Making Research Matter: Mobilizing research to impact on homelessness policy

Stephen Gaetz  
Professor, Faculty of Education, York U  
President, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness
The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a research and policy partnership working to conduct and mobilize research designed to have an impact on solutions to homelessness.
The problem we are trying to Solve.
Youth Homelessness is a seemingly intractable problem in Canada
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS in CANADA BY THE NUMBERS

- 40,000 over the course of a year
- 7,000 on any given night

YOUNG PEOPLE aged 16-24 make up about 20% of the homeless population.

DIVERSITY

29.5% identified as LGBTQ2S
30.6% identified as Indigenous
28.2% identified as racialized
16% identified as Black
10.1% identified as newcomers
Many homeless youth became homeless before they were 16, and youth who leave home at a younger age experience greater adversity on the streets.

40.1% were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness.
Involvement with Child Protection services

57.8% indicated some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past

47.2% had a history of placements in foster care and/or group homes

30.9% were in group homes
Dropping out?

This is not a result of their lack of desire or motivation, as 73.9% of those who have dropped out would like to return to school at some time.
Mental Health and Well-Being

Findings indicated that a total of 85.4% (942) of the youth fell in the ‘high’ symptom/distress category. This is indicative, in the general Canadian population, of youth midway between inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care levels.

85.4% of youth fell in the ‘high’ symptom/distress category

42% reported at least one suicide attempt

35.2% reported at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization
Criminal Victimization

PROLONGED EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

Exposure to street violence makes the impact of pre-street adversity much less relevant. This suggests that whether prior to becoming homeless young people were exposed to adversity or not, experiencing violence while homeless has a ‘leveling’ effect on youth mental health risk.

*Exposure to sexual and physical violence on the street made youth over three times as likely to be in the high mental health risk group.*
Exploitation and Sex Trafficking

Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of interviewed youth were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking.
Pathways off the streets
and
Exits from Homelessness
Data points to some important conclusions

First, we are waiting too long to intervene.

Second, experience of homelessness has a devastating impact on health, safety, mental health and well-being.

Third, some young people – Indigenous, LGBTQ2S, newcomer youth – experience additional burden of discrimination and exclusion.

Fourth, the emergency response does not prevent or end youth homelessness.

Fifth, our public systems are failing to prevent youth homelessness.

Sixth, people with lived experience of youth homeless strongly profess the need to shift to prevention.
The Shift to Prevention
Addressing homelessness in Canada

Prevention

Emergency Response

Housing and Supports
Cost of keeping someone in a state of homelessness per year, in five Canadian cities:

- Moncton - $29,610
- Montreal - $56,406
- Toronto - $58,927
- Winnipeg - $45,565
- Vancouver - $53,144
The change we want to see ...

Prevention → Emergency Response → Housing and Supports
50% First experienced homelessness before the age of 25
The 2018 PiT Count survey asked respondents at what age they first experienced homelessness.

Half of all respondents first experienced homelessness under the age of 25. This percentage was still high among older adults (aged 50-64) and seniors (aged 65+), with 25% first experiencing homelessness before 25.
Solving problems through Social Innovation
What is a Social Innovation Lab?
“Social Innovation” is defined as:
“...a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions. The value created accrues primarily to society rather than to private individuals” (Stanford, 2017).
Solving “Wicked Problems” through Social Innovation
Co-Leadership

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a research and policy partnership working to conduct and mobilize research designed to have an impact on solutions to homelessness.

A Way Home is a national coalition reimagining solutions to youth homelessness through transformations in policy, practice and planning. We also lead the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness.
MtS Research Program

Research Theme Areas

Core Research Themes

- Theme 1
  Shifting to PREVENTION and Early Intervention

- Theme 2
  Sustaining Successful EXITS from Homelessness

- Theme 3
  Enabling HEALTH, WELL-BEING and INCLUSION

- Theme 4
  Enhancing Outcomes for INDIGENOUS Youth

- Theme 5
  Leveraging DATA & TECHNOLOGY to drive Policy and Practice

Crosscutting Research Themes
Making the Shift has funded **39 research projects** across Canada focusing on the prevention of youth homelessness.
Employing design thinking, our **demonstration projects** are intended to expand our knowledge and understanding of innovative approaches to preventing and ending youth homelessness by identifying, developing, prototyping, testing, evaluating, and mobilizing innovations in policy and practice.

Demonstration Project Models: Upstream, Youth Reconnect, Family and Natural Supports (FNS), Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)
1 Enhancing Family and Natural Supports

“My trauma led me down a wrong path, and I didn’t know that I had ... places where I could go to access help for that. And my family didn’t know how to support me with my mental health. So they ended up giving up on me because they didn’t know... how. And they didn’t have... anyone show them or teach them how to take care of someone with those circumstances.”

Kamloops Youth
Unfortunately, family is often framed as a problem and as part of a young person's past.
The underlying ethos of an FNS approach is that family and the support of caring adults is important to almost everyone and can be an asset that enhances young people’s quality of life, and gives youth a sense of belonging, identity, security, self-esteem, and someone to rely on when problems emerge.

Youth experiencing homelessness said that enhancing family and natural supports was an important goal on their journey:

- 77% said they would like to improve contact and relationships with their family.
- Young people who reported positive relationships with friends were much more likely to report high levels of self-esteem. Likewise, those who are in regular contact with family members (more than once a month) and who value family connections also demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem (Gaetz et al., 2016)
“Almost everyone has, like, the one teacher that they really trusted and liked, or the one school counsellor that was cool and not scary. So it would be nice if just they got this basic training and also like, signs to look out for. And like, how to approach a student and be like, “hey, you know, how’s everything at home, everything going okay?”

Vancouver Youth
Why do **SCHOOLS** matter?
Youth Reconnect

Keeping young people in place through School-Community Partnerships
YOUTH RECONNECT Workers

Engage with students, teachers and counsellors
Meets Youth Reconnect Worker

Who supports Sarah and her family.
1. Keep young people “in place”

“Keeping young people in place is about keeping them in their community. To this day I still feel out of place, an outcast, that’s bumming out of housing...It would be so nice to get that sense of home again, even if you have to rebuild your home.”
Youth with Lived Experience

2. Stabilize living situation

“A lot of kids and their families need help, they don’t get along, YR helps with that, you can sit down and have conversations, handle conflict when it comes to parents.”
Youth Reconnect Participant

3. Support young people and their families

“The family is a collective unit that needs to be supported. (It’s) not the youth that has all this bad stuff that happened to them.”
Youth with Lived Experience

4. Enhance school engagement

“A lot of people on the verge of dropping out of schools. YR would be a helpful response for those youth...A lot of people hesitate (to reach out for support) and the more they hesitate they aren’t going to do anything. They are ashamed of the situation.”
Youth Reconnect Participant
3

The Upstream Project Canada

Preventing Youth Homelessness and School Disengagement Through Early Intervention

Authors
Jacqueline Sohn & Stephen Gaetz
Population Screening:
The **Student Needs Assessment** is used to identify students at risk of homelessness, dropping out, and criminal involvement.

All students fill out a survey, conducted once a year ...
Flexible Supports Delivery
A 3-Tier Response

**Tier 1.**
Active monitoring by school staff, or a secondary consultation where a referral is made to another program or agency.

**Tier 2.**
Casework support, either a brief counselling-type of casework or case management by TGP

**Tier 3.**
‘Wrap-around’ case management for complex cases requiring the formal involvement of several agencies.
35% in the spectrum of risk

KELOWNA

Risk of Homelessness & School Disengagement
Follow up interview assessment
Conducted by Upstream Case Manager
Helping youth *exit* homelessness for good!
The Core Principles of HF4Y

Promoting housing stabilization, well-being, social inclusion and positive transitions to adulthood.

1. A Right to Housing with No Preconditions
   ↓

2. Youth Choice, Youth Voice, and Self-determination
   ↓

3. Positive Youth Development and Wellness orientation
   ↓

4. Individualized, Client-driven Supports with no Time Limits
   ↓

5. Social Inclusion and Community Integration
Currently homeless youth

Early Intervention: youth leaving care

ENDAAYAANG Supporting Indigenous youth
Supporting the shift to PREVENTION
Research to IMPACT Cycle

Engaged Scholarship:
- Community engagement
- Government relations

Full Implementation to foster scale and impact

Dissemination Uptake & Capacity Building

Research & Evaluation

Project Outcomes ➔ Research Impact
- Reduction in youth homelessness
- Better outcomes for youth
Preventing Youth Homelessness

What you can do in your community

Early Intervention

- Family and Natural Supports
- Shelter Diversion
- School-based Early Intervention

Exiting Public Systems

- Housing First for Youth
- Youth Exiting Corrections
- Youth Leaving Care
- Exiting Mental Health/Addictions Services

Exiting Homelessness

- Family and Natural Supports

Upstream Canada

Youth Reconnect
Our task:

**Influencing a move up the Commitment Curve**

- Reflects change that may happen among or within organizations
- The commitment curve is a way of assessing the commitment of stakeholders to changes in policy and practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Incorporation</th>
<th>Stakeholder has incorporated and fully integrated policy/practice into organization’s strategy.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adoption</td>
<td>Currently piloting and testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>Planning to implement if resources and supports available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Perception</td>
<td>Positive perception - service / policy could help achieve our goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Understand service / policy but not ready for implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Some awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Lack of awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
how do we get there?
Public facing resources

UPSTREAM

Family and Natural Supports

Youth Reconnect

Communications Strategy
Productive Interactions

- All orders of government
- Service providers
- Community entities
- Funders
Government Relations
Community Engagement

Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada

By Stephen A. Gazz

On the surface, youth homelessness seems to be an intractable problem. In many Canadian cities, the sight of young people panhandling or sleeping in parks may be unsettling, but by 2014 it probably doesn’t shock most people. It seems that we have been dealing with this problem for a very long time; because of its persistence the solutions to youth homelessness can appear elusive.

Instead of becoming complacent with the reality of youth homelessness, perhaps we need to reframe our response to the issue.

That is, it is time to shift from an approach that manages the problem, to an approach that ends youth homelessness. The good news is that we do...
**Shifting Practices**
Building capacity at the frontlines to deliver prevention-based services that improve the well-being of young people.

Get support:

1. Training & Technical Assistance offerings:
   - Housing First for Youth
   - Family & Natural Supports
   - Program Implementation
   - Systems Planning

2. Community of Practice calls

3. **FREE** Online training/resources on the Homelessness Learning Hub
Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative

NEEDS ASSESSMENT
## Interest in the Prevention of Youth Homelessness

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prevention is necessary to solve youth homelessness.</td>
<td>6.7% (7)</td>
<td>3.8% (4)</td>
<td>0.0% (0)</td>
<td>6.7% (7)</td>
<td>82.7% (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think my organization should do more in the area of youth homelessness prevention.</td>
<td>6.8% (7)</td>
<td>6.8% (7)</td>
<td>13.6% (14)</td>
<td>34.0% (35)</td>
<td>38.8% (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think my community should do more in the area of youth homelessness prevention.</td>
<td>5.8% (6)</td>
<td>1.0% (1)</td>
<td>1.9% (2)</td>
<td>12.5% (13)</td>
<td>78.6% (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have seen a growth in interest in youth homelessness prevention in the last five years.</td>
<td>3.8% (4)</td>
<td>9.6% (10)</td>
<td>11.5% (12)</td>
<td>38.5% (40)</td>
<td>36.5% (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need support as an organization to help shift to prevention.</td>
<td>6.9% (7)</td>
<td>9.8% (10)</td>
<td>18.6% (19)</td>
<td>29.4% (36)</td>
<td>35.3% (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We could do more homelessness prevention IF we were provided with dedicated funds.</td>
<td>6.9% (7)</td>
<td>4.0% (4)</td>
<td>7.9% (8)</td>
<td>13.9% (14)</td>
<td>67.3% (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We could do more homelessness prevention IF we had access to quality Training and Technical Assistance</td>
<td>5.8% (6)</td>
<td>6.7% (7)</td>
<td>13.5% (14)</td>
<td>26.9% (28)</td>
<td>47.1% (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think my organization has funding for and interest in TTA on youth homelessness prevention interventions.</td>
<td>29.1% (30)</td>
<td>11.7% (12)</td>
<td>32.0% (33)</td>
<td>17.5% (18)</td>
<td>9.7% (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Youth Homelessness Prevention Interventions & the Commitment Curve

I) Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)
II) Family and Natural Supports (FNS)
III) Reconnect
IV) Duty to Assist (D2A)
V) Upstream
### Housing First for Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Incorporation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
<td>We are currently piloting and testing a HF4Y Program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>We are planning to implement HF4Y, but we need more support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest/lack capacity</td>
<td>We are interested in HF4Y, but we lack the capacity to implement it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Perception</td>
<td>Implementing HF4Y would help achieve organizational goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware, lack interest</td>
<td>Clear understanding of HF4Y but there is no interest in implementing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>We have heard about HF4Y but don't know much about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>We are not aware of this program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

N=147

- **Zone of Interest**: 53.7% (N=79)
Desire to Learn More

Percent of organizations indicating that they would like to find out more about the following interventions.

- HF4Y: 70.5%
- Family & Natural Supports: 73.0%
- Youth Reconnect: 72.6%
- Duty to Assist: 71.4%
- UPSTREAM: 65.1%
In the Zone of Interest

Zone of Interest
Percent of respondents who are positively inclined towards implementing the intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HF4Y</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Natural Supports</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Reconnect</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty to Assist</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPSTREAM</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interest in Training and Technical Assistance

Percent of organizations interested in Training and Technical Assistance for the following interventions, but who are not sure where we access it.

- HF4Y: 36.1%
- Family and Natural Supports: 45.0%
- Youth Reconnect: 36.6%
- Duty to Assist: 34.9%
- UPSTREAM: 30.1%
END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS!

IF YOU WANT TO

END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS!

IF YOU WANT TO
ANY QUESTIONS?