

Evidence Brief

Five Best Practices for Working with Youth Experiencing Homelessness

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and reviewed evidence in online databases to compile a list of strategies and best practices for supporting youth experiencing homelessness. The following key terms were used in searches: "youth," "young people," "adolescents," "teens," "homeless," "street-involved," "unstable accommodation," and "at risk."

Context

Youth between the ages of 13-24 make up 20% of Canada's homeless population. In Ontario, as in other provinces, certain groups are at higher risk of experiencing youth homelessness (including youth living with mental illness and addiction, young people transitioning out of care, LGBTIQ2S youth, Black and Indigenous youth). For example, while Indigenous people make up 5% of Canada's population, a disproportionate 30.6% of the homeless youth population are Indigenous. Racialized youth make up 17.4% of the youth homeless population (Gaetz et al., 2018).

Definitions of Key Terms

Homelessness refers to a range of experiences and situations. This evidence brief uses the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness definition:

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, unhealthy, unsafe, stressful and distressing. (Gaetz et al., 2012, p. 1)

For the purposes of this evidence brief, best practices are understood as a series of actions and strategies designed to produce the best or optimal outcomes for the population in question.

Key Messages

Homelessness is linked to structural and systemic inequalities. It is the result of a range of factors (Gaetz et al., 2018), such as limited access to affordable housing, poverty, and weakened community/family supports. Marginalized sub-populations and groups – already grappling with structural and systemic inequalities – are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and housing instability (Samuels et al., 2018; Phipps & Oickle, 2018). Evidence shows that the physical and mental health consequences of homelessness are disproportionately felt by marginalized groups (Phipps & Oickle, 2018). As such, young people who belong to already marginalized groups are at increased risk of experiencing homelessness and, in turn, adverse outcomes and trajectories.

Notably, the literature shows that a high proportion of youth experiencing homelessness have experienced traumatic events in their history, and the experience of homelessness can, in and of itself, cause trauma. Homelessness places considerable stress on young people. They face challenges to their physical, mental, and emotional health (Samuels et al., 2018; Gaetz et al., 2018). As it is, adolescence is marked by significant changes, as youth make the transition from childhood to adulthood (Waterston et al., 2015). Homelessness can add to or compound stress experienced by youth during this formative period and increase vulnerability to negative outcomes. Effective interventions to support youth experiencing homelessness understand the factors driving youth homelessness and use frameworks that provide youth with comprehensive, sustainable solutions and strategies. Additionally, effective interventions address systemic inequalities, promote the uptake of strategies focused on prevention, and address issues impacting disproportionately-affected groups.

Summary of Evidence:

Five Best Practices for Supporting Youth Experiencing Homelessness

1. Use frameworks that integrate rights-based principles.

The evidence emphasizes the importance of building on rights-based approaches to addressing youth homelessness. Provinces across Canada have adopted “Housing First” – a recovery-oriented framework that understands housing as a right. The approach prioritizes moving individuals out of homelessness as quickly as possible and addressing challenges that lead to housing loss (Government of Canada, 2016; Gaetz et al., 2016).

2. Support prevention and stabilization initiatives.

The evidence highlights the importance of using comprehensive approaches that integrate both emergency/crisis responses and prevention strategies (Waterston et al., 2015). Prevention-oriented approaches give youth sustainable exits from homelessness (Gaetz et

al., 2018). Elements of prevention-oriented approaches include addressing inequality and discrimination, prioritizing early intervention (Gaetz et al., 2018), and providing supports for families and communities to strengthen social inclusion and reduce adverse experiences or trauma (Waterston et al., 2015).

3. Increase low-barrier access to services.

Marginalized youth access vital services at lower rates due to barriers to services. For example, LGBTIQ2S youth are less likely to access services in facilities where they encounter homophobia and transphobia. Adopting policies that eliminate stigma and discrimination reduces barriers to services for youth (Abramovich, 2012). Additionally, youth workers can play an important role as navigators and connectors to services for youth experiencing homelessness. They can assist youth in connecting to essential support services (Springer et al., 2013). Low-barrier service is trauma-informed, respects autonomy, and is non-judgmental and non-discriminatory (Robards et al., 2017).

4. Engage youth in program development.

Including youth with lived experience in program development leads to the use of engaging approaches and interventions that better meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness (Stewart et al., 2010; Robards et al., 2017).

5. Use trauma-informed approaches.

A significant portion of youth experiencing homelessness have survived traumatic events. Research highlights the importance of adopting trauma-informed approaches to facilitate healing from past events. Additionally, service providers are encouraged to use flexible approaches and to prioritize judgement-free relationship building. Fostering trust and safety facilitates ongoing youth engagement in care (Vitopoulos et al., 2018; Samuels et. al., 2018).

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