

# What We Know About Youth Homelessness

25 - 40% of youth experiencing homelessness self-identified as LGBTQ



## Youth in shelters

- 1 in 5 of the homeless population using shelters are unattached youth between the ages of 16-25, and a further 1% are under 16; In some communities this is as high as 1 in 3 (Segaert, 2012).
- It is estimated that about 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness annually, and about 30,000 are homeless on any given night; there are at least 35,000 young people who are homeless during the year, 6,000 on any given night (Gaetz et al., 2013:22).
- This does not include young people who:
  - do not enter the shelter system
  - are absolutely homeless and are sleeping out of doors or in other places unsuitable for human habitation
  - Or those who are temporarily staying with friends and have nowhere else to live (couch surfers).
- The youth homeless population is diverse.
  - 37% of youth in shelters are female
  - Young women are especially at risk of crime and violence (including sexual assault) while homeless, leading them to find alternatives to the streets, even if those alternatives pose other significant risks (Gaetz et al., 2010)
  - Certain significant sub-populations of youth are over-represented, including Aboriginal youth (Baskin, 2013) and in some cities like Toronto, black youth (Springer et al. 2013).
  - 25-40% of the youth who are homeless identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual or queer (LGBTQ) (LGBTQ make up 5-10% of the general population (Abramovich, 2013; Josephson & Wright, 2000).
- Typically, young people who remain homeless for extended periods of time are also exposed to early sexual activity, exploitation, addictions and safety issues in a compressed time frame issues (Milburn et al. 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010).

Access to housing and employment may be very restricted for teens under the age of 18 (particularly those under 16)

- In Ontario, there are considerable barriers to accessing social assistance for youth under the age of 18, which leads many young people to participate in the informal economy, often including illegal and quasi-legal activities such as drug dealing and the sex trade.
- Undermining the employability of homeless youth is the fact that few are able to remain in school.
  - While the drop-out rate for young people in Canada is 8.5% (Statistics Canada, 2012), the rate for homeless youth is exponentially higher at 65% (Gaetz et al., 2010).
  - High school drop-outs face a considerable disadvantage in the labour market and may face exposure to a life of poverty (Sum et al., 2009; Statistics Canada, 2010; 2012b; 2012c).
- 77% of homeless youth are unemployed.

1 in 5 shelter users are youth



## Causes of Youth Homelessness

The causes of youth homelessness are not necessarily the same as those that impact adults.

- The key causes of youth homelessness, include:
  - Family conflict
  - Structural factors
  - Institutional and systems failures.
- Family conflict underlies youth homelessness and many are fleeing abuse or leaving the care of child welfare services
- Homeless youth typically lack the experience and skills necessary to live independently and this is especially true for those under the age of 18.

More than 50% of homeless youth have been in jail, a youth detention centre, or prison

- While there are some commonalities that frame the experience of homelessness for young people and adults, for instance - lack of affordable housing, systems failures in health care and corrections - there are important differences including physical, mental, social and emotional development.
- Street youth, unlike homeless adults, leave homes defined by relationships (both social and economic) in which they were typically dependent upon adult caregivers, thus experiencing an interruption and potential rupture in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community.
- Youth homelessness is rarely experienced as a single event - and may be the end result of a process that involves multiple ruptures with family and community and numerous episodes of leaving, even if for short periods.

The school drop-out rate for homeless youth is 65%.

At any time during the year as many as 65,000 youth in Canada are without a place to call home.



Homeless kids come from every part of the country and every background.

Across the country, in large and smaller communities alike, vulnerable young people find themselves with no place to call home – couch-surfing with friends, staying in shelters, in squats or on the street in alleys, doorways or parks.

Youth living in rural communities often have to leave their friends and support system because often there are no services in rural areas to support youth at risk or homeless.

Contrary to the stereotype that kids are on the street because they don't want to live by their parents' rules, most have fled or been forced out of homes where there is abuse and neglect.<sup>[4]</sup> Mental health issues are also a major factor in youth homelessness.

About half of homeless kids come from middle – and upper – income families.<sup>[6]</sup>

About 43% of homeless youth have been involved in the child welfare system, many have moved through a series of foster or group homes.

- A youth's greatest challenge may be their lack of self-worth and the confidence to believe that they can succeed. One trusted service provider, family member or mentor can make all the difference.
- Homeless kids have a lot of potential, what they often lack is opportunity and hope.
- What homeless kids need is a wide range of services and support to become productive and successful adults.

For all of these reasons and more, a youth-based strategy—and the services that support this strategy—must be distinct from the adult sector

Gaetz, S. (2014). *Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

[1] *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions, Raising the Roof*, 2009., [2] *Raising the Roof, Youth Homelessness.*, [3] *No Way Home, The Fifth Estate*, CBC, 10 March 2004., [4] *101 Things You Need To Know About Youth Homelessness*, St. Thomas University, NB, 2006., [5] *St. Thomas University, 101 Things.*, [6] *St. Thomas University, 101 Things.*, [7] *St. Thomas University, 101 Things.*