YOUTH RECONNECT WORKS

RAFT

SUPPORTING NIAGARA'S YOUTH

YOUTH RECONNECT WORKS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the first major review of our Youth Reconnect program. Utilizing data collected over the past 6 years and with a sample size of over 500 youth an external researcher was hired to analyze the data and determine how successful this program has been in addressing youth homelessness. It is our desire that this report will illustrate the value in seeking preventative solutions with a goal of ending youth homelessness as opposed to managing it and ultimately prolonging it. Some effort has been made to quantify the costs and savings of this program to society and the taxpayer; what we can't quantify is the losses suffered by the youth, both emotional and mental. It is our hope that by illustrating what can be quantified will we be able to continue lessening the impact of those losses.

MAIN FINDINGS ·

1   67% of youth became homeless or were put in imminent risk of homelessness due to Parental Conflict.

2   40% of all youth were referred to the Youth Reconnect program by a School Official.

3   80% of youth were in housing at the time of discharge compared to only 35% at intake.

4   The Youth Reconnect program was able to find accommodations for 86% of youths in the same region where they were originally from.

5   70% of individuals were attending an educational institution at the time of discharge.

6   From the time of intake to discharge, there were 60 fewer youth staying in overnight shelters, which equated to a savings of $115,920 since the start of the Youth Reconnect program.

7   Considering the program was able to secure regular housing for 361/463 clients who were at risk of accessing shelters in the near future, the RAFT accrued a savings of $697,452 over the life of the project.

8   We can conservatively assume the program assisted at least 247 students to return to an educational setting, which equated to a savings of $4,718,688 over the entirety of the Youth Reconnect program.

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the program was able to
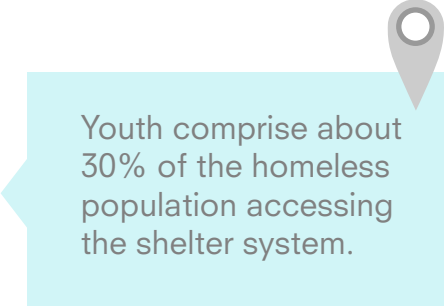secure regular housing for
361 of 463 at risk clients

over the life of the RAFT project: a total savings of $697,452 were accrued

INTRODUCTION

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA ····················

Over the past two decades, homelessness has become a very serious issue in many urban centres across Canada. Throughout the 1990's, homelessness became a prominent social problem resulting from fewer affordable housing initiatives, problematic social assistance programs, and shifting employment opportunities (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2007). It has been estimated that up to 200 000 individuals experience homelessness every year (State of Homelessness, 2013). Moreover, the same report suggested that homelessness costs our economy up to 7 billion dollars every year.

More recently, youth homelessness has become a nationwide concern. One study has suggested that youth comprise 30% of the homeless population accessing the shelter system. This accounts for approximately 35 000 individuals annually, or up to 6000 homeless youths on any given night (Segaert, 2012). Unfortunately, these statistics do not describe the entire population. We know that shelters are a place of last resort for this population with many opting to stayed temporarily with friends and others and some actively choosing the streets.

> Youth comprise about 30% of the homeless population accessing the shelter system.

Originally, a broad-based strategy to address homelessness in Canada appeared to be more than adequate, however this is simply not the case. Youth are still developing physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Many have little to no work experience or have dropped out of educational institutions. In many situations, youth homelessness arises from family conflict that forces them to leave their homes. Lastly, there are separate systems in Canada that manage youth in terms of welfare support, judicially and both in terms of healthcare and education (Kamloops, 2014). Thus, in order to respond to youth who are homeless, local community initiatives have established a variety of services to sustain these populations.

ABOUT THE RAFT ·······································

In 1992, in response to growing concerns associated with a lack of services for at-risk and homeless youth, an interfaith task force examined how the community could best meet their needs. Following consultations with education, social services, justice, the faith community and local agencies, the RAFT, operated by the Niagara Resource Service for Youth, became a reality.

With funding from service clubs, community groups, the faith community and concerned individuals, the RAFT took shape and officially opened in May of 1994. The RAFT began as a drop in centre operating five nights a week. The RAFT expanded its programs to include a 24 bed 24/7 Hostel, a Steps to Independent Living program, a Regional Transportation program, a community based Youth Reconnection Program and Eternal Routes a family finding/family reunification program for youth who have been in care and are transitioning to adulthood.

The community development initiatives are aimed at reducing and preventing the number of at-risk youth in Niagara. Through its Neighbourhood Awakening Initiative, the RAFT helps build stronger, caring communities in Niagara by engaging potential at-risk youth and fostering their empowerment, independence and self-esteem.

ABOUT YOUTH RECONNECT

Youth Reconnect was launched as a pilot project in 2008 in the Town of Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada. This project was later scaled up to cover the majority of the Niagara region in 2009. The project itself developed to address youth homelessness in a rural community, which brought together numerous stakeholders from across the Niagara region. Until this point, homelessness generally was considered an urban issue and the existence of youth homeless was largely overlooked, if considered at all. Using available research and recognizing that funding for any initiative would be limited, forced the stakeholder committee to consider prevention as opposed to emergency services. The lack of an existing region wide service system also forced the committee to look for alternatives. As the focus was youth, a natural solution was the secondary school system. This choice was backed by research, which noted that average age of youth homelessness was 15-16. Empirical data concluded that the vast majority of youth accessing the shelter system were attending high school immediately prior to their homelessness. In many cases youth had to dropout of high school in order to travel to available urban shelters.

> The Youth Reconnect Initiative is a community based prevention program that reconnects high risk youth to their home community.

The Youth Reconnect Initiative is a community based prevention program that reconnects high risk youth to their home community. Referrals come from high schools, community partners, social service agencies and police services. Program participants are adolescents, between the ages of 16-19. Participants are precariously housed and in eminent danger of becoming homeless. This situation forces teens to choose between remaining in school or acquiring their basic needs for shelter, food and clothing; often the result is dropping out of school and leaving their community in search of crisis services.

The initiative helps clients' access resources and increases their self-sufficiency, by assisting adolescents to maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community. Youth Reconnect provides advocacy, life skills training, one-on-one mentoring, emergency hostel access, family reunification, and community integration. Provided in partnership with other social service agencies, initiative focuses on helping clients to live independently and reduce high-risk behaviours while maintaining school attendance.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this report was derived from the Niagara Resource Service for Youth called the RAFT, which was initiated in 1994. Briefly, individuals were eligible to receive services if they were 16-19 years of age. In the present report, data was analyzed from a sample of 563 youth who participated in a baseline and/or follow-up visits between April 2008 and May 2014.

Participants were administered a questionnaire at intake, three months, nine months, one year, and at discharge. The questionnaire elicits a range of information, including demographic data, housing status, income, and access to education.
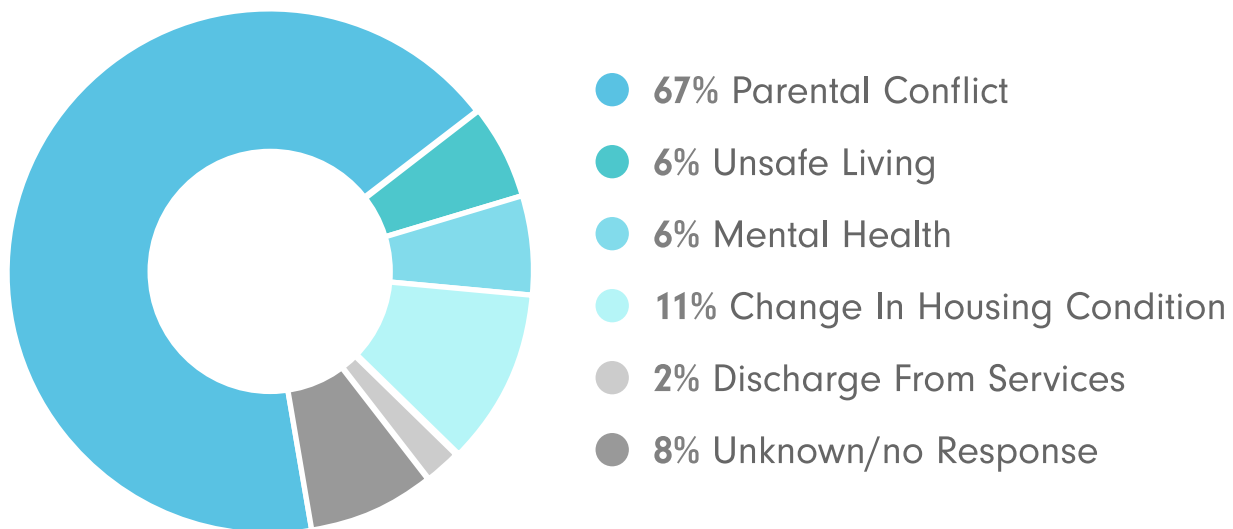
Descriptive statistics summarizing the reasons for homelessness and how youth were referred to the RAFT services were drawn from 239 youths who had accessed the program between March 2013-April 2014.

Simple descriptive statistics were used to generate findings for variables describing participant outcomes. These variables included: gender, housing status at discharge, housing region at discharge, education status at intake and discharge, and employment status. A cost-savings analysis was also performed to determine the economic impact of housing youth and retaining youth in educational institutions in Niagara over the past six years. All statistical analyses were analyzed in 2014 and performed using the SAS software version 9.3 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC).

Reasons for homelessness from March 2013 to April 2014 (N=239)

Youth accessing the RAFT reported several different reasons for being homeless. The majority (67%) had experienced some form of parental conflict, which included: parental conflict, being kicked out, and/or being pregnant. Of the remaining youth, 11% reported a change in housing condition (relationship breakdown or needing new housing because of issues with landlords or payment issues), 6% were in unsafe living conditions (not a safe home, alcohol/drug abuse by the parent or youth, or experiencing physical/emotional/or sexual abuse). A small proportion (6%) had been diagnosed with mental health issues, and a few youth (2%) reported being discharged from services, such as incarceration facilities or foster care.

REASONS FOR HOMELESSNESS

- **67**% Parental Conflict
- **6**% Unsafe Living
- **6**% Mental Health
- **11**% Change In Housing Condition
- **2**% Discharge From Services
- **8**% Unknown/no Response

Referrals to program from March 2013 to April 2014 (N=239)

Youth were referred to Youth Reconnect from a multitude of different services. The majority of referrals came from school officials such as youth counselors (40%), local youth shelters/hostels (25%), or social service agencies such as Family and Children's Services in Niagara, Port Cares, or probation officers. The remaining referrals came from the Ontario Works program (12%), and family, friend, or self-referrals (9%).

REFERRALS TO PROGRAM

- **40%** School Official
- **12%** Ontario Works
- **9%** Family/Friend/Self
- **14%** Other Social Service
- **25%** Youth Shelter/Hostel
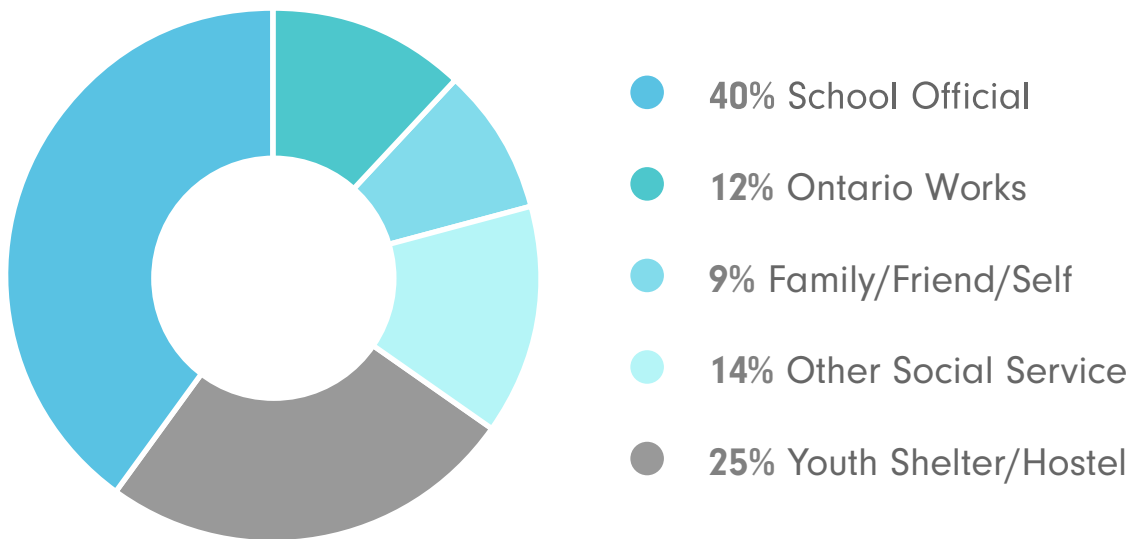
Youth Reconnect services & numbers

Youth Reconnect by the numbers:

- From April 2008 to May 2014, 563 youth had accessed Youth Reconnect.

- 56% of youths accessing RAFT were female (315/561); 43% were male (244/561); 0.5% were transgender.

- At intake 35% (199/562) were in regular housing whereas at discharge 80% (361/463) were in regular housing.

At the time of discharge, 88% of youth found stabilized housing or prevented housing breakdown (discharge outcomes figure).
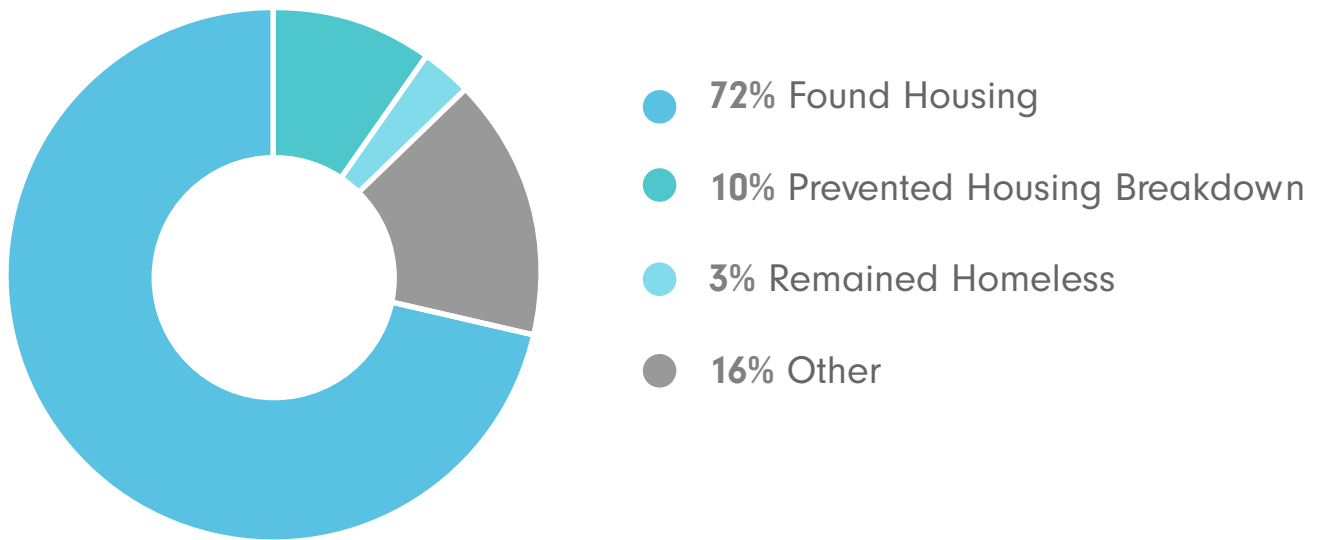
35% of youths were housed at intake

80% of youths were housed at discharge

DISCHARGE OUTCOMES

● **72%** Found Housing

● **10%** Prevented Housing Breakdown

● **3%** Remained Homeless

● **16%** Other

One major goal of the RAFT program is to find housing for youth or maintain housing in the same region where they had accessed services. This enables youth to stay in contact with their social support network, maintain friendships, and remain in an environment in which they are familiar and comfortable living in. Further by allowing youth to stay in their home communities it lessens the burden on urban services and allows youth to receive natural supports as opposed to costly institutional ones. Of the youth entering the RAFT program, 86% found accommodations in the same region where they had originally accessed the services (region figure).

PROPORTION OF YOUTH WHO WERE KEPT IN THE SAME REGION

● **86%** Kept in the Same Region

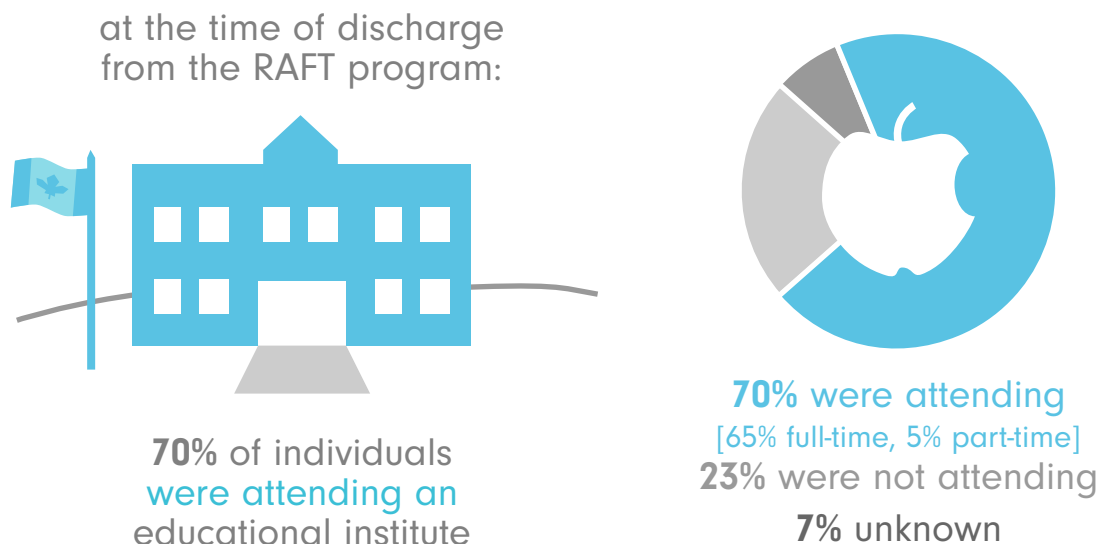● **14%** Moved to a Different Region
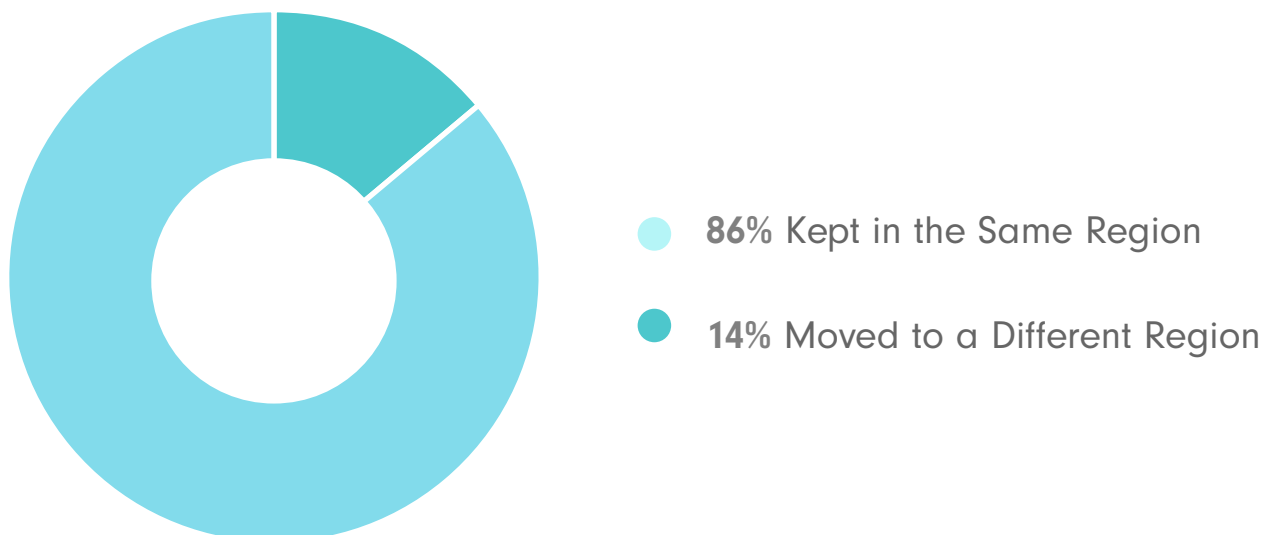
Education and Employment

Access to education is a basic human right but also an integral developmental component in every youth's lifetime. It is an arena to master new skills, forge lifelong friendships and relationships, and is a mandatory prerequisite for most employment opportunities in Canada. Not surprisingly, high school dropouts are three times more likely to come from low-income families, and has been linked with two times greater unemployment and lower salaries (Pathways to Education, 2012). Moreover, 63-90% of homeless youth have reportedly not graduated from secondary school in Canada despite being the appropriate age to have earned their diploma (Homeless Hub, 2014). Thus, the RAFT not only tries to find housing accommodations for at-risk youth but also encourages individuals to continue attending educational institutions or assists youth to return to high school if they had previously dropped out. Thus, although 89% (411/461) of the youth were unemployed, 70% of youth were attending an educational institution at the time of discharge or only 23% were not in school (education figure). This is a promising statistic given the long-term positive returns that education will afford youth rather than prematurely entering the workforce without at least a high school diploma. Moreover, graduating with a high school diploma has been linked with other positive health outcomes including: longer life expectancy, fewer reported cases of hypertension, smoking, diabetes, and cardiovascular illnesses (Pathways to Education, 2012). Finally, graduating with a high school diploma improves the likelihood that an individual will attend college or university, which is associated with higher average salaries and greater breadth of employment opportunities.

- 216/446 have Ontario works income; 136/446 have no source.

PROPORTION OF YOUTH ATTENDING EDUCATION AT DISCHARGE

at the time of discharge from the RAFT program:

70% of individuals were attending an educational institute

70% were attending
[65% full-time, 5% part-time]
23% were not attending
7% unknown

Cost of Services

- Shelter bed $1932 per month.

- Therefore 60 fewer people in emergency shelters, which equates (based on $1932 cost per month in a shelter) to a savings of $115,920* over the entirety of the project. (*Assumes each youth averaged one month per stay in the shelter).

- However, all youth who accessed Youth Reconnect were at risk of accessing an overnight shelter in the near future. Based on this assumption, and the fact that the program was able to secure regular housing for 361/463 clients, the RAFT accrued a savings of **$697,452** over the life of the project.

- 1/562 in jail (1%); 71/562 in shelter (13%) at intake; 3/453 in jail (1%); 11/453 (4%) in shelter at discharge.
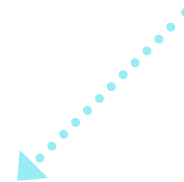
from the time of intake to discharge:

there were **60 fewer youths** staying in overnight shelters

$1932/mo
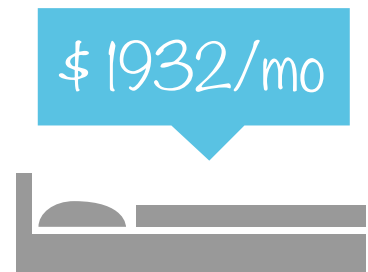
[at an average stay of 1 month, and cost of $1932 per person]

this equated to a **savings of $115,920 since** the RAFT program began

Education Cost-benefit analysis:

Annual cost of dropping-out of high school: $19,104 (Hankivsky, 2008).

The Youth Reconnect program helped retain 325/462 youths in an educational institution, which equated to a public and private sector savings of $6,208,800 for life of the project. However, of the 325 youth who were still in school at discharge, 76% were from a region outside of St. Catharines where the RAFT shelter is located. Youth who had to leave their home community to access the shelter would have to drop out of high school because they would not be able to maintain the prerequisite attendance. Therefore, we can conservatively assume the Youth Reconnect program assisted at least 247 students to return to an educational setting, which equated to a savings of $4,718,688 over the entirety of the program.
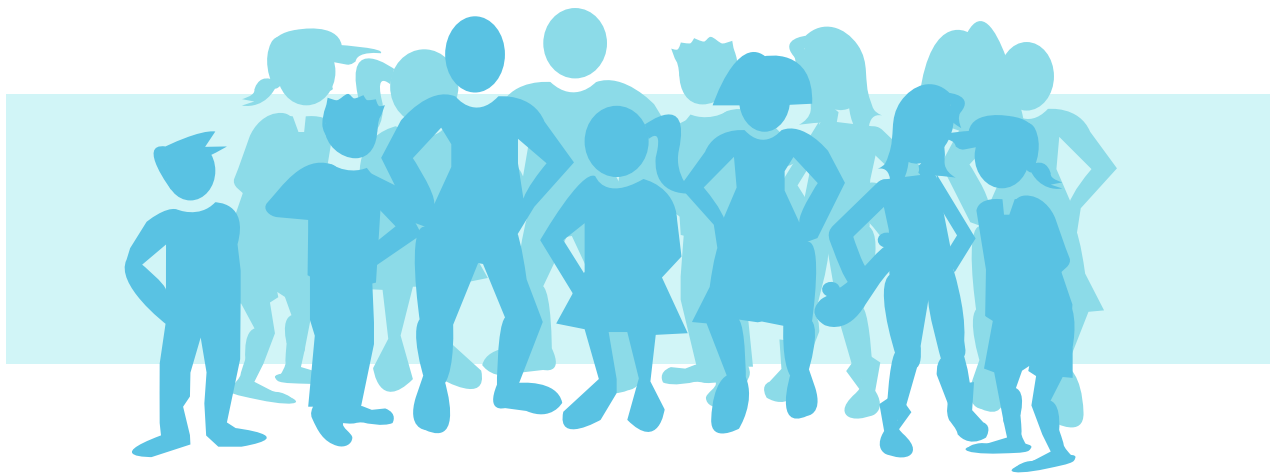
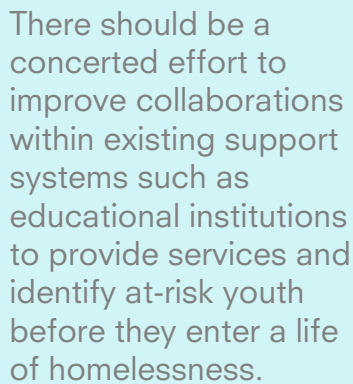RAFT assisted at least **247 students**
to return to an educational setting

[which equated a savings of
$4,718,688 over the entirety
of the the RAFT project]

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to **collaborate with schools** to identify at-risk youths and prevent homelessness by providing an array of services.

- Continued efforts to **prevent and reduce homelessness though housing first strategies** rather than simply managing the issue.

- Promote and **encourage family reunification** if possible to ensure youths have a network of peers, family, and friends to support them.

- Local communities have developed and demonstrated the benefits of preventing youth homelessness. There may now be a need to integrate all levels of government to create a nationwide system of supports to reduce and eradicate homelessness in Canada.

- The Adolescent healthy survey reported that 41% of youths approached a teacher, and 27% spoke with a school counselor in the past year (only behind friends and family) (Kamloops, 2014). Evidently, educational institutions are an existing system which youths are taking advantage of for support. Therefore, although there will always be a need for emergency services, there should be an emphasis on minimizing the need for these services and **maximizing the existing systems that are in place to provide support for youths.**

- **Continue to expand similar integrated youth programs in rural communities across the country.**

CONCLUSIONS

In the present report, we observed a high proportion of youth (88%) who had prevented housing breakdown or were in stabilized housing at discharge. Moreover, the number of youth who reported living in regular housing increased from 35% at intake to 80% at discharge. These results are especially promising considering the various health, economic, and social risks associated with youth living on our streets. However, although these results are promising there is still a need to shift our strategies for how we respond to youth homelessness. Rather than focusing on responding to youth once they have become homeless, there should be a concerted effort to improve collaborations within existing support systems such as educational institutions to provide services and identify at-risk youth before they enter a life of homelessness. By partnering with the educational system for early identification, we will be able to transition to a homeless reduction approach rather than simply managing the issue using emergency services.

> There should be a concerted effort to improve collaborations within existing support systems such as educational institutions to provide services and identify at-risk youth before they enter a life of homelessness.

Although the generalizability of our findings are limited to our area of research, other reports published in low-income areas in Toronto, and more recently in Kamloops have demonstrated similar results to addressing youth homelessness (Pathways to Education, 2012; Kamloops, 2014). Evidently, youth homelessness is not entirely concentrated in major metropolitan areas in Canada, and there should be continued efforts to maintain and integrate programs targeting youth in rural areas across the country.

Homelessness does not only affect the individual living on the streets, but also severely costs society as a whole. Considering the exorbitant costs associated with increased healthcare visits, judicial problems and incarceration, and the funding associated with operating emergency shelters, leaving homeless youth to fend for themselves on the streets is a much greater financial burden than providing housing for youth. Evidently, there are challenges associated with securing affordable housing for youth however; the results from this report demonstrate that it not only possible but economically feasible and beneficial for society to invest in housing the homeless. These findings compounded with the fact that the RAFT assisted 247 youth to return to education also provided a large positive return on investment.

Ultimately, the Youth Reconnect program has provided an invaluable service to the region of Niagara and especially to at-risk and homeless youth. Securing housing for at-risk populations requires dedication, collaboration, and extensive planning yet, this program has demonstrated that the benefits far outweigh the costs. Although there will always be a need for emergency services, the goal of programs such as Youth Reconnect is to reduce the reliance on these services by implementing homeless reduction strategies to identify at-risk youth before they enter our streets. Although these results are promising, if we ever hope to end youth homelessness, there is a continued need to develop integration and collaboration between services targeting youths to improve the capacity of these services to respond to homeless populations.

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:
TYLER PETTES

Tyler Pettes's MSc, BPHE, research is focused on services targeting homeless and low-income populations in Canada. His work has included a series of studies and reports evaluating the adequacy, accessibility, and responsiveness for meal programs and food banks to respond to homeless and underfed populations in Canada. He is currently working with a team of collaborators at York University to develop a report evaluating housing prices and the cost of living in all major metropolitan areas across the country.

Tyler Pettes' research interests also extend to injection drug use, health policy and service evaluation, and HIV/AIDS risk behaviours. His recent work in this field include studies evaluating Methadone use amongst HIV positive injection drug users in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, and a gender-based analysis examining depressive symptoms and unsafe sexual practices amongst injection drug users.

The analysis and interpretations contained in this report are those of the RAFT and do not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

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