
AFTERWORD

A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Being homeless is stressful. It's 24 hours a day. Even if you experience a good week or month, there is always an underlying and pervasive feeling of instability, that everything around you is temporary. Despite the positive things you experience, there is still a strong fear that you will lose everything you have gained or relapse into homelessness. As a young person who has experienced homelessness and a transition back to housing, I have found that homelessness had a large impact on my mental health. I have learned, from myself and others, that the experience of homelessness can easily trigger previous or new mental health symptoms. For example, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and a general lack of family and community support often lead to an overall sense of hopelessness or depression. This depression can then translate into substance use or risky behaviours as youth seek comfort through harmful coping strategies because they lack healthier or more adaptive options. These risky coping measures can then lead to even greater or longer lasting mental health challenges and harm. This is why support for young people who are homeless is essential.

In my own experience, the most helpful services have come from dependable and flexible outreach workers, as well as highly trained and accessible mental health professionals. Outreach workers have been a lifeline for me. They created the feeling that somebody was actively helping me because they would come to wherever it was I needed them to be. Trustworthy, dependable and flexible service was key. However, access to these services is not very easy; wait lists are often over a year long or require specific referrals from physicians to which youth may not have access. These are barriers for youth who live on the street and who are forced to remain homeless longer because services are lacking or because they don't know how to get connected to a professional. Unfortunately, many youth who are homeless experience serious mental health challenges and require intervention, but cannot easily access highly qualified and trained mental health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists. I feel that this access is an investment in the well-being of youth that helps prevent further escalation of already stressful experiences.

I had the opportunity to enroll in an integrated program called HOP-C that linked me with a supportive team that stayed connected with me and with each other. I had access to high-quality mental health care, an outreach worker, and peer mentorship in the community. This included the opportunity to attend fun community events. These events helped me and others in the program see past our current circumstances and have fun and let loose. They reminded me that there is more to life than my current situation and that I had the capacity to be happy.

My own improved mental health has increased my capacity for life and my ability to work toward a better future. It enables me to put actions to my words. This change started with attending appointments and making efforts to maintain a healthy balance, and then led to working toward education and employment goals. Improved mental health has shifted my perspective on life: I feel hope, that I can achieve things. The focus of my life is no longer on mere survival, but on seeing and experiencing what life has to offer.

I support resources that assist workers and systems in better addressing the mental health and addiction challenges of youth. These supports help youth who need extra assistance, due to their histories and difficult experiences, to realize their potential and see a better future for themselves. Service providers who have solid training in mental health and addiction make us feel more secure and supported, and help ease the burden of homelessness. For me, they made getting through life just a little bit easier. They instilled hope and reminded me that there is life after homelessness. The best workers were constant sources of motivation, encouraging me to not give up on my life goals. All youth deserve this.

M.H.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

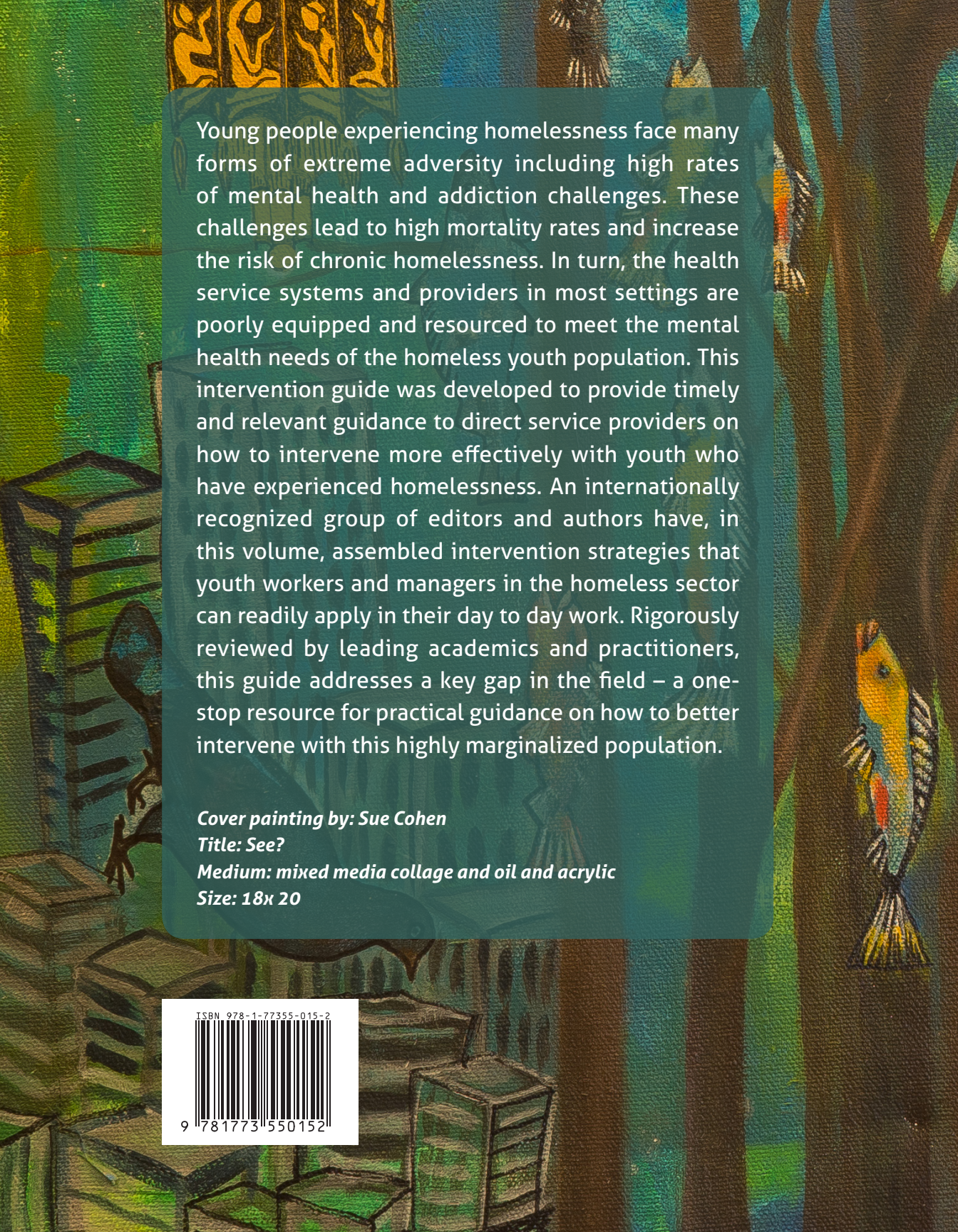
Sean Kidd, PhD, CPRP, is a senior scientist and division chief of psychology at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. He is also an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. His career has focused on marginality and service enhancement, specifically among youth experiencing homelessness and people with severe mental illness. He has published landmark papers in qualitative methods in psychology, and is internationally recognized for his research on youth homelessness, including being one of the most published scholars in that area. He has done extensive work in developing and testing psychiatric rehabilitation interventions and in examining social inclusion among marginalized populations.

Natasha Slesnick, PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist. At Ohio State University, she is associate dean of Research and Administration in the College of Education and Human Ecology, and a professor of couple and family therapy, human development, and family science. Her research focuses on youth and families experiencing homelessness, specifically on developing and evaluating interventions for substance use, HIV risk, mental health, and housing. She has evaluated and refined an ecologically based family systems intervention for shelter-recruited adolescents who have run from home, and for their families. She has also modified and tested individually focused interventions for street-recruited youth and young mothers with children in their care. Dr. Slesnick launched two drop-in centres for youth who are homeless: one in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and another in Columbus, Ohio.

Tyler Frederick, PhD, is a sociologist and an assistant professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa. He is a community-based researcher with a focus on marginalized young people. His research focuses on how young people navigate homelessness and how this process shapes their mental health, identity, and well-being.

Jeff Karabanow, PhD, RSW, is a professor of social work at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His research focuses on housing stability, service delivery systems, street health, and homeless youth culture. He has completed a documentary about the plight of street youth in Guatemala City and several animated shorts on Canadian street youth culture. Dr. Karabanow is one of the founding members of Halifax's Out of the Cold Emergency Shelter and is co-director of the Dalhousie School of Social Work Community Clinic.

Stephen Gaetz, CM, is a professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, and director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness/Homeless Hub. His program of research has been defined by his desire to “make research matter” by conducting rigorous scholarly research that contributes to our knowledge base on homelessness, and that at the same time can be mobilized to have a bigger impact on policy, practice, and public opinion. Dr. Gaetz has pioneered efforts to bring together researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and people with lived experience of homelessness to participate in community-engaged scholarship and knowledge creation designed to contribute to solutions to homelessness. As director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, one of his key projects is the Homeless Hub, an innovative web-based research library internationally recognized as a leading example of innovation in knowledge mobilization.



Young people experiencing homelessness face many forms of extreme adversity including high rates of mental health and addiction challenges. These challenges lead to high mortality rates and increase the risk of chronic homelessness. In turn, the health service systems and providers in most settings are poorly equipped and resourced to meet the mental health needs of the homeless youth population. This intervention guide was developed to provide timely and relevant guidance to direct service providers on how to intervene more effectively with youth who have experienced homelessness. An internationally recognized group of editors and authors have, in this volume, assembled intervention strategies that youth workers and managers in the homeless sector can readily apply in their day to day work. Rigorously reviewed by leading academics and practitioners, this guide addresses a key gap in the field – a one-stop resource for practical guidance on how to better intervene with this highly marginalized population.

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