Youth Perspectives on Homelessness Prevention

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF HOMELESS YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO INDEPENDENT HOUSING

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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: CANADA AND TORONTO

35,000 – 40,000
Canadian youth
(aged 13 – 24) homeless at some point during the year

1,000 – 2,000
Toronto on any given night

6,000
Canadian youth on any given night

KNOWLEDGE GAP

Margins

↓ Education
↓ Health
↓ Employment
↑ Trauma

Mainstream

↑ Child Welfare
↑ Racialized
↑ Poverty
↑ LGBTQ2S

Street Families ➔ Acquaintances
Youth ➔ Adulthood

“FALSE PROMISES”

(Kidd et al., 2016)
Produce an *insider* perspective on the experiences of formerly homeless youth as they transitioned into *independent* housing and attempted to achieve meaningful *social integration*. 
Holistic Concept
The ability for full societal participation across economic, political, cultural, and social domains

Relational Concept
Equal power relationships

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Critical Ethnography
- Understand “choices” given socioeconomic context

Ten Months
- Nine participants

Biweekly Informal Interviews
- Location chosen by participants
  - No car
  - 119 interviews
BASELINE DEMOGRAPHICS

Age

19-21

22-24

Sex*

Male

Female

* In this study, participant’s sex matched their gender
BASELINE DEMOGRAPHICS

Race
- Black
- White
- Asian
- Multi-racial

Education
- Less than high school
- High school upgrading
- Completed high school
- Attended post-secondary school (not completed)
BASELINE DEMOGRAPHICS

Sexuality

Child Welfare
BASELINE DEMOGRAPHICS

Employment

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Cash only

Welfare Subsidies
KEY FINDINGS

Precarity
Identity
Mastery and Control
I’m tired of the struggle...the struggle. I’m looking at my paycheck...this lady is telling me I’m only going to get $8.00 from welfare [because of claw backs related to employment income] and that stresses you out. I’m only getting $8.00 from welfare so now I’m already worrying about January and December. It’s just a stressful thing to wake up every day and you know...It blocks off me wanting to go to work, it blocks off me wanting to hang out with people. It’s not really a depression state...I just get very introverted. And it sucks because you can’t be like that. You have to be professional and go to work. It’s easier said than done.

~ Phoenix (Month Nine)
CHRONIC PRECARITY

Financial Inequities
- Most had income of $7,872.00/year (LICO $20,160)
- Dead end jobs
- Welfare claw backs

Social Inequities
- Inadequate mainstream connections (social capital)
- Limited knowledge re: “getting by” vs. “getting ahead”

Age-based Inequities
- 63% of Canadian youth (20 – 24 years) live at home

The thing is, adversity and poverty breed tremendous inner strength and maturity, and also a lot of creativity. But the outside world, they don’t understand what comes out of hardship. They don’t understand it’s surviving through hardship and developing resiliency, that’s really the part of it that’s interesting... that’s something that you should try to revive in your own life.

~ Phillip (Month Nine)
IDENTITY EVOLUTION

Shift in Place = Shift in Identity

- Home a marker of success
- Aware of societal discourse re: homeless people
- Supports embedded in homeless sector (old identities)

Emerging Adulthood

- Wanted to be seen as independent, responsible and competent young adults
- Working through other identity-related issues (e.g., sexual orientation and race)
IDENTITY EVOLUTION

Fragile Identities

- Linked to tangibles (e.g., housing)
  - could lose at any time
- Limited intangible assets (e.g., sense of purpose and control, self-efficacy and self-esteem)
  - eroded over time
- Not confident in education (streamlined and poor grades)
I just live day to day. Now I live day to day. My situation doesn’t make it possible to think far ahead...it doesn’t work now...something always comes up that I need to pay for.

~ Ashley (Month Seven)
MASTERY AND CONTROL UNDERMINED

Determination Not Enough

- Stuck/spinning – lack of purpose
- Chronic precarity exhausting
- Limited identity capital (self-concept as currency)

MASTERY AND CONTROL UNDERMINED

Poverty as Identity
- Inadequate consumers

Still the “Other”
- Inequitable life chances magnified

Life as a “Game of Chance”
- Focus on short-term survival
- Less sense of control over long-term outcomes
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLICATIONS

New Framework

Implications: Practice-Policy-Research
SOCIAL INTEGRATION FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Socioeconomic and Political Context
- Governance
  - Neoliberalism

Macroeconomic Policies
- Living wage
- Basic income

Social and Public Policies
- Housing
- Transportation
- Education

Culture and Societal Values
- Homelessness
- Youth

Socioeconomic Position
- Identity Capital
  - Self-esteem
  - Locus of control
  - Self-efficacy
  - Purpose in life

Age
- Sexual orientation
- Social class
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity

Education
- Occupation
- Income
- Social capital

Material Circumstances
- Housing quality
- Housing location
- Food security

Behaviours and Biological Factors
- Mental health

Psychological Factors
- Coping skills

Structural Determinants

Health System

Intermediary Determinants

Modified from Solar & Irwin, 2010
IMPLICATIONS: PRACTICE

- Incorporate teaching re: identity capital into staff training
- Decentralize outreach services to less stigmatizing locations
- Develop programs that foster social capital
- Re-define success – much more than “no longer homeless”
- Be transparent with youth about likelihood of escaping poverty with limited education and/or skills training
IMPLICATIONS: POLICY

- More affordable and better quality housing
- Consider providing a basic income for low-income youth living independently
- Provide free tuition plus living expenses for post-secondary education and training with no welfare “claw backs”
- Adopt a broader perspective to ending homelessness – the provision of a home alone will not end homelessness
IMPLICATIONS: RESEARCH

- Define and measure social integration holistically — include economic participation
- Implement more longitudinal studies — highlights “real world” challenges to social integration
- Conduct more qualitative studies so we can design youth-informed interventions and have youth-informed public policies
- Consider integration as a primary outcome measure in intervention studies with homeless youth (none to date)
REFERENCES: LONGITUDINAL STUDIES ON TRANSITION


