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# CHILD WELFARE AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

*A Proposal for Action*



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**A WAY HOME**  
VERS UN CHEZ-SOI  
CANADA

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Design by Dylan Ostetto, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

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## Child Welfare Involvement and Youth Homelessness: The Need for Government Action

Research has shown that child welfare involvement and homelessness are closely linked, and that involvement in child protection is associated with an increased risk of homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Stewart et al., 2014; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Zlotnick et al., 2012). In the first pan-Canadian study on youth homelessness, [Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#) (2016), 57.8% of youth reported some type of involvement with child protection services over their lifetime. Compared to national data indicating that 0.3% of the general public receive child welfare services (Statistics Canada, 2011), youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to report interactions with the child welfare system.

Importantly, research has demonstrated that Indigenous and racialized youth are over-represented in child welfare services (Blackstock et al., 2004; Statistics Canada, 2011). *Without a Home* also revealed that transgender, gender non-binary, and LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to report child protection services involvement than cisgender and straight homeless youth. These findings highlight that child welfare involvement is powerfully linked to homelessness for many young Canadians, and that youth facing structural and systemic disadvantage (e.g., poverty, racism, homophobia) are more likely to experience both child welfare involvement and homelessness. This means that in addition to the child welfare system, many ministries and systems have a role to play in supporting youth as they transition from care. Most importantly, these findings demonstrate the need for policy change to better support some of the most marginalized young people in Canada.

Fortunately, many provinces across Canada have recently demonstrated positive policy shifts towards ensuring housing safety and stability for youth involved in the child welfare system, both in and out of care. Further, there is a national movement towards preventing youth homelessness in Canada, including through the provision of supports for youth who are transitioning from care. In addition to the child welfare system, the youth justice, education, child and youth mental health, immigration and settlement, housing and homelessness services, and the labour market each have a role to play in supporting youth as they transition from care.

At the same time, the conversation about how to address homelessness has been evolving. We are moving away from thinking only in terms of emergency services and supports to investing in prevention and helping people rapidly exit homelessness. The recently released report, [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#), makes the case for this shift, and articulates a definition and typology that identifies where the critical points of intervention are, and who is responsible. Reintegration supports for people transitioning from public systems was identified as a priority, with a special focus on the needs of young people who have a history of involvement in child protection.

To leverage this momentum, all orders of government in Canada must consider what policies, programs, interventions, and investments can contribute to more successful transitions from care for young people. At the provincial and community level, these programmatic and policy reforms and investments will enable child welfare systems to contribute to both the prevention of youth homelessness and better outcomes for young people involved with child welfare.

*57.8% of homeless youth have histories of child welfare involvement.*

*73.3% of youth who became homeless before the age of 16 reported child protection involvement.*

*Homeless youth are 193 times more likely to have been involved with the child welfare system than the general public.*

(Gaetz, O'Grady, Kidd, & Schwan, 2016)

## Child Welfare & Youth Homelessness in Canada: What do we know?

With the release of [Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#) (2016), we now have robust national data on the links between youth homelessness and child welfare involvement. *Without a Home*, conducted by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness in partnership with A Way Home Canada, surveyed 1,103 youth experiencing homelessness across Canada. Youth in 42 different communities and nine of the 10 Canadian provinces, as well as Nunavut Territory, completed the self-report survey. The results provide the first national picture of youth homelessness in Canada.

*Without a Home's* findings on child welfare involvement were striking. Almost sixty percent (57.8%) of homeless youth in Canada report involvement with the child welfare system at some point in their lives. In comparison, among the general population in Canada, roughly 0.3% of youth have child welfare involvement (Statistics Canada, 2011). This suggests that youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely than youth in the general population to report involvement with the child welfare system.

Youth participants described many different forms of involvement with the child welfare system (e.g., investigations, voluntary supervision and/or care agreements, and non-voluntary custody and care orders). Youth also reported interactions with the system at different times in their lives. On average, young people reported initial encounters with the child welfare system at 8.5 years of age and the termination of the relationship at 12.5 years of age. Close to a third of the study respondents (31.5%) reported that involvement began before the age of 6, and just over half (53%) reported that they were still involved with the child welfare system beyond the age of 16.

While there are multiple reasons why the child welfare system might become involved in a young person's life, evidence of childhood trauma and abuse is a key cause. Among Canadian youth experiencing homelessness, *Without a Home* revealed that a very high percentage had experienced childhood trauma and abuse (63.1%). Among respondents, 51.1% had experienced physical abuse, 24% had experienced sexual abuse, and 47.5% had experienced other forms of violence and abuse during childhood and/or adolescence. Given the numbers of young people reporting abuse and trauma during childhood and adolescence, it is unsurprising that 57.8% of youth surveyed indicated they'd had interactions with the child welfare system.

### Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness

*“Youth homelessness” refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence*

(Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

Unfortunately, data also indicated that not all cases of abuse were identified. Of those survey respondents who reported a history of physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse in childhood, 63.8% were involved in child protection and 50.3% were taken into care. A full third of those who experienced abuse during childhood and/or adolescence did not report any involvement with child protection services (30.3%).<sup>1</sup>

Despite variations in policy and service-provision across the country, we know that youth in—and leaving—state care experience disproportionately negative outcomes in several domains, including: housing, education, employment, criminal-legal system involvement, and overall health and wellness (Barker et al., 2014). Foster care involvement, in particular, is associated with a number of intersecting issues for young people: housing instability and homelessness, academic underperformance, poor mental and physical health, underemployment, and interactions with the criminal-legal system during and after care (Doyle, 2007; Gypen et al., 2017; Racusin et al., 2005).

Findings from *Without a Home* demonstrate four key areas of concern with respect to child welfare involvement and youth homelessness: (1) housing instability in care, (2) difficult transitions from care, (3) early experiences of homelessness, and (4) inequity. Research suggests that a systems-level prevention framework, guided by a human rights orientation, is the most effective way to address these areas of concern.

*Young people who are homeless (ages 13-24) make up approximately 20% of the homeless population in Canada.*

*On any given night, there are at least 6,500 young Canadians who experience homelessness and approximately 50,000 over the course of a year. An even greater number are part of the hidden homeless population.*

(Gaetz et al., 2014)

## 1. Housing Instability in Care

Research has shown that some youth experience housing instability while in care, often shifting between various foster care homes, group homes, friends' homes, childhood home(s), and various other locations (Nichols, 2014). A lack of stability during care is associated with negative outcomes across a range of domains (Salazar, 2013; Villegas et al., 2014; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Frequent changes in housing and support placements (and consequently school) are commonly cited as a negative predictor of success for youth (Gypen et al., 2017). *Without a Home* found that this pattern was prevalent among homeless youth who had previous child welfare involvement, with many youth being removed from their family home at an early age. Almost half of all youth in the *Without a Home* study (47.2%) were not only involved in child protection, but had also lived in a foster care and/or a group home setting. Of the 35.2% of youth experiencing homelessness who had been in foster care, 53% had been removed from their family home before the age of ten. Among this group, the average number of foster care placements throughout tenure in care was 3.7.

<sup>1</sup>The combined responses total 94.1%. The remaining 5.9% experienced abuse, but were unsure if they were ever involved in child protection, or they chose not to answer.

Importantly, these figures do not take into consideration the number of other housing placements young people experience while in care, such as time spent temporarily in youth shelters, group homes, motels, respite care on the weekends, or time spent living with their biological families. Other studies have shown that youth who have experienced multiple placements during their time in care, and those who ran away from a government care environment, are more likely to end up homeless (Curry & Abrams, 2015). This instability mirrors the instability young people experience once they become homeless, often characterized by multiple family ruptures and multiple episodes of living outside the home and in a range of unsuitable living conditions (e.g., outdoors, on friends' couches, in abandoned buildings) (Gaetz et al., 2016).

## 2. Difficult Transitions from Care

When a young person is no longer receiving child welfare services, they are said to have transitioned from care. Transitions across any system are fraught with challenges for those coordinating these institutional moves and for young people themselves (Nichols, 2014; 2016a; 2016b).

The *Without a Home* study demonstrates that young Canadians experiencing homelessness often face numerous difficulties when transitioning from care. Findings indicate that among youth who had been in care and went on to experience homelessness, close to a third (30%) viewed their transition from care as directly impacting their current situation of homelessness. When asked whether they would have appreciated continued support after they aged out or left care, 43.2% replied yes (39.9% said no). Unsurprisingly, those who 'aged out' were much more likely to indicate they would have appreciated continued support (57.4% vs 38.6%) than those who chose to leave.

Young people's relationships with the child welfare system change for a variety of reasons over the course of their lives. Youth who participated in *Without a Home* and were involved with child protection services cited numerous reasons for leaving care, including 'aging out' of care (26.3%) or returning to live with their biological families (12.3%). Among study participants, 18.8% indicated they chose to leave care of their own accord. Of these, 16% explicitly referred to a "bad experience" in care as driving their decision. Importantly, 38% of youth experiencing homelessness with histories of child welfare involvement 'aged out' of care, meaning that they exceeded the upper limit of eligibility for state services in their province/territory. This suggests that 'aging out' of care influenced their subsequent experiences of homelessness.

*“The need to provide young people with opportunities to succeed as emerging adults remains a challenge to the Child Welfare system. While society has embraced families to support their offspring well into the child’s twenties and beyond, youth dependent on the guardianship of the province have had to accept something far less.”*

- The Children's Advocate 1998-99 Annual Report, p.17



Difficult transitions from care can result in a range of negative outcomes, not least of which is housing instability and homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Karabanow, 2004; Serge et al., 2002). *Without a Home* data indicates that difficult transitions are also correlated with higher rates of unemployment, lack of educational engagement and achievement, involvement in corrections, and experiences of poverty. In addition to inadequate income and supports, many young people who leave care fail to make the transition to independent living because of inadequate education, lower levels of physical and emotional well-being, and a lack of the supports and resources that most young people rely on when moving into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2005; Gypen et al., 2017).

A key challenge is that in most jurisdictions, child protection legislation and practice have not kept pace with the social and economic changes that make it much more difficult for young people to live independently in their teens and early twenties. According to Statistics Canada (2011), over 40% of young Canadians (between the ages of 20 and 29) live with their parents because of the high cost of housing, poor labour market prospects, and the need for additional educational qualifications. In this context, child protection services that cut off support for young people at the age of 18 or even 21 leave young people in jeopardy and at risk of homelessness.

*“The premature withdrawal of support services can be absolutely devastating to young people struggling with the transition to adulthood. Child welfare authorities need to be aware that this is happening and to take steps to ensure that a more humane approach is put in place.”*

- The Children’s Advocate 1998-99 Annual Report, p.26

### 3. Early Experiences of Homelessness

A key finding of *Without a Home* is that 40.1% of Canadian homeless youth became homeless before the age of 16. Three important findings relevant to child welfare involvement were identified:

- Youth who became homeless before the age of 16 were much more likely to report involvement with child protection services (73.3% vs. 57.8%).
- Youth who became homeless before the age of 16 were more likely to have experienced childhood neglect than youth who became homeless after the age of 16 (48.6% vs. 37%).
- Those with earlier experiences of homelessness reported higher rates of placement in foster care and/or group homes (62%) compared to youth who first left home between 16-18 (39.7%) or 19-24 (28.7%).

More broadly, *Without a Home* data indicates that the younger the age at which a young person ends up on the streets, the more likely they are to report considerable difficulty before becoming homeless and greater adversity once they become homeless. This suggests that preventing homelessness among young people who are under 16 years of age should be a policy priority, including specifically youth with histories of child welfare involvement.

This high rate of youth who experienced homelessness before the age of 16 may seem surprising given that the state has an obligation to protect young people who are under 16. However, we know that some young people end up on the streets because they are running away from state care environments (e.g., group homes and/or foster care environments), or because they have run away from, or been kicked out of, their familial homes and their absences were not reported to the police or child protection services.

Across Canada, youth shelter eligibility is limited to young people who are over 16 years of age, unless they have been placed temporarily in a youth shelter by the child welfare system due to insufficient housing placement options (Nichols, 2014; 2016a). Youth under 16 years of age, or those with young children themselves, may seek to avoid interaction with the child protection system and/or other institutional authorities (e.g., health care workers, social workers, and police officers), making them particularly vulnerable.

## 4. Inequity

Research consistently demonstrates that children and families of particular races, ethnicities, and classes are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Gypen et al., 2017), and thus that child welfare involvement is linked to structural forms of disadvantage and marginalization (e.g., racism, poverty, colonialism). Numerous studies have revealed that in Canada, Indigenous and racialized youth are over-represented in the child welfare system (Blackstock, 2011; Blackstock et al., 2004; Statistics Canada, 2011; Villegas et al., 2011). The overrepresentation of these groups in the child welfare system is a key concern given that experiences in care are associated with housing instability and homelessness, as well as academic underperformance, poor mental and physical health, underemployment, and interactions with the criminal-legal system during and after care.

Indigenous youth are particularly overrepresented in the child welfare system. While Indigenous youth represent about 7% of the total population of youth in Canada, they make up about half of the children and youth in care (Statistics Canada, 2011). In the prairie provinces, Indigenous youth make up almost 70% of youth in care, and in the Canadian territories this rate is close to 100%. When children are removed from their homes, fewer than half (44%) are placed in homes where at least one caregiver is Indigenous.

### Youth who become homeless at an early age are more likely to:

- *Be involved with child protection services*
- *Experience multiple episodes of homelessness*
- *Be tested for ADHD*
- *Experience bullying*
- *Be victims of crime once homeless, including sexual assault*
- *Have greater mental health and addictions symptoms*
- *Experience poorer quality of life*
- *Attempt suicide*
- *Become chronically homeless*

(Gaetz et al., 2016)



Importantly, a landmark ruling in 2016 by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's ruled that the federal government discriminates against Indigenous children on reserve by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services that exist elsewhere. The Tribunal concluded that this has "resulted in denials of services and created various adverse impacts for many First Nations children and families living on reserves" (p.166). Both underfunding (levels of support are lower than the provincial average for children in care who are off reserve) and the approach to delivering care have disadvantaged Indigenous children and youth in numerous ways. The high percentage of Indigenous youth in care is a reflection of our colonial past and ongoing racism, and is also the outcome of jurisdictional disputes between different levels of government. The application of Jordan's Principle is an attempt to overcome jurisdictional disputes, and ensure Indigenous youth get access to care and support in an appropriate and timely way.

The overrepresentation of particular sub-populations in child protection in Canada is also mirrored in the youth homelessness population. Corresponding with earlier research, *Without a Home* found that Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S youth, and racialized youth are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness across Canada. In addition, *Without a Home* revealed that among youth who are homeless, gender and sexual minority youth are more likely to have involvement with child protection services at some point in their lives. Transgender and gender non-binary youth were more likely to report child protection involvement than cisgender youth (70.8% vs. 56.9%), and LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection than straight youth (62.8% vs. 55.8%). Those who identified as LGBTQ2S were also slightly more likely than those who identified as straight (50.0% vs. 46.3%) to have been in foster care and/or group homes.

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## Cause or effect: What is the relationship between child welfare involvement and homelessness?

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For close to twenty years, researchers have documented a link between involvement with the child welfare system and youth homelessness across North America. Research on youth homelessness consistently points to the high percentage of youth who have had some prior involvement with child protection services, including foster care, group home placements, or youth custodial centres (Bender et al., 2015; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004; Nichols, 2013, 2014; Mallon, 1998; Serge et al., 2002; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). In many ways this is not surprising, given that histories of abuse are common among people experiencing homelessness and are precisely the factors that draw the interest and attention of child protection services.

However, researchers have struggled to determine whether the increased incidence of homelessness among youth with histories of child welfare involvement is attributable to the child protection interventions themselves, experiences prior to contact with the child welfare system (e.g., experiences of abuse, neglect, or addiction in the family home), or other factors. Nonetheless, scholarship has shown that the drivers of both child welfare involvement and homelessness are structural, systemic, and individual. This means that while child protection services do not necessarily cause youth homelessness, the child welfare system can play an active role in *preventing* it.

## What conceptual and practical shifts are needed to break the link between child welfare and youth homelessness?

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We must take a critical look at the state systems charged with caring for the welfare of youth in Canada *before* they experience homelessness, as well as the systems of care we offer for young people experiencing homelessness. The child welfare system is only one of these systems. Youth justice, education, child and youth mental health, immigration and settlement, housing and homelessness services, and the labour market each have a role to play in a systems-approach to the prevention of youth homelessness in Canada.

A systems-level prevention framework, guided by a human rights orientation, is the most effective way to ensure positive outcomes for all youth. Now is the time for action. If we are serious about ensuring that our work leads to positive outcomes for all youth, then we must commit to *preventing* young people from ever experiencing homelessness. There are five key conceptual and practical shifts needed to break the link between child welfare and youth homelessness in Canada: (a) prioritize equity and the realization of human rights, (b) focus on positive youth development and wellness, (c) adopt a systems response, (d) invest in homelessness prevention, and (e) foster youth participation and innovation.

### A) EQUITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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All young people living in Canada have fundamental rights that are encoded in laws and treaties, such as the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Human rights treaties provide a constitutional or legal framework to ensure that all people experience fair and equal access to housing, education, healthcare, work, life, safety, justice, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement. Human rights treaties also constitutionalize people's rights to live free from discrimination. The state is responsible for ensuring all people experience these rights.

Given the documented links between child welfare system involvement and youth homelessness, among other social, educational, and health issues experienced by children and youth who have been in state care, we need to ensure that the child welfare system actively supports the **equitable inclusion** and care of all young people. Where systemic patterns of inequality, exclusion, and neglect are evident, the state has failed to act on its responsibilities as a human rights protector. **Equality cannot be realized by treating everyone the same way.** For equality to be realized, an equitable approach to policy-making and service delivery is required. This means putting the needs and experiences of those the state has failed at the forefront of policy and programmatic decision-making, including within the child welfare system and the youth homelessness sector.

In the context of evident human rights failures, systemic and conceptual shifts are required to ensure all young people in Canada experience fairness, inclusion, and care. We must ensure that our public systems of care do not exacerbate historical patterns of exclusion shaped by colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and cissexism.

## B) POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND WELLNESS FOCUS

Young people in care, and those who leave care, should be treated like any other young person. They need ongoing support, a strong voice to support their vision of their futures, and time to transition to adulthood. Supporting young people to transition from care should be embedded within a ‘positive youth development’ orientation, which is a strengths-based approach that focuses not just on risk and vulnerability, but also youth and community assets. A positive youth development approach:

- *Supports young people to identify their personal strengths in order to build self-esteem and a positive sense of self;*
- *Facilitates the development of young people’s communication and problem-solving skills;*
- *Enhances and builds natural supports, including family;*
- *Recognizes and builds from young people’s own goals and aspirations; and*
- *Supports sustained and meaningful engagement with education and other opportunities for personal growth.*

Adopting a positive youth development approach has important implications for practice. Program models, assessment practices, and case management supports must reflect the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural needs and strengths of developing young people. Programs and supports must build on the strengths, talents, and dreams of young people, enhancing protective factors and resilience. The focus, then, is not simply independence, but well-being.

## C) SYSTEMS RESPONSE

Working towards better outcomes for youth requires a willingness to collaborate and invest financial and human resources at all levels of government. The willingness to work together must be coupled with structures that support mutual engagement in—and accountability to—one another’s work and the changes we all want to see: better outcomes for youth.

This shift will require that each sector recognize its work as implicated in the outcomes young people experience – whether negative or positive. The prevention of youth homelessness and other manifestations of poverty and exclusion is a shared responsibility, and questions about who “owns” the youth homelessness portfolio are therefore moot.

In order to be effective, an integrated systems response requires coordinated and collaborative engagement across all levels of government. Because both homelessness and child welfare are ‘policy fusion’ issues, responses must involve health, corrections and justice, housing, education, and other sectors that these young people come into contact with. This requires that all levels of government, including Indigenous governments, be at the table.

## D) YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

Historically, communities and government have focused on investing in supports for young people once they are already experiencing homelessness, rather than working to prevent young people from becoming homeless. More recently, stakeholders have begun exploring innovative and cost effective measures to prevent youth homelessness and address the root causes of youth homelessness. This preventative approach operates on three levels:

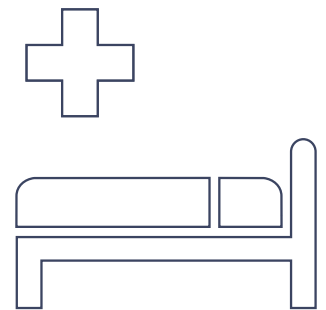
### PRIMARY PREVENTION

Primary prevention of youth homelessness means ‘working upstream’ to address structural and systems factors that more broadly contribute to precarious housing and the risk of homelessness for young people, including poverty, discrimination, educational and labour market exclusions, and a lack of affordable housing. Primary prevention of youth homelessness includes systems prevention, which means working with mainstream institutions to stop the flow of young people from child protection, health care, and corrections into homelessness. The child welfare system is one of many systems (e.g., youth justice, child and youth mental health, education) that could play a key role at the primary prevention level by ensuring stability and suitability of housing placements for youth in care, coordinating seamless transitions across systems/out of care, encouraging youth agency and decision-making, and exploring the efficacy of harm reduction approaches for youth in care.



### SECONDARY PREVENTION

Secondary prevention of youth homelessness refers to a range of targeted strategies to quickly support youth who are either at imminent risk of homelessness, or who have recently experienced homelessness. Secondary strategies should be designed to work quickly to support young people to either retain their housing (with their families or independently), or ensure they are quickly rehoused into permanent and stable accommodation that is affordable, safe, and appropriate. Schools, primary care, and food banks are some of the many partners that communities can work with to identify youth at risk and quickly facilitate access to supports. Effective early intervention strategies with youth include: coordinated intake and assessment, youth-centred case management, and shelter diversion strategies, such as Host Homes and other respite models, which allow care-providers and youth to take a ‘time out.’ Family, roommate, and landlord-tenant mediation are also useful tools.



### TERTIARY PREVENTION

Tertiary prevention involves supporting young people who experience homelessness to exit quickly, access housing, and receive the necessary and appropriate supports. It means ensuring that young people are able to obtain housing that is safe, affordable, and adequate, and that they have the supports they need to reduce the likelihood that they will experience homelessness ever again.



A key tertiary prevention strategy for youth experiencing homelessness is Housing First for Youth (HF4Y), based on the principle that youth should be provided immediate access to housing with no preconditions. A harm reduction approach is essential to tertiary prevention efforts with youth experiencing homelessness. As identified in the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness's Policy Brief: Federal Investment in Youth Homelessness, key program interventions include:

- *Housing First for Youth (including transitional housing options such as the Foyer)*
- *Employment training and support*
- *Mental health and addictions supports, including harm reduction*
- *Reengagement in education*

Research has shown that prevention and early intervention is enormously cost effective. Access Economics, for example, found that for every \$1 spent on providing mental health care for youth, there is a \$3.26 "return on investment" for treatment, and a \$5.60 return on investment for the implementation of best practices, such as early intervention (Access Economics, 2009).

## E) YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND INNOVATION

Ensuring the human rights of young people requires that youth are directly engaged in developing the policies, frameworks, programs, and services that affect their health, their housing, and their future. We must begin by regularly asking young people to teach us about the actual conditions of their lives, and to work with us to identify the positive outcomes they want to see in their lives. Once we know what we are aiming for, we can work backwards to create policy and programmatic structures and supports that seek to create these changes.

Young people's lives change relative to changes in the labour and housing markets, the education system, and society more broadly. We need to commit to engaging youth on an ongoing basis in order to create responsive and flexible institutions that remain effective at creating better outcomes for youth in a changing world. This is not a one-time effort. Youth must be meaningfully engaged at every step of this process, including progress evaluation, and this engagement must be conducted in a non-judgmental and anti-oppressive way, with minimal or no risk for the participants.

## Recommendations

The results of *Without a Home* indicate that young people who have been involved in the child welfare system are vulnerable to homelessness and housing insecurity. To address this important finding, we have proposed a number of evidence-based recommendations that reflect our commitment to human rights and equity. These recommendations are intended to provide better support for young people in care, and to ensure that they are able to successfully transition from care in ways that ensure housing stability, access to supports, and well-being. The recommendations are directed at the Government of Canada, provincial and territorial governments, and child protection services and workers. The content of the recommendations are drawn from and build upon a broad range of resources from Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario) and Europe (Scotland, FEANTSA).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aldanaz, 2016; OCYA, 2013; Scottish Government, 2013; Shaffer & Anderson, 2016; Youth Leaving Care Working Group (Ontario), 2013.

## GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

While child protection legislation, policy, and funding is a provincial and territorial responsibility, responding to homelessness is the responsibility of all orders of government. As such, the Government of Canada can play a role in supporting better transitions for youth leaving care. It is recommended that:

- 1. WORKING WITH PROVINCIAL, TERRITORIAL, AND INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENTS, THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA SHOULD COMMIT TO MAKING CANADA A WORLD LEADER IN HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE TO SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITION FROM CARE IN A WAY THAT IS SAFE, PLANNED, AND SUPPORTED.**
- 2. IN RENEWING ITS HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY, THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA SHOULD ENSURE THAT YOUTH AND HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION ARE PRIORITIZED, WHERE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS FROM CARE BECOME AN IMPORTANT FOCUS.**
- 3. THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA SHOULD PLAY A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN CONVENING, SHARING, AND SHOWCASING BEST PRACTICES IN POLICY AND SERVICE PROVISION IN, AND TRANSITIONING FROM, CARE.**
- 4. THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA SHOULD PROVIDE ADDITIONAL INVESTMENTS TO SUPPORT INDIGENOUS-LED REFORMS OF CHILD PROTECTION.**

The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (2016) and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission clearly outline the need for reform of federal support for Indigenous children, youth, and youth in care. We recommend that:

- a) Funding levels be enhanced in the next federal budget to equal (at minimum) what children receive off reserve.*
- b) Federal support should address operations (capital costs, multiple offices, cost of living adjustment, staff salaries and benefits, training, legal, remoteness and travel) to ensure lower caseloads and better support for Indigenous children and youth.*
- c) Preventive approaches (primary, secondary and tertiary) should be emphasized that include Indigenous-led solutions to assist Indigenous families and communities to care for their children and youth and maintain children's safety in their family homes.*
- d) The federal government should work with provincial and territorial governments to enhance collaboration, ensure consistency of funding and approaches across jurisdictions, and strengthen the implementation of Jordan's Principle to reduce service gaps, delays, and denial of support for Indigenous children and youth.*
- e) Ensure that within a renewed homelessness strategy there is support for:*
  - Co-funded collaborative initiatives involving Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Homelessness Strategy (Ministry of Families, Children and Social Development), the Ministry of Youth and other relevant ministries to better serve Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities; and*
  - Innovative strategies and interventions, such as Housing First for Youth, adapted to meet the needs of Indigenous youth, their families, and their communities.*
- f) The recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's Calls to Action regarding Addressing the Legacy of Child Welfare be fully adopted (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 (Vol. 6), p. 223-224).*



## PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS

Given their responsibility for child protection, provincial and territorial governments should put in place legislation, policy, and funding to ensure better transitions for young people leaving care and prevent the possibility of homelessness. It is recommended that provincial and territorial governments:

### 1. IMPLEMENT AN AFTER CARE GUARANTEE.

An After Care Guarantee means that when young people are taken into care, the state commits to providing ongoing support (as needed) until a young person reaches the age of 25. This is built on the belief that youth in care need to have the same gradual and extended transition to adulthood that most young people enjoy. Rather than extend the mandate of child protection services or create a whole new system, services and supports can be provided through agencies and services that have experience in working with youth and young adults. The After Care Guarantee should include:

- a)** *A clear After Care policy that outlines the different responsibilities of the province/territory, child protection services, and other institutions and systems.*
- b)** *An aftercare worker who is assigned to all young people in care at the age of 16. This worker should operate as a 'system navigator' and ongoing source of support for young people after they have transitioned from care.*
- c)** *Clear processes through which young people in care are supported to actively engage in planning what happens when they leave care. This means that youth are:*
  - Actively supported by an aftercare worker in drafting a plan;*
  - Provided with a full range of options to support planning;*
  - Supported to guide the creation of a plan that addresses the following areas: housing options, education and employment, personal development, health and wellbeing, life skills and practical skills, social networks and natural supports, meaningful and ongoing relationships with adults, and social and health services and supports; and*
  - Given the opportunity to decide when they no longer need support, but also have the right to opt back in to services and supports should they change their mind at a later time.*
- d)** *A guarantee that all young people leaving care will have access to housing that is safe, appropriate, affordable, and sustainable. Provincial and territorial governments should work with municipalities and the community sector to create and sustain housing options for youth who experience multiple challenges in obtaining and maintaining housing. Young people should have access to a range of housing options, including transitional housing, shared accommodation, independent living, and returning to their family home. Young people should also be provided with the option of remaining with their foster family if all parties agree.*
- e)** *The provision of access to financial support, including, where necessary:*
  - Income support;*
  - Financial support for the transition to independent living; and*
  - Support to waive adult high school program or university tuition fees and address other education costs.*
- f)** *Supports to ensure young people leaving care are able to develop permanent, supportive relations with adults in their lives. This includes:*
  - Helping young people to develop and nurture natural supports in their community; and*
  - Supporting young people to engage with and build relationships with family members, if the young person desires this.*

- g)** A mandate that the provincial ministry responsible for child protection track outcomes for young people in care, and also for those who have left care until they are 25.
- h)** For Indigenous youth, the After Care Guarantee must:
- Respect traditional knowledge, cultural traditions, and practices, as well as account for the impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities, including intergenerational trauma;
  - Actively engage Indigenous Peoples (including Elders) in supporting transitions from care; and
  - Ensure that provincial and territorial governments, in addressing the needs of Indigenous youth, implement Jordan's Principle, which is a child first policy that means jurisdictional disputes cannot get in the way of indigenous youth getting access to supports they need.

## **2. ENSURE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM EXPERIENCE SAFE, APPROPRIATE, AND STABLE HOUSING.**

Housing instability undermines health and well-being, school engagement, and safety for youth. A focus on ensuring safe, appropriate, and stable housing will require:

- a)** Prioritizing kinship care and holistic and responsive (e.g., family and youth-led wrap-around) supports for families wherever possible, and working with families to coordinate the supports they need and want to ensure the family is well;
- b)** Providing family mediation and conflict resolution supports to ensure resolvable conflicts do not interfere with young people remaining stably housed; and
- c)** The development and implementation of community respite and Host Home programs, which offer emergency housing in the community to young people in need of a safe place to sleep. The practice of placing youth "in care" in homeless shelters when they require emergency housing should be ended.

## **3. IMPLEMENT A FOCUSED PREVENTION STRATEGY TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE UNDER 16 AND AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS.**

While in care, many young people experience adverse circumstances, housing instability, and episodes of homelessness. The *Without a Home* study found that while an alarmingly high percentage of youth first became homeless before they were 16 (40%), young people with a history of being in foster care or group homes were almost twice as likely to experience early homelessness as those who were not in care (52.5% vs. 27%). A prevention strategy focusing on youth in care under the age of 16 should include:

- a)** Aligning ministerial, departmental, and program mandates and funding to enable better collaboration in support of positive outcomes for youth;
- b)** Identifying provincial and federal inter-ministerial opportunities for collaboration and improved service coordination (for instance, between education, child and family services, and health and justice);
- c)** Supporting grassroots, community- and youth-led initiatives that support youth-voice, youth leadership development, and capacity building among younger youth;
- d)** Provide social and material supports to reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with children under 16; and
- e)** Support programs and initiatives that seek to generate family wellness and community integration (e.g., free classes, drop-in programs, and support networks for parents of children 0-18; subsidized access to cultural resources and recreational activities; childcare and public transportation for families; co-operative and other forms of subsidized housing).

#### **4. IMPLEMENT A FOCUSED STRATEGY TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE FOR WHOM THE SYSTEMS FOR YOUTH CURRENTLY SERVE LEAST WELL, INCLUDING: INDIGENOUS YOUTH, LGBTQ2S YOUTH, GENDER NON-BINARY YOUTH, AND RACIALIZED YOUTH.**

This means working with people from these equity-seeking groups to design and implement:

- a) Policies and legislation that encode into law the things equity-seeking groups need and want to experience inclusion, full access to public resources, and active participation in civic life;*
- b) Procedures and programs that support the desired outcomes that young people from equity-seeking groups have identified for themselves;*
- c) Equity and diversity-seeking hiring policies in all provincial ministries serving youth, at all levels of organization and leadership; and*
- d) Opportunities for leadership and control of services among equity-seeking groups.*

#### **5. IMPLEMENT HARM REDUCTION MODELS THAT FOCUS ON REDUCING THE RISKS OR HARMFUL EFFECTS ASSOCIATED WITH SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIVE OR OTHER HIGH-RISK BEHAVIOURS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL.**

In many cases, compliance-based services and zero-tolerance policies do not fit the needs of high-risk or vulnerable youth. Given that many vulnerable youth are simultaneously managing developmental changes and a complex set of challenges and disadvantages, some youth may make lifestyle choices that involve sexual practices, drug use, and other behaviours which put them at risk. For some youth, these activities are directly linked to experiences of trauma, discrimination, abuse, and neglect. To best support these young people, we need to:

- a) Develop a common understanding of harm reduction and its benefits for vulnerable youth;*
- b) Develop program models that focus on choice for youth, recognizing that some young people will desire a harm reduction environment while others will want and benefit from abstinence-based services. The provision of multiple options for youth should be the cornerstone of any harm reduction approach.*
- c) Support community organizations to develop programs and initiatives that include a harm reduction approach; and*
- d) Monitor and evaluate harm reduction responses to encourage continuous improvement in serving vulnerable youth.*

## **CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES AND WORKERS**

The following recommendations are intended to guide program and practice at the community level to enable the prevention of youth homelessness and support successful transitions from care. It is recommended that child protection services and workers:

#### **1. IMPLEMENT STRENGTHS-BASED POLICY AND PRACTICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE CURRENTLY IN CARE TO BUILD THEIR RESILIENCE, GIVEN THAT THIS LEADS TO MORE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS FROM CARE. THIS INCLUDES:**

- a) Embedding support for adolescents and young adults in a wraparound “system of care” to facilitate access to necessary services and supports; and*
- b) Assisting young people in care with planning and goal-setting for when they leave care. This includes ensuring young people have consistent and clear information about:*
  - Housing options,*
  - A range of supports tailored to their needs,*
  - How to navigate systems, and*
  - Options and supports for post-secondary education and training.*

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**2. PROVIDE ONGOING AND MEANINGFUL TRAINING AND SUPPORTS FOR CASE WORKERS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS IN CARE. THIS INCLUDES:**

- a) Ensuring case workers are aware of and trained in the practice of trauma-informed care;*
- b) Increasing the awareness of caseworkers, caregivers, and service providers of mainstream and specialized services that serve young people leaving care; and*
- c) Implementation of policy, strategies, training, and accountability mechanisms to support anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, solutions- and equity-oriented practice among frontline and managerial child welfare staff who work with children and youth in care.*

**3. SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO ACCESS NECESSARY AND APPROPRIATE MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS SUPPORTS, AND ENSURE THAT THOSE TRANSITIONING FROM CARE ALSO ARE ABLE TO TRANSITION TO ADULT SYSTEMS.**

**4. ENSURE THAT CASE WORKERS HAVE APPROPRIATE CASELOADS TO CARRY OUT THIS IMPORTANT WORK.**

**5. PROVIDE AN ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK SO YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE, AS WELL AS THOSE TRANSITIONING FROM CARE, HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE ONGOING FEEDBACK.**

**6. EMPLOY A STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT TOOL TO ASSIST IN DETERMINING HOMELESSNESS/FLIGHT RISK.**

Such a tool can be used to help determine:

- a) Risk factors and assets (a strengths-based approach),*
- b) Support needs,*
- c) Both a short term and long term support plan, and*
- d) Eligibility and prioritization for Housing First for Youth*

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