

A Policy Proposal for the Alleviation of Youth Homelessness in Canada

Fredericton Constituency Youth Council Taskforce

Marianne Arseneau, Austin Henderson, Jenna Im, Seshu Iyengar, Gillian Miller, Matthias

Whalen

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## **Introduction**

Thirty-five thousand Canadian youth will be homeless this year and on any given night, approximately 6,000 will be without a home (Gaetz et. al., 2016, p. 6). Due to the nature of the discourse surrounding “homelessness” and “homeless people,” there is often a misconception regarding how multifaceted homelessness is across the nation. Youth homelessness represents a particularly challenging problem: despite the vast amount of research into the circumstances surrounding homelessness and its effect on youth, the continued existence of youth homelessness remains a problem that needs to be dealt with in Canada.

In 2016, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, a non-partisan national research network, defined youth homelessness for the first time, as youth aged 13-24 that are not able to provide adequate residence and are living independently without a parent, guardian, or caregiver (Gaetz et. al., 2016, p. 43). There are three main issues that lead to homelessness amongst youth: individual factors, such as family issues; structural factors, such as social conditions including unemployment or poverty; and institutional failures, such as aging out of protection services (Saint John Human Development Council, 2016, p. 7).

There exist policy changes that can present structural and institutional factors, as well as ensure youth made vulnerable by personal circumstance have adequate support structures. The intersectional nature of homeless youth ranges in age, gender, demographic, sexuality, race, etc. and this can render certain solutions difficult to implement in a way that improves conditions for all homeless youth. Youth lack the experience of successful independent living that the majority of homelessness alleviation programs fail to address, and people working with youth report the

confusion that occurs due to the nebulous nature of who qualifies as a young person. For example, in New Brunswick, an individual graduates high school at seventeen, is allowed to vote at eighteen, but may only sign contracts at nineteen (Gallant-Daigle, 2017). This complicated network of factors indicates the need for committed action on the part of citizens and their government.

Nominally, the issue of youth homelessness falls under the purview of the Department of Social Development, and is within the mandate of the Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development. However, numerous other departments are instrumental stakeholders in the alleviation of youth homelessness. Gaetz (2012) reveals that in one month, an average homeless Canadian costs \$1,932 to have a shelter bed, \$4,333 in provincial jail costs, \$10,900 in hospital costs, \$701 in rental supplements, and \$200 in social housing (p. 5). It is clear that homelessness in general is not merely an issue for one department: actions can be taken in consideration of the Department of Health, the Department of Finance, the Department of Justice and the Department of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour.

The federal government has previously spearheaded research efforts into ending homelessness: the prime example of this is the At-Home/Chez-Sois pilot project in six designated communities. In 2014, as a result of the National Final Report from this project, the program was refocused towards a “housing first” approach. The goal of this approach is to provide permanent housing to homeless individual as quickly as possible. The individuals then have to have regular meetings with support teams to help them overcome problems such as drug or alcohol addiction. The “housing first approach has proven to be effective in reducing homelessness. This proves that the government has launched efficient programs in the past, but

that such programs require more funding than they had originally received.

In order to eliminate youth homelessness across the country, the Government of Canada must ensure they address the multi-faceted nature of youth homelessness in a collaborative manner. Research into the issue demonstrates that a variety of avenues exist for the federal government to take a leadership role in addressing and eliminating youth homelessness. These include increases in funding to programs alleviating youth homelessness, setting national standards for the quality and amount of services and financial assistance available to youth, and to ensure the voices of youth are appropriately heard in the process. This taskforce offers a set of seven recommendations that the federal government could take to address the issue of youth homelessness.

### **Recommended Actions**

1. Increased and long-term funding as opposed to yearly funding contracts
  - a. Specific allocation of funds distributed via Homelessness Partnering Strategy towards youth issues
  - b. Renewed focus on Housing First alternatives for youth, particularly people with extenuating circumstance
  - c. Fund supplementary programs to Housing First, including crisis beds and specialised centres.
2. Improved services
  - a. Ensure the Department of Social Development fulfills their mandate of creating a National Housing Strategy

- b. Change metrics of evaluating homelessness to better target families and youth
  - c. Creation of national standards for the quality of assistance given to homeless youth
    - i. Offer funding to ensure youth have access to a basic income and set of services
    - ii. Early intervention for childhood support
3. Youth Engagement
- a. Creation of a National Commissioner for Children
  - b. Changes to Section 43 of the Criminal Code
  - c. Redefine youth engagement to better capture voices across the spectrum
    - i. Encourage and develop truly inclusive education programmes
    - ii. Youth voices on commissions and education on services that youth will need

### **Background to Recommended Actions**

The recommendations listed above broadly fall under three classes: funding based recommendations, service based recommendations, and engagement based recommendations. Dialogue between the taskforce and community stakeholders, particularly conversations with people involved in offering services and housing to homeless youth, revealed these three areas as being opportunities for the federal government to take a position as a national—and global—leader on the elimination of youth homelessness.

Funding recommendations broadly deal with ensuring the financial stability of youth

who need assistance and offering long-term commitments to organisations like Chrysalis House in Fredericton to ensure that their work can continue without interruptions. Service recommendations aim to focus on what aspects of service delivery for homeless youth can be improved nationally; here, the federal government has a role in issuing directives and creating national standards to ensure no youth in the country is at a disadvantage. Finally, engagement recommendations as how policy and law can be amended in order to prevent society from implicitly isolating youth voice.

The most crucial theme that came up in interviews with community organisations was the role of the federal government as a source for funding. Currently, many organisations can only expect annual funding commitments from the government. This causes problems in management: for organisations like Safe Harbour in Saint John, long-term government support could offer stability in services which they currently cannot achieve (Sharpe, 2017). In Fredericton, Chrysalis House has offered shelter to youth with a diverse set of needs. To such established organisations long term funding is an opportunity to offer services better suited to the individual needs of youth. For example, Chrysalis House as an organisation houses youth who are in emergency situations and who need more long-term shelter, as well as helping individuals who need a wide range of mental health and physical health services (Gallant-Daigle, 2017). Stable funding towards programs with more specific tools to aid groups such as indigenous youth, LGBTQ youth, or youth with addictions is a prerequisite to those programmes existing. This requires commitments from the government to ensure longevity of such programmes.

Currently federal funding towards initiatives ending homelessness are directed through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Per the government of Canada's website, this strategy



involves funding projects in regional and national funding streams (“Funding: Homelessness projects”). The Homelessness Partnering Strategy aims to focus on Housing First projects: this method has previously proved extremely effective at reducing homelessness in urban centres. While the directives of the HPS do allow for funding of non-Housing First policies for groups that need such programmes, a specific youth oriented directive could allow for the creation of many local and regional programmes that will directly address the problem (Government of Canada, “Homelessness Partnering Strategy Directives”). Through the HPS the federal government has a clear mechanism for promoting the welfare of homeless youth.

Furthermore, it is crucial that the government creates a set of national standards with regards to the quality of assistance given to youth who are homeless. The most essential standards include being able to ensure that youth have access to a basic income and set of services and that there is a standard for early intervention to support children. The early intervention support comes at a time when youth have recently become homeless or who are on the verge of homelessness. New Brunswick has many desirable elements in its current model from which a federal standard could draw from and improve upon, such as income assistance to all homeless youth and an integrated service delivery model.

The current federal government has promised that they will release a National Housing Strategy. Progress has been made towards this promise, but it must be recommended that this national housing strategy contains a specific section that addresses a strategic solution to address the crisis of homeless youth. Like with the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, the directives and guidelines contained in a future housing strategy have the potential to create an environment where youth homelessness is dramatically reduced. Additionally, in their current search for

members of the national committees of poverty and homelessness, it is critical that the government include a youth perspective on these committees by accepting a youth member. Without doing so, the voices of the younger and most vulnerable population will not be heard in the national policies. Furthermore, individuals who end up on such a council must be obliged to discover what community stakeholders and homeless youth feel needs improvement in the system: the voice of all affected individuals must be heard. The taskforce has previously sent a letter regarding this to the Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development.

In addition, the current ways in which homelessness is being evaluated must be adjusted, specifically within government programs. Currently when deciding who needs services the most, everyone is evaluated using the same scale: this is effective at targeting single, adult demographics but misses out on youth. This is because single adults are more likely to be on the street, therefore visibly homeless. In contrast, youth are rarely street homeless and their vulnerability is not adequately assessed by the current metrics used to evaluate homelessness (McFarland, 2017). The federal government needs to implement a system that acknowledges that vulnerability looks different for single adults, families and youth; something in which the current system is failing to do. We propose three different scales are used to more accurately measure the vulnerability of the three aforementioned groups of people among the homeless population. This will help ensure that homeless youth are not overlooked and are given access to services and resources that better fit their needs.

In this process, the Canadian government must ensure there are adequate resources that specialise in assisting homeless youth that associate with increasingly marginalized demographics. As mentioned in an interview with John Sharpe, many youth are homeless

because they are not accepted by their caregivers, but are also not able to adapt to homeless programs unless they are targeting their specific demographics (Sharpe, 2017). For example, 23% of homeless youth in Toronto identify as LGBTQ, as a result the city has a specialized centre to help these individuals (Homeless Hub, 2016). These programs must be both accessible in a broad range of communities and target many diverse demographics: those with mental health issues, those that suffered from abuse, Indigenous youth, and youth transitioning out of care. This once again relates to funding: such specialised centres need resources to ensure longevity, and support available in difficult periods.

Political changes to improve the status of youth include the creation of a National Commissioner for Children. Internationally, over 60 countries have a position of this nature, but Canada has failed to act in this regard (Picard, 2017). Having a Child and Youth Commissioner at the national level is important because this is the only citizen demographic that cannot vote, and therefore do not have their voices heard in policy issues. Youth require a non-partisan representative to address concerns relating to homelessness and poverty. Such a representative would be empowered to critically analyse government policies for impacts on youth, particularly those from marginalised demographics.

Legal issues facing youth in Canada are not in the abstract: this country remains one of the only countries that permits “spanking” as a form of discipline. It has been suggested that there is a direct correlation between physical abuse and youth homelessness, and spanking can often be the start of an abusive relationship between guardians and their children. In 2004, *Section 43* of the Criminal Code of Canada was voted to remain legislation. Alisa Watkinson, professor at the University of Regina, suggests that there is substantial contemporary research

that reveals the harm of childhood physical punishment. Per Watkinson, clinical psychologists believe abolishing Section 43 of the Criminal Code will lead to more positive outcomes in society, including alleviating youth homelessness.

Finally, it is crucial that on a provincial and federal level youth engagement is re-evaluated as a concept. Currently, engagement efforts towards youth are taking the form of political councils, committees, and leadership exercises. While these programmes may appeal to a specific type of person, they fail to critically introspect on what societal structures currently disengage youth. It is important that in every province youth have fair and equal access to a proper education and the resources needed to take advantage of the institutions in the country. Education in particular can be a large part of this new engagement: the federal government can have a role in spearheading truly inclusive education nationwide in order to ensure that the one size fits all classroom model can be updated to better cater to the needs of a diverse set of students.

Furthermore, communities should be encouraged to follow the lead of examples such as the work proposed by community organisations in Fredericton, where initial talks are underway for the creation of a one-stop shop for youth services (Gallant-Daigle, 2017). This centre will be accessible to all youth, and will be prepared to guide youth in a variety of difficult situations towards the full set of resources available to them. Through centres like these government programmes can go from the abstract to the tangible. The federal government can act to encourage and support these types of resource centres in the long term, ensuring youth across the country know what resources are there to help them.

### **Authority for Recommended Action**

Between 2013 and 2014 the federal government renewed its national homelessness strategy and rebranded it as the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). The main focus of the strategy has been Housing First, an innovative pilot of the Canadian Mental Health Commission that looked at the intersection between homelessness and the mental health supports and focused on assisting people who are chronically or episodically homeless by providing a safe roof over their heads as a path to care and improved wellbeing. Housing First was piloted in six communities across Canada. The HPS takes the pilot to the next stage by investing a \$600 million fund over the 2014-2019 period to implement a Housing First strategy in over 60 communities across Canada. In New Brunswick four communities are part of the HPS: Fredericton, Moncton, Saint-John and Bathurst (Government of Canada, *Homelessness Partnering Strategy*).

Beyond the existence of national-level authority, one must recognise the obligations placed on Canada due to its international commitments. Access to shelter and safety is a basic human right, as seen in article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

Canada, as a signatory, is obliged from a moral perspective to ensure all people in the country

have access to shelter. Beyond this, Canada is a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates in article 27(3) that

“States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.”

Canada, having ratified this treaty is bound to it by international law; the federal government again is obliged to end youth homelessness from a legal and moral perspective.

### **Conclusion**

Youth homelessness is unquestionably an issue that must be immediately addressed. Implementing the aforementioned recommendations, parliamentarians and stakeholders would address the systemic, youth empowerment, financial, and personal issues that often lead to youth homelessness. Citizens need to express their concerns and urge the government to address the youth that have no voice. Our elected officials need to act on this issue and rectify homelessness, especially for youth, as soon as possible. One child without a home is too many and there is no better time to act than now.

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