

## PATHWAYS IN & OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

# 2 Reconnecting with Family and Community: Pathways Out of Youth Homelessness

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Central to our concept of adolescent development is the idea that the movement from childhood to adulthood is a gradual process, one that is guided by the intensive involvement of supportive adults, and family members in particular. Few young people live wholly independently. Most rely on family members – not just parents, but also siblings and other adults (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins) – for a variety of their needs, and to help with the task of growing into adulthood. While we know that relations between young people and the adults in their lives are rarely without some degree of tension and conflict, there is a strong belief that given time, young people will move into adulthood with positive family relations intact (Sherrod, 1996; Fasick, 1984; Nash et al., 2005).

When analyzing young people who are homeless, though, the focus on family shifts. Young people become homeless for many reasons, but the most significant is family conflict. For many young people, the streets become a refuge after fleeing households where they have experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse. The fact that two thirds of street youth leave homes characterized by violence and abuse should make one reconsider whether reuniting these youth with their families is desirable, or even possible. Our understanding of youth homelessness is very much based on the idea of the family as a ‘problem’ – that family abuse and conflict are at the core of the young person’s experience of homelessness. We have identified “problems within families” as a key cause of youth homelessness, but we must be careful how we generalize this knowledge and apply it to practice. We need to further explore the nature and meaning of family relations for street youth and to deepen our understanding of the roles, meaning and composition of families. Just as the use of ‘runaway’ and ‘street kid’ obscures

the complexity and diversity of pathways to homelessness, so the use of terms such as “family dysfunction”, “family conflict” or “abusive home” oversimplifies the issue by assuming that all family members contribute to the tensions that exist between young people who become homeless, and their caregivers or other family members. The result is that family is framed as a problem, and often dismissed as potential partners in working towards solutions to youth homelessness.

What do we know about the dynamics of family relations and how they may differ for street youth compared to other young people? Are *all* relations within the families of homeless youth – parents, siblings, extended family – problematic? Are all broken relations irreparable? Does – and should – homelessness mean an end to the role of the family in these young people’s lives? If, as will be argued, there is a chance for reconciliation, what are the potential benefits to young people, to their families and to their communities? Key to the process of reconciliation is a rethinking of the assumptions upon which existing programs and services are based - specifically the focus on self-sufficiency.

It is a common mistake to assume that self-sufficiency means independence from family. Central to the goal of self-sufficiency is the importance of establishing important relationships and relying on the guidance of others while moving forward in life (Allen et al., 1994; Allen et al., 1996; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). People flourish most when they have supports, and these may potentially include family. Many street youth services, though, assume that because young people are fleeing damaged family situations, in order to move forward with their lives, they must leave that world behind, permanently. Most services and interventions for street youth largely ignore the potential role of family members in helping young people make the transition to adulthood. However, we profoundly limit our understanding of youth homelessness, and how we respond to it, if family (defined narrowly) is seen only in terms of dysfunction and if we assume that broken family relations cannot be reconciled, even partially. The key is learning how to build healthy relationships and how to deal with and/or resolve conflicts with family, where possible.

Developing programs for family reconnection can be seen as a central component of a systems-based<sup>1</sup>, preventive approach to youth homelessness. Working with young people and their families before homelessness occurs, or intervening to mediate family conflicts (where possible) once young people

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1. Sometimes referred to a ‘system of care’ approach (which originated in children’s mental health), this means that programs, services and service delivery systems are organized at every level to increase client access, and ensure that individual needs are met by mainstream and specialized services (Gaetz, forthcoming). Prevention is best addressed through such integrated systems, where young people and families who are in crisis access the services they need in a timely and seamless fashion.

leave home, offers them the opportunity to effectively improve or resolve family conflicts so they can return home and/or move into independent living in a safe and supported manner. For many, if not most street youth, family *does* matter in some way, and addressing family issues can help young people potentially move out of homelessness and into adulthood in a healthier way.

## Prevention is Key

One of the main arguments framing the research profiled here is the need to re-think existing approaches to youth homelessness by placing a stronger emphasis on prevention. In characterizing the Canadian response to homelessness, it is important to note that most of our effort and investment goes into emergency responses rather than prevention. Evidence on the introduction of preventive approaches to youth homelessness in Australia and the United Kingdom (discussed below), points to the success of prevention and intervention strategies either before a youth leaves home or when a young person becomes homeless. Interventions focus on family mediation and attempt to repair damaged relationships so that young people can remain at home, or if that is not possible or wise (particularly in cases of abuse), that young people can move into the community with proper supports, in a safe and planned way.

The findings explored in this chapter are based on research conducted with the Family Reconnect Program, part of Eva's Initiatives in Toronto (Winland, et al., 2011). The program offers youth (between the ages of 16 and 24) at risk of leaving home or who are homeless and living in youth shelters, opportunities to rebuild relationships with family through participation in individual and/or family therapy. The research methodology consisted of three components. First, we conducted interviews with staff of Eva's Family Reconnect program (hereafter referred to as FRP). This included all counseling staff, plus the Clinical Consultant who provides direction and support for the Family Reconnect team. Interviews were conducted as a group and individually on several occasions. Second, in order to best assess the impacts of FRP on those who participated, the research team conducted a series of interviews with program clients – both youth and family members.<sup>2</sup> The third

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2. Participants were approached by FRP staff about their willingness to be interviewed. This resulted in a total of seven youth clients and eight family clients volunteering to be interviewed for the project. Family members interviewed included parents, aunts and uncles and grandparents. The clients and family members identified for this study were not related to each other. The age range of youth clients (four males and three females) was 19-26, with an average age of 20. Four of the youth are still street involved and staying at the shelter and the rest have since left the shelter system and either live at home or on their own. Four of the clients were people of colour and all except one, who does not have legal status in Canada, are either permanent residents or Canadian citizens. The socioeconomic profiles of the families of these youth range from low income to wealthy professionals with postgraduate education, pointing to the fact that homeless youth come from diverse backgrounds.

research method used was to analyze the data that Eva's Initiatives collects on its clients. Over the past five years, Eva's has been recording information about clients who participate in the program. Our research with this program, and on similar programs in the United Kingdom and Australia, reveals key gaps in our understanding of the relationship between family breakdown or conflict, and youth homelessness. Most significantly, it strongly suggests that not all young people who are homeless are permanently alienated from all of their family members; many young people who are homeless continue to maintain ties with family members, friends and the communities they left.

Eva's Family Reconnect program was established with a mandate to assist young people aged 16-24 interested in addressing and potentially reconciling differences with their families. Working with young people who are interested in developing healthier relationships with their families, staff offer individual and family counseling, referrals to other agencies and services, psychiatric assessments, psychological assessments for learning disabilities, as well as accompaniment and advocacy assistance. Young people and families come into contact with Family Reconnect through a number of channels. For most clients, the first point of contact is through staff working at Eva's Place shelter. In fact, the Family Reconnect staff rely heavily on referrals by front line shelter staff, who will inform the FRP team of cases in which a youth might be interested in and/or can potentially benefit from youth and/or family counseling. In these cases, youth are not obliged to consult with the Family Reconnect Program staff but are made aware of the resource.

In some cases, parents and/or other family members may directly contact the FRP before a young person becomes homeless. They may request the involvement or intervention of the FRP staff, however, counseling may only proceed with a youth's explicit consent. This kind of preventive work often involves young people under the age of 16. There is no single or set outcome expected from the work with the Family Reconnect Program. Young people may improve their relationships with family members to the point of being able to return home. For others, moving back home is not possible or advisable, but moving back to the community with the support of family members may be a realistic goal. For others still, there may be no significant improvement in relations with family, but young people may be helped to reconcile themselves to this fact, allowing them to move forward in their lives in a meaningful way.

The program offers an important example of how the principles of family reconnection can be applied at the program level. This is done by addressing damaged family relations through individual counseling and support, counseling and mediation with family members, as well as and group counseling that help

young people learn from their peers. The Family Reconnect program highlights the importance of support for young people – and their families – in dealing with mental health issues and learning disabilities. These challenges often underlie problematic family relations, and a better understanding of youth's mental health issues and learning disabilities – usually assisted by clinical assessment and treatment of these issues – often helps young people and their families figure out how to move forward from what seemed to be an impossible situation.

At the end of the day, a better understanding of what leads to family conflict and youth homelessness – whether or not young people are eventually able to move home – helps them to move forward with their lives. Most important here is consideration of the safety and wellbeing of the young person. With the help and support of Family Intervention counselors, youth, and potentially family members, work on the root causes of their struggles, including family breakdown, conflict, difficulties at school and lack of adequate learning assessment or mental health resources, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as life and parenting skills. By focusing on building positive family relationships where possible, the program helps young people and their families develop skills and tools, learn to access necessary supports and work towards long lasting, healthy and supportive relationships.

## What the Research Tells Us

The pathways into homelessness are complex and shaped by a variety of individual and structural factors that result in unique circumstances for different individuals. While the stresses and strains discussed above (family conflict, mental health issues, etc.) are experienced by a large number of young people, not all of them will become or remain homeless. Often it is a significant event triggering a crisis that leads a young person to run away or to be kicked out of the home (Janus et al., 2005). Such events can range from conflicts with parents and/or violent encounters, to school failure and involvement with institutional authorities such as the police (O'Grady et al., 2011). Some research suggests that many teenagers leave home under difficult circumstances, but a large number will eventually return home (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005; Teare et al., 1992).

The large body of research on youth homelessness that has emerged over the past few decades focuses primarily on the processes that lead to the street and the risk factors associated with homelessness. It consistently identifies difficult family situations and conflict as being the key underlying factors in youth homelessness. Between 60% and 70% of young people flee households where they have experienced physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse (Ballon et al., 2002; Braitstein et al., 2003; Caputo et al., 1997; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus

et al., 1987; Karabanow, 2004; Poirer et al., 1999; Tyler et al., 2004; Whitbeck, 1999; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Van den Bree et al., 2009; Andres-Lemay et al., 2005). There are clear consequences to such early exposure to violence and abuse, including low self-esteem, higher rates of depression and suicide attempts, increased risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse, difficulty forming attachments (bonding) to caregivers and other significant people, and running away or being kicked out of the home. More specifically, research in Canada and the United States points to the fact that the majority of street youth come from homes where there were high levels of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, interpersonal violence and assault, parental neglect and exposure to domestic violence, etc., (Gaetz, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; 2009; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Whitbeck & Simons, 1993; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009).

In addition to the above, other strains on the family may stem from the challenges young people themselves are facing. Substance use, mental health problems, learning disabilities, struggles with the education system and dropping out, criminal behaviour and involvement in the justice system are key factors. The causes of such behaviours, however, are complex and may include some of the stresses associated with parental behaviour such as alcohol or drug use (Mallet et al., 2005). In some cases, parental psychiatric disorders are also a factor (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005). Furthermore, parental substance abuse predicts not only youth homelessness, but also youth substance abuse (McMorris et al., 2002). Conflict with parents can result from a number of different stressors, and the inability of children and/or their parents to adequately cope with the challenges they are facing. Structural factors such as poverty, low income and unemployment also play a role (Clatts & Rees, 1999). Cutbacks to financial and social supports for low income and otherwise marginalized families in Canada contribute to stress that may create some of the situations that lead to youth homelessness. Discrimination based on ethno-cultural, racial, religious and other forms of difference, is also a factor that contributes to homelessness. The combination of racism and poverty can also lead to school disengagement and failure, as well as to criminal behaviour (Springer, 2006).

Finally, homophobia is strongly involved in youth homelessness. Young people who are sexual minorities are greatly overrepresented in the street youth population (Gattis, 2009; Higgitt et al., 2003). Several studies reveal that 20-40% of street youth identify as gay, lesbian or transgendered, a rate much higher than in the general population. Homophobic responses to the 'coming out' process have the potential to create or worsen tensions between the young person and their family, friends and/or community (Rew et al., 2002). The ensuing conflicts with parents and community members can often lead to homelessness.

Most scholars also acknowledge that for youth, the path to the streets is rarely the result of a single event, but rather is typically part of a longer process that may involve repeated episodes of leaving home (Milburn et al., 2005). Street youth who are chronically homeless typically have a history marked by repeated episodes of leaving home; they may run away (or be kicked out) but will return home, only to leave again. For many young people, the path to becoming homeless does not take the form of a straight line, but involves a series of conflicts and crises, in some cases beginning in early childhood. For most street youth, then, homelessness is not merely an event or episode, but rather a process that will, without intervention, result in a degree of social exclusion – manifested in a lack of recognition and acceptance leading to social and economic vulnerability – that makes the transition to adulthood highly challenging and problematic. Street youth, unlike homeless adults, leave homes defined by relationships in which they are typically dependent (socially and financially) on their adult caregivers. Becoming homeless does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather, it means leaving home: an interruption and potential break in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community. An additional factor to consider when thinking about youth homelessness is that the home they are fleeing – or have been kicked out of – is rarely one for which they were responsible or in control of.

The experience of homelessness thrusts young people into a new world, which, on the one hand, may feel liberating for a time, as they discover the freedom of being away from the conflicts and tensions that led to homelessness, but in the end becomes very limiting. We know that the longer young people remain homeless, the greater the negative outcomes. Homelessness inevitably leads to health problems (Boivan et al., 2001; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Rew, 2002). Young people who are homeless lack proper nutrition during a crucial time of physical growth and development. Unfortunately, whether homeless youth get their food from money they earn or from homeless charitable services, they are unable to consistently obtain enough nutritious food (Tarasuk et al., 2009). In addition, mental health and addictions become more challenging the longer one remains homeless. Young people also become more depressed and are more likely to think about or attempt suicide. The relationships that young people develop with other homeless youth are often described in terms of being a ‘street family’; a caring substitute for a real family. Unfortunately, however, these relations are not always based on trust, and in the end become problematic, because while the knowledge and connections that street youth have may be useful for surviving on the streets, they are of limited value in helping young people develop long-term, trusting, and healthy relationships.

Canadian research has been useful in helping us understand pathways into youth homelessness. But although it confirms what we know about the causes of homelessness, the tendency to generalize family conflict and the experience of abuse in particular leads to assumptions about abuse being the sole cause of youth homelessness. Little attention has been paid to the analysis of young people who do not identify abuse as a significant factor in their homelessness. Where there is no abuse, however, there may still be conflict.

Despite all we know then, there is a significant gap in the literature on connections to or relations with family. Most of the scholarly attention is on the (often risky) behaviour of homeless youth themselves. There is very little research, for example, that compares the outcomes for young people who return home after a period of homelessness, with those who do not. Furthermore, many, if not most young people exist in a web of close and/or extended family relations, some of which may be problematic and others which may not. The research that does exist on family reunification shows that young people who reunite with their families have more positive outcomes than those who do not. A study by Thompson, Pollio and Bitner found that those who returned home after a shelter stay reported “more positive outcomes in school, employment, self-esteem, criminal behaviour and family relationships than adolescents discharged to other locations” (2000:83). Other research shows that those who fail to reunite are more likely to have longer shelter stays, an increased sense of hopelessness, pessimistic tendencies and more suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Teare et al., 1992; Teare et al., 1994). For some homeless youth who are particularly independent and/or who have no desire to reconnect to their families, or who come from abusive homes that are unlikely to change, reunification may not be a realistic goal. A more appropriate intervention would be to provide young people with information on the services and supports in the communities from which they came, or the communities they have adopted. The key is to provide youth with support options.

## What Do We Mean by “Family”?

In reframing our understanding of the families of street youth, we need to add complexity to our understanding of family. Family units defined as problematic are complex and diverse in composition. Among young people who become homeless, some come from two-parent homes. Some live with birth parents, step parents and/or adoptive parents. Others are raised by single parents, grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles, or other caregivers. Households may include siblings, extended family members, and others who are not directly related to the individual, but who nevertheless may play a key role in a young person’s life. Family composition – and relations – may also change over



time. Personal histories of homeless youth, from the research conducted with Eva's Family Reconnect Program, reveal that the youth move through different family situations throughout their lives – from originally living with birth parent(s), to living with relatives such as grandparents, or in foster care. They may be recent immigrants or refugees, in which case their family situations may be unstable or in flux. The point is that there is no single version of the family, and that complex social and cultural family arrangements mean that young people will have different kinds of relations with different family members.

A person may experience conflict (even violence) with one or more members of their family, but may have positive relations with others. Findings from research conducted with Eva's Family Reconnect program also revealed that even when young people are homeless, the majority (69%) continue to have some kind of active involvement with family. One of the key successes of the program is that 62% of participants became more actively involved with family members during their involvement in the program, and 14.5% reconciled a damaged relationship with a family member. These improved relations may have been a result of either individual counseling, where young people were encouraged and supported in their efforts to engage family members, or through family counseling. They also reported having developed a better understanding and appreciation of the conditions that forced them to leave. Family conflict does not necessarily mean that young people have difficult relationships with all family members, all of the time. Even if a young person comes from a household where there is abuse, there may potentially be positive relationships with some family members, for instance, aunts, uncles, cousins and/or grandparents who either live outside the home or were not involved in the abuse. It is also important to consider that for street youth, serious family conflict and/or abuse may not be the cause of their leaving home. For these youth, in particular, families may represent potential supports for reducing and preventing youth homelessness.

Finally, an important point to consider is that relationships characterized by conflict are not always irreconcilable. It goes without saying that human relations often involve conflict of one kind or another, and this is especially true of family relations. When conflicts become more serious, there may be opportunities to improve things. In some cases, situations resolve themselves as individuals grow, mature and/or adapt. In other cases, people learn to tolerate a certain level of conflict. Sometimes people in conflict situations require the chance to live temporarily apart, to cool off or to think things through. Where conflict becomes chronic, there may, in the end, be a need for outside interventions such as individual and family therapy, or mediation. For many youth who find themselves on the streets, the conflict that resulted in their homelessness can be at least partially resolved through proper interventions and sup-

ports. For example, undiagnosed mental health issues or learning disabilities may underlie family conflict and contribute to the young person's pathways to the streets. For many parents, the diagnosis of mental health issues and learning disabilities may lead to a shift in how they think about and respond to their child. For example, according to a Family Intervention counselor: "We have a case of a young man from the African continent with mental health problems that were very challenging, because of the difficulties his family had in accepting this. His mom was a highly educated woman who believed that he had demons and could not understand that his problems were psychiatric."

An important thing to consider regarding the outcomes of this type of program is that physically reuniting with family may not be desirable or possible. Coming to terms with this may be important in helping young people – and their families – move forward with their lives. For example, those interviewed during the course of research, for whom family reconciliation was not an option, spoke of learning to accept that living with family was impossible, although they could maintain relationships or contact with siblings, parents, or extended family. One youth we interviewed stated: "I know I can never live with [my family] again, but I have a close relationship with my sisters now and I speak to my mom once a week and that's cool." Another stated that "the staff here helped me deal with my anger and resentment of [my family] and now I can move on and have a better attitude in my relationships in the future. I'm learning to be patient with people." While moving back home, either temporarily or permanently, is not possible for all youth, an improved understanding of the situations that forced them to leave home may allow them to move forward with their lives. And, for those who come from abusive backgrounds, it is important to remember that while some relationships hold little hope for reconciliation, the potential for positive relations with at least some family members exists. The streets and shelter system should never be the only options.

An effective response to youth homelessness would balance prevention, emergency responses, and transitional supports to rapidly move people out of homelessness. Preventive strategies range from working with families, schools and the community to either help keep young people at home by resolving or helping them cope with family problems, or alternatively, providing young people with the supports they need to live productive lives. Prevention also means that other institutions – including corrections, mental health and health care, and child welfare services – work effectively to ensure that young people leaving care have necessary supports in place (including housing) and do not end up homeless. A truly preventive approach requires coordination of services, the ability to identify when young people may be at risk of becoming homeless, and a commitment to intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness.

## The Canadian Response

The ‘emergency services’ model that characterizes the street youth sector in Canada in many ways copies the adult homelessness sector. Across Canada, there are a range of services and programs for homeless youth, including shelters, drop-ins, employment programs and health services intended to help young people meet their needs once they become homeless. Typically these programs are operated by NGOs, and are community based. While this has resulted in the development of a number of excellent community-based programs across the country, these agencies and programs are not integrated into a broader strategic response that works to keep people off the streets in the first place, or to intervene quickly to either get them back home or obtain the supports they need to live independently. There are complex reasons for this, including an historical emphasis on community-based services rather than an integrated systems approach, and the belief of politicians (and arguably, much of the general public) that the fragmented web of street youth services takes care of the problem.

Sector-wide, preventive approaches that might highlight family mediation and connection are absent. Within the youth homelessness services sector, services are not coordinated, information systems are not in place to support information sharing (for example, to avoid replication and for tracking purposes to maximize effective and seamless service delivery), and sector-wide intake (including shelters and counseling) and referral systems are not available. Emergency services are for the most part funded to provide support for people *while* they are homeless, and this shapes the orientation of the services themselves. In addition to meeting immediate needs and providing a level of care, the key program goals of most street youth serving agencies (if they have a program beyond meeting immediate needs) is to provide practical support for individuals to develop the capacity to become independent, and move towards economic self-sufficiency<sup>3</sup>.

One example of the need for an integrated approach is reflected in the high percentage of homeless youth who report previous involvement with child welfare and protection services, including young people who have become wards of the State and live in foster care or group homes (Eberle et al., 2001; Fitzgerald, 1995; Flynn & Biro, 1998; Minty, 1999; Novac et al., 2002; Raychaba, 1988). In many areas, gaps in the child welfare system mean that young people 16 and older may have great difficulty accessing services and supports. System failures in child welfare – including the fact that young people can ‘opt out’ of care but not back in, and that young people can age out of care – means that many

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3. A 2006 study conducted in Ottawa identified this as a key characteristic of street youth serving agencies (Klodowsky, Aubry & Farrell, 2006).

young people transition from child welfare support not to self-sufficiency, but to homelessness (see Nichols, this volume).

## What Needs to be Done?

In the face of an increasing demand for solutions to homelessness, it is crucial to know what works, why it works and for whom it works. While there are many programs across Canada that have developed innovative approaches to youth homelessness, few focus specifically on reconnecting homeless youth with family, or attempt to mediate and resolve underlying family conflict. That said it is important to acknowledge that family reconnection is no cure-all, as there will always be many situations in which family reconciliation is impossible.

The research on situations that produce youth homelessness consistently identifies difficult family situations and conflict as being the key underlying factor. While this is the reality for many young people who are homeless, the potential role of the family as part of the solution is largely ignored. Family is considered to be part of the past. Emergency services thus focus on providing refuge for young people, and helping them reach self-sufficiency and independence (without the support, where possible, of family members). This is perhaps not surprising, nor entirely unreasonable, given the high percentage of young people who are fleeing abuse. However, research also identifies a sizeable percentage of street youth who experience family conflict but who do *not* come from abusive family backgrounds, making the argument for family reconnection more of a priority.

The effectiveness and underlying logic of the Family Reconnect program suggests that the basic principles of the program can be applied more broadly at a 'systems level'. That is, in contrast to developing an agency-based program or response, it is possible to approach the issue from a more integrated systems level, bringing together a range of services and approaches that work *across* the street youth sector, and ideally, engage with programs, services and institutions 'upstream' (that is, before the young person becomes homeless). Increasing family reunification programming can thus be seen as a key approach to preventing youth homelessness.

There are several key features to an integrated, systems level approach to family reconnection. To be effective, such an approach requires strong institutional support by all levels of government, ensuring that family reconnection programming is widely available across the country and is not dependent on support from individual organizations that consider these programs necessary or appropriate. In other words, young people should have access to such interventions wherever they live. A systems response also requires that programming work across institutional and jurisdictional boundaries. An effective family re-

connection program requires collaboration between education, child welfare services, the mental health sector, housing, settlement and corrections. In many ways, youth homelessness (and by extension, family reconnection) is a ‘fusion policy’ issue that suggests the need for an integrated local approach with strong communication between government departments and community agencies, so that appropriate and timely interventions can take place. Most importantly, an intervention program such as Family Reconnect must be widely available – and in some ways targeted – to young people who are *below* the age of 16. Examples of effective and integrated systems-level, preventive approaches that focus on family mediation/reconnection are found in the United Kingdom and Australia. Their integrated approaches not only help improve the lives of young people and their families, and the communities they live in, but they also make economic sense, as prevention is much less costly than emergency services.

#### i) Australia: ‘Reconnect Program’ for Young People At Risk of Homelessness

Australia’s “Reconnect Program” is operated by the Australian government’s Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, and has been in operation since 1999. The program is a national early intervention initiative designed to reduce youth homelessness by reconnecting both homeless youth and youth who are at risk of becoming homeless with their families, schools, and communities. The program is a classic example of a systems level approach in that it is widely available across the country, and it works across institutional boundaries to provide young people who become – or are at risk of becoming – homeless with the supports they need to stay at home, or find alternative supportive living arrangements. There are over 100 Reconnect programs, and some specialize in supporting sub-populations such as Aboriginal youth, refugees and new immigrants, and lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. While funded by the central government, it nevertheless operates through a network of community-based early intervention services, with the goal of assisting youth in stabilizing their current living situations, as well as improving their level of engagement and attachments within their community (Australian Government, 2009). The Reconnect Program targets young people aged 12-18 (and their families) who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.

The service delivery model of Australia’s Reconnect program includes “a focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a ‘toolbox’ of approaches that includes counseling, mediation and practical support; and collaboration with other service providers. As well as providing assistance to individual young people and their families, Reconnect services also provide group programs, undertake community development projects and work with other agencies to in-

crease the broader service system's capacity to intervene early in youth homelessness.” (Australian Government report, 2003:8) The Reconnect program emphasizes accessibility, a client-centered orientation, and a holistic approach to service delivery. The success of the program requires working collaboratively with key agencies and institutions. They stress good links with service providers as crucial. Like Canada, the Australian population is diverse, and includes a large Aboriginal population. The Reconnect program therefore stresses the importance of equitable and culturally appropriate service delivery. As part of this strategy, they strive to employ staff from backgrounds representing the populations they serve in order to more easily engage with the diversity of Reconnect clients.

A key feature and strength of the Australian model is how the concept of ‘reconnection’ is conceived. In striving to help young people stabilize their living situation, the goal is to not simply work on family relationships in isolation, but rather, to improve the young person’s level of engagement with training, school and the local community. In fact, whereas in Canada the response to homelessness largely ignores education as significant in the lives of homeless youth (Winland et al., 2011), in Australia, it is central. While they do recognize that many homeless youth have negative school experiences, they also see schools as key to the identification of young people who are at risk, and thus have an important role to play in keeping young people connected to their community and in helping them successfully move into adulthood. They argue that: “An integrated national strategy for early intervention for early childhood, middle childhood and youth would draw attention to the inter-relationship of schools with family and community rather than regarding schools purely as vehicles for pedagogy” (Australian Government report, 2003:8).

Several years ago the Australian government began an extensive evaluation to assess and analyze program strategies and outcomes in order to determine whether the Reconnect programs were effective in accomplishing what they were designed to accomplish.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, they wanted to find out whether positive outcomes were sustained over time. They were also interested in understanding whether – and how – the program strengthened the community’s ability to deliver early intervention to at-risk youth. Finally, they evaluated the effectiveness of the program’s management (Australian Government report, 2003; RPR Consulting, 2003). The evaluation identified positive and sustainable outcomes for young people and their families, including improvements in:

- The stability of young people’s living situations

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4. For more details, go to the Reconnect program website: [www.facs.gov.au](http://www.facs.gov.au)

- Young people's reported ability to manage family conflict (this improvement was sustained over time)
- Parents' capacity to manage conflict
- Communication within families
- Young people's attitudes towards school
- Young people's engagement with education and employment
- Young people's engagement with community (e.g. involvement in organized activities, volunteering, etc.)

The evaluation also pointed to the success of the program in building community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness. The program design allows for flexibility, and as a result, Reconnect programs vary by area and focus. Furthermore, community characteristics and local infrastructure can have an impact on the ability of Reconnect services to build community capacity. The factors that underlie the most successful Reconnect programs appear to be: "a clear understanding of and commitment to the Reconnect model; teamwork; and leadership" (Australian Government report, 2003:11).

Key conclusions were that Reconnect services:

- are highly effective, relative to their small size, in increasing community services infrastructure for early intervention;
- build capacity with family, schools and community organizations, through collaborative approaches and by strengthening service networks;
- build capacity by helping other organizations to focus on effective early intervention;
- build capacity over time, where adequate resources and stable management are available;
- can be highly effective models for achieving participation by Indigenous communities in approaches that support early intervention.

The Australian Reconnect program is an excellent example of a systems approach to family reconnection and youth homelessness prevention. The Reconnect program begins with an understanding that youth's personal and family problems are not separate from each other, nor are they isolated and disconnected from all other aspects of their lives. In turn, the program aims to break the cycle of homelessness by applying a holistic approach, providing many services including counseling, group work, mediation and practical support such as the identification and procurement of services to the whole family. It also targets services, including

ethno-culturally sensitive programs and mental health services, to the individual needs of clients (Australian Government report, 2009). Finally, the program is based on a commitment to a systems level response where community capacity (accessibility to appropriate services and supports) must be built so that homelessness prevention becomes the work of a broad range of institutions, services and programs, and not simply the responsibility of the homelessness sector.

Innovations around the idea of family reconnection for homeless youth or those at risk are also found in the United Kingdom.

## ii) United Kingdom: Prevention and Family Mediation

In the UK, the response to homelessness is significantly different than Canada's in that it is a strategic and integrated approach, and designed to work as a system rather than as a collection of independent community-based responses. Following a national policy push in 2003, the number of homeless youth in the UK fell by 40% in two and a half years. This reduction was not traced to rising employment or expanded affordable housing, but rather, to the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention strategies (Pawson et al., 2007). For homeless youth, perhaps the most notable development has been the establishment of the National Youth Homelessness Scheme, first announced in 2006 as a national strategy to 'tackle and prevent homelessness'. The overall goal was to have the national government, local governments and community-based service providers work with young people and their families to prevent homelessness and help youth transition to adulthood in a sustainable, safe way. The key here again is the focus on *prevention*, and there is much we can learn from this orientation (Pawson, 2007). The UK approach to preventing youth homelessness begins with the recognition that remaining at home may not be an option for all young people, particularly for those who experience abuse. However, for most youth, their life chances generally improve the longer they stay with their families, and the more 'planned' their transition is to independent living. The key to a preventive approach is that young people and their families "need to be able make informed decisions about whether to live apart and, if they need it, to have access to appropriate resources and skilled support if homelessness is to be prevented" (NYHS website: [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)). "Key elements of 'what works' include flexible and client-centered provision, close liaison with key agencies, and building in support from other agencies when necessary. The need for timely intervention was also highlighted, as was the need for active promotion of the availability of the service and early contact with clients on referral" (Pawson et al., 2007:14). Again, reflecting the 'partnership' approach of the UK strategy, local governments are expected to develop interventions to be delivered in collaboration with key partners including Children's Services, the youth service, the not-for-profit sector, and importantly,



schools. This collaborative, cross-sector approach is seen as necessary in supporting young people and their families and in preventing homelessness.

The core aspects of this preventive strategy include:

*A) Advice, Assessment and Early Intervention:* Providing timely information and supports to young people and their families is crucial. This includes services to develop resilience (the ability to cope with and overcome problems), raise young people's awareness of their rights and provide advice and direction about where to get help. The UK has pioneered a "Single Point Access Information and Assessment" for young people, who can access the service either in person or via the phone or Internet. As a system, it relies on a good assessment method (such as the Common Assessment Framework, described below), and a strong organization linked to services both within and outside the homelessness sector. Being both a 'triage' service and a single point access service ensures reliable assessment, more coordinated efforts, and a more effective evaluation of the appropriateness of services. Once a young person becomes homeless, or is identified as being at risk of homelessness, they are not simply unleashed into the emergency services sector. Rather, an intervention process is initiated, the youth's needs are assessed, risks are identified, and plans are put into place. This type of intervention is a strong case management approach to working with young people, in order to get them the supports they need either in the homelessness sector or in mainstream services. This integrated approach means that youth become not so much 'clients' of agencies, but of the sector. They are therefore supported from the moment they are identified, right through to the solution stage, and then after they have either returned home, or moved into a place of their own. The intervention is intended to help young people and their families move quickly to some sort of effective solution, rather than spending long periods of time in emergency services.

Central to this approach is the use of the "Common Assessment Framework" (CAF), a shared assessment system promoted by governments in the UK. The goal of the framework is to "help practitioners working with children, young people and families to assess children and young people's additional needs for earlier, and more effective services, and develop a common understanding of those needs and how to work together to meet them" (CWDC, 2009:6). The idea is that everyone who works with young people should know about the CAF and how to deliver it. The CAF builds upon a larger government policy document called "Every Child Matters – Children and Young People's Plan," and consists of:

- A pre-assessment checklist to help decide which specific assessment is appropriate

- A process to enable child and youth workers to use a common assessment and then act on the result rather than a haphazard (and often replicated) assortment of assessments from diverse agencies.
- A standard form to record the assessment
- A service delivery plan and review form

Assessment services may be developed and delivered by local governments, but there is an understanding that partnerships with not-for-profit services are often the best route, as they likely have the expertise, legitimacy and hence the best track record with youth. Organizations that have experience and credibility in their work with young people who are homeless, and that have strong knowledge and relationships with other local providers, are therefore recommended.

That being said, there are challenges with the CAF, as in some jurisdictions, organizations have been reluctant to take a lead role because of capacity and resource issues (Smith & Duckett, 2010:16). On the other hand, evaluations of the CAF demonstrate positive service outcomes, including an improvement in “multi agency working, information sharing and (a reduction in) referral rates to local authorities” (Smith & Duckett, 2010:17).

B) *“Respite” or “time out” housing*: An interesting innovation in the early intervention strategy in the UK is the use of “respite” or “time out” housing. Respite housing is understood as temporary accommodation for young people who, because of a conflict or crisis, are suddenly homeless. But rather than have them move into homeless shelters, they are provided temporary accommodation with intensive intervention supports, including family mediation where appropriate. It is, in a sense, a ‘time out’ or ‘cooling off’ space, where young people and their families can work on repairing relations to enable them to return home. If returning is not an option, they are provided with accommodation while they work out longer term housing support. This strategy is considered most appropriate for 16 or 17 years old.

C) *Working in Schools*: As is the case in Australia, much of the preventive work in the UK occurs in schools. This is an important consideration, because this is where young people spend much of their time. This is also where one can access young people under the age of 16 who may be at risk. Schools exist in virtually all communities and in many cases are important community hubs with high levels of parental involvement. Work in schools is often delivered by not-for-profit agencies in collaboration with teachers and social service workers in the school system. These are usually the same agencies that deliver family mediation services. The rationale for this is, “if we can make a difference to young people’s attitudes and circumstances at a young age, there is a greater

chance of them not becoming homeless” (NYHS website: [www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/prevention/schools/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/prevention/schools/)). There are several aspects to this work. First is the focus on education, with the intention of increasing young people’s understanding of homelessness, to help them identify and address situations where they may be at risk of homelessness, and provide them with information about services and supports for when they are in crisis. Second, supports in schools empower youth through personal development. This means helping them develop more effective problem solving and conflict resolution skills. In some cases, the programs also provide support for families and parenting skills. Third, the presence of agencies in schools helps them become key points of contact for young people and/or teachers who suspect that something may be wrong. In their review of prevention programs in the UK, Quilgars et al., (2008) demonstrated how such programs provide a means to:

- “increase young people’s awareness of the ‘harsh realities’ of homelessness and dispel myths about the availability of social housing;” that is the readily available supply of social housing;
- “challenge stereotypes about homeless people, particularly regarding their culpability” for their circumstances;
- “educate young people about the range of housing options available to them after leaving home and raise awareness of help available;”
- “emphasize young people’s responsibilities with regard to housing”, specifically how to manage and take care of a home;
- “teach conflict resolution skills that may be applied within and beyond the home and school” (Quilgars et al., 2008:68).

Furthermore, the authors argue that programs that have a peer-educator component are well received and highly effective.

## The Economic Case for Family Reconnection

There is no doubt about the effectiveness of the Family Reconnect program model. While it is acknowledged that for many homeless youth reconciliation with family is not desirable, nor possible, helping young people to understand and come to terms with this can be part of the work itself. For others, reconciliation of some kind is in fact possible. There is also a strong case to be made for the cost effectiveness of this program. *Preventing* youth homelessness on the one hand, and on the other, helping those who are homeless move quickly into housing (either at home or independent living), leads to both short term and long term savings. An integrated approach not only helps improve the lives of young people and their families, and the communities they live in, but it also makes economic sense.

In Toronto for example, it costs more than \$20,000 to keep a young person in a homeless shelter for a year, and this is not taking into account the added costs of health care, mental health and addiction supports, and corrections that are a direct result of the experience of being homeless (Shapcott, 2007). There is certainly plenty of evidence from across Canada that keeping people who are homeless in emergency services (i.e. shelter system) is expensive, and that it is much cheaper to prevent homelessness and/or provide people with the opportunity to move out of homelessness through supportive and affordable housing<sup>5</sup> (Laird, 2007; Eberle, 2001; Halifax, 2006; Shapcott, 2007; Pomeroy, 2006; 2007; 2008). As Pomeroy has argued, the cost of homelessness does not only come from emergency shelters and drop-ins. When people become homeless they are more likely to use expensive health services due to poor health, addictions and mental health challenges. They are also more likely to end up in jail, one of the most expensive forms of accommodation in society. Toronto's Family Reconnect Program (FRP) operates on a yearly budget of \$228,888. In 2010, the FRP supported the return home or move to independent or supportive housing (with family support) of 25 youth, and in addition prevented seven youth from becoming homeless. One can only imagine the cost savings if the Family Reconnect program expanded into a systems-wide program.

## Conclusions

While the reasons a youth leaves home vary widely, a key finding of this research is that they often want to establish or re-establish some kind of connection with some or all of their family members. This may involve occasional and limited contact, reuniting with family and moving back home, or simply coming to terms with why they left and moving forward with their lives. Another finding indicates that families, too, who have children living on the streets, often do not know how to reconnect with their children, to better understand and support them, and to access appropriate resources, not just for their children, but for themselves when experiencing, for example, poverty, family breakdown, illness or abuse. The analysis of youth homelessness should begin, though, with an understanding of the significance to youth of the home that is left behind, because for young people the meaning of home is different from that of adults. For youth, home is a safe place where young people expect to find adult support and guidance. In helping prevent youth homelessness, and/or support homeless youth in moving forward in their lives, we need to do more to resolve the family conflicts at the root of youth homelessness.

A strategy that supports youth to move towards self-sufficiency must necessarily start with a focus on the needs and protection of the young person in

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5. See Gaetz, S. (2012) "The Real Cost of Homelessness: can we save money by doing the right thing?" <http://www.homelesshub.ca/costofhomelessness>

question, but at the same time need not ignore the potential significance of family relations. All healthy, self-sufficient adolescents (and adults) depend on others, including friends, co-workers, other adults and community members. For many, links with family are part of this network of support, and self-sufficiency can be achieved by reconnecting with relatives. However, there is a common reluctance on the part of many who work with homeless youth to acknowledge the importance of family in young people's lives. Family conflict, abuse or breakdown, often described as a main cause of youth homelessness, is used as justification for breaking ties with family and aiming to become completely self-sufficient without family support. To some degree, this is understandable, as many homeless young people are indeed fleeing family violence. It perhaps goes without saying that many youth are in a state of distress when they enter the shelter system, and reconnecting with family may not seem realistic or desirable at the time. This may mean that neither young people nor agency staff place priority on exploring the potential for reconnecting with family. Nevertheless, it is in fact when youth have just become homeless that opportunities to reconnect with family are greatest, and the full range of street youth serving agencies must be part of an effective referral system to services that support family reconciliation. Programs such as Family Reconnect should be essential features of a response to youth homelessness that focuses on prevention.

The Family Reconnect program's acknowledgement of the importance of family will appeal to all individuals along the political spectrum. Preventing youth from entering the shelter system is both a socially responsible and an economically sensible response to youth homelessness. While there are no 'happily ever after' stories, there is enough evidence of healing, greater understanding and reconciliation to make a very strong case for the vital importance of programs like Family Reconnect.

## Recommendations

### 1. Government of Canada

- 1.1 The Government of Canada, as part of its Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), must adopt a strategy to end youth homelessness.

### 2. Provincial Government(s)

- 2.1 All provinces must develop a strategy to end youth homelessness that includes a focus on prevention and family reconnection.
- 2.2 The Child and Family Services Act should be amended to enable young people to continue their involvement with Children's Aid Societies up until such a point as they are determined (through

a comprehensive assessment strategy) to be ready to move forward with their lives in a productive and healthy manner.

2.3 Provinces should establish an inter-ministerial committee to develop an effective intervention strategy to reduce the number of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who become homeless.

### 3. Municipal Government(s)

3.1 Municipal governments, where they are creating a strategy to end youth homelessness, should incorporate family reconnection as a central principle.

3.2 Municipalities should focus attention on developing and or expanding Family Reconnect programs where they exist.

3.3 Municipal governments should require that all street youth serving agencies adopt a family reconnection orientation as part of a preventive strategy.

3.4 Municipal governments should adopt a rapid re-housing strategy for young people who are new to the street.

3.5 Municipal governments should offer 'time out' or respite shelter that is separate from the regular shelter system.

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