



# Child protection services and youth experiencing homelessness: Findings of the 2019 national youth homelessness survey in Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Youth leaving or being discharged from child protection services (CPS) are a particularly vulnerable population in Canada that could be at an increased risk of homelessness, which has many adverse consequences including declining physical and mental health, school disengagement, involvement with the justice system, and substance use disorders. In this paper, we examine the extent to which youth accessing homelessness services with a history of involvement with CPS differ from their peers who have not interacted with CPS using the 2019 Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey—which is by far the largest study ever administered in Canada on youth homelessness (n = 1375). This examination includes a diverse range of life circumstances and outcomes, including quality of life, relationships with friends and family, criminal records, education, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Furthermore, controlling for demographic characteristics, we present risk factors that are likely to be correlated with youth homelessness, including ACEs and the CPS history, and conclude by discussing policy implications and proposing future research avenues.

## 1. Introduction

Youth homelessness has become a critical social challenge in Canada. On any given day, it has been estimated that 6,000–7,000 young people experience homelessness and are unable to secure stable housing (Gaetz et al., 2016). The experience of homelessness for youth is often accompanied by poverty and family conflict, which perpetuates the cyclical pattern of homelessness (Grant et al., 2013). Many youth experiencing homelessness face barriers to pursuing education and finding employment, leaving them insecure and dependent on friends and family supports for financial assistance and a place to stay. In this context, youth who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences, such as violence and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, are particularly vulnerable, leading often to intervention by child protection services (CPS). Research indicates that there exists a possible relationship between the early experiences of youth with CPS and the subsequent risk of homelessness (Alberston et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2015; Berzin et al.,

2011; Dworsky et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2017; Gaetz et al., 2016; Goldstein et al., 2011; Nichols, 2013; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2017). This body of research suggests that a disproportionate number of youth experiencing homelessness have been involved with child welfare programs including foster care and group home placements, at some point in the past.

Within the context of the Canadian response to youth homelessness, in this paper, we investigate the extent to which youth experiencing homelessness with a history of involvement with CPS differ from their peers who have not interacted with the child welfare system. This investigation includes a diverse range of life circumstances and outcomes, including quality of life, relationships with friends and family, criminal records, education, and adverse childhood experiences. A limited body of research has explored such a complex interrelationship (e.g., Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Dworsky et al., 2013; Foust et al., 2020; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2017), although it is largely confined to the United States and the Canadian research studies are only emerging (e.g.,

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Alberton et al., 2020; Gaetz et al., 2016; Goldstein et al., 2011; Goyette et al., 2019; Nichols, 2013; Nichols et al., 2017). We, therefore, fill a gap in the extant literature on the intersection between CPS and youth homelessness by presenting the results of the 2019 National Youth Homelessness Survey in Canada.

We begin the paper by exploring the literature and then explaining the methodology and analytic procedures. We used the 2019 pan-Canadian data ( $n = 1375$ ) that were collected as part of the second national survey of young people who have experienced homelessness, which represents 49 different communities across Canada. This survey was a follow-up to the first national survey, conducted in 2016 (Gaetz et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2017). In the paper at hand, we examine the sociodemographic characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness who self-identified as having a history of involvement with CPS. Next, we explore how certain background variables and outcomes in those areas are distinct from those of youth who did not report any involvement with CPS. Predictive risk factors that are likely to be correlated with youth homelessness, including the CPS history in the Canadian context, are also presented. We conclude the paper by discussing policy implications and proposing future research avenues.

## 2. Context: Child protection services (CPS) and youth homelessness

In general, a survey of existing literature on the relationship between CPS involvement and youth homelessness demonstrates that youth taken into care who may subsequently leave care—whether on their own volition or through “aging out” of the child welfare system foster care or group homes—struggle with this transition and often experience challenges in finding and retaining decent, safe, and stable housing. In one ethnographic study, for example, Nichols (2013) provided a deeper understanding of the institutional link between child protection services and homelessness, arguing for a coordination of policy and service delivery at a municipal or regional level to support youth transition from foster care to adulthood. Involvement with CPS often results in episodes of homelessness with its associated adverse consequences including, among others, poor and declining physical and mental health (Fowler et al., 2011; Medlow et al., 2014; Perlman et al., 2014), low educational participation and attainment (Alberton et al., 2020; Villegas et al., 2014) involvement with the justice system (Courtney et al., 2011; Ferguson et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2013), and substance use disorders (McVicar et al., 2015; Thompson & Hasin, 2011).

Extant research has suggested that varying sociodemographic characteristics of youth involved with CPS tend to be associated with different outcomes. Research studies have highlighted that sub-populations experiencing discrimination, including Indigenous and racialized youth as well as 2SLGBTQA+ youth, are overrepresented among youth with a history of involvement with CPS and face greater social equity barriers to accessing health services, education, and employment opportunities (Alberton et al., 2020; Barker et al., 2014; Blackstock, 2011; Gaetz et al., 2016; Mosher & Hewitt, 2018; Nichols et al., 2017; Sinha et al., 2018). For example, Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2017) found that Black youth accessing homelessness services were significantly more likely to have a history of CPS involvement compared to White youth.

In Canada, Indigenous youth are overrepresented both in the child protection system and youth homelessness (Baskin, 2007; Nichols et al., 2017). Contributing factors to child welfare involvement and youth homelessness among Indigenous groups can be seen in the context of the Canadian history of colonialism, including practices aimed at eradicating Indigenous cultural traditions, such as Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop, as well as ongoing racism against Indigenous youth (Thistle, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). There also seems to be an increased risk of experiencing mental health challenges among Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness, with child protection history and street victimization playing a profound role

in their distress levels (Kidd et al., 2019). For example, one recent study found that Indigenous populations (i.e., First Nations, Métis, or Inuit) were almost four times more likely to have been involved with CPS than non-Indigenous populations, with 259% greater odds of experiencing episodes of homelessness (Alberton et al., 2020).

Findings of the 2016 Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey (Gaetz et al., 2016) in Canada provided important insights. The study, which was the largest survey on youth homelessness at that time ( $n = 1103$ ), revealed some characteristics unique to youth who had been in the care of CPS: those youth who left home before the age of 16 were more likely to have reported involvement with CPS (73.3%). A higher percentage of gender minorities, including transgender and non-binary youth reported involvement with CPS than cisgender youth (70.8% vs. 56.9%). CPS involvement was also found to be more prevalent among Indigenous youth (70.5%) compared to members of racialized communities (43.5%) and White youth (55.1%).

Moreover, the 2016 Without a Home survey found that 57.8% of youth experiencing homelessness reported some type of involvement with CPS over their lifetime, with 47.2% having a history of placements in either foster care or group homes (Gaetz et al., 2016). In a longitudinal study—The Youth Pathways Project—conducted in Toronto, 150 street-involved youth were interviewed regarding their experience with child protection services. The study reported that 43% of street youth had been involved with the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) at some point while growing up (Fidler et al., 2008). In the province of Quebec, Goyette et al. (2019) also found that 20% ( $n = 138$ ) of youth who aged out of care experienced residential instability being either on the street, in ad-hoc shelters, or in emergency shelters, compared to 8% of youth still in care.

In terms of the studies emerging in Canada, it is worth mentioning two main limitations associated with the relatively understudied link between CPS and youth homelessness. First, since CPS falls under provincial and territorial jurisdictions (Swift, 2011), there is the issue of inconsistent data collection and management policies and practices across jurisdictions, which makes it challenging for researchers to produce or access a compiled, nationwide database that contains CPS statistics and demographic characteristics (Jones et al., 2015; Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010). The second limitation, although not unique to Canada, pertains to various methodological considerations of conducting research, including the recruitment of participants, informed consent, small sample sizes, low response rates, and issues attributed to self-reported surveys and questionnaires, such as their reliability (Bender et al., 2015; Hong & Piescher, 2012; Medlow et al., 2014; Siegel et al., 2016).

Acknowledging these limitations, in this paper, we contribute to the study of the link between CPS and youth homelessness, using the 2019 pan-Canadian survey of youth who accessed homelessness services. The 2019 survey was larger in sample size than the 2016 national survey and included more information regarding the child welfare system, which affords the current paper a more in-depth analysis.

## 3. Study design and methodology

### 3.1. Data collection and recruitment strategy

Building on previous studies that examined the link between homelessness and CPS, we employed the latest data drawn from the 2019 iteration of *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*, which was conducted through 98 agencies serving youth experiencing homelessness in 49 communities across Canada. The self-reported survey is by far the largest study ( $n = 1375$ ) ever administered in Canada on youth homelessness and contained questions regarding demographics information (i.e., age, race, sexual identity, gender identity, Indigenous identity) and a wide array of homelessness indicators, such as adverse childhood experiences, quality of life, friend social support circles, education, CPS records, and involvement with the

justice system and legal issues. The 2019 survey received approval from York University's Human Participants Review Committee and was a follow-up to the original 2016 survey ( $n = 1103$ ), the first pan-Canadian survey of young people who experienced homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016).

Youth participants were identified through collaboration between the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and A Way Home Canada, with their associated network agencies. Over a four-month period between January and April 2019, surveys were distributed to youth participants either electronically or on paper and were administered by agencies that serve youth experiencing homelessness, including emergency shelters and day programs. Youth were approached by staff and provided with survey and informed consent materials. The staff reviewed the purpose and nature of the survey with youth and completed the informed consent process. Youth were given either paper copies of the survey or a computer or tablet to complete the survey online. Youth received \$10 as compensation for their participation. The survey consisted of 11 sections with questions that asked about youths' situation prior to their participation in the survey, their housing history, demographics, involvement with CPS, life at home, relationships, health and well-being, involvement with the justice system, education, income and employment, and attitudes towards life. Participants took approximately 30 to 90 min to complete the survey. A total of 1375 participants were recruited, the majority of whom were based in Ontario (58%) followed by Quebec (13%), Alberta (9%), Manitoba (6%), British Columbia (5%), and Nova Scotia (5%) with the other provinces accounting for less than 4% of the participants.

### 3.2. Variables and analytical procedures

We selected those youth participants who were between 13 and 24 years (mean = 20.10,  $SD = 2.56$ ), consistent with the "Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness" provided by the COH (Gaetz et al., 2016, p. 27). After eliminating cases with missing values, the final workable sample included 993 cases of which 607 (61.1%) youths had a history of involvement with CPS and 386 (38.9%) youths did not report any interactions with CPS. The age of first reported experience of homelessness (mean = 16.55,  $SD = 3.20$ ) was also recorded. Racial diversity of the participants consisted of Black (15.8%), racialized (e.g., East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, Middle Eastern) (22.8%), and White (61.4%) populations. Indigenous identity was treated as a dichotomized variable, with 28.3% of the participants self-identifying as having Indigenous identity and 71.7% as non-Indigenous. Another variable examined in the study was sexual identity with two mutually exclusive items: either self-identified as non-2SLGBTQA+ (65.3%) or self-identified as 2SLGBTQA+ (34.7%), with the latter comprising lesbian, gay, two-spirit, bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual, and pansexual subpopulations. Gender identity included women (39.5%), men (50.1%), and gender minorities (10.4%), i.e., those who did not identify as cisgender men or women, including two-spirit people, transgender men, transgender women, and gender non-conforming, or non-binary groups.

In addition to the participants' demographic characteristics, we examined adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) using an array of outcome categories that the participants may have experienced during their childhood, including emotional abuse, physical violence, sexual abuse, family neglect, economic hardship, separated parents, family psychiatric disorders, and family incarceration history—some participants provided multiple episodes of ACEs during their lifetime. A cumulative integer score was calculated that corresponded to the number of ACE incidents the youth self-reported, ranging from zero (no exposure) to nine—extreme exposure to past harmful childhood experiences (mean = 4.08,  $SD = 2.63$ ).

To minimize standard responses due to survey fatigue, key items from validated measures were extracted and, in some cases, brief measures were used. In selecting those items, key considerations were observed, including investigator consensus on topic relevance and youth

feedback on the draft survey. More specifically, with respect to quality of life, seven items were adapted from the validated WHOQOL-BREF measure (Skevington et al., 2004). Five-point Likert scale items, with one representing "not at all" to five indicating "completely", covered outcome domains, including quality of life, physical health, access to health care services, environment, life satisfaction, safety, and psychological issues (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.86). The participants were also asked to report whether they have experienced any alcohol or drug overdoses or attempted to end their life with possible yes and no answers. Regarding hospitalization, a dummy variable was created representing those who have never been admitted to a hospital overnight and those who have reported at least one incident.

To assess social support from friends, six items were derived from the Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher & Sass, 2010) (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92). Three additional items were added that were relevant to the youth general support life, including those people that can help in an emergency, provide emotional support, and those who can check in on the youth regarding their well-being. Likert-based scales were employed, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", with a higher number indicating generally greater access to the support system.

In this study, we also examined youth involvement with the justice system and legal issues. Variables included whether the youths have reported any history of arrest or police custody. The participants were also asked to provide any experience of discrimination or harassment by their landlords. Additionally, as a follow-up question, the youth were asked whether they have ever been evicted from their rental property.

Our analysis also included education. The level of education was classified into three categories consisting of the following: less than high school, high school diploma or equivalent, and college or university degree. The youth participants were also asked whether they have been tested or assessed at school for any of the following items: learning disabilities, special needs, gifted program, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Concerning analytical procedures, we first used a chi-squared ( $\chi^2$ ) statistic to examine the basic tests of association between the demographic characteristics of the CPS group compared to the non-CPS group and to detect any statistically significant relationships. For continuous and Likert-scale variables such as ACEs, quality of life, and social support from friends, an independent samples *t*-test was utilized to compare the mean scores between the CPS group and the non-CPS group across the aforementioned domains.

Additionally, we decided to examine the relationship between the age of the first experience of homelessness and child protection services. The age of the first experience of homelessness is important as experiencing homelessness before transitioning to adulthood and developing essential life skills could increase hardship and expose young individuals to greater adversity on the streets; the findings of the 2016 Without a Home study (Gaetz et al., 2016) indicated that 40.1% of youth experiencing homelessness reported that they were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness. Furthermore, the study found that youth who left home at an earlier age were more likely to experience multiple episodes of homelessness, be victims of crime and sexual assault, have poorer quality of life, be involved with child welfare services, and have greater mental health barriers. More specifically, 73.3% of youth who left home before the age of 16 reported involvement with child welfare services. In this study, we conducted a stepwise linear regression to control for the demographic features of the youth to investigate any association between the age of the first reported experience of homelessness (as the outcome variable) and identify potential risk factors, including involvement with child protection services and adverse childhood experiences. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) cut-off score was set to five (Studenmund, 2017) to control for any multicollinearity. No VIF score greater than 1.28 was observed. Outlier cases outside two standard deviations of the outcome variable were removed to improve and strengthen the regression model.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Within-Group analyses of CPS involvement

Six hundred and seven youths (61.1% of the total sample) reported prior involvement with CPS, of whom 21.3% of participants reported their involvement with foster care families, 14% with group homes, 28% with both foster care and group homes, and 36.7% with other child protection services. The latter category included those youth who may have interacted with child protections services but were not necessarily taken into care; it might also be possible that child welfare services including counseling were provided for families. The mean age of the first contact with child welfare services was 7.6 years (SD = 5.12), while the mean age of leaving foster care or group homes was 14.7 (SD = 4.52). With respect to age, the CPS group had a mean age of 19.8 years (SD = 2.65). Among valid responses, 36.5% of the participants identified themselves as belonging to the 2SLGBTQA+ subpopulation. Regarding gender identity, gender minorities accounted for 11% of the participants, while 43.9% self-identified as women and 45.1% as men. The majority of the youth were White (63%), while the remaining self-identified as Black (11.5%) and racialized (25.5%). In total, 34.9% identified as Indigenous youth, including First Nations, Inuit, and Metis populations, while 65.1% did not identify as Indigenous within the CPS group.

### 4.2. Transitional supports while in care

The respondents involved with CPS were asked a broad range of questions that explored the kinds of transitional supports they received, which were intended to prepare and assist them when it was the time for them to leave care. Thirty percent of youth reported they had received help from a caseworker to plan their departure from foster care, group homes or both. Only 13.7% of the participants indicated that they were aware whether their risk of homelessness was assessed before transitioning from care, while the majority (49%) expressed that they did not know if such an assessment was made—the remaining participants reported that they were not sure. The analysis of self-reported surveys demonstrated that, while in care, the youth at least received some degree of support in transitional planning aimed at reconnecting them with family or a relative (35.5%), or that offered support around life skills training (45.70%), budgeting (44.2%), planning for school (46.4%), and employment preparation (44.9%).

### 4.3. Transitional supports after departure

A common theme observed among the participants who were discharged from care was that 51.6% reported that they did not receive any help regarding a suitable plan for where they could go or how they could support themselves after their departure. The following percentages indicate the proportion of the participants that received support in: finding employment (30.5%), keeping current housing (30%), seeking legal assistance (33.6%), reuniting with family members (35.5%), returning to school (40.6%), acquiring life skills training (42.1%), and accessing physical and mental health services (44.2%).

### 4.4. Cross-Case comparisons

Table 1 compares the demographic characteristics of the participants who accessed homelessness services (aged 13–24 years) between those who were involved with CPS and those who did not report any involvement with CPS. The results show a meaningful difference between the mean age of the first experience of homelessness for the CPS group (16) compared to the non-CPS group (17.4). In total, 31.9% of the youth were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness; 37.7% of the CPS group reported their first homelessness episode before the age of 16 in comparison to 23.5% of the non-CPS group. The

**Table 1**

Demographic characteristics of youth participants (aged 13–24 years) accessing homelessness programs based on their history of involvement with CPS.

Demographics Variables	CPS Group		Non-CPS Group		t (df)	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)		
Age	19.8	(2.65)	20.5	(2.42)	- 3.97	***
Age of the First Experience of Homelessness	16	(3.21)	17.42	(3.11)	- 5.99	***
	% <sup>a</sup>	(n)	% <sup>a</sup>	(n)	χ <sup>2</sup> (df)	***
<b>Racial Diversity</b>					19.44	***
Black ***	11.5	(62)	21.6	(79)		
Racialized *	25.5	(137)	18.4	(67)		
White	63.0	(339)	60.0	(219)		
<b>Indigenous Identity</b>					40.06	***
Indigenous ***	34.9	(206)	16.3	(62)		
Non-Indigenous ***	65.1	(385)	83.7	(319)		
<b>Gender Identity</b>					9.92 (2)	**
Women **	43.9	(257)	34.3	(129)		
Men **	45.1	(264)	55.1	(207)		
Gender Minorities	11.0	(65)	10.6	(40)		
<b>2SLGBTQA+ Identity</b>						
Yes	36.5	(206)	31.5	(116)	2.46 (1)	
No	63.5	(358)	68.5	(252)		

Significance levels are reported at \* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, and \*\*\* p <.001.

<sup>a</sup> The symbol % reflects the percentage of the youth within the CPS/non-CPS group across different demographics characteristics.

chi-squared statistic revealed significant relationships between the participants' demographic features and the CPS/non-CPS groups, including racial diversity, Indigenous identity, and gender identity.

Regarding racial diversity, CPS involvement was found to be less prevalent among Black youth (11.5% vs. 21.6%), while other racialized groups seem more likely to have been in the care of CPS. However, despite the greater presence of the White (63%) population among the CPS group, the associations were not found to be significant. Additionally, 34.9% of the CPS group were self-identified as Indigenous, and CPS involvement was more than twice as likely to be seen among the Indigenous population (34.9% vs. 16.3%). Concerning gender identity, our analysis indicated that CPS involvement has been reported to be substantially more prevalent among women (43.9% vs. 34.3%), whereas CPS involvement was less likely to be seen among men (55.1% vs. 45.1%). However, no significant difference in CPS histories was observed for gender minorities. Those youth who self-identified as 2SLGBTQA+ were found to be greater in numbers when it comes to interaction with CPS (36.5% vs. 31.5%) though the association was not significant.

Table 2 presents the comparison of the CPS group to the non-CPS group across a range of outcomes. On average, youths with a history of CPS involvement were found to have been exposed to a greater number of adverse childhood experiences (4.78 vs. 3.42). Quality of life revealed statistically significant group mean differences, with a higher score for the non-CPS group while the CPS group is observed to have a stronger system of support from friends, though the association was not significant. Additional items regarding the support circles did not exhibit significant group mean differences.

Concerning categorical and dichotomized variables, having a history of CPS involvement was associated with increased frequency of drug or alcohol overdose, suicide attempts, and hospitalization. More specifically, 38.8% of the CPS group reported at least one episode of drug or alcohol overdose in comparison to 29.0% of the non-CPS group. Among youth involved with CPS, 59.6% reported suicidality, and 52.4% reported having spent at least one night at the hospital.

Similar observations emerged regarding youth involvement with legal issues, with an increased prevalence of discrimination by the

**Table 2**  
The CPS group compared to the non-CPS group across a range of outcomes.

Continuous/Interval Variables	CPS Group	Non-CPS Group	t (df)	—
	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	4.78 (2.58)	3.45 (2.37)	– 8.25 (857)	***
Satisfaction with Family	2.87 (1.37)	2.95 (1.35)	0.767 (848)	
Family Support Circle	3.30 (1.30)	3.24 (1.30)	– 0.542 (769)	
Social Support from Friends	3.84 (1.14)	3.69 (1.11)	– 0.95 (881)	
Help in Emergency	3.87 (1.36)	3.79 (1.35)	– 0.907 (868)	
Emotional Support	3.74 (1.43)	3.69 (1.37)	– 0.473 (868)	
Person Checks In	3.79 (1.42)	3.82 (1.28)	0.423 (779)	
Quality of Life	3.17 (0.92)	3.30 (0.88)	2.09 (921)	*
<i>Categorical and Dichotomized Variables</i>	% <sup>a</sup> (n)	% <sup>a</sup> (n)	$\chi^2$ (df)	
Drug or Alcohol Overdose	38.8 (149)	29.0 (76)	6.582 (1)	**
Attempted Suicide	59.6 (273)	41.0 (128)	25.674 (1)	***
Hospitalization	52.4 (132)	36.0 (64)	11.347 (1)	***
Police Custody	41.6 (154)	33.3 (78)	4.162 (1)	*
Discrimination by Property Owner	31.3 (148)	20.3 (64)	11.575 (1)	***
Eviction History	42.0 (182)	29.0 (93)	13.68 (1)	***
Educational Attainment			25.508 (2)	***
Less than High School ***	67.9 (334)	50.5 (165)		
High School Diploma or Equivalent ***	24.8 (122)	36.7 (120)		
College or University Degree **	7.3 (36)	12.8 (42)		
Learning Disabilities	57.3 (266)	35.0 (109)	37.004 (1)	***
Special Needs	29.9 (129)	15.8 (48)	19.146 (1)	***
Gifted Program	24.5 (101)	14.0 (42)	11.957 (1)	**
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	47.9 (214)	29.6 (90)	27.044 (1)	***

Significance levels are reported at \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> The symbol % reflects the percentage of the youth within the CPS/non-CPS group across different demographics characteristics.

property owner and of eviction history among the CPS group. The CPS group was also found to be more likely to be arrested and taken into custody by the police compared to the non-CPS group (41.6% vs. 33.3%).

The last area of inquiry was education and learning disabilities. The analysis demonstrated that youth with CPS records were more likely to have reported lower educational attainment. For example, the educational level of 67.9 % of youth was reported to be less than high school. Higher educational status was more evident in the non-CPS group, of which 12.8% reported having a college degree or higher, in comparison to 7.3% in the CPS group. Additional challenges facing the CPS group revealed significant associations. For instance, youth with a history of involvement with CPS were found to be at greater risk of learning disabilities (57.3% vs. 35.0%) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (47.9% vs. 29.6%).

#### 4.5. Age of the first experience of homelessness

A stepwise linear regression was employed to examine factors that

are likely to be associated with the age of the first experience of youth homelessness (Table 3). In the first step, demographic characteristics were included, namely, age, racial diversity, Indigenous identity, gender identity, and 2SLGBTQA+ identity. The cumulative score of the number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) was added in the second step, which improved the model (Adjusted R-Squared 0.21). Involvement with CPS, the defining factor and the primary variable of interest, was inserted in the third step, which further improved and strengthened the regression model, explaining 23 percent of the variation in the outcome variable (all models were significant at 0.001).

In the first two models, Indigenous identity was found to be associated with a lower age of the first homelessness experience, although in the third model, the association was not significant. Furthermore, with each unit increase in the cumulative number of adverse childhood experiences, controlling for the demographic characteristics, we could expect a 0.17-years decrease in the age of first homelessness. In other words, there exists an association between exposure to a greater range of adverse childhood experiences and a lower age of the first experience of homelessness. Of central interest, involvement with child welfare or protection services was found to be significantly associated with the age of the first experience of youth homelessness. Youth with a history of involvement with CPS could experience homelessness at a lower age—by 0.71 years. Therefore, involvement with CPS could potentially be linked to the experience of homelessness at an earlier age.

However, we caution against establishing causality as the cross-sectional design of the study demonstrates association and not necessarily cause and effect. As in any study, the findings might also be prone to some errors that occurred due to chance and multiple tests being run.

## 5. Discussion

Using the 2019 Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey in Canada, in this paper, we have endeavored to provide insights into the link between involvement with child protection services (CPS) and youth homelessness in Canada. Drawing on a large, national dataset, the paper's cross-sectional design offered a more in-depth analysis of youth with a history of CPS and a range of life outcomes compared to the first national survey (Gaetz et al., 2016). The 2016 Without a Home survey found that 40.1% of youth participants experienced their first homelessness episode before the age of 16 and 73.3% of those youth reported involvement with child welfare services. The findings from the second national study reported in this paper indicated that 31.9% were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness, of whom 72.2% reported having a CPS record. There seems to be an almost a one-year gap between the mean age of first contact with child welfare services. The findings of the first survey indicated the age of 8.5, while our analysis indicated 7.6 years, possibly due to the larger sample that was employed in this study.

By understanding CPS history and the ways that it shapes youths' circumstances in coping with life after their leave from child welfare services, we can identify key policy implications. Transitional planning for youth who are in care and providing stable housing for these youths seemingly continue to be challenging for the child protection system at large (Nichols et al., 2017). As our findings suggest that only 30% of participants received assistance while in care for planning their departure from CPS, with only 13.7% of participants indicating that their risk of homelessness was assessed, planned transitions from care become increasingly critical. Seamless transitions for youth leaving care require concerted efforts across all levels of government to invest in service provision and engage in implementing aftercare programs with continued financial supports to avoid potential negative risks facing youth including housing instability, homelessness, and low educational attainment (Dworsky et al., 2013; Shah et al., 2017; Villegas et al., 2014). Critical time interventions (CTI) for families and youth, including mechanisms to provide stable housing, can also be important in reuniting the youth in care with their families (Bai et al., 2020; Shinn

**Table 3**  
Stepwise linear regression – predictors associated with the age of the first experience of homelessness.

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	Coeff.	SE	t	Coeff.	SE	t	Coeff.	SE	t
<b>Age</b>	0.33***	0.03	9.43	0.35***	0.03	10.01	0.33***	0.03	14.37
<b>Racial Diversity</b>									
Black	1.32***	0.26	5.09	1.07***	0.26	4.12	0.99***	0.28	3.59
Racialized	0.17	0.23	0.77	0.14	0.23	0.59	0.19	0.24	0.80
White (ref) <sup>a</sup>									
<b>Indigenous Identity</b>									
Indigenous	-0.60**	0.21	-2.80	-0.53*	0.21	-2.51	-0.42	0.23	-1.90
Non-Indigenous (ref) <sup>a</sup>									
<b>Gender Identity</b>									
Women	-0.28	0.19	-1.49	-0.09	0.19	-0.51	-0.06	0.01	-0.33
Men (ref) <sup>a</sup>									
Gender Minorities	-0.50	0.32	-1.53	-0.33	0.33	-1.02	-0.24	0.34	-0.70
<b>2SLGBTQA+ Identity</b>									
Yes	-0.04	0.19	-0.21	-0.03	0.19	-0.14	-0.01	0.20	-0.04
No (ref) <sup>a</sup>									
<b>Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)</b>									
CPS Involvement									
Yes									
No (ref) <sup>a</sup>							-0.70***	0.19	-3.62
<b>Regression F</b>		21.58***			23.57***			20.49***	
<b>Adj. R-Square</b>	0.17			0.21			0.23		

Significance levels are reported at \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> ref = reference category.

et al., 2015).

Additionally, stable housing is a key element in the life of young adults who are transitioning into adulthood as they pursue educational and vocational opportunities while developing skills to lead an independent life (Berzin et al., 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015). Social workers play a key role in this regard, as research has demonstrated a strong connection between youth in care and their outreach social worker, even after their departure from the child welfare system (Collins et al., 2010). While employment and housing stability are mostly closely associated with positive mental well-being in young people after leaving care (Wade & Dixon, 2006), receiving support from social workers who can assess their needs and planning for their departure becomes even more salient.

The analysis of the second national dataset demonstrated key demographic differences among youth who accessed homelessness services with or without a history of CPS involvement. While youth who have interacted with CPS were less likely to be Black, compared to the non-CPS group, racialized youth with a history of CPS were found to be greater in numbers. Consistent with previous studies (Alberston et al., 2020; Gaetz et al., 2016; Kidd et al., 2019), Indigenous youth were at greater risk of involvement with CPS than their peers, which suggests their vulnerability to systemic and structural determinants leading to their homelessness and consequently adverse quality-of-life outcomes. CPS involvement was also found to be more prevalent among women compared to men. Recent literature suggests that young women with a history of child welfare involvement face higher rates of sexual and physical violence and are more likely to experience mental and physical health barriers, including emotional distress (Schwan et al., 2020). Our results, however, were inconclusive concerning the association between the 2SLGBTQA+ population and CPS.

Additionally, the cross-case comparisons revealed important insights across a wide range of outcomes. A high exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse appeared to be prevalent among youth involved with CPS, potentially creating challenging circumstances for youth transitioning into adulthood. In line with this finding, the 2016 Without a Home study found that a high percentage of young people (63.1%) experienced childhood trauma and abuse, with 57.8% of youth reporting a history of involvement with child protection services. Combined with structural factors such as income disparities and low provision of affordable housing,

adverse childhood experiences are expected to be strongly associated with early experiences of homelessness, and as such, leading to homelessness at an earlier age. It should be noted that, however, the relationship between CPS involvement and earlier age of homelessness experience is far from linear and may result from a complex interplay of factors that could compound the relationship. It is likely that ACEs in young adolescents contribute to homelessness at a younger age, which may be a notable sign for CPS to be involved in such cases.

With respect to youth quality of life and well-being, one clear indication of the findings discussed in this paper points to the prevalence of suicidality, hospitalization, and substance and alcohol overdose among youth with CPS history compared to the non-CPS youth population. Existing literature has substantiated such a link (Barker et al., 2014; McDonald et al., 2014; Siegel et al., 2016), underscoring the significance of intervention programs designed to reduce harm and minimize high-risk behaviors for vulnerable younger populations (Nichols et al., 2017). Furthermore, our findings demonstrated greater risks of suicidality, hospitalization, and lower quality of life among youth with CPS records. While it is generally hypothesized that youth in the care tend to have family conflicts and weak relationships with family support circles, our findings did not prove conclusive in establishing a link between CPS and family support. Nonetheless, our findings brought attention to the greater degree of support youth with CPS involvement generally receive from their friends, perhaps owing to peers playing a stronger role than immediate family members in aftercare circumstances regarding financial and temporary housing supports. While this is only a conjecture, Bender et al. (2015) found that youth in the foster-care system seeking homelessness services were more financially dependent on their friends (58%) compared to their relatives (46%).

Further examination of youth educational status and learning disabilities found fundamental barriers to succeeding at school. In line with the existing literature that has found a correlation between low educational attainment and youth being in government care (Fowler et al., 2011; Villegas et al., 2014), our findings provided empirical evidence identifying the need to place a stronger emphasis on early, school-based interventions and on building youths' cognitive, emotional, and lifelong skills while engaging them in educational opportunities that they might not otherwise have accessed.

Within the confines of the national dataset, accounting for demographic characteristics, we found that involvement with CPS could be

a risk factor for experiencing homelessness at an earlier age. This finding is generally consistent with the body of research that suggested placement in foster care programs can be associated with homelessness, in particular in Canada (Alberton et al., 2020; Baskin, 2007; Goyette, 2019). While past studies have demonstrated a high rate of homelessness among youth who were discharged from the government care system (Dworsky et al., 2015; Foust et al., 2020; Gypen et al., 2017), at the policy front, developing preventative measures, risk-screening instruments, and culturally informed strategies that can provide stable housing need to be given precedence. Additionally, support programs aimed at reconnecting youth with their families, particularly among youth who are under 16 and have an increased risk of homelessness, are warranted. Such programs need to be aligned at all levels of government and grounded in the recognition that an ad-hoc approach is no longer be a viable solution and therefore a shared agenda emphasizing prevention should be of high priority (Gaetz et al., 2016; Schwan et al., 2018).

We acknowledge a few limitations associated with this study that could be overcome in future research endeavors. Despite the large sample size of the second national survey, its cross-sectional design has somewhat limited our ability to establish causality, and therefore, results should be interpreted within the research's scope. Some limitations were attributed to the convenience sampling methods and the quality of data drawn from self-reported surveys, with the caveat that some geographical areas and large urban centers were overrepresented and, in some cases, underrepresented, thus potentially influencing some of the findings. Adopting a mixed methods approach that incorporates qualitative, in-depth interviews would also have shed more light on the unique pathways that youth with a history of CPS experience. Finally, given the limitations of cross-sectional studies in making causal inferences, investigating the relationship between CPS and youth homelessness using a longitudinal study design based on administrative data could be a powerful strategy for detecting changes over time in the characteristics of the CPS group as the target population, which is more likely to suggest a cause-and-effect relationship.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined a range of life circumstances and outcomes associated with a particularly vulnerable segment of the youth population: those who have accessed homelessness services and have a history of involvement with child protection services (CPS). Using a large sample size drawn from the 2019 national survey of young people who have experienced homelessness, our analysis revealed meaningful associations in demographic characteristics and significant differences between youth with a CPS history and those without any CPS records in the areas of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), quality of life, relationships, criminal records, legal issues, and education. Additionally, we examined risk factors that are likely to be associated with the first experience of homelessness, including ACEs and involvement with CPS. While young adolescents, particularly those from Indigenous and racialized communities, continue to be taken into care by CPS due to various reasons, including the complex link between poverty and family neglect, it is important to focus public attention on the system's failure to improve socio-economic conditions and enable families to reunite with their children. Policy implications discussed in the paper highlight the need to shift the policy discourse to prevention-focused approaches, in keeping with targeted strategies and implementation programs aimed at reducing risky behaviors, building life skills, supporting youth-led initiatives, and reuniting youth with their families. Future research avenues can harness the use of mixed methods approaches and longitudinal study designs to provide more insights into the intersection between CPS and homelessness.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Ahmad Bonakdar:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Stephen Gaetz:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Emmanuel Banchani:** Writing – review & editing. **Kaitlin Schwan:** Writing – review & editing. **Sean Kidd:** Writing – review & editing. **Bill O'Grady:** Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Data availability

The data used for this study is based on the 2019 National Youth Homelessness Survey, and we can share the data with other researchers as long as they agree to the terms and policies we have in place.

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