Supporting Indigenous Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Key Details

KEY WORDS
Indigenous, Youth, Homelessness

POPULATION GROUPS
Aboriginal Youth
Youth Living in Poverty
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES
Health & Wellness
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN
Canada

SOURCE
Institution

"Doing this work means understanding historical factors that underlie and mediate the cycle of Indigenous homelessness, and exploring practices that best support youth who are homeless in getting off the streets and finding stable housing" (p. 99).

1. What is the research about?

Indigenous people are overrepresented in Canada's homeless population, making up 5-60%, depending on the area. Much of the Indigenous population is made up of young people; more than 40% are under the age of 24, and 28% are under the age of 14. As a result of colonialism, Indigenous people face many barriers to finding and maintaining safe, affordable, and secure housing – including poverty, social and housing services that are not culturally appropriate, mental health challenges, issues with addictions, and intergenerational trauma as a result of the violence of residential schools and child welfare intervention.

The cultural genocide that Indigenous people suffered through residential schools and child welfare intervention has left lasting mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual impacts, which can be seen as social determinants of homelessness (factors that make it more likely for them to experience homelessness).

2. Where did the research take place?

This is a literature review that highlights promising practices for working with Indigenous youth who are experiencing homelessness.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about Indigenous youth (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) who are experiencing homelessness, and the workers they may encounter in the mental health and shelter systems, as well as other social service organizations.

4. How was the research done?

The author reviewed research pertaining to Indigenous homelessness in Canada, and highlighted ways that practitioners can apply the research to their work with youth.

5. What are the key findings?

A) Develop culturally-based interventions.

Developing a cultural connection supports Indigenous people's healing. Indigenous approaches to health and wellbeing will differ from mainstream approaches; culturally-based interventions need to look for overlaps between the two and find ways to adapt or design services. **When Indigenous worldviews are effectively incorporated into services, it can help to build better therapeutic relationships, improve treatment retention rates and outcomes, and help clients make meaningful changes.**

The specific ways that this is applied will depend on the context; however, the basic principle is that space must be created to deliver services that respect Indigenous

worldviews and are reflective of Indigenous approaches to healing. Within mainstream organizations, this can create many challenges, as their policies and approaches reflect fundamental differences in how to work with clients (e.g. working with individual clients as opposed to working with clients alongside their families and communities). It is important for practitioners to work diligently to overcome such challenges.

B) Use a holistic framework.

Using a hybrid approach, service provides can integrate the best of both Indigenous and mainstream paradigms and practices to best serve the needs of the client (e.g. spirituality being incorporated into mainstream mental health treatment). Using a hybrid approach goes beyond simply showing 'cultural sensitivity'; rather, the practitioner needs to be able to see things from both mainstream and Indigenous perspectives. In practice, this means **ensuring that various ways of knowing and healing are seen as equally valid**.

C) Focus on relationships.

Building **strong, genuine relationships** cannot be overlooked as part of culturally-based interventions. Appropriate humour, self-disclosure (within reasonable limits and guided by professional ethics), and showing empathy can help to strengthen therapeutic rapport.

D) Acknowledge cultural context in mental health assessments.

Mainstream assessment tools use non-Indigenous populations as their norm, and there is currently no psychometric tool developed specifically for Indigenous peoples. When using mainstream assessment tools, youth workers need to think about important information that may be left out, and how they can introduce this information. Specifically, they should **take into account how colonialism has personally impacted individual youth, as well as consider the broader context of colonialism**.

Youth workers are cautioned against making clinical judgments solely from a Western lens, and are encouraged to **consider how symptoms and behaviours are part of a bigger picture** – one that should consider the role of values, community, family, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism. When possible, youth workers may **consider consulting with Indigenous Elders and healers** during the assessment process.

For examples of specific questions to consider, including in an assessment, please see page 97 of this chapter.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

For many Indigenous people, homelessness not only describes the lack of a physical home – it may also describe feeling that they are missing a cultural or spiritual identity. Therefore, **addressing the physical issue alone may not be sufficient**; youth will likely benefit from services that support them to (re)develop these identities.

Mainstream ideas about homelessness, especially when thinking about Indigenous peoples in Canada, often revolve around a 'blame the victim' narrative. Attitudes that follow from this narrative range from ignorance to explicit racism – and people working in the social service sector with Indigenous people who are homeless are not immune to these attitudes. Youth workers need to approach the issue of Indigenous youth homelessness from an understanding of its root causes: colonialism, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing racism and discrimination. **To combat Indigenous youth homelessness, youth workers need to seek out and employ practices that acknowledge and incorporate structural understandings of the issue and that explicitly incorporate Indigenous worldviews.**

FIND IT ONLINE

https://exchange.youthrex.com/report/mental-health-addiction-interventions-youth-experiencing-homelessness-practical-strategies

Stewart, S. (2018). Supporting Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness. In Kidd, S., Slesnick, N., Frederick, T., Karabanow, J., Gaetz, S. (Eds.), *Mental Health and Addiction Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Practical Strategies for Front-Line Providers* (89-100). Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

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