

# Youth Homelessness: A Review of Social Programs

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## Abstract

Youth homelessness is a complex problem in Canada. While social programs do exist to help homeless youth, there appears to be some confusion as to which program is best suited for helping homeless youth be successful in their lives. This paper examines how social programs help youth leave the streets. The paper analyzes three levels of social programs starting with informal programs, middle-mode programs and formal programs in an attempt to determine the best way to reintegrate homeless youth back into mainstream society. A close examination of social programs suggests that more funding is needed to provide more spaces for youth participation as well as emotional supports to provide stability in their lives. Currently, there are gaps between the social programs. Each program has its own individual rules for operation and does not adequately support transitioning youth. Youth homelessness occurs due to the breakdown of the micro, meso and macro level institutions leaving youth to attempt to take control of their own lives by living homeless.

## Introduction

Youth tend to take the brunt of harsh criticism and are often seen as being deviant. The teenage years are difficult times due to the fact that youth are expected to mature and become functioning members of society. However, the adolescent years are filled with many biological, psychological, and social changes. These changes, in themselves, can contribute to adolescent participation in risky behaviour, which may lead them to be viewed as deviant. However, some youth are predisposed to risky behaviour because of their specific life circumstances, such as their family situations. If close family members participate in acts of crime, the likelihood of the youth also participating in crime increases. Such risky behaviours seen among youth include inductions to gangs, substance abuse, selling drugs, or participating in sex trafficking. Some adolescents are victims of abuse and have had the misfortune of being exposed to harsh lifestyles and these lifestyles have led to them becoming at risk youth.

Some youth who participate in risky behaviour only do so briefly and eventually move away from that lifestyle. However, others become entrenched in deviant routines and are simply unable to leave their deviant lifestyles. Youth who become embedded in deviant lifestyles often find that they are unable to connect to society and tend to rely on illegal acts to support themselves. Due to the nature of youth deviance, some youth can find themselves in positions where they no longer have a home to go to. Homelessness among at risk youth puts the adolescent at further risk of illness or exploitation. Additionally, youth entrenched in deviant

lifestyles are typically unable to transition to adulthood in a normal way due to their lack of resources or access to stable relationships, housing, and food. Youth homelessness can take many forms including those who live on the streets, living in group homes or foster care, and even those who are staying with a friend for a period of time.

There are other factors that can lead to youth homelessness outside of the scope of deviance. Some factors are outside of the youth control; for example, some youth leave home due to unstable family life. Some families experience parental divorce, and possibly the introduction of stepparents and stepchildren. Additionally, many youths leave home due to physical, sexual or emotional abuse. It is estimated that 33% of homeless youth have experienced sexual abuse, while 50% have suffered from physical abuse or neglect (Brown & Amundson, 2010, p.101). In these cases, the youth may choose to become homeless in an effort to avoid further harm to themselves. Youth are also considered homeless if they are living in group homes or foster care. However, in these situations, some youth opt to leave these temporary homes and live on the streets because it provides a greater sense of freedom rather than dealing with the constant movement of placements while in the foster care system.

Youth who live on the streets have likely experienced a lot of instability in their lives and education would be not something that is of great importance. Homeless youth struggle with meeting their basic needs, which makes it difficult to attend school. Therefore, it is imperative that homeless youth find stability in housing conditions as well as

regular access to food and healthcare before they can grow into functioning members of society. Many homeless youths rely on social programs in their communities for their basic needs. Social programs are those that provide shelter and basic needs for homeless individuals. These social programs are often funded through subsidies from the government or they operate as non-government organizations. Regardless, many programs have stipulations for participation; one such stipulation is age. Mainstream society considers youth to be those who are between the ages of 12 and 18. However, when looking at how social programs define youth there are some discrepancies. Some social programs state that youth are from the ages of 14 to 24, or 12 to 29, but most programs consider youth to be between the ages of 16 to 24 (Evenson, Barr, & Raising the Roof, 2009, p.7). Many social programs have recognized that individuals past the legal age are still in need of supports, thus they consider those up to the age of 24 to be youth. However, aside from the age discrepancies each social program provides slightly different supports to meet basic needs of homeless youth.

Some programs require the youth to be a responsible individual, while others simply request that the young person maintain constant contact with case workers. The ultimatums that social programs place on homeless youth create gaps in the care they provide. Youth programs are designed to help specific youth based on the type of homelessness they are experiencing. Some youth are homeless because they live on the streets, while others are considered homeless because they couch surf, but both of these situations are treated differently when it comes to social programming. Essentially, the social programs that have been created to help solve youth homelessness have actually created specific definitions of what a homeless youth is and what kinds of problems that youth is expected to have. Many youths who are in need of housing are unable to qualify due to the nature of their homelessness. Therefore, understanding what social programs are available to homeless youth will help determine how the different social programs are helping different levels of homeless youth become self-sufficient.

### Understanding Homelessness

In Canada, homeless youth make up 20% of the homeless population, and at this time there does not appear to be any single successful program to help homeless youth succeed (Evenson, Barr, & Raising the Roof, 2009, p.7). It has also been found that 40% of youth agencies in urban areas are actually serving youth from rural areas (Schiff, Schiff, Turner, 2016, p. 77). This means that the majority of homeless youth are coming into the cities from rural areas. Therefore, it is clear that support programs are necessary to help reduce this number in Canada. Social integration theory can be used when examining the reason why social programs

exist for homeless youth. This theory provides the basis for inclusion, wherein all members of society are participating in meaningful relationships (Thulien, Gastaldo, McCay, & Hwang, 2019, p.119). Social integration theory describes how individuals who do not have equal access to economic, political and cultural supports tend to feel outcasted from society. This means that youth who find themselves on the streets may not feel comfortable or are unable to access the same resources as non-homeless youth. The lack of socio-economic resources means that the youth are unable to achieve the insider status and they find themselves stuck in a grey zone where they are unable to behave according to society's standards (Thulien et al., 2019, p.122). Therefore, social programs that support youth often focus on bringing the individual back into mainstream society and finding ways to put them back into the economic system where they can begin to support themselves.

### Overcoming Homelessness

A number of studies have been conducted in an attempt to describe what works best when getting youth off the streets. Karabanow (2008) found that there are six stages of youth disengagement from the streets. First, the youth must want to leave the streets; it was found that usually a traumatic event, such as sexual assault or drug overdose, lead the youth to ask for help. Some youth also find that the freedom of living on the streets is exhausting or simply boring and so they attempt to find ways back into a home. For other youth, they simply matured, or they describe how something just clicked and they realized they wanted more from life. Step two involves how social supports in their lives helped them become successful. Having support from family, friends, or case workers helped them feel confident in their ability to make the change. Many of the youth on the streets suffer from low self-esteem and need someone who is supportive of them in order to make the change. The third step involved seeking formal supports. This includes finding stable housing, formal employment, and even getting help with banking and budgeting. The fourth step consists of the youth actually leaving the streets. The youth must physically leave and cut ties with the street culture. This can be difficult because many youths who have been on the streets for long periods of time find it harder to cut these ties and move on. Youth often struggle with guilt for leaving their street family behind. Youth who leave the streets have to attempt to make new and meaningful connections with new people, but this action can be an additional stressor in their lives. At step five, the youth must begin to restructure their life. Time management and a shift in thinking is necessary to be successful. At this stage many youths find that they are feeling healthier, sleeping better and begin to feel an increased self-esteem and self-confidence. At the final step the youth develop a new sense of identity, belonging and control. When asked about their

long-term goals, many youth state that they would like to have a family and find meaningful safe employment.

Brown & Amundson (2010), found that there are three main things that help get youth off the streets. The first is encouraging the youth to take responsibility for their actions, and their future. The second is taking the time to engage in constructive activities such as employment, volunteering or job training. When people are busy, they are much less likely to commit crimes. The third major helping factor in helping get youth off the streets includes social supports. These supports can include family, friends and even case workers. The youth must come to the realization that they can control their lives. Once youth realize that they would like to make a change they usually need help from social programs that are available in many communities across Canada.

Homelessness is a process; it is not just one event that occurs leading to youth becoming homeless (Piat et al., 2015, p. 2377). Therefore, programs must take varying approaches with how they attempt to reintegrate youth into mainstream society.

### **Social Programs**

There are three main models of programs that can be used to describe how agencies govern youth. Informal programs are those that tend to focus on unwritten rules while formal structures focus on contractual rules. The middle-model programs consist of a balance between formal and informal structures. The informal model programs are those that provide shelter to homeless youth on more of a first-come first-serve basis. The youth that use this type of program only go because they need a place to sleep, shower or do their laundry. This type of informal program may offer a case worker to the young person so they can be monitored through the use of a harm reduction approach. This means that the case worker will work with the youth to make sure that they have safety measures in place to protect themselves when they are on the streets. There are no formal guidelines that the case workers have to follow aside from ensuring that the youth has a safety plan in place. Informal programs rely on self-governance, where the youth are not strictly governed by the social programs but rather govern themselves with the guidance of the program. That is to say, the youth have more agency in their decisions for their lives and can choose to utilize the free services provided on their own terms. Programs at the informal level are used by youth who have enough internal agency, which allows them to make the decision to seek out help at shelters. The social program is shifting responsibility onto the youth by leaving the doors open for youth to access services if they feel the need to. Ultimately, informal programs encourage youth to govern themselves and only act in a supportive manner when requested. However, informal programs can have detrimental

consequences to the homeless youth if they are not removed from that lifestyle within a short period of time. Studies have shown that youth who have attempted to leave the streets find that the longer they are homeless, the harder it is to leave (Karabanow, 2008, p.781). Additionally, studies have found that youth who move to the streets often become addicted to drugs, and the longer they are addicted the harder it is to become clean (Brown & Amundson, 2010, p.101). The longer the youth remain on the streets, the greater the possibility of becoming entrenched in street life or even becoming lifelong drug abusers. Informal programs rely too much on the individual wanting to help themselves rather than moving the youth into safer housing. The function of informal agencies is to provide a place where the youth can attend when they are in need of basic services, but ultimately does not solve the problem of homeless youth.

Some social programs fall somewhere between formal and informal social controls. The middle mode is a structure of program that provides more formal rules mixed with informal structures. These programs can also operate based on a harm reduction model while providing more guidelines as to how the youth must participate. Middle mode programs are those that provide options for housing the homeless youth. The main purpose is to remove the youth from the streets and reintegrate them into society. Some of programs provide housing rent free, but youth are encouraged to work and build savings for themselves, while others have mandatory savings guidelines that are to be used later for damage deposits to their own apartments. Often these rent-free programs are temporary, and the youth is expected to maintain a certain level of sobriety. However, youth can return to the institution while under the influence, but that is only if they are not causing a disruption or bringing substances back to the housing complex. Therefore, these programs govern in more of a formal manner because there are rules regarding how youth behave, but also informal because there are unwritten rules regarding sobriety. Sobriety is an expectation, not a requirement. Youth who participate in these programs have more internal agency because they want to leave the streets and become successful in maintaining their own home, but still require social programs to provide governance over their success. That is to say that the relationship between the youth and the program is a hierarchical one where the program will only help the youth if the youth complies with the rules. If the youth wants to continue to participate in the program, then they must govern themselves according to the rules of the program. The middle mode programs place responsibility on the youth to behave appropriately and will remove youth who fail to follow the rules.

The middle mode programs provide entry level solutions to housing. Although the housing programs provided are

temporary, the program is removing the youth from the streets. However, these programs only work if the youth has internally accepted the move away from the streets. That is to say that the youth must be prepared for the change, as well as mentally accept their new life. Removing the youth from the streets is one way these middle mode programs are effective, although they are short term, the program is governing the way in which the youth lives. These programs are one step closer to helping homeless youth reintegrate into mainstream society.

The third type of programs available to homeless youth are those that are formal programs. At this level the agencies govern youth activities and life more strictly. These programs can be seen as having more contracts and rules of engagement. Youth in these programs are expected to govern themselves according to the formal rules provided. High levels of internal and external pressures are placed on the individual with expectations to achieve integration back into mainstream society. There is a hierarchical relationship between the youth and the program, as the external rules of the program override any internal agency the youth may have. The agency at this level governs the young person by way of providing supports in finding an affordable apartment, budgeting, and providing resources to help youth operate independently. Although the formal level of programs expects a high level of self-governance and responsibility from the youth, the program still exerts control over the person's life. These programs often have strict entrance requirements that must be met. Not just any youth can participate in these programs. Often youth need referrals, must attend classes, or go to high school. In these ways, the program is shifting responsibility from the institution onto the individual but is doing so in a way that places the agency in the position of a parent. The youth must abide by all rules and regulations or they will be removed from the program. At the formal level of programing, youth are considered to be successfully re-integrated into mainstream society. This is because the youth is no longer homeless; they have their own place, with a lease in their name. The onus is on the youth to ensure their rent and bills are paid. However, there are still the external pressures from the rules of the program that the youth must keep in mind. The formal programs can be seen as effective because they provide supports to the youth so that they can fully participate in society.

## Discussion

One major concern with the middle to formal model programs is that there are often long waiting lists. Brown & Amundson (2010, p.109) found that there is a lack of community supports for at risk youth. When youth do decide to get help, they find that they are bounced around from agency to agency or end up on long waiting lists to receive

funds. This is counterproductive to helping youth at risk because they are still homeless until they are able to get the help they need to get off the streets. Thulien and colleagues (2019) found that even those youth who become successful in removing themselves from the streets find that they often struggle to maintain their new life. The costs of living alone are too high for a single individual, and it was found that many young people are unable to afford many of the housing and transportation costs and end up living paycheque to paycheque. Additionally, the task of distancing themselves from street life is challenging because in order to be successful, the youth must also cut ties with some services that they may rely on for help (Thulien, et al., 2019, p.122). Often homeless youth create new friendships with other individuals who are also homeless. The youth's homeless friends are likely to use the same free programs that provide food, clothing, banking, and even healthcare (Thulien et al., 2019, p.122). Thus, when a homeless youth chooses to move away from the streets, they struggle to leave their street friends behind, and by continuing to attend the free programs they will continue friendships with individuals who can encourage homelessness (Thulien et al., 2019, p.122). Youth who wish to successfully transition from the streets find that they have to completely leave it behind so that they don't get drawn back into their old habits. Therefore, it is important to create programs that provide proper supports financially as well as emotionally until the youth is in a position where being self-sufficient leads to success.

Youth who wish to be successful in overcoming homelessness must first want to make a change in their lives. At a micro or individual level, the youth must want change, and to become a successful individual in society. The youth themselves must want to reintegrate back into mainstream society, and forcing the youth to make a decision or a move before they are ready will likely lead to failure of both the social programs and the success of the youth. Homeless youth, or youth who wish to leave the street life must have high levels of self-governance in order to be successful at supporting themselves. The individual must exercise restraint and control over their lives and be able to utilize self-governance in the programs they participate in. Youth must control their behaviours and make choices that lead to success rather than those that would hinder the progress of moving off the streets. The onus is really on the youth, and it is important that the programs are supporting the youth financially and emotionally, as well as being patient with those who may make mistakes. As previously stated, youth who leave the streets find that they are leaving behind their street family. Therefore, it is important that social programs provide more than basic needs of the youth. The social programs must also provide emotional supports and help facilitate supportive relationships with individuals who will not lead them back into old habits.

At the meso or institutional level there is a focus on how the program's operation can lead to the success or failure of the transitioning youth. Meso level institutions need more funding for youth care. Many social programs that provide help to youth only have so many spots open, which can lead to homeless youth remaining homeless longer than anticipated. It can also lead to the youth feeling like the system has failed them because when they were ready to make a change, the program was not available. It is also important that social programs provide case workers or youth workers who are motivated to help youth be successful. Building strong reliable relationships with case workers can help youth feel supported emotionally. Strong emotional supports help young people feel secure and can help them learn how to make good choices in terms of future relationships with people. Youth workers become a part of the new life the youth is trying to build for themselves. The connection between the individual and the worker can not only create positive relationships but can also start to teach the youth how to engage in healthy relationships. Youth who are able to surround themselves with emotionally stable relationships are more likely to be successful in re-integrating into mainstream society. That said, youth can learn how to create meaningful relationships with their workers, as well as teachers, or even coaches. These relations can help form a supportive family role in the youth's life and allows for positive emotional growth going forward. Social programs that provide help to homeless youth must understand the importance of social relationships in order to successfully remove the youth from the streets.

When analyzing social programs that help youth overcome homelessness, looking at the macro level will help view the problem from a societal level. This means that to help homeless youth is to prevent homelessness in the first place. In other words, by providing support to families who are going through a divorce, or providing help to parents who have addictions, youth homelessness can be prevented. Often youth who are in foster care find that they are moving every few months. This instability creates anxiety in youth and can lead to deviance. Thus, providing more funding and stability to the social service programming will properly support the youth who are in their care. Additionally, the way society views homelessness needs to be changed. Homeless youth are not always just some deviant kids, but are often vulnerable individuals who felt that street life was safer than their previous living conditions. Instead, homeless youth should be viewed as those individuals who need help and support. Ultimately, youth homelessness often occurs due to the breakdown of social relationships, and the failure of social systems to support them. By providing support on more of a broader level, at the family or community level, will help youth feel supported and may be less likely to choose deviant lifestyles.

Becoming homeless is a process wherein there is a failure at the micro, meso and macro levels of a youth's life. Youth who feel like they are unwanted or are emotionally abused will opt to live on the streets. Creating homeless initiatives where youth can start at different levels of rehousing programs will help homeless youth become self-sufficient. For example, if a youth is not ready to move off the streets yet, then provide services that meet their basic needs. Once youth become ready to be more independent, move them into a middle-mode program to see how they operate. Then once the young person becomes successful in middle-mode programs, move them to formal programs where they can then be introduced back into mainstream society. The most important part of this initiative is that the youth has the opportunity to move up or down the housing continuum based on how successful they think they can be. There should be no disgrace if the youth makes it to the formal programs and finds that they need more support from a more informal program. Ultimately, the social programs that are currently available to youth are often too full to cope with all the homeless youth in Canada, and by operating together rather than independently the programs can provide more support and consistency for the youth. Overcoming homelessness is a process, it is not just something that happens once you place the youth in a home. Youth need to be properly guided to success through the use of strategically designed social programs.

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