ottawa for market rental landlords on preventing discrimination against youth. Ottawa Community Housing and other affordable housing providers should revise how youth are allocated social housing opportunities to ensure they have access to healthy, positive living environments. City inspection and bylaw for housing should investigate low-barrier housing and rooming house property owners and landlords to encourage higher standards for residents. The ways in which the Landlord-Tenant Act does not apply, especially in the case of rooming houses, should also be examined, where *"they can literally just walk into that house and give you 24 hours to go. For no reason"*, as expressed by one participant. Lastly, an effective Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) intervention should take place at first point of contact with any youth serving agency: the recurrence of homelessness we've heard over and over in our consultation highlights a failure to do so.

Shelters

Almost all participants who shared their experiences with the adult shelter system commented on the violence, drug use and generally dangerous and inadequate conditions they had found themselves in. A lesser quality of service as well as no visible effort made to redirect youth to appropriate services were also present in almost every account of adult shelters. As for youth shelters, although they were generally viewed as being respectful and appropriate services, youth found it unfair that they should follow strict rules in order to keep their bed. The explicitly identified barriers to shelter, resulting in sleeping outside or in an adult shelter were the following: violence or threatening behavior, missing curfew, having drug or alcohol on premises, intoxication, smoking inside, as well as intimate relations or demonstrations.

Adult shelters must establish a protocol and/or train their workers to make firm referrals to youth serving supports for youth clients unfit to be served by adult services. Youth serving shelters should revise policies to be lower barrier and avoid youth losing shelter beds.

"I was 24. And so, I just came to Ottawa and I didn't have any resources. I was in hospital for three weeks and then they found me a spot in a women's shelter."

-Young woman describing how she first became homeless

Discharges

So it was an endless cycle of streets, of drugs, of jail. When you get out of jail you're back on the street. You've got nothing. Because you're back on the streets, you're surrounded by the drugs. Because you're back at the shelters so you're back on dope. Back on dope, you're back doing crime. Doing crime, you're back getting caught and jail."

-Man describing his transition from youth homelessness into chronic adult homelessness

No hospital, agency (such as CAS) or detention facility should discharge youth into homelessness. This denies their human right to housing and contributes to their cycling into adult homelessness. Protocols must be put in place to ensure people are housed in their transition out of service, care or detention .

Demographic Specific Recommendations



It is important to acknowledge, that despite the way we have categorized this data, identities of vulnerable young people experiencing homelessness are often complex and intersectional. For clarity and flow, we have clearly divided recommendations into the three key subpopulations that are overrepresented in the youth homeless population. However, many young people that we interviewed identified with multiple communities, further complicating their search for appropriate services. It is clear there is more work to be done on the part of service providers and the structure of the social service system to respond effectively to young people who occupy multiple complex identities, and we hope that the following recommendations from young people provide some direction for how to move forward.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth

As true for all other youth, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth must be met where they are at, in compliance with the “youth choice and self-determination” principle of Housing First for Youth. We wish to emphasize this because our consultation has allowed us to meet several highly resilient young people who often opted out of services because they were not responsive to their needs. Without culturally competent services, we’ve heard about unfair compromises that had to be made. For instance, as a result of not being able to smudge inside her living space (for the smoke is deemed a safety hazard), the young woman cited above has significantly reduced her spiritual practice. She explained the issues with smudging outside:

“It kind of loses its meaning. The purpose of smudging is to kind of, you know, you remove your jewelry, you undo your hair, and it’s something out, it’s purifying, right? It’s meant to be purifying so if you’re doing it in full view of everyone staring and you’re taking off your shoes and you’re, it’s, it’s just, it attracts a lot of unwanted attention, so I’ve found that since I’ve been here since January I haven’t practiced as much.”

We’ve also seen a number of First Nations, Inuit and Métis young people who are not accessing services at all or services that are linked into the wider data system, which provides an opportunity to better understand the number of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis young people who experience homelessness. We strongly suspect that in accordance with the findings yielded by our literature review, First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth make up a large portion of the hidden homeless population.

“Certain teachings and certain spiritual practices could definitely be, you know, helpful I think. [...] To healing and having someone on hand who understands that. I mean, I’m living here at the YMCA and the first thing I asked was am I allowed to smudge here? And I’m not.”

-Young First Nations woman describing the need for culturally safe services



In order to adequately work alongside First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth:

- Cultural safety training must be provided to all people working in the sector. Orientation to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis services is also crucial, for workers must be equipped to effectively refer their clients. We suggest that the training be delivered locally, by a First Nations, Inuit and/or Métis agency, in order to build and strengthen relationships.
- We must implement a cross-sectoral mandate to connect youth to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis services first at intake stages. Youth entering cities must be connected with temporary income and orientation to services in a detailed fashion to prevent prolonged homelessness.
- We must recognize cultural differences in how we respond, in order for our services and structures to not further colonize First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. For instance, we are encouraged by CAS's growing pursuit of the kinship model allowing for First Nations, Inuit and Métis youths' placement with other family members.
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis practices should be permitted and encouraged in all services and housing (e.g. hospitals, shelters, supportive housing). For example, one participant expressed their desire for "more First Nations run places where they're free to practice, where elders are free to visit and counsel youth because a lot of elders also have experience with traumatic backgrounds".
- A strong relationship and desire to collaborate needs to be built between mainstream and First Nations, Inuit and Métis service providers. This starts by engagement with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis service providers directing mainstream service providers as to the best way to do this. Newer models such as those between Wabano Centre and Youth Services Bureau - where the response for a young person identifying as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis is to immediately connect and refer them to Wabano are positive steps in the right direction. The default setting should be First Nations, Inuit and Métis services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth, not the other way around. The more that mainstream service providers can support and facilitate this connection to culturally appropriate services, the better.
- All service providers should implement progressive affirmative action policies, in order to have more First Nations, Inuit, and Métis staff.
- The Truth and Reconciliation recommendations should be known, understood and met to the best of mainstream service providers' abilities.

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

-Young Inuit woman expressing the need for services responsive to her cultural experiences

The previously stated suggestions for youths’ realities are also applicable to Inuit youth. However, we have made this additional and distinct series of recommendations to acknowledge some particular issues faced by Inuit youth. One of the greatest challenges faced seems to be the culture shock experienced when young people arrive from the North, let alone the adaptation to a different geography. Furthermore, the mainstream sector’s lack of understanding of Inuit culture was clearly expressed. We’ve also heard that many Inuit youth are simply brought to Ottawa by Child Welfare and dropped off at the Shepherds of Good Hope where they are asked to wait for a worker to come and meet them.

Based on our consultation, we strongly recommend the following:

- Revamp of the intervention for Inuit youth entering cities, finding them a culturally safe and appropriate place to stay, as well as connecting them with temporary income and orientation to services in a detailed fashion to prevent prolonged homelessness.
- Enhanced child-care for single mothers separated from their partners.
- Enhanced support for people taking entrepreneurial or alternative forms of income making outside of the job market. This flexibility is key, as some Inuit youth may not have engaged with the mainstream, formal employment context and may be intimidated by this process.
- Enhanced services for Inuit youth who have recently aged out of youth services.
- Enhanced Inuit specific sensitivity training for service providers around generational trauma and residential schools, and the impact of this history on substance use and mental illness.
- Hiring Inuit workers to support Inuit people in southern services for youth.

In order for the mainstream sector to truly move towards culturally safe service provision for First Nations, Inuit and Métis young people, we must start with listening and building better relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis agencies. These recommendations have come directly from First Nations, Inuit and Métis young people who have lived through homelessness, and additional recommendations and ideas about how to change mainstream organizational culture must come from the ongoing feedback and recommendations from First Nations, Inuit and Métis service providers and the wider First Nations, Inuit and Métis community in Ottawa.

“Most queers don’t go to shelters because it’s dangerous.”

-Trans youth promoting enhanced accessibility of services for LGBTQ2S+ youth

While most LGBTQ2S+ respondents were satisfied with the appropriateness of youth shelter services, adult shelters and other services were reported as being more problematic. Safety was the most often stated preoccupation by this subpopulation, often more concerned with fellow shelter occupants’ transphobia and homophobia than shelter workers’. However we also noticed that lots of work has been done over the last few years, particularly in youth services,, judging from the differences between recent accounts of accessing services, which were mostly positive, compared to those of older youth looking back on past experiences, which were mostly negative. Lastly, the numerous accounts of family based transphobia and homophobia, which was far too often the motive for them being kicked out, indicates that there is a general lack of education and prevention done with families.

In order to further improve our work with LGBTQ2S+ youth, participants suggested:

- Specific services, shelters or spaces in shelters for lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, trans, two spirited and non-binary youth.
- Providing sensitivity training for sector workers to enhance referrals to community health centers to medical professionals who can support transitions and sexual health for LGBTQ2S+ youth. This training should also include advisement on how to respect and support one’s transition to pronouns and identity despite the state of bureaucratic paperwork.
- Hire queer workers to support youth.
- Enhance access to mental health support for LGBTQ2S+ youth.
- Enhance support to access employment for LGBTQ2S+ youth.
- Pursue efforts to educate children, adolescents and their families about the variety of sexual identities and orientations to build safer schools, families and communities in which all youth feel at home, in order to prevent experiences of homelessness.

Newcomer Youth

The first or second generation immigrant youth we spoke with all shared a difficult and sometimes irreconcilable tension between their culture of origin and the Canadian culture, leading to disagreements with parents that sometimes led to homelessness or precarious housing. Other newcomer youths' families were abusive, but participants reported having difficulty recognizing it at that time. We've also heard that, along with other Canadian families, lots of stigma exists among certain newcomer families. Sexual orientation and identity other than straight and cisgender, homelessness and mental health issues are concepts that sometimes simply don't exist, are not conceivable nor acceptable. These taboos make it very challenging for newcomer youth to identify a problem and ask for help.

Based on what we've heard from participants, we recommend:

- Enhance education in schools and community institutions for youth from ethnically and culturally diverse communities about youth service options to prevent and intervene in homelessness.
- Make information about multi-faith housing initiatives accessible in community centers.
- Enhance opportunities for newcomer youth in Ottawa schools to participate in The Upstream Project- a school-based prevention program AWHO is working to bring to Ottawa this coming year. This will likely require significant engagement with newcomer families around the value of both the assessment tool and connection to ongoing supports if a young person is identified as being at risk. Enhanced family based preventive interventions and mediation that recognize the impact of intergenerational differences between first and second generation newcomers amongst families.
- Enhance support for newcomer parents to access education, work and social networks and mental health supports as needed when they arrive in Canada.



Conclusion

To summarize, it is clear that more supports and services are needed that address the complexity that youth from these communities experience around homelessness. It's not enough to have services that are rigid in accepting certain individuals and turn away others. Youth who don't qualify to get help never get the chance to improve their circumstances. Any step forward starts with understanding the individual and properly assessing what intervention is needed. Building a rapport with service providers and having enough service providers to do this is crucial.

Shockingly, while conducting research, the harsh and sometimes violent stories individuals told of their experiences was as surprising as how peers and the general community seemed to respond to the nature of the research we did. Excited to share the work we were doing and tell others that we were part of a community that was aiming to truly find out how we could create bridges and solutions for homeless youth, we were met with a different response. People were apprehensive and skeptical, or worse, not even concerned. As a result, the Research Liaisons saw seemingly younger versions of themselves in those they interviewed, facing much of the same hardships; an eerie reminder that the state of Ottawa's homeless crisis is not improving fast enough.

Perhaps we haven't come to see addressing homelessness as a need, rather we see it as something to be put away, hidden and swept under the rug. Youth homelessness is not a subject that everyone wants to acknowledge, and it's not something that everyone has the language to speak about. Herein lies the elephant in the room - an obstacle that must be overcome in order to progress, and eradicate youth homelessness. We must move towards a community in which conversations about youth homelessness are not taboo. We hope that this report is a step in this direction, and something that can be built upon in the future in our community.



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