

FACTSHEET

Six factors to support the mental health & resilience of refugee youth experiencing homelessness



This factsheet was developed from “Perspectives of refugee youth experiencing homelessness: A qualitative study of factors impacting mental health and resilience” (2022) by Bushra M. Khan, Jordana Wasserman, and Mitesh Patel in *Frontiers in Psychiatry*.

Due to high rates of harmful and even traumatic experiences, homelessness negatively impacts the mental health and resilience of refugee youth, who also experience barriers in accessing support services and resources. Informed by the lived experiences of refugee youth, researchers propose a variety of interventions across six factors to consider in supporting the mental health and resilience of refugee youth experiencing homelessness.

01. Housing Security

Refugee youth have stress about being discharged from shelters and having nowhere else to go. When they are discharged, they often experience barriers in finding housing.

Interventions that **connect youth to housing resources and workers** can provide guidance and support in the processes of finding, accessing, and/or renting appropriate accommodations. This guidance also helps youth develop important life skills, such as learning where and how to grocery shop and do laundry, which will enable them to live independently.

02. Financial Security

Refugee youth deal with financial stressors, including housing, school expenses, medical costs, applying for citizenship, phone and Internet plans, and sending money back home to their families.

Funding supports could help these youth to meet their basic needs, such as food and clothing. Youth should also be provided with **financial literacy education**, including how to navigate different financial considerations, such as applying for financial assistance, and then be **connected to appropriate and accessible resources**.

03. Education

Obstacles to education, like waiting a long time for study permits, language barriers, international student fees, and difficulty accessing financial supports like the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), have negative impacts on refugee youth, creating undue stress, despite youth's drive and willingness to learn.

Interventions should include **encouraging school attendance and continued education, providing financial supports for the costs of textbooks and tutors, and offering guidance in navigating the logistics of the education system and in accessing resources and opportunities.**

04. Sense of Safety

Refugee youth often come from unsafe conditions in their home countries, and they describe finally experiencing a sense of safety by being in Canada, which allows them to have better mental health.

Safety and stability should be the primary focus of mental health interventions for these youth, which can be created by **ensuring predictability and consistency** in shelters and other accommodations and across other support services designed for refugee youth experiencing homelessness.

05. Sense of Control

To develop resilience, refugee youth need to feel a sense of control in their lives. This can be fostered through **supporting youth with goal-directedness** – identifying and focusing on future goals – as this imbues youth with hope and determination and contributes to this sense of control.

Fostering a sense of independence and responsibility in youth also helps to create a sense of control – for example, **ensuring that they have responsibilities to others** (such as chores) that may **provide a sense of ownership**. Youth, however, should be **supported to enact their independence** and not feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities.

06. Social Connectedness and Belonging

Intentionally creating a **nurturing and welcoming environment** for youth will foster a sense of belonging and social connectedness that may help to overcome the social isolation that refugee youth may have experienced since leaving their homes.

Programming for refugee youth must provide a **welcoming physical space** and **an engaged and devoted staff**. Youth find it particularly comforting when **staff interactions are characterized by kindness, guidance, care, and support**. Practitioners should be **proactive** in connecting with youth.