

Jacqueline Sohn

Upstream Canada: Youth Homelessness Prevention That Works — Lessons from Developmental Evaluation

Adapting a prevention model from one country to another is not simply a matter of translation — it requires ongoing learning, community engagement, and the willingness to refine what is not working without losing what is essential.

The implementation of Upstream Canada was supported through developmental evaluation: embedding continuous learning into implementation rather than treating evaluation as a separate, retrospective exercise.¹ This brief explains what that approach involved, what it revealed about the conditions for effective prevention, and what policymakers and communities can apply when scaling early intervention initiatives.



Access the Upstream Canada [Program Model Guide](#) and additional resources on the Homeless Hub

What is Upstream Canada?

Upstream Canada is a school-community partnership model that identifies young people at risk of homelessness and school disengagement through universal screening, embedded school supports, and coordinated case management, before a crisis occurs. Adapted from [Upstream Australia](#) (also known as the COSS model), the model targets youth aged 12–16, when early warning signs often emerge but go unaddressed. Upstream shifts identification from crisis-based referral to proactive, population-level screening, ensuring that support is not contingent on disruption, visibility, or a family's capacity to advocate for themselves.²

For a full overview of the Upstream Canada model, see Brief #21. For quantitative screening findings, see Brief #22. For qualitative findings from participants, see Brief #23.

About this Research

This brief draws on developmental evaluation findings from Upstream Canada’s demonstration sites in Kelowna, British Columbia and St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador (Nfld), including a rural pilot in Marystown, Nfld. Developmental evaluation was conducted by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) as part of the **Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab**, involving Community Readiness Assessments, ongoing feedback loops between research and practice, and regular Communities of Practice sessions.

These findings focus on implementation conditions — what enabled or constrained effective, equitable delivery — and what the adaptation process reveals about scaling prevention across diverse Canadian contexts. As with all qualitative and process-focused research, the goal is depth of understanding: these findings identify patterns and lessons, not statistical prevalence.^{1,2}

Why Developmental Evaluation Is Essential

Developmental evaluation is an approach to monitoring and improving programs in real time, distinct from summative evaluation which assesses outcomes after the fact.¹

For a model like Upstream Canada — adapted from an international context and implemented across diverse Canadian communities — ongoing evaluation is not a compliance exercise. It is how the model was shaped to fit Canadian realities without losing fidelity to the core components that make it effective. Developmental evaluation shifts implementation from “deliver and measure” to “test, adapt, and strengthen.”^{1,3}

Key features included:

- ongoing feedback loops between research, practice, and youth participants;
- continuous adaptation based on community readiness; and
- an emphasis on relationship-building and local ownership. National partners (the COH and A Way Home Canada) worked alongside schools, community organizations, and local teams, supported by regular Communities of Practice.

Community Readiness: What the Sites Revealed

Community Readiness Assessments conducted at each site revealed both the local conditions that supported implementation and the structural barriers that constrained it. These findings shaped how the model was adapted in each context and what sustained investment would require.

Kelowna, BC

The Community Readiness Assessment in Kelowna identified strong cross-sector leadership and growing collaboration, alongside structural barriers common to prevention work, including limited data-sharing mechanisms, short-term funding cycles, and challenges demonstrating near-term outcomes.

Stakeholders consistently noted that youth homelessness remains largely invisible—often overshadowed by adult homelessness—and that many at-risk youth experience hidden family conflict, instability, or disengagement that does not align with public stereotypes.

St. John's, Nfld

In St. John's, prevention readiness was shaped by the largely hidden nature of youth homelessness, particularly outside the downtown core. While overall community concern was moderate, the education sector demonstrated stronger recognition of the link between school disengagement and future housing instability.

The community benefits from strong youth-serving organizations and a culture of generosity; however, geographic and transportation barriers, fragmented service systems, and limited prevention mandates constrain coordinated response.

Marystown, Nfld

Upstream Canada's rural pilot in Marystown generated important lessons for scaling prevention in small communities.

Learning from Rural Adaptation

- Heightened privacy concerns and close social networks influenced participation in the SNA and willingness to disclose risk.
- Historical skepticism toward externally introduced or short-term programs reinforced the importance of sustained local presence and relational credibility.
- Engagement increased over time as trust deepened, with informal referrals becoming more common. Early variability in participation should not be interpreted as program failure in rural settings.

Effective rural scaling requires long-term investment in trust-building and locally anchored implementation.^{1,2}

What the Evaluation Tells Us: Five Key Lessons

Across all sites, five lessons emerged consistently from the developmental evaluation. Together they provide a practical framework for how prevention models can be adapted and scaled without losing what makes them work.

Lesson 1: Prevention needs ongoing trust-building, especially when risks are hidden

Especially in communities where risk is invisible and stigma remains strong, building the relational credibility needed for young people and families to engage takes time. Programs that are introduced and then withdrawn before trust is established do lasting damage to community willingness to participate in future prevention efforts.⁴

Lesson 2: Schools are critical access points — but impact depends on what follows

Schools are the right place to identify early risk, but identification without coordinated community-based response is insufficient.⁵ The strength of the pathway from school to community support determines whether the school's early warning leads to timely help for a young person.

Schools are the right place to identify early risk, but identification without coordinated community-based response is insufficient.⁵

Lesson 3: Continuous adaptation strengthens uptake without compromising integrity

Refining assessment language, adjusting engagement approaches, and responding to local feedback are not departures from the model — they are how the model improves. The distinction between adaptation that strengthens fidelity and drift that undermines it must be actively managed through ongoing evaluation.¹

Lesson 4: Prevention can intervene where structural inequities manifest

While poverty, racism, and colonialism shape risk at a structural level, prevention can act where those forces show up in young people's lives^{6,7} — reducing harm through earlier identification and coordinated response.⁸ This does not replace the need for structural change, but it means prevention is not futile in the face of it.

Lesson 5: Shared learning infrastructure is essential to alignment

Communities of Practice proved essential to keeping research, policy, and frontline implementation aligned across sites.³ Without structured mechanisms for shared learning, local adaptations

remain local — they do not improve the model nationally or build the collective evidence base that supports scaling.

What Governments and Funders Must Do

Developmental evaluation changes what effective prevention investment looks like. The following actions reflect what the evidence shows governments must fund and require to enable adaptive, high-fidelity prevention at scale.

- 1. Invest in learning infrastructure, not just program delivery.** Communities of Practice, evaluation capacity, and structured feedback loops are not overhead — they are how prevention models improve over time. Fund them as core components alongside program delivery. *Brief #8 demonstrates the return on this investment: for every \$1 invested in Upstream Canada, approximately \$6 in future public costs are avoided.*
- 2. Allow adaptation within clearly defined core components.** Fidelity does not mean rigidity. Upstream Canada's core components — universal screening, embedded staff, coordinated case management — must be protected, but their expression can and should adapt to local context. Fund the flexibility that responsible adaptation requires.
- 3. Interpret early variability as implementation learning, not failure.** Prevention models in new contexts take time to establish trust and reach. Funding structures that penalize early variability create incentives to avoid the communities that most need sustained investment — particularly rural communities and communities with historical reasons to distrust externally introduced programs.
- 4. Support long-term trust-building, especially in rural and Indigenous contexts.** Rural communities and communities with historical reasons to be cautious of externally introduced programs require longer investment timelines and locally anchored implementation. Short funding cycles are structurally incompatible with the trust-building that prevention depends on in these contexts.
- 5. Require equity-focused monitoring from the outset.** Community readiness assessments and ongoing evaluation should track who is being reached, who is not, and whether the model is functioning equitably across different student populations. Equity monitoring should be built into funding agreements, not added after implementation is underway.
- 6. Invest in Indigenous-led design, delivery, and evaluation.** Prevention for Indigenous youth must be designed and governed by Indigenous communities, grounded in Indigenous understandings of wellbeing and belonging, and evaluated on Indigenous terms. This is not an adaptation of the standard model — it is a distinct investment that governments must make explicitly.

What Service Providers Must Do

Within the conditions governments set, community organizations and school partners shape how Upstream Canada functions day to day. The following priorities reflect what the evaluation shows matters most for consistent, adaptive delivery.

- 1. Embed evaluation into practice from the start.** Developmental evaluation works because it is concurrent with delivery, not retrospective. Build data review, reflection, and adaptation into regular program rhythms — not just annual reports to funders.

2. **Invest in school relationships before the program scales.** Community readiness determines how quickly trust can be established. Do not rush referral volumes at the expense of the school partnership quality that sustains them over time.
3. **Refine assessment tools continuously.** Upstream Canada's experience shows that the language and framing of the SNA can be adapted to improve youth acceptability without compromising the screening function. Treat tool refinement as ongoing work, not a one-time design decision.
4. **Build local ownership.** Programs introduced from outside a community will only sustain if local partners – schools, agencies, families – come to see them as their own. Developmental evaluation supports this by giving local partners a genuine role in shaping the model rather than simply receiving it.
5. **Connect to Communities of Practice.** Shared learning infrastructure across Upstream sites is what allows local adaptation to improve the model nationally, not just locally. Participate actively rather than treating it as an administrative requirement.

Conclusion

Upstream Canada demonstrates that prevention models can be responsibly adapted across diverse contexts, but only when adaptation is treated as a deliberate, structured process rather than informal drift.¹⁸ Developmental evaluation made that possible: by embedding learning into implementation, the model was shaped by the realities of Canadian communities rather than imposed on them.

The lessons are practical. Trust takes time, especially where risk is hidden, and systems have historically underserved the people they were meant to help. Schools are essential access points, but their impact depends on coordinated community pathways. Rural and Indigenous contexts require longer investment timelines and deeper local anchoring than urban demonstration models.

For policymakers, the implication is clear: scaling prevention is not about replicating a program. It is about investing in the conditions – trust, coordination, learning infrastructure, and sustained funding – that allow a model to take root and improve over time.

How to cite this document: Sohn, J.. (2026). Upstream Canada: Youth Homelessness Prevention That Works – Lessons from Developmental Evaluation [Policy brief]. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

© 2026 The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press

To learn more about homelessness prevention visit the Homeless Hub:
homelesshub.ca/collection/prevention



REFERENCES

1. Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. Guilford Press.
2. Rogers, P. (2008). Using programme theory to evaluate complicated and complex aspects of interventions. *Evaluation*, 14(1), 29–48.
3. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
4. Hernández Jozefowicz-Simbeni, D. M., & Israel, N. (2006). Services to homeless and runaway youth: Gaps and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(6), 721–738.
5. Gaetz, S., & DeJ, E. (2017). *A new direction: A framework for homelessness prevention*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
6. Public Health Agency of Canada. (2018). *Key health inequalities in Canada*. Government of Canada.
7. Thistle, J. (2017). *Indigenous definition of homelessness in Canada*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.
8. Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & DeJ, E. (2018). *The roadmap for the prevention of youth homelessness*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.