

Reflections from Canada: Can Research Contribute to Better Responses to Youth Homelessness?

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Abstract

As with the United States, youth homelessness in Canada is a seemingly intractable problem; in the past, Canada has mainly looked to the United States for how to address the system. Moreover, the Canadian response has not been robustly driven by research and evidence. In the last few years, much has changed in terms of how we are responding to youth homelessness in Canada in policy and practice. This change includes an increase in the influence, uptake and impact of research. In this commentary, key issues shaping the national dialogue on youth homelessness in Canada are discussed. The research articles from this volume are used to illustrate and highlight some of the key challenges associated with these key issue areas, to point to where research can have an impact, and to identify where some clear gaps in knowledge exist. More opportunities to increase international collaboration on youth homelessness research stands to enhance the influence of research on solutions to homelessness.

Historically, Canada has in many ways taken its lead from the United States on how to address the problem of homelessness. On the positive side, this has included the broad adoption of Housing First, community systems planning, Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS) data management, and coordinated entry, for instance. However, it has also meant that we have almost completely ignored prevention, that we have allowed the “politics of scarcity” to shape how we think about prioritization, outcomes, and performance indicators, and in some ways have considered a response to youth homelessness as an afterthought—something we can deal with more seriously once we have made much more progress on addressing chronic homelessness (particularly amongst adults). At the level of policy and practice in both countries, I would argue that historically very little of what we do regarding youth homelessness is adequately informed by research evidence, in spite of claims otherwise.

The last 5 years have seen some important shifts in how we think about and respond to youth homelessness in Canada. First, broader international engagement—in particular with Australia and Europe (through FEANTSA and the European Observatory on Homelessness)—has greatly expanded our thinking about the nature of the problem and what to do about it. Second, higher orders of government (federal, provincial, and territorial) have begun to take youth homelessness seriously. For instance in the new Canadian Federal strategy, [Reaching Home](#), communities are expected to incorporate a strategy on youth homelessness in systems plans, and prevention is being prioritized. Third, the arrival of A Way Home Canada, a national coalition to prevent and end youth homelessness (which has since inspired the creation of A Way Home America as well as similar movements in Scotland, Belgium, and many individual communities and states), has had a huge impact on policy, planning, and practice, in helping encourage a shift from a crisis response to youth homelessness, to one that focuses on prevention and sustainable exits.

Finally, there is research. In Canada, research has advanced our understanding of youth homelessness, contributed to conceptual shifts on how to respond to the problem, and increased our understanding of what works, for whom and in what contexts. While all of these shifts have not yet resulted in the broader systems transformation we are looking for, at least they are helping us point in the right direction.

Research can and should have an impact on how we think about and respond to homelessness. A key challenge that impedes creating real solutions to youth homelessness is that, while we know much about its causes and conditions, we know much less about how to prevent it, and how to produce better outcomes for youth who have experienced homelessness. The different papers in this volume are helpful contributions to our knowledge and illuminate many of the issues for which we need to increase our understanding in order to inform better policy and practice, leading to more positive outcomes for young people. In addition, issues raised in these articles speak to many challenges and concerns we have in Canada regarding how we are, and how we should be, responding to youth homelessness. In the following are some of these key issues.

Prevention

Although the language of prevention is often used in Canada and the United States to discuss responses to homelessness, little evidence supports the idea that we are actually doing much to prevent the problem. In 2017, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness released *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention* (Gaetz and Dej, 2017) providing a definition and typology. The prevention of *youth homelessness* refers to legislation, policies, interventions, and practices that reduce the likelihood that an unattached young person between the ages of 13 through 24 will experience homelessness. Moreover, it means “providing those who have been homeless with the necessary resources and supports to stabilize their housing, enhance integration and social inclusion, and ultimately reduce the risk of the recurrence of homelessness” (Gaetz and Dej, 2017: 35). The shift to prevention is supported by an emerging body of literature from Canadian (City of Toronto, 2016; Distasio et al., 2014; Forchuk et al., 2008) and international (Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick, 2008; Mackie, 2015; Mackie, Thomas, and Bibbings, 2017; Maher and Allen, 2014; Pleave and Culhane, 2016; Shinn et al., 2013) sources that demonstrate

that prevention strategies have a positive impact on reducing homelessness. However, a paucity of research demonstrates effective policy and program interventions that address youth homelessness specifically, outside of Australia (MacKenzie, 2018; MacKenzie and Thielking, 2013; Australian Government, 2013).

We have argued that the prevention of youth homelessness should be a priority in Canada. The first national survey on youth homelessness found that 42 percent had their first experience of homelessness prior to the age of 16 and that this cohort typically experienced multiple episodes and worse health and mental health outcomes (Gaetz et al., 2016). In Canada we don't really do anything to help young teens who experience homelessness, and they are largely invisible to the homelessness serving system (which typically does not provide support until a person is 16 or sometimes 18 years old). This is a serious flaw in policy and practice in Canada, meaning that in practical terms we are waiting too long to provide young people with assistance. In a very real sense, we are waiting until such young people age, become more ill, and experience more trauma before we deem them worthy of support. We need to fix this problem.

Two articles in this volume speak to prevention by pointing to the need to provide better supports for young people leaving public systems. Dworsky, Wulczyn, and Huang (2018) have conducted research on young people who run away from “out-of-home care,” and identified that personal characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity and age, as well as contextual factors such as placement type and community context (population density and poverty) are predictors of running away. They suggest that with this knowledge, effective screening would enable targeting of supports for those at risk of running away. It could be argued that such targeting could also inform better transitional planning and supports for those who age out of care. Walker et al. present their findings on an evaluation of a research practice partnership in the development of a Coordinated Youth Housing Stability Program. Their analysis of state-wide court data found that across jurisdictions, 20 to 50 percent of all youth in juvenile court had at least one prior episode of homelessness. Their qualitative analysis pointed to the “tensions around the role of probation in addressing youth homelessness, the need for better methods of identification, and a lack of intensive family-based services targeted at preventing housing instability” (Walker et al., 2018). Both studies point to the need for other systems and institutions to play a larger role in the prevention of youth homelessness.

Addressing the Needs of Key Sub-Populations

The diversity of youth experiencing homelessness and the intersectionality of different forms of exclusion are clearly important to consider within any strategy to address youth homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016; Abramovich and Shelton, 2018). In our national survey on youth homelessness, we identified that Indigenous youth, who make up less than 5 percent of the Canadian population, make up almost a third (30.6 percent) of the population of youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2017). Moreover, LGBTQ youth are also over-represented, accounting for 30 percent of the youth homelessness population, a figure that is consistent with what Rice et al. report in this volume. Family rejection, inadequate social services, institutional erasure, homophobic and transphobic violence, and discrimination in shelters and

housing programs make it difficult for LGBTQ youth to secure safe and affirming places to live (Abramovich, 2016; Abramovich and Shelton, 2018). In their analysis of LGBTQ youth who experience homelessness, Shelton et al., found they most commonly experienced homelessness because: “they were kicked out/asked to leave the home of their parents, relatives, foster or group homes; this was even more common among transgender (young adults).” Their study identified some interesting intersectional differences in experiences and supports based on race/ethnicity and experience of poverty, and they suggest the need for more research to disaggregate the differential experiences (and needs) of subpopulations of LGBTQ youth. Given that homophobia and transphobia are not only causes of youth homelessness, but also frame the experience of being homeless and accessing supports, it is imperative that, from a policy, program, practice, and training perspective, we address discrimination in a proactive way.

Related to this, Samuels, et al., in their study of how and why unstably housed youth access support included a discussion of the experiences of LGBTQ youth. Their fascinating study identified a number of factors associated with the use and rejection of both formal and informal resources—including the experience of discrimination, level of trust and resilience—that had an impact on accessing services. Understanding service avoidance is an important area of research, given the underlying assumptions we often make regarding the reliability of Point-in-Time counts and By-Name lists (which track who is homeless and accessing services in a community) to adequately capture and reflect the extent of homeless when we do not clearly have a handle on who avoids “touching the system” to access services. As Rice et al. point out, “many youth experience homelessness who do not come into contact with the Continuum of Care.”

The Politics of Scarcity and the Need to Revisit What Outcomes We Are Looking For

The finite amount of resources available to the sector has a profound impact on how we think about, discuss, and make decisions regarding prioritization, who gets what support, and what outcomes the sector is responsible for. This is what we refer to as “The Politics of Scarcity” and considerable implications result from it. Vulnerability is often constructed purely in terms of chronicity and medical risk factors as opposed to other important factors relevant to youth homelessness, such as risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking, gang violence, and so on. It means that important policy and planning directions such as the prevention of youth homelessness are avoided, the argument sometimes made that first we must house all those who experience chronic homelessness, without a solid understanding of how and why people transition to that status. It means resistance to expanding the definition of youth homelessness to include the hidden homelessness, without understanding the complex pathways youth experience on their way to the streets. It means that many of our prioritization methods (and assessment tools) unwittingly commit low acuity youth to an expectation that they bootstrap themselves out of homelessness with the unintended consequence that many young people have to wait until things get really bad before we help them.

This leads to the question, from a policy, practice, and research perspective, regarding exactly what outcomes we are looking for when young people exit homelessness either from their own volition,

or with necessary supports. Again, research needs to challenge our underlying assumptions. In Canada and the United States, the key performance indicator we tend to look to is simply whether someone is stably housed (or not) when they exit homelessness. The question we need to explore when analyzing the work is what exactly stability means, and whether these outcomes are sufficient.

Rice et al., in a thoughtful analysis of data from TAY-VI-SPDAT, discuss outcomes for low acuity youth, many of whom are described as returning home or self-resolving their housing situation. I question whether we really do have a good understanding of what happens in these cases. How many young people will use a romantic relationship to exit homelessness, even if it is unsafe and unhealthy, because the other option is worse? How many die, given what we know about high rates of suicidality for youth who experience homelessness? How many move to other jurisdictions? How many simply go underground, because their experience of services and supports was not deemed helpful? We definitely need more research in this area to better inform whether and how we support young people new to the streets. Given that 27 percent of low scoring youth did not exit homelessness, we need to consider how to better assess the needs of this group. Rice et al.'s conclusion that offering Rapid Rehousing support and/or more attention to nurturing family and natural supports for this group is a good idea; expecting young people to bootstrap themselves out of homelessness is not.

What do we know about the outcomes for youth who have longer experiences of homelessness who are now housed? Henwood et al. explore the outcomes of the implementation of supportive housing for youth. They report very positive findings for young people who receive Permanent Supportive Housing, including ontological security, improved mental health and well-being, and positive identity development. This is an important finding given that we actually know very little about what housing stability actually *means* when young people exit homelessness, whether by their own volition or with some form of support. Almost no research has been done on health, well-being, and inclusion outcomes for young people receiving rapid rehousing, for instance. In contrast to what Henwood et al. found, much of the research that does exist on the outcomes for youth exiting homelessness demonstrates results that are certainly compelling, but not in a positive way. Simply being housed is not a positive indicator of well-being, recovery, safety, healthy living, labour force participation, nor social inclusion.

Several Canadian studies point to this conclusion. Kozloff et al. in an analysis of data from the At Home/Chez Soi study, found that for young adults (aged 18 through 24) housing outcomes were similar to the adult cohort, but in terms of quality of life indicators the results were not so positive. An analysis of the outcomes for a study in Toronto and Halifax followed 51 young people for 12 months as they transitioned from homelessness (Kidd et al., 2016; Karabanow et al., 2018). This study showed that while young people made an incredible commitment, they also faced significant structural barriers resulting in social isolation, challenges in maintaining housing stability and finding employment, and a decline in hope. Thulien et al. (2017) in Toronto describes in detail the factors that undermine housing stability and well-being, including the lack of affordable housing, limited social capital, inadequate education, and limited labour force participation, which leads to poverty-level income, an inability to formulate long-range plans, ongoing feelings of outsiderhood, and the constant fear of becoming homeless again.

Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan. (2014) have conducted considerable research on youth transitions to housing in Dublin, Ireland, including a qualitative study tracking the housing trajectories of 40 young people for 6 years. On a more positive note, almost all young people who exited homelessness returned to education or vocational training; most young people identified significant challenges including financial hardship and establishing positive social relationships; and few were able to maintain independent housing, with most either moving back home or into transitional housing (it should be noted that family support was a positive predictive factor). Of significance is the importance of supporting rapid exits from homelessness. “Those young people who ‘got out’ early were likely to ‘stay out,’ even if a number did return to homelessness temporarily for a period” (Mayock and Corr, 2013: 65).

The key conclusion here is that we need to consider exactly what outcomes—beyond housing stability—we should be looking for if we want to enhance well-being and inclusion, and reduce the longer term risk of a return to homelessness. Longitudinal research on what happens to young people when they exit homelessness, as well as more systematic evaluations of interventions designed to support young people to leave the streets, are needed to enhance our understandings of how to better support young people. As long as our efforts to support youth are based on unquestioned (and perhaps unfounded) assumptions about our interventions and the lives of young people after they exit homelessness, I am not sure we can truly make the claim that we are doing the right thing.

One thing is certain—much can be gained from international collaboration on research on youth homelessness. Understanding of how issues are framed, understood, and responded to in different national contexts helps to shed light on the problem at home and on what needs to be done to effectively respond. David MacKenzie’s commentary on the response to youth homelessness in Australia is a great example of what can be learned from other nations. As a Canadian, the research presented in this volume is immensely helpful in advancing my own thinking on a range of issues. More opportunities to engage in international sharing and collaboration on youth homelessness research stands to enhance the influence of research on solutions to homelessness.

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