the homeless hub

POLICY CHALLENGES TO HOMELESSNESS
AMONG CARIBBEAN YOUTH IN TORONTO

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What do you need to know?

Immigrants have become a major presence in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), with some estimates suggesting approximately 50% of Toronto residents are now foreign born. It is important to understand their needs, particularly as immigrants are more likely to be vulnerable to housing insecurity and homelessness compared to those born in Canada. In addition, some research has shown that homeless youth from minority groups may be more reluctant than white homeless youth to access community or government resources for assistance as they prefer to utilize informal social networks. Those who lack such networks might be at increased risk of homelessness. The experience of homelessness may differ for young immigrants, particularly those of colour, who often encounter discriminatory treatment based on race, and are subject to racist policies and procedures within the public school system and other institutions, such as police services.

What did the researchers do?

Forty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with Caribbean youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Participants were between the ages of 15-25, and were either living in shelters or unstable housing arrangements and utilizing services at one of seven community agencies. All participants were either born in the Caribbean or to Caribbean parents in Canada, and special efforts were put in place to recruit a large sample of females (17 participants). Youth were asked about their reasons for being homeless, previous episodes of homelessness, family background, hopes and goals, feelings of safety, experiences of racism and discrimination, sources of social and financial support, and community resources they accessed. Detailed questionnaires were used to probe for socio-demographic characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity and education.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?
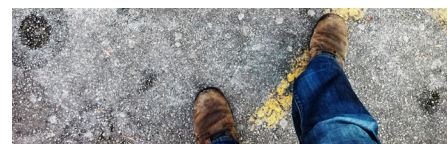
This chapter combines research and a review of literature to explore the racialized dimensions of youth homelessness in Toronto, particularly among Caribbean youth aged 15-25. It seeks a greater understanding of socio-demographic characteristics (age, education, economic background) of homeless Caribbean youth, their pathways into homelessness, their support systems, their interactions with police, their vulnerabilities and the impacts all these factors have on their self-image and sense of control over their lives. The chapter concludes with suggestions on how relationships can be improved between Caribbean communities and many of the institutions in our society, particularly the public school system and the police as a way of addressing the needs of homeless Caribbean youth.

What did the researchers find?

The most frequently cited cause of homelessness by youth was family breakdown, followed by eviction as a result of a lack of resources to pay rent. Large numbers of participants reported negative experiences with social institutions such public schools and with the police. This was particular true for male participants. For instance, 42% of the youth had been either suspended or expelled from school, mostly for fighting under the zero-tolerance policy of the Safe Schools Act (which has since been abolished). Only 12% had completed high school. Respondents reported largely negative encounters with police, including being arrested, questioned and searched. Youth frequently were stopped for a process called 'carding', where police stop and question individuals, collect personal data which is then entered into a database. There was a very strong perception among respondents that racism and discrimination were pervasive in these social institutions, with 90% voicing a belief that police discriminate on the basis of race, and nearly half feeling that racism had affected their grades at school. These multiple structural disadvantages ultimately set youth on a path to homelessness and have prevented them from seeing a path out of homelessness. The research also showed that despite their immediate circumstances, youth generally retained a positive self-image.

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How can you use this research?

The results of this research point to the need for policy reform in three areas. First, efforts must be made to bridge the social and cultural gaps that immigrant youth face when entering the education system, as well as to address the systemic racism in public schools that overwhelmingly disadvantage Black males. More constructive strategies are needed to keep racialized youth in schools, including the presence of mentors and reforming the curriculum so that the positive contributions of diverse racial, ethnic and religious groups are highlighted. The underrepresentation of racialized groups among teachers and administrators in schools must also be addressed. Second, efforts must be put into place so that police officers can be seen as a source of help for immigrant youth when they become homeless or experience distress. This requires greater oversight in the process of carding in the community, as well as efforts to prioritize community policing. This is a strategy to help homeless Black youth by encouraging officers to get to know the community and its residents better, ultimately resulting in a shift in attitudes so that homeless Black youth are seen as vulnerable persons in need of assistance rather than as potential criminals who should be controlled or removed. Youth diversion programs are also an alternative strategy that can break the cycle of homelessness, petty crime, fines and imprisonment. Finally, policy initiatives for the community that provide young people with better access to housing, health, and other basic social supports are needed, including services that assist in reconnecting youth with their families, as well as specialized supports for LGBTQ youth.

About the researcher
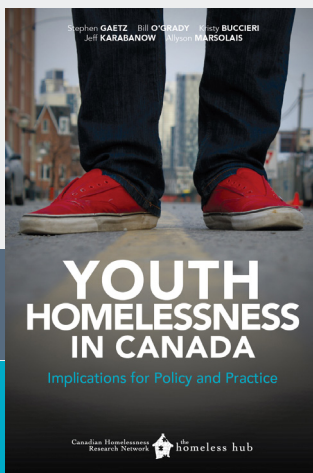
JOSEPH SPRINGER is a tenured professor in the School of Urban and Regional Planning at Ryerson University. His interests in teaching are in the area of policy analysis evaluation and housing. Current research includes: the salience of race and ethnicity in the provision of services to elderly tenants in Public Housing; the characteristics and patterns of hostel use among homeless people in Toronto.

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