

DISCUSSION PIECE

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## Preventing Youth Homelessness in the Context of COVID-19: Complexities and Ways Forward

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### Abstract

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has magnified detrimental social and health experiences and consequences for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Recent research indicates that heightened household tensions due to stay-at-home orders, coupled with pandemic-related financial insecurities, have worsened pre-existing factors for many young people, particularly for those experiencing stigma and violence. As a result, it can be projected that the risk and experience of youth homelessness will intensify. In spite of this, there has been scarce attention to the impacts the current context has on these vulnerable groups. This commentary aims to bring attention to the prevailing issues and challenges faced by youth at-risk of homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides crucial considerations for preventative solutions by incorporating the Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Framework. Based on research across fields, we offer insights for equity-focused, collaborative interventions, focusing on the education and social services sectors.

### Keywords

Youth homelessness, COVID-19, youth homelessness prevention, cross-sector collaboration, applied research, at-risk youth

## Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has magnified the broad spectrum of health and social harms faced by individuals experiencing and at risk of homelessness. Research to date has focused on the increased risks for individuals experiencing homeless in contracting COVID-19 and having adverse reactions based on factors such as the disproportionate likelihood of having pre-existing health conditions (e.g., cardiovascular ailments) and living in congregate settings (Lima et al., 2020; Perri et al, 2020; Tsai & Wilson, 2020). However, there has been little attention to youth at risk of homelessness in this

context. Abrupt shifts in the availability of food, shelter, essential services, in addition to economic constraints and isolation due to stay-at-home orders have exacerbated young people's adverse social experiences (Lima et al., 2020; Perri et al., 2020; Tsai & Wilson, 2020). In light of the impacts of the COVID-19 context on these vulnerable groups and the projected intensification of risk and experience of homelessness as a result, this commentary aims to bring attention to this issue and provides crucial considerations in thinking about preventative solutions. This analysis draws from the Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth

Homelessness Framework in discussing the impact of COVID-19 on youth experiencing homelessness across Canada.

### **Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Framework**

As outlined by the Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Framework, youth homelessness prevention is multifaceted and should focus on three broad categories of prevention: 1) primary prevention, which involves addressing upstream and structural determinants which facilitate housing insecurity for youth (e.g., due to family breakdown), 2) secondary prevention which includes rapid action to assist youth who are at risk of experiencing or have recently entered homelessness, and 3) tertiary prevention which surrounds providing support to youth who have experienced homelessness for an extended period of time (Gaetz et al., 2018). Moving beyond these categories, the roadmap outlines six priority areas (structural prevention, systems prevention, early intervention, eviction prevention, housing stabilization, and duty to assist) which should be focused on when conceptualizing youth homelessness prevention strategies. Priority area recommendations range from the macro-level (e.g., poverty reduction strategies) to micro-level interventions (e.g., client-tailored crisis intervention) and focus on tenants relating to equity and inclusion (Gaetz et al., 2018). This framework provides an interdisciplinary approach to what should be considered when implementing, adapting, and evaluating youth homelessness prevention strategies and, therefore, should be leveraged within existing and future programs when accounting for COVID-19.

### **Background**

Youth at risk of and experiencing homelessness under the age of 16 already face immense barriers to accessing services and supports (Gaetz et al., 2016). This is despite what we know from research demonstrating that over 40% of people with lived experience had their first encounter with homelessness before the age of 16 (Gaetz et al., 2016; Gaetz et al., 2018). In addition to heightened barriers to accessing

services and supports, the necessary measures to control the spread of the virus also include the closure of schools and community programs. Therefore, youth at-risk are not as visible by trusted adults in the community who might otherwise be able to intervene. This has further escalated pre-existing, often interconnected risk factors for homelessness among youth related to unstable home lives, such as abuse and /or neglect escalated by stress in the household, financial insecurity, and housing instability for parents and youth (Cohen & Bosk, 2020).

It is well-established that even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalized youth with diverse social identities experienced intersecting forms of oppression driven by factors such as gendered harm, colonialization, and/or homophobia (Salerno et al., 2020). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Two-Spirit, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQ2SIA+) youth, for example, are known to experience disproportionate rates of homelessness and associated mental health and substance use disorders when compared to non-LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, largely attributed to these forms of oppression (Robinson, 2018). Despite this, the unique experiences and needs of diverse youth who experience homelessness across Canada have been minimal in conversations that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Intensification of Harms and Risks in the Context of COVID-19**

Rates of youth who experience homelessness have been increasing steadily across North America. For example, reports from the United States indicate that there is over 35,000 youth who experience homelessness on any specified night (Henry et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2020), and in Canada, 35,000 - 45,000 each year (Gaetz et al., 2016). Pre-COVID-19 vulnerabilities contributing to youth homelessness include family violence or poverty, limited availability of affordable housing, newcomer status, engaging with child welfare or criminal justice systems, and experiences of gender, sexual, colonial, and/or racial oppression (Morton et al., 2019; Salerno et al., 2020). Indigenous and LGBTQ2SIA+ youth account for over 30% of the youth homeless population in Canada (Gaetz, 2018; Gaetz et al., 2016). Similarly, research across the United States

has demonstrated that gender diverse and transgender youth experience homelessness at higher rates than cisgender youth yet continue to face barriers in attaining appropriate and effective housing services (Eisenberg et al., 2019).

The necessary measures imposed by COVID-19 have amplified risk factors for youth in relation to experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness, with abrupt closures and reductions in educational programs, drop-in services, shelters, employment opportunities, and social connectedness (Coughlin et al., 2020). This has been particularly relevant for sexual and gender minority youth. In addition to higher mental health illnesses like anxiety, suicidality, and substance use, (Abramovich et al., 2021) documented that homeless LGBTQS2 youth across Toronto, Canada faced increased barriers to health and social services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the Roadmap Prevention Framework, key aspects which have been influenced throughout the pandemic include the integration of systems prevention, early intervention, and specifically eviction prevention (Gaetz et al., 2018). Youth-serving organizations across Canada for example have documented how the rapid shift to online services create particular challenges for youth who do not have access to technology, are unable to engage with services in a safe manner or location, or experience language and cultural barriers (Buchnea et al., 2020).

The closure of these essential services limits the ability for youth to receive assistance in navigating housing, food, income, or general support services, increasing physical and mental health illnesses, risk of entering into homelessness or furthering their experience of homelessness (Coughlin et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2020). Disturbingly, 57% of participants (n=63) from a study conducted across Canada (ranging from frontline service providers to executive leadership) documented that the largest challenge faced by youth experiencing homelessness or housing precarity during COVID-19 was that they were unable to access basic needs (Buchnea et al., 2020). These closures relate specifically to tenets of “systems prevention mechanisms” (e.g., providing effective and accessible health and social supports to youth and “intervening early on” in regard to youth homelessness prevention

interventions. As outlined by the Roadmap framework, the systems prevention mechanism for fostering youth homelessness prevention focuses on three main areas: transition supports for youth between social institutions, improving youth’s ability to access equitable services, and improving youth’s experiences navigating services through the reduction of factors such as discrimination and inequity (Gaetz et al., 2018). The influence of COVID-19 on this mechanism is therefore uniquely problematic for youth who face intersecting forms of oppression, given the limited ability for current youth homelessness prevention interventions to foster equity and inclusion. The inability to access essential resources during this time due to COVID-19 related closures, not only inhibits the ability for rapid action surrounding youth homelessness prevention but may also influence existing progress on any youth homelessness prevention mechanisms listed in the roadmap which were occurring pre-COVID-19.

The severe restrictions in support systems that provide access to basic needs deepen social and health consequences for youth and can strain familial relationships that are critical to keeping youth stably housed. Heightened household tensions due to stay-at-home orders and pandemic-related insecurity in access to basic needs have worsened pre-existing risk factors for many young people (Buchnea et al., 2020; Gabriel et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2020). Increased exposure to these family dynamics may be particularly problematic for youth who experience violence and stigmatization (Buchnea et al., 2020; Gabriel et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2020).

Additional challenges faced by housing insecure youth as a result of COVID-19 include experiences with evictions - the main prevention area outlined in the Roadmap framework (Buchnea et al., 2020; Gaetz et al., 2018). Alarming, it is projected that over 1.5 million families across the United States will experience evictions or become homeless as a consequence of economic insecurities caused by the pandemic (Coughlin et al., 2020; Wulfforst, 2020). In Canada, despite varying provincial and territorial governmental regulations regarding evictions during the pandemic (i.e., eviction moratorium where individuals have extended periods of rent relief or eviction pause where evictions could not occur), studies have revealed

that eviction challenges remained consistent during the pandemic (Buchnea et al., 2020). The variability of such regulations across the country, in addition to gendered, racialized, and homophobic governmental policies, contributed to gaps in housing sustainability for many individuals (Dalwood, 2021). In Buchnea and colleagues' (2020) report, 33% of the 60 social service organizations surveyed felt that evictions prevention is one of the top concerns for youth at risk of homelessness during COVID-19. Youth who are evicted may, for instance, face absolute homelessness or stay in an abusive or exploitive relationship, strictly for shelter.

COVID-related restrictions and harms faced by at-risk youth have the potential to significantly influence occurrences of mental health illnesses and substance use among youth experiencing homelessness. In Tucker et al.'s (2020) study of 90 youth experiencing homelessness during the pandemic in the United States, many reported feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and loneliness (48%, 44%, and 38%, respectively). In this same study, increased alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use were reported by 16%, 20%, and 28%, respectively. Similar findings were documented in Canada by Thulien and colleagues (2020), who studied the mental health and well-being of youth receiving support from 188 housing-specific service providers. They reported that 92% of these youths had experienced an increase in boredom, 91% an increase in isolation, 85% an increase anxiety, and 36% an increase in suicidal ideation. Concerning substance use patterns among youth experiencing homelessness, general use of substances was up by 69%, with a 37% increase in overdoses since the onset of the pandemic (Thulien et al., 2020). Isolation and violence also contribute to these health and social outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, which may have been exacerbated during stay-at-home orders as a result of health and social service and school closures in addition to potentially limited engagement with support systems (Curry et al., 2017; McCann & Brown, 2019).

These findings illuminate how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased inequalities and adverse experiences of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, particularly among stigmatized sub-groups. Those

experiencing intersectional and multifaceted forms of oppression continue to face disproportionate health and social hardships (Gabriel et al., 2020). Preliminary analyses by Auerswald et al., (2020) for example, have demonstrated that Black, Latino, and Native American youth experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity had an increased likelihood of experiencing educational or occupational disruptions during COVID-19, contributing to their vulnerability. Given what is known about how the context of COVID-19 has contributed to the intensification of harms and increased risk of homelessness for youth, prevention is critical – *before* they experience homelessness and are consequently more likely to become entrenched into a lifetime of homelessness and marginalization. Early intervention supports have been reported as essential in facilitating youth homelessness prevention initiatives within health and social sectors as they aid in minimizing adverse outcomes for both youth and their families (Gaetz et al., 2018). In the following sections, we discuss the need for prevention through cross-sector interventions through schools and community and provide context into complexities that are key to consider in this approach.

### **Prevention and the Role of Schools - Complexities and Potential**

In light of the intensification of risk factors for youth in the context of the pandemic, it will be critical to equip schools and communities with the capacity to support these young people as they continue to return to in-person participation. The integration of capacity building initiatives for services such as schools aligns well with homelessness prevention efforts such as systems prevention (e.g., school-to-work transition supports), early intervention (e.g., assessment of homelessness risk), and duty to assist (e.g., rights-based approach to providing youth with necessary, comprehensive, and all-inclusive health and social service information) (Gaetz et al., 2018). As the issues faced by these young people are complex and multifaceted, collective work across sectors will be crucial to prevention efforts. However, very little is understood about how to do this effectively and sustainably, given the inherently distinct priorities and institutional

norms and cultures that must be aligned in this work – particularly in the education and social services sectors (Sohn & Gaetz, 2020). Theoretically, while deep collaboration is an ideal approach, the nature of work for practitioners in the community, social service, and education sectors is not generally aligned. While some collective cross-sector efforts have demonstrated success in certain areas such as safety and employment, they have not historically achieved significant and sustained outcomes in education through working with schools (Jacobson, 2016). This can largely be attributed to the different institutional norms, cultures, and priorities between schools and community organizations.

These challenges are exemplified by the efforts to establish schools as community hubs for social change. This concept dates at least as far back as Jane Addams' work (1910) and John Dewey (e.g., 1907; 1924) and has evolved considerably throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Dewey's philosophy of education as integrated with life, formed the basis of his conception of schools as 'social centres' and subsequently contributed to the notion of school hubs as central to community-based problem solving (Saltmarsh, 1996; 2005). In historical and current writings about schools as community hubs across Canada, however, the role of the school is only vaguely mentioned as a partner, with no explicit frameworks or examples to support engagement. This is in contrast with jurisdictions across the United States, where homelessness prevention initiatives for youth are integrated primarily within schools and education-based institutions (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. & Administration., 2007). Even when schools have been used as sites to provide community supports, resources, and programs, they have not traditionally been involved in planning or aligning objectives. Instead, community and governmental organizations typically work peripherally, viewing schools as obstacles rather than fellow change agents (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Valli et al., 2016). Across Canada, schools have essentially served as the physical space and administrative support for community services and supports, where programs are offered outside of school hours and run independently.

In the Canadian context, some of the reasons for this include concerns about tensions between

bureaucratic agencies; limitations around partnerships and data sharing between education institutions and other social services; and accountability demands on teachers that focus on academic achievement. Consequently, there are severe limitations on time to address broad, critical issues that impact students. Schools tend to be cautious about working with agencies that typically do not understand the ways schools work and their needs (Jacobson, 2016; Kartal, 2016; Osmond et al., 2019). Magnifying these challenges are rapidly changing contextual factors – such as a pandemic, which is an extreme change – and, as a result, shifting priorities and resources (Campbell, 2017; Kubisch et al., 2011). These factors and numerous others have led to a culture in the education sector and schools unaccustomed to the kind of external collaboration that is required to effectively prevent youth homelessness.

Adding to these complexities and barriers are the deep and pervasive misconceptions around youth homelessness (e.g., the prevalence of youth experiencing homelessness) across sectors that can offer critical supports. It is therefore imperative that key partners across sectors understand the issues, their roles in prevention, and how this work aligns with the objectives and priorities in their scope of practice. This is an often taken-for-granted, critical initial step in laying the groundwork for educators in schools to become amendable to new initiatives that could be viewed as adding to – rather than alleviating – social care burdens (Sohn & Gaetz, 2020).

### **Ways forward**

Re-imagining and re-framing youth homelessness to align with the priorities, culture, and realities of the education sector as a result of COVID-19 is imperative to fostering positive collaboration – and therefore, sustainability and success during and post-pandemic times. For instance, a long-standing, widespread educational priority area across Canada is equity. As youth homelessness prevention is concerned with student well-being and equity, communicating the issue and the proposed responses will help advance and sustain prevention work (Sohn & Gaetz, 2020). Without attention to the complexities of working with

different sectors in preventing youth homelessness and adapting accordingly to context shifts such as the COVID-19 pandemic, program transfer approaches are susceptible to failure (Fixen, 2019; Westley & Antadze, 2010; Westley et al., 2014).

Addressing youth homelessness through prevention requires collaboration and sustained commitments that are difficult to realize and attain, particularly during global emergencies. Success relies on research knowledge and intentional, jointly planned alignment of priorities, culture, and relationship-building. For example, evidence-informed prevention approaches that mitigate against reproducing harm can require shifts in understanding by educators and social service practitioners alike. Research also highlights the importance of engaging youth experiencing homelessness as active agents in program development to improve the effectiveness of interventions by reducing the harm associated with power imbalances (Gabriel et al., 2020; Salerno et al., 2020). Future research is needed to understand how best to integrate these initiatives within the current context created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additional considerations for education and social service practitioners involved in the development and implementation of youth homelessness prevention interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic include ensuring that interventions are equity-focused in that they meet the specific gendered, racial, sexual, and cultural needs of specific youth populations. As highlighted above, those with intersecting marginalized identities have faced unique disparities as a result of the pandemic. The needs of these groups must be prioritized in the development, implementation, and adaptation of youth homelessness prevention initiatives moving forward. The integration of gender-transformative frameworks within health and social service interventions, for example, have been proven effective in minimizing harms such as gendered structural stigmatization associated with gender-neutral or blind programming for women or gender diverse people (Frericks, 2012; March et al., 1999; Robinson et al., 2019).

These equity-focused frameworks are likewise critical to consider in schools as they face new and increased challenges for students

brought upon by the pandemic context. While homelessness is not conventionally within the scope of practice for educators, they will be contending with more students who experience the risk factors associated with homelessness in light of recent and emerging stressors. Awareness of these issues can increase the likelihood of supportive rather than punitive responses to behavioural challenges that may emerge or increase as a result of new or increased risk for students. Given the already troubling numbers of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness and the projected increase, better solutions are needed to support equitable opportunities and outcomes for young people.

In this discussion paper, we have illuminated both the critical need for and complexities involved in addressing youth homelessness through prevention, which are heightened by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Foregrounded is the impact that is particularly experienced by sub-groups – an equity problem that will certainly be grappled with in schools for the foreseeable future. As such, rather than rushing to impose programs and initiatives, it is imperative to embed sustainability into solutions. This requires innovative approaches that are established in collaboration with frontline practitioners in schools and social services, as well as youth with lived experience and research producers who hold and can contribute unique and critical areas of expertise.

As we consider solutions to the escalated harms experienced by youth at risk of homelessness due to the COVID-19 context, research-informed approaches to sustainable collaboration as well as effective, equity-focused interventions will be vital. This discussion paper illuminates how efforts can gain significantly from research across fields, including social work, education, and health sciences. Importantly, a thoughtful, relationship-building process may seem counter-intuitive to the urgency of the issue. However, considerations to the complex historical context and current realities of schools, in addition to the misconceptions and added complexities facing sub-groups of at-risk youth will establish the solid grounding in propelling the cross-sector collaboration that is crucial to this work.

The value and necessity in applying existing and new research from across fields is apparent

in addressing the complex fusion issue of youth homelessness prevention (e.g., Roadmap for Youth Homelessness Prevention). Importantly, research-based knowledge will equip stakeholders with the tools to lead this work with successful, sustainable outcomes for youth at risk of and experiencing homelessness, whose complex and varied challenges have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the onus is not only on frontline practitioners, but on researcher producers to mobilize this knowledge and collaboratively engage with communities towards sustainable, interdisciplinary, and cross-sector solutions – beyond the silos that practitioners and researchers alike are accustomed to.

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