

Topic: Youth Facing Homelessness in Canada

How does homelessness affect different demographical groups of youth in Canada?

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Abstract

In this paper, the focus is on the varying challenges faced by different demographical groups when experiencing homelessness. The aim of this literature review is to analyze five subgroups of youth and their challenges when faced with precarious housing situations.

Introduction

Homelessness is typically recognized as individuals who simply do not have a home, but there are many other aspects to it. Homeless youth between the ages of 12-15 years account for 20% of the general homeless Canadian population. This is approximately 40,000 Canadian youth experiencing homelessness. This topic is extremely important to the course Families in Canada because youth homelessness stems from their household, since 77.5% of youth that are experiencing homelessness state that their inability to get along with their parents is the reason they became homeless (*Youth*, n.d). Unstable family structure and the inability to communicate within the family is what leads to “Forty-eight percent of street youth [feeling] that they [are] less depressed now than when living at home” (Ayerst, 1999). In this literature review, there is an analysis of the diverse demographical groups of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada and the unique challenges that they face.

Literature Review

Youth That are Accompanied by Animal Companions

When individuals see someone living on the streets with an animal companion, it is commonplace to judge their capability of owning this companion animal. However, what most

fail to realize is the incredible benefits that owning an animal companion has on youth facing homelessness, as well as the sacrifices one has to make to provide for their companion. It is also important to keep in mind that youth who end up homeless oftentimes do not choose to own a pet, but run from a troubled home situation with their childhood pet. Of the homeless population, those with animal companions make up approximately 25% (*Pet ownership among homeless youth*, 2014).

Beneficial Aspects of Having an Animal Companion: There are many reasons why someone who may be struggling to take care of themselves chooses to keep and care for an animal companion. The companionship one gains from having an animal companion is unmatched. The instability and isolating experience of being homeless is a very daunting one, but with the pure and nonjudgmental form of love that a companion animal gives, it can provide a monumental psychological benefit (Paul, 2018). When facing structural vulnerabilities, it is crucial for youth to feel supported and loved and their animal companion could provide them with the courage needed to excel in their new environment. Another positive aspect of animal companionship is the benefit of instilling responsibility in the youth (Paul, 2018). The responsibility of caring for an animal is a strenuous task but in doing so, it encourages the youth to provide for their animal companion and pushes them to reach for bigger and better endeavours. The mental health benefits that animals have on their caregivers are outstanding, and when a youth is faced with a threat as large as not knowing where their next meal is coming from, the benefits of having an animal companion can make all of the difference.

Deterrents Faced When Owning an Animal Companion: Even with the knowledge of the abundant benefits of owning an animal companion, animals often act as a deterrent, in terms of finding housing and accessing crucial resources (*Pet ownership among homeless youth*, 2014).

Over 50% of youth have reported that their animal companion caused difficulty for them when finding shelter since a large portion of homeless shelters in Canada are not pet-friendly (*Pet ownership among homeless youth*, 2014). Since youth refuse to surrender their animal companion in return for refuge, this unfortunately forces the youth to turn to the streets. Additionally, resources such as mental health services and job scouting services are not equipped for youth that have animal companions, and giving them up is not a choice, so they will likely miss out on these sensitive needs (*Pet ownership among homeless youth*, 2014). Animal companions have many benefits to youth facing homelessness and give them the courage and companionship to thrive, although they do act as deterrents when trying to access necessary resources, which segregates them from the general homeless population.

Indigenous Youth

Within the Canadian homeless population, Indigenous youth are largely overrepresented, as they are responsible for making up approximately 15% of the homeless youth population, whereas they only represent 0.5% of Canada's population (*Racialized communities*, nd). Historical trauma, oppression, and inequality are all factors that lead to homelessness within the Indigenous communities (*Racialized communities*, nd).

The Impact of Historical Trauma: One significant event that plays into historical trauma is the residential schooling system that generations of Indigenous children endured (*Racialized communities*, nd). The maltreatment these children experienced at the schools was detrimental. The aftermath included disrupted family structure, violence within the household, substance abuse and mental illnesses, and all of these problematic factors that were passed

through the generations (*Racialized communities*, nd). The unstable family structure is what can lead to youth fleeing the home, which puts the generational trauma at fault.

Inequity Towards Indigenous Youth: Indigenous individuals have been shown to have lower education, employment rate, and income, overall limiting them when seeking employment and shelter (*Indigenous peoples*, nd). With the difficulty associated with accessing resources such as employment scouting services, since their resumes are likely less-developed, this is a barrier when attempting to break the cycle of poverty (*Indigenous peoples*, nd). These factors also lead to high incarceration rates and suicides among Indigenous youth (*Indigenous peoples*, nd). The suicide rates are elevated within the indigenous youth community, whereby it is shown that “First Nations youth die by suicide about 5 to 6 times more often than non-Aboriginal youth. Suicide rates for Inuit youth are among the highest in the world at 11 times the national average” (*Youth Mental Health Stats in Canada*, 2020). Furthermore, the generational trauma and inequities that Indigenous youth face, set them apart from the general youth population, causing detrimental consequences.

Youth Facing Drug-Related Addictions

Youth that are experiencing homelessness are susceptible to unhealthy coping mechanisms, oftentimes including illegal drugs. In a study by The Homeless Hub, 24% of youth facing homelessness admitted to having a drug dependence (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). Another study was done on 150 unhoused youth, and of these “Seventy-one percent had used alcohol in the last 30 days, 91% were current cigarette smokers, and 73% had used marijuana in the last 30 days. Thirty-four percent of the youth had used hallucinogens, 16% amphetamines, 24% cocaine, 11% crack and 5% heroin in the last month” (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). The extremely high

percentages of drug use display the prominent crisis that we are facing among youth facing homelessness.

Using Drugs as a Tool for Survival: In comparison to housed youth who typically use drugs for recreational use, for many youth facing homelessness, the use and sales of drugs is a crucial tool to make money. Often the last resort of selling illegal drugs can have hefty consequences such as incarceration (*Youth Homelessness in Canada*, n.d). Since many unhoused youth have not completed secondary school and lack the essential elements needed on a resume to apply for jobs (home address, work experience, bank information etc.), selling drugs for income to survive is a desperate choice (*Youth Homelessness in Canada*, n.d). It also may be thought that it is a life-saving tool for youth living on the streets. There are many threats when sleeping on the street, such as theft, exploitation and violence, so youth living on the streets utilize drugs to self-medicate to avoid sleep (*Youth Homelessness in Canada*, n.d). For many youth facing homelessness, drugs are viewed as a tool to help them survive, rather than a substance that is a detriment to their health.

Rehabilitation Services: Substance abuse is a dangerous addiction and aiming to break the dependence early on can lead to a more successful road to recovery. Despite the high prevalence of substance abuse among unhoused youth, only approximately 16% of drug-using homeless youth access substance-related services such as counselling, group meetings and rehabilitation services (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). There are a few reasons that contribute to the low number of youth taking advantage of the rehabilitation services available. One of the main reasons youth do not take part is because of the lack of accessibility (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). While these services are available for the youth, they are not always easily accessible, which reduces their utility. Another reason for the lack of enrolment could be the lack of interest in

wanting to quit abusing substances. As mentioned previously, the utilization of drugs is often viewed as a survival tool for homeless youth. These youth may believe that the only way that they can thrive is with continued substance abuse. The population of youth facing homelessness that have a drug dependency is a substantially large one and for the youth, and they may view no way out of this unfortunate lifestyle

Youth Belonging to the LGBTQ2+ Community

Youth that identify themselves as a part of the LGBTQ2+ community are “disproportionately represented among homeless and street-involved populations, and they face greater odds of experiencing violence and exploitation, health challenges, precarious housing and hunger” (*Youth Homelessness in Canada*, n.d). The LGBTQ2+ community makes up approximately 25 - 45% of the homeless youth population in Canada. The societal norms are causing this population to be at a severe disadvantage.

Disapproving Families: The leading cause of homelessness in youth identifying as LGBTQ2+ is being forced out of their homes after coming out to their families (*The cost of coming out*, n.d). Due to societal stigmas surrounding the LGBTQ2+, many families aren't accepting of their children once they reveal their identity, and it is estimated that 68% of youth that come out to their families face rejection (*The cost of coming out*, n.d). Youth may choose to live on the streets rather than endure their toxic home environment, but approximately “one in four are forced to leave their homes” (*The cost of coming out*, n.d) due to unstable family structure. So, the unstable family structure and damaging stigmas surrounding those belonging to the LGBTQ2+ community is a factor that leads to youth homelessness.

Transgendered Individuals: The existing shelter system is already very tough for youth but it is heightened for transgender youth. When seeking refuge in a homeless shelter, approximately 1 in 3 transgender youth get denied access (*Youth*, n.d). The discrimination faced is what leads to “trans youth experiencing homelessness feel[ing] safer on the streets than in shelters due to homophobic and transphobic violence that occurs in the shelter system” (*LGBTQ2S*, n.d). As a result of the negligence from the shelter system and services supposedly aimed towards them, they are at an extreme disadvantage to prosper and break the cycle of homelessness. Further, youth that are part of the LGBTQ2S+ community face additional adversities as a result of disapproving families and the transgender community faces unique challenges due to discrimination.

Youth Suffering From Mental Illnesses

Mental illness is a predominant concern among the youth population in Canada but is especially accelerated within the group of youth facing homelessness since, “Young people aged 15 to 24 are more likely to experience mental illness and/or substance use disorders than any other age group” (*Youth Mental Health Stats in Canada*, 2020). 42% of youth facing homelessness state that they have a formal diagnosis of a mental illness, in comparison to the 20% of housed youth facing mental illnesses (Kirst & Erickson, n.d) (*Youth Mental Health Stats in Canada*, 2020).

The Influence of Suicide: When youth are faced with hardship as large as one of being unhoused, there is a chance that their mental illnesses will overpower them and lead to the contemplation of suicide. 27% of youth facing homelessness admit that they have contemplated taking their life, and 15% admit to attempting suicide (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). When faced with

adversity, youth may feel as though taking their own life is the only way out of their living circumstances. In addition, self-harm is also a large concern among youth facing homelessness. Approximately 45% of youth facing homelessness admitted to engaging in self-harm behaviours, which are any acts such as cutting or hurting oneself with intent to end their life (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). The mental health crisis amongst homeless youth is evidently so prevalent that the contemplation of suicide is common.

Counselling Services: Mental illness can be properly treated or managed when professional help is sought. Within the unhoused youth population, 24% have accessed therapeutic services such as counselling (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). A factor that could lead to the lack of utilization of the available resources is the lack of accessibility (Kirst & Erickson, n.d). While these services may be available to the youth, there may be various barriers, such as geographical, lack of transportation, and no technology to access virtual counselling services. Moreover, when mental health illnesses are left unsettled, youth often turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as self-harm, drugs, violence, etc. This validates that mental health affects the homeless population drastically more than the housed youth populations and the inaccessibility to resources is a detriment to the youth.

Conclusion

Youth homelessness is a crisis that Canada is currently facing. While it seems like a daunting topic, this paper helps to understand the various demographics of youth and how they are affected by homelessness. From youth with animal companions, Indigenous youth, those belonging to the LGBTQ2+ community, youth dealing with substance abuse and those suffering from mental illness, all groups face a unique set of hardships, resulting in different lenses when

viewing homelessness. Demographics and the related hurdles they face are ever-changing questions is therefore posed; How does homelessness affect different demographical groups of youth in Canada? Will it be a constant topic of discussion and debate?

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