# LEAVING HOME

*Youth Homelessness in York Region*

REPORT

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## HOW TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT:

# *Acknowledgements*

This report contains not only the findings from the research project conducted in the summer of 2013, but a framework for action going forward. Knowledge has been mobilized from within Canada and internationally, it has been drawn from academic partners, community groups and agencies and individuals.  It has spanned sectors and geography.


The release of this report is the beginning of the next phase of the journey to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness in York Region.  You are invited to be part of the journey.


*November 2014*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In York Region, there is a growing awareness of the problem of youth homelessness.  In the past many people saw it as a 'big city' problem, more likely to occur in places like downtown Toronto or Vancouver.  But we now know from research that the factors that drive youth to become homeless are not isolated in big cities, but are also present in urban, suburban and rural areas.  This is most certainly true of York Region.  The question then becomes, what do we do about it?

York Region is a large and growing urban area with over one million residents. In York Region, there are a range of public, non-profit and charitable programs, systems and services that serve low-income and homeless individuals and families. There is also a regional government, as well as nine municipalities. While there are a number of service providers in the region doing great work, the problem of youth homelessness continues. Too many young people have to leave the community because they and their families are not getting the supports they need. When a young person leaves their community and moves to the streets of Toronto or another big city, the consequences can be dire.  Health worsens and the risk of victimization and exploitation increases, making it harder and harder to escape homelessness.

The good news is that across York Region many people are recognizing the need to approach things differently, since the current response does not meet the needs of young people and families in crisis, or provide services that prevent crises.

This report is the culmination of a community engagement process designed to raise awareness of youth homelessness and potential solutions, and to inspire progressive change.  Led by United Way York Region and supported by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, the goal of this initiative is the development of a more coordinated and integrated systems response to youth homelessness, one designed to support families and help young people stay in their communities, stay in school, and grow into an adulthood characterized by happiness, well-being and opportunity.

This collaboration shed light on the fact that more information about the nature and scope of youth homelessness in York Region was necessary. There was a need for a deeper understanding of both the conditions that produce and sustain youth homelessness, as well as the range of supports that young people access.

The result was the roll out of an intensive research project over the summer of 2013.  Interviews were conducted with 60 young people from York Region who had experienced homelessness, as well as a number of service providers. This report presents the findings from this research and concludes by bringing lessons learned from other jurisdictions together with key findings from our research. Key recommendations are also presented. All are intended to inspire and contribute to a broader conversation about the problem of youth homelessness so that young people and their families get the supports they need to avoid this undesirable outcome.

*The factors that drive youth to become homeless are not isolated in big cities, but are also present in urban, suburban and rural areas.*

# RESEARCH ON YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN YORK REGION: KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from this research project highlight a number of issues that increase our understanding of the nature of youth homelessness in the region, both in terms of its causes and conditions. Much of this is consistent with established research knowledge regarding young people who experience homelessness, underlining the degree to which we must recognize that the factors that produce youth homelessness exist in every community. The research points to the specific challenges that York Region faces in addressing this problem. At the same time, key findings help point the way to solutions.

## PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS —

Contrary to some popular misconceptions, very few young people leave home and become homeless for frivolous reasons. A combination of individual/relational problems (conflict with family, mental health or addictions issues on the part of either the young person or other family members, involvement with the law) intersects with structural problems (lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing) to create the conditions for homelessness. For some young people, difficult transitions from care (child protection) or from the criminal justice system result in homelessness. The important point is that each person's pathway into homelessness is unique and complex. Moreover, this research demonstrates that homelessness for young people in York Region is rarely a 'one-off' event with linear causes and effects, but is more adequately described as a process. The vast majority of youth in this sample moved in and out of homelessness with a great deal of fluidity and experienced multiple barriers well before and after any particular episode of homelessness.

Our research shows that for some youth, there were multiple missed opportunities for intervention. In some cases a youth may have avoided homelessness had their family received increased supports to address conflict or abuse. Some youth may have benefited from increased support from their school. For other youth, better access to mental health services and addictions treatment may have prevented them from leaving home.

## FAMILY CONFLICT —

At the center of most youth homelessness is conflict within the family. This conflict can result from a range of factors, some having to do with the broader family, others having to do with the young person in question. In this study, 92% of participants reported that conflict with parents or caregivers was a factor that contributed to their eventual homelessness, and 72% said this was a major cause.

In addition, almost 60% reported either physical or sexual abuse as being a contributing factor leading to their eventual homelessness and 21.7% identified it as a major factor.

> *At the center of most youth homelessness is conflict within the family.*

## YOUTHFUL AGE —

The average age at which participants left home for the first time was 15.83, with a median age of 16. A key finding is that 44.4% of participants first experienced homelessness at age 15 or younger. The implications of this are significant, as we know from research that those who leave home at a very young age tend to fare worse over the long run. In terms of solutions, it suggests the need to design interventions that catch kids when they are in school and before they become homeless.

## REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES —

In our sample, some sub-populations of young people were under-represented, while others were over-represented. Contrary to the established literature on youth homelessness, young people who are sexual minorities (LGBTQ), as well as ethno-racial minorities were underrepresented in our research. Only 23% of participants identified as a 'visible minority' compared to 37% in the general population of York Region. Similarly, only 8.2% of participants identified as LGBTQ, whereas research in large urban centers consistently finds that 25-40% of homeless youth identify this way.

This may suggest that these groups are not accessing services (as we interviewed young people at service sites), and that there is a need to find out more about the pathways into homelessness for minority youth. This was not the case for Aboriginal youth who make up 4.3% of the general population, but were overrepresented in this sample at a rate of 14.8%.

## INADEQUATE HOUSING —

Perhaps not surprising for most people in the region, one of the barriers youth experiencing homelessness face in moving forward with their lives is the inability to access affordable housing. Low-cost housing in the region is in short supply, and the vacancy rate for rental housing is low. As a result, young people who are living independently find it challenging to find accommodation. An outcome is that they stay temporarily with friends, in homeless shelters or leave the region altogether. Young people also reported facing discrimination from landlords based on their age or if they were on income assistance.

## ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT —

Compounding the housing problem is the fact that young people have difficulty obtaining and maintaining employment that pays a living wage. For young people with low education and skill levels, the types of employment that are usually available are part-time, seasonal

## MENTAL HEALTH —

For anyone who works with young people – and in particular, those who are homeless – concerns about mental health and wellness are difficult to ignore. Young people in this study reported frequent bouts of anxiety and depression. For instance, when asked if they experienced feelings of depression in the past 30 days, three-quarters said they did several times a week, and nearly 40% reported experiencing these feelings daily. Similarly, nearly 60% reported feeling lonely at least once a week, and 71.7% reported difficulties sleeping. A large number had attempted suicide as well, with 14.8% having done this prior to becoming homeless, and 8.2% once homeless. A few youth (under 10%) experienced more serious mental health difficulties, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, youth were less likely to receive support for these struggles once they left home, and several young people reported experiencing difficulties accessing mental health services, despite a desire to do so.

## YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES OR SPECIAL NEEDS —

Disabilities can create barriers to educational engagement and achievement, as well as access to programs and services. Research in Canada has found that approximately 20% of young people between the ages of five and fourteen have a chronic disability, 22% have a learning disability and 14% have a speech disorder (Statistics Canada, 2008). Undiagnosed learning disabilities can also be the source of family conflict, because the disengagement from school that sometimes results in being misinterpreted as a behavioural issue or a lack of motivation. In our study, the percentage of youth who cited diagnoses of ADHD (28.3%) or other learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (5%), is higher than the Canadian average. Many young people felt their needs in this area had not been fully addressed. These figures do not take account of young people with undiagnosed learning disabilities.

and precarious labour with low wages and no benefits. In this study, only 12 young people, or 19.7%, reported current employment. Of those that were employed, few were engaged in jobs with any long-term prospects.

## EDUCATION —

While the high school drop out rate in Canada is now below 9%, for the young people in this study, the rate was approximately 70%. In fact, 21% had only completed grade 9 or lower. Less than 30% reported currently attending school. For some, the process of disengagement began before they left home. For others, the experience of becoming homeless – and the dislocation from their communities – led them to drop out. Given the centrality of educational attainment to important outcomes later in life (including employment, health and well-being) enhancing access to education for this population should be a priority.

## SUBSTANCE USE —

The use of substances, both legal and illegal, is common amongst adolescents and young adults. This is also the case amongst youth experiencing homelessness, particularly in regards to tobacco, marijuana and alcohol use. For many, but not all, substance use can be highly problematic and addictions can ensue. It needs to be pointed out that while many young people already have addictions when they become homeless, problematic substance use is also an outcome of the trauma and difficulties young people face while homeless. Young people in this study demonstrated higher rates of substance use, and a minority identified their use as problematic. For instance, seventeen participants, or 28.3%, indicated substance use was an *'important'* or *'very important'* factor related to their leaving home.

Effective responses to this issue should be based on evidence. While across Canada many mainstream services, as well as those in the youth homelessness sector, embrace an 'abstinence only' model, there is considerable evidence that harm reduction models are more effective and should be incorporated into responses to youth homelessness.

## SERVICE USE —

Shelters are operating at capacity and many of the youth interviewed had recurring shelter stays. In addition, some youth had exhausted the maximum number of nights allowable in a particular shelter, leaving these youth in a holding pattern, waiting to get back into the shelter. This suggests that too many youth in York Region are relying on emergency services and become stuck in a cycle of homelessness. A positive development is that new contracts with shelters in the region stipulate that individuals cannot be discharged into homelessness. This is a very progressive and supportive move. Youth using various services were more likely to find the experience positive when they forged strong connections with staff.

For some youth, shelters – along with transitional units and drop-ins – were the only access points for support services. Youth were often not aware of other support services within the community. This may mean that young people who are not in contact with shelters, transitional units or drop-in centers are not accessing the supports they need.

Service providers identified two recurring barriers that young people face in accessing service in York Region: geography and a lack of knowledge of and clarity about how to access services. The region is not sufficiently covered by public transportation to allow ease of travel between youth services. Moreover, service providers reported long wait times for services and expressed frustration at having to refer youth outside of York Region due to the lack of local services. Youth who leave the region run the risk of becoming disconnected from positive support networks, including service staff, friends and family, and wait lists can be so long that staff lose contact with youth, thus diminishing their opportunity to provide assistance.

## SYSTEM INTEGRATION —

In York Region, there has been a notable effort by individual service providers to improve the level of coordination between community organizations and mainstream services. However, stakeholders throughout the region have expressed concern that these efforts fall short. Our findings reveal that both service providers and youth are left to individually navigate a fragmented system. The ability of services providers to do so is dependent largely on their interpersonal relationships, knowledge of services and a great deal of personal commitment to supporting youth in need.

# DEVELOPING A RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Across Canada, communities are recognizing that the current response to homelessness – one that focuses for the most part on emergency services – is inadequate. There is a growing sense that we need to move from simply managing the problem, to actually preventing homelessness, and for those who experience this crisis, helping them rapidly move into accommodation with necessary supports.

In York Region, there is also a building momentum for change. The question is then, what can be done differently?   In moving towards a more integrated model, York Region can benefit from extensive research and practical examples from elsewhere in the world and adapt these learnings to develop an effective, humane and "Made in York Region" response to youth homelessness.  Below are key elements of such a response.

## PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

*The goal of prevention is of course to stop young people from becoming homeless in the first place. This involves:*

### I. Primary prevention  -

This means working upstream to address factors that increase the risk of youth homelessness, by addressing broader structural issues such as poverty, family violence and neglect for instance.   Primary prevention also involves working with: a) protective factors, b) families to address conflict and enhance support, and c) the education system to ensure that teachers, counsellors and other adults are able to identify young people at risk and to mobilize effective interventions.  The latter point about working with schools is particularly important, given how young many people are when they become homeless. Additionally, virtually all young people attend school at one point or another, and the adults they encounter there (teachers, coaches, counsellors etc.) may be aware that something is not right, but not know what to do.  There are excellent examples from the UK and Australia of effective responses to youth homelessness that are integrated into schools.

### II. Systems prevention -

This means stopping the flow of young people from institutional care into homelessness. The research on youth homelessness in York Region demonstrates that many young people had some sort of engagement with either child protection services in the past, or with the criminal justice system.  Inadequate support for young people either transitioning from child protection services or leaving detention means that many fall into homelessness. While both child protection services and youth criminal justice are largely the purview of higher levels of government, there are ways of providing community based services and supports that more effectively respond to the needs of young people leaving care.

### III. Early Intervention -

This means placing special attention on early intervention with the goal of helping young people remain 'in place' – that is remain in community where their natural connections and supports are.  Early intervention strategies are designed to address the immediate risk of homelessness by ensuring that young people and their families get access to necessary supports before homelessness occurs.  It also means providing those who do become homeless with immediate supports to ensure their time spent homeless is not prolonged.

The diagram below identifies four key and interrelated early intervention strategies that together are designed to help young people stay in place. This supports, where possible, the reconciliation of relationships enabling young people to move back in with family member or caregivers, and where this is not possible (for other reasons including safety), to help them move into independent (and supported) accommodation in a safe and planned way.

FIGURE 1   *Models of Accommodation*

LIVING **WITH PARENTS** OR **CAREGIVERS**

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY

**IMMINENT RISK** OF HOMELESSNESS

COORDINATED ASSESSMENT
CASE MANAGEMENT
FAMILY RECONNECTION
SHELTER DIVERSION

FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION

RAPID RE-HOUSING
*(with supports)*
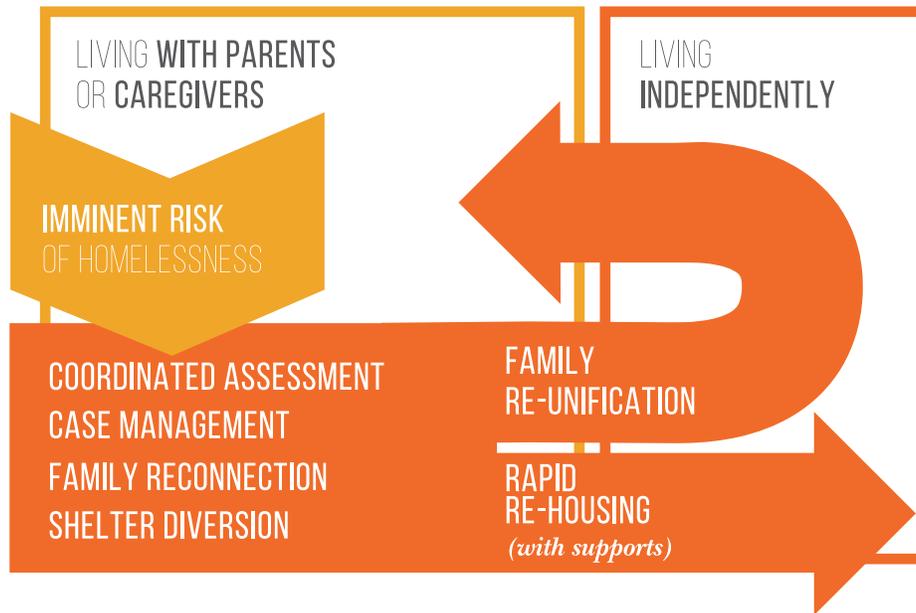
## SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN THEY ARE HOMELESS

A successful strategy to address youth homelessness moves beyond the provision of emergency services. The research suggests that a successful and effective framework starts with accommodation and supports that are built around the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult. We cannot take for granted that models developed for adults will work well for young people. Following from this, the goal should be to ensure that young people avoid emergency shelters, and where this is not possible, to ensure that their stay be short, so as to avoid greater risk of prolonged homelessness.

The diverse needs of young people, determined in part by age and experience, require an equally diverse range of housing options. One must consider the extent and kinds of supports a young person might need, in addition to providing access to stable housing. A more comprehensive model of accommodation and supports based on existing literature about effective practices should be built upon the following pillars:

- *Housing support*
- *Health and well-being*
- *Complementary supports, including life skills*
- *Education, employment and training*
- *Youth engagement*

*A successful strategy to address youth homelessness moves beyond the provision of emergency services*

## HOW DO WE GET THERE? AN INTEGRATED SYSTEMS RESPONSE.

For York Region, adopting a plan to end youth homelessness will invariably mean doing things differently. Communities across Canada are becoming more and more interested in developing strategic and coordinated plans to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness as part of their broader homelessness strategies. We are learning much about how to plan and implement successful strategies. Below are key elements that should be part of a plan.

### 1. Develop a plan

The first step in preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness is to devise and implement a plan or strategy. The plan should be *inclusive* in its process, be *strategic* in its objectives, set real and measurable targets for *change*, be clear to all stakeholders and lead to *real changes* in young people's lives.

### 2. Create an integrated system response

Youth homelessness is a 'fusion policy' issue in that it involves many different parts of government, including health, education, child and family services, housing and social services, and corrections, for instance. In other words, youth homelessness cannot be solved by the homelessness sector alone. An integrated systems response means that programs, services and service delivery systems are organized at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of a young person. A "system of care" approach means that the services in the system are designed and coordinated to meet the needs of the young person, rather than having the young person fit the program.

*The plan should be *inclusive* in its process, be *strategic* in its objectives, set real and measurable targets for *change*, be clear to all stakeholders and lead to *real changes* in young people's lives.*

### 3. Facilitate active, strategic and coordinated engagement by all levels of government, including interdepartmental collaboration

It is important that all levels of government – not just within the region, but the province, as well - work together to align policy and funding to support an end to youth homelessness. The federal government renewed the Homelessness Partnering Strategy in 2013, with a new emphasis on Housing First. In Ontario, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing funds service managers to coordinate housing and homelessness initiatives at the municipal level. The new poverty reduction strategy "Realizing our Potential" also articulates a plan to end homelessness, which will support local initiatives. Aligning these initiatives with a strategic response to youth homelessness will be important.

### 4. *Adopt a positive youth development orientation*

Effective models of support for young people are based on an understanding of the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. A Positive Youth Development approach should be adopted broadly, focusing on the assets and protective factors necessary to support healthy development and transitions to adulthood. Young people should also be engaged as active partners in developing solutions to youth homelessness.

### 5. *Incorporate research, data gathering and information sharing*

Evidence matters. Research, data gathering and information sharing support the planning, implementation and evaluation of effective, evidence based solutions.

The process to address youth homelessness in York Region has already begun. There is a real opportunity for York Region to emerge as a national leader in this area, by adapting learnings from elsewhere and creating innovative new possibilities to change the lives of many young people and families in the community. The goal should be to help young people develop into adults whose lives are characterized by opportunity, well-being, engagement and support. This is where the people of York Region can make a difference.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Part 1: Building Capacity and Readiness**

**1.1**    Develop a working group/round table to address youth homelessness

**1.2**    Raise public awareness about youth homelessness

**1.3**    Engage young people in the planning and implementation of solutions


**Part 2: Planning an end to youth homelessness**

**2.1.**    Develop a comprehensive plan to end Youth Homelessness in York Region

**2.2.**    Engage key organizations to support planning

**2.3.**    Engage the Province in the development of the provincial strategy to end youth homelessness


**Part 3: Implement strategic initiatives to address youth homelessness**

**3.1.**    Engage the York Region District School Board and the York Catholic District School Board in a youth homelessness prevention / early intervention initiative

**3.2.**    Support the use of harm reduction approaches when working with young people who have or are at risk of experiencing homelessness

**3.3.**    Develop a region-wide program to support families that are struggling with instability and youth homelessness

**3.4.**    Increase young people's access to necessary supports and services

**3.5.**    Develop and implement research and data strategy to support plan

**3.6.**    Implement anti-discrimination framework

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In York Region, there is a growing awareness of the problem of youth homelessness (we define homeless youth as unattached and between the ages of 13 and 25).  In the past, many people saw it as a 'big city' problem, more likely to occur in places like downtown Toronto or Vancouver.  But we now know from research that the factors that drive youth to become homeless are not isolated in big cities, but are also present in urban, suburban and rural areas.  This is most certainly true of York Region.  The question then becomes, what do we do about it?

Youth homelessness is often treated as a difficult and unfortunate problem for which there is no real solution. We sometimes frame it as merely an outcome of adolescent misadventure; of bad or rebellious kids who dislike chores and are attracted to the freedom that the streets offer. Research on youth homelessness – including this study of York Region – demonstrates that most young people who become homeless do so because of family conflict and in some cases serious abuse. Life once on the streets is difficult and challenging, and moving forward in a positive way can be a struggle.

A more sympathetic portrayal of youth homelessness, one that recognizes the struggle and discord that produces the problem, is often accompanied by resignation. In other words, it is unfortunate that some young people become homeless, but we are doing the best we can.  After all, in these austere times, we cannot really afford to do things differently, and in any event, basic needs are being taken care of.

But it is reasonable to ask if this is really all we can do. York Region comprises nine municipalities with over one million residents and over the years has been working towards developing services to address youth homelessness. The local response in the region can be characterized in two ways.  On the one hand there are several excellent organizations with devoted staff working to make the lives of young people who experience homelessness better.  This includes 360°Kids, the Sutton Youth Shelter (Salvation Army) and the York Region Youth Shelter (owned and operated by Blue Door Shelters).  On the other hand, the existing infrastructure is weak overall, there is no coordinated response, and as a result, many young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, are not adequately served.

## HISTORY OF RESPONDING TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN YORK REGION

There has been an ongoing and consistent concern with youth homelessness in York Region ever since it was first identified as an issue in 1999 (Crosslinks, 1999; York Region Homelessness Task Force, 2000).  That same year, the York Region Homelessness Task Force received a mandate from the Regional Council to determine the extent and nature of homelessness in the region and develop long-term strategies to address the issue.  In its final report (2000)[1], the task force expressed significant concern about homelessness among youth and suggested that the complexity of issues identified required a comprehensive cross-sector approach. Subsequent York Region Community Plans to Address Homelessness (2001, 2003, 2008 Update) re-enforced the concern and shed light on the limited access to emergency shelters and transitional housing options for youth experiencing homelessness.

1. Responding to Homelessness in York Region, From Awareness to Action  Report of the York Region Homelessness Task Force, York Region Community and Health Services, 2000.

Until 2006, the only emergency supports for young people were 10 beds for male youth in Newmarket. That year, the Sutton Youth Shelter opened providing additional emergency shelter and transitional housing beds for youth, including the first beds for young women in the region. There remained no emergency beds for young people in southern York Region – the most densely populated municipalities. Additional supports for young women are currently in development, including Belinda's Place, Newmarket, the first emergency shelter specifically for single women, and the Richmond Hill Housing and Community Hub, which will provide drop-in services, wrap-around services, emergency shelter and transitional units for youth in southern York Region in one place (2016). Throughout this period, the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness has played a role in raising awareness and advocating for change.

While the supports to young people experiencing homelessness have improved substantially over the past 15 years, and there has been significant recognition of the need to work differently and cooperatively to address root cause issues, it has been difficult to:

*a) Successfully respond to  the complexity of the issues in such a vast region;*

*b) Come together to address youth homelessness from a systems perspective; and*

*c) Ensure that collaborative leadership/resources are available to support this critically needed approach.*

## A DESIRE FOR CHANGE

There is a real opportunity to change the current response to youth homelessness. The good news is that across York Region there is a growing sense that the current response is not enough; that something different needs to be done to better meet the needs of young people and families in crisis.

This report is the culmination of a community engagement process designed to raise awareness of youth homelessness and potential solutions and to inspire progressive change. Led by the United Way York Region and supported by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, the goal of this initiative is the development of a more coordinated, integrated systems response to youth homelessness, one designed to support families and help young people stay in their communities, stay in school, and grow into an adulthood characterized by happiness, well-being and opportunity.

Beginning in late 2012, the initiative began with a learning series designed to build capacity to address youth homelessness in new ways. The goal was to bring interested partners together to learn from national and international examples of innovative and effective approaches to the problem. The audience for the learning series included leaders/representatives from various sectors, including education, child protection, health, children and youth mental health, youth justice, law enforcement, social service organizations and municipal, provincial and federal governments, as well as community members and parents.

The series began in November 2012 with a research forum featuring Dr. Stephen Gaetz of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (previously the Canadian Homelessness Research Network) whose presentation focused on a re-imagined response to youth homelessness. Drawing on innovative examples of program models and systems approaches from Canadian and global perspectives, Gaetz emphasized the need to move beyond the initial emergency response to youth homelessness. Increased emphasis on prevention and accommodation and supports that promote healthy transitions to adulthood for young people and a reduced focus on emergency response is needed.

Between February and June 2013, seven additional sessions took place, where leading researchers/practitioners from across Canada presented and participated in a community dialogue to further inform the response to youth homelessness in the region. Presentations explored the need for prevention built on upstream partnerships with education, health care, child protection and the youth justice sectors, as well as innovative models of housing, training/employment.

*The learning series included:*

### SESSION 1:

*"A systemic approach to addressing youth homelessness in Niagara Region"*

- Mike Lethby, Executive Director, Niagara Resource Service for Youth

### SESSION 2:

*"Addressing homelessness and mental health challenges"*

- Cheryl Forchuk, Ph.D., Professor and Associate Director of Nursing Research Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Western Ontario

### SESSION 3:

*"Joining the dots: Understanding the links between child protection and youth homelessness"*

- Keynote: Naomi Nichols, Ph.D. Applied Social Scientist, Learning Institute at the Hospital for Sick Children

### SESSION 4:

*"'The Infinity Project' - An innovative Housing First program for homeless youth"*

- Katie Davies, Boys and Girls Clubs, Calgary

### SESSION 5:

*"Integrated housing model for Aboriginal Youth – Foyers for youth organized through the bands"*

- Susan McGee, Chief Executive Officer of Homeward Trust, Edmonton

### SESSION 6:

*"'Train for Trades'– An innovative housing and social enterprise project focusing on 'green jobs' employment training and youth homelessness"*

- Sheldon Pollett   Choices for Youth, St. John's, Newfoundland

### SESSION 7:

*"'Roofs for Youth' Discharge planning and support for young people leaving detention – Pilot project"*

- Madelyn McDonald, Woods Homes & Leslie McMechen, Calgary John Howard Society, Calgary

## RESEARCH ON YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

One outcome from the collaboration was the realization that more information about the nature and scope of youth homelessness in York Region was needed. Specifically, there was a need for a deeper understanding of both the conditions that produce and sustain youth homelessness and the range of supports that young people access.

The result was an intensive research project conducted in the summer of 2013. Sixty young people from York Region who had experienced homelessness were interviewed. In addition, a number of key informant interviews were conducted with services providers from across the region to assess their understanding of the needs of young people and the challenges they face regarding access to services.

This report presents the findings from this research and concludes by bringing lessons learned from other jurisdictions with key findings from our research. Key recommendations are also presented. All are intended to inspire and contribute to a broader conversation about the problem of youth homelessness so that young people and their families get the supports they need to avoid this undesirable outcome.

# 2  WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS?[2]

Youth homelessness is a significant problem in Canada.  While the sight of young people panhandling on street corners may be something we associate with major urban centers, in fact youth homelessness is a problem for all communities, large and small, rural and urban.  The visible presence or absence of youth experiencing homelessness should not be considered an indicator of the nature or extent of the problem in any community, including York Region.

What do we know about youth homelessness? There is a considerable amount of research that illuminates the causes and conditions of youth homelessness in Canada and points the way to real and practical solutions.  We define youth experiencing homelessness as young people:

> *Between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers and importantly, lack many of the social supports deemed necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood. In such circumstances, they do not have a stable or consistent residence or source of income, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to the support networks necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood.*

(Gaetz, 2014a:13).

In characterizing the population of young people who are homeless, it is important to recognize how diverse it is.  Typically, there are more males than females on the streets (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; 2009). This is likely due to the fact that personal safety is a big factor for young women, who may instead stay in dangerous and unhealthy relationships or contexts rather than risk the kind of violence or exploitation they are likely to experience on the streets (Gaetz, et al., 2010).  Some ethno-racial groups are over-represented amongst the youth homeless population, including Aboriginal youth (Baskin, 2007; 2013; Brown et al., 2007) and black youth (Springer et al., 2007; 2013).  Young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered are also typically over-represented amongst the youth homeless population (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, 2013).  Finally, we must take age differences into account; the circumstances and needs of a 14-year old youth experiencing homelessness will be profoundly different from those of a 22-year old.

When thinking about youth homelessness, it is important to consider that it is in many ways distinct from adult homelessness. Young people who become homeless usually leave homes where they were dependent on adult caregivers and, as such, will have little experience running their own household.  In addition, many will be in the throws of adolescent development.  The significant developmental changes they experience (physical, cognitive, emotional and social) can potentially have a significant impact on decision-making, social relationships, inclusion as well as educational

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2.  Sections of this summary are copied with permission from: Gaetz, Stephen (2014a) <u>Coming of Age: Reimagining our Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada.</u> Toronto:  Homeless Hub Research Paper Series #11

and employment opportunities (Christie & Viner, 2005; Steinberg, 2007). Finally, because of their youthful age, many will experience difficulties in accessing necessary supports. Once on the streets, young people are thrust into adult roles at an accelerated rate, whereby they must obtain housing, find work and make 'mature' decisions, all while experiencing the trauma associated with losing their family, their home and potentially their community. Becoming homeless can also foreclose the opportunity to participate in many of the institutions that are designed to help navigate the transition to adulthood, including school, sports, arts, part-time jobs etc. Youth homelessness does not provide freedom so much as a whole new set of challenges.

It is also important to note that the causes of youth homelessness are distinct from those that produce adult homelessness. There is a common and enduring myth that young people who become homeless are merely angry teens who are attracted to the freedom of the streets. While this may be true for some young people, the rigours of life on the streets – lack of food, safety, access to clean clothes and support – mean that few who leave for frivolous reasons will stay homeless for long. In understanding how and why young people become homeless, it is important to note that there is no single story that defines the pathway to the streets. Typically youth homelessness is the outcome of a complex interplay between individual problems and relational conflicts, structural factors and for some young people, institutional failures. Below is a diagram that frames the key contributors to youth homelessness.

DIAGRAM 1  *Causes of Youth Homelessness*



STRUCTURAL FACTORS

INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONAL FACTORS

SYSTEMS FAILURES
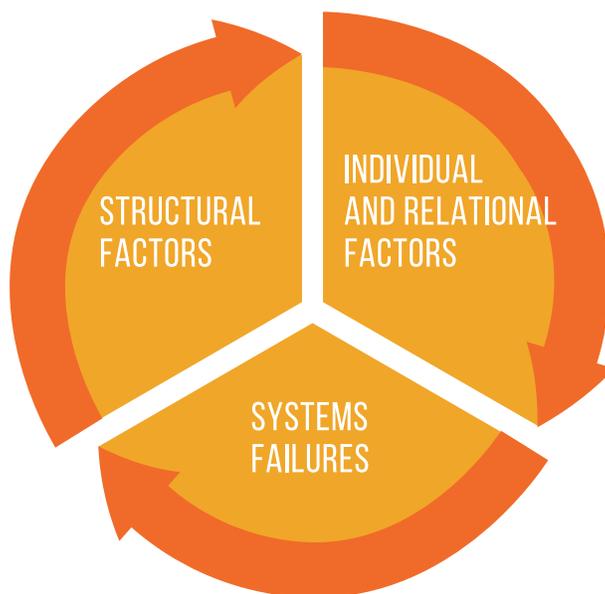
## A) INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONAL FACTORS

It is perhaps not unusual to think of young people "running away from home" or being "kicked out", when the issue of youth homelessness comes up. Research reinforces the perspective that difficult and challenging family situations and relationships underlie most youth homelessness (Karabanow, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Braitstein et al., 2003; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus et al., 1995). However, lest one assume that much of this conflict is minor and typical of that which comes from raising teenagers, it is worth pointing out that in many of these cases, abuse drives young people out of the home. There is extensive research in Canada and the United States that

points to the fact that a significant percentage of youth experiencing homelessness – between 60 and 70 percent – leave family environments where they have experienced interpersonal violence, including physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Many have also been exposed to parental neglect and domestic violence (not directly involving the youth). Where violence and abuse is not present, other factors may drive family conflict, including the presence of learning disabilities, psychiatric disorders (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005) and addictions (McMorris et al., 2002) associated with young people themselves or family members. The inability to cope or manage on the part of young people and/or parents and family who do not know what to do, may lead to other factors that produce challenges, including school failure or disengagement, involvement in crime, and other risk behaviours (Karabanow, 2004).

## B) STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Individual and family problems often have to be put in a broader context, where systemic, social and economic factors provide the conditions that contribute to youth homelessness. The experience of poverty, including inadequate income and housing and a lack of food, for instance, may exacerbate family conflict and lead young people to leave home, either of their own choice or because their families can no longer support them. Significant economic shifts over the past two decades have also created new challenges for young people transitioning to independence. That is, the profound lack of affordable housing and the growing scarcity of well-paying full-time jobs for young people – particularly those who drop out of high school - means that many young people who leave home will not be able to generate sufficient income to obtain and maintain housing, and in a competitive housing market, may face age-based

discrimination. A lack of access to adequate education – and in some cases necessary supports for those with disabilities, - inadequate nutrition, etc. may undermine school success and lead to educational disengagement.

One of the key drivers of homelessness that is often ignored is the impact of discrimination. We know well from research that racism restricts people's opportunities, can impact on schooling and makes the transition to independent living that much more difficult. This is important because Aboriginal youth and racialized minorities are over-represented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness. Finally, it should be noted that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth are clearly overrepresented in the street youth population (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, 2013; 2013). Homophobia in the home, school or community contributes to youth homelessness. The experience of discrimination (exacerbated when combined with poverty) can contribute to school disengagement and failure, drug misuse, mental health issues, criminality and gang involvement.

## C) INSTITUTIONAL AND SYSTEMS FAILURES

A key factor underlying youth homelessness is the failure of mainstream institutional systems to ensure that young people are able to access the supports they need. This is particularly the case when young people are in the care of such institutions – whether corrections, mental health services, or child protection – and do not receive adequate transitional supports when they leave. Our child welfare system was built at a time when young people could leave care at sixteen, seventeen or eighteen and find a job and secure housing. As mentioned above, the world has changed dramatically and few young people have the opportunity to establish independence at such an early age. In other words, outdated policy and practice mean that many young people "age

out" of care at 18[3] – and transition not to self-sufficiency, but rather to homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Lemon Osterling & Hines, 2006; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Nichols, 2013; Mallon, 1998; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Serge et al., 2002). A number of Canadian studies purport that 40-50 percent of youth experiencing homelessness have a history of exploitative, uncaring, unsupportive and even abusive foster care or group home involvement (Nichols, 2013; Karabanow, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz et al., 2010; Lemon Osterling et al., 2006; Raising the Roof, 2009; Serge et al., 2002).

Inadequate support for young people discharged from corrections also contributes to youth homelessness. More than half of young Canadians who are homeless have been in jail, a

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3. A young person "ages out" of care when they reach a certain age and are no longer entitled to particular services or supports, regardless of need or circumstance.

youth detention center, or prison (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). In a sense, many are discharged from prison into homelessness.

In terms of mental health supports, many young people are not receiving the help they need. The Canadian Mental Health Association estimates that 10-20% of young people are affected by a mental illness or disorder, some with particularly challenging mental health issues, such as schizophrenia, often first appearing during the teen years (CMHA website). Mental health problems are even more acute amongst the population of youth experiencing homelessness (Kidd, 2013; McCay, 2009; 2013). In some cases, young people are discharged from health care facilities, without adequate follow up supports or even a home to go to. Once on the streets, the absence of support is often worse because young people lack family support, financial support and the knowledge necessary to navigate the system.

*Homelessness is not so much the outcome of a single event, but rather, a process that can be drawn out over a number of years*

In looking at the causes of youth homelessness, then, it is clear that broader structural factors, institutional failures and profound conflicts within the family setting have a bigger impact on youth homelessness than the decision by young people to leave home for frivolous reasons.  In fact, for most youth experiencing homelessness, the factors that produce homelessness are complex and often difficult to tease out.  Each young person has their own story, and there may not even be a common understanding of what happened, or what the key drivers of homelessness were.

It is also true that the pathway to homelessness is rarely direct.  Homelessness is not so much the outcome of a single event, but rather, a process that can be drawn out over a number of years, beginning with conflicts at home or school, which lead a young person to temporarily couch surf (stay with friends or other family members), stay in an emergency shelter, then possibly return home, etc.  The pathway to longer-term homelessness can be influenced by the factors described above, alternatively it may be an event – an argument or dispute – that leads to the decision to leave home, either on the part of the parents or the young person.  Disentangling cause and outcome is always a challenge.  The vast majority of youth experiencing homelessness left traumatic environments in search of belonging and acceptance (Karabanow et al., 2004).

The point, then, is that youth homelessness must be understood as different from adult homelessness, both in terms of causes and the experience of life on the streets.  All of this points to the need to consider solutions that are unique to youth homelessness.  We cannot simply take what we know about adult homelessness, change the age mandate and apply it to youth.  When considering pathways off the streets for homeless youth, the needs of developing adolescents and young adults must be understood.  We need to view this population, first and foremost, as young people who are trying to survive without the supports that many of us take for granted.

*Youth homelessness must be understood as different from adult homelessness, both in terms of causes and the experience of life on the streets*

# 3 THE CONTEXT: YORK REGION

In order to address a complex problem such as homelessness, it is important to understand the local context and how this shapes the conditions that produce the problem and creates both challenges and opportunities for moving forward. In this section, we review the characteristics of York Region, including urban geography, the lack of affordable housing and employment opportunities in order to get a better understanding of the problem of youth homelessness.

## 3.1 ABOUT YORK REGION

The Regional Municipality of York (York Region) sits between Lake Simcoe and the City of Toronto. With a population of 1,032,524 (Census, 2011), the region spans 1,776 square kilometers (686 square miles) and consists of nine local municipalities. This includes Aurora (p. 53,203), East Gwillimbury (p. 22,473), Georgina (p. 43,517), King (p. 19,899), Markham (p. 301,709), Newmarket (p. 79,978), Richmond Hill (p. 185,541), Vaughan (p. 288,301) and Whitchurch-Stouffville (p. 37,628). While the overall population of York Region is expected to grow to over 1.5 million by 2031, most of this growth will take place in five municipalities: East Gwillimbury, Markham, Newmarket, Richmond Hill and Vaughan.

The majority (68%) of the region is within the Greenbelt Plan Area, including the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan Area. While the region has some of the most productive agricultural lands in Canada, with approximately 38% of land use devoted to farming activities, the Region is entering into a new era of city building.

Within the region is also the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation. The Anishnaabe people who live there are descendants of a larger group known as the Chippewas of Lakes Huron and Simcoe.

As Canada's seventh largest urban municipal area, the geography and political structure of York Region is important to understand; this shapes the social and economic context in which homelessness and extreme poverty are experienced. The nine distinct municipalities that make up York Region – and the differences between them – are key to understanding life in the area. Few people would describe themselves as residents of "York Region"; most have much stronger identifications with one of the nine municipalities. These municipalities all have their own unique and distinct geography, character and history. The municipalities in the south, such as Markham, Vaughan and Richmond Hill, are largely urban, and because they physically border the City of Toronto, there are stronger links and identification with the city. The northern municipalities are characterized by a mix of rural farmland, protected countryside (the Oak Ridges Moraine) and smaller urban centers, and are rapidly growing in population. There are ethno-cultural differences that define local culture, and many people form strong identifications with these sub-communities.

As a major Canadian municipal region that has largely developed since the Second World War, few of the urban areas and towns that make up the region have high-density urban centers, though some such as Markham, Vaughan and Richmond Hill, for instance, are working toward this kind of development. The common built form is low-density sprawling suburbs with single family homes, divided by main streets with shopping and services. Land use planning throughout the region means that business and industrial development is in most cases separated from residential areas.

Ontario's Places to Grow Act is informing how and where growth is happening in York Region and is changing the types of housing that are

in development (increasing the diversity – more town houses/condos are being build) and leading to much more intensification on transit corridors. However, even with express targets related to affordability, residents with low to moderate incomes have significant difficulty making ends meet. This issue has been identified as a key priority of the Human Services Planning Board of York Region (HSPB-YR, 2012).

Local government in York Region is organized in a two-tier structure. Public transit, water, emergency management and policing are handled by York Region, while curb-side garbage collection, local parks and libraries are the responsibility of each municipality. This division of responsibilities can create special challenges when addressing complex issues. While the region establishes policies and bylaws, so do each of the nine municipalities, and these do not always align. As an example, some municipalities allow homeowners to develop secondary rental suites, while others do not[4].

The geographic spread of the municipality and the complexity of municipal government also create implications for services and supports. There are pan-regional institutions that span the geography of the nine municipalities, including district school boards, the local integrated health network and the regional government. Other services – both public and private – tend to be unevenly distributed across the region. The geographical spread of the region and the dispersed distribution of business and industry, shopping, and importantly social and health services means identifying and accessing services and supports can be confusing and challenging for many area residents.

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4. Only 5 of the 9 municipalities currently allow second suites as a right. This does not mean they do not exist in the remaining municipalities, just that they are not regulated. This becomes a problem in terms of safety and quality of rental accommodation, and compliance with the Tenant Protection act.

## KEY IMPLICATIONS:

- *Transportation is a major issue. With a public transit system and a transit infrastructure largely built to accommodate privately owned vehicles, young people and those with low incomes face challenges moving through the area. This limits access to services and resources, which can be great distances apart and largely removed from residential areas.*

- *Social and health services are largely found along major traffic corridors, but are also dispersed throughout the municipality in a somewhat ad-hoc way. Because of the two levels of government, ensuring an equitable distribution of service nodes throughout the region becomes a challenge, which further limits access to supports.*

- *The lack of concentrated downtown areas means that without access to good information, it is difficult to assume where one might go to get needed services and supports.*

- *Schools become crucial centers of contact for young people, families and services providers. The school systems (York Region District School Board, and the York Catholic District School Board) are perhaps the only social services that are relatively evenly dispersed and accessible throughout the region. Both boards have worked with municipalities to enhance the role of schools as 'community hubs', and many schools built over the past ten years have integrated community centers and resources into their structures.*

## THE POPULATION OF YORK REGION

The population of York Region is characterized by higher than average incomes, and ethnic diversity. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, the median household income in York Region is $89,100 (compared with just over $66,000 for the Province of Ontario) (York Region, 2014). The high average income levels, however, should not lead one to assume that the region is without poverty. In the Making Ends Meet Report (HSPB-YR, 2012), it was pointed out that there is growing polarization in incomes in York Region and that in 2006 – a few years before the economic crisis – the number of households with incomes below $39,000 was over 57,000, an increase of 21% in five years. Much of the poverty is concentrated in the most populous southern municipalities (Vaughan, Richmond Hill, Markham) and in the north, in Georgina.

York Region is also known for ethno-racial diversity. The region is a key gateway for new Canadians; 43% of the population was born outside of Canada. Thirty seven per cent of the population are visible minorities. The largest ethno-racial subgroups include: Chinese (42%), South Asian (25%), West Asian (6%) and Filipino (5%) (York Region, 2014).

## KEY IMPLICATIONS:

- *While the region is prosperous, poverty is a major issue. For people and families who are low-income earners, accessing affordable housing, well-paying jobs and transportation become major issues.*

- *A diverse population is an asset. However, over time it is becoming more difficult for new Canadians to achieve success, as immigrant labour market outcomes are declining (Darbey, et al., 2011).*

*"According to Statistics Canada, immigrants who came to Canada during the 1980s started off with a 28.4% disadvantage in income compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, but within a few years their salaries became comparable. By contrast, immigrants who arrived in the 1990s started off with a 36.6% earnings disadvantage and after ten years, they were still behind by almost 10%, with this number increasing to almost 20% for those arriving a decade later"* (Graham, 2007).

- *People who are new Canadians are vulnerable to poverty and homelessness, but may not be a visible segment of the homeless population. "Homelessness amongst immigrants is a hidden issue, as immigrants double up with friends and family and tend not to use the shelter system" (Preston et al., 2009).*

## HOUSING AND THE AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

Housing in York Region is dominated by low density, suburban housing tracts characterized in large part by fully detached single-family homes. Across the region, 67% of all housing stock is single-family dwellings, with higher percentages in the outlying communities of King, Georgina and East Gwillimbury. Low rise apartments and row housing are the most common multi-unit developments in the region's urban communities.

Compared with other urban municipalities in Canada, York Region has a very underdeveloped rental housing supply. On average, 69.5% of all households are owner-occupied in Canada, while in York Region the percentage is 89.5%. The reason for this has to do with the fact that the region has grown substantially over the past several decades, a time when investment in rental housing across the country has declined dramatically due to key economic and policy shifts from the 1990s. At that time, the Government of Canada began drawing down its investment in affordable housing in the early 1990s and downloaded responsibility to the provinces. At the same time the government used monetary policy (low interest rates), CMHC mortgage insurance and tax incentives (for instance, RRSP Home Buyer's Plan) to encourage the home ownership market. The effect across Canada, perhaps felt most acutely in York Region, was the dramatic decline of the rental housing building economy, as demonstrated in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 *Percent of New Housing Stock in York Region Purpose Built for Rental*
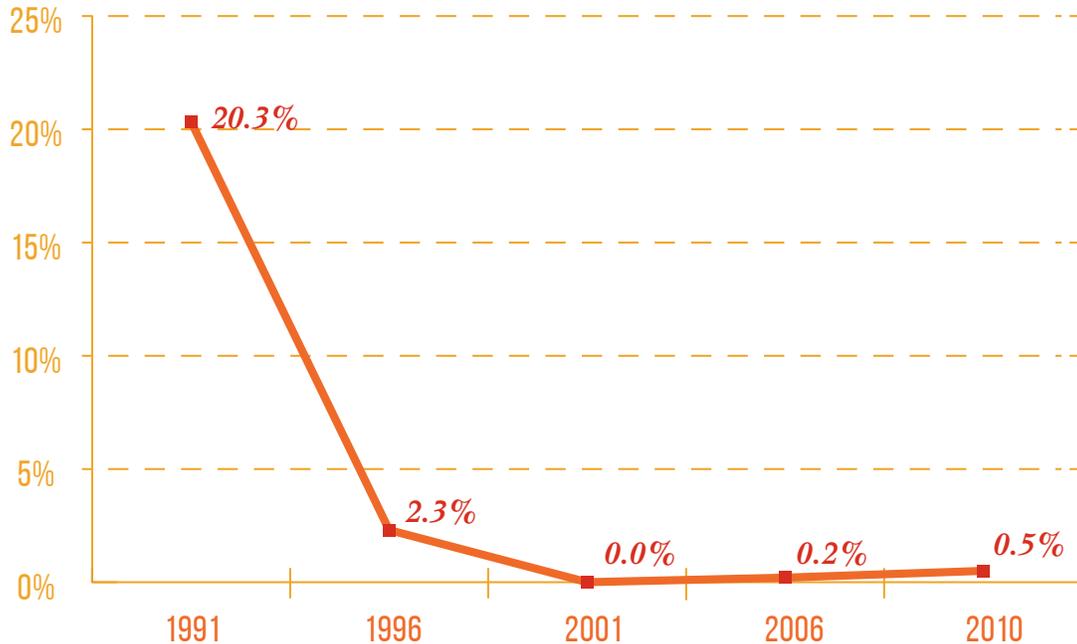


Source: FCM based on CHMC, Starts and Completions Survey, 1991 to 2010

The lack of rental housing in the region translates into very low vacancy rates. While a healthy vacancy rate is considered to be minimally 3%, in York Region the rate fluctuated between 1.2 and 2% between 2000 and 2010, and was 1.6% in 2012.

There are also affordability issues to consider, for scarcity of supply and increased demand mean that there are few low cost units available for singles or families. In 2013, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the region was $977, well above affordability for an individual earning minimum wage. While the region is actively working to expand the affordable housing supply, it will likely take years to have any impact. Research from the Regional Municipality shows that 71% of low-income owners and 56% of low-income tenants are spending 50% or more of their income on housing. CMHC defines any household that spends 30% or more of their income on housing as being in 'core housing need', and in 'extreme core housing need' if they are spending 50% or more.

In York Region, the social housing supply includes around 7,000 units. This housing, operated largely by non-profit and co-operative housing organizations, provides housing for low-income individuals, families and seniors, who pay rent based on their income (rent-geared-to-income is usually based on 30% of income). Unfortunately, the waiting list for social housing in York Region is around 9,500 (Pearce, 2013b), meaning there are more people on the list than there are actual units of social housing.

*The lack of rental housing – and in particular, housing that is affordable – contributes to the housing crisis in the region*
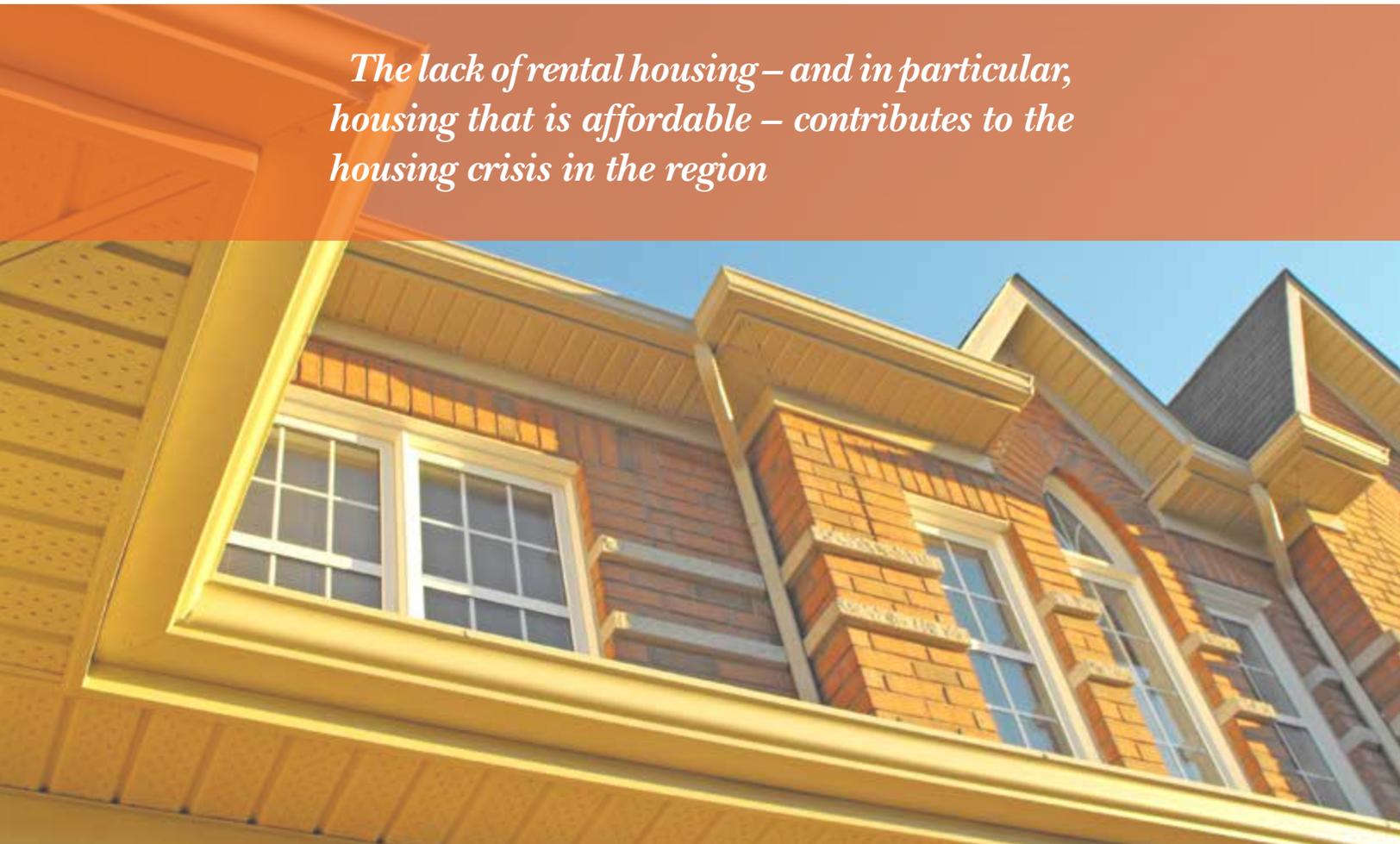
## KEY IMPLICATIONS:

- *The lack of rental housing – and in particular, housing that is affordable – contributes to the housing crisis in the region, as rental housing is traditionally an important housing option for low and moderate income earners, as well as single persons, the elderly, and importantly, young adults.*

- *Very few teenagers and young adults have access to, or even consider, home ownership an option.*

- *For young people who can no longer stay at home, the lack of available and affordable rental housing in the region presents a huge barrier to obtaining housing in their neighbourhoods and enabling them to "remain in place" where their natural supports – school, teachers, friends, family, adult mentors – are strongest.*

## EMPLOYMENT

York Region has a large, vibrant and diversified economy and is Ontario's second largest business center after Toronto. The industrial sector focuses on information and communications technology, financial and insurance companies, life sciences and health technology, as well as a manufacturing sector. These sectors demand educated employees, and it is worth noting that 67% of York Region's workforce (aged 25-64) has a post secondary education.

Unemployment is a problem in the region, in particular for young people. Youth are typically more likely to be unemployed and underemployed than the adult population. In 2012, the unemployment rate in Canada was 7.5%, and the youth unemployment rate was 14.1%, with the Ontario rate considerably higher at 16.9% (Geobey, 2013). There is an even greater disparity in York Region, where "figures from the 2011 National Household Survey indicate residents aged 15 to 24 face an unemployment rate of 20 per cent compared to just 5 per cent for the 'working age' population between the ages of 25 and 64" (Pearce, 2014a). Those who are employed tend to be underemployed (not full-time) and working at low wage jobs.

## KEY IMPLICATIONS:

- *The lack of viable employment opportunities for young people makes it difficult for persons under 25 to earn a living wage. This, combined with the lack of affordable rental housing, means living independently is particularly challenging.*

- *Education matters! The rise in credentialism (Côté & Bynner, 2008) has resulted in a steady decline in drop out rates in Canada, reaching a low of 7.8% in 2011-2012 (Statistics Canada, 2012). The drop out rate for young people who experience homelessness remains incredibly high. That the businesses in the region require highly skilled workers for the most part exacerbates problems for young people with inadequate education who are seeking employment.*

- *Young people who are homeless are much more likely to be early school leavers. In two separate studies of youth experiencing homelessness, Gaetz and O'Grady found the drop-out rate ranged from 57% to 65%, with an even higher rate amongst those who engage in prostitution, squeegeeing or panhandling (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, 2010).*

# 3.2 HOMELESSNESS IN YORK REGION

Some research focusing on homelessness in York Region has been conducted. One project that focused on health identified that people experiencing homelessness or who are 'at risk' had significant health problems, including inadequate nutrition, mental health issues, oral health problems, as well as pain, discomfort and disability. Being homeless and living in poverty means that maintaining health and hygiene is challenging. People who are homeless also experienced difficulties accessing health services and supports because they lack identification (including health cards), are unaware of existing resources, face transportation challenges, lack money (for medication and other health products) and experience discrimination (Mooi, 2010).

It is difficult to estimate the scale and scope of homelessness in general and youth homelessness in particular in York Region, as there have been no reliable counts. However, the conditions that produce homelessness (and youth homelessness) exist across the region suggesting that it is not an issue that can be ignored, even if this does not translate into a visible street-based population.

There are several factors that contribute to the lack of visibility of homelessness in York Region. First, because it is a municipality without a center or high-density core, there is no concentration of services for people who are homeless. Second, the dispersed landform and transportation issues suggest that the number of absolute homeless people may be lower than in other more densely populated jurisdictions. This is not necessarily the case, for the hidden homeless population - that is, people without access to permanent housing - may be doubling up with neighbours, friends or relatives. A final factor to consider is a much smaller infrastructure (and investment) in emergency services compared to other large urban centers. The City of Toronto, for instance, has a population of 2.7 million, and over 3,800 emergency shelter beds, while York Region, with 40% of the population, has a fraction of the number of beds (115). This lack of homelessness emergency infrastructure is also characteristic of the other surrounding municipalities of the GTA (See Figure 2 below).

FIGURE 2    *Permanent Emergency Shelter Beds Greater Toronto Area (#beds/100,000 pop.)*



POPULATION: 1,032,524
SHELTER BEDS: 115 (8.97)

POPULATION: 1,297,000
SHELTER BEDS: 384 (3.37)

POPULATION: 2,700,000
SHELTER BEDS: 3800 (710)

POPULATION: 608,000
SHELTER BEDS: 93 (6.53)
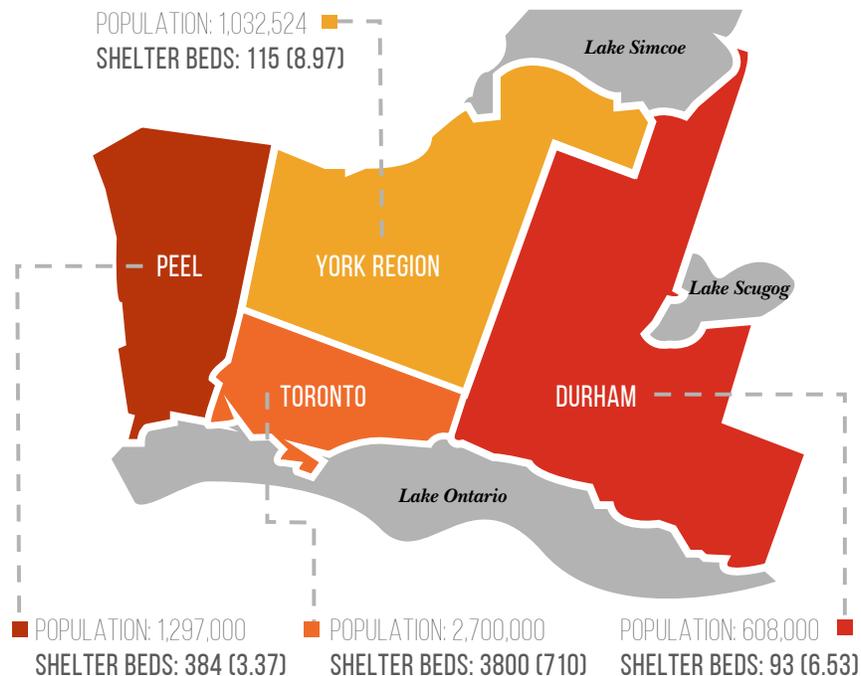
## RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS
## IN YORK REGION

While homelessness is not necessarily highly visible in the region, it is nevertheless an issue that has required a response. Historically, both the community sector and local government have been actively engaged in this response.

The York Region Alliance to End Homelessness (YRAEH) was active at the community level in engaging the public on the issue, conducting research and increasing awareness of homelessness within York Region (e.g. Hidden in Plain Sight photovoice exhibit). The YRAEH also acted as a think tank, built community capacity/ infrastructure and facilitated collaborative projects. Lack of funding to sustain staffing of the collaborative in 2011 impacted the ability of community partners to continue generating cohesive/strategic solutions, strengthening partnerships, developing best practices and undertaking non-partisan advocacy. This has been a challenge because in the jurisdictions that have made great progress on preventing and reducing homelessness, community entities such as this have played an important leadership role.

In addition, the regional government has played a key role through investment in the following interventions:

- *Housing Solutions: A place for everyone – York Region ten year housing plan*
  *As mandated by the Province of Ontario, York Regional Council approved a ten year plan to address housing in June 2014. The plan focuses on sustaining and increasing the rental house supply, supporting home ownership affordability and strengthening the homelessness and housing stability system. The latter includes a focus on prevention (see below) and a move towards a service integration model. As part of this objective, the plan emphasizes the need to identify and address specific gaps in the provision of services for homeless youth.*

- *York Region Homelessness Prevention Program and Housing Stability Program*
  *Programs designed for people in crisis and at risk of homelessness that helps offset costs for rent, utilities and mortgage payment arrears, moving costs, ID replacement or urgent medical needs.*

- *Making Ends Meet*
  *The plan put forward by the York Region Human Services Planning Board is designed to address the lack of affordable housing in the region and help residents become more economically self sufficient.*

As the designated "community entity", United Way York Region is responsible for managing the implementation of the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy. In this capacity the UWYR administers over $650,000 to a range of community agencies and services, which support over 850 of the region's most vulnerable residents. In 2013, this included the following agencies:

- *360°Kids (formerly Pathways for Children, Youth and Families) - Youth Street Outreach Worker*

- *Community Legal Clinic of York Region - Preventing Homelessness Through Targeted Eviction Prevention*

- *John Howard Society of York Region - Reintegration Project*

- *Salvation Army, Sutton Youth Shelter-Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative*

- *Women's Center of York Region-Enterprising Careers*

- *The York Region Food Network - Kitchen Renovation*

In addition to administering funds, UWYR plays a crucial convening role between residents and community partners and identifies needs, raises public awareness and works towards solutions to poverty and homelessness in the region.

The region also has a number of other services and supports that assist people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless.

FIGURE 3   *Location of Key Youth Homelessness Supports in York Region*



*1.* THE SALVATION ARMY SUTTON YOUTH SHELTER

*Lake Simcoe*

*2.* BLUE DOOR SHELTERS

*3.* 360° KIDS
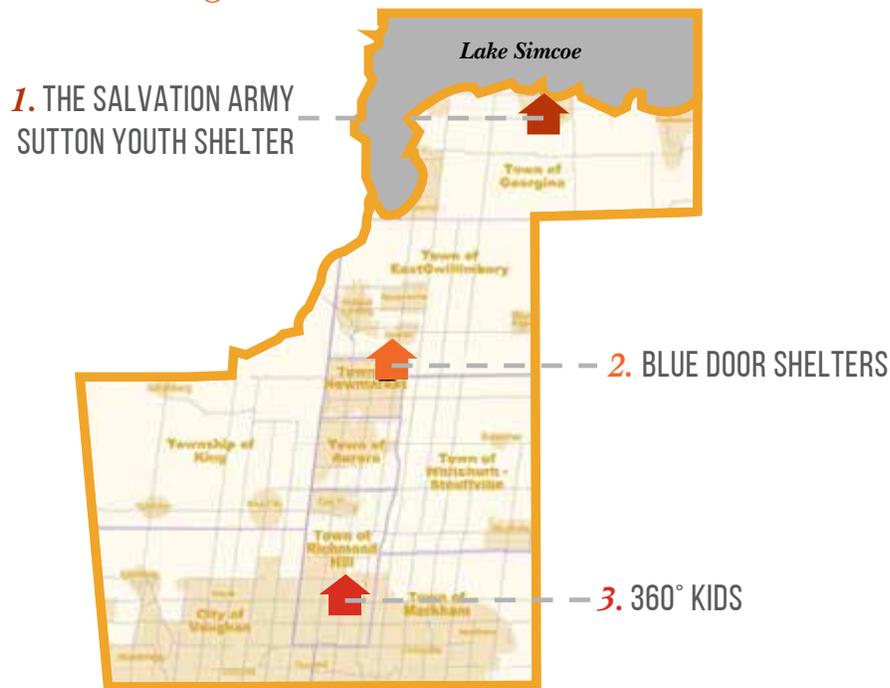
## RESPONDING TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness in terms of its causes and conditions. Young people in this situation have a diverse set of needs.  There are a number of services throughout the region that provide critical supports for youth in general and it is likely that youth serving organizations will encounter someone who is homeless at one time or another.  However, given the region's geographic size and population, it is challenging that very few organizations are specifically mandated to address the needs of this population.

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the range of targeted services for young people who experience homelessness has slowly expanded since 1999 and includes the following agencies.

### *1.  The Salvation Army Sutton Youth Shelter*

The Sutton Youth Shelter opened in 2006 and has 16 emergency beds and 10 transitional beds for youth aged 16-26 (the first beds for homeless young women in the region). Other services include outreach, counselling, education and employment, housing support and access to medical services. Their computer room and drop-in space allows youth from the region to access support as needed.

### 2. *Blue Door Shelters*

Blue Door Shelters operates three shelters in the East Gwillimbury and Newmarket areas. This includes a shelter for families, one for men and another for youth. During their stay access to employment support, counselling, housing advice and referrals is available. Until 2006, the only emergency supports for young people in the region were 10 beds for male youth (Aged 16-24), who were entitled to stay up to four months at the York Region Youth Shelter in Newmarket.

### 3. *360° Kids*

360° Kids, provides a number of services specifically targeted to youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. Presently, 360° Kids has 13 residential beds in East Markham and a set of transitional apartments for youth. They also run the Home Base Drop-In Center for youth located in Richmond Hill. Here youth can access employment, housing and personal supports. In 2016, 360° Kids is set to open the Richmond Hill Housing and Community Hub. The Hub will add an additional 14 emergency beds and 11 transitional units to the region.

## KEY IMPLICATIONS:

- *The infrastructure to respond to homelessness in general, and youth homelessness in particular is underdeveloped, and focuses for the most part on the provision of emergency services. This suggests that there are likely capacity pressures on the existing services.*

- *Emergency shelter beds are mostly located in the northern part of the region, away from the more densely populated areas. As such, knowledge of the existence of these supports is probably limited. Transportation to the services becomes a barrier for youth, and for those staying at the shelters, transportation to other services and resources is a challenge.*

- *Many young people and their families may need supports they are unable to access, because of geography and the fact that the infrastructure is underdeveloped. This means that many young people who experience homelessness may have to leave the region to have their needs met.*
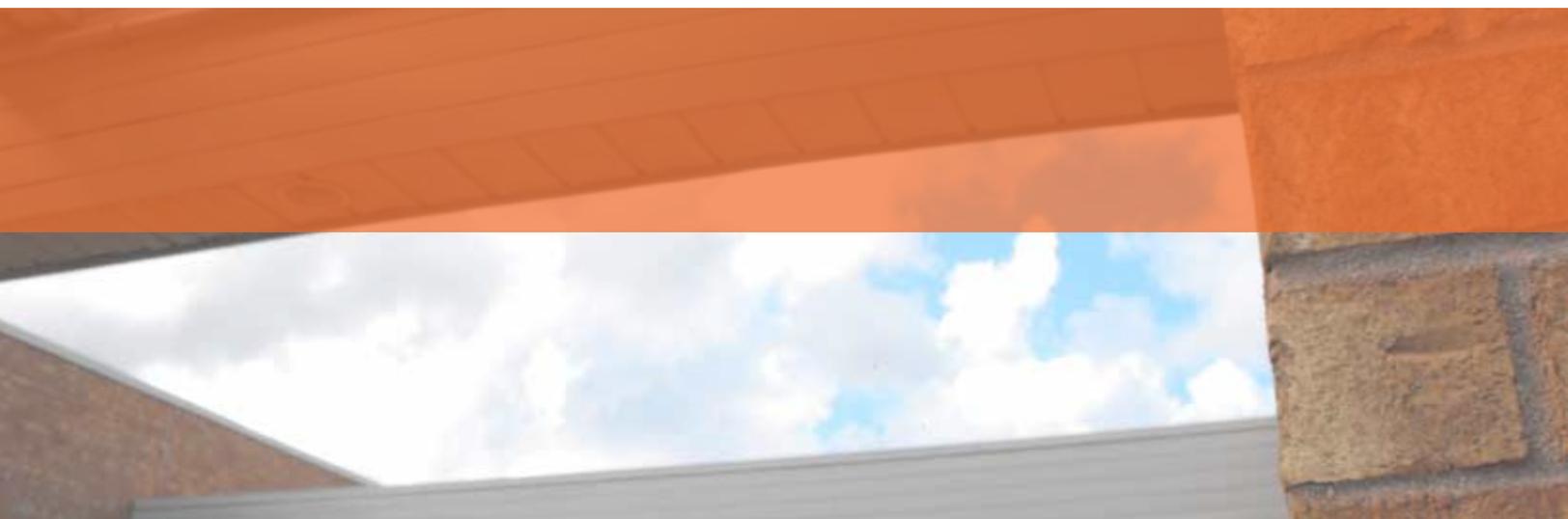
# 4 YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN YORK REGION

This study of youth homelessness was conducted in order to increase knowledge and understanding of the nature and extent of the problem in York Region. It responds to a serious gap in the literature, as to date very little research has explored youth homelessness in York Region (with the exceptions of Cameron et al., 2004 and van Daalen-Smith & Lamont, 2006). As such, our primary aim was to gather basic information about the pathways into and experiences of homelessness in York Region for young people. The knowledge learned about youth homelessness can contribute to real solutions to the problem.

*The specific goals of the research project were to:*

1. Understand the extent of the problem.

2. Learn more about the backgrounds of young people who became homeless, what caused them to leave home, and what their experience was like once on their own.

3. Learn more about the local response to youth homelessness, including current services for youth, in order to better understand what is useful and where gaps remain.

4. Connect what we have learned here with the broader research knowledge base that exists on youth homelessness, its causes and circumstances, and strategies and solutions to the problem.

5. Contribute insights that can lead to a more effective and humane response to youth homelessness in York Region.

6. Raise public awareness of the problem.

## 4.1  RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The research focused on the lived experience of young people who were homeless in York Region. In addition, we were interested in increasing our understanding of youth homelessness and the response of service providers in the area.

### YOUTH SURVEY/INTERVIEWS

The goal of our research was to interview at least sixty young people who had experienced homelessness. In order to recruit youth participants that were either homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness, our team visited five organizations that serve young people who experience

homelessness. Four were in York Region and included Blue Door Shelters, Salvation Army Sutton Youth Shelter, 360° Kids' Homebase, YMCA (employment training program), and two 360° Kids' transitional residences. We conducted interviews at Youth Haven, located in Barrie, due to its proximity to York Region. A total of 62 youth completed a written survey and participated in an hour-long interview. Two youth were deemed ineligible as they were currently living at home and had been for some time, leaving a final sample size of 60.

The survey was designed to elicit basic information from the participants, including their demographic information, employment and education histories and current mental health and substance use concerns. The qualitative interview was designed to elicit rich information about the histories of the participants, including their lives before homelessness, their experiences while homeless, services they received in York Region and what recommendations they had for better addressing youth homelessness in the region.

Quantitative data was entered into an SPSS database and analyzed for basic descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically using NVivo-9 software. Data was first sorted deductively using broad pre-determined categories such as 'employment' and 'home life'. Once data was organized according to these broad themes, it was coded inductively by sub-themes that emerged within each category. For example, various sub-codes emerged from the category 'employment' including 'current' employment, 'history' of employment, and 'barriers to' employment.
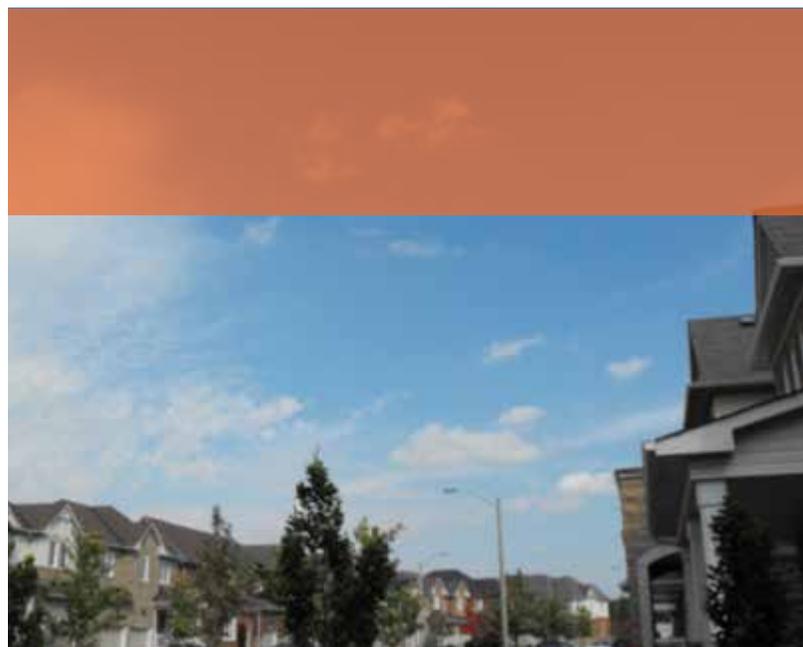


## INTERVIEWS WITH KEY INFORMANT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with service providers from eight organizations, seven from York Region and one in Barrie. Agencies were selected based on their connection to youth homelessness and included input from four executive directors, three program directors, one manager, one employment worker and one outreach worker. The agencies that were included in this research were 360° Kids, Jewish Vocational Services – York Region, York Region Youth Shelters, the Salvation Army – Sutton Youth Shelter, Rose of Sharon, Yellow Brick House, John Howard Society of York Region and Jewish Family and Child Services In addition to the 10 semi-structured interviews, a number of less formal conversations were held with librarians, officers from the York Regional Police Services, staff at United Way York Region, the Community and Health Services Department of York Region and from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. While official information was not drawn from these conversations, they were fundamental in shaping the direction of the research.

## 4.2 RESULTS

Listed below are the results from both the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews.

The results have been separated broadly into the following sections: life before homelessness, pathways into homelessness and experience of homelessness, although as will be shown, it is not always possible to draw a distinction between 'before' and 'after' homelessness. We discuss the multiple barriers that young people face in moving forward with their lives, their past and current experiences in education and conclude with a discussion of the services available for young people in York Region, both from the perspective of the youth and service providers.

## 4.2.1 PARTICIPANTS

The research sample drawn from York Region is in many ways consistent with broader research on youth homelessness, with a couple of notable exceptions. Of the 60 participants, 35, or 57.4% identified as male, 22 or 36.1% as female, and 1 or 1.6% as transgender (two surveys were left blank), which is fairly consistent with research that shows there are generally 2 homeless male youth for every 1 female. It is also nearly identical to the research conducted by van Daalen-Smith & Lamont (2006) who interviewed 21 young people who were either homeless or previously homeless, a few of their parents and service providers in York Region. The mean age of participants was 19.97. Twenty-three per cent of participants identified as a 'visible minority', which is an under-representation of the York Region population data in general (approximately 37% of the population). Aboriginal youth are over-represented, making up 14.8% of the sample (they make up only 4.3% of the general population), while young people who are new Canadians make up 8.2% of the sample, compared with 20% in the general population. Only 8.2% identified as LGBTQ, which is much smaller than is commonly found in research on youth experiencing homelessness. This is particularly true for research conducted in large urban areas such as Toronto, where LGBTQ youth make up 25-40% of the youth homeless population (Abramovich, 2013; Josephson & Wright, 2000).

When asked to reflect on the socioeconomic status of their households while they were growing up, the majority (39%) felt they were 'average', followed closely by 26% who felt they lived 'below average'. Just over 13% stated they were 'poor' and over 16% indicated they were either 'above average' or 'well off'. This is in contrast to the research conducted by Cameron et al., (2004) in Richmond Hill, which lists the majority of their participants as "economically advantaged", although it is not clear if this is based on the higher than average income of households in the area in general or if self-identified by the young people themselves.

## 4.2.2 LIFE BEFORE HOMELESSNESS

Uncovering the childhood experiences of youth experiencing homelessness in York Region allows us to better understand the causes of homelessness and where there are missed opportunities for early-intervention. This section discusses our findings on the home lives of the young people interviewed. Specifically they were asked about their experiences of family conflict and abuse; personal and parental experiences with health, mental health and substance abuse; and child protection and foster care.

## FAMILY INCOME

Poverty and lack of income can be a structural cause of homelessness. For young people who become homeless, this issue becomes more complicated because personal income may not be a relevant factor prior to homelessness (as financial dependence on adult caregivers defines childhood and adolescence), but most certainly is once they leave home and have to support themselves. Our data indicate that young people in the sample came from a variety of family income levels. While low-income families were over-represented (42% were from families described as poor or below average), it is important to realize that youth homelessness is not merely driven by poverty and that the underlying factors can be present in all kinds of families and occur in virtually any community. For York Region, this means that youth homelessness is a problem across the region and cannot be identified with any specific communities.

FIGURE 4 *Estimated Household Income while Growing Up*



- 6% WELL OFF
- 16% ABOVE AVERAGE
- 39% AVERAGE
- 26% BELOW AVERAGE
- 13% POOR
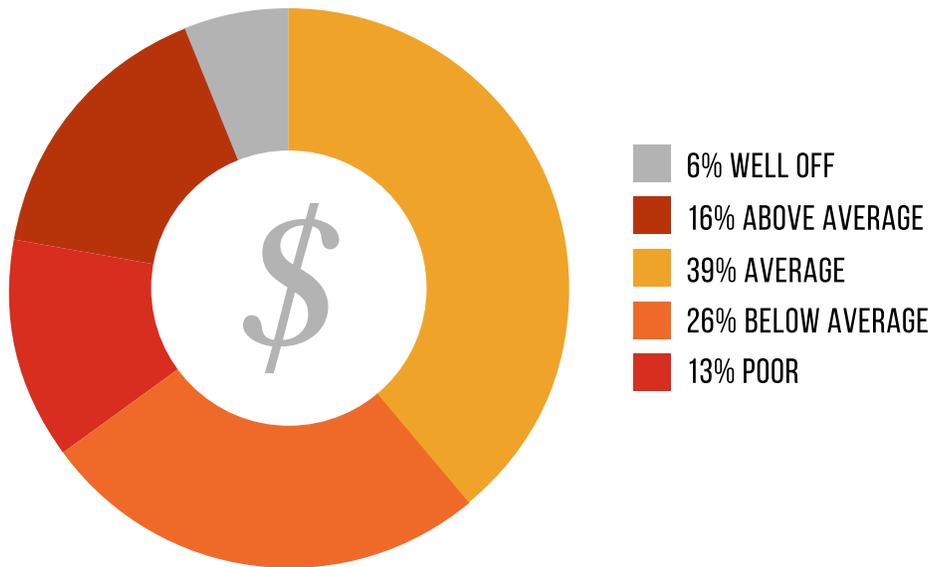
## FAMILY STRUCTURE

Youth were asked who their main caretakers were during childhood. For some, this was easy to answer. Twelve youth, or 19.7% reported growing up in a household with both parents. Many youth stated that they lived with one parent only, with 15 participants, or 24.6% youth stating they lived with their mothers and 1 youth (1.6%) with his father. Youth who experienced the separation or divorce of their parents were likely to suggest that this marked a negative turning point in their childhood. Rob, age 25, for instance commented:

*It was good while it lasted. Then, they split up when I was about 14. Shit went downhill from there.*

Unfortunately, many youth reported highly unstable family backgrounds. A large number (36.1%) were unable to pick just one caregiver they grew up with and reported moving frequently between caregivers.

Youth whose parents had separated were more likely to share experiences of high-transience and shifting family structure, sometimes moving between parents or navigating new relationships with stepparents. Other youth, such as Sofia, age 18, lacked the consistent support of either parent and grew up with other adults such as relatives:

> *I lived with relatives because my mom left my dad when [we] were babies…We were really sick when were young, and my dad couldn't take care of us - he had work…so he had people that he paid to take care of us…So I basically grew up with relatives.*

## CONFLICTUAL AND CHAOTIC FAMILY LIVES

All young people live within a web of family relations. For those who become homeless, we know from extensive research that many, if not most come from households characterized by high levels of family conflict and discord (Winland, et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2009; Karabanow, 2008). This can be between the young person and parents or siblings, or conflict between other family members (parents for instance) that disrupts the life of the household. Family conflict often underlies youth homelessness and many flee abuse or leave the care of child welfare services.

This matters because family instability and chaos have been linked to adverse development outcomes including low self-esteem, poor decision-making and future mental health challenges (Baker-Collins, 2013; Anda, et al., 2006; Sokolowski, et al., 2013). We use conflict to describe a wide-range of stressors that youth can face at home such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, family breakdown and domestic abuse. Our findings are consistent with other research in this area. Young people recounted a wide-range of negative childhood experiences. However, it is important to note that not all young people explicitly categorized their home life as wholly negative. Instead, some youth were quick to suggest that they grew up 'normally' and/or that their relationships with key adults in their lives had been largely positive. In some instances, this occurred even when youth went on to describe experiences of conflict and abuse.

Over 92% of participants reported that conflict with parents or caregivers was a factor that contributed to their eventual homelessness, and 72% said this was a major cause. The roots of this type of conflict often go deep. Participants were asked to describe their childhoods, specifically whether there were any positive or negative memories that stood out for them. While some youth recounted positive experiences, other youth went on to describe their childhoods as "crazy" with frequent fighting and yelling. It was clear that for some, this had an obvious emotional impact. Rose, age 20, reflects on her experience of family conflict:

> *I remember most of the time, whenever we did anything we were always just fighting. We just really couldn't get along. Even when my mom tried to make us have family dinners, there was a lot of screaming and shouting. A lot of crying. You're either angry or sad.*

Conflict was not the only source of family chaos. As mentioned above, some youth and their families experienced a high degree of transience, often as a result of abandonment by one or both parents. It is notable that many families moved within York Region multiple times. Chris, age 19 commented on this:

> *I honestly lived all over. When I was living with my mom I lived in Richmond Hill and she also moved to Newmarket at one point and then…I lived up in Keswick and Aurora.*

There were a few youth who reported growing up in Barrie for a period of time and less frequently, in Toronto. Some families had moved to York Region from international locations. The majority of participants however, reported growing up in York Region. This suggests that policies and programs targeted at family instability could assist in preventing youth homelessness in York Region.

## PARENTAL HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIONS

Other sources of family instability and conflict included poor health, mental health challenges and substance abuse among parents. Among those youth with experiences in at least one of these areas, substance use was the most frequent. Twenty per cent suggested that their parent's drug and alcohol use negatively impacted their childhood, and in fact 38% reported that their parent's substance/alcohol use was a major factor that impacted on their eventual homelessness. Previous research conducted on youth experiencing homelessness found that a comparable 24% of youth experienced substance abuse within the family (Raising the Roof, 2009). Substance abuse among parents has been linked to higher rates of physical abuse (Walsh, MacMillian and Jamieson, 2003), youth substance abuse and youth homelessness (McMorris et al., 2002). Ray, age 25, reflected on his father's use of alcohol:

> *Grandma just passed away... Dad's not really dealing with it too well. He was pretty bad before, he likes to drink a lot and take out his problems on others, but it's a lot worse now. He just doesn't know how to deal with anything; he comes home from work and just starts drinking. He's been doing that for 15 years.*

Only 15% of youth indicated that one or both parents experienced poor physical or mental health; however for those who did, such as Chris, age 20, the impact appeared to be significant:

*My dad had prostate cancer and my mom had diabetes so it was up to me and my sister…we had to take care of them most of the time. Then we kinda got depressed and started taking pills for that.*

Sixteen percent of the youth interviewed mentioned the death of a parent or primary caregiver, usually from illness. In two instances however, the death was the result of domestic violence. For these youth, the death of their parent marked a significant moment in their childhood. Devin, age 19, elaborates:

*I feel like a lot of bad things have happened because of her [mothers] death, because I wasn't able to handle a lot of things… growing up, not dealing with it and then dad moving on so quickly after she died with a new girlfriend and everything, I just didn't handle it the best of ways.*

## ABUSE

It is well established that physical, sexual and emotional abuse contributes to youth homelessness. In our survey, almost 60% reported either physical or sexual abuse as being a contributing factor leading to their eventual homelessness, and 21.7% identified it as a major factor. During the interviews, more than one third of the youth explicitly mentioned experiences of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. The majority of these experiences were physical, though a small proportion referred to emotional abuse and even fewer to sexual abuse. Jerome, age 24, comments on the 'freedom' he experienced everyday in going to school and getting away from his mother and the constant physical violence:

*The day that I got on that school bus I felt completely free from my mom for the day. As soon as I got home the beatings started again.*

A few youth described the process by which they attempted to adapt to the abuse. For some youth this meant you have to "just deal with it" while others physically retaliated. While the youth we interviewed had left their abusive situations, some faced lasting consequences, including ongoing difficultly with conflict resolution and/or anger management, leading to a loss of friends, school suspension, discharge from services and contact with the criminal justice system. Devin, age 19, for example, reflects on her experience with ongoing anger:

*I get depressed and then I get sad and then my anger kicks in, I have extreme anger problems. Once my anger… once I black out …I feel like I don't want to, it's hard for me to deal with it every day…*

*Unsupported transitions out of the child welfare system can be one cause of youth homelessness.*

## INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES AND FOSTER CARE

There is a body of research that suggests difficult transitions from child protection contribute to the prevalence of youth homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Serge et al., 2002). In our research, there is no doubt that many young people had some experience of involvement with child protection services at some point in their lives. Nearly half of the youth we interviewed (28 participants or 46.7%) had some form of interaction with the Children's Aid Society (CAS). For some youth, CAS was involved only once. Youth reported that the agency "came to check on things and left," without follow-up. For those youth who experienced limited interaction with CAS, feelings were mixed. Some felt that their presence was helpful while others described feelings of mistrust and/or low levels of confidence in the agency. For instance, Kaitlyn, age 17, commented on how CAS was unable to determine whether abuse was happening in her household:

*I remember CAS coming but my mom had made us put on an act. That's what happens most of times unless there is like documented proof…CAS is only really useful for like drug abuse and alcohol abuse because that kind of stuff you can't hide but when it comes to stuff that's more physical and psychological abuse, it kind of goes in the air and nobody cares about it.*

Of the 28 youth who reported CAS involvement, 14 were taken into foster care, group homes or adoption. For these youth, the experience of foster care differed dramatically. Half of the youth returned home, some to improved family circumstances. One youth suggested that his experience in foster care had a positive effect on his family and allowed his mother the time she needed to address her substance abuse issues. Others faced a high degree of transience and were shuffled between different foster families, group homes and relatives. One youth estimated that she had lived in 20 foster homes and group homes between the ages of three and twenty-two. While only 28% of the youth interviewed experienced living in foster care, the experiences of those who did not return home were markedly chaotic. For instance, Caleb, age 23, and Jerome, age 24, both ran away from foster care and faced subsequent difficulties. Both had contact with the criminal justice system, struggled with drug use and/or mental health challenges, reported difficulties with aggression and were among the most transient of the youth we interviewed. Caleb states:

*I went to foster care and I went to a couple different houses because the first guy was a weirdo. The second person, she just had a shitload of kids in her house, like she didn't even have enough rooms for them… I ended up getting kicked out of there…then, I went to a couple different more, then I just said fuck foster care and I did my own thing.*

Similarly, Jerome reports:

> *The very first time I left home I was 14 and then when I left Children's Aid initially I was 16 so I was in care for 2 years…when I was 16 I went to Toronto and lived on the streets in Toronto and experienced a lot of crappy stuff.*

Understanding the prevalence of child protection services and foster care involvement within the youth homeless population is important. First, child protection involvement is illustrative of family breakdown, chaos and dysfunction that could be addressed through a range of supportive services. Secondly, for those youth who are best placed in foster care, there is significant risk of 'aging-out' of the child welfare system without the proper supports or adequate readiness for independence. Unsupported transitions out of the child welfare system can be one cause of youth homelessness.

## POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY

While most of the youth reported living extremely chaotic lives, it is important to note that this was not always the case.  At the same time, while conflict may have been present between some family members, this does not imply that all family relations were conflictual.  Almost half of the youth interviewed described the relationship with at least one of their parents as positive. These relationships sometimes remained positive even throughout their experience of homelessness. At other times, they were marked by periods of breakdown culminating in estrangement. In many cases it was difficult to categorize relationships as entirely positive or negative, but it is important to highlight that some youth felt supported by their parents, at least for a period of time. While family conflict, neglect and abuse were certainly present within our findings, these experiences were not universal. For instance, Frankie speaks of his great relationship with his mother and lukewarm relationship with his stepdad:

> *Ah my mom was my best - she's my best friend and my stepdad, when I was younger, it was all good but as I got older, stepdad and son relationship, I guess it's just average*

# 4.2.3  BECOMING HOMELESS

Our research demonstrates that for the young people interviewed, homelessness was not a one-off event, but perhaps more accurately can be described as a process. Instead, participants moved in and out of homelessness with a great deal of fluidity.  For instance, a young person may run away or be kicked out of their house and go live with friends or relatives temporarily, before moving back home.  After some time, they may leave again, move in with friends or end up on the streets.  Consequently, it was not a simple task to draw a distinction between life before and life during homelessness, particularly for those youth who started leaving home at an early age.

FIGURE 5  *Pathways into Homelessness*

AT HOME

HOMELESS SHELTER          WITH RELATIVES

COUCH SURFING          OUTDOORS
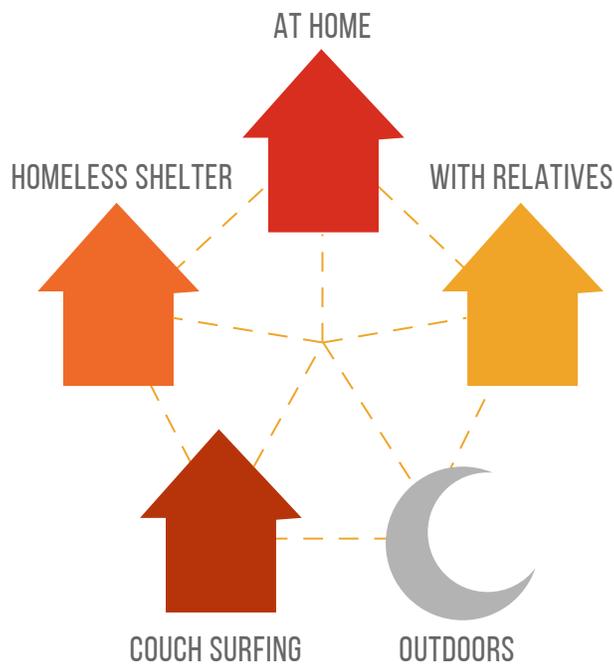
## AGE OF LEAVING HOME

One of the things that stands out from this research is the fact that for many of the research participants, the pathway into homelessness began at a very young age. The average age at which participants left home for the first time was 15.83; the median age was 16. As displayed in table 2 below, 44.4% of participants left home at age 15 or lower, and another 22% left at the age of 16. In 70% of the cases, parents or caregivers wanted the youth to leave, either unilaterally or in agreement with the youth themselves. This is a significant finding, because it suggests that for the majority of young people they first experienced homelessness at a very young age (it should be noted that in Ontario, young people under the age of sixteen cannot access homelessness services). This also indicates that the risk factors that contributed to their homelessness were present during that time and that adults outside of the family home may have been aware of this (note that virtually all young people would have been in school at the time). This issue will be pursued further in the discussion section of the report.

TABLE 2 *Age First Left Home*



AGE
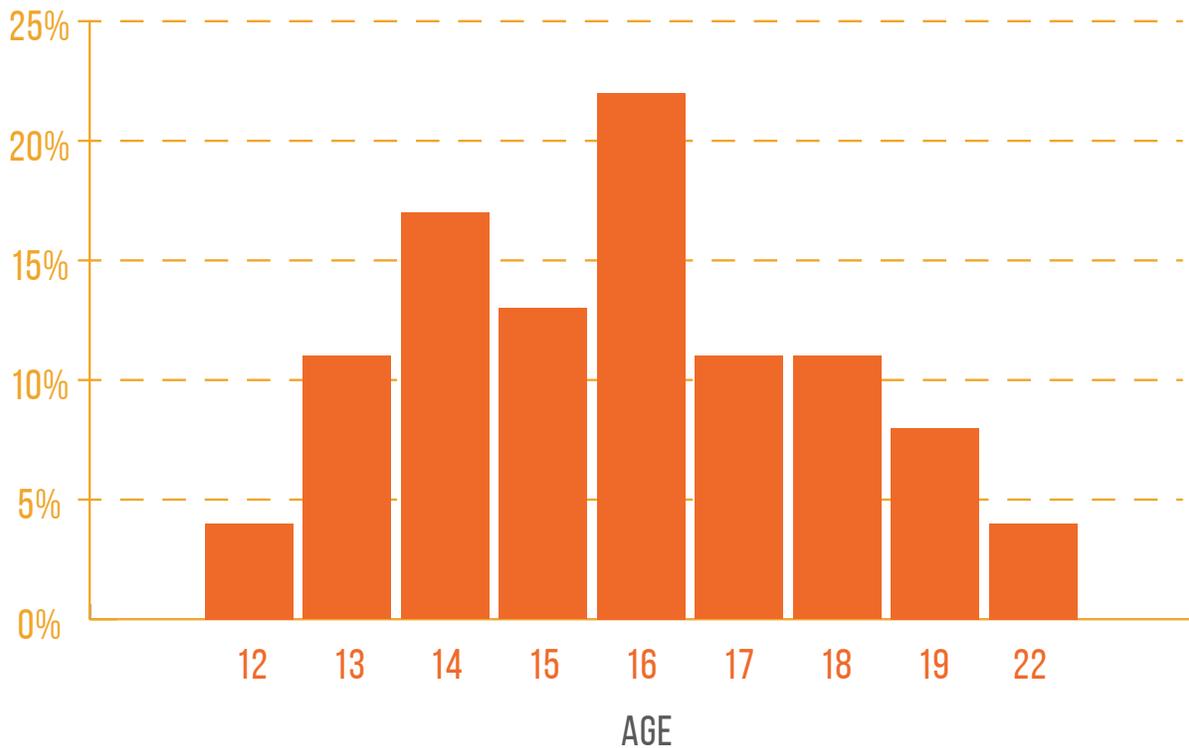
# LEAVING HOME – CAUSES

Identifying the causes of youth homelessness can be extremely challenging, because there are typically a number of factors interacting at the same time. When asked about the key causes of their homelessness, most young people were able to identify multiple factors as being implicated. This makes it difficult for a young person to say for certain what the singular or actual cause was. For instance, a young person may be kicked out of their house because they skipped school or were found with an illicit drug. There may, however, have been a history of family conflict, or parental addictions that preceded this. Moreover, there may be factors that the young person themself is unaware of, such as an undiagnosed learning disability that contributed to school disengagement, or mental health disorders undiagnosed amongst family members (including the young person).

Nevertheless, we identify factors that young people report as key in contributing to their eventual homelessness. Table 3 highlights a selected range of factors that young people identified as significant in contributing to their homelessness.

TABLE 3 *Selected Factors Contributing to Youth Homelessness*



NOT IMPORTANT    SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT    SIGNIFICANT
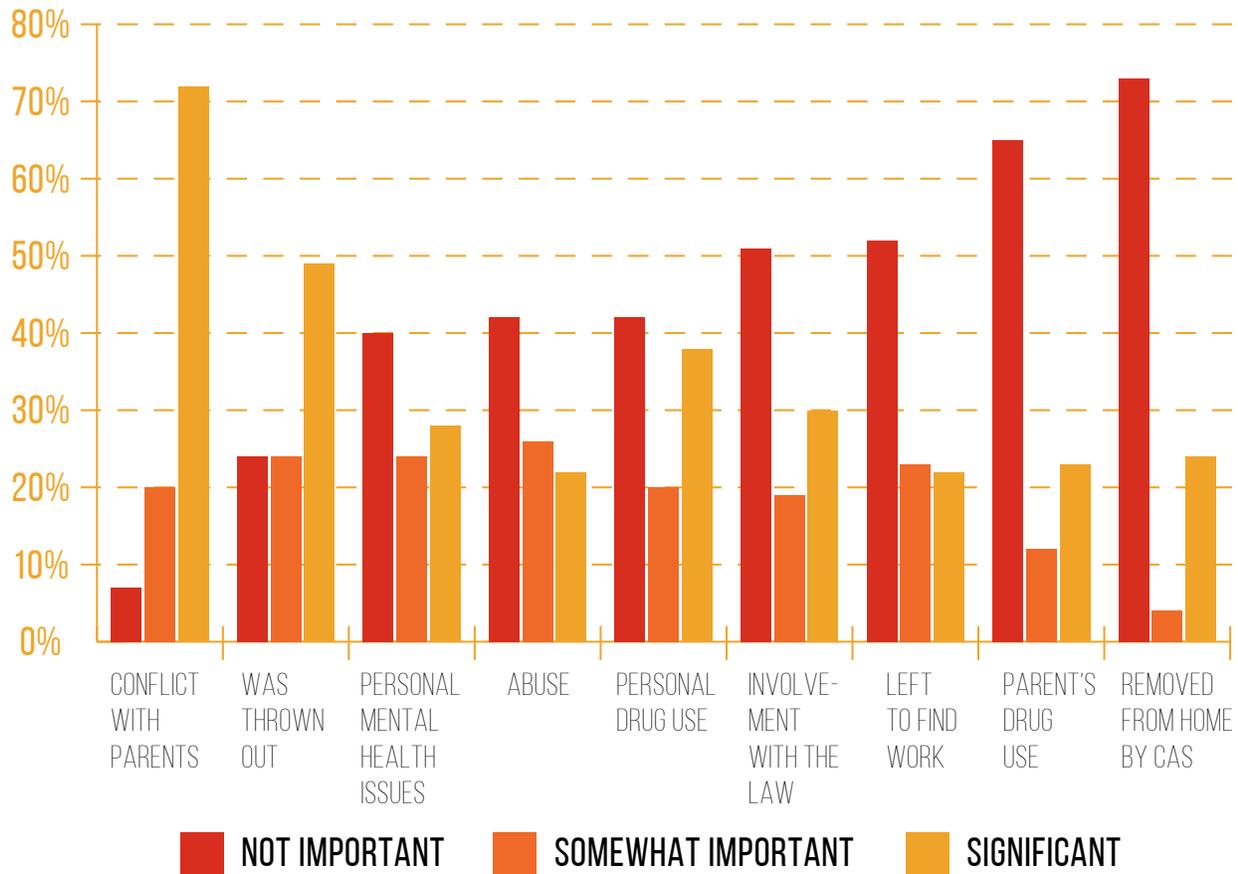
When youth were asked to reflect on the main reason they either left home or became homeless, the vast majority indicated that they left because of some form of family conflict, particularly with their parents or caregivers. In fact, as mentioned above, only 7% reported that family conflict was 'not important' in their decision to leave home. While a majority made the decision to leave themselves or in agreement with caregivers, 75% reported being kicked out at some point (it is important to remember that most youth experienced multiple episodes of homelessness and that each case might have been precipitated by a different circumstance).

As is well established in research, experiences of abuse are unquestionably linked to adverse individual outcomes and can be a chief driver of youth homelessness (Karabanow, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Braitstein et al., 2003; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus et al., 1995). Research has generally shown that between 60-70% of youth experiencing homelessness leave home due to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009).

> ### *The vast majority indicated that they left because of some form of family conflict*

As mentioned above, this was also the case in this study, as 58% identified abuse as a contributing factor in their decision to leave home. Interestingly, several participants left this section of the survey blank – 11 in regards to physical abuse and 13 for sexual abuse. While it is impossible to know the reason for this, it is possible that the number of young people who experienced abuse is somewhat higher, and some participants did not feel comfortable answering this question.

Some youth articulated the role they had played in the breakdown of their family. For instance, when Trevor, age 20, was asked how things were at his family home before he left he stated:

> *Perfect, everything was good. I'm the reason why I moved. I stole something I shouldn't have stolen and they couldn't trust me to live in the house… They got over it a while back but it doesn't make up for the fact that it actually happened. They wanted me to stay but I personally felt like I had to go and do what I had to because I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't want to take from them again. They didn't deserve that.*

Two young people experienced blatant homophobia within their homes, one due to his sexuality, the other her gender. Lacy, age 18, described the devastation experienced when she told her mom she was transgender:

> *My mom and my relationship was pretty much stronger than ever…and then one day, trusting the fact that at this point, my mom and my relationship is so close, thinking that, there's no way, because my mom is also a generally accepting person – she's got homosexual friends – and, I decide to tell her, "hey, Mom, guess what? I'm transgendered". And then "Guess what? You're leaving my house!".*

Trouble with the law also contributed to the experience of homelessness for several youth, particularly young men. Forty nine percent identified conflict with the law as a contributing factor, and 30.2% said it was a significant reason for their leaving home. Criminal justice involvement was most often discussed as a factor in their homelessness with regards to the ongoing tension it created at home, but in the case of five young people, homelessness was the direct result of being discharged from jail with no place to go. In some cases, the participants were dropped off at a shelter, and in one case, Jose, age 25, described his living situation as 'not the problem' of the prison:

*Well they don't send you [to the shelter]. It's up to you to fend for yourself… Once you leave the jail, they have… it's their responsibility to make sure you're in town… right? So they'll give you a ticket, a bus ticket but once you're in town you're not their problem.*

In another situation, Jose was required to stay in a shelter in order to avoid going to prison:

*I had these conditions…stipulations… And one of them was to live in this shelter In Newmarket. I had to live there because I had no surety…I couldn't live with my mom, I couldn't live with this person. Was my first charge so they're like "yeah, we'll give you bail and you're going to have to stay at the Blue Door".*

Finally, mental health issues stand out as a cause of homelessness, which only 40% of the sample identified as a non-factor.  Conversely, 28.3% suggested it was a major factor. Almost 50% identified challenges with depression and anxiety as contributing to their homelessness, and over 50% implicated their personal substance use and addictions.  This is an important factor to consider, because excessive use of substances can be both a cause of, and a response to mental health problems.

## ONCE HOMELESS, WHERE DO YOUNG PEOPLE STAY?

Youth homelessness is inherently characterized by housing instability.  When they leave home, young people may stay in a variety of places, including temporarily with friends and family (couch surfing), emergency shelters, with partners, outdoors in parks, alleys or on rooftops, in abandoned buildings, etc.  If they manage to make money, they may rent a room on a short-term basis.  The reality is that most young people move between a variety of shelter situations, often punctuated by temporary returns home.

The majority of respondents attempted to return home after leaving initially, only to be faced with the same problems and be forced to leave again. For some youth, this happened multiple times. Scott, age 22, describes this process:

*I was out for like a year and then they let me back to see if I could do it all over again and that started trouble again… After living with a friend for a year I was back for another year and then I got in another fight with them and I was kicked out again…Same stuff every time. He [dad] never stopped being how he was and I didn't like it so I just wanted to get out of there.*

The average age at which youth had last lived with their parents was 17.70.

The places that participants went to immediately after leaving home varied, but typically involved moving to a friend's or a relative's house. Some moved into their own apartment and others sought emergency shelter. Unfortunately, for many participants, these initial arrangements proved to be unsustainable, and they were forced to look for new accommodations shortly thereafter. In fact, it was not uncommon for young people to describe moving frequently between the various places listed above after leaving home.

There were many reasons for this. In many cases they felt they had worn out their welcome, or experienced conflict with their new roommates. In other cases, participants reported living in inadequate housing, particularly if they rented their own unit. This included small spaces and in some cases health hazards such as mice. Some young people described conflict with their landlords, and others described the difficulties they faced in meeting high rental costs every month. Addictions and unemployment were also reported as being factors for some youth. Several participants, including Malcolm, age 29, describe losing their housing after a breakup with their romantic partner:

*I was with my baby mum most of the time. We were together for about 4.5 solid years. So we always had a place. We separated a couple times and I ended up in shelters. That is why I'm here now, we just separated like a month ago.*

## STAYING IN EMERGENCY SHELTERS OR ON THE STREETS

Most of the youth interviewed ended up living in shelters or transitional housing at some point. A few were forced to live outdoors. Youth who lived outdoors reported sleeping in the bush, under a bridge, or in a tent. For some, not only did the frequent moves cover various types of accommodation, but also a wide geographic range. Jerome, age 24, states:

*I've been to Barrie, I've been to Newmarket, I've been to Sutton…I've been to every shelter in Toronto, you can possibly think of, I've been there.*

## LEAVING YORK REGION

One of the challenges of understanding youth homelessness in York Region is that very little is known about those who leave town. Because the emergency services in the region are generally sparse and at the same time located in the center/north of the region, many young people may not access local services, or may eventually move on. There is very weak infrastructure to help young people stay 'in place', and so it is understood that many will leave town, either to go north to Barrie, or more likely to the City of Toronto, which currently has nine emergency shelters dedicated to youth. Others will move even further afield. What happens to young people who leave York Region is generally unknown; though we do know that when this

happens young people not only lose their family, but also their community. Relations with friends and supportive adults (teachers, coaches, neighbours, etc.) become weakened or severed. More research is needed to understand this process and its implications for young people who come from areas with weak supports for youth experiencing homelessness.

In our study, a small number of youth reported traveling to Toronto and living on the streets. For these youth, the experiences were not positive. Jerome describes his experience:

> *I was sleeping on the street, no sleeping bag, just my bag and a blanket. I did around here [York Region] too, but most times I was in Toronto because I started to know people down there. So, like they weren't my friends …but it was better to be around somebody just in case you started getting robbed or something… I've seen a lot of horrific things, I mean, from watching people die to watching  people shoot up, have overdoses to selling drugs to stealing cars…*

In order to gain a sense of the transience experienced, participants were asked to estimate the number of places they had stayed in the past year. Several, including Trevor, age 20, had trouble putting a number on this and estimates dozens:

> *A number? I'd say 30, 40, 50. Like a good amount of locations. I've slept everywhere. I've slept downtown Toronto. I slept at the Eaton Center. I slept in so many places I didn't want to sleep - And not in comfortable positions.*

Similarly, Andy, age 19 states that he stayed in:

> *Probably like 40 [different places]…Just couch surfing and on the streets and friend's houses, family houses…*

The level of transience reported by youth was very high. As youth moved from place to place, including back and forth from their homes of origin, their experiences of homelessness were generally episodic. Not all youth experienced homelessness immediately after leaving their family home, but experienced some event afterwards that later led to their homelessness. In light of these facts, it might be useful to view homelessness as a process rather than a single event. Young people moved from various places and continued to experience multiple barriers throughout their lives. Even after being housed for a relatively stable period of time, many young people reported becoming homeless again. They experienced a number of causes' of homelessness throughout their lives, including eviction, conflict with roommates, unaffordable housing, experiencing a critical incident, etc.

## COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILY AFTER LEAVING HOME

As we have argued, the experience of youth homelessness must be understood in the context of family conflict. This is true of the York Region sample, as the vast majority of participants reported having strained relationships with at least one family member and in many cases multiple family members. Most young people reported having little contact with their families at the time of the interview, although there was some variation. For instance, some youth spoke to some family members and not others, some remained in contact with at least one of their parents rather frequently and some had lost touch with their relatives entirely.

Sometimes the lack of communication was the choice of the young person, and at other times they tried to make contact but were unsuccessful. For instance, Sofia, age 19, had tried repeatedly to get in touch with her father and even had others try on her behalf, but to no avail:

> *I called him on my b-day and was like I miss you, and I miss everything, and I want to move back to you. And I told him what was going on, me and Eric broke up, and he never called me back, messaged me or left me a voice mail…not just this year but the year before too…Even my worker has tried calling him, and nothing. Anything to do with me, he won't do it.*

Others, such as Rose, age 20, remained firm on their decision not to speak to their family:

> *I don't visit them, I don't phone them, I don't email. I blocked them online so they can't contact me. When I moved out, I never told them where I lived… So I haven't been in contact with them since New Year's and I don't plan on contacting them anytime soon.*

Some youth expressed great pain at this lack of contact. One young woman, Devin, age 19, states:

> *I shouldn't be in an environment where my father doesn't father me. It hurts me, it hurts everyday and in everything that I do, it shows.*

Other young people, such as Ray, age 26, spoke to some members of their families regularly:

> *I talk to dad, I talk to mom…Like I still love them…I just don't get along [with dad] and it's bad for us; both of us. He's not getting any younger, can't be yelling and screaming like that. It's no good.*

# 4.2.4  BARRIERS TO INDEPENDENCE

For most of the youth in the sample, transitioning to independence was not as simple as finding a job and a place to live. As will be shown below, youth struggled to obtain an income they could survive on and housing that was suitable and affordable. In addition, concerns over health and well-being, addictions and mental heath created further barriers for some attempting to transition to independence.

## MAKING ENDS MEET

In York Region, the Human Services Planning Board has acknowledged that many individuals and families struggle to make ends meet (HSPB-YR, 2012).  The very high cost of housing and the high cost of living, combined with lower incomes mean that many people face incredible financial challenges that can impact on housing stability, nutritional vulnerability and well-being.  For young people generally, financial instability may be exacerbated by changes in the labour market that make finding full-time employment that pays a living wage more and more challenging.

For young people who are homeless and/or who lack credentials (because they left school at an early age) the situation is even worse. Participants were asked to describe how they made ends meet while they were homeless. The majority of youth were forced to utilize a combination of sources of income, typically involving employment, income assistance, or relying on family, friends, or their partners. Table 4 below lists the percentage of youth who have received income from the listed sources in the past 30 days. Income assistance, either in the form of Ontario Works or the Street Allowance was the most frequently cited source of income, followed by money obtained from family or friends and employment. While youth were staying at shelters, they were grateful to have their basic needs met, including food and shelter. Short stays in shelters and frequent transience however meant that for most youth, making ends meet was a continuous struggle.

TABLE 4  *Sources of Income*
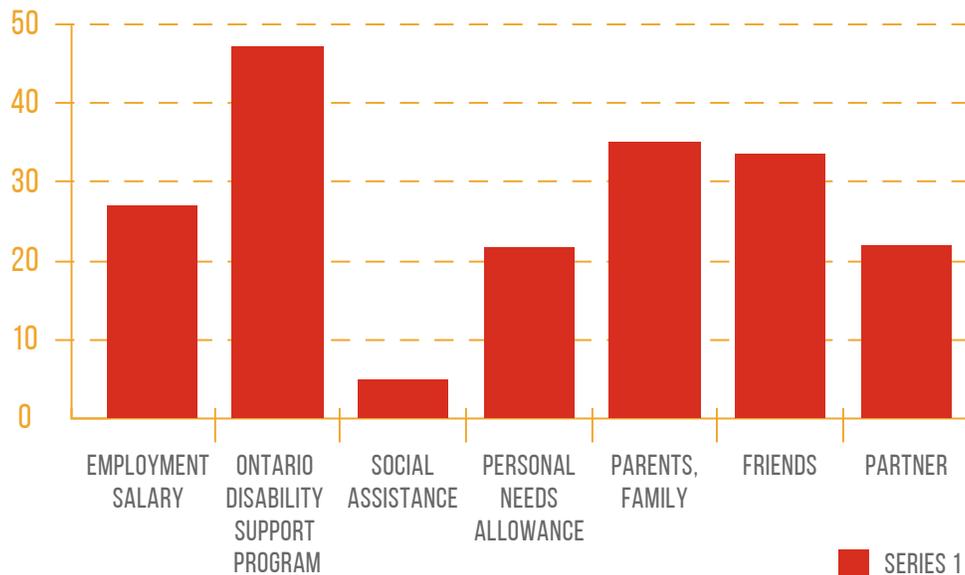
## EMPLOYMENT

Participants were asked to describe both their current and past employment experiences. It was common to hear that participants had trouble finding employment due to the unavailability of quality jobs, low skill and education levels and criminal justice histories. Kailey, age 16, describes her difficulties in finding a job:

> *I just go out to the mall or from plaza to plaza looking for a place… that I can work at because I've been to malls and I've applied at many stores but they don't call back… I've applied to plazas, Loblaws, No Frills, but they still haven't called me. It's pretty hard to get a job in Richmond Hill. Not a lot of people are hiring, like they just don't need that many people…I just need a job.*

Youth also struggled to maintain employment due to precarious housing, temporary or seasonal work, transportation concerns, mental health and health challenges, and in a couple of instances, substance abuse. Only 12 young people, or 19.7% reported that they were currently working. Of those who were, few were engaged in jobs with any long-term prospects. Part-time work, particularly in the service sector, was the norm. Precarious or seasonal work, such as landscaping or construction jobs, was very prevalent. Others attempted to piece together whatever work they could, including odd jobs that were available sporadically, even if just for a day. For instance, there were some employers who would come to a shelter looking for labourers for one day. Josh, age 21, describes how he struggles to make ends meet with low wages and part-time hours:

> *Minimum wage in Ontario is fucking ridiculous. It's not the worst thing on the planet but 40 hours a week minimum wage you're still below the poverty line…there's a lot of jobs but every single job is 20 hours, part time. And even then, if you're lucky, your part time job will be the same days. If you're unlucky it will be random days…and you won't be able to get a second job… if you're current job is not giving you the same hours every week, how do you have a second job, you can't schedule stuff correctly?*

## SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

As shown in the Table above, a large number of young people had to rely on social assistance at some point or another. For some it was a necessity in order to leave their parents' home and live on their own. For others, it provided a few hundred dollars a month that could go toward securing basic necessities while homeless. Youth who received assistance were grateful for the small amounts of money they received, although some, including Jaime, age 23, commented that they continued to struggle to make ends meet:

> *I'm just doing the whole $600 a month from OW and every penny goes to rent, bills and I have next to nothing left after.*

Other youth, such as Cody, age 18, were adamant that they would never turn to welfare for assistance:

> *I'm not really interested in welfare. They told me if I was I could get it but I'd rather get a job.*

## HOUSING AND THE COST OF LIVING

Unfortunately, regardless of whether youth were working or relying on social assistance, the income secured was often not enough to meet the high costs of living, particularly with regards to housing. For instance, David, age 24, describes how precarious employment made it difficult for him to maintain housing:

> *If there were more permanent lines of work for people it would be a lot easier for people to keep their place. That's the main thing, like we're paying first and last so much.*

Similarly, Devin, age 19, describes how she struggled to obtain housing with the meager amount provided by social assistance:

> *Welfare does help out a lot but they don't give you nearly enough to survive and get your own place and everything like that.*

Sadly, Nathaniel, age 24, explained how his need to save money in order to move forward in his life, or to maintain employment and avoid criminal activity, made him decide to forgo housing:

> *I want to do things the right way, I don't want to sell drugs, I don't want to rob people, and I don't want to steal…I don't want to do*

*any of these negative things… I have to figure out how can I save money, so my job doesn't pay me more…so what kind of expenses can I cut? Food I can't cut, personal money I can cut down some…well, I can survive without a place, you know what I mean? And I'll save at least like $550.*

## EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

For many youth, there was a strong desire to work and eventually find a career, though housing was seen as an important pre-requisite. Some of the young people interviewed were enrolled in an employment program, typically where they were provided with paid pre-employment training, employment placements and assistance finding work. One such program was YEP (Young Entrepreneur Program) offered through the Sutton Youth Shelter, which gives youth the opportunity to earn money while also learning business skills they can apply to starting their own business. Sam, age 23, valued his experience at the YEP program tremendously:

> *I did the YEP program when I was 19 and then I basically got my business plan up and going… It was awesome. I tell all the kids here all the time…go do it and I'm so proud of them that they're doing it.*

While many youth had plans to further their formal education, learning practical skills and the ability to see the results of work was also cited as important to several youth. For instance, Chris, age 19, states:

*I like working with my hands…not like work with paper just because it feels like it reminds me of school too much and it feels like work work. But when you work with your hands, I can see what I'm doing, I can see what I've accomplished.*

Unfortunately, a few youth reported that the employment programs paid minimum wage, which is insufficient to make ends meet. Another youth, Lincoln, age 23, was grateful for the income obtained through the employment program but was frustrated at the inability of the program to secure him a job:

*It [the program] was alright…helpful because it put money in my pocket at the time, but I didn't get a job after so it was just a waste of time.*

## ACCESS TO HOUSING

In light of the low vacancy rates in York Region and the high costs of housing, many participants reported extreme difficultly in both finding and being able to afford suitable units. When youth were able to find a place, it was often in a small unit such as a single room or basement. Others relied on roommates to contribute to rental costs. It was not uncommon for young people, such as Colby, age 19, to search for housing for months:

*I've been looking pretty hard the past two months. I've been to over 2 dozen appointments, open houses, talking to landlords…All the time it's been in my budget, they've just been like my request is denied or they just rented to someone else because they had the money right away or they don't want you to be on welfare or they don't like who I am, stuff like that…*

As shown in the above quote, sometimes even when youth were able to find housing they could afford (at least somewhat), many faced discrimination from landlords as a result of their age or because they were on social assistance.

When Colby was asked to elaborate on why being on welfare impacted his ability to find housing he stated:

> *It's hard to get a place when you're on welfare and stuff because a lot of people don't wanna take welfare, especially two young people at the age of 18 or 19. It looks like we're just going to party and stuff…usually we don't get approved for places.*

Another participant, James, age 23, spoke about how he faced discrimination by landlords for living in a shelter, due to the stigma associated with being a "homeless youth":

> *What's the biggest obstacle to get housing? It's the simple fact that you're in a shelter. People don't like calling back and leaving messages with a shelter. Even if you had financial resources? It's the simple fact that you're a youth, you're homeless and it's the whole stereotype that goes along with that.*

## HEALTH AND WELL -BEING

Participants generally reported that they were in good physical health, with 62% rating their health as *'good'* or better. Only five youth felt their health was *'poor'* or *'very poor'*. Despite these relatively high ratings, over a quarter of the youth still felt that their health had declined from the previous year.

Youth with health issues generally took advantage of the services that were close to their location, such as a visiting a nurse practitioner at the Sutton Youth Shelter. Emergency rooms and other local services, such as drop-in clinics, were also used by respondents when health concerns arose, but because of mobility challenges, travelling to specialists or other remote services was more difficult. Those who remained relatively close to home were often lucky enough to have a family doctor when needed, but those with a more transient lifestyle were less likely to have a regular doctor. In addition, nearly 30% reported lacking a valid health card.

## MENTAL HEALTH

For anyone who works with young people – and in particular, those who are homeless – concerns about mental health and wellness are difficult to ignore. A high prevalence of mental health challenges– for the most part relating to depression and anxiety - was evident in our research in York Region. Young people reported relatively high levels of depression and/or feelings of sadness. When asked if they experienced feelings of depression in the past 30 days, three-quarters said they did several times a week, and nearly 40% reported experiencing these feelings daily. Similarly, nearly 60% reported feeling lonely at least once a week and 71.7% reported difficulties sleeping. A few youth described struggling with cutting behavior and a couple struggled with an eating disorder.

TABLE 5 *Diagnosis of Mental Health Problems*
        *"Have you ever met a professional about any of the following…?"*

| % | YES, BEFORE LEFT HOME | YES, AFTER LEFT HOME | NO, BUT WOULD LIKE TO | DOESN'T APPLY TO ME |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| DEPRESSION | 36.6 | 21.3 | 8.2 | 23 |
| SCHIZOPHRENIA | 9.8 | 3.3 | 6.6 | 63.9 |
| ANXIETY | 19.7 | 13.1 | 13.1 | 36 |
| BI-POLAR | 11.5 | 6.6 | 9.8 | 57.4 |
| HELP WITH RELATIONSHIPS | 13.1 | 13.1 | 18 | 41 |
| TRAUMA/ ASSAULT | 14.8 | 8.2 | 9.8 | 54.1 |
| BRAIN INJURY | 8.2 | 1.6 | 3.3 | 70.5 |
| ATTEMPTED SUICIDE | 14.8 | 8.2 | 3.3 | 54.1 |
| SUBSTANCE USE | 16.4 | 11.5 | 6.6 | 52.5 |

In most cases, feelings of depression and anxiety were experienced by participants well before they left home. In fact 21 young people (36.6%) reported receiving treatment for depression while still at home. Twelve others (19.7%) received treatment for anxiety.

In other cases, young people such as Sofia, age 18, reported recent emotional difficulties that had not been previously experienced, most likely as a result of several life events and/or homelessness:

> *Now I'm always scared to be alone, because I don't know, I started to overthinking things to the point that I get upset, and I've like never had that before.*

Table 5 also indicates that a significant number of young people have been diagnosed with more serious forms of mental illness, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. A large number have attempted suicide, with 14.8% having done so prior to becoming homeless and 8.2% once homeless. All of this suggests the importance of interventions for young people, both when they are still living at home and after they have left.

Learning disabilities also create barriers to educational engagement and achievement. In our study, there was a relatively high number of youth who reported diagnoses of ADHD (28.3%) or other learning disabilities such as dyslexia (5%). Many young people felt their needs in this area had not been fully addressed. These figures do not take account of young people with undiagnosed learning disabilities. Five participants (8.3%) reported having epilepsy.

A few youth reported having serious mental health concerns, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. For instance, 6 young people (9.8%) stated they were in treatment for schizophrenia when they lived at home, 2 (3.3%) after they left home and 4 (6.6%) had never received treatment, but had a desire to. These numbers were slightly higher in regards to bipolar disorder with 7 youth (11.5%) indicating they received treatment while at home, 4 (6.6%) after they left and 6 (9.8%) desired treatment.

As these numbers show, youth received support for their mental health concerns at much higher rates when they were at home as opposed to afterwards. This was the case for all mental health concerns, including depression and anxiety. Only 13 (21.3%) youth reported receiving support for their depression and 8 (13.1%) for anxiety while homeless, compared to 21 (34.4%) and 12 (19.7%) while at home. This may be the result of struggling for basic needs, high levels of transience and/or a lack of knowledge about where to access services.

In fact, several young people reported experiencing difficulties accessing mental health services, despite their desire to do so. One youth pointed out that mental health services can be difficult to access in York Region, even with their own doctor looking for an affordable therapist. Other young people described the counselling that was available (i.e. affordable or free) as generally time-limited. This impacted their ability to form a sustained relationship with a counsellor, which in turn made it difficult for young people to either open up or receive thorough support. Malcolm, describes how difficult it was to find a consistent, affordable counsellor, particularly if not in an 'emergency' state:

*One of the toughest things to get help with in York Region is mental health…my doctor has been looking for a counsellor or a psychiatrist for me for a while but nothing is affordable.…places like this if they get a counsellor, the counselloronly lasts for like a month or whatever. If you go to the hospital they won't help you unless you want to kill yourself. If you get an addiction counsellor you talk to them about your addiction but you need a different counsellor to talk about something else…It's just, counsellors are really tough to find.*

Some participants, such as Lacy, age 18, blamed themselves for their continual struggles, stating they should have sought help but did not:

*In college I know if I'd been taking my medicine at that time, I probably would have had a lot less trouble, and if I had been, like, accepting the help from my therapist, if I'd looked for a therapist, and accepted help from people, and taken the anger management course the college suggested then. Refusing help was a really big issue and it's probably why a lot of stuff happened.*

For those who did access services, many reported experiencing great benefits. In some cases, participants felt better after obtaining medication, although this was not always the case, as some youth stated they felt worse on the medications they were prescribed. Others were grateful to have received counselling from a mental health center. For instance, Andrew, age 18, notes:

*[They] helped me get my feet back on the road…they stopped me from fighting, they stopped me…It's just a reminder that I'm a person, I'm not a tool you can just yell at and talk to and throw around…I'm a person.*

Interestingly, despite the many struggles young people faced, the majority indicated that they still experienced happiness regularly, and many remained hopeful about the future. For instance, 47 participants (78.3%) felt happy several times a week or more, 41 (68.3%) enjoyed life at least several times a week, and 43 (71.7%) felt hopeful about the future. For instance, Rose, age 20, states:

*I never saw myself going to post-secondary or even finishing high school. But now I've graduated high school and I'm going to post-secondary and I know how to be more social and make friends and I feel like I have support and that there are people who care about me right now and want me to succeed and are helping me to reach my goal. I've given myself goals…my view is a lot more optimistic now.*

## SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIONS

Substance use and addictions may serve as a catalyst for youth homelessness, but are also sometimes a response to living on the street. As Kirst and Erickson (2013) note, drugs and alcohol may be used to help youth "become a member of a social network, for recreation and pleasure, or as a mechanism for coping with the hardship and struggle for survival related to life on the street" (p. 186). This is not to suggest that all youth experiencing homelessness deal with addiction challenges. For instance, Canadian research found in a sample of 494 youth residing in shelters that 41% identified substance abuse as a barrier they wanted to address, but the majority did not (Raising the Roof, 2009). However, for those youth who do struggle with drug and alcohol use, the consequences can be serious. Substance use among youth experiencing homelessness is linked to poorer mental and physical health outcomes, increased

*Substance use and addictions may serve as a catalyst for youth homelessness, but are also sometimes a response to living on the street.*

victimization, disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system and, tragically, even death (Kirst & Erickson, 2013).

Participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they use legal and illegal substances, ranging from alcohol and cigarettes to marijuana and narcotics (see table 6 below). The most frequently used substance was cigarettes, with

nearly half (41.6%) reporting daily use. Only 8 participants (13.3%) reported never smoking cigarettes. The next most frequently used substance was marijuana, with just over 40% reporting use at least once a week, 18.3% daily, and an additional 15% several times a week. Ten young people reported drinking alcohol at least once a week, 4 (6.7%) many times a week, and 2 (3.3%) daily. Less common was habitual cocaine and injectable drug use, with less than 2% using cocaine and just over 3% using injectable drugs on a weekly basis.

TABLE 6  *Substance Use*

*"Do you use the following once a week or more?"*

| SUBSTANCE | % |
|---|---|
| CIGARETTES | 57.4 |
| ALCOHOL | 29.5 |
| MARIJUANA | 42.7 |
| COCAINE | 1.6 |
| INJECTION DRUG USE | 3.3 |

Not all youth indicated their substance use was problematic or a barrier to pursuing education, employment, relationships or other life goals. In fact, many youth did not mention substance use at all during the interview, while others suggested it was not an issue they were presently concerned about.

A third of the youth, however, did share with us experiences of frustration, stress and hardship directly related to their substance use. These participants suggested their use of drugs and/or alcohol had served as a catalyst for events such as leaving home, fractured relationships with friends and family, dropping out of school and contact with the criminal justice system. Seventeen participants, or 28.3%, indicated substance use was an 'important' or 'very important' factor in the reason they left home. Jerome, age 24, described his realization that substance use was interfering with his ability to achieve the goals he had set for himself:

*One day I woke up and I was like I don't wanna do this no more. I'm sick of living on the streets, I'm sick of being broke, I'm sick of being single, I'm sick of not having a girlfriend. I call my good friends that I grew up with and they have girlfriends, they have houses, they have cars, they have jobs and I'm 20 years old and I have nothing. No job, no girl, no car, no license…all I have to my name is what's on my back, which is my backpack…I lost everybody. It was just time to wake up.*

Some youth sought treatment for addiction voluntarily, while a few were ordered by the courts to do so. Few participants cited a lack of access to treatment and addictions counselling as a barrier to reducing or eliminating their substance use. Instead, youth were more likely to cite the difficultly of overcoming their addiction when drugs were readily available. James, age 23, described the challenges of avoiding substances while living in the shelter:

*I was still in the shelter. So that was the hardest thing for two weeks. Getting clean, being in a shelter. You're basically having the stuff thrown in your hands. From there, I stayed clean.*

The implications of this data suggest that while addictions are not a problem for all young people who experience homelessness in the region, they are for some. Access to effective interventions (treatment and counseling), as well as supportive harm reduction approaches in the community will mean that many young people will be able to more meaningfully and consistently mitigate the negative impacts of substance use.

# 4.2.5 EDUCATION: PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

When young people become homeless, it can be exceedingly difficult to remain in school. Without access to stable affordable housing, income and food and without strong adult support, school is often not a realistic possibility for these young people. In our research, we asked participants to reflect on their educational experiences.

For the purposes of this project, it should be clarified that when discussing education and schooling, this data and analysis refers to the formal education system. Education can, however, come in multiple forms, and can for example, also refer to what young people learn while living on the streets, couch surfing or in the shelters. Being young and homeless and able to 'make ends meet' is also valued in this study as educational.

## HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

Consistent with other research, a high percentage of the sample failed to complete high school (see Table 7 below).  The majority of participants had finished some level of secondary school, with 62.3% stating their highest level of education was between grades 10 and 12.  An additional 2 participants reported obtaining a general equivalency diploma (GED) and 1 completed a technical or vocational degree. Although no one had obtained a college or university degree at the time of the study, 4 participants indicated they had some college or university credits.

TABLE 7 *School Completion*
*"What is the highest level of schooling you completed?"*



SERIES 1
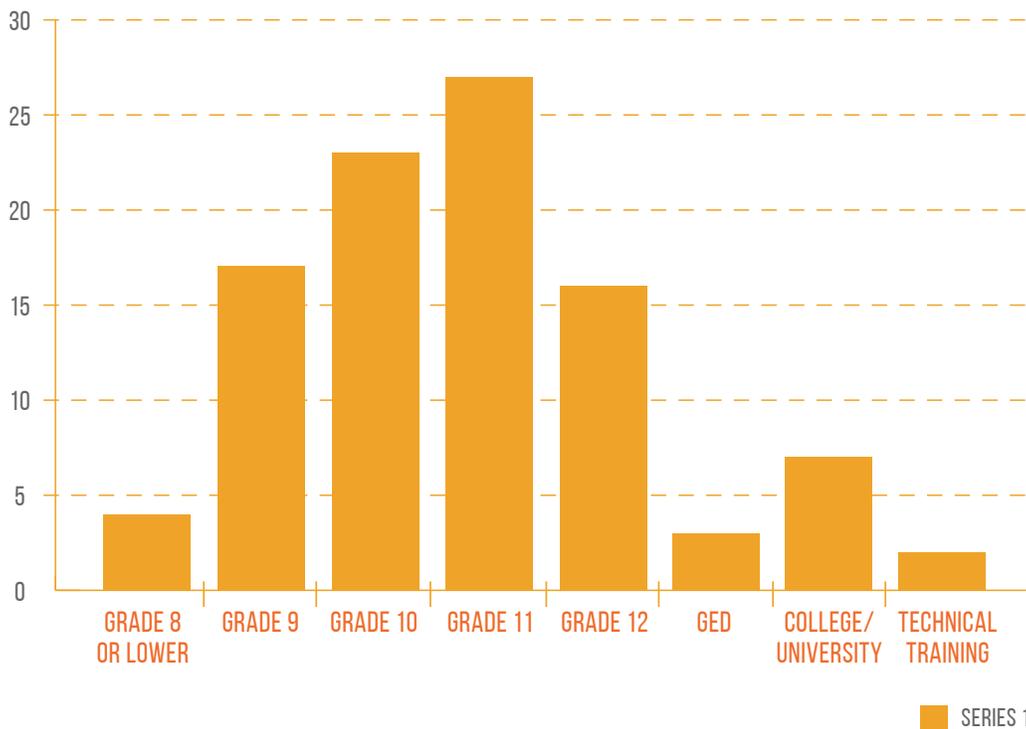
The key point is that a very high level of young people - 72% - had failed to complete high school, and 21% (twelve participants) had completed grade 9 or lower. Such low levels of high school completion will have long-term consequences for this population, in terms of labour market participation and future health and well-being.

## CURRENT EDUCATION

Research participants were asked if they were currently in school and the highest grade they had completed. Eighteen young people (29.5%) were currently enrolled in school. Within this group, the vast majority was in secondary school, although 1 youth was enrolled at the University of Toronto, 2 were in college, and 2 were in employment training programs (such as the Young Entrepreneur Program).

The remaining 41 participants, or 67.2% (1 did not respond) were not currently enrolled in any type of formal schooling.

## GENERAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

When participants were asked to speak about their general experiences with education, including in childhood, the answers varied tremendously. For some, school was a place they loved and associated with friends and teachers they liked. For some youth, such as James, age 23, school was never enjoyable:

> *[School was] very confusing. I was a kinesthetic learner. I had a hard time learning on paper. I was a hands on learner…I could take a shelf, throw the instructions away and build it. It was frustrating throughout school, grade school.*

Many young people described a slow process of disengagement from school, a process that typically began with problems at home. For instance, Malcolm, age 29, explained how the chaos in his household resulted in difficulties concentrating at school:

> *I think I was depressed 'cause I had family problems and abuse and stuff. My mom had a substance abuse problem and my dad was basically abusive. So I didn't really pay attention in school. I spent most of my time doodling or talking to people, suspended.*

Unfortunately, Malcolm did attempt to reach out to personnel at his school to talk about what was happening at home, but was not believed:

> *No one believed me that I was having problems at home. They know my parents, I grew up in a small town so they were like "no that's not going on".*

Another participant, Rose, age 20, spoke of having multiple responsibilities at home which ultimately interfered with her school work:

*So grade 11, I would have a lot of homework and what I couldn't finish in school I would have to go home. But the thing is, when I got home I had a lot of responsibilities. I had to take care of my siblings, keep the house clean, cook, do chores, most of the chores. So, when I got home from school, instead of doing my homework I had to do all my responsibilities so I started handing in nothing or half-finished work and that's when my grades started to fall, then I stopped caring because my grades were already down so I just started skipping school, chilling with friends, in the park or just playing around in the hallways. Then after I graduated grade 11, I didn't even go back for grade 12. I just, that was my most depressed year.*

This quote demonstrates the cycle wherein problems at home interfere with school. The participants in our sample frequently described this process, even when they previously were 'good' students. For instance, Cecelia states:

*I was the popular girl, I was the head cheerleader. When I started high school I was in all the clubs, all the party people, queen bee - and then I went from that to having a reputation for fighting because I just had so much fucking anger [about things happening at home] and then after that I went to the stoner kids and I never went to school and was always smoking weed and selling drugs and then I got out of school.*

This process of disengagement did not look the same for all young people, and sometimes included getting into multiple fights at school, suspensions, and even expulsions. Young people who were struggling with personal issues often experienced depression and anxiety, with some turning to substances. For a couple of young people, such as Cody, age 18, the use of substances (typically marijuana) contributed to their further disengagement from school:

*Drugs had a role in me not attending school as much and not being interested in it as much as well. If I wasn't associated with drugs, I think, school might not have been such a hassle in my eyes.*

For a few participants, school became challenging because of a learning disability. Oscar, age 19, describes his experience with ADHD and how this in addition to the treatment he received for the disability, impacted his education:

*I never liked school…it was really hard for me to focus because with my ADHD, if I don't like it I just have no interest at all. I was on Ritalin and I was doing good in elementary school but it made me pretty much like a zombie, I wouldn't be the same person. I wouldn't eat…I'd pretty much just sit there because I had no energy. It was pretty much sucking the life out of me.*

## BULLYING

Unfortunately several youth (approximately 10) reported being bullied in school, which affected them deeply and impacted their ability to continue their education. For example, Jerome, age 24, spoke about how being bullied affected his self-esteem:

*When I was younger I was made fun of, nobody liked me.…I wouldn't try anything because I just thought I was a piece of shit, I thought I was nothing, a speck of dirt…*

Similarly, Hugo, age 18, describes the horror he experienced in school after he got in a physical altercation with a female:

*It was horrifying. I never wanted to go back after that girl beat me up… [others said (in singsong voice)] "You got beat up by a gi-irl! You got beat up by a gi-irl! And you're poor. You got nothing. You got no money, you got no job… I'm not an animal, I'm a perfect human being [but] they don't understand that.*

A couple of participants, including Hugo, reported that racism contributed to their experience of bullying:

*There's a lot of racist people in that school…I was the only black kid in there who actually had some ethnic background. There were two other black kids there but they were all whitewashed… They were like, "you're so black…"*

Oscar, age 19, also experienced bullying because of his race and accent:

*I didn't know any English at all whatsoever, I was speaking Spanish and I was the only black person in the whole school. I was made fun of everyday…I told my mom like get me out of that school, I don't want to go there anymore. Grade 8 wasn't that bad but it was still somewhat the same because my accent was still pretty strong.*

A few participants attempted to reach out to either their teachers or parents when they were bullied, but generally did not feel supported. For instance, a couple of youth said that their teachers "didn't do anything". Another said his mom would reply with unhelpful clichés such as "sticks and stones", and in the case of Kailey, age 16, her stepmother was blatantly punitive:

> *My stepmom realized that I was getting bullied in school…she just got angry and said if I went to school and got beat again by any kid she was going to beat me up…she told me if you ever come home crying because you got beat in school, I'm going to beat you.*

## SCHOOL AS A REPRIEVE FROM HOME

Although going to school was not a positive experience for many of our participants, others reported that school provided a much-needed reprieve from home life. Previously, we heard from Jerome, age 24, who felt free from the beatings he received every day at home the moment he got on the school bus. Rose, age 19, had a similar experience:

> *When I was younger I actually kind of loved school because it was away from home. Most of my problems, I feel were centered around the family. At school, I wasn't bullied. I attended my classes. I actually enjoyed it. I had friends.*

## SCHOOL WHILE HOMELESS

Young people who must leave their households often experience a tremendous amount of loss, including their homes, communities, possessions, pets, and relationships with family. Having to leave their schools can result in further loss, including friends and supportive adults. It can also result in the interruption of learning, causing students to fall behind in their work. While the majority of youth who dropped out of school became disengaged prior to leaving home, once they left, staying in school became even more difficult. Finding housing and being able to survive on a day-to-day basis can make it challenging to remain focused on schoolwork. This includes time-limited stays at emergency shelters, as young people are not able to remain in one place long enough to achieve the stability necessary to go to school. Many young people must also work while they are in school. These difficulties can interfere with education despite students' desire to continue with their educational pursuits. Paula, age 25, explains:

> *School was good…I was working all the time and my mom was, losing my place. I just didn't have time to get there anymore and that time my rent was more important than missing work for school so I had to make a choice.*

A lack of adult support can further the difficulty of staying in school. Oscar, age 19 states:

*I was going to school and then I got kicked out at 15 and I stopped school for a year because I was worrying about where I'm living and stuff…then when I went back in, I didn't have any motivation to do it. I didn't have someone there pushing me to do it, like my mom telling me you gotta go to school…I was always skipping and then I ended up dropping out last year.*

Administrative complications can also have an impact when moving from school to school. Chris, age 19 states:

*[I dropped out in] grade 10. But because of all the moving around and stuff I had to do…It sucked because you'd have to register, re-register, transfer your credits (and not all transfer if don't finish the year there)…I was not into it.*

For those who attempted to remain in their school, transportation was often cited as a barrier. For example, Stacey, age 26, shares her experience of commuting:

*I was going to school…I had to take a bus from Brampton and then it was just too hard for me because it was too far for me to get to school. And so I stopped going to school in grade 10 I believe yeah, I was 16… it almost took me 2 hours and a bit. It was definitely a long way.*

## WHAT WOULD HELP

Young people were asked to reflect on what might have helped them stay in school and what would help them return, if desired. Not surprisingly, a stable place to live was cited as a priority for a number of young people, including Jose, age 25:

*Stability… If I had a place to sleep and food to eat then… why not go to school? But if you have nowhere to live and you gotta eat food, fuck school.*

Similarly, when Jennifer, age 18, was asked what would help her return to school, she replied:

*I just want somewhere stable to live…'cause like, just in the past two months I've lived here, in Keswick and then in the bush and it's gonna be, it would be too hard to go to school.*

Many youth, including Nathaniel, age 24, looked forward to returning to school once they felt they were more stable:

*When I establish myself, living like that, and I'm like on top of my game with everything, I can't wait to back to school, it's a beautiful thing…As soon as I'm stable I'm definitely going back to school and not for the diploma, not for the paper on the wall, just to learn the knowledge and be around people.*

## SUPPORTS IN SCHOOL

Some participants were able to remain in school despite their precarious living situations. One factor that was frequently cited as important to this was school staff, who provided emotional support and general understanding, referrals to community resources such as emergency shelters and access to food. Mitchell, age 17, describes how the staff at his school supported him:

> *I didn't want to leave school. I never left school actually…To me, I was special to the office, so they were trying to help me. Me, they care a lot. Other people theydon't really care….when I went to school they'd give me lunch coupons, I'd get a free lunch every day.*

Kaitlyn, age 17, describes how the support of the school staff was vital to her addressing her eating disorder:

> *I started eating less and I started like consuming a lot of coffee because that suppresses hunger right? So after that, I just started throwing up and then my counsellor at school noticed, she helped me out…my guidance counsellor had to tell all the other teachers what was going on because of my grades in school and so they gave me so much support, it was unreal.*

## FINANCIAL

Young people often described finances as a major barrier to obtaining a post-secondary education. A few were in the process of applying for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), which unfortunately saddles students with debt that often takes many years to repay. Kaitlyn, age 17, suggested that a bursary program would be helpful for her to pursue a post-secondary education:

> *Yeah, I wish they had more of like a scholarship kind of thing, like I feel like they don't really encourage schooling success and I feel like that's what they should do, like I feel like they should have like I don't know, like a bursary.*

## ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Some youth felt that mainstream school did not accommodate their needs, but that alternatives, such as independent learning credits (ILC), adult education or alternative school would be beneficial. Devin, age 19, describes how obtaining ILCs ultimately helped her graduate:

*It was hard for me to be in class so they tried to put me into the credit recovery type of class; It's basically like ILC, a course in a booklet so I'll sit there and I'll work at my own pace. It's a classroom in a school and there's a teacher but there's a couple of students, everyone has the same assignments. The booklet you just work through as much as you can so that was more independent, that was better for me, that's probably the reason why I graduated.*

Cody, age 18, states that alternative school provided an environment that was more supportive, particularly in regards to the teachers:

*They [alternative school teachers] just didn't bug you and they understood that a lot of kids in that class had been through stuff or had issues you know what I mean. So they understand that and connect with them and don't like press the kids.*

Receiving support for a learning disorder was also cited as vital to returning to school for two young people. For instance, Stacey, age 26, stated that undergoing testing for her learning disability would help her return to school:

*I'd have to go and do extra testing at the school because then they would give me extra time with assignments and tests and stuff like that.*

Sadly, for Chris, age 19, receiving assistance for his learning disability would help him return to school, but felt that after being discharged from prison, he was left with no support to do so:

*I had an assessment and they said I had ADHD and conduct disorder but in my mind I'm thinking, OK I'm 16 years old, you just told me I had this and you're going to release me from youth jail with no guidance, you should at least give me some resources to help with that.*

## FUTURE SCHOOL AMBITIONS

Research participants were asked if they had intentions of furthering their education in the future. The majority of participants (38 or 63.3%) indicated that they had some desire to further their education at some point in the future. For a few youth this simply meant obtaining their GED. Others dreamed of pursuing an apprenticeship, joining the army, or going to college or university. Interestingly, a few young people indicated a desire to become a social service worker of some sort, either as a way to 'give back' to the community or because they felt their experiences gave them a unique perspective and empathy to relate to people in difficult circumstances.

One young man who did return to school after dropping out, Hugo, age 19, described how that contributed to an increase in his self-esteem:

> *I went back [to school]…I thought I was stupid for a second there. I thought I couldn't do anything right. I didn't even think I'd be able to get my life back on track and now I am…and it's so inspirational for me…I get all A's, man. I'm happy!*

Some youth were more interested in pursuing employment and did not express an interest in returning to school. Others were unsure about what the future held for them. Unfortunately, Melissa, age 19, felt anxious about returning to school because of her struggles with math, but was afraid of the consequences of not doing so. She remains unsure about how to return:

> *I'm kind of scared of my future right now I feel, oh no, I'm not going to get anywhere because my high school wasn't like good. I did really well in Grade 9 but then all the other years were just [makes noise with mouth]…I don't want to be poor. Because if I ever have kids I don't want them to go through being not having food and anything like that. I don't want to put them through what I've had…I was trying to get back into school last September but they're like oh, yeah, you're fine. I'm like, no I'm not…I hate math, I suck at math so bad…[but] I love learning…*

# 4.2.6   THE SERVICE RESPONSE

There is no "one size fits all" response to youth homelessness. Youth experiencing homelessness may share nothing in common beyond their lack of housing. As illustrated in this report, youth require diverse supports as a result of their wide-ranging experiences with family, school, health and employment. Age can especially dictate what types of service a youth may require. In this section we explore the extent to which this diverse group of youth feels adequately supported by the services available to them.

## I)   SERVICES: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVE

### *Shelters*

Many of the youth interviewed had extensive knowledge of the shelter system in York Region. With only a few shelters to choose from, it was common for youth to have stayed at the Blue Door Shelters for youth, families and men, as well as the Sutton Youth Shelter. Youth were also likely to access shelters outside of York Region, including Youth Haven in Barrie and shelters in the City of Toronto.

Participants shared diverse experiences of the shelters in York Region. For some, the shelter was a place of transition, support and encouragement. For others, the shelter was an inadequate and temporary response to their lack of housing. The following themes arose from the participant interviews: anxiety about shelters, a place of support, services offered, shelter rules and discharge, transitional housing, 360 Kids (a drop-in centre) and support from staff. Each will be discussed in turn. A discussion on gaps in service and how services can be improved follows.

### *Anxiety about shelters*

For youth who have never been to a shelter, and even for some who have, shelters can be intimidating and frightening.  Some youth recounted feelings of fear and anxiety prior to their first stay at a shelter. In total, a third of the youth described unease about staying in a shelter. Some youth, like Frankie, age 20, were reassured after their first experience:

> *When I got here, I was pretty nervous and I was kind of scared but it's like I gotta do what I gotta do. I'm just going to do it; it's better here than I thought it was though.*

A few young people we interviewed outside of the shelter system suggested their fear of shelters prevented them from accessing these services. Others, such as Devin, age 19, did not necessarily fear the shelter, but wanted to stay where they felt more comfortable:

*I really don't want to go to a shelter. I really don't want to be in that environment. I'm sure it's not as bad as the stigma, but obviously it's not as comfortable…It's not like it's unsafe or anything, it's safer than being on the streets, but being a young person kicked out, the last thing you want to do is go somewhere where you're uncomfortable.*

## A Place of Support

Youth experiencing homelessness face a wide range of barriers to independence. They also possess widely varying skill sets, strengths and aspirations. As such, individuals require different types of support to achieve their goals. Some youth felt that one or more of the shelters were able to offer them the support they needed. Lacy, age 18, a youth who had recently found an apartment with the support of the shelter staff, emphasized her appreciation:

*This shelter was really, really helpful, and I'm extremely grateful for the fact that [they] provided all the services, and the fact that they are really good when you have nowhere else to go.*

However, other youth looked to the shelter as a temporary solution rather than a place of transition or support. Malcolm, age 29, articulates this viewpoint:

*Do what you have to do to get out of them. It's not a motel or anything like that. You never have food, you never have a comfortable bed, you always have to watch your stuff, there's always something going on.*

Those who viewed the shelter as a "stop on the way" were sometimes uninterested in the services the shelter had to offer, or expressed frustration at the lack of support available to them. Dante, age 22, shares this frustration:

*They're not really looking to help you. If you come to ask them, they'll help you, but they don't really go out of their way to help you.*

## Services offered

The youth's assessment of the usefulness of services available through the shelter varied. Anger management classes, employment and skills programs, resume support and health services seemed to be of particular value to participants. Alyssa, age 16, wishes she had attended anger management classes sooner:

Leaving Home — *Youth Homelessness in York Region*

*It's actually – it's taught me I don't always have to hit people. It's been very useful. I don't always have to hit people and I've been calming it down a lot. If someone had put me in there before, I would have been fine.*

For some youth, shelters – along with transitional units and drop-ins – were the only access points for support services. Youth were often not aware of other support services within the community. This may mean that young people who are not in contact with shelters, transitional units or drop-in centers are not accessing the supports they need. Outreach teams can mitigate this, but for those who are couch surfing and/or highly transient, awareness of and access to services may be limited.

## *Shelter Rules and Discharge*

When asked about their experiences within the shelters, some participants were quick to reference the rules. Perceptions of fairness were central to the youth's opinions about their shelter experiences. Some youth said the rules at one or both of the youth shelters were clear, fair and easy to follow. Other youth said the rules – particularly curfews – created barriers for maintaining employment and school attendance.

Many youth had been discharged from at least one shelter in York Region, as well as one or more shelter(s) elsewhere. There were a variety of reasons for discharge, including curfew violations, minor rule infractions and threats or acts of violence or self-harm. While some participants were supported to move to another

shelter, or the hospital when necessary, others described being discharged with minimal support. Those in the latter situation stayed with friends, travelled to other shelters or slept outside.

Some youth referred to their "time being up". That is, they had exhausted the maximum number of nights allowable in a particular shelter. Problematically, these youth often found themselves in a holding pattern, waiting to get back into the shelter. Oscar, age 19, who at the time of the interview was living outdoors in a tent, illustrates a "revolving door effect" where the same youth enters and exits the shelter system repeatedly:

*I'm not allowed in York Region, all my time is up. I've got to wait until October and then I can come back.*

A positive development is that new contracts with shelters in the region stipulate that individuals cannot be discharged into homelessness. This is a very progressive and supportive move.

## *Transitional Housing*

Youth in transitional housing were interviewed at the Sutton Youth Shelter and two 360 Kids apartment units. The experiences of youth in transition were often different from those in the shelter. While youth in transitional housing faced similar barriers towards independence, they were more likely to report feelings of comfort and stability. While some participants expressed apprehension or anxiety about moving into transitional housing, most, like Elizabeth, age 17, adjusted well once they arrived:

*At the beginning it was hard because I didn't really want to be here; it's just like my group home, and it's going to be crappy, there's going to be weird people, I don't want to live here, I want to live on my own, I want to be independent. Then, after being here for a while, I realized that the structure of the place is really good, and the people who work here are really good.*

Those youth who had settled in described feeling well supported by staff, but also by other youth within the house. A few youth likened the relationships they had built to family. Rose, age 20, who was set to leave for university in the fall, expresses her sadness about leaving:

*[It's] scary because I'm going to miss this place, because even the kids here have all become not just friends, [but] kinda family. Even past residents, that have left I'm still in contact. Everyone is*

*friendly because we're all like in the same situation right? So we're just helping each other… So like, I'm kinda happy I'm going but I'm kinda sad that it's almost like saying goodbye.*

Just as for shelter users, a few youth in transitional housing expressed frustration with the rigidity of the rules or treatment by staff. For instance, Paul, age 16, felt bullied by staff and said the rules were often inconsistent or contradictory. He felt residents should be afforded greater independence and opportunities to make decisions. Kaitlyn, age 17, highlighted an inconsistency among staff. While she said most were extremely supportive, other staff seemed not to care about the youth at all:

*There are staff members here who literally lock themselves in the office and don't interact with us at all. They come and go and make you feel uncomfortable.*

## 360° Kids Home Base Drop in services

The youth interviewed at the 360° Kids drop-in center spoke highly of the services that were available to them. Some participants use Home Base primarily to visit with friends, use the computers and eat a hot meal. Many said the center had a community feel and that all youth could benefit from its services. Rob, age 25, expresses his enthusiasm for Home Base:

*You can use computers, [there are] people to help you with your resume. You can eat if you're fucking starving and if you have nowhere to go. Even if you have somewhere to live and you have parents, you could start recording music and stuff. This is a really good place for a lot of youth. It's really great.*

The range of services allowed youth to utilize the supports in different ways, depending on their needs. Nathaniel, age 24, who also praised the staff and services at Home Base, used the center as an alternative to sleeping on the street. He worked throughout the night, stayed in a coffee shop in the morning, and then arrived at Home Base when it opened. Once at Home Base, he was able to get rest on the couches:

*I come here around one, make some food, you know it's amazing, I don't even buy my own food, [but] if I can, I buy some food, cook it, and then I go to sleep.*

## Importance of Staff Support

It is worth noting that youth using these services were more likely to find the experience positive when they forged strong connections with staff. A key factor contributing to positive opinions of support staff, teachers, medical personnel and even family was the degree to which these people were respectful towards the youth. Ray, age 21, emphasizes this point:

*The staff here are helpful. That's why I come here, is the staff. You get some staff and co-ops that are meh, but you're here for three months and they grow on me. They're respectful and polite.*

Similarly, Caleb, age 23, placed a high priority on respect, but perceived the staff to be less respectful than Ray did:

*I believe [staff] could talk nicer. It's not even being more supportive, it's just about fucking having more respect for the youth. They wonder why we bitch at them and shit, you know what I mean? Because you do it to us too, right?*

Another important factor for youth was whether staff listened to them. Whether for needed support, to discuss problems they were having, or for feedback on certain rules or other staff, many youth sought out staff with whom they felt comfortable talking openly. Rose, age 20, told us how important it was to be listened to by the staff at the transitional unit:

*I didn't have anybody to turn to, no help, no support, no one was really listening. Before I came here, no one would help anybody, like, not even my family would help each other. So when I came here, I knew that I could talk to someone, like my counsellor. I noticed that there was staff here that wanted to help and support me.*
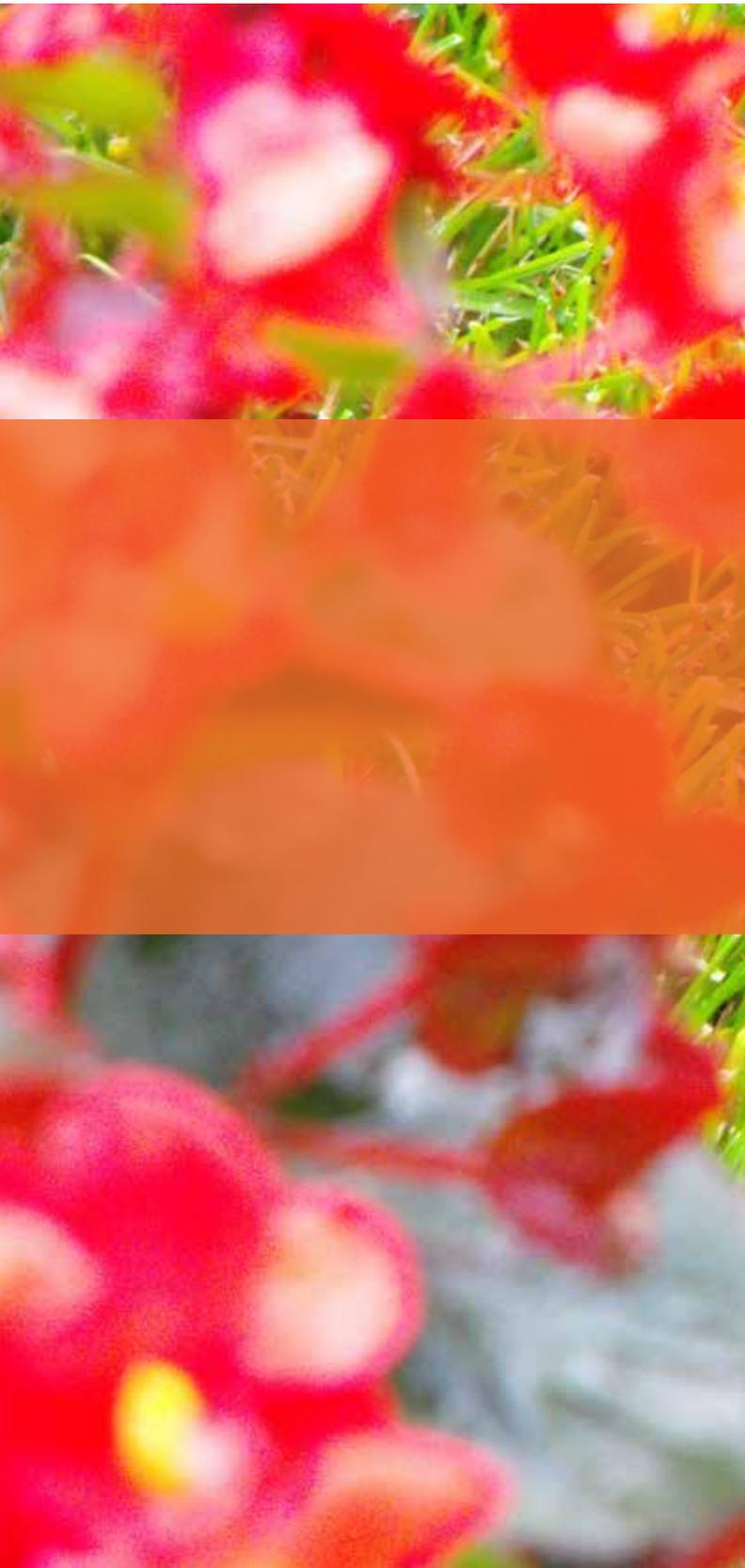
## Service Improvements

Participants were asked for feedback on the ways in which services could be improved in York Region. The consistency in their answers was striking. The following four issues were repeatedly identified by youth: Lack of services, transportation, skills training and employment and housing.

## Lack of Services

Some youth expressed frustration over the lack of support services within a reasonable distance from the shelters or transitional units. For example, James, age 23, expressed concern that he had not seen his addictions counsellor in a while due to the challenges of transportation over long distances. Though he conceded he could find someone closer by, he was reluctant to leave his current counsellor, whom he trusted. Some youth found the distance between the Blue Door shelters and Sutton Youth Shelter difficult, especially if one or both were full. Some youth, including Malcolm, age 29, coped with a lack of services by travelling to Toronto or Barrie:

*Sometimes if I hit rock bottom or something I go to the city building at Richmond and Peter in Toronto. They can set you up with whatever, tell you where to go to get help with stuff.*

Others resisted leaving York Region for fear of danger in Toronto. Without a place to stay, David, age 24, slept outside in a tent for three weeks, in order to avoid leaving York Region:

*I'd rather camp out before I [go to Toronto]. I've heard the ones down there, they are pretty bad. Yeah, no thank you.*

## Transportation

Closely related to the above, participants felt that transportation was a major barrier. Just as the lack of transportation and its cost prevented youth from attending school, it sometimes prevented them from accessing health services, housing and employment and even visiting family and friends. Some services provide bus tickets, explicitly for the purposes of looking for housing or attending school; however, youth noted that some services had reduced the number of bus tickets provided. Rob, age 25, describes the paradox of gaining employment in York Region:

*It's hard to get around. Like, even when you get accepted to a job, how the fuck you gonna work every day if you don't have bus fare? You gotta work two weeks before you get paid. How you gonna buy lunch and get on the bus?*

## Skills and Employment Training

As previously discussed, many youth said they were diligent about checking job postings, handing out resumes and participating in employment programs. Ultimately, however, youth were often left frustrated at the lack of jobs available, or the skills required to secure even entry-level employment. Colby, age 19, describes the need for more opportunities for skills training:

*You either know how to get a job or you don't. Most of the time [employment programs] are just telling you how to do a resume, how to do an interview. I've never really had like a full steady time job so I need skills training. There's a lack of that.*

## Housing

Finally, a majority of participants mentioned barriers to acquiring affordable housing. Some felt increased supports to find housing or communicate with landlords are needed. As noted earlier, a frequent complaint was the significant level of discrimination experienced by youth due to their age or because they receive income assistance. Couples who sought to live together also faced discrimination, with some landlords preferring to rent to an individual.

# II) SERVICES – PROVIDERS PERSPECTIVE

Youth participants provided important insights into some of the strengths and limitations of the services mandated to support them. To further understand the barriers that services face in their efforts to respond to youth homelessness, we sought to gain the perspectives of service providers. We interviewed 10 participants from 360 Kids, Jewish Vocational Services – York Region, York Region Youth Shelters, Salvation Army – Sutton Youth Shelter, Rose of Sharon, Yellow Brick House, John Howard Society of York Region and Jewish Family and Child.

## *A coordinated response*

As illustrated throughout this report, youth experiencing homelessness have a diverse set of strengths, needs and barriers to independence. As such, an effective response to youth homelessness encompasses a wide range of agencies and services, committed to delivering a coordinated and integrated response. These agencies include services specifically mandated to address youth homelessness and those with a wider remit such as schools, law enforcement and child protection services. Involvement of the latter groups is especially important as research consistently shows that youth who are experiencing homelessness come into regular contact with mainstream systems, such as the police and justice system, emergency healthcare and child protection services, more frequently than youth who are housed (O'Grady et al. 2011, Dworsky & Courtney 2009, Cheng et al. 2012, Nichols 2008). Despite these frequent interactions, mainstream systems and agencies dedicated to youth homelessness often lack formal mechanisms to effectively coordinate care.

In York Region, there has been a notable effort by individual service providers to improve the level of coordination between community organizations and mainstream services. However, stakeholders throughout the region have expressed concern that these efforts fall short. Typically, coordination is improved through interpersonal and ad-hoc relationships. This means that individuals from different organizations are encouraged to connect. Through these relationships, service providers make the most appropriate referrals to other agencies within the youth homelessness service sector.

Our findings reveal that in the absence of formalized referral channels or a system-wide approach, a great deal of pressure is put upon individuals to secure the appropriate supports for youth. This is seen clearly in the interactions between mainstream services and agencies dedicated to serving youth.

## *Child Protection Services*

Children who are in the care of Child Protection Services (CPS) receive support until the age of 18, though an application can be made to extend this to the age of 21. Once children pass the age of cut off - an age hardly indicative of being a fully independent adult - they 'age out' of available supports. Youth are not often sufficiently supported through this major transition.

While very few of the youth in our research indicated that they had aged-out of care, service providers suggested it was an issue in the region. Some had concerns that the

sector was ill-prepared to deal with such circumstances. One youth shelter works directly with CPS to reserve beds for youth who are leaving care. Though this is perhaps a temporary solution, a shelter bed does not provide a supported, long-term transition to independent living. Some youth will require more support as they leave care; support that a shelter cannot be expected to provide.

## Criminal Justice System

Youth experiencing homelessness are more likely than housed youth to be in contact with police and the justice system, as perpetrators, but often as victims (Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri 2011). In York Region, the York Regional Police Department has been working with youth shelters to develop a formal memorandum of understanding. Almost a decade of outreach and engagement has gone into fostering mutual understanding and working relationships between youth homelessness service agencies and police in order to reduce the over-representation of youth experiencing homelessness who are incarcerated.

The justice system also frequently interacts with the youth homelessness service system through parole officers. Interpersonal relationships built over years have led to individual parole officers referring youth to services that can provide support for housing, employment and education. One interviewee explains:

*You get to know people. For probation, I find that there are a couple officers that refer people…A lot of this is that people get to know*

*you and they refer people to you because they know who you are. Versus, here's a program, go to this program. It's more like, I know this guy and this is what he does.*

Some youth participants were discharged into homelessness from jail; others felt unsupported by their parole officers and a few experienced police harassment.

## Education System

Schools play several important roles in the lives of young people. They provide youth with education, access to supportive adults, peer networks and for some, a place to escape chaotic or abusive family lives. Schools can serve a particularly important role for those who are at risk of experiencing homelessness. For instance, the school may be the only access point for supports for youth who are couch surfing or for concerned parents.

Throughout the interviews with service providers, it was clear that referrals to homelessness services do come from school staff, principals and teachers. This was confirmed through our interviews with youth; some had received or at least sought help through their schools. However, the majority of service providers interviewed expressed concern that most of the referrals from schools came from individual guidance counsellors who had become aware of specific programs or organizations. Here, guidance counsellors were left to support youth through their own knowledge and relationships rather than a clear and integrated system of support.

## Emerging Issues

Service providers identified two emerging issues that affect the response to youth homelessness in York Region. First, there is a growing concern among York Region Police and service providers about substance abuse and addiction. Second, human trafficking is rising in prevalence and visibility. While the issue of human trafficking was not mentioned by the youth we interviewed, research suggests that vulnerable homeless youth face a greater risk of becoming victims (Bigelsen, 2010). One service provider remarks on the necessity of providing human trafficking victims with holistic support:

*"York Regional Police recently told us that they could pull a youth out of trafficking 365 days a year. We need to provide these now homeless youth with safe and affordable housing, as well as wrap around supports to help them cope and not return to the life."*

Further research is needed in York Region to better understand the consequences of human trafficking and to determine which solutions are most effective.

## Barriers

Service providers identified similar service barriers to those described by the youth in the previous section. These barriers prevent youth from getting the support they need, but also prevent service providers from being as effective as possible. The main barriers discussed within the interviews were geography and a lack of access to services.

*i   Geography* — York Region is made up of nine municipalities that span 1,762 KM, nearly three times the size of the City of Toronto. This space is not sufficiently covered by public transportation to allow ease of travel between youth services. This can be a serious issue when youth are seeking shelter. Switching between GO transit and York Region can be expensive; some youth opt to 'sneak on' instead of paying the fare when it is not available. One service provider was concerned about repercussions of fare evasion, as multiple occurrences can result in a criminal charge.  This has been a continuous concern for people experiencing homelessness in York Region (Mooi, 2008). The size of York Region, can also pose challenges for follow up services. As youth move around the region, they frequently lose contact with the supports they have built.

*ii   Access to Services* — A lack of access to specialized services, such as mental health assessments, addictions and housing supports, were a barrier to care for service providers. Service providers reported long wait times for services and expressed frustration at having to refer youth outside of York Region due to lack of local services. At times, youth were driven as far as Hamilton to access detox services when none were available in York Region. Long wait-lists mean that struggling youth were asked to wait 3 months or more for residential addictions treatment. Service providers were concerned that long wait times were enough to lose youth.

In addition, service providers felt that more housing specifically for youth, subsidies and housing supports were needed to help youth out of emergency services. Four out of 10 service providers also discussed the problem of referring youth outside of York Region due to the lack of available housing or services. Youth who leave the region run the risk of becoming disconnected from positive support networks, including service staff, friends and family.

*iii   Overcoming barriers to service* — Interviewees suggested that some service providers in York Region frequently went out of their way to mitigate these barriers. There were several examples throughout the research that highlighted the compassion and lengths the service providers would go to make sure youth were safe. One example, as mentioned earlier, was a service provider accompanying a youth to Hamilton on a Friday night to ensure they had access to a detox program. Not only do service providers go out of their way, many organizations absorb the costs associated with the barriers mentioned. Many service providers seemed deeply concerned that youth described inadequate opportunities to support their transitions out of homelessness. It seems that both service providers and youth are left to individually navigate a fragmented system of supports. The ability of service providers to do so is dependent largely on their interpersonal relationships, knowledge of services and a great deal of personal commitment to supporting youth in need. One service provider elaborates on the logic behind interpersonal connections:

*When it comes to the service agencies, we're fairly underserviced in York Region compared to Toronto. We have no choice but to develop really close working relationships with our community partners because ultimately we're here to service these individuals. The more we can decrease the gaps and the more we can minimize the re-victimization of these people the better the outcome is.*

# 5   DISCUSSION

For many young people and their families in York Region, youth homelessness is a significant problem that is multi-dimensional and in need of collaborative solutions. The key findings from this research highlight a number of issues that increase our understanding of the nature of youth homelessness in the region, both in terms of its causes and conditions.  Much of this is consistent with established research about young people who experience homelessness.  This is important, because it underscores the fact that the causes of youth homelessness exist in every community.  This is not just a Toronto problem, or a Vancouver problem. It is also a York Region problem.

It is important to stress that while the causes of youth homelessness – in particular, family conflict, abuse, etc. are present across communities, what happens when young people become homeless differs and is based to some degree on the characteristics of the community, the nature of supports and how the community has chosen to respond to the problem.

In this section, we summarize key findings from the research, both to highlight essential data that has emerged, but also to help point the way to solutions.  That is, the findings contribute not only to our understanding of the nature of the problem, but also to where we need to go in developing a community response that will prevent, reduce and eventually end youth homelessness.  Here are our key findings:

> *The pathways that lead to homelessness for young people
> are not linear and rarely the result of a single event*

## PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS

Our findings, consistent with other research, suggest that the reasons for youth homelessness are substantially different from those that produce adult homelessness.  Moreover, there is a complexity to the causes and factors that lead to homelessness. Though a high percentage of young people report family conflict (and abuse) it is an oversimplification to suggest that youth homelessness is just a product of "bad parents". Youth face many individual challenges, and a variety of factors cause homelessness, including substance use and addictions (the young person's or a family member's) mental health problems, and involvement with the law.   Moreover, the pathways that lead to homelessness for young people are not linear and rarely the result of a single event. The majority of young people in this study experienced challenges such as family poverty, chaos and conflict years before their first experience of homelessness and most continued to experience barriers after leaving home, resulting in multiple episodes of homelessness. This makes the attribution of chronic homelessness a challenge; young people can move in and out of homelessness many times over the years. These episodes may be punctuated by lengthy periods when the young person is at home with their parents or caregivers.

## FAMILY CONFLICT

Consistent with other research on youth homelessness, the youth in this study came from homes characterized by high levels of family conflict. This came in many forms, but in most cases youth felt that living at home was no longer an option. We found that a number of issues presented in the homes of the participants, including financial strain, divorce or separation, and mental health and substance use (either the parent's or the youth's). Notably, many (but not all) young people came from households where they had experienced physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse. Additional conflict arose from secondary factors such as young people becoming involved in the criminal justice system or educational disengagement.

There are clear implications from these findings. Providing families with the resources necessary to cope with stressors and conflict can play an important role in supporting young people to stay home and avoid the experience of homelessness.

Given the fact that many young people experienced conflict for a great number of years before they left home and that many attempted to return home, it is possible that interventions geared toward the whole family (such as conflict mediation) may prevent young people from leaving home.

If a young person does leave home, it is also possible to provide support and services so that they may return home. If young people are unable to reconcile with their primary caregivers, or it is not a viable or safe option to return home, efforts can be made to engage other family members so that young people avoid homeless. Several examples of programs targeting youth experiencing homelessness and their families will be discussed in the next section.

## YOUTHFUL AGE

Although the youth in this sample had a mean age of just over 19 years, almost half left home for the first time before the age of 15 and half most recently left home before the age of sixteen. The consequences of leaving home at an early age are profound. Youth in this situation are more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as greater exposure to crime, violence and exploitation (Gaetz et al., 2010), are more likely to have addictions challenges and be involved in the sex trade (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002) and generally experience homelessness for prolonged periods of time (Public Interest, 2010). They are also more likely to be vulnerable on the streets, experiencing higher levels of criminal victimization.

There are several implications to this. First, most services for youth experiencing homelessness are geared toward those aged 16 and older. Young people under this age threshold therefore are unlikely to have access to vital supports and services and are even less likely to be able to access employment and housing on their own. Second, this suggests that if young people are not accessing services until they are older, they are more likely to have been exposed to numerous additional traumas and hardships, are more likely to become street-entrenched and have increased barriers to moving forward with their lives. Interventions for youth should be available well before they have had to experience homelessness for several years. It is likely that at the age of 15 or earlier, many young people are still in school, and could benefit from support provided through the school.

## UNDERREPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES

While some marginalized sub-populations such as Aboriginal youth were overrepresented in this study, it is also true that other racialized minorities and LGBTQ persons were underrepresented. This information is important to consider when compared to what is typically found in research with young people who are homeless and to the demographics that characterize the population of York Region in general.

There are several ways this can be interpreted. First, the sample size in this study was relatively low. Second, because we recruited our sample through street youth serving agencies, it is possible that young people from some racialized or minority communities, for a variety of reasons, are less likely to access services in these environments. Both of these possibilities may indicate that our sample was not an adequate reflection of the population of youth experiencing homelessness at large. A third possibility exists: it is possible that racial and sexual minorities do not experience the same rate of homelessness in York Region as do other youth. Based on our understanding of youth homelessness in other jurisdictions, we suggest that the first two explanations are much more plausible than the third. Young people who are minorities may flee to the city in an attempt to find services, staff and other young people they feel more comfortable with. All of this suggests that we need to know more about the demographics of youth homelessness, and that there is definitely a need to find out more about the pathways into homelessness for minority youth.

## INADEQUATE HOUSING

Young people in this study experienced a variety of difficulties accessing permanent affordable housing. We know that compared to other municipalities, there is a dearth of rental housing in York Region (only 13% of units, compared with an average of 30%). In addition, the rental vacancy rate is low, meaning that young people encountered difficulties finding available units because of cost and in some cases, age discrimination. If young people do find a potential place, it was typically unaffordable (the average market rent for a one bedroom apartment in York Region was $977), as the income available to young people does not provide a living wage or the means to support the cost of living. Young people often had to share units, or access small places such as single rooms or basements. In a few cases, participants lived with mold or pests, such as mice. Finally, landlords are often reluctant to rent units to young people, fearing that they will not be responsible with rent, will have parties, or will damage the unit. Landlords were also found to be hesitant to rent units to individuals on welfare or from shelters as the result of stigma and discrimination.

This suggests that in York Region, attention must be directed towards developing a range of housing options for young people so that those who cannot return home will be able to obtain and retain housing that meets their needs (see examples like the Foyer: Gaetz & Scott, 2012). For young people, it is important to consider that inadequate housing is not only about lack of low cost rental, but about appropriate housing with supports for youth in transition at different developmental stages. These housing options should be available throughout the region so that young people can remain 'in place', near their natural supports (family, friends, supportive adults) and can stay in school.

## ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

For young people with low levels of education and skills, the type of employment that is usually available is part-time, seasonal, precarious work with low wages and no benefits. The income that youth are able to procure is typically not enough to meet the daily costs of living.

Lack of income is identified as a significant problem for most young people in this study. It is a difficult job market for anyone under the age of 30, let alone someone who is homeless and an early school leaver. Ensuring young people have access to income supports is key, as is supporting young people to find employment and obtain necessary training opportunities to increase their employability. Raising the Roof has done important research on strategies for engaging private sector employers in providing job opportunities to homeless youth, lessons that could be applied in York Region (Noble, 2013).

Ensuring access to enhanced employment training opportunities is one option. While some young people joined employment programs in an attempt to further their skills and gain access to employment, they did not always secure employment for the young people. In the absence of continued education, these employment programs have been criticized for having the potential to pigeonhole youth into low-wage labour (Robinson & Baron, 2007). While employment programs may be helpful in the short-term, more effort must be made to provide youth with the supports they need to further their education.

## EDUCATION

The majority of young people in this study were not enrolled in any type of formal education. This was the case for many reasons, but was most often the result of a process of disengagement that occurred well before the youth left home. Once participants left home, struggling for basic needs and high transience levels made it difficult for those who remained in school to continue to do so. Yet dropping out of school severely limits the opportunities young people have to move forward with their lives and can mean they will struggle with poverty for the rest of their lives. As such, efforts must be made within schools to engage students who are struggling with personal and financial difficulties so that they do not drop out in the first place.

In addressing youth homelessness, we must not lose sight of the importance of education. Most people in Canada recognize the importance of education for young people, yet this concern is often cast aside when young people become homeless. We do know that in the current economic context, not having an education can have a negative impact on employability and life chances. The Canadian Council on Learning reports that the lifetime costs of one person dropping out of high school is over $300,000. This does not include other possible social costs including policing and corrections (Hankivsky, 2008).

*The lifetime costs of one person dropping out of high school is over $300,000*

If the desire is to have a long-term impact on the lives of young people who become homeless, an effective response should prioritize access to education and not just employment training. A great number of the young people in this study wished to further their education, but were not sure if they had the financial means to do so, a stable place to live, or the necessary supports for a learning disorder. For young people who have left school, services that provide stability so that they can pursue an education are crucial.

Young people who are homeless are much more likely to drop out compared to those who are housed. While the national drop out rate is under 9%, it is over 60% for young people in this study. Given the centrality of education in our understanding of what helps young people grow into healthy independent adults, re-engagement with education should be central to any youth strategy.

## MENTAL HEALTH

For anyone who works with young people – and in particular, those who are homeless – concerns about mental health and wellness are difficult to ignore. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has estimated that the percentage of young people who experience serious mental health issues is 10-20% and the situation for youth experiencing homelessness is even worse (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012). In one study of youth experiencing homelessness, approximately 40% identified as having mental health issues, with that number increasing the longer one spends on the streets (70% amongst those homeless more than four years). The range of mental health issues extends from mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (including obsessive/compulsive disorder and phobias) to other serious conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, hostility, paranoia and psychoticism, for instance. Extensive Canadian research indicates that the rigours of the streets can lead to higher rates of depression, suicidal ideation and other psychiatric disorders (McCay, 2009; McCay & Aiello, 2013; Kidd, 2004; 2013; Boivan, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2002; Leslie et al., 2002) and this risk is particularly pronounced among gay, bisexual and transgendered youth (Gattis, 2009; Cochran et al., 2002).

The youth in this study reported high levels of depression and anxiety, both before and after they left home. A smaller number of young people reported experiencing severe mental health challenges, including bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Unfortunately, youth were less likely to receive support for these struggles once they left home. The participants in our study discussed limited access to mental health supports in York Region, particularly if it was for ongoing concerns that were not necessarily an emergency. Counsellors that were affordable and that youth could form a sustained relationship with were difficult to find, even though several stated that counseling had helped them in the past.

All of this has important implications for planning a response to youth homelessness in York Region. This requires an integrated systems response so that when young people are at risk of, or become homeless, they have case management support that will increase their access to necessary mental health services and supports. Services for young people who experience homelessness should prioritize:

- *Ongoing staff education and training in trauma-informed care*

- *Access to assessments and supports for mental health problems and learning disabilities*

- *Implementation of harm reduction strategies*

- *Implementation of healthy sexuality programming (not abstinence only)*

Finally, this situation once again points to the need for the availability of more services for young people before they leave home, as these mental health challenges can create further family conflict and discord, causing young people to leave home, where they are likely to receive even less support.

## YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES OR SPECIAL NEEDS

Learning disabilities can create barriers to educational engagement and achievement. Research in Canada has found that approximately 20% of young people between the ages of 5 and 14 have a chronic disability, 22% a learning disability and 14% a speech disorder (Statistics Canada, 2008). Undiagnosed learning disabilities can be the source of family conflict, because the disengagement from school that sometimes results is misinterpreted as a behavioural issue or a lack of motivation. In our study, the percentage of youth who cited diagnoses of ADHD (28.3%) or other learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (5%), is higher than the Canadian average. Many young people felt their needs in this area had not been fully addressed. These figures do not take account of young people with undiagnosed learning disabilities.

In developing a plan to address youth homelessness in the region, attention should be paid to prevention approaches that support young people with learning disabilities and their families and that enable them to succeed in school.

## SUBSTANCE USE

The use of substances, both legal and illegal, is common amongst adolescents and young adults. This is also the case amongst youth experiencing homelessness. For many, but not all, substance use can be highly problematic and addictions can ensue. It needs to be pointed out that while many young people experience addictions prior to homelessness, problematic use is also an outcome of the trauma and difficulties young people face while homeless.

There is a vast body of literature that addresses addictions issues face by young people who become homeless (Adlaf et al., 1999; Roy et al., 2009;). In our study, we found that while most young people did not identify substance use as a problem or barrier, a third of the youth did and required support.

There are different ways to respond to substance use amongst youth. While many mainstream services, as well as those in the youth homelessness sector, embrace 'abstinence only', there is considerable evidence that harm reduction models are more effective and should be incorporated into responses to youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2014a; 2014c; Barnaby et al., 2012). Harm reduction remains controversial in many communities, though it can be argued that it is because it is not well understood. Harm reduction is defined as an approach aimed at "reducing the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual, the community and society as a whole. It is deemed a realistic, pragmatic, humane and successful approach to addressing issues of substance use. Recognizing that abstinence may be neither a realistic or a desirable goal" (Gaetz, 2014a: Harm Reduction).

## SERVICE DELIVERY

The best response to youth homelessness is to prevent youth from becoming homeless in the first place. Our research shows that for some youth, there were multiple missed opportunities for intervention. In some cases a youth may have avoided homelessness had their family received increased supports to address conflict or abuse. Some youth may have benefited from increased support from their school. For other youth, better access to mental health services and addictions treatment may have prevented them from leaving home. Even with a plan for prevention in place, however, there must still be a process to quickly move those youth that do experience homelessness toward stable housing.

Our research indicates that York Region does not have an adequate system for transitioning youth out of homelessness. Many of the youth we interviewed experienced a high degree of transience and instability. A majority had stayed in more than one shelter, multiple times. Others had moved between shelters, foster care, group homes and jail with intermittent periods of couch surfing.

That is not to say that the individual services are inadequately supporting youth. Our research shows that some youth within shelters and transitional units found staff to be supportive, encouraging and caring. They accessed various supports for employment, housing and education. A few youth were preparing to move into an apartment or attend university. However, the fact remains that shelters are operating at capacity and many of the youth we interviewed had recurring shelter stays. This suggests that too many youth in York Region are relying on emergency services and becoming stuck in a cycle of homelessness.

The service providers we interviewed offered important insight as to why this might be the case. Youth, families, service providers and school staff are left to navigate a poorly connected service system spread out across a massive geographic area. If a youth requires support, there is no roadmap to assist them. The quality of support a service provider can offer a youth is dependent almost entirely on their ability to build personal relationships and networks with other providers. Youth and supportive, caring adults are without access to a formalized system of support.

These findings suggest that York Region must move away from the provision of emergency services towards more holistic models of accommodation, designed specifically for youth. Effective models such as Housing First and the Foyer are discussed below. However, these successful models of support and accommodation must be delivered within an integrated systems response. Youth homelessness in York Region cannot be addressed through the homelessness sector itself. The solution requires a cross-sector, coordinated approach where service delivery organizations, programs and services are working together in a formalized yet flexible way that can respond to the diverse needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

# 6  DEVELOPING A RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN YORK REGION

In York Region, the response to homelessness – and youth homelessness in particular – can be characterized as inadequate and underdeveloped. What can be done about this?  What can be done differently?

The good news is that a lot has been learned about how to effectively respond to youth homelessness over the past several years, and many of these lessons can be adapted and applied in York Region.

In *Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness* (2014), Stephen Gaetz argues that there are three basic things a community can do to address homelessness.  The first focuses on prevention: stop people from becoming homeless in the first place by addressing the causes of homeless and implementing early intervention strategies when people are at imminent risk of homelessness.  The second is to ensure that there are emergency supports – things such as emergency shelters, day programs, soup kitchens, etc. - to address the immediate needs of people in crisis.  No matter how effective prevention strategies are, there will always be the need for some form of emergency response.  Third, it is necessary to ensure there is a range of accommodation options and necessary supports that will not only ensure people have access to housing, but will help them attain stability as they move forward with their lives.

Over the years, many communities across the country have built their response to homelessness around investment in a broad range of emergency services and supports.  The problem with this approach is that while it is the case that some people are able to pull themselves out of homelessness, others struggle and may become mired in homelessness for years on end, with worsening health, exposure to trauma and a loss of hope.  This is particularly a sad fate for young people who become homeless.

COMING OF AGE: REIMAGINING THE RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

*www.homelesshub.ca/ comingofage*

All of this raises important questions about what to do in York Region. Should the response to youth homelessness be to expand the emergency capacity, or should it be to do something different?

It is argued here that rather than increase its investment in emergency services, York Region should shift the balance and focus its efforts on prevention and ensure that appropriate models of accommodation and supports are in place and available. This involves a major shift in thinking.

FIGURE 6 *Accommodation Model*

PREVENTION → *emergency response* → ACCOMMODATION & SUPPORTS

The move towards a more integrated approach, which emphasizes **prevention** on one hand and **accommodation and supports** on the other, can be made drawing on extensive research and knowledge regarding what has worked in other regions, much of which is summarized in the Coming of Age report.

# 6.1  PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The goal of prevention is to stop young people from becoming homeless in the first place. There are different aspects to a prevention strategy, including primary prevention, systems prevention and early intervention.

## IV.    PRIMARY PREVENTION

Primary prevention means working upstream to address factors that increase the risk of youth homelessness, broader structural issues such as poverty, family violence, neglect or discrimination, for instance.   Primary prevention also involves working with: a) young people to enhance protective factors, b) families to address conflict and enhance support, and c) the education system to ensure that teachers, counsellors and other adults are able to identify young people at risk and to mobilize effective interventions.

### a) Enhancing Protective Factors

When we speak of 'protective factors', we are referring to a person's individual qualities and personality traits that help them persevere in the face of stress, traumatic events or other problems (Smokowski et al., 1999; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Bender, 2007; Gilligan, 2000; Ungar, 2004; Ungar et al., 2013). Protective factors can contribute to, and enhance resilience, which:

*is the likely outcome of a child's both having qualities that are inherently protective (e.g. intelligence and positive coping skills) and having access to resources and networks of support that promote and help maintain a process of healing and psychological wellness*

(Herrenkohl, 2008:94).

Enhancing protective factors can happen within families, schools, clubs or anywhere else young people reside and may include working to improve decision-making and planning skills, enhance self-esteem (Lightfoot et al., 2011) and reinforce positive family and peer relations.

Enhancing protective factors also means addressing discrimination. We know that in Canada some racialized minorities – including black and Aboriginal youth – are over-represented within the youth homeless population, as are LGBTQ youth. Racism and homophobia limit people's opportunities in education and employment (amongst other spheres) and thereby undermine young people's efforts at becoming independent.

### b) Family supports

It should go without saying that for all young people on the path to adulthood, family is important.  Given the degree to which family conflict is implicated in youth homelessness, more effort needs to be made to support families, while at the same time ensuring the safety of young people in cases where there is abuse.  A range of potential family supports include:

- *Strengthening anger management and conflict resolution skills within families*

- *Building parenting skills to support healthy childhood development*

- *Ensuring young people have access to early childhood education, adequate nutrition and enriched engagement (arts, sports) in the community*

- *Promoting awareness of brain and child development*

These programs and interventions need to be available throughout York Region (rather than centrally located) in order to meet the needs of the young people and their families in the area. At the same time, an effort will need to be made to help families connect with these resources and supports, because if they do not know they are available, they will no be able to use them.

## c) *Getting into schools*

An important thing to note about youth homelessness is that virtually every one who experiences it was once in school. Moreover, there was very likely an adult somewhere along the line – a teacher, a coach, a counsellor, a librarian – who knew something was not right, but perhaps did not know what to do about it. Given the very high percentage of young people in our study who reported leaving home before the age of sixteen, this is highly likely.

Engaging the education system in preventing youth homelessness should thus be a central strategy. Much is known about effective approaches for engaging schools, particularly from evidence-based work internationally. In Australia, the government-funded Reconnect Program delivers education and prevention services to young people in schools (Evans & Shaver, 2001; Australian Government, 2003; 2013). In the UK, community-based organizations work within a prevention framework to develop and implement programs that are supported and funded by the central government. Importantly, this prevention work begins in schools and targets youth even before they turn 16. In both cases, young people are educated about homelessness (causes of homelessness, effective interventions and available community supports), as are teachers and counsellors. Young people learn conflict resolution skills and have access to supports if they are at imminent risk of homelessness.Working in schools enables other preventive supports to take place, including enhancing protective factors and providing family support (to learn more about these programs, see Gaetz, 2014, pg. 36).

## II) SYSTEMS PREVENTION

Systems prevention involves legislation and program support aimed at stopping the flow of young people in institutional care into homelessness. The research on youth homelessness in York Region demonstrates that many young people had some sort of engagement with either child protection services in the past, or with the criminal justice system. Inadequate support for young people, either transitioning from child protection care or leaving detention, means that many fall into homelessness.

While both child protection services and youth criminal justice are largely the purview of higher levels of government, there are services and supports in the community that need to better align with the response to homelessness.

*Transitions from child protection –* It can be argued that it is both the experience of being in care and the transitions from protection to independence, that account for the relationship between involvement in child protection and homelessness. Some young

people leave care because of negative experiences in group homes or in foster care, while others simply 'age out', because care is only available to youth up to the age of 18.

*Transitions from corrections –* Whether young people are leaving the juvenile criminal justice system or the adult system, it is imperative that they receive effective discharge planning and supports.

In both cases, stronger links need to be made between those responsible for young people in institutional care and community service providers, in order to: a) help young people develop plans for transitions from care, and b) make arrangements for some form of 'aftercare' support, to reduce the risk of homelessness and or recidivism.

## III) EARLY INTERVENTION

When a young person is at imminent risk of homelessness, or has recently become homeless, there is a need for early intervention. The longer a young person remains homeless, the more likely they will become entrenched in the street youth lifestyle, their health and well-being will be compromised, and they will be subject to exploitation.

In York Region, there should be a focused effort on developing early intervention strategies that have as their overarching goals the prevention of or reduction in time spent homeless and helping young people remain 'in place'. There are several reasons to consider this. First, we know from this research study that the pathway to homelessness for many young people is a long and drawn out process, with many episodes of couch surfing, shelter stays and returns home. This means that there are most certainly moments where an intervention of some sort would be helpful and could reduce the risk of disengagement with school, leaving home and the community and potentially chronic homelessness.

Second, given the lack of emergency infrastructure and its central location within a large urban area, leaving home and accessing services or worse still, leaving the region (relocating to Toronto, Barrie or even further afield), means that young people do not just lose their families and homes, but that their relations with friends, teachers, caring adults and others in their community become weakened or severed. This is an outcome that should be avoided through effective early intervention strategies,

*The goal of (early intervention) is to address the immediate risk of homelessness, provide young people and their families with necessary supports and importantly enhance resilience while reducing the potential for negative outcomes. For those who do wind up having to leave home, early intervention also means reducing the risk of protracted homelessness (more than a month) for young people (Gaetz, 2014: 45)*

The exceptions to this are in cases where the young person chooses to leave the area of their own volition (rather than because of lack of options) or in situations where it is unsafe to remain (because of bullying or discrimination, for instance).

The figure below presents a model of early intervention designed to help young people stay in place so as to support, where possible, the reconciliation of relationships. This enables young people to move back in with family members or caregivers and when this is not possible (for other reasons, including safety), to help them move into independent (and supported) accommodation in a safe and planned way. Four key strategies are identified to support this transition.

FIGURE 7  *Models of Accommodation*



LIVING **WITH PARENTS** OR **CAREGIVERS**

LIVING **INDEPENDENTLY**

IMMINENT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

COORDINATED ASSESSMENT
CASE MANAGEMENT
FAMILY RECONNECTION
SHELTER DIVERSION

FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION

RAPID RE-HOUSING *(with supports)*
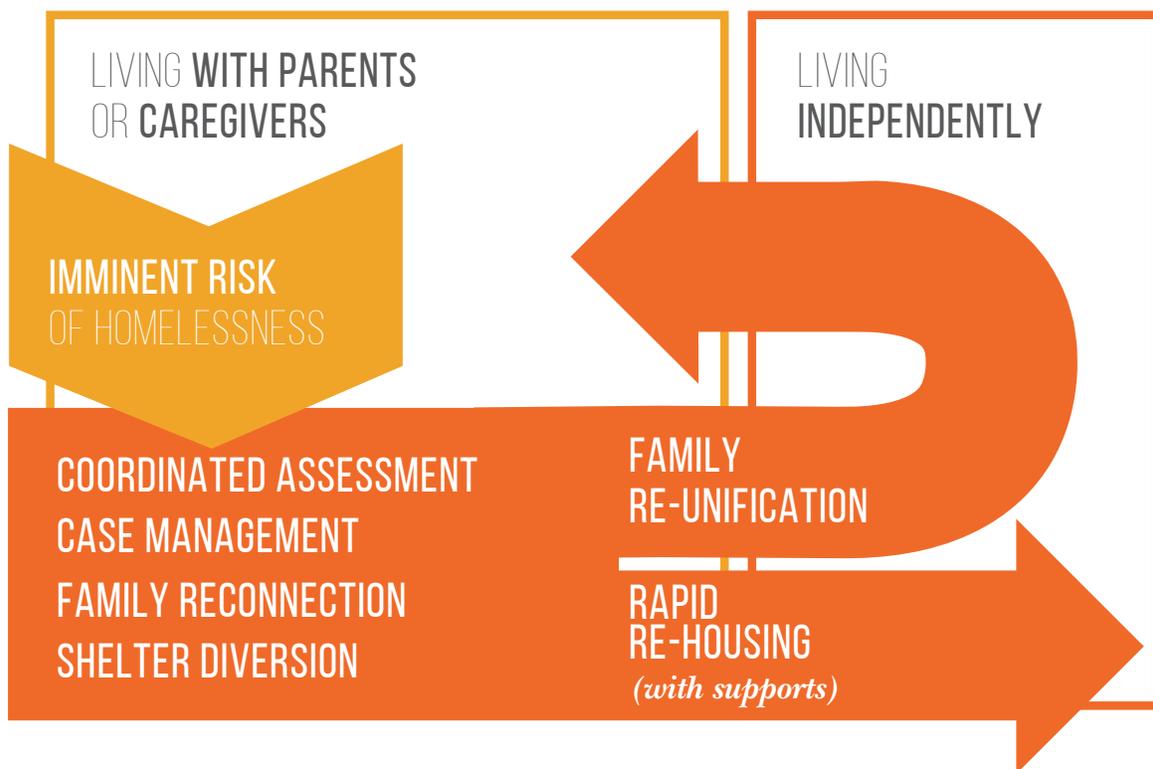
## *Coordinated Assessment*

Key to delivering integrated and focused early interventions is a standardized approach to assessing a young person's current situation, the acuity of their needs and the services they currently receive and may require in the future. The best approaches take into account the background factors that contribute to risk and resilience, changes in acuity, and the role parents, caregivers, community and environmental factors play on the young person's development. The National Alliance to End Homelessness in the US argues that coordinated assessment undergirds a more efficient and effective homelessness response through:

- *Helping people move through the system faster (by reducing the amount of time people spend moving from program to program before finding the right match);*

- *Reducing new entries into homelessness (by consistently offering prevention and diversion resources upfront, reducing the number of people entering the system unnecessarily); and*

- *Improving data collection and quality and providing accurate information on what kind of assistance consumers need (NAEH, 2012 Coordinated Assessment Toolkit).*

In York Region, all service providers – including schools – should have access to a standard coordinated assessment tool. A new tool is currently being developed by the Government of Alberta, and will be available in the New Year to communities across the country.

## Case Management

One of the things that often happens when we rely on emergency services – or there are none at all – is that young people are often left to their own devices in terms of sorting out their problems and working their way out of homelessness. This message was delivered by many young people in this study. It is therefore argued that young people and their families will need support to navigate systems through a case management approach, which is defined as a:

*Collaborative, client-driven process for the provision of quality health and support services through the effective and efficient use of resources. Case management supports the client's achievement of safe, realistic, and reasonable goals within a complex health, social, and fiscal environment* (National Case Management Network of Canada, 2009, p.8).

Case management is key to early intervention, and ensures that the needs of young people (and potentially their families) are assessed and, where appropriate, access to programs and services is arranged, coordinated and

advocated for. Given the challenges presented by the geography of York Region, transportation and accompaniment should be part of case management support.

## Family Reconnection

As outlined in the report, *Family Matters* (Winland et al., 2011), the underlying ethos of a family reconnection approach is that family is important to almost everyone, even young people who experience homelessness. It is a belief that a truly effective response to youth homelessness must consider the role that family – and the potential of reconciling damaged relationships – can play in helping street youth move forward with their lives: "For many, if not most street youth, family does matter in some way, and … addressing family issues can help young people move into adulthood in a healthier way, and potentially move out of homelessness" (Winland, et al., 2011).

The goal of family reconnection is to support families, build stronger relations and mediate conflict in order to: a) prevent youth homelessness, b) help young people who have become homeless return home, c) rapidly rehouse those for whom a return home is not possible (in the case of family violence, for instance), or d) secure stable housing for youth who have been homeless over a long period of time. Done well, it means breaking the cycle of homelessness by providing young people and their families with ongoing support in order to address the underlying issues leading to conflict.

There are many good examples of how family reconnection can work, including the highly successful Family Reconnect program of Eva's Initiatives in Toronto (Winland et al., 2011; Winland, 2013). The Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary have

integrated family reconnection and supports into their programs involving prevention, emergency supports and housing for youth experiencing homelessness. Key examples of how family reconnection can be integrated into the work done in schools are provided in both the *Family Matters* and *Coming of Age* reports. Family Reconnection strategies should be a priority in York Region, as a way of helping young people stay in place, of healing families and reducing the risk that young people will need to access emergency shelters either in York Region or worse still, that they leave the community.

## Shelter Diversion

When young people become homeless (or are at risk), housing and supports are needed as an interim measure. Shelter diversion refers to developing temporary housing options, supports and interventions as alternatives to emergency shelters. Ideally, these supports should be in the neighbourhood, in order to ensure existing natural resources remain intact, that the young person stays in school (if possible) and at the same time reduces the likelihood that they will have to rely on emergency shelters outside of their community, or worse still, leave the community altogether.

A good suggestion for York Region is the development of a 'host home' program, which has a strong track record in the UK (described as 'respite housing') and is becoming more popular in the United States. Considered particularly appropriate for young people under the age of 18, it is designed to provide:

*Safe, high quality accommodation for a short period of time to give them and their families a 'breather', and provide a supportive environment for all parties to rebuild their emotional resilience and renegotiate relationships*

(Quilgars et al., 2011:8)

The development of 'host homes' respite housing stems from the knowledge that young people sometimes become homeless as a result of a major family conflict, where temperatures rise, angry words are said and the young person leaves or is kicked out. In such cases (and in particular where there may be family conflict, but no history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse) a 'time out' space is needed, where young people are provided with a safe space in another family home. After an initial assessment case management begins so that young people and their families can work on repairing relations. By incorporating a family reconnect orientation, youth and their families are supported so that the young person can return home, or conversely, they are provided with temporary housing while they work out longer-term housing support.

This kind of program makes sense for York Region, because once again, the goal, when appropriate, is to help young people stay in place. It also provides an opportunity for the community to get involved in supporting an end to youth homelessness.

# 6.2  SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN THEY ARE HOMELESS

A core principle of Housing First is that people who experience homelessness do much better if they are provided with housing first and then get access to necessary supports to help them remain housed.  This is also true of young people. This suggests that a successful strategy to address youth homelessness moves beyond simply the provision of emergency services.

When the young people in York Region speak of their needs regarding housing, a few things stand out. First, while emergency shelters are necessary, young people desire something more permanent and less stigmatizing. Second, one size does not fit all. Young people have a range of needs and models of accommodation and supports should be built around these. Third, the transitional housing that is available has provided young people with positive experiences.

The research on models of accommodation and supports points the way in terms of how to conceptualize a successful and effective framework.  The starting point is that accommodation and supports must be built around the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult.  We cannot take for granted that models developed for adults will work well for young people. Once again, for young people, it is important to consider that *inadequate housing* is not only about the lack of low cost rentals, but also about appropriate housing with supports for youth in transition at different developmental stages.

The needs of young people are diverse enough to require a range of housing options and these needs are in part determined by age and experience. When considering housing options for young people, one must consider the extent and kinds of supports a young person needs in addition to providing access to **stable housing.**  As with 'early intervention', it is important to recognize the importance of case management in ensuring that young people have access to help, care and the supports they need. A more comprehensive model of accommodation and supports should be built upon the following pillars:

- *Housing support —* Assistance in finding and obtaining appropriate housing, as well as life skills related to the care and maintenance of housing, including dealing with leases and landlords.

- *Health and wellbeing —* Attention to the health needs of young people, including nutritional vulnerability, mental health, addictions, access to necessary mainstream services, etc.  As suggested, a harm reduction approach should be adopted, and sobriety should not be a precondition for access to housing.

- *Complementary supports —* This includes mentoring and individual support focusing on self-care and life skills required to live independently, such as obtaining ID and health cards, help registering in school, shopping, setting up a bank account, and developing financial literacy, etc.

- *Education, employment and training —* Young people should be supported in obtaining employment and access to education should be at the center of supports. At the same time, young people should be able to access income support if their earnings do not allow them to live independently.

- *Youth engagement —* This involves nurturing positive relationships with others, supporting connection to communities and helping young people to engage in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling.

There is an emerging literature that addresses the kinds of housing options that are appropriate to meet the needs of young people. The Infinity program in Calgary demonstrates that Housing First can work for young people – and in particular older teens and young adults (Scott & Harrison, 2013; Davies, 2013; Gaetz, 2014). Housing First is an evidence-based housing model that has shown to improve the lives of a great number of people, particularly adults with severe mental health and addictions concerns. For young people, Housing First means providing them with access to scattered site housing in the private rental market, with necessary supports including rent supplements. A Framework for Housing First (Gaetz, 2014) articulates the key elements of a successful approach that works for developing adolescents and young adults. Ensuring there is a range of housing options (including good transitional housing models such as the Foyer), as well as adequate rent supplements (given the cost of housing in the region would be key to a successful application of the model.

Within the Housing First model, there is arguably still a role for transitional housing when speaking of the needs of youth (Gaetz, 2014b). Youth are a unique population, as many do not have the life skills to live independently and more importantly, the human capital to support lifelong learning. Transitional housing (which can be dedicated or scattered-site) can provide youth with the stability necessary to get an education. Too often programs for young people impose relatively short limits on the time residents may stay, meaning youth must focus on finding employment and housing so as to be self-sufficient when their time 'runs out'. This can however, regardless of the good intentions of the program, divert attention away from education, again limiting the lifetime earning potential of the young person.

In addition, some youth, particularly younger youth, may enjoy having other people, including supportive adults, around on a daily basis. Several of the youth living in the Pathways residential programs described how they liked living with others and in some ways felt the program facilitated a sense of 'family'. This experience can be priceless for youth who have grown up without this feeling, or connection to others.

There is an emerging literature on successful models of accommodation and support. Two key documents to explore in this regard focus on transitional housing (the Foyer) and Housing First for youth.

## THE FOYER

This report provides extensive information on the successful and evidence-based Foyer transitional housing model for youth. An accompanying tool kit gives communities direction on how to establish one.

***www.homelesshub.ca/foyer***
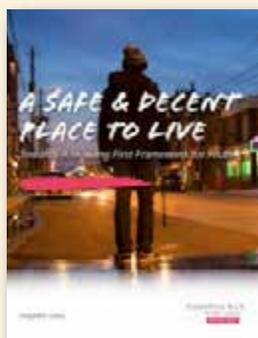
## HOUSING FIRST

This report provides a detailed framework of how Housing First can be adapted to meet the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult.

***www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirstyouth***

# 6.3 HOW DO WE GET THERE?
## AN INTEGRATED SYSTEMS RESPONSE

For York Region, adopting a plan to end youth homelessness will invariably mean doing things differently. While there will always be a need for emergency services, it is argued that there is a need to shift direction and emphasize prevention on the one hand and on the other, provide young people with access to housing (with supports) as quickly as possible.

Communities across Canada are becoming more and more interested in developing strategic and coordinated plans to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness as part of their broader strategies to end homelessness. We are learning much about how to plan and implement successful strategies. Below are key elements that should be part of a plan.

## 1. DEVELOP A PLAN

"The first step is devising and implementing a plan or strategy, one that is inclusive in its process, *strategic* in its objectives, sets real and measurable *targets for change*, is *clear* to all stakeholders and leads to *real changes* in young people's lives" (Gaetz, 2014: 25). The planning stage should be a collaborative community-based process involving a diverse group of stakeholders (including youth) to identify what might work in York Region.

*Outcomes of plans should focus on:*

- *Increased housing stability for youth through rehousing (Housing First) or family reunification;*

- *Increased resiliency in youth experiencing, or at risk of becoming, homeless;*

- *Prevention of youth homelessness through education and enhanced family and natural supports;*

- *Access to education, income and employment opportunities;*

- *Effective models of accommodation and support that give young people options and choice in how they move forward with their lives;*

- *Healthy transitions to adulthood.*

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## 2. CREATE AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM RESPONSE

In York Region, there are a range of public, non-profit and charitable programs and systems and services that serve low-income and homeless individuals and families. There is also a regional government, as well as nine municipalities. Youth homelessness is a 'fusion policy' issue involving many departments of government and a range of mainstream service providers, and cannot be solved by the homelessness sector alone:

FIGURE 8 *Fusion Policy Issues*



An integrated systems response means that programs, services and service delivery systems are organized at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of the young person. A "system of care" approach means that the services in this system are designed and coordinated to meet the needs of the young person, rather than having the young person fit the program.

*For the strategy to be a success, there will be a need for:*

- *Greater service integration – Involving not only youth homelessness service providers, but also mainstream services. Currently, collaboration and support works on an ad hoc basis and is dependent upon individual relations. A structured system will be more effective. An excellent model to work from is the Street Youth Planning Collaborative in Hamilton, Ontario.*

- *Vertical Integration – This means all levels of government must support the changes.*

- *Key institutions that work with youth must be at the table. This means that child protection, children's and adult mental health, police services and corrections must be actively engaged in solving the problem of youth homelessness.*

- *Perhaps the most important partner in the system of care is the education system (including both main school boards, YRDSB, and the YRCSB), because all young people are in school at one time or another and we know from this research that homelessness becomes a problem for youth at a relatively young age.*

Systems integration does not happen easily, but it can be done.  Our research on effective practices suggests that leadership and coordination (a dedicated role) is essential to developing and sustaining an integrated service model.

## 3. FACILITATE ACTIVE, STRATEGIC AND COORDINATED ENGAGEMENT BY ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT, AS WELL AS INTERDEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

It is important that all levels of government – not just within the region, but also the provincial government - work together to align policy and funding to support an end to youth homelessness. The federal government renewed the Homelessness Partnering Strategy in 2013, with a new emphasis on Housing First.  In Ontario, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing funds service managers to coordinate housing and homelessness initiatives at the municipal level.  The new poverty reduction strategy "Realizing our Potential" also prioritizes an end homelessness, which will support local initiatives.  Aligning these initiatives with a strategic response to youth homelessness will be important.

Key changes to reduce and prevent youth homelessness have to occur at the provincial level – for instance, reforming child protection to extend responsibility to the age of 24, and ensuring more effective transitions from care, or more effective discharge planning and support for young people leaving corrections.  The region must be more actively involved in advocating for necessary changes in legislation, policy and practice to stop the flow of young people from care into homelessness.

## 4. ADOPT A POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ORIENTATION

Effective models of support for young people are based on an understanding of the needs of developing adolescents and young adults.

- *Youth homelessness, both in terms of its causes and conditions, is distinct from adult homelessness, and therefore so must be the solutions.*

- *The goal is not transition to independence, but rather to empower young people to achieve their full potential in their transition to adulthood and well-being.*

- *A Positive Youth Development approach should be adopted broadly, which focuses on developing the assets young people need to successfully transition to adulthood, in order to build protective factors and enhance resilience.*

- *Young people should be engaged as active partners in developing solutions to youth homelessness.  There should be no solutions for youth, without youth.*

## 5. INCORPORATE RESEARCH, DATA GATHERING AND INFORMATION SHARING

Evidence matters. Research, data gathering and information sharing support the planning, implementation and evaluation of effective, evidence-based solutions:

*Research can impact the solutions to homelessness by providing a deeper understanding of the problem, strong evidence for solutions, and good ideas from other countries that can be replicated and adapted locally. Research should be part of any strategic solution to youth homelessness* (Gaetz. 2014:30).

A research and data strategy should include the following elements:

- *A youth focused Point-in-Time count to better understand the nature and scope of the problem;*

- *System-wide data collection and sharing across sectors must be in place to support an outcomes-based approach to addressing homelessness;*

- *Program evaluation at the agency and systems level, both as a means of measuring outcomes and progress, but also to contribute to continuous improvement.*

## 6.4    MOVING FORWARD

The process of finding new ways to address youth homelessness in York Region has already begun. Over the past two years, a community engagement process led by the United Way York Region has emphasized collaboration, participation from a broad range of sectors, and collective learning. The community has leadership, engagement by the right players and the knowledge, wisdom and talent to move quickly to develop an effective strategy to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness. This presents a real opportunity for York Region to emerge as a national leader in addressing youth homelessness, through the adaptation of learnings from elsewhere and the creation of innovative new possibilities to change the lives of many young people and families in the community. The goal should be to help young people move toward adult lives characterized by opportunity, well-being, engagement and support. This is where the people of York Region can make a difference.
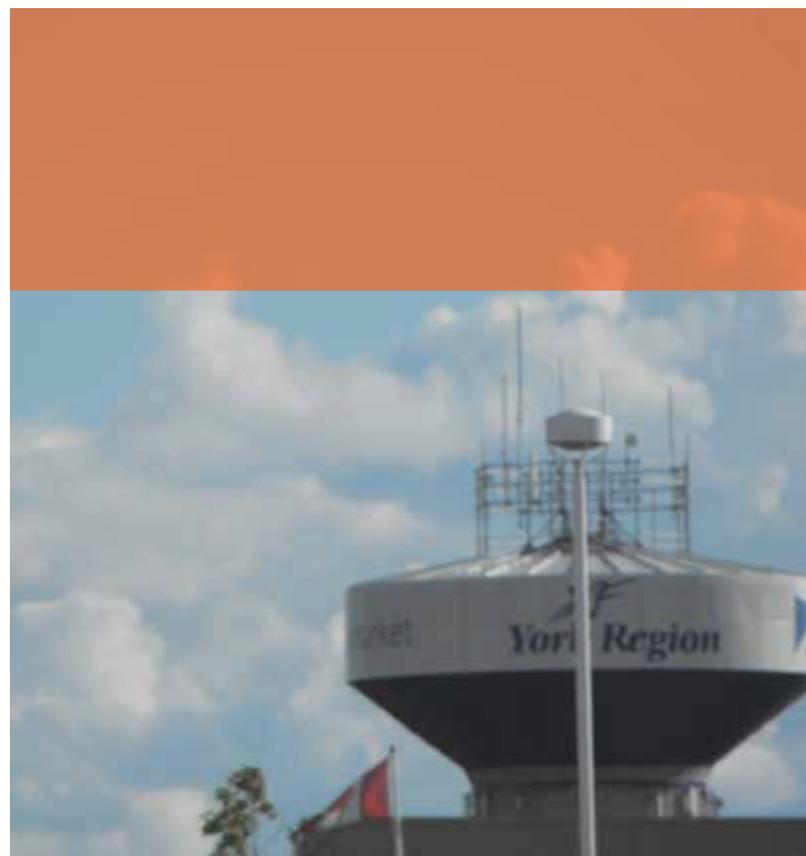
# 7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our collective efforts at *"Re-Imagining Our Response to Youth Homelessness in York Region"* have brought us to a new place of possibility, wherein we can positively impact the lives of vulnerable young people in our communities.

The research undertaken in 2013, together with evidence informed by models and emerging Canadian and international practices, has provided rich data to inform our understanding of the pathways taken by young people into homelessness in York Region and new approaches to inform our response. It has helped to identify the supports that are needed by young people and families and the need to address the structural and systemic barriers that may inhibit the ability of young people to develop and thrive as adults.

The recommendations in this report reflect the desire of UWYR and the Youth Homelessness Research Advisory Committee to move forward with this work, in order to prevent, reduce and end homelessness among young people in York Region.

## WE BELIEVE THAT:

All young people have potential and their voices, experience and wisdom must inform/guide our plans as we develop new ways of working together informed by a Positive Youth Development framework.

We cannot do this work in silos. Youth homelessness is a "fusion policy issue" and requires a systems lens. Together we can continue to build our understanding of the connection between issues and the response of different sectors/systems and funding structures, in order to remove obstacles and create new opportunities for young people. As the pathway to homelessness can begin in the early teens when young people are still in school, the education system is a particularly critical partner in prevention/early intervention strategies.

Youth homelessness is a symptom of the stresses and challenges facing youth and families in our communities and is influenced by multiple factors. Addressing youth homelessness through a systems lens creates an opportunity to address a range of issues that impact a much broader population of vulnerable young people, not just those whose life experiences result in their inability to stay at home, or find and secure affordable housing and appropriates supports.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## PART 1: BUILDING CAPACITY AND READINESS

### *1.1   Develop a working group/round table to address youth homelessness*

Within the context of the development of a new Community Plan to tackle homelessness and new planning/organizing committee being developed in York Region under the renewed Homelessness Partnering Strategy (2014-2019), develop a working group/ round table focused on ending youth homelessness in York Region. Membership should include representation from the education sector, (YRDSB/YCDSB), child protection, mental health, youth justice, all levels of government, as well as the homelessness sector, mainstream service providers and UWYR.  The working group should include youth who have experienced homelessness and/or accessed services in York Region.

### *1.2   Raise public awareness about youth homelessness*

The working group, working in partnership with communities, local government and United Way York Region should work to create a broader understanding within the community of the causes and conditions of youth homelessness and the viability of potential solutions. Particular efforts should be made to raise awareness among youth about the causes of homelessness. All youth, regardless of their circumstance, should be knowledgeable about the resources available in their community so that they themselves can seek support, or help a friend who is facing challenges.

### *1.3  Include young people in the planning and implementation of solutions*

Young people who have experienced homelessness bring with them knowledge and an understanding that is an important resource.  They also bring other assets, including creativity, commitment and good ideas.  All solutions to youth homelessness should be developed with an inclusionary framework that ensures that young people have input in ways that are respected and that are meaningful to them.

## PART 2: PLANNING AN END TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

### *2.1  Develop a comprehensive plan to end Youth Homelessness in York Region.*

The working group, working with the regional government and UWYR should develop a plan to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness in York Region. The plan should be inclusive in its process, be strategic in its objectives, set real and measurable targets for change, be clear to all stakeholders and lead to real changes in young people's lives. This plan should be prepared within 16 months.

## 2.2  Engage key organizations to support planning

The working group should engage key local stakeholders in this planning effort, but also include mainstream service providers, such as school boards, the police, the LHIN and community services. Engaging a broad cross-section of stakeholders is dependent on better awareness of the issue and dismantling of negative stereotypes associated with youth homelessness.

Moreover, given that there is an emerging knowledge base about how to develop and implement plans to end homelessness in Canada, the working group should engage key organizations that have skills and knowledge that will help shape youth-focused plans.  This should include:

- *Canadian Observatory on Homelessness – Research and technical support on addressing youth homelessness.*

- *Mobilizing Local Communities (Eva's Initiatives) – Support the development of community plans to end youth homelessness.*

- *Raising the Roof – Support the development of prevention strategies on youth homelessness, employment initiatives, and family initiatives.*

- *Hamilton Street Youth Planning Collaborative – Knowledge, experience and expertise in developing a service integration model.*

## 2.3  Engage the Province in the development of the provincial strategy to end youth homelessness

The planning and implementation of the plan to end homelessness is in its early stage. The plan is part of a broader poverty reduction strategy that also highlights directions for addressing families with children and youth.  The working group, Regional government and UWYR should engage the Province in supporting an integrated approach that addresses youth homelessness.  Some key elements include:

- *Development and investment in youth specific models of accommodation and supports;*

- *Changes to provincial legislation in order to enable community based agencies to work more effectively in partnership with child protection services to provide interventions and supports for young people under 16 and their families.*

# PART 3: IMPLEMENT STRATEGIC INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

## 3.1  Engage the York Region District School Board and the York Catholic District School Board in a youth homelessness prevention / early intervention initiative.

York Region can become a leader in innovation by adapting promising practice models of school-based interventions that address youth homelessness, such as those identified in

the Coming of Age report and elsewhere.  Interventions piloted at the school or district level, if they show promising results, could be brought to scale across the region. Key elements of the plan could include:

- *Early intervention programs that involve partnerships with community based agencies could include risk and asset assessment, case management intervention, family mediation and reconnection and targeted support*

- *Expansion of the York Region District School Board Early School Leavers Reengagement Strategy, to include community partners will help target young people who are or have been homeless.*

## 3.2  Support the use of harm reduction approaches when working with young people who are or are at risk of becoming homeless.

While across Canada many mainstream services, as well as those in the youth homelessness sector embrace an 'abstinence only' model, there is considerable evidence that harm reduction models are more effective and should be incorporated into responses to youth homelessness.  The working group should seek support from experts on youth-based harm reduction, in order to develop a workable harm reduction agenda.

## 3.3  Develop a region-wide program to support families that are struggling with instability and youth homelessness.

Work with families and family support services to develop a region-wide program that provides ongoing supports, including family and individual counseling, mediation and reunification.

## 3.4  Increase young people's access to necessary supports and services.

Develop, through communications, case management and program development, strategies to ensure that young people (and their families) who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless, have greater access to:

- *Employment*

- *Education*

- *Affordable housing*

- *Mental health supports*

- *Assessment (mental health, addictions, disabilities)*

Service providers, as part of a systems-wide approach, must be equipped with better knowledge and formalized mechanisms to link youth and families to the resources they need.

### 3.5  Develop and implement research and data strategy to support plan

Good research and data are essential to the successful implementation of plans to end homelessness.  The working group should endeavor to:

- *Identify a youth-focused common assessment tool (the province of Alberta is currently developing one)*

- *Implement a sector wide data management system to support the plan*

- *Invest in evaluation of the plan and specific initiatives*

- *Working in partnership with the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, develop an ongoing research agenda to support the plan.*

### 3.6   Implement an anti-discrimination framework.

Given that we know young people who experience homelessness are often also marginalized by sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia, it is important that service providers addressing youth homelessness ensure that policy and training support an anti-discrimination practice.  Outreach should also be implemented to reach such marginalized youth.

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