



The invisibility of disability for homeless youth

1. What is the research about?

There is some evidence that youth with cognitive disabilities (intellectual, developmental, and/or learning disabilities) are more likely to experience homelessness, and that rates of disability are higher among the homeless population. However, the intersection of disability and homelessness remains a largely unexplored research area. This study examines the ways in which youth with cognitive disabilities are made vulnerable in Ontario's homelessness sector. In particular, the authors address the barriers to accessing disability services and the siloed nature of the homelessness and disability service sectors.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place at three sites in Ontario: Niagara, Hamilton, and Toronto, representing small, medium, and large municipalities, respectively.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about frontline staff, managers, and directors working in the housing, disability, employment, education, child welfare, and criminal justice sectors. Participants included teachers, psychologists, social workers, shelter staff, adult protective service workers, child protection workers, and employment counsellors.

4. How was the research done?

This study is part of a larger research project that explores the intersection of disability, education, and employment among homeless youth. The authors use data from 30 individual interviews and 14 focus groups (including a total of 97 participants) with key informants across the relevant sectors. Participants were asked about agency mandate, target population, eligibility criteria, responses to youth who are outside the target population, referral processes, and gaps in services.

“The homelessness sector was not designed to anticipate disability, nor was the disability sector designed to anticipate homelessness ... Operating as siloes, it is [the] lack of knowledge and engagement between these sectors – more so than disability – that works to disable youth and to make them vulnerable” (p. 105).

5. What are the key findings?

The findings suggest that the vulnerability of youth with cognitive disabilities “exists not only within the two sectors but stems directly from the gaps between them” (p. 105).

a) The youth homelessness sector is not equipped to respond to the needs of youth with cognitive disabilities. Service providers are often not aware of a young person's disability, and lack the skills to perform a diagnosis. Cognitive disabilities are rarely included in lists of complex needs, and thus not addressed.

b) Even when service providers are aware of a disability, they face significant barriers referring youth to needed services.

In order to access disability services in Ontario, youth must navigate a lengthy, complicated assessment process. For youth experiencing homelessness, it is a “herculean task, one that fails to recognize that not all disabled youth have the support of families, a stable placement, and economic resources to allow them to wait indefinitely” (p. 105).

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research reveals the vulnerability of youth with cognitive disabilities in Ontario's homelessness sector. The authors argue that services should recognize “the complexity of need and intersectionality of experience and identity for homeless youth, rather than addressing narrow diagnoses” (p. 105). A larger system solution requires dismantling sector siloes and establishing multi-agency partnerships.

Organizations should consider implementing early intervention programs that identify youth at risk of becoming homeless and reconnect them with families, schools, and communities. Programs can be especially impactful if they are targeted at youth with intellectual, learning, and/or developmental disabilities. Youth shelter staff can benefit from training and/or screening tools that can support them in identifying youth who might have cognitive disabilities for referral to psychological assessment.



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