

How Do Youth Use Homeless Shelters?



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“Future research should seek to better understand how shelter use by youth changes over time, why shelter use varies by ethnicity, and most importantly, what interventions might be most appropriate for preventing youth from experiencing homelessness at all” (p. 333).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research explores the experience of youth homelessness and the effectiveness of shelters as a response to youth homelessness by examining the frequency and duration of youth homeless shelter usage.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in Calgary, Alberta.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about youth experiencing homelessness and accessing the shelter system – specifically, how those experiences vary for Indigenous, white, and racialized youth.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

Researchers accessed a large dataset collected and maintained by the Calgary Homeless Foundation, which describes the daily movements of people experiencing homelessness into and out of shelters. This study focused on the data describing shelter use by youth aged 18 to 24: 105,149 daily observations of 3,176 youth’s emergency homeless shelter usage between January 1, 2014, to December 31, 2019. Researchers used a *cluster analysis* technique (examining naturally recurring groups of data – or clusters – in a dataset) to group youth by the length and frequency of their shelter stays. Additionally, researchers compared youth’s first admissions into shelters to the number of re-admissions after they did not use the shelter system for an extended time.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

i) How youth use homeless shelters – and how effective shelters are as a response to youth homelessness – will vary across different contexts:

Researchers found that 86.4% of all youth making use of the shelter system in Calgary used shelters infrequently and for short stays, defined as less than 14 days (a long stay, by comparison, is defined as 100 days or more; an episode is a shelter stay that is separated by a subsequent shelter stay by at least 30 days). For this reason, the shelter system in Calgary was determined to be a cost-effective response to youth homelessness.

However, when researchers performed a similar analysis on data from Toronto on the use of homeless shelters by youth, they discovered that the average shelter stays per episode were significantly longer than in Calgary, making shelters a more expensive and less effective way for the public sector to respond to youth experiencing homelessness.

ii) There are three types of youth shelter users:

a) transitional (infrequent use and short stays)

- 36% of all shelter beds used by youth in Calgary
- average number of days per episode: 9

b) episodic (more frequent use than transitional users, but also relatively short stays)

- 23.7% of all shelter beds used by youth in Calgary
- average number of days per episode: 12

c) chronic (few stays, but each stay is long)

- 40.3% of all shelter beds used by youth in Calgary
- average number of days per episode: 116

iii) Patterns of youth shelter use in Calgary vary across specific identity categories:

- Youth identifying as **male** dominated the population of youth using homeless shelters, particularly as chronic users (80% of these users identified as male).
- Youth identifying as **Indigenous** were overrepresented in homeless shelter usage, making up 32.6% of users aged 18 to 24, even though only 4.2% of youth in this age group in Calgary identified as Indigenous.
- **White youth** leave the shelter system earlier than **Indigenous youth** and earlier than **racialized youth**.
- **Indigenous youth** are more likely to readmit into the shelter system than **white youth**.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Youth shelters are not a one-size-fits-all approach to responding to youth homelessness. This research demonstrates the need for **well-targeted** and **well-timed interventions**, and **sensitive policies** geared toward preventing youth homelessness and supporting youth – specifically Indigenous youth and racialized youth – who experience homelessness.

Responses must also be designed to be **appropriate and responsive to the needs and realities of the context and communities being served**. Incorporating culturally-responsive interventions could improve outcomes and advance wellbeing for these youth.

Q Jadidzadeh, A., & Kneebone, R. (2021). [How do youth use homeless shelters?](#) *Journal of Poverty*, 26(4), 322-336.