FROM MARGINALIZED TO MAGNIFIED

Youth Homelessness Solutions From Those With Lived Expertise

A Youth First Voices Report

February 2020

Most of the photographs and art work that appear in this report were contributed by members of Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

It's cold, dark and the snow is falling. Your feet are numb, with fingers like icicles. Your tummy rumbles as you try to remember the last time you ate. Loneliness sets in as you remember loved ones from the past. A car pulls over, you get in. You don't know who the person is. Can this person help? In desperation, you place your wet socks on the dashboard praying that they will dry. Is there anyone to help?

This is the voice of youth homelessness. It was my own experience as a youth who became a permanent ward in the foster care system and subsequently experienced homelessness. Today, as the Executive Director of A Way Home Kamloops Society, I am saddened by the situation in which we find ourselves around youth homelessness and have found it to be my duty to provide a platform for the voices of youth with lived expertise to be heard.

Every day, our team sees how complex systemic barriers play out in a youth's life, preventing them from leaving homelessness behind. A Way Home Kamloops has set a strategic priority to help lead the development of a provincial plan, as there is a significant need for policy changes and the resources to create the housing and supports that will prevent young people from being homeless.

It has been the greatest honour to engage with other youth with lived expertise by leading this project and elevating youth voice by writing this report. It has been a journey of understanding how our most horrific life experiences that cause the deepest wounds can sometimes become our life purpose. Lived experience must be recognized as lived expertise. This is the silver lining of youth homelessness and why lived expertise must be at the center of all policy and program development. This provides opportunities for youth to find purpose in their most difficult experiences by creating systemic change and better opportunities for other youth by helping the system learn and change. We also know that services will be better equipped to respond to young people if youth voice is at the center.

Today, B.C. has an unprecedented policy window to create a provincial plan to end youth homelessness that will maximize these opportunities to coordinate the response to youth homelessness with a local and federal commitment to change. This is a crucial opportunity for the B.C. government to take a leadership role and support communities to create the much-needed services and responses that youth are crying out for.

Many youth involved in this project spoke about an end to homelessness being so much more than the physical bricks and mortar, but also including a sense of belonging and connection within communities. Our government should champion a provincial plan that will help lead communities in developing a shared responsibility to invest in young peoples' inclusion and relief of homelessness. A provincial plan would support communities to develop their own strategies to prevent and respond to youth

homelessness and articulate the important roles that each sector must play. As youth homelessness is a growing area of research, the province should take the time to consult with communities and determine what strategies would produce maximum impact.

The most important action our government can take to end youth homelessness is to listen to the youth and put *"Youth First Voices First."* Youth voice should be required within a provincial plan to end youth homelessness. This report is a first step and provides a valuable opportunity to elevate youth voices with lived expertise of homelessness in hopes that no other young person will have to experience the trauma of having nowhere to go. We need to act fast and alleviate some of the harm being done by providing youth with housing first.

This report is dedicated to the brave, courageous and resilient young people with lived expertise who shared their stories and solutions in hopes of change for the next generation. We are dedicated to mobilizing your voices and advocating for the solutions you called for.

There is no time to wait.

It's a revolution.

We can and we must invest in the youth of British Columbia with a provincial plan to end youth homelessness.

Katherine McParland
Report Author

Some of the members of Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why does the injustice of youth homelessness still exist and how should the British Columbia government fulfill its duty to end it? The issues of homelessness, tent cities and housing affordability have come to dominate media headlines and government news releases; however, youth homelessness has been much less in focus. This report seeks to shine a spotlight on youth homelessness in B.C. by elevating and featuring the voices of young people with lived expertise who are calling on our government to listen and make a change.

The information in this report was gathered through a youth-led process which saw University of Calgary graduate social work student Katherine McParland, with the support of B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth (RCY), bring together 16 youth leaders. In honour of a local youth group in Kamloops that has pioneered youth homelessness advocacy, the provincial youth leaders chose to call themselves Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C.[1] These young leaders rolled out youth forums in their communities, resulting in face-to-face consultations with more than 163 young people who made recommendations to inform a provincial plan to end youth homelessness. Another 68 youth participated in an online survey hosted on the RCY website.

These brave and resilient young people chose to share their experiences in hopes of creating change, so that other youth would not have to endure what the youth leaders had themselves survived. Their stories and recommendations have provided valuable insights on the pathways into youth homelessness, risks and barriers impacting youth who are experiencing homelessness and, ultimately, solutions to end it. Our collective hope is government will develop and implement a distinct plan to end youth homelessness in B.C. that has its foundation rooted in the voices of the youth in this report. These are real young people. All over B.C., right now, there are youth who don't know where they will sleep tonight. There is an urgent need for government to respond to ensure that every young person has the housing and supports they need to thrive. There is literally no time to wait.

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[1] Youth Against Youth Homelessness (YAYH) is a youth-led group of 12 leaders in Kamloops with lived expertise of homelessness or housing insecurity. This group acts as the youth advisory to the A Way Home Kamloops Committee and is responsible for implementing the community plan to prevent and end youth homelessness. YAYH has received a national award for youth engagement and impacted provincial and national policy changes and research related to youth homelessness. www.awayhomekamloops.com

FINDINGS

PATHWAYS INTO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

1 Unsafe family home experiences
"Homelessness is intergenerational."

2 Unsafe and non-responsive foster care system
"Social workers should help you get housing, but they drop you."

3 Addiction and/or mental health
"[Using substances] keeps you warm in the winter and makes the concrete softer."

4 Affordability crisis and lack of affordable housing
"[There is] no place to rent if you want to live in your hometown."

5 Discrimination and stigma
"[Youth are] being judged by the way a person may look or how they dress."

IMPACTS OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

1 Physical health risk/violence
"Surviving...doing things you wouldn't normally do to eat. I ate out of the garbage and stole food... to take care of myself."

2 Mental health risks
"[Homelessness] makes you feel unloved."

3 Education/Employment challenges
"How will you be able to attend school without a place to stay?"

4 Unsafe housing situations
"In shared accommodations, there are no tenant rights. [That means] no notice for eviction."

5 Vulnerable to exploitation
"Survival rape."

6 Increased substance use
"Started using substances."

7 Death
"You could lose your life."

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HOUSING

1 Gaps in emergency supports such as youth shelters
"The youth shelter...calls your parent and guardian, who might be the person you are trying to get away from."

2 Shortage of youth-specific housing options
"We need certain apartments dedicated to youth in the system."

3 Wait lists
"Couch-surfing is not considered homeless. I couldn't get help."

4 Discrimination
"People don't want to rent to young people."

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SUPPORTS

1 Wait lists for services
"It takes months to get into a treatment program."

2 Inflexible/restrictive eligibility requirements
"It's always about chasing that next eligibility requirement."

3 Lack of information about programs/supports
"I didn't know how to access organizations for help."

4 Lack of identification
"ID is expensive [and you] can't even volunteer without it."

5 Lack of transportation
"[There should be] a sliding scale for transit."

6 Lack of wraparound holistic services
"[There should be] more support for [the] trauma of leaving home."

7 Barriers to cultural services
"Inability to access culture even if it's known."
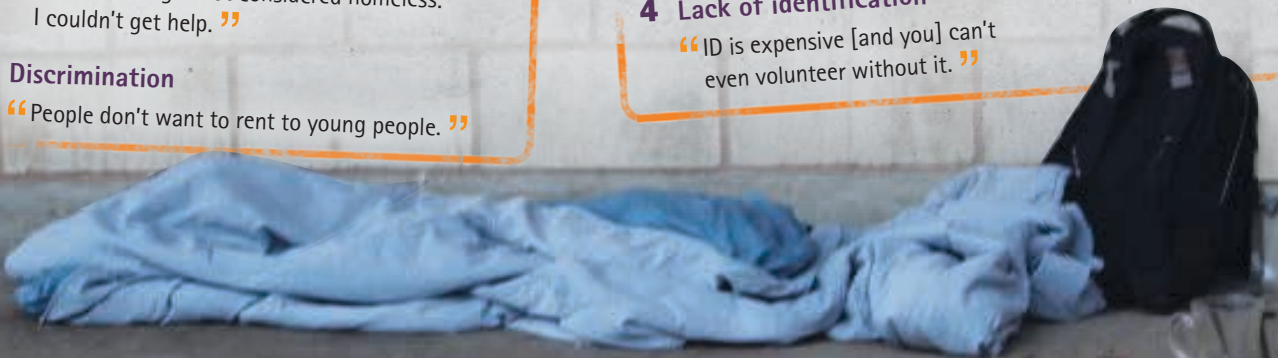
SOLUTIONS FROM YOUTH

1 Listen to the youth: invest in lived expertise leadership!

"When given the opportunity to grow, homeless youth grow deep and sturdy roots. We need to engage with homeless youth to see what they as individuals need to grow those roots. And we need to be prepared to follow their lead as allies and advocates."

2 Access to a continuum of government-funded distinct youth housing options

"Housing first with harm reduction, designed to meet youth needs, not adult values."

3 Improve foster care placements to ensure they are providing appropriate supports to meet the needs of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

"[I am tired of] paid relationships."

4 Change MCFD policies regarding Youth Agreements and aging out as a strategy to both prevent and respond to youth homelessness

"Help us find housing before we age out and have nowhere to go."

5 Increase cultural services available to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

"Drumming, songs, dance, once a week for kids can change your life."

6 Improve emergency responses to youth homelessness

"I didn't need to freeze tonight."

7 Increase financial supports, including raising government income assistance rates and providing rental subsidies

"Poverty is a full-time job and doesn't give you time to do other things to get out of poverty."

8 Increase the wraparound community supports available for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

"I wish someone was there to see bright things, [a] possibility for hope and housing. A supporting hand. Someone to reach out. This is not your life."

9 Foster young peoples' connections to natural supports and a sense of community

"Create a community for our youth aging out; ongoing support and [community] becomes your extended family. This is missing with our youth aging out of care and [is needed to] uplift them."

10 Improve education opportunities for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

"Make [education] more accessible."

11 Increase opportunities for youth employment

"Programs that help to bridge the gap with employers."

BACKGROUND

Context

Youth homelessness is a significant rights issue impacting the most vulnerable young people in B.C. communities. There is growing recognition that youth who are homeless are distinct from other sub-populations. In 1992, youth homelessness was defined as *"an individual between the ages of 15 to 24 who is not living in a family home or in care ... and is in an unsafe or temporary living environment ... [including] youth who have been out of the home ... for 24 hours or more and are uncertain as to where they will go or what they will do next."* [2]

In 2016, the Canadian definition of youth homelessness was refined to include experiences of youth ages 13 to 24 *"who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but don't have the means or ability to acquire stable, safe or consistent residence."* [3]

These definitions show the hidden, fluid and episodic nature of youth homelessness that is characterized by experiences such as couch-surfing and staying with unsafe people. Over the past two decades, there is growing awareness in our communities about the magnitude of the issue. Although many have written about the context of youth homelessness, the purpose of this report is to give a platform to the voices of youth themselves, who have long been silenced.

Youth homelessness is a complex social issue that impacts youth in both urban and rural communities. Many young people do not have access to the support they need, leaving them with nowhere to go or creating barriers to exiting homelessness. For example, in some rural communities, youth reported there were no emergency services or supports, such as shelters, they could access. To add to the complexity of the issue, communities across B.C. are confronted with interconnected challenges impacting youth homelessness such as the toxic drug supply, poverty and increased pressures on underfunded service providers to deal with these issues.[4] Currently, the magnitude of youth homelessness is still being uncovered with the development of youth homeless counts and, as of yet, there are no dedicated provincial or federal funding programs designed to meet the distinct needs of homeless youth. Community organizations face a mighty struggle to find the necessary funding to provide the services youth need to exit homelessness.

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[2] K. McCall, *Support services to homeless/street youth in Ottawa-Carleton: A needs assessment and plan for action* (Ottawa: The Community Task Force on Homeless/Street Youth, 1992), 7-8.

[3] Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, "Canadian definition of youth homelessness," Homeless Hub, 2016, https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/what-homelessness.

[4] A Way Home Kamloops, "2018 Youth Homelessness Count Report," A Way Home Kamloops, June 1, 2019, https://www.awayhomekamloops.com.

POINT IN TIME COUNTS COMPARED TO YOUTH COUNTS

To estimate the extent of homelessness in order to inform policy and funding decisions, the federal government incentivizes communities to participate in Point in Time (PIT) counts. PIT counts provide a "snapshot of homelessness" through the process of volunteers surveying people who appear homeless on the street or in shelters during a 24-hour period.

Because youth homelessness is often a hidden issue where young people may be couch-surfing, may not appear homeless, or are afraid to speak up, PIT counts may underestimate the magnitude of youth homelessness. In 2016, A Way Home Kamloops conducted Canada's first youth-specific homelessness count that used distinctive methodology in partnership with a PIT count. The PIT count methodology identified six youth who were currently homeless, while the youth count identified 56 youth who were currently homeless and a total of 129 youth who had ever experienced homelessness. As youth counts are a new area of research, there is opportunity for innovation, such as developing youth-friendly survey tools and distinct methodology to give youth a voice. In 2018, A Way Home Kamloops conducted a second youth count during a three-day period and included the following methodology:

- **Service Inventory:** Organizations that work with youth, or have youth who access their adult services, had staff complete this survey with all the youth they encountered during that time.

- **Public Systems Count:** Key contacts within the health, justice and foster systems surveyed youth connected to public systems.

- **School District Count:** The youth count surveyed all Grade 10 students within the school district to identify youth who may be experiencing housing insecurity.

- **Magnet Events:** Youth-specific magnet events were hosted such as sleepover parties and barbeques.

- **Street Count:** Volunteers were trained to survey youth on the street who may or may not appear homeless. Youth-specific hotspots were mapped out.

- **Count Booths:** Booths were set up outside youth hotspots such as the skate park and bus stops, etc.

A youth count is different from a PIT count because it:

- uses different methodologies geared toward the distinctiveness of youth homelessness

- identifies youth who may not access services and are less visible

- uses a survey designed with youth-friendly language that meets the developmental stages of young people

- occurs over a longer period of time

- involves the school district and general youth population who may be experiencing more episodic homelessness

- identifies youth who have experienced homelessness in the past year, as well as those who are currently homeless

- uses methodologies that give voice to youth who may not be captured in the general PIT count

- provides opportunities for youth engagement and leadership

- uses a broader definition of youth homelessness

- provides valuable demographic data to help inform prevention initiatives

- increases public awareness about youth homelessness

- adds to the growing body of knowledge, as there is limited research information about youth homelessness.

Other communities in B.C. are innovating in this new area of youth counts, including Metro Vancouver and Nelson. Over the next few years, youth counts will be refined as more communities follow suit and further develop methodologies that will shed light on the issue of youth homelessness.[5]

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[5] A Way Home Kamloops Society, "2018 Kamloops Youth Homelessness Count Report," A Way Home Kamloops, June 2019, www.awayhomekamloops.com

B.C.'s affordable housing crisis forms the backdrop and context against which the youth homelessness crisis plays out. Youth face many barriers to securing appropriate housing including low vacancy rates, discrimination and a lack of prior experience of independent living. Youth are being impacted by changes in the economy that have led to poverty and, in some cases, traumatic breakdowns within families unable to compete in the economy. Although there have been significant strides in increasing the inventory of affordable housing in B.C. and some specific projects have been designated for youth, there is still a long way to go. BC Housing has encouraged and approved some youth-specific housing and projects where youth housing is a component within general housing proposal calls.[6] However, this report shows a need for a distinct call for proposals for youth-specific housing as many youth voiced that affordable housing programs are not accessible to – or safe for – youth.

Additionally, youth homelessness is an under-researched area and there is a lack of academic evidence on what program models will prevent and end youth homelessness.[7] There is a need for distinct responses to youth homelessness that meet the unique developmental needs of young people to support a healthy transition to independence. Interventions need to be strategic to alleviate the systemic barriers youth face and move them into housing with support as quickly as possible. Research shows the longer youth are homeless, the more trauma and victimization they experience.[8]

Youth homelessness is not an individual choice, but rather the result of a combination of complex systemic issues and policy decisions that prevent youth from obtaining secure and safe housing. Young people affected by homelessness are aging out of many different types of services and face age eligibility requirements.[9] For example, the child welfare system has been framed as the *"super highway to homelessness"* [10] for a multitude of reasons such as the abrupt transition to independence at age 19 when youth age out of the system in B.C. A Vancouver study identified that street-involved youth were 160 times more likely to have been from government care than the general population of youth and that street-involved youth who were formerly in government care were twice as likely to be First Nations, Métis and Inuit.[11] The process of aging out of many different services

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6   BC Housing email communication to author, August 31, 2019.

7   Katherine McParland, Jayla Rousseau-Thomas, & Jeanette Wagemakers Schiff, "A critical review of research and policy in Youth-Focused Housing First,"*Canadian Journal of Social Policy Review* 79 (Spring 2019): 50-68.

8   John Coates & Sue McKenzie-Mohr, "Out of the frying pan, into the fire: Trauma in the lives of homeless youth prior to and during homelessness," The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare 37, no. 4 (December 2010): 65-96.

9   A Pathway to Hope, the provincial government's "roadmap for making mental health and addictions care better for people in British Columbia," includes commitments and specific actions to help support youth transitions by investing/expanding programs.

10 Bill Metcalfe, "Foster-care is 'superhighway to homelessness' youth advocate tells Nelson audience," *Nelson Star*, October 18, 2018, www.nelsonstar.com/community/foster-care-is-superhighway-to-homelessness-youth-advocate-says/

11 Brittany Barker, Thomas Kerr, Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, Michelle Fortin, Paul Nguyen, Evan Wood, & Kora DeBeck, "High prevalence of exposure to the child welfare system among street-involved youth in a Canadian setting: Implications for policy and practice," *BioMed Central Public Health Journal* 14 (February 2014): 197-203.

such as foster care, mental health, disability and health care supports creates complex transitions that are challenging to navigate and that perpetuate homelessness. These system failures have resulted in a fragmented and broken web of our social fabric in which some youth may have nowhere to go to get the help they need to thrive in our communities.

For First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth, experiences of homelessness are rooted in colonial institutions and processes such as residential schools, the Sixties Scoop and the foster system[12] of today, and the resulting displacement. The Indigenous definition of homelessness (see text box) highlights the layering and intergenerational impacts of colonization on Indigenous people experiencing homelessness.[13]

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[12] Foster system: This is the term that was chosen by the youth leaders and that will be used in this report, based on their feelings that, in their experiences, the foster system lacked care. However, the youth leaders also wish to acknowledge that many foster caregivers do provide care that is child- and youth-centred, caring and nurturing. The experiences and voices of children and youth who do have positive caring experiences can help to inform what the foster care system can and should be.

[13] Jesse Thistle, *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2017), 6-29.

INDIGENOUS DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

In 2017, Jesse Thistle created the Indigenous definition of homelessness that looks beyond the *"colonialist definition of homelessness"* and emphasizes that the *"Indigenous concept of home is a metaphysical understanding of emplacement rather than a built-in environment."* [14] This interconnectedness shows that the solution to homelessness is relational and must consider the *"broader legacy of marginalization and displacement created by settler colonialism."*

Thistle developed 12 dimensions of homelessness that include:

- *historic displacement of homelessness (the colonial experience of being separated from the land and the loss of language and culture)*
- *geographic separation*
- *spiritual disconnection*
- *cultural disconnection and loss (not being connected through relationships)*
- *overcrowding leading to homelessness*
- *going home homelessness (where you are seen as an outsider in your home community)*
- *nowhere to go*
- *escaping harm homelessness*
- *emergency crisis*
- *climate refugee homelessness.*

Thistle speaks about the *"layering of dimensions as it relates to a residential school survivor"* and the intergenerational impact that will form *"the totality of one person's homelessness … [and that] will eventually lead to a chronic state of unsheltered homelessness."* This understanding of Indigenous homelessness should inform the solutions, and should include culturally appropriate policies and procedures as well as the implementation of the *Calls to Action* of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Indigenous definition of homelessness

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[14]   Jesse Thistle, *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2017), 6-29. https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COHIndigenousHomelessnessDefinition.pdf

In 2015, Canada accepted and pledged to adopt the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) *Calls to Action*, which have definite implications for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth experiencing homelessness.[15] For example, Indigenous youth are over-represented in our foster system and the TRC calls on Canada to reduce the number of Indigenous youth in care. The TRC further calls for distinct strategies to ameliorate the injustices faced by Indigenous youth who are experiencing homelessness, including child welfare experiences, health concerns and issues surrounding and impacting murdered and missing Indigenous women. The unique experience of homelessness for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth must be understood in order to create solutions that will address the detrimental impacts of colonization.

Clearly, the issue of youth homelessness requires urgent action to support young people to have the opportunity to realize their potential. In 1989, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* was developed, outlining the rights of young people. It states that youth have rights that protect them from all forms of physical and mental violence, both of which are interconnected with the pathways to and impacts of homelessness.[16] The Convention clearly states the need for housing and for youth voice to be heard. The *UNCRC* should frame our understanding of youth homelessness as a rights issue that urgently needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, support for youth experiencing homelessness is lacking and their rights are not being upheld. This report calls on government to ensure that such supports are provided and adequately resourced.

Current window of opportunity

There is a current window of opportunity to influence policy and systems change that could make significant progress toward eradicating youth homelessness in B.C.

In Canada, 61 communities receive federal government funding designated to provide support to address homelessness. Only seven B.C. communities are designated to receive this funding.[17] Recently, the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development appointed an Advisory Committee on Homelessness to inform the redesign of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy.[18] This has produced an opportunity to amend some of the restrictions on federal funding that were creating systemic barriers to addressing youth homelessness. For example, the Committee has recognized prevention as a key strategy in addressing chronic homelessness. Another example is that the housing-first

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[15] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *In Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Ottawa: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 223-242. Calls to Action related to Indigenous Youth Homelessness: Calls 1-42 and 66.

[16] United Nations, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, November 20, 1989, www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx.

[17] Employment and Social Development Canada, "2011-2014 HPS Community Plans," Find a Reaching Home Community, last modified April 16, 2019, www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/find-community/community-plans.html

[18] Employment and Social Development Canada, *Advisory Committee on Homelessness Final Report* (Ottawa: Employment and Social Development Canada), 2018.

requirements[19] have been loosened, which will allow for models of housing that better support youths' developmental needs such as congregate models.[20] The re-designed federal funding to address homelessness creates a significant opportunity to provide the services youth need in their local communities.

Federal government funding is administered through municipalities with Community Advisory Boards. This process has inspired many communities to improve coordination to reduce gaps in services that may impact homelessness. As a requirement of federal funding, these communities have developed broader homelessness action plans.

In 2012, Kamloops, and Kingston, Ont., were chosen as part of a national pilot to develop youth-specific plans to end youth homelessness in their communities.[21] During the last few years, many communities, both rural and urban, have developed distinct plans to address youth homelessness. In B.C., communities that have developed, or are developing, strategies to end youth homelessness include Kamloops, Kelowna, Nelson, Cowichan and Victoria. Community plans are powerful tools to develop strategies and grow awareness of the collective responsibility to raise each child. It is encouraging that some B.C. communities are coordinating services and recognizing their responsibilities to end youth homelessness; however, there is a real need and, indeed, a role, for the provincial government to develop a youth-informed, overarching plan that will provide support and leadership to local initiatives.

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19 The Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) was a federal government program to support local communities in responding to homelessness. Communities were mandated to spend 40 per cent of their HPS funding on housing-first program models, which prioritized independent, permanent, scattered-site housing programs. These programs did not necessarily meet the distinct developmental needs of youth who sometimes preferred communal or transition housing to gain life skills prior to living independently. HPS has now been dissolved and the federal government is in the process of launching the new Reaching Home funding program for homelessness.

20 Congregate models of housing provide youth with accommodation that is shared with other youth. This model can help youth build peer support, develop healthy roommate skills and create a sense of belonging.

21 Net News Ledger Staff, "The Mobilizing Local Capacity Program to end youth homelessness working in Kingston and Kamloops,"November 20, 2012, www.netnewsledger.com/2012/11/20/the-mobilizing-local-capacity-to-end-youth-homelessness-program-working-in-kamloops-and-kingston/

A WAY HOME KAMLOOPS COMMUNITY PLAN TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

In 2012, a former youth in care with lived expertise of homelessness who is also the author of this report brought together a group of people in an abandoned building with the intention of developing housing and supports for youth experiencing homelessness.[22] This group become the steering committee behind the community plan to end youth homelessness entitled A Way Home, which was launched in 2014.[23]

The plan brought together community members from all sectors, including youth, service providers, landlords, businesses and government ministries with the mission of preventing and ending youth homelessness. The collective now has more than 160 members and five action teams working on community projects to reduce youth homelessness.

A Way Home Kamloops developed the Kamloops Youth Housing First Wrapforce that provides a youth-specific, centralized housing and supports intake system in partnership with 15 organizations. Each organization has identified a Youth Homelessness Champion to ensure youth do not have to share their story over and over again and that youth find no wrong doors. This system helped develop a community continuum of youth housing options so that youth have choice in the type of housing that best meets their needs. The Wrapforce includes a Youth Housing First program that provides youth at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness with scattered site housing options. In 2018, the Wrapforce received 103 referrals and 43 youth were housed using this approach to youth homelessness.

The Youth Against Youth Homelessness team is the heart of A Way Home Kamloops and is comprised of a group of 12 youth with lived expertise of homelessness who guide the community work. There are two hired youth advisors and a peer navigation program for youth accessing post-secondary education. In support of this work, Thompson Rivers University has contributed five bursaries per year to youth in Wrapforce housing to pave the pathway to education.

As the first community in B.C. to develop a youth-specific plan to end youth homelessness, A Way Home Kamloops has achieved many milestones and learned many lessons.[24] Through this work, youth have identified systems change as a priority at the provincial and national levels to end homelessness.

In 2019, A Way Home Kamloops managed 130 referrals from youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Thirty-two youth, four children and three babies were provided program housing through the Youth Housing First program. An additional 30 youth were provided market housing; five youth connected to other program housing; and four youth reconnected home. A total of 71 youth were supported to obtain housing in 2019.

A Way Home Kamloops Community Plan to End Youth Homelessness

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22 A Way Home Kamloops Society, "A Way Home Kamloops", September 15, 2019,
    https://www.awayhomekamloops.com/about
23 John-Paul Baker, "A Way Home Youth Homelessness Action Plan," A Way Home Kamloops, June 2017,
    https://www.awayhomekamloops.com
24 https://www.awayhomekamloops.com/programs

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Duty to Assist

The nation of Wales has legislated homelessness prevention through the concept of "duty to assist" outlined in the *Housing (Wales) Act* established in 2014. This Act *"places a duty on local authorities to work with people who are at risk of losing their home within 56 days to help them find a solution to their problems."* [25] Duty to assist is inclusive of everyone, but particularly mentions the applicability to youth leaving care or custody centres, which are key systemic factors influencing youth homelessness. Local authorities may take many different actions to prevent or relieve homelessness, which can include:

- mediation between landlords and tenants or family
- grants or loans
- support with debt management
- advocacy
- providing suitable housing for up to six months
- helping people access social or private housing
- security to prevent the risk of abuse[26]

The Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales[27] is based on legislation and explains how duty to assist obligates housing and social services to coordinate services to support youth transitioning out of care in a planned way

The Leaving Care legislation mandates local authorities to complete adequate planning, provide holistic supports, and offer housing options through collaboration to prevent homelessness.

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[25] Welsh Government, "Homelessness," Welsh Government, last modified July 16, 2018, https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/homelessness-strategy.pdf.

[26] "Housing Wales Act," Legislation.gov.uk, 2014, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2014/7/part/2/enacted.

[27] Barnado's & St. Basil's, "Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales," Barnado's Cymru Research Publications, October 2016, https://stbasils.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Finalframework2a_CareLeavers_A4.pdf.

The nation-wide consultation process for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy redesign revealed that there is a significant role for provinces and territories in addressing youth homelessness.[28] Many of the pathways and systemic barriers perpetuating youth homelessness fall under provincial jurisdiction such as the child welfare system, which highlights the need for inter-ministerial coordination at a provincial level. The Advisory Committee on Homelessness recommended that the concept of Duty to Assist (see textbox) be developed to prevent and respond to homelessness.

Recently in B.C., the provincial government has responded in significant ways to address the inequalities and oppression that the most vulnerable in our society experience. For example, the province conducted a comprehensive consultation to inform its Together B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy, which resulted in homelessness being identified as a key concern. This legislated strategy has raised government income assistance rates and eliminated the two-year independence rule for youth seeking access to income assistance. Previously, young people over the age of 19 had to show they had been independent of their family and living on their own for a period of two years to be eligible for income assistance, which could mean two years with no funding to secure housing. The Together B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy is an encouraging development as it may support solutions to some of the structural causes of youth homelessness.[29]

In recognition of the urgency of the homelessness issue, the B.C. government committed to a Homelessness Action Plan in 2017 that falls under the jurisdiction of two ministries: Housing and Municipal Affairs and Social Development and Poverty Reduction.[30] The ministers' mandate letters from the Premier clearly indicate a scope to develop a youth homelessness action plan as they have been tasked with working in partnership to develop a homelessness action plan. The plan has four pillars to address homelessness:

1) Prevention

2) Immediate response

3) Stability

4) Working together.

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[28] Employment & Social Development Canada, "Final Report of the Advisory Committee on Homelessness on the Homelessness Partnering Strategy," last modified March 27, 2019. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/publications-bulletins/advisory-committee-report.html

[29] All information in this section from: Government of British Columbia, *Together B.C. Poverty Reduction Strategy* (British Columbia: Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction), 2019.

[30] "Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction Mandate letter," Shane Simpson, accessed November 10, 2019, http://www.shanesimpson.ca/news/minister-social-development-and-poverty-reduction-mandate-le
"Minister of Housing and Municipal Affairs Mandate letter," accessed November 10, 2019 https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/premier-cabinet-mlas/minister-letter/robinson-mandate.pdf

To help guide this work, the province developed the Office of Homelessness Coordination with the mission of moving beyond reactive emergency responses to developing a coordinated systems approach to addressing homelessness. Inter-ministerial coordination is key to addressing youth homelessness. The province is committed to addressing the housing and support needs of people who are homeless and has announced the following actions:

- create 2,000 supportive modular homes (completed)

- create 2,700 supportive homes

- create 1,750 homes for Indigenous people, off- and on-reserve

- create 1,500 transition homes for women and children fleeing violence

- create 14,000 mixed-income homes

- increase eligibility and rates for the Rental Assistance Program and Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (completed)

- conduct the first provincial homelessness count (completed).[31]

Although these actions are promising, community advocates have been advocating for the B.C. government to develop a distinct plan to end youth homelessness as young peoples' needs cannot be collapsed into a broad plan to end adult homelessness. In 2017, Fred Ford and Katherine McParland co-founded the B.C. Coalition to End Youth Homelessness with the purpose of supporting the province to develop a distinct plan to end youth homelessness.[32] The Coalition consists of more than 45 members, including youth and service providers from communities across B.C., and was instrumental in supporting this project. It has prioritized this Youth First Voices report as the foundation of its ongoing work to educate government on the elements that need to be included within a plan to end youth homelessness.

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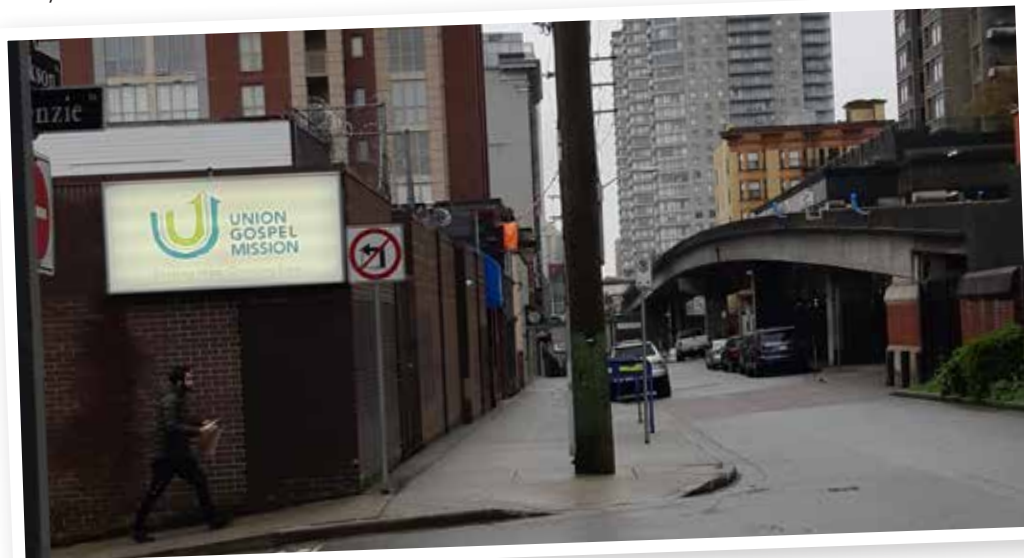
31   Office of Homelessness Coordination, email message to author, April 4, 2019
32   Katherine McParland & Fred Ford, "The B.C. Coalition to End Youth Homelessness Strategy to End Youth Homelessness," A Way Home Kamloops, Feb. 5, 2018, www.awayhomekamloops.com

METHODOLOGY

Project purpose

The purpose of this report is to elevate Youth First Voices (see text box) to inform a provincial plan to end youth homelessness in B.C. The voices of young people with lived expertise are the most important and must be heard by government and decision-makers to ensure the provincial plan to end youth homelessness is reflective of young peoples' distinct needs.

YOUTH FIRST VOICES

The term "Youth First Voices" means that youth who have lived experience with homelessness are honoured and recognized as having expertise. The term also recognizes the many other intersectional issues that shape lived expertise.[33] The B.C. Coalition to End Youth Homelessness Strategy emphasizes that it is crucial for youth who have experienced homelessness to have a prominent, leading voice in ending it. This founding principle was developed by youth with lived expertise of homelessness as a preferred term to describe their lived experience. The term Youth First Voices has roots with the Lived Expertise Committee for the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness that embraced the principle of *"nothing about us, without us."*[34] By recognizing that Youth First Voices have lived experiences that qualify as expertise, youth can find purpose in the painful experiences of being without a home, which can be used to create change for other young people. Youth First Voices is a core value that will be referred to throughout this report.

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[33] Municipality of Waterloo, *Considerations in the development of advisory groups of people with lived expertise of homelessness and or poverty* (Waterloo: Homeless Hub, 2012), www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/PROMISING.PRACTICE.MANUAL.FINAL.pdf.

[34] The Lived Expertise Advisory Council, *Nothing About Us Without Us: The Seven Principles of Leadership and Inclusion of People with Lived Expertise* (Homeless Hub, 2014), www.homelesshub.ca/resource/nothing-about-us-without-us-seven-principles-leadership-and-inclusion-people-lived

The plan must include inter-ministerial coordination and must clearly lay out the responsibility of the province to act as family for those youth who have none. For example, if the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) takes on the role of parent, youth need all the other ministries to act like aunts and uncles to support their journey through *"adulting."* [35] Youth have identified responsibilities and roles for 10 different government ministries that will be called on for action to end youth homelessness.

Project questions

THIS PROJECT ASKED YOUTH THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1 What are the pathways into youth homelessness and how can it be prevented?

2 What types of housing and support will help to end youth homelessness?

3 What are some of the systemic barriers and policies that perpetuate youth homelessness?

4 What should the government's role be to end youth homelessness?

5 What are youths' solutions or recommendations to end youth homelessness in B.C.?

Project approach

This project was developed based on principles of participatory action and is a generative study intending to gather information from youth with lived expertise to improve our understanding of youth homelessness. The core imperative of this work was for it to be *"First Voices-led"* to truly capture and elevate the voices of youth with lived expertise of homelessness. This type of methodology is essential as it provides a necessary authenticity to the information gathered by creating opportunities for youth who are often silenced to make their voices heard.

Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C.

To guide this work, project lead Katherine McParland worked with the B.C. Coalition to End Youth Homelessness to identify youth leaders from 12 different communities across B.C. including urban and rural areas. These youth leaders had diverse lived expertise of homelessness and its intersections with culture, age, care experience and sexual diversity. Their strength, resilience, passion and commitment to making a difference is what made this project possible. Initially, there were 13 youth leaders identified to carry out this work, but unfortunately some members continued to experience homelessness and housing insecurity and were unable to continue their work as part of the advisory team.

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[35] The term "adulting" began to emerge in social media in 2008. The Slang Dictionary refers to adulting as *"an informal term used to describe behaviour that is responsible and grown up ... involves meeting the mundane demands of independent living."* See "What does adulting mean?", Slang by Dictionary, 2019, www.dictionary.com/e/slang/adulting/.

An additional three youth leaders were later recruited to support the completion of the report.

In July 2018, Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C. met in Victoria to create youth forums that would be rolled out in their communities to inform this report. They designed an interactive youth forum outline and returned to their communities to develop local forums that would engage young people with lived expertise. The youth leaders were supported by local organizations within the B.C. Coalition to End Youth Homelessness to roll out the forums in their communities. Youth leaders used innovative strategies to encourage other youth to participate such as hitting the streets to invite youth, reaching out to existing groups or friends and engaging others on social media. An RCY Advocate and the project lead attended each youth forum to support and bear witness to the voices and expertise of young people. In June 2019, youth leaders met in Burnaby to review the draft themes and craft the messages from Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C. that appear in this report.

Youth forums

A total of 163 youth with lived expertise of homelessness participated in 13 forums between August 2018 and October 2018. The forums, held in 12 different B.C. communities, created safe places for youth to share their experiences and recommendations for change. The youth forums were full of emotion and participants showed a passion for sharing solutions to inform a provincial plan to end youth homelessness. Youth from surrounding areas travelled to the forums to participate and many forums continued past the planned three-hour mark, some lasting more than five hours.

In Victoria, the project lead participated in a radio interview prior to the forum and there was a large response from local youth. There was also larger attendance in more rural areas such as Nelson and Duncan, where youth may not have had as much opportunity to be consulted on their experiences of homelessness. Youth in rural areas felt an urgency to advocate for services as some rural communities do not even have a youth shelter. In larger urban areas such as Vancouver, attendance was smaller and youth leaders reasoned that it may have been because youth in the Metro Vancouver area have been over-researched without sufficient action being taken by government to respond. As one youth stated, *"There are lots of surveys, lots of meetings, but no real help."*

At some youth forums, service providers and other professionals including police showed up with a desire to share their perspective on how to respond to youth homelessness. As the focus of the forums was on youth voices, these other visitors were not allowed to participate. Their voices are not included in this report; however, their interest speaks to the importance of government engaging with these groups to inform the plan.

Q: HOW DO YOU MAGNIFY MARGINALIZED YOUTH VOICES?

A: COMMUNITY BY COMMUNITY.

16 YOUTH LEADERS

went to

12 COMMUNITIES

and talked with

163 YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERTISE.

Add

68 SURVEY RESPONDENTS

and the result is

11 SOLUTIONS TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Online surveys

After identifying the preliminary themes that arose during the youth forums, the project lead developed an online survey to give youth who had not attended a forum an opportunity to share their voices. The survey was promoted by the RCY and Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C. and a total of 68 youth participated:

Number of Forum Participants by Location	
Victoria	28
Nelson	27
Duncan	18
Abbotsford	18
Kamloops	15
Nanaimo	13
Kelowna	11
Vancouver (2 forums)	11
Vernon	9
Prince George	6
New Westminster	4
Surrey	3
Total Participants	**163**

Number of Participants by Age	Forum	Survey
Under 13	2	0
13 – 15	23	4
16 – 18	43	17
19 – 21	28	9
22 and older	46	35
No response	21	3
Total	**163**	**68**

About the youth we heard from

- 231 youth from across B.C. with current or past experiences of homelessness
    - 163 forum participants in 12 communities across B.C.
    - 68 survey respondents from across B.C. (43 per cent from the Lower Mainland)

- 47 per cent of forum participants and 26 per cent of survey respondents self-identified as Indigenous
- 5 per cent of forum participants and 7 per cent of survey respondents self-identified as non-binary or transgender
- 32 per cent of survey respondents self-identified as LGBTQ2S+
- 49 per cent of survey participants reported they had MCFD involvement in their life prior to experiencing homelessness

Survey respondents' experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity

- 45 per cent of youth were currently experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity
- 68 per cent of youth identified couch-surfing as their most recent experience of homelessness
- 22 per cent of youths' most recent experience of homelessness was staying on the streets/camping
- 84 per cent of youth reported having their first experience of homelessness before they turned 19, and 53 per cent before the age of 16.

Youth Survey: At what age did you first experience homelessness/ housing insecurity? (n=62)		
	Count	Percentage
Under 12	9	15%
13 – 15	24	39%
16 – 18	19	31%
19 – 21	6	10%
22 – 24	4	6%
Total responses	**62**	

Adds up to more than 100% because of rounding

FINDINGS

Report acknowledgement

As the reader, you may find some of the input and quotes that follow jarring or difficult to understand. Some of the comments and imagery shared by youth will be difficult for care providers and systems leaders to hear.

We acknowledge that many service providers are doing the best they can within the systems to which they are accountable. However, there is no doubt that the current supports and resources available to youth who are experiencing homelessness – or at risk of experiencing it – are not sufficient.

The youth advisory group for this report requested that the word "care" be removed from the term "foster-care system" because, in members' experiences, the care was missing. The youth who informed this report have endured some of the most challenging experiences in care, which in many cases contributed to their experience of homelessness.

However, we acknowledge that these experiences do not represent the experiences of all youth in care. Some youth have had very positive experiences in the foster care system, including loving foster parents who have safe-guarded them from experiences such as homelessness.

PATHWAYS TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

MESSAGE FROM YOUTH AGAINST YOUTH HOMELESSNESS B.C.

All pathways to youth homelessness are interconnected and impact each other. We want to highlight that youth are not being listened to and that this is a primary factor in creating their pathway onto the street. We feel that people listen to the parents more than the youth and it often feels as if kids are supposed to be seen and not heard. We are here to change that. If we, as youth, don't feel listened to and supported, how are we supposed to trust adults? Our life experiences have already taught us that we can't trust adults, which is why we have had to become independent too soon.

We have had experiences where our families have kicked us out and then have told social workers that we could return home, even though we couldn't, which resulted in no help from government. One youth's experience was that they just left MCFD and walked down the road in the snow. Another youth shared an experience of their social worker denying a Youth Agreement and pressuring them to leave their home community for treatment or live in an unsafe group home where the food was locked up. This youth chose the streets. It took many of us years to get on a Youth Agreement. We were denied multiple times and were couch-surfing in order to survive. The process for Youth Agreements and Agreements with Young Adults should be standardized and not based on individual social worker discretion. Youth Agreements should be an accessible solution to prevent and end youth homelessness.

In our experience, if you are a difficult kid, MCFD doesn't want to deal with you, even though you need more help than a normal kid. Being a youth in care can feel like being in the ocean and literally drowning. You are splashing water and screaming for help. MCFD is sitting on the dock with a floatee and throws it, but the rope is not long enough to reach you. The connection is not being made. The ministry is telling you to swim to the floatee, but you can't. This is how youth fall through the cracks.

The foster system needs to change. We are in situations where we need support to know our rights. Indigenous youth are experiencing racism and intergenerational trauma in the foster system, which we see as a modern day residential school system within which youth are losing vital connections to their cultures.

continued

Having unsafe family homes and unsafe foster homes are very interconnected for some of us. We may have to move because of unsafe foster homes or our families may not be included in our care planning. Sometimes foster parents don't care or meet our needs and may only want to keep us because of the money instead of the care. We feel foster parents should help us get to appointments, including driving us to see our counsellors, and should also be trained in how to comfort. Kids are scared and don't know what to expect! We feel like we have to be fully independent while in a foster home. We wonder – where is all the money going and who are the right people to be foster parents?

Group homes can be unsafe and there are sometimes bad people who can be bad influences. We are trying to find a connection and someone to trust. When you age out, the system pretends like they are helping you but, when you need them, they are nowhere to be seen. We lose all of our supports. We believe that the foster system is an outdated system that doesn't work for all youth.

There is an overarching theme from youth in this report of the need for emotional and natural supports to create a safety net that will prevent youth homelessness. We need emotional support from our social workers. Situations such as the social worker from Kelowna who allegedly stole money from youth experiencing homelessness concern us. We need workers with lived experience as there should be *"nothing about us without us."*

Addiction and mental health are huge pathways into youth homelessness that we can relate to. Substance use can be a coping mechanism to calm our minds. Everyone is secretive about mental health and it takes time to gain trust to share what's going on. People judge based on physical appearance and we feel we are shut down on that basis. We know there are not enough adequate services for mental health in B.C. and youth are being left to their own devices without the support they need to succeed.

Finally, unaffordable housing is a major issue. How can a youth struggling with all of these other pathways afford or secure stable housing? Not enough is being done to get more housing or shorten wait lists for youth. The adult system has specific funding for housing. Why aren't we focusing on youth as well? We need housing and coordinated access systems specifically tailored for youth.

Now is the time for change. These pathways need to be addressed or youth will continue to experience homelessness.

There is no time to wait.

Youth with lived expertise shared that, like a river, there are many interconnected pathways that lead to youth homelessness. The dominant currents that youth voiced as being the most significant pathways into homelessness were:

1) **unsafe family home experiences**

2) **unsafe and non–responsive foster system**

3) **addiction and/or mental health issues**

4) **affordability crisis and lack of affordable housing**

5) **discrimination and stigma.**

These pathways are the result of a fragmented system that is not responsive to the distinct housing and support needs of youth. Forum participants and survey respondents emphasized these pathways in hopes that government will be responsive and adopt strategies that will prevent youth homelessness.

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES

Youth participants in the online survey were asked to identify the main factors impacting their first experience of homelessness or housing insecurity. Youth were able to select more than one response, therefore percentages below total greater than 100.

Overall, unsafe family home experiences and issues with mental heath and substance use were the most frequently reported factors leading to homelessness. Among youth who indicated that MCFD had been involved in their life prior to homelessness, nearly one-third reported their foster placement and/or aging out as a factor.

Youth Survey: Which issues led to your first experience of homelessness/housing insecurity? (n=68)

Unsafe family home experiences	57%
Substance use or mental health problems	40%
Not eligible for a Youth Agreement or other income supports	26%
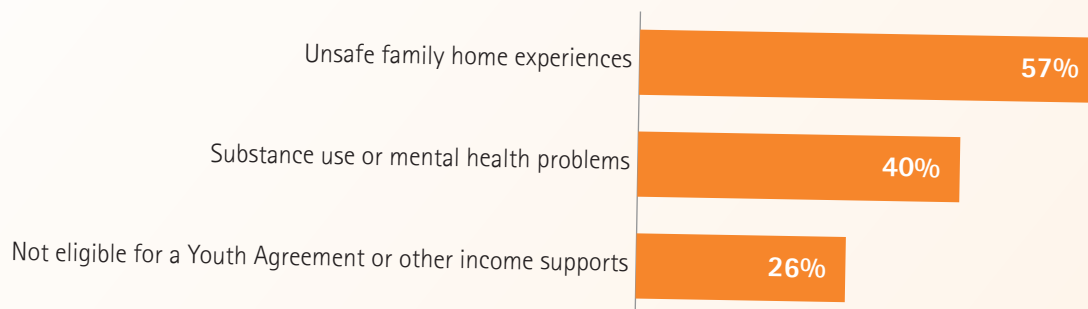
continued

For youth with MCFD involvement
Youth Survey: Which issues led to your first experience of homelessness/housing insecurity? (n=33)

Issue	Percentage
Unsafe family home experiences	76%
Substance use or mental health problems	45%
Not eligible for a Youth Agreement or other income supports	33%
Inappropriate or unsafe foster home placements	30%
Aging out (reported for youth 19 year and older)	29%
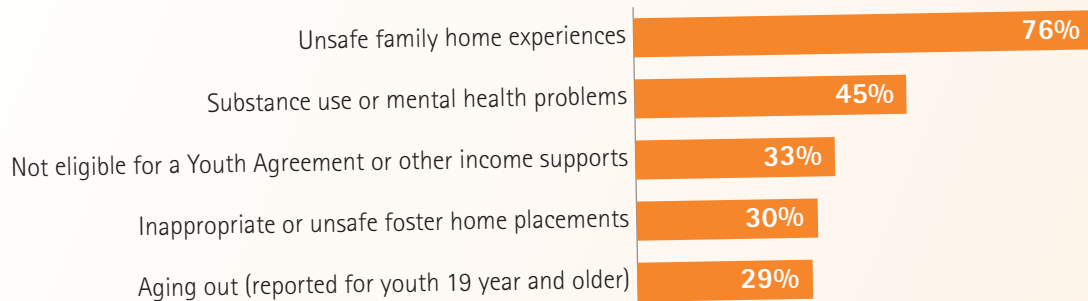
1) Unsafe family home experiences

A key pathway into homelessness identified by youth was an unsafe family home, including experiences of abuse, neglect, conflict and intergenerational trauma.

YOUTH VOICES

"Is an unsafe family home safer than the streets?"

"What are we doing to support families before apprehension? Instead of paying for foster homes, help families heal together. Youth in care end up homeless because [they are] in [an] unsafe foster home ... [They] end up on the street because [they] don't feel safe. This could be prevented."

At 12 forums, youth reported fleeing abusive parents and unsafe family home experiences including sexual abuse, exploitation, emotional abuse and domestic violence. These situations put youth in the difficult position of either remaining in abusive home environments ruled by adult caregivers or leaving and balancing the challenges of never having lived independently and not having anywhere safe to go.

Forum participants also reported experiences of family conflict such as being kicked out, family breakdowns and a lack of support to keep the family together resulting in youth homelessness. Youth pointed out that there is a lack of prevention supports such as family mediation to reconnect and preserve familial relationships.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Family Reconnect

Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth – a non-profit organization based in Toronto – developed the Family Reconnect Program in 2001. The program is designed to prevent and end youth homelessness by promoting and supporting family connections for youth.[36] The program can provide family mediation to support a youth to remain at home or reconnect back to family if they have already left home. Sometimes returning home is not the best option for the youth or family, and the youth may be supported through this program to obtain their own housing. Youth are also supported to preserve familial relationships as natural connections have a significant impact on improving outcomes for youth. Eva's Initiatives has developed an online toolkit that provides information on implementing this program and on expected outcomes for youth: https://www.evas.ca/family-reconnect-toolkit/

[36] Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth, "Family Reconnect Toolkit," last modified 2016, https://www.evas.ca/family-reconnect-toolkit/.

YOUTH VOICES

"My mom is homeless so I can't rely on her when I am homeless."

"I have been couch-surfing since I was a baby."

"Parents abuse drugs and alcohol and put it before the kids."

"Young people [are] having to act like a parent to their parents [who are] experiencing mental health and homelessness."

Young people spoke about homelessness being an intergenerational experience. In particular, Indigenous youth spoke about intergenerational trauma related to residential schools that has influenced generational experiences of homelessness. Other youth described their parents' experiences of housing instability and poverty, which affected their ability to parent. This required some youth to take on caregiver roles, while others were exposed to negative family experiences such as being involved in a gang or having a life of crime passed down to them.

Other youth spoke about the negative impacts of being exposed to their parents' substance use and mental health issues, resulting in abuse, neglect, having to take on a parental role themselves or leaving home.

Youth who participated in the forums identified that investigation responses from MCFD to these unsafe family home experiences were often insufficient and that responses from teachers and social workers when youth disclosed abuse was limited. A common theme shared by youth was not feeling listened

YOUTH VOICES

"During investigations, grown-ups act differently in front of grown-ups [the social worker] and then yell [at] and abuse children behind closed doors."

"MCFD listens more to grown-ups. Kids are supposed to be seen and not heard."

"MCFD investigations are pre-planned. If a youth is looking for help, parents won't admit they kicked the kids out and MCFD says: 'Go back home.'"

"You can't get into foster care if your parents [say they] are willing to take you back home."

"[MCFD] believes the parents more than the youth."

"Nothing does more to break a youth's trust of ANY support system [as when] they reach out for help and they are made to feel no one believes them. No youth would willingly want to put themselves into [a position of] vulnerability or risk of harm without a good reason."

"More has to be done and taken seriously for youth experiencing conflict, abuse, trauma. When I disclosed being abused at 15 with in-person proof, it was minimized, dismissed and laughed at by my social workers at the time."

to during the investigation process. They felt their parents were afforded more credibility. In many cases, youth said their voices were not respected or taken seriously and some youth said they were even accused of lying. Young people also spoke about experiences where parents put on an act in front of social workers resulting in the youth not getting the support they needed from MCFD.

A common theme that youth reported when discussing poor investigation processes was the response to family conflict, which in many cases led to homelessness. Youth reported that family conflict was minimized during investigations and some youth were told they could return home only if they follow the rules. Forum participants provided many examples of when MCFD checked with the parents who would say the youth could return home, when in reality the youth could not or it was unsafe to do so. As a result, the youth said MCFD refused to take them into care or provide any supports.

Youth said this results in them being left without support and increases their risk of experiencing homelessness and violence.

2) Unsafe and non-responsive foster care system

The forums revealed that those youth who are assessed as being in *"need of protection"* and who are brought into the foster system may experience further harm or have experiences that *"teach them how to be homeless"* in the future. The very system that is designed to protect youth sometimes causes further harm. There are three significant foster care pathways to youth homelessness, including:

A) Inappropriate or unsafe foster home or group home placements

At all 13 forums, youth cited inappropriate and unsafe placements in the foster system most often as their pathway to homelessness with 47 such responses. Youth said they were removed from their own family home – which was deemed unsafe – only to be placed into

YOUTH VOICES

> "It was so bad I can't even talk about it. I want them to burn in hell."
>
> "Your safeguard is running away."
>
> "I'd rather be homeless."

> "Kids are not educated about what to do if it is a bad home."
>
> "You need to be supported to advocate for rights."

> "Do what we say or you don't have a place to stay."
>
> "Everything you do is controlled [which is] not always for the best."

another environment in which they were re-traumatized or abused. In some cases, youth said oversight of foster homes and group homes was lacking and that they found themselves facing oppression and discrimination in a place that was supposed to be a home for them.

Many youth said they were unaware of their rights and, in the absence of that knowledge, made decisions with their feet by running away from the system that had failed them, despite the fact that they had nowhere safe to go.

Forum participants reported that the foster system sometimes responds to youth running away by issuing an AWOL alert. This can result in overexposure to systems of control such as police and further marginalize youth in the system who are fleeing inappropriate foster care environments. Youth spoke about finding that their placements had been given away without notice because they had run away when a better alternative, in their view, would have been to provide them with additional supports. One youth said that her AWOL news articles still existed on the Internet even though she had aged out of care a few years earlier:

"I stayed on the street cause I hated it so much. I was AWOL all the time, [a] missing person. If you Google me, my missing picture comes up. This stays on your record even though I am not under 19 anymore."

A common theme youth raised was having inappropriate placements that did not meet their needs with strict expectations and unreasonable rules. For example, some youth gave examples of punitive responses such as being locked out of their foster home for being late for curfew and the foster parents not answering the door although they were home.

Youth spoke about feeling institutionalized and experiences of having services and medication forced on them instead of receiving support. Other youth spoke about the pressure to adapt to different foster home environments to fit in: Said one youth: *"There was a boy who was treated like a doll. The foster parent dressed and cut his hair the way the foster parent wanted – to fit their mold."*

Many youth reported negative impacts of having food kept locked up in their placement. An Indigenous youth pointed out the cultural implications:

"In Native homes, you go to the fridge and help yourself. In foster homes, you can't. For example, 5 p.m. is dinner. [You] can't help yourself to food in the fridge, although it's family tradition to look in the fridge. This is part of culture too!"

YOUTH VOICES

"It's not really like your home."

"People [are] not fostering out of care, just for a pay cheque."

"I am tired of paid relationships."

"Foster care feels transient, [like you're] just a part of the system. [You're] not an individual and don't have a say in your future."

"[You] pack [your] s### in garbage bags and feel like garbage."

Many youth reported that some foster placement options were devoid of love or a sense of belonging and, in their view, were not responsive to the youths' needs. In some cases, young people spoke about a lack of support to stay connected to their family and culture. Some youth expressed that they didn't feel welcome in the placement and the difficulty of adjusting to a structure so drastically different from how they grew up. Youth spoke about how it is scary to move in with strangers and an unfamiliar environment where they may experience isolation and loneliness without enough support.

Additionally, youth spoke about the negative impacts of poorly planned transitions from foster home to foster home, resulting in a lack of stability or permanency. In some cases, youth said they were placed in hotels or youth shelters as a resource between placements. Research

shows that placement instability negatively impacts youths' well-being and identity formation, resulting in disconnection from relationships and an increased likelihood of aging out without a social network.[37] At the forums, youth spoke about this disconnection and experiences of feeling kicked out for no reason with a short amount of time to pack and the need to adjust to a new home with different rules or structures.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Lu'ma Native Housing Society

Lu'ma Native Housing Society, based out of Vancouver, operates the Aboriginal Child Village. This is a mixed-use 24 unit housing complex with 13 units dedicated to Indigenous youth in care and three units to youth aging out of care in partnership with Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society. Indigenous youth in care are given their own apartments and their foster parents move in with them. If there is a breakdown in relationships, the youth remains in the apartment and the foster parents move out, avoiding a traumatic move for the youth in care. Additionally, as there is a cluster of housing units for other Indigenous youth in care, they form peer connections and a sense of belonging through the Youth Mentorship Program. This program provides Indigenous youth in care with housing stability and permanence. lnhs.ca[38]

[38] BC Housing, "Indigenous Housing Series - Lu'ma Native Housing Society," BC Housing, https://www.bchousing.org/research-centre/library/indigenous-peoples/bk-case-study-luma-native-housing-society&sortType=sortByDate.

YOUTH VOICES

"Foster parents starve you."

"Why do they put me in an unsafe home?"

"[In] some placements, [I was] not allowed to speak until spoken to."

At eight of the 13 forums, some of the youth spoke about experiencing abuse in their foster homes from foster parents or siblings.

Some youth felt there wasn't enough room in *"safe foster families."* They were also concerned about a lack of oversight, enforcement and check-ins on caregivers, and cited a need for better screening including ensuring that foster parents are not using substances.

[37] Tonia Stott & Nora Gustavsson, "Balancing Permanency and Stability for Youth in Foster Care," *Children and Youth Services Review 32*, no. 4 (April 2010): 619-625.

YOUTH VOICES

> "If [your] needs aren't met in the foster home, you should be given another option."
>
> "Sometimes I'd rather be on the street than the [foster] home."

> "People don't listen to youth when they report: [They] listen to hear, [they] don't listen to respond."
>
> "Social workers communicate with foster parents more than with their youth and tend to accuse the youth of lying."
>
> "Is MCFD incentivizing the wrong people to be foster parents? Going after them because there is a shortage?"

Another common theme shared by youth was that there was a poor response when they reported concerns to their social worker.

Many youth felt they didn't have a voice or choice in what type of placement option would meet their needs and that their perspective was minimized.

Youth forum participants were aware of bureaucratic limitations and identified social workers' caseloads and busy-ness as main reasons for their lack of communication and *"hands-off approach."* Youth said they need emotional support from their social worker and think the adults in their lives should be accountable to ensure this is happening. Youth did not find the lack of support and oversight by social workers acceptable and recommended that the ministry take the necessary steps and provide the necessary resources to ensure foster home placements are safe and appropriate from the perspective of young people.

PROMISING PRACTICE:

Youth Advisory Council

In September 2015, MCFD formed the Provincial Director of Child Welfare's Youth Advisory Council. This included 15 diverse youth in and from care from across B.C. The council's purpose is to *"inform, discuss and provide recommendations to the Provincial Director of Child Welfare and other program areas and working groups regarding services and policies impacting children, youth and families."* [39] The Youth Advisory Council elevates youth voice with decision-makers and infuses the ministry's policy development with youth perspectives. This group is inspiring and should be built upon. Similar structures should be developed in other areas of government to ensure youth voice is always heard.

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[39] Provincial Director of Child Welfare, *Youth Advisory Council: The First Year Report* (British Columbia: Ministry of Children and Family Development), 2016.

DEFINITIONS

When youth are experiencing homelessness and in need of protection, MCFD can respond with a Youth Services Response such as a Youth Agreement[40] instead of bringing a youth into care.

Youth Agreement: A legal agreement between a youth and the MCFD in cases of extreme need … or in need of protection. Youth are assessed by social workers to determine eligibility and are asked to create a plan for independence. Youth live independently and receive support from MCFD as they build life skills. This program is a protection response that MCFD may take for youth ages 16 to 18 who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Independent Living: Youth in care may access the Independent Living program as part of their transition planning out of care. Youth transition from family caregiver homes or group homes and live independently in their own rental accommodations or housing programs with MCFD support until they turn 19.

40 "Youth Agreements," Government of British Columbia, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children/youth-agreements.

YOUTH VOICES

" The system is not set up for [youth] 16- to 18-years-old. There is not a lot of support for this age group as they are not children or adults. "

" At a certain age they won't put you into foster care. "

" [There are] too many hoops to jump through for a Youth Agreement. "

" Youth Agreements can take over a year to get on. "

B) Significant barriers to accessing a Youth Agreement

Young people gave clear examples of how child welfare policies can cause homelessness. In particular, they singled out systemic barriers to accessing support through MCFD between the ages of 16 and 18.

Within the Youth Agreement assessment process, young people reported a lack of flexibility and unrealistic eligibility criteria, in addition to poor communication and a lack of support to find housing or meet their support needs. A Youth Agreement is a contractual experience that requires a youth to prove their eligibility rather than a recognition that a basic income should be a human right for young people without a home. Youth who participated in the forums felt that adults need to recognize that they may need support to secure housing before being able to work on the goals of education and employment against which Youth Agreement eligibility is assessed.

Youth highlighted the intensive, bureaucratic processes required to access a Youth Agreement, during which time no immediate emergency financial help is provided:

> "[We need] prioritized financial aid for youth [similar to Jordan's Principle]. No door is the wrong door for accessing youth services. Financial aid should be given, even if temporarily, to ensure youth don't have to experience exploitation."

Young people reported variances in social workers' discretion about who is or isn't a fit for a Youth Agreement. Instead of what youth described as arbitrary decision-making, they emphasized the need for a flexible system that is responsive to what each youth voices as the best fit for their own needs. In some cases, youth reported being denied access to a Youth Agreement for *"not being mature enough."* This is problematic for youth who are AWOL from their foster homes and who, if provided with flexible supports in a timely manner, could avoid homelessness. Said one youth: *"I was too young for a Youth Agreement, and after two years of couch-surfing, I qualified."*

Conversely, other youth shared experiences of being told they were *"too mature"* because of their independent experience of homelessness and that they should return home or apply for underage income assistance.

YOUTH VOICES

"My Youth Agreement was declined because emotional abuse is not the same as physical abuse so you have to work and go to school and look for housing."

"'If your parents aren't hitting or trying to kill you, we can't help.' [This is] MCFD's response to some youth seeking support [who] end up couch-surfing and homeless."

"They can cancel your Youth Agreement immediately."

"[There's] not enough support on a Youth Agreement. [MCFD] ended up taking away [my] Youth Agreement for smoking pot."

In some cases, youth reported that their particular family experiences were not validated. They said they were told they were not eligible for a Youth Agreement and should return home, resulting in homelessness.

Some youth reported that, when they were denied Youth Agreements, they had to prioritize survival activities such as finding employment over developmental milestones such as education. Forcing youth to manage these responsibilities required them to shift their focus from education to survival, which impacts their future quality of life. Said one youth: *"[I was] told [I] can't get a Youth Agreement without being in school, [but I] can't get to school without being on a Youth Agreement."*

Those youth who were successful in accessing Youth Agreements reported rigid expectations to keep their funding. In some cases, youth said that when they were cut off Youth Agreements, it was without notice and with no other options for income or a foster home, ultimately resulting in homelessness. Some youth were told to apply for underage income assistance, which represents another system transition that leaves youth without income and potentially homeless while jumping through another set of eligibility hoops.

ON THEIR OWN: SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE

In 2014, RCY released a report on the issue of youth aging out of care and the lack of aftercare support resulting in negative outcomes. Seven pillars of support were identified to support youth aging out of care:[41]

1) **Relationships:** All youth aging out need at least one supportive relationship in their life. Youth need a variety of healthy relationships including with peers, adults, mentors and birth families. These relationships form support networks that help prevent youth homelessness.

2) **Education:** The education outcomes of youth in care can be impacted by many traumas, including the effects of abuse and disruption resulting from being moved around within the system. Youth should not have to navigate being independent until their education is complete, so they can focus on school instead of bills and other "adulting" skills.

3) **Housing:** As youth aging out of care are at risk of homelessness, youth need access to safe and stable housing. Youth should not age out without appropriate housing.

4) **Life skills:** Most youth generally learn life skills from their parents; youth in care need support to develop these adulting skills at a young age.

5) **Identity:** As youth aging out are going through a key developmental stage of understanding who they are, they should be supported to form their identity. For Indigenous youth, connection to culture is critical for understanding who they are.

6) **Youth Engagement:** Youth aging out need to have their voice heard and have opportunities for self-determination and to develop leadership skills.

7) **Emotional Healing:** Youth aging out need services to be provided with an understanding of the impact of trauma. Youth need access to mental health supports and opportunities to heal.

The foundation for these pillars is financial support. Youth aging out need the same benefits that youth with family privilege receive. (see text box on page 43)
https://rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/reports/monitoring-reports/on-their-own-examining-the-needs-of-b-c-youth-as-they-leave-government-care/

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[41] Representative for Children and Youth, *On Their Own: Examining the Needs of B.C. Youth As They Leave Government Care* (British Columbia: Representative for Children and Youth), April 2014.

YOUTH VOICES

"My [19th] birthday wasn't my birthday. I was homeless. Growing up in a group home, you get too comfortable with people doing things for you. Then you don't have it and you're not used to doing it yourself. When you get kicked out of care, you think people will help."

"19 is too young to age out. 21 or 25 would be better."

"[We need] a class just for aging out of care."

"Start life skills at age 16. Set them up in housing before kicking them out."

"[We need] people who actually care."

"Why do [they] push [us] out the door? [We] need support with the simple things ... so we don't have to go back to what we know."

C) Aging out of foster care and a lack of aftercare support

At all forums, youth identified the abrupt transition to independence and the trauma of aging out of care as a key pathway into homelessness. Many youth said that there is a lack of preparation and transition planning for youth who are aging out. In some cases, youth gave examples of the abrupt transition from a restricted placement to independence with no follow-up support.

In some cases, youth reported that they experienced homelessness when they aged out. Youth said they struggled with accessing housing for many reasons including discrimination due to their experience in care, having a lack of references and lacking a co-signer. Because of their lack of preparation, youth felt pushed into adulthood and some youth cited pressure to find a job instead of completing their education. Said one youth: *"[There is] nowhere to go when you age out."*

Some youth gave examples of not being provided with basic transition necessities such as disability assessments prior to their 19th birthday, leading to a glaring gap in needed supports. *"Not everyone gets an aging-out planning meeting,"* said one forum participant.

Additionally, many youth reported that they did not have the life skills or support to live independently after their 19th birthday. They simply weren't ready yet. Youth said they needed support to gain the life skills required to live on their own, including how to pay bills, budget, cook, clean, go to school and balance their lives. In the previous B.C. school curriculum, the course CAPP/Planning 10 included life skills, but they are no longer included in the replacement course of Career-Life Education and Career-Life Connections. Youth said they did not learn these adulting skills from their parents, and needed planned ways to receive this education from their government parent.

YOUTH VOICES

"Like, I was taken care of my whole life, but hadn't been taught any life skills. By the time I did move out, I felt like a zoo animal being released out into the wild."

A common theme youth raised was the detrimental impact of the abrupt loss at the age of 19 of all supports, including their social worker and foster family. Said one youth: *"[My] foster home [was] saying they could keep me forever. Empty promises aging out."*

For some young people, the desire for family connections was so strong, it led them to re-connect with parents who were not healthy and who, in fact, were negative supports. For some youth, this meant that they ended up taking on a parental role themselves. *"My mom is living with me because she is homeless,"* said one youth.

Youth reported feeling disconnected and many young people said they don't feel they have a community of supports that will prevent homelessness as they transition. Youth without family privilege said they are lacking ongoing wraparound supports that will prevent homelessness.

FAMILY PRIVILEGE

John R. Seita, a former youth in care, developed the concept of family privilege in 2001.[42] This term was developed based on Peggy McIntosh's 1997 concept of white privilege that identifies the status that people who belong to the dominant culture experience from unearned privilege. Seita refers to family privilege as a type of human capital that is key for youth development and identifies many invisible benefits that people experience if they are part of a stable family. Youth in or from care or youth who are leaving unhealthy or abusive family environments are at a disadvantage as they don't have a sense of belonging or a built-in support network that guards against issues such as homelessness. Youth without family privilege may also not have the opportunity to learn critical life skills that are usually passed down from family members and that support housing sustainability. Young people who are without family privilege need wraparound supports that enable natural connections and a sense of belonging and also create permanency.

[42] John R. Seita. "Growing up without family privilege," *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 10, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 130-132.

YOUTH VOICES

"There should be a second part to foster care."

"[There should be] more one-to-one workers helping you get through it."

Participating youth said the most common issue related to aging out that leads to homelessness is the fact that MCFD's aftercare program, Agreements with Young Adults (AYA), does not work for the majority. Youth felt AYA should present an opportunity to prevent homelessness for those aging out, but needs to be re-imagined to ensure *"comprehensive and universal supports"* for all youth from the foster system. MCFD reports that only 14.5 per cent (1,078) of 7,450 former youth in care who are eligible for this program are accessing it. A key issue is that AYA only benefits the highest functioning youth who are ready to access post-secondary education, something many youth aging out are not ready to do. Many, especially the most vulnerable youth at risk of homelessness, require holistic supports in order to stabilize before accessing education and do not meet the criteria for aftercare support. Said one youth: *"When you age out of the system, you do not meet certain criteria for support and you just get dropped."*

Similar to a Youth Agreement, youth felt that an AYA can be paternalistic and contractual. One youth gave an example of experiencing homelessness as a result of being kicked off AYA during a summer break. Although that policy has been amended to prevent this from happening by providing year-round funding, youth shared examples of abrupt discharges off AYAs and they criticized the lack of tangible support for youth accessing the program.

Although AYA criteria has been amended to include life skills programs, there is no funding provided through MCFD for organizations to deliver these prescriptive programs.[43] This results in many youth not being eligible to access aftercare programs as they do not exist in their communities. Youth felt that AYA is infused with problematic ideas around *"deserving youth"* versus those who are perceived as *"undeserving"* of support and shared their feelings that the program needs to be inclusive of all youth who age out of care.

HOW MANY DESIGNATED AYA LIFE SKILLS PROGRAMS ARE THERE IN B.C.?

There are 20 approved life skills programs in the province, 14 of which are operational.[44]

HOW MANY YOUTH WHO ARE ELIGIBLE FOR AYA ACCESS IT?

As of Dec. 31, 2018, 14.5 per cent (1,078) of eligible youth had open AYA files. This is compared to the 7,450 youth between the ages of 19 and 26 who were eligible.[44]

[44] Ministry of Children and Family Development, email communication, July 8, 2019

[43] MCFD writes that "There is no funding provided. However, non-profits can apply with MCFD to become an approved life skills provider so that young adults can access AYA for that purpose." Personal Correspondence, MCFD, September 3, 2019

3) Addictions and/or mental health issues

At all 13 forums, youth reported addiction and mental health issues as key pathways into homelessness. Youth talked about addiction being a form of self-harm, a concept that is supported by research around substance use as a coping mechanism for trauma and emotional pain.[45] Once homeless, substance use can be a way to cope or survive and youth are stuck in a cycle. One youth described *"feeling so rooted in your trauma that you are afraid of anything else. It becomes your identity."*

Forum participants spoke about the impact of addiction and mental health issues in their homes and family or caregivers sometimes not knowing how to provide support. Said one youth: *"My parents weren't there when I needed them ... so I [turned] to drugs to survive."*

Youth reported there is a lack of support and services for young people facing addiction or mental health issues, which can result in youth becoming homeless. Youth face many complex barriers to get into detox or programs they need – such as rwait lists, costs and eligibility requirements including age. Youth gave examples of needing to be off substances to access treatment, but finding no youth-specific detox beds existing in their community. In some cases, youth said they didn't know where to go for help and couldn't get the supports they needed in their own communities. This was especially emphasized in rural and remote areas. Said one youth: *"I wish I had known about where I could get help when this was happening to me, but I didn't know help even existed beyond going back into foster care/group home."*

In some cases, youth said the lack of a harm reduction approach to substance use in program housing leads to youth experiencing homelessness.

YOUTH VOICES

"You need a safe place to use. It is not safe to use in an alley.**"**

""I chose to be homeless so I can use.**"**

It is important to emphasize that this pathway may not necessarily be a youth's own substance use or mental health issue. In some cases, youth said they were vulnerable to roommates using substances or having their place taken over as a place for other people to use. Youth who are living independently can struggle to keep their housing and may be evicted because of behaviours resulting from substance use or mental health issues.

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45 Representative for Children and Youth, Time to Listen: Youth Voices on Substance Use (British Columbia: Representative for Children and Youth), 2018. See also Gabor Maté, *In the realm of hungry ghosts: Close encounters with addiction* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009).

YOUTH VOICES

❝The crowd you hang with buys booze and constantly shows up. People are happy to have a place to go use. People keep showing up and just keep bringing people.❞

❝You may have all the motivation but can't keep your house because of addiction.❞

❝Parents don't have enough money for you.❞

❝[I was] born into poverty.❞

❝Not enough money from the government, you have to work and still starve.❞

❝[The Youth Agreement] and AYA need to be updated … [the] shelter [amount] is NOT enough. A lot of homeless youth are off the grid, not going through the system, hiding. No one knows they're struggling if they're scared to ask for help, until it's too late.❞

4) Affordability crisis and lack of affordable housing

Youth identified a lack of funds and the affordable housing crisis as a key pathway into homelessness. For youth still at home, a parent may not be able to *"afford them"* and a lack of family housing may split up families.

Youth who are independent of caregivers are hit especially hard, as they can be struggling with income and face barriers to accessing adequate income supports to afford housing. Youth reported that MCFD income supports through the Youth Agreement and AYA programs are not adequate to secure sustainable housing. Policy and practice diverge widely as monthly financial support amounts range from $500 to $900 based on local market rates with flexibility to be increased through approval by MCFD's Director of Operations. These shelter amounts are not always made available to youth and young people can struggle to find, safe appropriate housing.

Those youth who are able to secure income assistance have limited access to housing as they only receive $375 for shelter, which is woefully inadequate for most communities. This shelter rate puts young people in precarious situations where they are forced to look for shared accommodations in which they may be exploited or unsafe. There are zero market housing options available for this shelter rate and, if youth don't have a fixed address, they won't even receive this amount. When they find work to try to supplement the shelter rates so they can secure housing, they are monetarily penalized, a practice that allows no opportunities to get ahead. On a monthly basis, youth can earn up to $400 through employment and, after that point, earnings are clawed back off their paycheque dollar-for-dollar.[46] This contrasts with disability benefits rules, by which a person can now earn up to $12,000 per year without any clawback of earnings.

Some youth have no income at all, which puts them in a vulnerable space for exploitation. Youth also reported that not having government income can impact their mental health, as they have to work harder to survive. Youth reported systemic barriers that prevented them from securing income to access housing, resulting in homelessness. For example,

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46 The provincial government announced in Budget 2020 that earnings exemptions will be increased.

YOUTH VOICES

"Need a source of income and [that can be] hard ... there are lots of hoops."

"The government owns the Aboriginal peoples' land and homes and refuses to fix the houses so youth leave the reserve because they can't live in the homes."

youth may be bounced between income assistance and MCFD systems trying to receive crucial income support. Some youth over 19 reported experiencing previous barriers to accessing income assistance such as the two-year independence rule, which required that they had been apart from their parents for two years.[47] Although this policy has recently been changed, the youth who participated in the forums identified it as an issue that impacted them in the past. Young people who are unable to work because of disabilities face a fragmented system to apply for the designation of Person with Disabilities. It has been reported by youth and service providers that they face wait times of up to three months and that being denied on their first application is the norm.

Even youth who were employed reported affordability challenges in securing or sustaining housing as most youth only have access to minimum-wage, part-time or casual positions that experience seasonal fluctuations in hours, resulting in unstable income. Youth spoke about barriers to accessing employment insurance or medical benefits when only working part-time.
Said one youth: *"[You] can't afford rent even when working."*

Some youth participants from rural areas and reserves said they were faced with the difficult decision to leave their communities in order to find housing.[48]

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[47]   The provincial government released its first ever Poverty Reduction Strategy, Together B.C., in 2018, after the research for this report was conducted. This strategy waived the two-year independence rule in order for youth to be eligible for income assistance. This was a milestone for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness as it reduced barriers to youth accessing income.

[48]   The B.C. government is the first in Canada to invest provincial housing funds into on-reserve housing. This milestone was announced by government in June 2018.

SUPPORT RATES FOR YOUTH AGREEMENTS

Monthly Support Amounts:	
Basic shelter	$500 to $950/mo
Telephone	$25 to $50/mo
Hydro & other utilities	$100/mo
Basic support for an individual with no dependents	Up to $533
Clothes	$73/mo
Local transportation	Bus pass cost

Limited or Discretionary Support Amounts:	
Security deposit	$250 to $350 (2X only)
Diet allowance	$300 (discretionary)
Other transportation/travel	$500 (1X only)
Start-up costs	$500-$1000 (1X only)

Other discretionary fees include medical costs up to $750 or $550 for other discretionary costs as approved by a social worker,[49] as well as $5,500 once per school year for educational fees.[50]

By comparison, the current support rate for AYA is up to $1,250 per month, and is income-tested, similar to the Persons with Disabilities rate through income assistance.

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[49] Discretionary fees are categorized as exceptional funding and can be used to cover fees associated with obtaining rehabilitation, treatment support or other emergency medical or dental not covered by MSP. Discretionary fees require the approval of a Director of Operations. MCFD communication, Sept. 2019.

[50] A youth can access the AYA funds for education if they are not eligible for the Youth Education Assistance Fund (YEAF) bursary or Tuition Waiver Program, or if the funding through YEAF does not cover all the education costs. However, tuition is not covered if a youth is receiving the tuition waiver. MCFD communication, Sept. 2019.

5) Discrimination and stigma

Youth at all the forums identified discrimination and stigma as creating a significant pathway into youth homelessness that can force youth to leave unsafe homes and create barriers to them securing housing.

YOUTH VOICES

"I was kicked out after coming out."

"I ran away from my group home as I experienced discrimination for being gay."

"Transphobia is very prominent in the peer group."

"[Communities] need rainbows to show [youth] they're safe."

LGBTQ2S+ youth face a lot of stigma and discrimination that can perpetuate homelessness. In some cases, youth reported that it can be unsafe to stay in their home or youth may be disowned because of their sexual identity.

Because of such significant discrimination, youth shared that they were at risk for exploitation, abuse and bullying. Young people further reported that trans youth, in particular, face many barriers, especially in smaller communities.

Youth highlighted a lack of supports for LGBTQ2S+ young people and a need for safe environments such as school-based groups that bring youth together to help them through their experience of coming out. One youth said there is a need for *"more information in elementary school [as youth] may know when they are young and not know how to come out. Help them feel safe to be themselves."*

Several youth reported experiences of discrimination based on Indigenous cultural identity that led to having to flee a foster home or group home. In some cases, youth said their connection to culture was not supported, leading to a search for belonging that impacted their experience of homelessness. Said one youth: *"Some social workers say they have no way to help with it."*

B.C. HUMAN RIGHTS CODE

Under the B.C. Human Rights Code, prohibited grounds of discrimination include *"race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, religion, family status, marital status, physical disability, mental disability, sex, age, sexual orientation, political belief or conviction of a criminal or summary conviction offence unrelated to their employment."* [51]

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[51] "Define discrimination and harassment," Government of British Columbia, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/all-employees/working-with-others/address-issue/define-discrimination-harassment.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Hogan's Alley Society and Nora Hendrix Building

This report has limitations in reflecting the distinct experience of homelessness for youth from racialized populations. There are multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that can create systemic exclusion and significant barriers to housing for these populations.

The black community in Canada faces historical and systemic discrimination resulting in lasting socio-economic impacts. For example, in the 1920s, the area of the Georgia Street viaduct in Vancouver was a cultural hub for black Canadians known as "Hogan's Alley." In the 1960s, the city tore down buildings in this neighbourhood to create a freeway, which later became the viaduct. This created displacement and anecdotal accounts of an over-representation of homelessness for black Canadians in B.C.

Recently, BC Housing partnered with the Hogan's Alley Society to create the Nora Hendrix supportive housing building adjacent to the Georgia Street Viaduct. June Francis, co-chair of the Hogan's Alley Society, stated that this *"represents a monument to our oppression."* This supportive housing program includes cultural programming such as music and art and the building was designed to reflect black culture. This housing program shows how cultural support can benefit racialized communities who are subjected to discrimination and for whom culture is an important part of quality of life.

Through future research, there is a need to understand the distinct experiences, needs and solutions for racialized youth experiencing homelessness. B.C. needs to develop more specialized housing programs for racialized youth who face historical and intersecting oppression to accessing their right to housing.[52]

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[52] Roshini Nair, "Hogan's Alley Society brings cultural sensitivity to temporary housing project," *CBC*, February 2, 2019, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/hogans-alley-housing-project-1.5003333

IMPACTS OF
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

MESSAGE FROM YOUTH AGAINST YOUTH HOMELESSNESS B.C.

Some people think that we are choosing the way we are living, when homelessness is not a choice! This creates further stigma for those who are experiencing homelessness. Who would choose these impacts?

The impacts of youth homelessness are no longer only happening in deep, dark alleyways or late at night. They are now being brought into the light, in part through initiatives such as this report. These impacts are real and are happening now and we strongly feel that government cannot – and must not – ignore them anymore.

This report is dedicated to the friends we have lost. We are the voices for the youth who are lost and the future youth who will be lost because of homelessness. We are giving voice to the voiceless. These youth are the future and these impacts don't just happen in silos; they affect all of us. If we don't take care of the youth now, what will happen later?

These impacts show that prevention is key and that homelessness is negatively affecting our transition to adulthood. Single-pronged approaches aren't working. We need both proactive and reactive solutions or we will have only incremental progress when kids are suffering.

The time to act is now! No kid should be without a home and have to experience the devastating impacts of youth homelessness. There is no time to wait!

The young people who shared their inspiring stories of survival for this report demonstrated incredible resilience and hoped to create change to prevent the next generation from experiencing what they did. They made clear that the impacts of youth homelessness are distressing, services are weak and sometimes there is simply nowhere to go. They hoped that their difficult experiences would demonstrate to government the urgent need for a provincial plan to respond to youth homelessness.

YOUTH IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING DEVASTATING IMPACTS OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS::

1 Physical health risk/violence

2 Mental health risk

3 Education/employment challenges

4 Unsafe housing situations

5 Vulnerability to exploitation

6 Increased substance use for coping

7 Increased risk of death.

Many studies have shown that the longer youth are homeless, the more trauma and victimization they experience.[53] Research has also shown that youth experience trauma both before and after experiencing homelessness, which can lead to their marginalization and exclusion from society.[54] Young people from rural areas are often in even more precarious situations in which no resources exist to prevent or alleviate the impacts of homelessness. Youth participants stressed the need to respond quickly to lift youth out of homelessness before the damage is irreversible.

YOUTH VOICES

"I had a traumatic injury without medical support."

"[You can end up] shot, stabbed, beat and injured."

1) Physical health risk/violence

At all forums, youth identified physical health impacts and injuries experienced because of homelessness. They suffered physical impacts due to not having their basic needs met, such as food and water. One youth in Nelson described the great lengths they went to for clean drinking water by using sand filters. Said another youth: *"A compounded lack of nutrition [feels like] a slow death."*

[53] Jean Francois Boivin, Nancy Haley, Guillaume Galbaud du Fort and Elise Roy, "The health of street youth: A Canadian perspective," *Canadian Journal of Public Health, 96*, no. 6 (December 2005): 432-437.

[54] John Coates and Sue McKenzie-Mohr, "Out of the frying pan, into the fire: Trauma in the lives of homeless youth prior to and during homelessness," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare 37*, no. 4 (December 2010): 65-96.

YOUTH VOICES

❝[It's] dangerous for MCFD to call [your] parents as now your parents know you reported it and you have to go back.❞

❝Angry parents are crazy and if parents know where you are, they can report you. Then you might end up sleeping outside. [I] had to sleep on top of a bus stop outside to stay safe.❞

❝You can develop a physical disability.❞

❝[There is] permanent mental and physical damage due to neglect even if [you are] actively trying to heal yourself.❞

❝[It] causes emotional trauma when external supports don't believe the youth.❞

❝Not being listened to [or] adults not believing you [creates a] minimized feeling like your abuse doesn't matter.❞

❝[You] feel like a burden ... like no one loves you.❞

❝How do I trust a counsellor? If my own parents don't want to listen, why would they?❞

❝I can't have relationships.❞

Many youth said that while they were homeless, they experienced physical violence or assaults and sometimes were unable to access medical support.

Some youth discussed experiences of being sexually assaulted while they were homeless and not having the stable emotional supports necessary to report it.

In some cases, youth reported continuing physical abuse as a result of the investigation process in which the parent was told that the youth had reported abuse in the home, but MCFD did not subsequently provide a safe place for the youth to go.

Youth at forums identified that these physical impacts of homelessness can result in long-term damage to their well-being.

2) Mental health risk

Youth spoke about the devastating impacts of homelessness on their mental health. On the street, youth are unsafe and experience a lot of trauma that can result in post-traumatic stress disorder. Young people talked about experiencing depression, anxiety and stress to the point where one young man said his hair was turning white and he was pulling it out as a form of self-harm. Said another youth: *"Giving up [your] home is damaging to your mental health."*

Other youth said they internalized the impacts of homelessness and identified self-harm as a coping mechanism. Said one: *"[Homelessness] impacts your self-esteem and self-talk."*

The experience of reporting abuse or harm and not being listened to had an especially harmful effect on the youth who participated.

Isolation and loneliness were also major issues for youth while homeless, which further magnified mental health issues.

Many youth said they experienced a sense of hopelessness while homeless and felt they had no sense of purpose or self-determination, which again had significant impacts on their mental wellness.

YOUTH VOICES

" [You are] not in charge of [your] own future. You feel trapped. "

" [You] give up hope [which is] damaging to [your] mental health. "

" [Your basic] needs need to be met before going into a classroom. "

" It's impossible to think about work or education when housing/life is so unstable. "

" [It's hard] being away from school for extended durations. [There is a] loss of course knowledge and skills [when you] return. "

" It should be a right to go to school. "

3) Education/employment challenges

Homelessness has an enormous impact on youths' prospects for education and employment. Many youth spoke about the concept of housing first, and said it was challenging to focus on school or work when stressed about surviving. Housing First for Youth is a philosophy and program model that provides youth *"with immediate access to housing that is safe, affordable and [includes] the necessary and age-appropriate supports."* [55] Income support programs such as Agreements with Young Adults or Youth Agreements require youth to be working or going to school, which youth characterized as problematic. These requirements can be overly demanding when young people are faced with housing insecurity. Youth felt that they cannot achieve their goals without first having the solid foundation of a home.

One youth experienced bullying at school because of their homelessness, saying *"[it's] difficult going to class when [you're] going to be laughed at."*

Exacerbating the problem was a lack of flexibility and support to promote other ways of learning. One youth cited *"teachers not understanding or [being] flexible"* as an issue.

Facing such extraordinary pressures, young people sometimes felt they needed to be supported to take a healthy break from school and then return in a positive way. Said one: *"Let youth know it's okay to take time off school to get healthy."*

Youth spoke about a need to increase holistic supports within schools and to provide information on where to go for help to access community resources. They also talked about their need for support upon their return to school after time off to realize their right to an education.

The provincial government's tuition waiver initiative also met with criticism from participating youth, largely because they felt supports were not tailored to the issues they were dealing with or the trauma they experienced. Young people spoke about the need for supports such as counselling, mentorship and advocacy to help them navigate the education system.

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[55] Steven Gaetz, *This is housing first for youth: A program model guide* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2017) http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COH-AWH-HF4Y.pdf.

YOUTH VOICES

> "[Youth] need extra support for the tuition [waiver program such as] peer support workers because youth in their situation may need more help catching up."

> "The tuition waiver program needs to be extended so youth who don't get their lives together before 27 have a chance to experience post-secondary as well."

> "Funding has barriers ... [you are] not able to access multiple [types] simultaneously."

> "Upgrading is not always funded."

> "Where [do you] clean [your] clothes, uniform, self?"

> "[You need to have] somewhere to live [to] take care of hygiene and ... work clothing."

> "It's difficult keeping a job without a home."

Youth reported that cost was a barrier to accessing education as they didn't always know which grants or financial supports they were eligible for. In some cases, they said they did not meet eligibility requirements based on length of time in care or school program and that, even within AYA, there were funding gaps – for example, they were not able to afford textbooks.[56] Youth cited significant barriers around the 60 per cent course load requirement to access AYA or the tuition waiver program as many youth who have experienced trauma or graduated from alternative schools may find it challenging to balance course loads. Other youth may want to work part-time and go to school in order to afford housing, but are unable to do that with the 60 per cent course load requirement.

Some youth reported barriers such as returning to school after experiencing homelessness and requiring adult upgrading classes that don't qualify them for financial support. Other youth shared that there needs to be increased awareness and advertising around the opportunity to achieve an adult Dogwood.[57] In some cases, youth spoke about not being eligible for student loans because of previous histories of defaulting or other credit issues. One youth provided an example of when a bursary was deducted from her income assistance cheque dollar-for-dollar.

A common theme youth talked about was the challenge in securing employment without the foundation of a home. Without employment, it is difficult to secure housing. Young people reported the difficulties in accessing employment without a phone, Internet or home address, as potential employers could not contact them. This also impacted their hygiene, work attire and how they presented for interviews.

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56 "Agreements with Young Adults," B.C. government website, 2019, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/youth-and-family-services/teens-in-foster-care/agreements-with-young-adults

57 B.C. Government, "Adult Education," accessed December 29, 2019, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/adult-education

Other youth spoke about the stigma youth experience if they have had to drop out of high school and are trying to secure employment. In their experience, many employers would not hire youth who have dropped out of school. Youth appreciate employment programs such as the Bladerunners program that helps youth achieve needed certifications while receiving a paycheque.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Bladerunners

Bladerunners is an innovative program that was created in B.C. to support youth in overcoming complex barriers to employment. In 1994, 25 youth were recruited from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and were employed to help construct General Motors Place arena. This group was given the name "Bladerunners." [58] This free program now exists throughout B.C. and provides employment support to youth ages 15 to 30. Youth can access employment readiness support, job coaching/mentoring, employment certificates and work experience through the program. Homeless Hub completed a case study on this promising practice that can be found here: https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/19BLADERUNNERSweb.pdf

58 "The Bladerunners Program," Work B.C., https://www.workbc.ca/Employment-Services/Labour-Market-Programs/Bladerunners-Program.aspx

YOUTH VOICES

"Education should be more interactive [to] prepare youth socially for work.**"**

"[I have] no résumé [and a] lack of interviewing skills.**"**

"Discrimination is very real and even with education you can get turned away for having coloured hair.**"**

"[There is] trouble with employers trusting young people.**"**

Youth also faced additional challenges around finding employment including a lack of education, skills and experience. They felt they needed support to navigate employment and build the life skills necessary to be successful.

Youth across the province highlighted stigmas such as racism, sexism, ageism and experiencing additional discrimination based on their histories of receiving government services as continuing barriers to employment.

YOUTH VOICES

" [My] mental health [can affect my] ability to go in on time, if at all. "

" [My] addiction gets in the way. "

Mental health and addictions challenges related to their homelessness experiences also factored into youths' ability to secure employment and youth felt they needed supported opportunities to build skills.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Train for Trades

Train for Trades is a youth employment program that was developed by Choices for Youth in St. John's, Nfld.[59] The program is targeted to youth facing barriers to employment such as not having graduated high school, mental health challenges, substance use or prior involvement with the criminal justice system. This program provides youth with:

- Training: construction and energy efficiency retrofit training
- Support: intensive support model with low staff ratios and access to 24/7 after-hours support
- Employment: three tiers:
    Tier 1 - General entry to the program lasting 44 weeks with intensive supports. Tasks are repetitive and apply training. Work involves basement retrofitting, which helps renters reduce the cost of hydro bills.

    Tier 2 - Modernization and Improvement program, which involves more detailed work on the exterior/interior of the house. Youth receive reduced support and a financial raise.

    Tier 3 - Full-time employment with benefits.

Train for Trades provides youth with access to a GED certificate, which is a certificate that shows a young person has graduated high school. The majority of youth complete their GED while in the program. This program involves a harm-reduction, strength-based approach that promotes safety.

https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/download-chapter/Youth%20Employment%20Toolkit.pdf

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[59] Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, *Youth Employment Toolkit*, (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2015), 1-94. https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/download-chapter/Youth%20Employment%20Toolkit.pdf

YOUTH VOICES

"A lot of jobs for youth [are] in customer service [where you have to] deal with negative people that treat you like shit."

"[It's] not easy to find a job [in a] small town."

Many young people reported a lack of job opportunities available to youth that were a good fit for their needs or areas of interest. They said most opportunities were limited, part-time or casual work in customer service. Other youth spoke about only being able to secure jobs such as in the trades or cooking, which can sometimes negatively impact mental health and substance use issues and, in turn, result in youth being penalized for these impacts.[60]

Youth also spoke about needing support around their rights in the workplace. Said one: *"Jobs take advantage of youth [and you need support to] understand your rights."*

Youth said that a provincial plan to end youth homelessness should address these educational and employment impacts.

4) Unsafe housing situations

Youth reported that a significant impact of homelessness was being forced into unsafe housing situations. Because of the affordable housing crisis, many youth are forced to enter roommate agreements with complete strangers. For example, a youth shared that when he aged out of foster care, he was forced to find a roommate because the income assistance rates were so low. He felt that no matter how unsafe a potential roommate could be, it was a better alternative to being homeless on the streets. He responded to an advertisement on Kijiji and moved into a shared accommodation. The youth felt unsafe in this housing situation and later discovered his roommate had been convicted of murder and extreme violence. Said the youth: *"I didn't get to meet the [roommate]. [It was like] I don't care who you are. I'm living with you. I'm homeless."*

" [In] shared accommodations, [I] stay[ed] with a predator [and experienced] a lot of violence. You don't know who your roommate is."

"This creepy old dude was watching me sleep."

Many youth shared experiences of abuse or violence in unsafe housing situations such as shared accommodations in market housing.

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[60] The United States conducted a national survey on drug use and health and discovered the highest rates of substance use by industry occurred in the mining, construction, accommodations and food services industries: The Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, "Substance Use and Substance Use by Industry," last modified April 16, 2015, https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1959/ShortReport-1959.html

YOUTH VOICES

"Roommates using drugs while you are clean."

"Older guys teach the younger [ones] the wrong things: drugs, dealing and gangs."

"Your roommate bringing around the wrong people."

"[I] was being woken up to people in my room."

"The more you see, the more you learn, the more you do."

"You can find yourselves homeless without time to find a home."

"People take advantage of youth. [The] burden of proof is on the youth."

"Youth are forced into prostitution. [Sometimes] they are taken in by a mom in a house."

"[It can be] self-fulfilling prophecies... [Exploitation] can be passed down by Grandma, Mom and now [the] youth [is] involved."

Other youth spoke about some of these roommate situations being very negative, including the impact of roommates using substances and even experiences of being recruited into gangs.

Youth spoke about the impact of these unsafe housing situations in which roommates had a lack of boundaries, which resulted in youth feeling afraid and vulnerable.

Finally, forum participants emphasized the insecurity of these types of housing options. Market shared accommodations do not fall under the *Residential Tenancy Act*.[61] As a result, despite treaties such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which stipulates the right to a home, in practice, youth experience a lack of rights which, for forum participants, sometimes resulted in homelessness without notice.

5) Vulnerability to exploitation

Many youth spoke about experiencing different types of exploitation as a result of homelessness. In Kamloops, youth talked about sexual exploitation resulting from a lack of choice combined with a strong need to have their basic needs met, such as shelter.

Some youth spoke about having to engage in sexual activity to have a couch to sleep on – a situation they termed *"survival rape"*– as opposed to staying on the street where they risked sexual assault.

Other youth spoke about experiencing sexual exploitation while homeless. For example, a youth in Nanaimo talked about the exploitation of underage youth in the tent city because of their homelessness experience. Other youth spoke about their desire for family and a sense of belonging being used to force them into exploitative situations.

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[61] Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre, "Am I covered by the law if I share a rental unit with the owner?", Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre, http://tenants.bc.ca/living-with-the-owner/
Tenant rights are between the landlord and leaseholder. Roommates are not covered under the *Residential Tenancy Act*, however they can bring disputes to the Civil Resolution Tribunal.

PROMISING PRACTICE

NOW Program

The NOW program was founded in 1998 in Kelowna with the mission of providing a *"client-centred continuum of care for women, youth and their children who are vulnerable, exploited or homeless."* [62] NOW provides homelessness prevention support, a shelter with 24/7 support and residential safe homes for young women who have been exploited. Youth are provided with life skills training, substance use counselling and one-to-one support. Through the program, youth are provided trauma, equine, yoga and naturopathic therapies. NOW provides holistic aftercare support including continued supports/therapies, financial assistance and opportunities for peer mentoring. https://www.nowcanada.ca/

[62] "Programs," NOW Canada, https://www.nowcanada.ca/programs/therapies/.

YOUTH VOICES

"HUSTLE: How U Survive Thru Life Everyday."

"[If your] family is in the game, you're more likely to be in the game. That's how you've grown up and that's all you know."

"You grow up in gang violence and that's what you know... A lot of people don't have choices."

"You're dragged into drug dealing ... [because you are] needing protection. The more people you know, the safer you are."

Exploitation manifested in other ways as well. Youth found themselves having to resort to illegal survival activities as their only way to obtain an income to meet their basic needs. For example, some spoke about being forced into drug dealing either as a result of being homeless or because they grew up around it within their family home. One youth referred to drug dealing as survival hustling. Other youth had to steal food to avoid hunger.

Some youth were forced into gangs. These provided a sense of protection on the streets but, in fact, youth faced increased violence and safety concerns as a result of their gang involvement. They felt they could not get out of the gang life and spoke about horrifying experiences.

"THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS"

Over the past 20 years, many researchers have referred to legal responses to homelessness as *"the criminalization of homelessness."* [63] These punitive responses to youth in public spaces have historical roots dating back to Britain's *Vagrancy Act* while the ongoing stigma of homelessness influences many people to see it as an individual fault. Youth experiencing homelessness face increased monitoring from law enforcement and behaviours of survival may be penalized with different forms of regulation. For example, Ontario has the *Safe Streets Act* through which many survival behaviours draw tickets and fines, sometimes resulting in youth becoming incarcerated. Further to this, youth who are homeless may have to participate in the *"informal economy"* that is illegal, such as panhandling or minor crimes such as stealing food for survival.

[63] Ron Sommers, "Governing the streets: The legal, social, and moral regulation of homeless youth," in *Youth Homelessness in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2013), 369-386.

YOUTH VOICES

"Punishing homelessness for being homeless leads to more homelessness."

"[Police] assume you're wrong or guilty. Because you're homeless, [they] don't believe you."

"Racist and violent cop was going to arrest me for nothing."

"[There is] increased punishment for male Indigenous youth."

In some cases, youth reported they were not involved in illegal activity, but said their experience of homelessness was criminalized by police and bylaw officers. Youth said they were targeted while they were homeless and felt they were sometimes incarcerated because of their homelessness.

This criminalization of homelessness has a greater impact on Indigenous youth, who are over-represented in the justice system.

Some youth said the result of the criminalization of homelessness was being arrested, but they saw jail as a form of housing. Said one youth: *"Law enforcement says your homelessness is not their problem. They threaten to arrest you, but sometimes this is good because you get food and shelter when you are arrested."*

This type of "housing," however, was not permanent and youth reported that transitions out of jail further perpetuated their homelessness.

YOUTH VOICES

" [I was] released out of jail with nowhere to go. "

" [When] you're on bail, you need somewhere to stay ... or can be sent back. "

" Escapism ... using to dull emotional stress. "

" I started using substances. "

6) Increased substance use for coping

At every forum, youth talked about homelessness leading to increased substance use as a coping mechanism.

Because they had very limited places to go where they could safely use – and no services such as safe injection sites for youth – young people reported risky practices when using substances. Many youth housing programs don't allow youth to use on-site or to have guests so they can use with another person in case they overdose. One youth spoke about these restrictions leading to safety concerns of being taken advantage of or overdosing without supports.

Many youth spoke specifically about the increased risk they faced of overdosing due to the fentanyl crisis. Said one: *"I almost overdosed on Xanax. I felt it happening, but I didn't go for help."*

Research shows that youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to use substances than youth who have stable housing.[64] A November 2018 RCY report on youth substance use called on government to – among other recommendations – develop a comprehensive system of substance use services to address the diverse needs of youth in B.C., including youth-specific harm reduction services. *Time to Listen: Youth Voices on Substance Use* strongly featured youth voices, and also called on government to create a youth-friendly, single source of information about youth substance use services, and to implement a training program to help foster parents build skills to cultivate safe and open dialogue with youth about substance use.[65] In addition, a recent BC Coroners Service report reviewed aggregate data from 2009 to 2013 of 26 youth ages 13 to 18 and 156 youth ages 19 to 23 who overdosed and died. A clear recommendation to prevent future deaths is to reduce the barriers to youth seeking medical assistance and raise awareness of the importance of seeking immediate help.[66]

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[64] Marritt Kirst, Patricia Erickson and Carol Strike, "Poly-substance use among male and female street youth in Toronto, Canada," *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, 2, no. 2 (January 2009): 123 - 139.

[65] Representative for Children and Youth, *Time to Listen: Youth Voices on Substance Use* (British Columbia: Representative for Children and Youth), 2019.

[66] Child Death Review Panel, *Preventing death after overdose: BC Coroners Service Child Death Review Panel. A Review of Overdose Deaths in Youth and Young Adults 2019-2013: A Report to the Chief Coroner* (British Columbia: BC Coroners), 2014.

> **PROMISING PRACTICE**
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> **Imouto House – Atira Women's Resource Society**
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> In 2011, Atira responded to a significant need in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside by providing no-barrier housing for 16 young women ages 16 to 24 at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The program was named Imouto, which means *"little sister"* in Japanese. The supportive housing program provides 24/7 on-site support and wraparound community support through partnerships with mental health and other youth-serving organizations. There is an inter-generational mentorship program in which older women provide peer support. The program is young women-focused and is violence/trauma-informed with a harm-reduction, low-barrier, relationship-based approach that provides anti-oppressive housing. In addition to the 16 rooms/beds, there is a two-bed emergency shelter where young women can stay while Atira looks to find them alternative accommodation. Young women can arrive anytime and just show up at the door with no referral required, no intake/paperwork and no questions. This is a promising practice that re-imagines our emergency response to youth by providing safety and housing first.[67]
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>
> [67] "Housing," Atira Women's Resource Society, https://atira.bc.ca/what-we-do/housing/imouto-housing-for-young-women/

7) Increased risk of death

Several youth at the forums were clear: the most devastating impact of youth homelessness is death. Said one: *"Death could be the result of all causes [of youth homelessness]."*

In some cases, youth specifically reported suicide as an impact of youth homelessness. *"Suicide becomes an option for you,"* said one youth.

Other youth mentioned the BC Coroners Services report and the over-representation of former youth in care *"who died at five times the rate of the general population of young people in B.C."* [68] The devastating consequence of death as a result of youth homelessness is perhaps the starkest evidence of the urgent need for a provincial youth homelessness strategy.

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[68] BC Coroners Service, *BC Coroners Death Review Panel: Review of MCFD-Involved Youth Transitioning to Independence* January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2016: Report to the Chief Coroner of British Columbia, (British Columbia: BC Coroners Service), 2018.

TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE

Discussing the devastating impacts of homelessness made some of the forums emotional experiences for the youth participants. In New Westminster, a youth leader recognized this and asked the group to brainstorm the positive impacts of their survival of homelessness. Although homelessness is a dark, difficult experience, the young people at the forums who survived it were resilient and able to turn lemons into lemonade. This group described *"homeless life positives"*:

- You gain street family. People who are suffering are more generous and would give you the shirt off their back.

- You become generous as you understand what it's like to be without.

- Music and art make for a happy homeless person (money-making opportunities, stress reduction, etc.).

- You are resourceful and can adapt to your surroundings (heat, cold, days, nights).

- You get your bearings and can navigate the city/town more easily to identify areas that are safer to be in.

- You become unafraid of everything as you are ready for anything in a way. You have less fear of the unknown and are more open-minded.

- You gain transferable skills such as resiliency and coping mechanisms.

- You gain empathy and appreciate things.

- You develop self-advocacy skills.

- There is so much value in lived expertise. The negatives of your experience can be the positives for another.

- You can contribute and help the next generation and our community. Life doesn't give you anything you can't handle!

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HOUSING

MESSAGE FROM YOUTH AGAINST YOUTH HOMELESSNESS B.C.:

We would like to bring attention to the fact that there is a shortage of housing and, specifically, housing options for youth, which causes many safety concerns. It is not always safe for us to be placed with older adults coming out of homelessness. In our group, we shared our own experiences in which housing was not safe and our experiences of losing our housing because of other people.

Youth housing needs to be much more supportive! We have seen youth evicted for not yet having all the life skills they need to be successful. One youth was threatened with being kicked out because they didn't know how to cook, instead of offering life skills support and a cooking class! Addiction is another huge barrier as some youth are told they need to be sober in order to access housing. There is a lack of low-barrier options for youth. We need lots of support, especially when our own families won't accept us.

Wait lists can take months. There is more need than housing stock. Wait lists can be traumatizing for youth as they are left in limbo. This approach to housing eligibility is reactive and not proactive. The Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT) and the Youth Assessment and Prioritization Tool (YAP) are tools that are used to prioritize youth for housing and set up youth for failure as they have to get to rock bottom in order to get help. Eligibility is based on a numerical scale and you need a high number to qualify for housing, which causes youth to lie to get help. For a long time, couch-surfing wasn't considered homelessness. The VAT tool for youth over 19 incentivizes young people to stay in the worst spot in order to get help. At the same time, these tools do not help the youth at the bottom of the list who are being proactive and who are trying hard to do well by not using substances as they try to get out of homelessness. Ironically, those who are doing well can end up at rock bottom. We want to be clear: the solution is more housing for youth, not changing the tool.

While we are waiting for housing, youth shelters are non-existent in many of our communities. Sometimes, we have nowhere else to go and have to go to adult shelters, and it is not safe. These are shelters where you have to share a room and living space and eat when you are told. Sometimes, we have to go to other municipalities in order to access services. Many youth won't go to shelters because they require parental consent. This is frustrating, but shelters are strict about it and this practice forces kids onto the street. We ask: what is the lesser of the two evils?

continued

It's not like we can go out and get our own housing because discrimination is a major barrier. Youth are heavily discriminated against, which limits our access to housing. We are facing ageism and, even though you can sign a lease when you are under 19, many landlords choose not to rent to youth because they may not be informed that a youth under 19 can sign a lease. Many people judge us on our outward appearance. When landlords ask about our rental history, we face problems. It is difficult to say, *"I was on the streets half of my life and in the foster system the other half."* Sometimes, if you identify as LGBTQ2S+, some landlords won't rent to you. Some members of the older generation or people from a religious background say you are going to Hell. The problem is no one wants to be forced to be straight. People shouldn't have to hide their sexuality because of fear, shame and neglect.

We all know there is a shortage of youth-specific options and now is the time for government to act. In many of our communities, there is no youth-specific housing and limited access to low-income housing. We also know that many youth cannot afford housing and this, in turn, impacts our food security which is a problem as we are growing young people. If you don't have breakfast, you can't go to school or work or contribute your best.

Government, we need you to build more apartments that are specifically for youth under 19 and for youth ages 19 to 25. We all know the first step is youth housing first. There is no time to wait.

YOUTH VOICES

> " [The shelter should be a] chance to get yourself together again. "
>
> " Being introduced to people who can help you on the next step to transitional housing. "

> " Priority [is] based on youth with the most issues. [You] need to produce a sob story to access services. "
>
> " Couch-surfing is not considered homeless [and I] couldn't get help. "

> " [It's] not safe to go to [the] shelter and [some] won't let youth in [because there are] sex offenders and criminals [there]. "
>
> " There are more adult homeless people than children, so it is more dangerous to be a child. [We] need shelters for just homeless kids. "
>
> " There's no facility for youth. If you're in between adult and youth, you're in between and have nowhere to go. "

A provincial plan to end youth homelessness will need to address systemic barriers that are perpetuating youth homelessness. Small ripples of change in different areas of the system can work together to produce effective solutions that will allow communities to eradicate youth homelessness.

Youth reported the following barriers as having a significant impact on their ability to access housing:

1) **gaps in emergency supports such as youth shelters**

2) **shortage of youth-specific housing options**

3) **wait lists**

4) **discrimination.**

1) Gaps in emergency supports such as youth shelters

The first response to youth who are at risk of becoming homeless or are experiencing it should be to provide safe housing as quickly as possible with supports that will prevent future homelessness. Young people identified that crisis responses to youth homelessness must reflect the actual, immediate needs of youth. Forum participants further noted that shelters should be a gateway opportunity to plug into supports. Shelters in their current form often do not meet the actual and immediate needs of youth, often resulting in further harm. The young people who participated in the forums had different ideas about the roles shelters could play.

Youth identified that accessing the emergency shelter system is often impossible given that some communities don't even have youth shelters, especially in rural and remote areas, and others have very limited availability of shelter beds. Youth criticized the fact that shelter stays are time-limited, and many said they were unable to secure housing prior to their stay expiry date, resulting in further episodes of homelessness. For example, many shelters have a stay-limit of 30 days, during which youth are expected to develop a plan for housing. This means, in effect, that there is no emergency housing option for youth experiencing homelessness. Because there is such limited access to shelter beds, youth said there was pressure to prove their situation was worthy of support.

YOUTH VOICES

"When I went to MCFD and wanted to go to a safe house, they said I needed [my] parents' permission and [that] doesn't work for everyone."

"I wasn't allowed to leave an abusive foster home. [I would] run away [and they] would bring [me] back. MCFD can influence who accesses the shelter."

"[The shelter] says they are weapon- and substance-free. If you bring something in, there is no safe place to bring these items [and you are] needing protection on [the] streets."

"Do not force staff to become 'rehabilitation therapists' by taking away drugs and having a shelter full of people in drug withdrawal. Staff aren't trained for that."

"[You] have to be there at 8 p.m. and have to leave at 8 a.m., [which is] stressful. [You are leaving with] not enough food in [your] stomach. If youth can't eat in the a.m., [you] don't eat until dinner time."

"[A youth] followed me after I left the shelter and threatened me. There is no safety after you leave."

A common theme that youth reported was that it is not safe for those under age 24 to be at an adult shelter, where they can be vulnerable to exploitation.

Additionally, youth from the LGBTQ2S+ community spoke about specific problems such as trans youth being unable to access their preferred gender side. Said one youth: *"[A] two-spirited male is not allowed in a women's shelter [even though] in their heart and mind they are the other gender."*

A significant barrier for youth participants under 19 to accessing shelter support is the procedural requirement to inform MCFD and contact the parent. Youth cited this as a particular safety concern as the parent may be the very person who is abusing them and from whom they are fleeing.

Other youth said they were unable to access the shelter in their community after hours, leading to homelessness without a crisis response. Said one youth: *"Staff turn youth away in the middle of the night."*

In some cases, youth said they had to choose between accessing the shelter or losing their belongings due to program policies such as bag limits. *"[I] can't access the shelter cause I have too much stuff,"* another youth said.

Another common theme youth identified was experiencing the shelter system as being very rigid and controlling.

For example, youth spoke about being locked out after curfew or not being able to use substances. Said one youth: *"[You] lose your bed cause you're high or drunk and then you have nowhere to go."*

Youth also found it challenging that they couldn't bring in drug paraphernalia or weapons that they might require on the street to keep themselves safe.

Youth reported, however, that they were not safe in some shelters and sometimes needed protection.

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES

The online survey asked youth about barriers faced in accessing shelters. Almost half of the respondents (47 per cent) identified one or more barriers they had experienced. The top five barriers reported were:

- unable to bring all belongings
- didn't want to involve MCFD
- did not feel safe
- too many rules (curfew for example)
- no pets allowed

YOUTH VOICES

" [The shelter] feels re-traumatizing [when you are] coming from care with unrealistic rules."

" Youth shelters need a harm-reduction focus."

There are no comprehensive lists of shelters available for youth in the province, which signifies a significant gap in the policy-making system. Some youth shelters are funded privately, others through MCFD or the Ministry of Health. Some are youth-specific, others youth/adult integrated. However, there is no clear picture of what emergency responses exist for youth experiencing homelessness in B.C.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Shelter diversion – Okanagan Boys and Girls Club

Although there are benefits to quick emergency responses and access to shelters, in some cases there is a strong rationale to diverting youth who are trying to access a shelter to natural supports. Sometimes, this can result in better outcomes for youth by preventing exposure to negative aspects of street life such as substance use. Okanagan Boys and Girls Club began practising shelter diversion in October 2017 and trained its staff in the Family and Natural Supports Framework in January 2018. An example of shelter diversion is connecting a youth to natural supports where they can stay temporarily while working toward housing or reconnecting home. Another example is providing family mediation so a youth can remain at home and conflict is resolved.

By shifting its practice, 43 youth have been diverted from the shelter since October 2018. Shelter diversion shifted shelter reliance from an average number of seven youth per night as of October 2017 to an average of 0.5 youth per night as of December 2018.[69] Shelter Diversion

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[69] Sarah MacKinnon, Okanagan Boys and Girls Club, personal communication to author, Jan. 21, 2019.

YOUTH VOICES

" [There is] no youth-friendly housing. "

" Where is this housing you speak of? "

" Giving youth the skills to identify their own needs as well as an environment to explore their own identity, and [the] opportunities available to them, is one of the most important things. "

" Youth need supportive housing options with on-site support workers... that reduce barriers youth face. "

" [It can be a] serious situation and [you] need to get out of [the] house, but...[it's] not possible to get housing. "

" [I have] housing but [it is] unaffordable and likely unsafe. [It has] pests, heat, water problems [and] ineffective management but [I] can't afford rising rents. "

2) Shortage of youth-specific housing options

The shortage of youth-specific housing options came up continually during the forums.

Many youth identified a lack of housing options that meet their distinct needs as a major barrier to escaping homelessness, and were vocal about what they wanted to see.

They were equally clear about what they didn't want to see – no youth housed in single room occupancy hotels (SROs) such as those in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside:

"SROs are gross. They are within my price range, but I am scared to share a bathroom. They have communal bathrooms where people are nodding off or in pools of blood."

"Social workers put youth in SROs. [There are] limited options for youth [who are struggling with] substance use."

Unfortunately, there is a real lack of affordable housing and the rental market is competitive. Young peoples' experiences of poverty, together with discrimination, age barriers and lack of life skills, often leaves them nowhere to go.

Some youth spoke about "slumlords" who didn't follow the *Residential Tenancy Act*. Said one: *"Rental boards should enforce laws."*

Many youth cited safety concerns related to being housed with older adults who have been on the streets their entire lives. They felt it was inappropriate to expect youth to access the same housing options as chronically homeless adults. In addition, while youth over the age of 19 can theoretically access adult homelessness programs, in practice youth reported this was not the case. Said one youth: *"[We are] pushing youth into modular housing. Youth need more supports. [It's not safe for] 22-year-old and 65-year-old people who have been homeless forever [to be] in the same modular housing."*

Youth believed that there should be distinct affordable housing units specifically for them so they can stay safe and leave homelessness behind. However, despite the recent housing boom in B.C. and unprecedented investments in affordable housing, there has been no distinct plan or strategy to increase the inventory of youth-specific housing.

WHAT IS YOUTH HOUSING?

Youth Housing is a broad term and can include youth housing models for those 19 and under, youth housing for those in the 18 to 25 age range, and/or youth housing for those transitioning from care.

MCFD has the primary operational responsibility for vulnerable youth who are under 19 and homeless. BC Housing is funding 63 housing projects (675 units) targeting youth; 37 projects are targeting youth, 22 are group homes (partnerships with MCFD, CLBC, health authorities, AHMA), four are shelters targeting youth.

Youth housing proposals are eligible for funding under the Building BC programs. BC Housing continues to create youth housing to address this gap and has four projects in the construction phase, one project in the development stage, and is working on 12 other projects that target youth, as well as five student housing projects.[70]

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[70] BC Housing, email communication, August 31, 2019

PROMISING PRACTICE

Kikékyelc: A Place of Belonging: Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Family and Community Services

LMO is the first Métis child welfare agency in B.C. to develop and operate its own housing, and offers a continuum of culturally appropriate and supportive housing for youth aging out of care. In April 2017, the province announced that LMO had been awarded $3.9 million from BC Housing to develop affordable Indigenous housing in Kamloops.

Kikékyelc: A Place of Belonging will be a 31-unit apartment building that is alcohol-, drug- and violence-free. There will be single and one-bedroom suites, accessible suites, a kekuli common space, a common kitchen, coin laundry facilities, green space, resident Elders, cultural mentors, and in-house support workers. Kikékyelc will co-house Indigenous Elders, professionals and youth who are or who were previously associated with child welfare services. Co-housing fosters traditional intergenerational relationships, which strengthen the community and cultivate a sense of belonging to residents.[71]

[71] Seanna Proulx at Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Family & Community Services, email communication, October 28, 2019

3) Wait lists

Wait lists create another obstacle for youth to overcome, in ways that are unique to their age group. The Vulnerability Assessment Tool used by BC Housing to prioritize wait list applicants often prioritizes older people with chronic health conditions and, some youth said, does not recognize hidden experiences of homelessness such as couch-surfing.[72]

Some youth reported that they were unable to even get on a housing wait list until they turned 19, which disrupts and undermines the transition planning process.[73] Youth cited long wait lists and further reported that they sometimes were not able to apply for housing if they didn't have an existing source of income.[74] In fact, many youth who participated in this review thought they were required to be homeless in order to access BC Housing units but, the fact is, youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness are eligible for supportive housing. This shows the need to get the word out to youth on what housing and support services are actually available. Youth who are experiencing homelessness face many difficulties in navigating systems. Individual housing programs should ensure they are also using a prevention lens and supporting youth experiencing hidden homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

YOUTH VOICES

"Couch-surfing and hotels are a form of homelessness, but [housing providers don't always] recognize this. [For some programs] you have to be six months on the streets before you can get housing."

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[72] Note: BC Housing is looking to use a modified Vulnerability Assessment Tool to prioritize youth for supportive housing. This tool provides a focus on youth and captures the unique features of youth homelessness. It is anticipated to be finalized in April 2020. BC Housing, email communication, November 29, 2019.

[73] Note: BC Housing does not have an age restriction for two of the housing registries that it administers: Housing Registry and the Supportive Housing Registry. The majority of youth housing projects do not use BC Housing's registry database for referrals and manage their own referrals or have referral arrangements with MCFD. BC Housing, email communication, August 31, 2019.

[74] Note: Under the Supportive Housing Registry, youth don't need an existing income, as one of the first steps is supporting the applicant to connect to income and supports and often the housing provider will hold the unit while this process is happening. Under the Housing Registry, applicants do need a source of income and BC Housing would provide information on how to apply for income supports. BC Housing, email communication, August 31, 2019.

YOUTH VOICES

" [There is a] lack of affordable housing. [The] more tenants [who] are interested increases discrimination. They choose the cream of the crop. "

" Transgendered males are discriminated against. "

" Landlords … assume youth will have a party house. "

" [People assume that] being too young, [you are] unknowledgeable to make a decision, because you're just a kid. "

" Landlord[s] are often loathe to rent to younger people, thinking we will not be responsible or reliable with rent. I have had landlords refuse to rent to me … [so] it would be really helpful to have a youth advocate who could accompany the youth to viewings and the lease signing to hopefully help reduce the ageism present in the rental market. "

" There is stigma for youth in care and less credibility. "

" Nobody wants to rent to former youth in care, even if rent is 100 per cent guaranteed. "

4) Discrimination

Many youth reported discrimination and stigma both as a pathway into homelessness and a barrier to leaving it. For example, some youth said that being transgender resulted in a landlord denying their rental application. One youth gave an example where a landlord shared this information with other landlords, advising them not to rent to the youth.

Many youth, especially those under 19, said ageism impacted their ability to secure housing.

Indigenous youth said racism impacted their ability to secure housing. For example, youth in Prince George gave examples of rental advertisements that were openly racist, stating *"no Indigenous people."* Said one youth: *"[There is] racial stereotyping."*

Another common theme shared by youth was discrimination based on their receipt of social services, such as income assistance or having been in foster care.

Many youth also felt discriminated against for their experience of homelessness and were afraid of judgment when accessing housing. Youth also reported that these experiences of discrimination impacted their ability to secure income through employment, which further impacted their ability to exit homelessness. The effect, youth said, was cyclical as landlords can discriminate against youth for not having employment. Said one youth: *"Landlords ask about work and won't rent to you unless you have a job."*[75]

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[75] This form of discrimination is illegal under Part 10 of the BC Human Rights Code.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SUPPORTS

MESSAGE FROM YOUTH AGAINST YOUTH HOMELESSNESS B.C. :

There are many barriers to supports that are inter-related. Youth shouldn't have to get to the lowest point in order to get help. Kids shouldn't have to be at risk to be a priority. Some people may not have coping skills or capacity to deal with setbacks. Don't restrict people with rules around eligibility!

A lot of supports require youth to be sober to access them. We need a *"supports first"* lens that takes a *"housing first"* approach to supporting youth. You shouldn't have to be sober in order to get help. There is a lot of complicated paperwork to prove you are eligible, which makes it impossible to get support and there is a lack of wraparound services. We need shared case management where we get to choose the people who we will work with and sign a permission form so we don't have to repeat our stories.

Wait lists are major barriers. You can be on a wait list for months to see a psychiatrist or counsellor and the eligibility requirements are brutal. They make you wonder, *"Am I worthy of receiving help?"*, which repeats the cycle. There are not enough publicly funded services for mental health and the private ones are expensive and not covered by financial aid. So often they are solution-focused therapies that focus on brief, quick interventions that do not address trauma and, because of the strain on services, there is a *"get in and get out"* mentality. We face many barriers to getting medication covered and, if we can't get it through our parents, it can lead to buying medication on the streets. We deserve the dignity of having medication that actually works for us.

Assessments for mental health and FASD are expensive and, if you want to get tested after 19, how are you going to afford it? We face lots of discrimination at the doctor's office, which means we either leave the office with shame or put off serious health issues. Doctors are not trauma-informed on how best to support youth with lived experiences of homelessness. Doctors don't take us seriously and sometimes stigmatize us because of our experiences of homelessness or addiction. Some of us have been told, *"We don't treat trauma here."* If they can't medicate you, you are untreatable. If we want therapy and support for trauma independent of mental health, this should be available.

There is stigma in accessing supports as a lot of people conclude that you may be a bad person if you need all these supports. Those of us who grew up in the foster system may think all support programs are going to be harsh based on our previous experiences, which makes us feel hopeless. It can also mean we don't even try to access supports, particularly if we don't have the information we need about supports. Information on supports for youth is needed early on in the school system before we drop out.

continued

We need more Indigenous cultural services. There has been a lot of harm done with the erosion of cultural identity. We have been colonized and introduced to drugs and alcohol that were not in our DNA, which impacts us in a significant way. People have been trying to kill our culture and, as young people, we are still doing this work to create change and preserve it. We have cultural practices that pre-date the legal system. Instead of sex education classes, we had coming-of-age ceremonies on what type of person we wanted to be. In school, we were robbed of this tradition and instead learned through textbooks and a wacky system that does not always support our cultural traditions. If we could go back and re-write our lives, these proper ceremonies would have taken place and would have been life-changing. We have not always been viewed through the lens of our proud histories and cultures.

Culture is identity. We need people hired to teach us how to become an adult. Services need to be Indigenous-led to find our own solutions instead of trying to impose them on us. Elders should provide comfort and connect us with our cultures so we can find ourselves. Indigenous youth who don't have that don't know themselves. We need to connect youth to culture so they can discover the power of dance, drumming, fishing, etc.

We believe it really does take a village to raise a child. When we grow up in a village, this provides consistency and the ability to build meaningful relationships. Today, we can't build these relationships because of time, ethics and barriers within the system. Supports should be youth-driven where we choose who we want in our lives and who we value. We need you to meet us where we are at! Support along the journey is key!
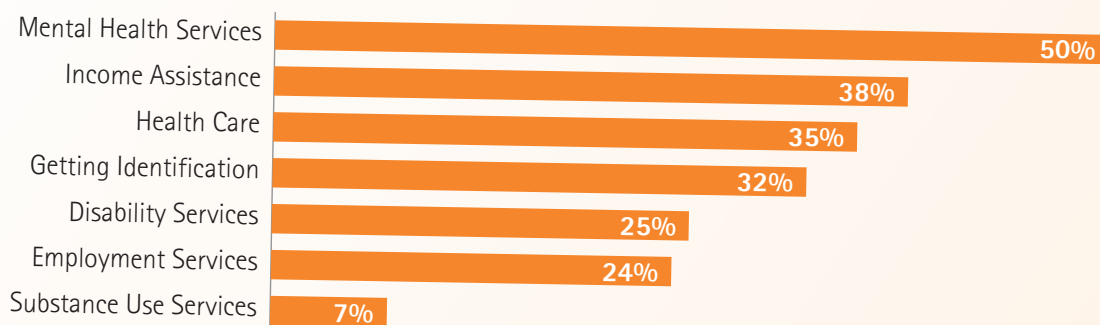
Across the province, young people spoke about a lack of support services for youth experiencing homelessness as a significant barrier to wellness. As youth are leaving homes where they have had adult support, they need wraparound services that mirror family privilege that can help them gain life skills necessary to obtain and sustain housing. Forum participants reported a multitude of barriers to accessing supports that impacted their experience of homelessness:

1) wait lists for services

2) inflexible/restrictive eligibility requirements

3) lack of information about programs/supports

4) lack of identification

5) lack of transportation

6) lack of wraparound holistic services

7) barriers to Indigenous cultural services.

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES:

Youth who participated in the online survey were asked what challenges they experienced in accessing government services. Participants could identify more than one challenge. The most frequently identified concern (50 per cent) was difficulty in getting mental health support. The other top three challenges included accessing income assistance, health care supports and getting ID.

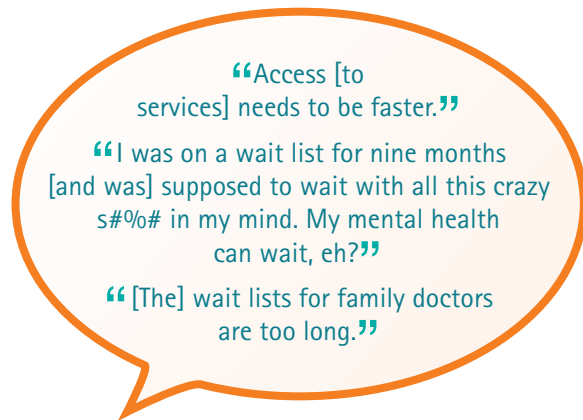**Youth Survey: Which services did you have difficulties accessing while you were experiencing homelessness? (n=68)**

Service	Percentage
Mental Health Services	50%
Income Assistance	38%
Health Care	35%
Getting Identification	32%
Disability Services	25%
Employment Services	24%
Substance Use Services	7%

1) Wait lists for services

Youth reported wait lists as major obstacles for needed services, such as mental health or substance use supports that would help prevent or alleviate their experience of homelessness. This was also the case for essential health care supports.

YOUTH VOICES

"Access [to services] needs to be faster."

"I was on a wait list for nine months [and was] supposed to wait with all this crazy s#%# in my mind. My mental health can wait, eh?"

"[The] wait lists for family doctors are too long."

Young people were passionate about the need to access support services immediately. They reported that, due to their experience of homelessness and not having a fixed address, they sometimes found themselves stuck on wait lists. A Vancouver youth shared an example of couch-surfing and having to temporarily move to a nearby community, which led to being put on the bottom of a new wait list. Said the youth: *"[You] have to switch wait lists if you move to another city and [then you] start waiting all over."*

Youth also identified mental health workers' large caseloads as a factor in creating wait lists that reduce the likelihood youth will receive the services they need to thrive.

2) Inflexible/restrictive eligibility requirements

Youth across the province highlighted the problem of arbitrary eligibility requirements to access services that create inflexible and restrictive systems. One barrier to accessing services cited by many youth was the requirement to share their story over and over. Youth said that it can be traumatizing to have to tell their story to each new service provider as part of the referral process as this brings up memories from the trauma. Other youth cited challenges in having to complete a different referral form for each support and having to jump through hoops to access the services they needed the most. Said one youth: *"[There should be an] easier referral process that does not require telling [your] trauma over and over again."*

Many youth reported that when they were struggling with mental health concerns, it could be *"panic inducing"* to have to *"prove"* service eligibility.

Some youth felt their concerns were not seen as serious and were unable to meet eligibility requirements. Youth said they needed advocacy support to navigate systems eligibility requirements so that they could obtain supports. Said one youth: *"There should be a 24-hour emergency line where an advocate will meet you ... The advocate should have your best interest in mind and not work for the police or MCFD in order to not have bias and keep your best interest above all."*

A common theme forum participants reported is that provincial systems have arbitrary age requirements that result in patchwork services and systemic barriers to leaving homelessness. For example, the corrections system considers 18 the age of adulthood

while, with regard to MCFD services, youth age out at 19. Youth highlighted age barriers in signing a rental lease, accessing a shelter, securing employment or education and even accessing services through MCFD.
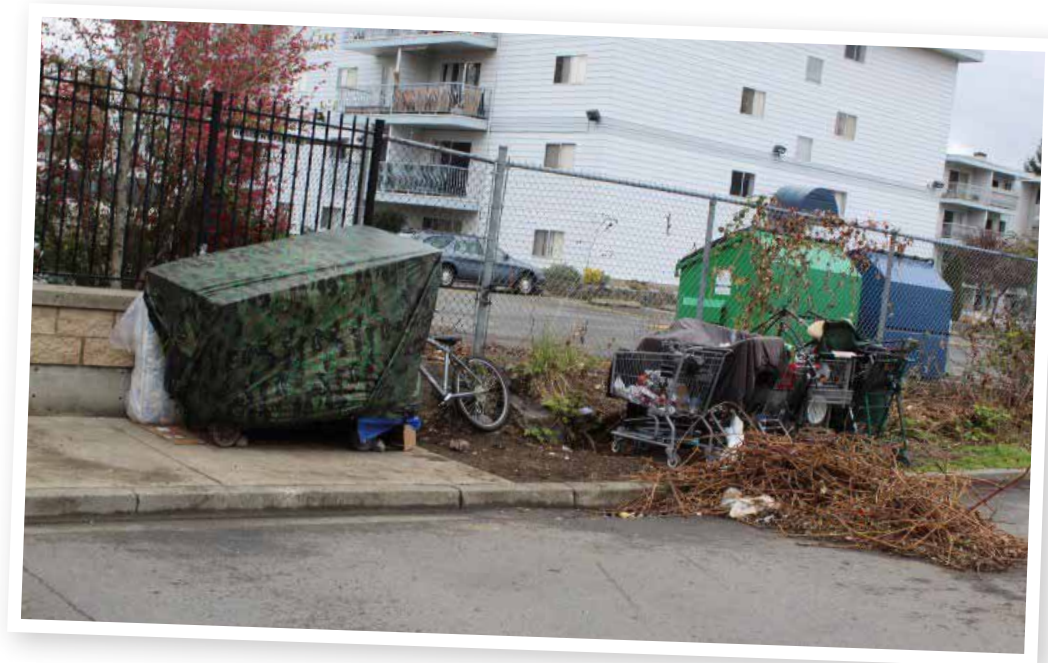
YOUTH VOICES

> **"** You're too young till you're too old basically. **"**
>
> **"** You don't get [as much] help when you're older as those kids who are younger. **"**

As outlined earlier, meeting the basic eligibility requirements for income assistance or disability funding represented more hurdles for youth. One youth talked about needing to get an assessment completed before he aged out of care – but it wasn't done and resulted in no supports. He said it would cost him thousands of dollars to obtain the assessment now. Said the youth: *"[I] require an expensive mental health assessment to qualify [for PWD]. [Your] social worker should pay for this assessment before you age out."*

In some cases, youth identified eligibility barriers in the justice system. Some youth said they were considered adults in the justice system at age 18, although they were still considered a youth in the foster system.[76] Youth expressed safety concerns about being placed in adult custodial centers at 18 and a need for changes in the justice system to meet the needs of youth. Said one youth: *"People weren't controlled. I didn't feel safe to leave my room."*

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[76] BC Government, "The Youth Criminal Justice Act," BC Government website, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/bcs-criminal-justice-system/understanding-criminal-justice/youth-justice/the-youth-criminal-justice-act

YOUTH VOICES

> "Where do you access the services?"
>
> "[You're] not aware of where to go for help or services that youth need."

> "Getting ID [is a barrier and] lots of youth don't have it. It's expensive [and you] can't even volunteer without it."
>
> "[You should be] able to enrol yourself in high school without ID."
>
> "Getting ID is a huge barrier. Without ID, you can't go to the doctor's, get medication, or even go to school. I couldn't go to school for three months cause I had no ID! Without ID, you can't do anything!"

> "[You] need a source of income, [which is] hard if you don't have ID. [It's] hard to get on PWD. There are lots of hoops [to get ID]."
>
> "[You need] government workers [that] must go into [the] bank … to confirm [your] ID and advocate for bank accounts."

3) Lack of information about programs/supports

Youth reported that a barrier to accessing supports is a lack of information on where to find the support they need.

Many young people said they didn't understand the process or what supports they could access. Said one youth: *"Make supports more known by creating open dialogue about youth homelessness."*

Youth criticized the dearth of advertising about services and suggested that information should be provided through road and bus signs, as well as media. Said one youth: *"[I] don't know where anything is. [There] should be things on stop signs or signs so youth know where to go."*

4) Lack of identification

Many forum participants identified that a lack of ID is a barrier to exiting homelessness or accessing supports, including education. Youth struggle to get ID if they are not housed as they may not have an address for the ID to be sent to. In addition, the process costs money and takes time. A youth may have to apply and pay for a birth certificate prior to obtaining photo ID such as a B.C. Services Card.[77]

Without ID, youth have difficulty getting on income assistance, obtaining employment or opening a bank account to cash their government cheques. Youth also experience barriers to accessing medical support or obtaining needed prescriptions.

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[77] BC Government, "Your BC Services Card," BC Government website, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/health-drug-coverage/msp/bc-residents/personal-health-identification/your-bc-services-card

5) Lack of transportation

Youth identified transportation as another key barrier to accessing supports. They reported transportation issues in attempting to access substance use support such as detox or treatment, mental health services, health care, school and employment services, as well as *"getting stuck"* in another community without transportation to return home. Said one youth: *"[When you are] referred to housing or supports that aren't close to you, [you are] having to jump the transit fence and get a ticket."*

In many cases, youth also cited transportation as a barrier to accessing shelter services, so they couldn't access safe housing. This was especially problematic for youth from rural communities who needed to access shelter services in a nearby community.

YOUTH VOICES

" Even if a safe house [or] shelter... has space, there isn't always a way to get there."

" The bus system is not often enough to actually do stuff in the community ... or to get to a shelter. "

The affordability of local transit is a significant barrier to youth experiencing homelessness. In the urban centers near Vancouver, youth spoke about the experience of feeling criminalized when unable to afford the SkyTrain. While technically not a criminal offence, young people reported receiving TransLink fines when they were under 19 and homeless, which followed them into adulthood when they were still accountable for these transit tickets. To obtain a driver's license, youth first need to pay back their transit fines, creating additional barriers to transportation.[78]

Participants also emphasized the barriers that youth in care face in obtaining a driver's license without the same family privilege other youth may have to help them develop driving skills. Often, foster parents don't feel comfortable teaching youth in care to drive. The alternative – driving school – is expensive, and sometimes MCFD will require the youth to help pay for it, which is an additional financial strain for a young person who is already struggling.

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78 Translink, "Fare Infractions," 2019, https://www.translink.ca/Fares-and-Passes/Fare-Infractions.aspx

YOUTH VOICES

" Youth want to feel like they belong."

" [You need more supports] if you don't have family to rely on."

" [There is a] breakdown of the system [when you are] going to a system for help and not getting the resources you need."

" Caseworkers are stuck. The system restricts."

" Young people have to fill in the gaps."

" [You] can't reach your social worker after 4 p.m."

6) Lack of wraparound holistic services

Throughout the province, youth felt a lack of wraparound support services was a significant barrier impacting their ability to leave homelessness. Youth talked about their need to have comprehensive supports that create a sense of belonging for those coming out of homelessness and their need for a wraparound support network that mirrors positive family support.

Because of the lack of resources, youth who are disenfranchised can lose what they do have very quickly. For example, one youth spoke about *"being dropped"* by their counsellor for missing too many appointments. This is problematic as vulnerable youth who have experienced trauma need time to establish trust and a relationship with a service provider. This can result in limited access to the few supports that do exist for youth.

Youth also identified a need for supports to come to the youth and to have an outreach mechanism that is strengths-based and supports connections to community. Youth said it is important to meet young people where they are at. Said one youth: *"[There should be] more meetings at coffee shops rather than panic attack-inducing offices."*

Youth identified service hours as a barrier to accessing the wraparound support they need. Many young people reported that services were only offered between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., with very limited access to evening and weekend supports.

Other youth emphasized the need for emotional support and to have a variety of services and groups that meet their needs. For example, one youth identified a need to have more groups for young dads. To overcome some of these barriers to wraparound services, youth reported a need for centralized service hubs. Some youth said that service hubs would address the barrier of not having a phone when trying to get information about needed supports. Said one youth: *"There's no centralized, informed point of contact to discover and access supports."*

PROMISING PRACTICE

Foundry

The concept behind Foundry is to provide *"integrated health and social services … [by providing a] one-stop-shop for youth to access mental health, substance use services, primary care, social services, and youth, family, and peer supports."* [79] The Foundry began with a successful pilot in downtown Vancouver and has expanded to seven sites in B.C., including Abbotsford, Campbell River, Kelowna, North Shore Vancouver, Penticton, Prince George, Vancouver Granville and Victoria. The Foundry B.C. office is hosted by Providence Health Care and includes 100 partnerships. The Provincial Budget issued in February 2020 said government would expand Foundry centres, "the one-stop shop" centres that bring existing core health and social services together in a single location where young people ages 12-24 can find the care, connection and support they need, both online and in their community. Targets set are for 15 Foundry centres in B.C. in 2020-21, 17 centres by 2021-22 and 19 centres by 2022-23. [80]

https://foundrybc.ca/

[79] Foundry, "Who we are," Foundry, https://foundrybc.ca/who-we-are/.
[80] Government of British Columbia, Budget 2020, MMHA 2020-21 to 2022-23 Service Plan, p. 9.

7) Barriers to Indigenous cultural services

Youth said they experienced many barriers to accessing Indigenous cultural services, resulting in a disconnection from their heritage, family and identity. They felt that the roots of their disconnection stemmed from colonization and urbanization, and cited the ongoing devastating impacts of residential schools and intergenerational trauma. Some youth spoke about their parents being unable to pass down culture because of their own disconnection.

Some Indigenous youth gave examples of not having access to their coming-of-age ceremony, which they felt resulted in further disconnection from culture. *"Fifty per cent of Aboriginal youth in care have not had [their] coming-of-age ceremony. At age 13, you become a man; there are ceremonies and traditions. You don't know this and [are] going into manhood with no direction. They are lost. [It's] part of looking after the spirit."*

YOUTH VOICES

" [There is a] loss of culture due to intergenerational trauma.**"**

" We are all urbanized because of colonization. [It's] hard to represent yourself … [or] to reach out for teachings or get cultural support or direction.**"**

A significant theme that came up repeatedly was the disconnection and loss of cultural identity that occurs for Indigenous youth in care, which was a major issue for forum participants given the stark over-representation of Indigenous youth in the foster system. Said one youth: *"Institutions hold colonial and privileged perspectives which creates barriers."*

YOUTH VOICES

> "Embarrassed to ask questions when [you] don't know culture ... when you grow up in care and [don't] know protocols or traditions. It hurts when people say you don't know."
>
> "Knowing it's okay not to know and if you're learning other Indigenous ways, that is okay. It connects us to who we are regardless. No matter where I go or what, culture connects me to who I am. Sweats are healing, even if it's not my nation."

In many cases, youth highlighted that there were no opportunities to access culture and that social workers were not equipped to support their right to culture even when their cultural heritage was known. One youth said: *"Social workers need more culturally appropriate training. Youth in care don't know what nation they are from. It's how we introduce ourselves. [It] can be shaming not to be able to introduce ourselves that way."*

Forum participants identified barriers to learning cultural protocols from their home nation, which sometimes resulted in experiences of shame and embarrassment.

Youth identified a specific need to address geographic and transportation barriers to accessing their nations' cultural traditions. In many cases, youth face financial barriers to attending sweats or ceremonies that may be out of town. Said one youth: *"[Youth need] to be able to go to the ocean, river and forest to get our own medicines."*

Another common theme young people reported involved barriers to accessing Elders and having opportunities to learn their traditional language – key components in forming cultural identity. Youth were concerned about Elders being in high demand and also slowly passing away with the result that knowledge is being lost. Some youth recommended creating Elder/youth mentor programs, as there are simply not enough opportunities to make these connections. Said one youth: *"Elders are leaving now so it's harder. My Elder mentors have left."*

At three forums, Elders supported the youth who were participating. They were given permission by the youth to stay, which was an exception as the forums were otherwise youth-only events. However, as one youth said: *"Elders ... provide comfort when present with us."*

At that forum, the Elder pointed out that youth in care who are not connected to family face particular dangers without culture: *"If you don't have connection to family, you need support to take care of your spirit."*

SOLUTIONS FROM YOUTH: WHAT SHOULD BE IN THE PLAN

MESSAGE FROM YOUTH AGAINST YOUTH HOMELESSNESS B.C.:

These are the solutions we need government to support. What you are doing is not working and we have been let down too many times in too many ways. Don't tell us you will fix it. Show us.

We are here to advocate for the youth we once were – the youth who are going through the same circumstances and tragedies that we have survived. Each and every one of us is someone's child. What if we were yours'? In some cases, we are, when we are parented by the government through the foster system. Either way, to fix a long-standing problem, we need to totally transform the system.

We are calling for a paradigm shift, as many people automatically see us as broken because of stigma. Many people don't even think youth homelessness is an issue. We are not asking for pity. We are not ashamed! We are proud. You can't tell a youth; you have to show a youth.

We have chosen to be a part of this project and show our identities as we want to have ownership over our experiences and inspire other youth so they can open up and reach out. We believe our purpose is to give voice to the voiceless. It is important to show our communities that we are leading positive community work as this is the ultimate solution to NIMBYism. We want to show the general public that we are doing something around youth homelessness and youth are making a difference!

We are asking government to invest in youth voice, as not all communities have the capacity or resources to support youth with lived expertise to lead change. In the past, decisions were made without our involvement, which led to us missing valuable time with our families. It feels good to finally feel like our voices have value.

Youth voice should be magnified and it should be a legislated requirement to listen!

There is no time to wait.

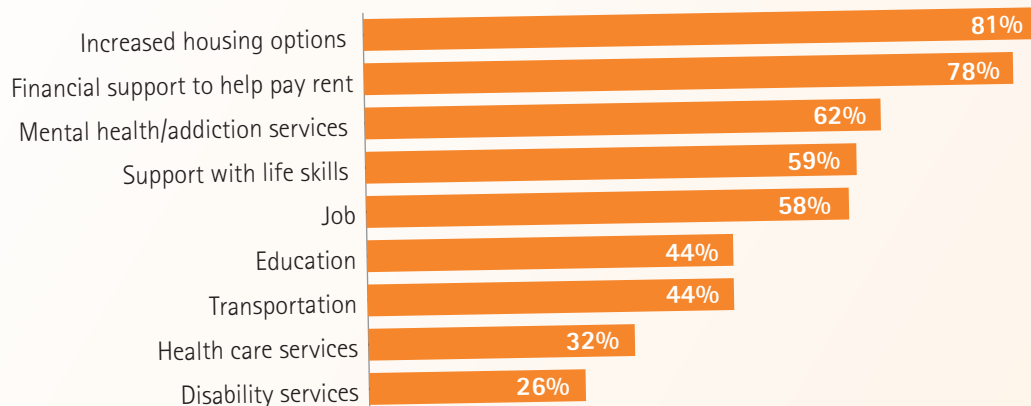Join our Youth First Voices revolution to end youth homelessness in B.C.

All children and youth have a right to a safe and secure home. The provincial government has an unprecedented opportunity to take a leadership role in creating a comprehensive plan to prevent and respond to youth homelessness and, further, to implement solutions that youth with lived expertise have voiced as being most important.

A distinct plan to address youth homelessness is critical, as young people have unique developmental needs that cannot be addressed through the same interventions used for adults. Quick, efficient and compassionate responses to youth homelessness are necessary to reduce the harm to young people and communities and to ensure our province is in compliance with the *UNCRC*. The solutions and recommendations in this section are entirely informed by youth with lived expertise in homelessness. It is imperative that the provincial government listen to these voices of lived expertise and ensure their recommendations are implemented in a timely manner so that every young person can realize their right to housing

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES

Youth who participated in the online survey were asked to select up to five supports that would make the most positive difference in helping youth find or keep adequate housing.

Youth Survey: Select the supports that you think would make the most difference to help youth find or keep adequate housing (n=68)

Support	Percentage
Increased housing options	81%
Financial support to help pay rent	78%
Mental health/addiction services	62%
Support with life skills	59%
Job	58%
Education	44%
Transportation	44%
Health care services	32%
Disability services	26%

Through the forums and online survey, the top solutions B.C. youth identified as key elements that should be included in a provincial plan to end youth homelessness are:

1 Listen to youth: invest in lived expertise leadership

2 Provide access to a continuum of distinct housing options

3 Improve foster care placements to ensure they are providing appropriate supports to meet the needs of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

4 Change MCFD policies around Youth Agreements and Agreements with Young Adults to both prevent and respond to youth homelessness

5 Increase cultural services available to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

6 Improve emergency responses to youth homelessness

7 Increase financial supports, including raising government income assistance rates and providing rental subsidies

8 Increase wraparound community supports available for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

9 Foster youth connections to natural supports and sense of community

10 Improve education opportunities for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

11 Increase opportunities for youth employment

Listen to youth

As part of government's commitment to youth engagement, young peoples' voices of lived expertise in homelessness should come first in the development of a provincial plan. Youth were clear that being listened to is key to preventing and ending youth homelessness in B.C. At all forums, youth recommended that young people with experience be listened to when developing programs, policies or legislation.[81] They believe strongly in the adage *"nothing about us, without us."*

Adults who work with young people – including social workers – sometimes have a paternalistic approach that can diminish youth voices. Youth need to be listened to during child protection investigations and when receiving services to ensure their needs are being met and they are safe. They want increased opportunities to use their hard-won advocacy skills by helping to educate professionals who work with young people and they would also like to be a part of community committees working toward solutions. They further recommend holding more youth lived expertise forums to amplify youth voices.

YOUTH VOICES

"Listen to us as we all have a lot to say. Do more than the bare minimum and do what we've been telling you that we need."

"I took a day off work to come here. I want to start working on the solutions."

"[We need] more youth-led and youth-run programs. Listen to the youth!"

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[81] Lisa Mickleborough, *Leading with lived experience: Youth engagement guidelines for the Child Welfare sector* (Toronto: Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, 2018), 1-21

PROMISING PRACTICE

Youth-Led Groups to End Youth Homelessness

FLOH: Matsqui-Abbotsford Impact Society

FLOH stands for *"Foster system, Life promotion, Opioid dialogue, and Harm reduction/ Homelessness"* and is a *"youth-led, adult-supported project for youth ages 14 to 24 across four communities in B.C.'s Fraser-Salish, Fraser Health region."* [82] FLOH provides a platform for youth with lived expertise to educate their community. This program includes paid youth 'FLOHcilitators' in four B.C. communities in the Fraser-Salish/Fraser Health region: Tri-Cities, Mission, Abbotsford and Chilliwack. As part of their work, they host community dialogues, community connection programs, training/advocacy and peer navigation. Most recently, they hosted the Fraser Valley's first youth-led conference. Unfortunately, this group has run out of funding and is no longer operating, which shows the strong need for the provincial government to invest in youth voice programs.

YEAH: Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness

YEAH stands for *"Youth Educating About Homelessness"* and is a youth-led group that was founded in 2018 as part of the Youth Homelessness Task Force, which includes 50 members from all sectors including non-profits, government, front-line workers and youth. YEAH self-directs projects that members are passionate about and collaborates as a group to create solutions. Most projects have been focused on researching conflict between youth experiencing homelessness and the justice system and hosting a symposium to reconcile those differences. The group also completed a research study of AYA that led to discussion with various levels of government.

Youth Against Youth Homelessness Kamloops

Youth Against Youth Homelessness (YAYH) is a youth-led group with lived expertise of homelessness that is taking action to lead the movement against youth homelessness. This group was founded in 2012 as part of the development of the Kamloops community plan to end youth homelessness and contributes lived expertise to all the work of A Way Home Kamloops, which includes 160 members from all sectors. YAYH includes paid youth advisors and a peer navigator who provide employment and education support. YAYH has received a national award for youth engagement and been mentioned in the Legislature by the local MLA. Most recently, YAYH is working on a youth-led youth homelessness conference to educate decision-makers on youth homelessness. The youth leadership group for this report chose to take the name "Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C." to honour the ground-breaking work that has been completed by the Kamloops young leaders.
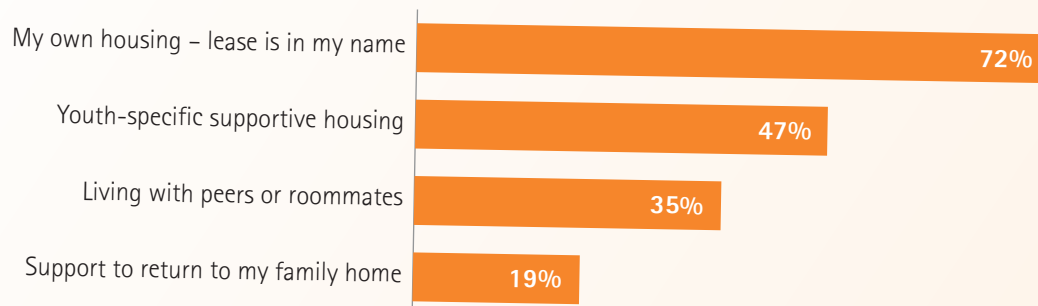
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[82] FLOH, "Home," FLOH, http://www.floh.foundation/.

Youth housing

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES:

Youth who participated in the online survey were asked to identify the best housing option for them based on their personal experiences of homelessness or housing insecurity. The majority (72 per cent) identified having their own housing with the lease in their name as their preferred accommodation. Nearly half of respondents (47 per cent) recommended youth-specific supportive housing as a key solution to ending youth homelessness.

Youth Survey: Based on your experience which options would be most helpful to you? (n=68)

Option	Percentage
My own housing – lease is in my name	72%
Youth-specific supportive housing	47%
Living with peers or roommates	35%
Support to return to my family home	19%

One of the top solutions that youth across the province prioritized was to increase the number of youth-specific housing units as a strategy to both prevent and solve youth homelessness. Government needs to reduce the barriers that youth face in accessing existing housing options by improving accessibility. This requires the development of low-barrier housing options with reduced eligibility requirements and expectations. No youth should have to experience homelessness in order to access the housing or supports they need.

Young people want to see barriers reduced through open-door policies that don't require a government referral or a guardian's permission. In particular, government should dedicate a certain number of housing units through BC Housing specifically to youth aging out of the foster system or youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Government should also provide distinct LGBTQ2S+ housing to alleviate discrimination faced by that segment of the homeless youth population.

Youth need affordable housing options that are safe and accessible to those on government assistance and to those with no source of income. They want rental subsidies for youth and, further, they want to ensure that youth are made aware of subsidies and financial support for housing. To do this, government should create a youth homelessness rental subsidy program and work closely with youth-serving organizations to distribute rental subsidies, so that youth are also connected with youth-specific supports to sustain housing. Government should adopt an approach to administering the rental subsidies through community organizations similar to the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP).

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION PROGRAM

The Homelessness Prevention Program provides portable rental subsidies to people at risk of homelessness through BC Housing. Youth transitioning out of care are identified as a target population for these subsidies. The Homelessness Prevention Program (rental subsidies) has helped provide housing to youth who would have otherwise been homeless. In 2018/19, there were 1,356 youth at risk who received rent supplements and support services through the Homeless Prevention Program (HPP). This represents 12.86 per cent of total HPP clients. A similar trend of usage has been seen in the first two quarters of 2019/20. [83]

[83] BC Housing, email communication, November 29, 2019

Most important, all youth said government needs to fund a variety of youth-specific housing options to support youth choice and voice in what types of housing best meet their needs as they transition to adulthood. Youth identified five housing models that government should prioritize in its plan:

1. Youth mentorship model

In this model, a supportive adult acts as a role model and provides opportunities to learn life skills through mentorship. Often a youth will live in a basement suite or in a home with a supportive roommate where they can practise independence with live-in mentorship. The key to success is ensuring the right match between mentor and youth. In some cases, youth identified that a youth mentorship housing model would be a good alternative to the foster system if foster care wasn't working for youth.

2. Transition housing

Transition housing, as a key part of the continuum, is a model that needs to be increased across B.C. as a crucial part of transitioning to adulthood. This model includes 24/7 supports who can provide emotional support, understanding, crisis response, advocacy and support with life planning for youth as they prepare to live independently. It is important that transition housing programs provide youth with their own space and privacy. They need to be low-barrier, inclusive and have flexible timelines so that youth are not forced to move before they are ready.

3. Scattered site housing

In this model, a non-profit organization takes out a lease on a residential market suite such as an apartment or basement suite and becomes the legal tenant. The landlord is safeguarded as they are legally renting to the non-profit and the youth moves in as a program participant. Some organizations have scattered site options where youth live independently or can also provide communal options where youth live with peers.

Scattered site housing breaks down barriers to renting such as discrimination and allows youth to develop rental references in a supportive environment. Many programs transfer the lease over to the youth's name after they have completed the program and the housing unit then becomes a permanent home for the youth.[84]

Scattered site housing units represent a positive way to bridge the gap for youth into the rental market and overcome barriers such as discrimination by landlords. For young people who are ready for it, a main strength of this model is it is permanent housing that simulates the residential tenancy experience with privacy as they work toward independence. Scattered site housing should be in a safe location and provide a continuation of supports and mentorship that help youth develop life skills. Currently, there is little access to this type of housing for most youth in B.C.

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[84] The scattered site housing model is traditionally used in adult housing-first programs and has been adapted to youth by grassroots non-profits such as Aunt Leah's Place and A Way Home Kamloops' Wrapforce Youth Housing First program. See textbox.

YOUTH VOICES

" [We need to] change BC Housing rules such as the [use of] the [adult] Vulnerability Assessment Tool.**"**

" [There should be] guaranteed BC Housing for youth aging out cause [the] government is your parent. [There should be] no two-year time limit [for transition housing, so you] can move when you are ready.[83] [We need a combination of] more supportive housing and regular BC Housing [units] to meet our needs.**"**

" [We need a] SAFER BC Housing program for former youth in care or low-income [youth].**"**

" Youth-specific housing that is long-term and starts before they age out.**"**

4. Permanent supportive housing

The permanent supportive housing model is for youth who need long-term supportive housing with 24/7 staffing or supportive "house parents," such as a Community Living BC homeshare model. Permanent supportive housing provides obvious benefits such as stability, security and consistency but, in addition, it offers young people the chance to gain life skills and avoid feelings of isolation. It is important that youth have choices and autonomy over creating their own routine and budgeting to avoid feeling like this housing option is an extension of foster care. One caveat: youth cautioned against allowing this type of housing to become a money-making scheme that could put young people at risk.

5. Independent housing

Independent housing is a good option for independence, freedom and choice and *"having no rules except your own."* However, there are risks that government must take steps to mitigate. In some cases, youth reported cases of *"house takeovers"* – when others come into a youth's residence and turn it into a party location – and that a lot of youth get evicted as a result. To prevent these experiences, there should be an extension of support and youth advocates accessible to youth in market housing.

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[85] Although, some housing providers may create a two-year time limit, this is not prescribed by BC Housing.

PROMISING PRACTICE

Youth Housing First – Aunt Leah's Society

Aunt Leah's Society was one of the first organizations in B.C. to develop Youth Housing First and to adapt the model to young people in or from the foster system to break down barriers to securing stable housing. Aunt Leah's operates from what it calls its "Family Model of Support." Basically, Aunt Leah's looks at what families are doing for their young adults and attempts to replicate that for former youth in care, as they should have the same level of support as they transition to independence. Aunt Leah's housing programs include:

- *The Friendly Landlord Network* – a Metro Vancouver-wide network of homeowners and property managers, who rent suites to youth transitioning out of government care. Friendly Landlords receive market rent and tenancy support from a coalition of experienced youth-serving organizations.

- *Housing and Education Link Program Subsidy (HELPS)* – The HELPS program provides housing subsidies to former foster kids so they can continue to pursue their education in a supportive space. Youth participating in HELPS can focus on their studies while making positive steps toward independence with the help of Aunt Leah's support staff.

- *The Link: Housing First program* – a further extension of The Link program, which provides at-risk or homeless participants immediate access to housing and regular support services. The Housing First program ensures that youth in great need can enter difficult rental markets, avoid homelessness and develop essential life skills. This program includes rent subsidies for former youth in care.

- *Thresholds program* – provides supported housing and services for new moms at risk of losing custody of their child. Moms live in a safe, caring home environment where they can learn how to care for their baby with the guidance of Aunt Leah's staff and a Family Support Worker.

- *Link Supportive Housing* – a new supportive housing program for youth who have aged out of government care. Using a scattered site model, this program has basement suites throughout Metro Vancouver dedicated to housing young people aging out of foster care. Supports range from emergency housing and supportive housing to a straight rental agreement.[86]

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[86] Sarah Stewart and Jason Preece, Personal communication, January 31, 2019

PROMISING PRACTICE

Youth Housing First – A Way Home Kamloops Society

A Way Home Kamloops Society has developed a Youth Housing First program for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The term Youth Housing First was developed to emphasize that youth voice and youth-led housing that honours lived expertise should be a central philosophy to the program. A Way Home Kamloops manages 24 scattered site units of housing that include both communal (roommate) and individual units of housing. This includes a combination of houses, apartments, and townhouses. There are some designated housing units for youth moms such as Stork's Landing and Safe Suites for Young Moms.

A Way Home Kamloops liaisons with property owners, takes out the lease and acts as a supportive landlord to the youth. Rent is subsidized through partnerships with the business community, which sponsors a youth's rental subsidy for one year.

Youth enter into the Youth Housing First program and receive a case manager and program unit of housing. Youth develop a wellness plan and work toward their goals with support from an inter-agency team called the Wrapforce. At the end of the year, youth can graduate from the program and the lease is transferred over to their name, which then becomes permanent housing. Youth continue to receive an extension of support along their housing journey.

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION PROGRAM

BC Housing funds the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) which is administered by community-based agencies and homelessness outreach providers. The HPP assists people in at-risk groups facing homelessness by providing rent supplements and support services to help them access rental housing in the private market. Youth transitioning out of the foster care system are one of the at-risk groups HPP targets. BC Housing is looking to expand HPP, resources permitting.[87]

As of June 30, 2019, there were 1,213 HPP rent supplements provided in B.C. for which youth are eligible to apply. Of these, 140 HPP rent supplements specifically target youth.

List of HPP Rent Supplement Serving Primarily Youth	Community	Number of HPP Rent Supplements
Covenant House Vancouver	Vancouver	20
The Watari Research Association	Vancouver	30
Threshold Housing Society	Victoria	15
Raincity Housing and Support Society	Vancouver	10
The Tamitik Status of Women Association	Kitimat	15
Pacific Community Resources Society	Vancouver	10
Archway Society for Domestic Peace	Vernon	20
Providence Health Care Society	Vancouver	10
Aunt Leah's Independent Lifeskills Society	New Westminster	10
Total		**140**

[87] BC Housing, email communication, August 31, 2019

Improve foster care placements

When youth were asked how to prevent youth homelessness, the most common answer was to improve foster care placements. Youth across the province recommend that MCFD conduct proper background checks and ongoing monitoring of foster parents, such as unannounced check-ins, to improve foster home safety. Government should also create the opportunity for youth to report caregivers through different methods such as online forms or through advocates. Youth should be empowered to have a voice in how funds that are allocated to foster parents are spent, and MCFD should monitor spending practices. Government should ensure youth in care are provided with a rights package and are regularly reminded of their rights.

A key solution to improving foster care placements is to make sure a foster home is a good fit for the youth. Government should ensure that youth in care have a voice, choices and

YOUTH VOICES

"Money would be tracked and foster parents would be held accountable."

"[There are some] people not fostering out of care, just for [a] paycheque."

"It's like a game of tennis – just being tossed around from court to court. [This home] don't accept you [and you are] bounced back."

decision-making power in what type of placement would best support their needs. Youth should be offered other options if a foster home isn't a fit. When youth are housed with a good fit, there is less likelihood of moving. Frequent moves can have enormous impacts on youth in care and their sense of stability. When a move is unavoidable, government must ensure that youth can move their belongings in appropriate boxes – not garbage bags – to preserve some dignity.

Youth want to see flexible guidelines in foster homes, including an end to the practice of locking up food. There should be designated foster homes that provide harm-reduction supports with caregivers who have specific knowledge and skills around supporting youth with substance use.

Government should make ongoing professional development and training opportunities available to foster parents. Many youth recommended reducing caseloads of social workers so they are able to adequately support youth. Youth recommend that social workers be available after hours and provide flexible support that meets youths' needs even after age 19.

Youth Agreement and Agreements with Young Adults policies

Two key policy areas need to change to have the most significant impact in reducing youth homelessness:

1. Improve access to Youth Agreements and ensure they are approached using a rights-based lens

Youth Agreements should be approached from a rights-based perspective and all efforts should be made to be flexible and reduce barriers to eligibility. Youth who say they can't return home should not be denied support if they are experiencing family conflict, even if MCFD deems them able to return home. MCFD should provide alternatives to address family conflict such as meditation and counselling support. Youth in care who have placements that are not meeting their needs should be supported by MCFD, which should develop an appropriate, supportive placement that is trauma-informed, or support the youth in their choice to access a Youth Agreement. The Youth Agreement rates should be increased across all regions, so youth can secure adequate housing that is safe. Youth also recommend reducing the number of abrupt *"kick-offs"* from Youth Agreements and supporting youth to develop healthy transition plans.
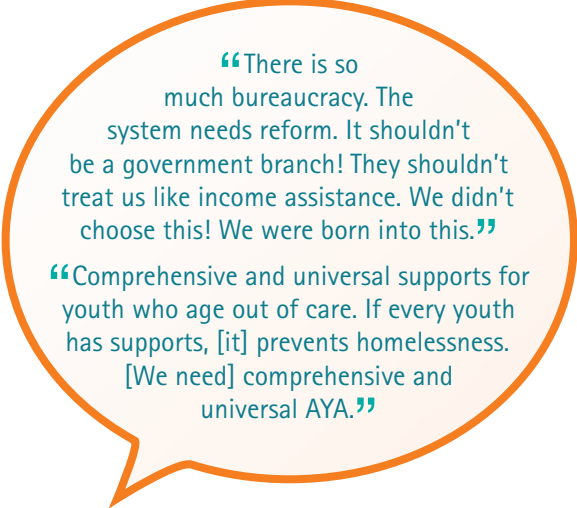
"Options for young people in care if a foster home doesn't meet their needs. [Provide] what works."

"Better, easier access to Youth Agreements."

2. Provide comprehensive, inclusive and adequate aftercare support through the Agreements with Young Adults program

Transitioning out of care is a major concern for young people in foster care. Youth are clear about the need for tangible supports post-19, and recommend that all former youth in care be automatically eligible for Agreements with Young Adults at age 19 instead of having to jump through hoops to obtain support. Support should begin well before aging out with comprehensive transition planning and life skills training.

YOUTH VOICES

"There is so much bureaucracy. The system needs reform. It shouldn't be a government branch! They shouldn't treat us like income assistance. We didn't choose this! We were born into this."

"Comprehensive and universal supports for youth who age out of care. If every youth has supports, [it] prevents homelessness. [We need] comprehensive and universal AYA."

Key to supporting youth after aging out is the Agreements with Young Adults program. However, in its current form, AYA only helps those who are most successful. This program needs to be re-imagined to be flexible, accessible and meet all the needs of youth aging out of care. Comprehensive AYA is key to preventing youth homelessness and government should ensure that, as part of the overhaul of AYA, the support rate is increased. Although there has been a recent rate increase, it has not been enough.

Government must also improve accessibility to life skills programs through AYA. Currently, although AYA has been amended to include life skills programs, there is no funding provided to non-profit organizations to enable them to provide programming.

Government should reduce age barriers to accessing the tuition waiver program and should consider establishing trust funds for former youth in care who are aging out, similar to what some youth with family privilege might have. Youth recommend that the government waive the two-year requirement for time spent in care in order to access the tuition waiver.

And finally, government should implement a more personalized approach for working with youth after they age out to support their transition to adulthood.

Cultural services

Young people across the province are clear that there is an urgent need to increase Indigenous cultural services and programs.

Elders are highly valued by Indigenous youth, and youth should have frequent opportunities to connect with Elders to learn about cultural identity. In particular, young people need support to make sense of intergenerational trauma related to residential schools and to understand and preserve their cultural heritage. Youth also need support in finding other ways to know their heritage such as family tree tracing.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre

This organization is providing cultural supports and innovative services that are making a difference in the lives of Indigenous and homeless youth. The centre's housing program "Nuutsumuut Lelum" includes 25 units of affordable housing with four designated for youth transitioning out of care. This is an example of how housing programs can address youth homelessness by designating specific units to youth. Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre designed the program to support the integration of youth into community as they transition to independence. As some youth in the foster care system do not have relationships or permanency beyond 19, this housing program is an opportunity to create these connections and build a supportive community around the youth.

The centre's Youth Advisory Council consists of 10 Indigenous youth in and from the care system. The council has three objectives: peer support, sustainability (permanency), and systems change. As one youth said *"I hope for the next youth who goes through the system that it will be a better experience."*

The youth council advocated to the city to obtain a bus stop in front of a youth safe house to improve accessibility for their peers. Youth are empowered to create change and attend provincial youth leadership conferences such as Gathering Our Voices. Youth are provided cultural supports and are connected to community supports.

The centre provides community-based alternative education programs to help youth complete Grade 12. There are currently 97 youth enrolled in Tsawalk Learning Centre. The school provides a "Land and Sea" program, in which youth are taught traditional harvesting, salmon fishing, gathering herbs, etc.

Annually, youth are supported to attend Tribal Journeys. This year, 21 youth attended and managed their own canoe.

Email communication, Chris Beaton, January 4, 2020.

YOUTH VOICES

"MCFD is another name for residential school. [It] focuses on all our children impacted in trauma. Our youth may not be able to be at home, but extended family could be there. Moving children from home to home is not a way of giving a better life. Show the importance of spirit in your [youth homlessness] report. Youth have broken spirits but are resilient just as our ancestors were. Being resilient to stand up and have a voice and be heard and not be another document on shelf. Look at generations of disconnection from spirit."

Government should ensure that an Indigenous lens is applied to services, particularly in the foster system. Indigenous cultures should infuse the child welfare system and Indigenous families must be supported to stay together to begin addressing the intergenerational impacts of genocide on Indigenous people.[88]

The education system should provide free language courses and support for youth to learn about their cultural identity.

There should also be more cultural housing opportunities and the number of housing units available through Indigenous housing societies should be increased.

The justice system should take a restorative – rather than punitive – approach that supports rehabilitation that reconnects youth back to culture and community.

Youth need culturally based detox and rehabilitative services for substance use, including opportunities to live on the land during detox, and to attend healing lodges designed for youth.

Emergency responses

Improving responses to youth homelessness requires a two-pronged approach. Government must: (1) improve the shelter system and (2) improve the investigation process.

1. Shelters:

Shelters are an important part of the emergency response to youth homelessness, but should not be considered an appropriate placement for youth in care. Time spent in shelters should be rare and brief, if at all. Youth with lived expertise re-imagined the emergency response to youth homelessness and what elements shelters should embody to be more inclusive to youth experiencing homelessness. For example, some youth believe that shelters should be low-barrier so youth are immediately able to have their basic needs met. That includes reducing oppressive rules that youth must follow to *"hold their bed."* Staff must also work with youth to identify a safe person to report to, rather than simply reporting to their parent. Additionally, MCFD should not influence who accesses the shelter or force youth to return home or to their foster home if they are fleeing those places.

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[88] National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019

The shelter response to youth homelessness must be re-imagined by increasing supports and reducing barriers to access, such as being available to complete intakes of youth 24/7 and relaxing the belongings limit.

Additionally, youth shelters should adopt a harm-reduction philosophy. Addiction may be a youth's only way to cope and they shouldn't be forced to choose between their addiction and having somewhere safe to go. Shelters must provide emergency housing options for both youth who are trying to maintain recovery and those who are actively using and need harm-reduction support. Shelters should provide a supportive environment with staff who can give community referrals to help youth access next-step housing.

It is important that shelters also be available to youth during the day by removing guidelines that force youth out in the morning. In addition, shelters must reduce length-of-stay restrictions to give youth time to find permanent housing.

Government must provide funding for more youth shelters and for shelters that are specific to sub-populations such as LGBTQ2S+ youth. Government should also improve the safety of shelters by creating safe spaces for youth who are transitioning such as specific shelters for youth ages 19 to 25.

Because shelters often fill up, there is a need to create host homes for youth if shelters are full to provide them with a safe place to go as a back-up plan.

2. Investigations

To help prevent youth homelessness, MCFD must improve investigations into child protection concerns. Social workers and staff must listen to youth and their perspectives should be given just as much weight and consideration as adults' views.

YOUTH VOICES

"Listen to the kid!! Society is wrong and they are being abused."

"Reconnect [youth shelter in Prince George] offers youth shelter and food there day to day [that I can access] whenever I am hungry or need energy. There's always other youth there. [They] offer programs and services, [and] good food. We need another place like that."

Youth homelessness should be considered a protection concern by MCFD. For example, if a youth is kicked out, they should be considered abandoned; if a youth is not accepted at home for being gay, the situation should be assessed as emotional harm. As youth homelessness meets the criteria for a Youth Agreement under the *Standards for Youth Support Services and Agreements*,[89] youth should be provided access to supports.

Young people should also be made aware of how to report abuse or homelessness. There should be opportunities to report at school or to gain anonymous help.

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[89] MCFD, Standards for Youth Support Services and Agreements, May 17, 2004

PROMISING PRACTICE

Host Homes

Social Planning Cowichan just launched a six-month pilot "Host Homes" as a responsive solution to youth homelessness. Youth ages 16 to 26 are matched with a host family that provides youth with a private room and housing for six months. This pilot program will match six to eight youth in the Cowichan area with host families. If the pilot is successful, the program will be expanded throughout the Cowichan Valley.[90]
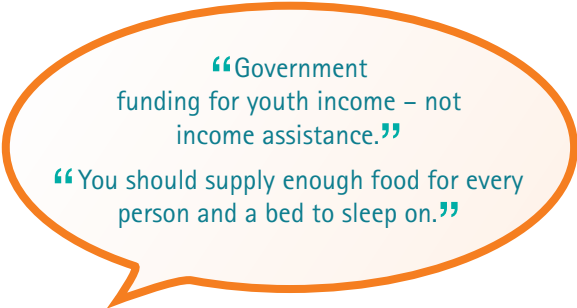
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[90] "Host Homes Cowichan", accessed December 29, 2019, https://www.hosthomescowichan.ca/hosts.html
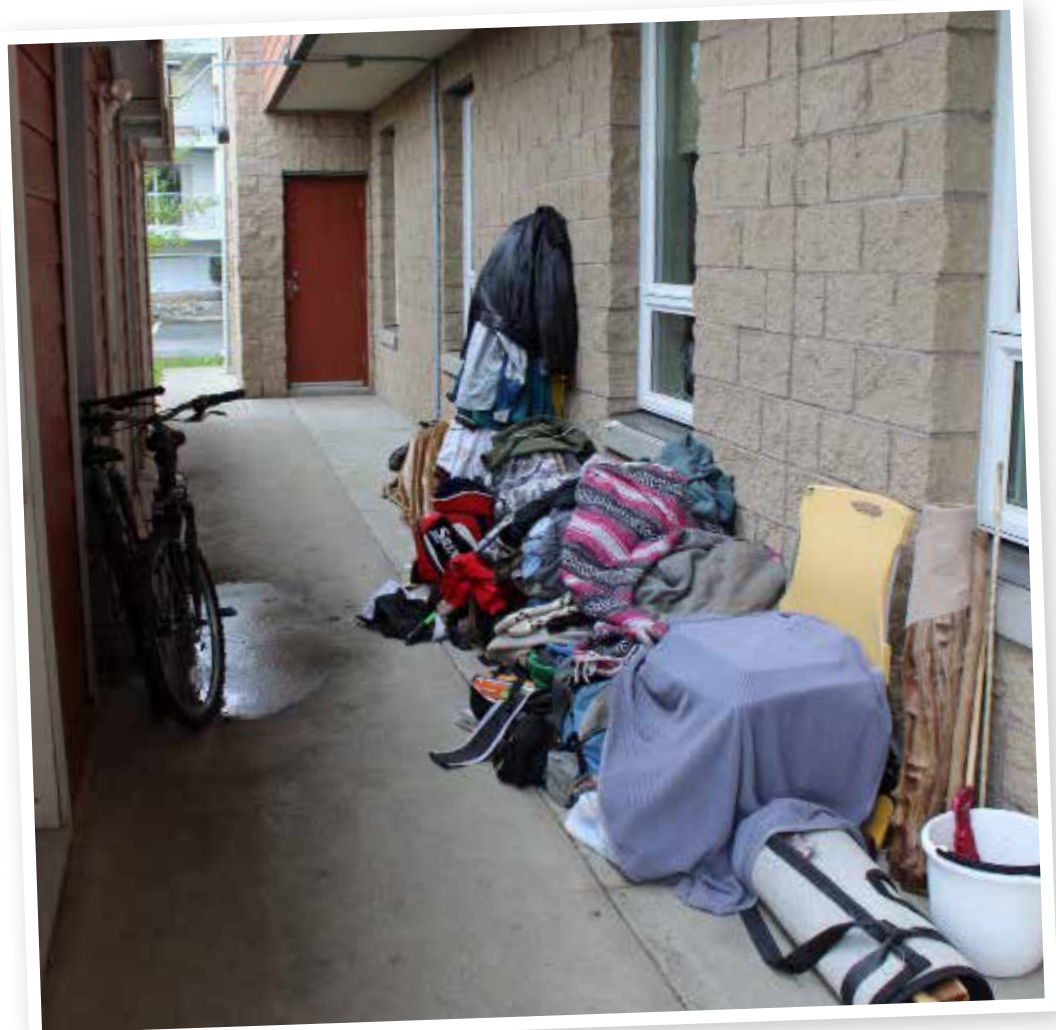
Financial supports

The provincial government needs to increase financial support to prevent and respond to youth homelessness.

YOUTH VOICES

❝Government funding for youth income – not income assistance.**❞**

❝You should supply enough food for every person and a bed to sleep on.**❞**

Specifically, young people recommend increasing the basic income for youth experiencing homelessness so they are able to meet their basic needs. For example, government should consider providing youth under 18 with the child tax benefit if they are not living at home. Government should consider developing a distinct youth income support program that reduces the barriers to accessing underage income assistance. Income assistance should be flexible and overcome systemic barriers by providing youth with immediate financial support that prevents and responds to youth homelessness in an effective way.

Government must also raise the rates for Income Assistance and PWD funding, as it is impossible to find safe housing with the current shelter rate. There should also be distinct youth rental subsidies that are flexible and easy to access.

The provincial government practice of clawing back youth earnings from employment revenue off their basic income assistance cheque must stop. This reduces youth incentive to get off government assistance during a crucial development stage where every opportunity to transcend poverty should be incentivized and supported.[91]

Community supports

A key solution to end youth homelessness is to increase the supports available to young people. Youth experiencing homelessness may require more intensive supports than adults, such as support to wake up and be on time for appointments by having someone accompany them. Government must ensure that the level of support youth receive mirrors the family privilege that other youth may have. Government needs to re-create family privilege for these youth.

Youth also need long-term supports to aid their transition into adulthood such as housing support workers, youth workers and counsellors. Specifically, government must ensure distinct support services for young adults over 19. Those supports need to be in an outreach capacity and *"come to the youth,"* including individual, peer and group models of support. Community service organizations should coordinate services to provide a wraparound *"web of support"* that meets a young person's holistic needs.

Government must increase awareness among youth on how to access supports by providing them with information. Strategies should include community maps of services,

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[91] All single recipients of Income Assistance receive a $400-per-month earnings exemption to encourage their participation in the work force. If the person has a Persons with Disability designation, they qualify for up to $12,000 of earnings exemptions annually.

signs and bus advertisements. Schools should teach youth how to connect to supports that could prevent or stop abuse and resources should not require a referral from government agencies to access support.

Government should provide increased support for mental health and substance use issues including immediate access to free counselling for any young person who has experienced abuse, homelessness or the foster system. There must be a continuum of substance use supports, including harm reduction, for all youth, including those under 19.

Youth also emphasized the need to have distinct services for trauma that are independent of existing mental health services. Youth said that trauma is not something that can necessarily be treated with the same traditional mental health therapies, such as outcome-based services, groups or medication. Government should ensure professionals from all sectors, including schools, housing and service providers, are trained in trauma-informed practices so that youth have the support they need.
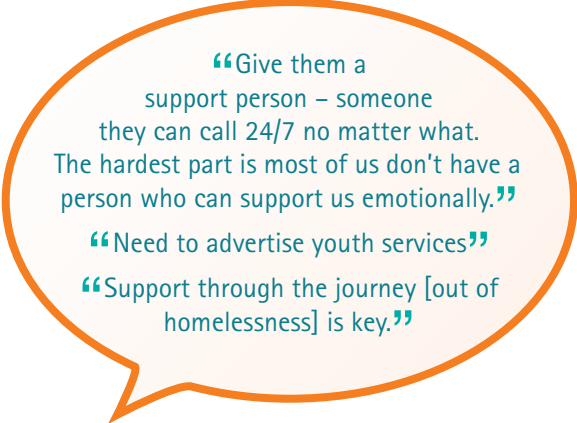
Finally, government must ensure transit is available throughout the province to increase access to youth support services.

Natural supports

Natural supports (unpaid supports such as family members, mentors, etc.) and a sense of community are key solutions to preventing and responding to youth homelessness. Youth need supportive responses to homelessness that meet relational needs for a sense of belonging.

Government must ensure it provides adequate support to families before crisis hits. This should involve the provision of free family counselling, supportive therapy, financial support and mediation. Supports should also include educating parents on the needs of youth and supporting youth to reconnect with home if they have left their homes. Youth also recommend that, if there are child protection concerns, kinship care with extended family members should be explored if viable.

YOUTH VOICES

"Give them a support person – someone they can call 24/7 no matter what. The hardest part is most of us don't have a person who can support us emotionally."

"Need to advertise youth services"

"Support through the journey [out of homelessness] is key."

Government must further ensure that, if youth are reconnected to home, they have a continuation of past supports so that the family does not fall back into old patterns. It is also crucial that supports listen to the youth, as it may not be safe for youth to return home. In these cases, youth can still be supported to have family as natural supports by learning how to set boundaries or define new relationships.

Where youth don't have family privilege, government should ensure the development of a community of natural supports for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Youth want communities to understand that their experiences of homelessness are not a choice and want government to help combat the stigma and discrimination they face. Laws should be amended to bar discrimination based on stigmatizing experiences such as being in care or on income assistance. Government should ensure that youth have mentorship opportunities that can assist in building a natural support network. Said one participant: *"Youth want to feel like they belong."*

Education opportunities

Education is a key pathway to preventing and ending youth homelessness. Schools can be places where youth without family privilege, such as youth in care, can find a sense of belonging with the proper supports. Youth need a flexible approach to education and one that can be adapted to individuals. Government should build on the promising practice of schools that offer flexible, self-paced programs with an opportunity to work from home or to apply as a mature student. There should be increased public awareness about these opportunities to achieve a GED. Government should also consider expanding high school programs that support training and work development such as trades programs.

To maximize chances of success, government must ensure holistic supports at schools. Young people want access to counsellors and on-site supports with opportunities to learn about community resources while at school. Many youth would benefit from having support workers who can help them navigate the education system.

Youth also need opportunities within the education system to learn "adulting skills" such as emotional literacy, social wellness, work experience and life skills. Said one youth: *"While in high school, [we] need to learn about adulting."*

Finally, youth recommend that post-secondary education be free for all youth who have experienced homelessness or the foster-care system. The tuition waiver program for former youth in care is a promising practice, but does not include the cost of textbooks and has eligibility restrictions. Youth recommend that school supplies should be included as part of the financial support. Additionally, youth are calling on government to remove restrictions such as the two-year in-care eligibility rule and the 75 per cent course load mandate. The tuition waiver strategy should be inclusive of all youth who have experienced homelessness to ensure that every young person has an opportunity to transcend poverty and to prevent future episodes of homelessness. Said one youth: *"Be like other countries [with] free education. [Let's] get rid of student debt."*

Employment opportunities

To prevent and respond to youth homelessness, government needs to increase opportunities for employment. Programs should provide pre-employment support, including resume building, interviewing skills, training, volunteering, haircuts, work gear and certificates such as Food Safe. Similar to education programs, employment programs need to be flexible, provide holistic supports and reduce barriers such as age restrictions. Young people need supportive environments to gain work experience in their chosen career. These can include work experience, job-creation programs or paid internships.

Other possibilities include drop-in employment programs for youth experiencing homelessness to obtain extra income by helping to clean up the community. Additionally, youth say that the minimum wage should reflect the cost of living.

YOUTH VOICES

"Employers need to try youth out and, if it doesn't work, then they need to try and help the youth find another job or position in that company that they can do."

" [There should be] city work when [youth are] homeless [to] pick up litter, etc. A drop-in job place … [to] get food."

CONCLUSION

This Youth First Voices report is an urgent call to action for our provincial government. B.C. has an unprecedented opportunity to create a provincial plan to end youth homelessness that will maximize opportunities to coordinate the response to youth homelessness with a local and federal commitment to change. This is a crucial opportunity for the B.C. government to take a leadership role and support communities to create the much-needed services and responses that youth are crying out for. Many youth spoke about an end to homelessness being so much more than physical bricks and mortar, but also including a sense of belonging and connection within their communities. Our government should champion a provincial plan that will help lead communities in developing a shared responsibility to invest in young peoples' inclusion and relief of homelessness.

The most important action our government can take to end youth homelessness is to listen to the youth and put Youth First Voices first. Youth voice should be legislated as a requirement within a provincial plan to end youth homelessness. Our hope is that this report informs the foundation of a Homelessness Action Plan as lived expertise should be recognized as a crucial base for any policy designed to alleviate youth homelessness.

The youth leaders behind this report are self-organizing to create change, including developing groups of youth in their communities to advocate for the solutions that will prevent and end youth homelessness. They are also continuing this very important work of elevating the voices of lived expertise through the B.C. Coalition to End Youth Homelessness. This provides a valuable opportunity for government to continue the conversation with young people who have solutions.

Youth shared their voices to inform this report that provides government with the key elements that should be included in a provincial plan. They did this in hopes that no other young person will have to experience the trauma of having nowhere to go. Government can and must invest in the youth of B.C. by developing a youth-informed provincial plan to eradicate youth homelessness in our province.

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

That the provincial government develop a plan to end youth homelessness in B.C. This plan should be developed and implementation begun by January 2021.

This report prioritizes direct youth voice, and youth who have experienced homelessness have clearly spoken through its pages.

The views of these young people, who have lived expertise in homelessness, have not previously been sought or heard. Yet their input is critical to informing any action intended to address the issue of youth homelessness in B.C. As this report clearly points out, a plan to address adult homelessness would not deal with the unique – and often very different – needs of homeless youth. The need for a youth-specific plan is clear.

This report recommends that the provincial government, led by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, with assistance from other ministries and community organizations, create and implement an action plan to address youth homelessness. The plan should be informed by the solutions offered by the youth who participated in this review and government should continue to seek input from youth with lived expertise as well as the extensive network of service providers who work with them as it develops this plan.

There is no time to wait.

Listen to the youth.

APPENDICES

About the forum participants

Forum Participants n=163
Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

		Count	Percentage
Gender	Female	66	41%
	Male	65	40%
	Non–Binary/Transgender	12	7%
	No response	20	12%
Age	Under 13	2	1%
	13 to 15	23	14%
	16 to 18	43	26%
	19 to 21	28	17%
	22 to 24	34	21%
	25 and older	12	7%
	No response	21	13%
Indigenous Identity	Indigenous	76	47%
	Non–Indigenous	66	40%
	No response	21	13%
	First Nation	30	18%
	Métis	16	10%
	First Nation/Métis	5	3%
	Inuit	2	1%
	Did not specify	23	14%

About the survey participants

Survey Participants n=68
Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

		Count	Percentage
Gender	Female	44	65%
	Male	19	26%
	Non-Binary/Transgender	5	7%
	No response	1	1%
LGBTQ2S+		22	32%
Age	13 to 15	4	6%
	16 to 18	17	25%
	19 to 21	9	13%
	22 to 24	18	26%
	25 and older	17	25%
	No response	3	4%
Indigenous Identity	Indigenous	18	26%
	First Nation	10	15%
	Métis	7	10%
	Unknown Indigenous Ancestry	1	1%
MCFD Involvement prior to first homelessness	Yes	33	49%
	No	28	41%
	Don't Know/No Response	7	10%
Location	Metro Vancouver/Fraser Valley	29	43%
	Kootenays	11	16%
	Vancouver Island	10	15%
	Thompson Cariboo	10	15%
	Okanagan	3	4%
	Other/No Response	5	7%

WHAT IS THE FOSTER SYSTEM? – DEFINITIONS OF SERVICES

Throughout this report, youth speak about a variety of different placement options within the foster system. In this context, given that we did not require youth to differentiate between specific types of care experiences (e.g., group home placement or foster home), the "foster system" can refer to any type of care. Because of the open-endedness of the term, readers should therefore avoid drawing conclusions about foster homes or assuming the youth are referring to a specific caregiver.

Aboriginal Agency Resource: includes foster homes, group homes, institutions and other resources that are delivering services under contract to a Delegated Aboriginal Agency. These resources may be operated by a non-profit society, private agency or an individual.

Adoption: the child will be referred to an adoption section of MCFD for the recruitment of an appropriate adoptive home.

Bed Subsidy Home Services: services are contracted by MCFD on an annual or more frequent basis with private individuals or non-profit societies. Generally, the services include basic care and nurturing on a 24-hour basis, with guaranteed emergency placement for individuals or family groups. A bed subsidy home may have capacity for one to six children.

Child Services: when specific services are provided for children who are: in care, taken in charge or have a youth service or Youth Agreement.

Children in Care: children who are in the custody, care or guardianship of a Director (*CFCS Act*) or Director of Adoption (*Adoption Act*).

Continuing Custody Order: the Provincial Director becomes the sole guardian of the child and the Public Trustee becomes the guardian of the child's estate.

Contracted Resources: also called Specialized Residential Service. Includes bed subsidy homes, group homes, staffed/specialized child care resources, intensive child care resources, receiving and assessment homes, planning programs and satellite home programs. They may be operated by a non-profit society, private agency or an individual.

Family Care Home: means a family or persons approved by and funded by the Director, to care for children who are in the care, custody and guardianship of the Director.

Family Service Request: are intended to enhance family functioning, to preserve family integrity and to offer assistance to families with respect to child development and parenting skills.

continued

Foster Home: means a family or persons approved by and funded by the Director, to care for children who are in the care, custody and guardianship of the Director. Family care services are provided from private homes lived in and maintained by foster parents. Family care homes include Restricted, Regular, Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 homes. Parents who provide family care services are referred to as family care parents, foster parents or foster family.

Group Home: services are contracted by MCFD on an annual or more frequent basis with private individuals, organizations or non-profit societies. Generally, the services include 24-hour skilled parenting and child care services, a structured family model, group and individual counselling and activities, and programming for individual children designed to achieve the specific goals of the child's plan of care. A group home may have capacity for between three to eight children.

Independent Living: this program provides financial and emotional support to an eligible temporary or continuing custody child in care who is 17 years of age or over. Its objective is to provide the youth with the experience of living independently and enhancing their independent living skills.

Intensive Child Care Resource: provides short-term, intensive, individualized services and programs to children with severe and profound behavioural or emotional disorders.

Level 1 Family Care: family care homes provide care for children who present average to moderately challenging behaviour.

Level 2 Family Care: family care homes provide care for children who present moderate to severely challenging behaviour and/or moderate to severe degree of risk to self or others and/or property.

Level 3 Family Care: family care homes provide care for children who present extremely challenging behaviour and/or extreme risk to self, others or property.

Missing/Runaway: youth who are AWOL from their usual resource. They may be in a known location which is not approved by MCFD or at an unknown location.

Non-Ministry Resource: placement types which include living independently, parents/relatives, adoption, other resources (hospitals, jail), AWOL, no fixed address and Aboriginal resources.

Respite: refers to out-of-home care provided by the Director to a child with whom there is a support services agreement.

Supports: means any specialized services or youth supports to meet the individual's needs.

Therapeutic Network Home: provides services similar to staffed/residential programs. Specialized intervention in a family setting supported by a defined network of similar family settings.

Youth Agreement: May provide one or more services such as residential, educational, or other support services and/or financial assistance.

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