

# Building From Experience: The Youth Action Research Revolution

Partial Summary of Research  
on Youth Homelessness Prevention

April 2022



**DANS LA RUE**

# Acknowledgments

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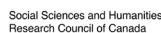
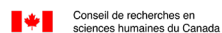
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## Executive Summary

“COVID-19 has laid bare the cracks in Canada’s social and economic systems. It has amplified the housing crisis and exposed it as a human rights crisis: now, more than ever, access to an adequate, secure, and affordable home is a matter of life and death.” (<https://www.make-the-shift.org/righttohome/>)

The COVID-19 global health pandemic has exacerbated social inequalities within Quebec, across Canada and on a global scale. While Quebec currently faces unprecedented rates of social inequality, the problems we now face have been brewing for some time.

Prior to the pandemic, we conducted a study on the things that public institutions across Quebec — from schools to hospitals to prisons — could do differently to help actualize young people’s rights to housing. We focused on these public sector institutions because they all play key roles in young people’s trajectories into and out of homelessness, but not all of them fully recognize their responsibility in preventing youth homelessness.

In this partial summary of research, we share our findings regarding three of the six public institutions we studied:

- Education
- Health Care
- Child Protection

In a followup, we will summarize our findings regarding the other three institutions we studied: social assistance, the criminal-legal system and housing services. In addition to these summaries, we are providing a fuller account of our findings in sector-specific journal articles and fact sheets.

Our study was conducted as a three-year participatory youth research project in collaboration with Dans la Rue, a multi-service agency that serves street-involved youth in Montreal and which is leading provincial efforts to prevent youth homelessness in Quebec.

Our research team, the Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR), has identified key patterns of institutional exclusion, discrimination and neglect that currently threaten young people’s intersecting human rights (e.g., to housing, health, education, and work) and entrench a range of social inequalities youth experience. YARR’s work endeavours to forefront young people’s knowledge and experiences of Quebec’s public institutions, with the assumption that lived expertise is a key source of knowledge in any effort to address a complex social, political and economic problem like homelessness. In understanding youth homelessness, young people who have experiential knowledge should be viewed both as rights holders and as experts:

Those who are homeless or living in inadequate housing are traditionally regarded as recipients, beneficiaries or “objects” of

government or charitable programmes. When recognized as rights holders, however, they are active subjects, empowered to engage and be involved in decisions affecting their lives and the enjoyment of their rights. This means they can assist in ensuring strategies are responsive to their lived experiences and are thus more effective. (United Nations, 2018)

In this report and throughout our project, we hope to call in people who work in public institutions and who may not see themselves playing a role in the prevention of youth homelessness in Quebec. The meaningful participation of multiple ministries and levels of government is integral to actualizing young people’s intersecting rights, including the right to adequate housing — defined by the International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as the right to live in security, peace and dignity. The [2018 Report](#) of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing is definitive on this issue: The realization of a rights-based housing strategy depends on comprehensive and “whole of government” approach.

To support the development of a provincial youth homelessness prevention framework that empowers a range of public sector institutions to be part of the solution, we have distilled several institutional “points of failure” and “points of possibility” (Sauve et al., 2018) — that is, specific programmatic restrictions, policies, and processes that are current drivers of youth homelessness in the province, as well as those that should be leveraged in an effort to ensure all young people experience the full spectrum of human rights they have been promised.

In addition to this summary document, we are publishing journal articles to provide more detailed accounts of our findings for each sector examined. You can find one of our articles [here](#), and please follow the Research for Social Change Lab for further updates.

## **Intendend Audience**

We have written this report for professionals and decision-makers who work in public systems adjacent to the homeless-serving system and who may not see or understand the ways policies, programs, practices and resource-issues in their systems influence young people’s access to housing and shape their efforts to be well.

Our aim is to provide sufficient and specific evidence about the ways Quebec’s public institutions currently constrain and enable efforts to make sure youth with precarious housing situations have access to the things they need to ensure they do not become homeless. We hope our findings will be useful to government decision makers, policy analysts, and advocates seeking to create the structural and systemic changes that are needed to prevent youth homelessness in the province. The burden of responsibility for change should not be shouldered by individual youth and families, nor

should we rely on youth homelessness organizations to solve problems that clearly have their origins in wider failures of our public systems.

## Introduction

In Montréal, and internationally, research shows that a focus on crisis-driven, emergency responses to youth homelessness misses critical opportunities for preventing young people from becoming homeless in the first place — or rapidly moving them into stable housing when they do become homeless (Schwan et al., 2018b). Perhaps more problematically, our own research suggests that existing crisis-driven responses are also inaccessible for many young people (e.g., due to waitlists or eligibility). The result is that as a society we are neither effectively preventing young people from becoming homeless nor successfully intervening when they do.

In Canada, 20 percent of Canada’s homeless population is made up of young people 13-24 years (Gaetz, O’Grady, Kidd & Schwan 2016). 40.1% of young people are less than 16 years of age when they have their first experience of homelessness and 75.9% go on to experience multiple episodes of homelessness throughout their adolescence; 53.2% drop out of school (compared to the Canadian average of less than 9%); 85.4% are in a state of mental health crisis; and 35.2% have experienced at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization (Gaetz, et al., 2016). In Montréal, 23% of the homeless population is 29 years of age or younger (MMFIM 2018).

Shifting our response to preventing youth homelessness requires a cross-sectoral response, which involves addressing the structural, systemic and relational drivers of homelessness. Equally, efforts to move young people stably out of homelessness must pair access to housing with a range of supports that address the multiple dimensions of youth wellbeing (Parsell, Petersen & Moutou, 2015). Unfortunately, research suggests State institutions often unintentionally exacerbate conditions of vulnerability for young people without stable housing (Nichols, 2014; 2016). Our research project sought to identify public sector institutions and institutional processes that enable and/or constrain the redistributive capacity of the state – for example, welfare, social services, education, healthcare, child welfare, child and youth mental health services, immigrant settlement

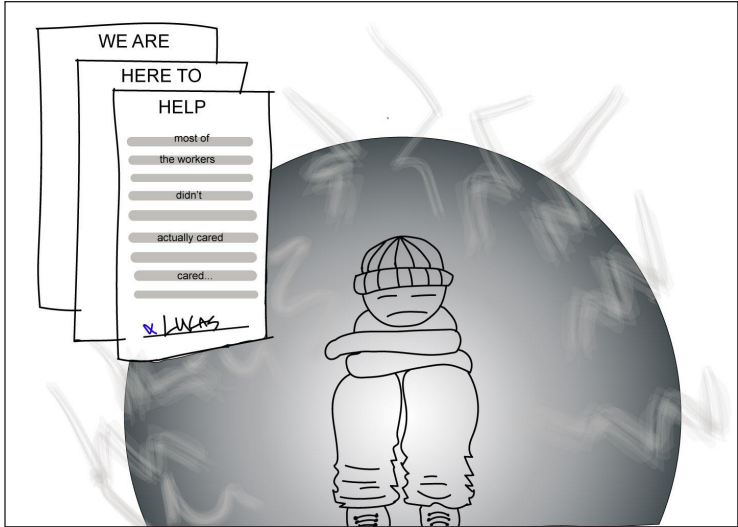


Art by YARR member Maxime Plamondon.



services, and public housing (Jenson, 2013; Sheilds & Evans 1998). As a team, we focused on identifying the normative standards embedded in the public sector that unequally shape young people’s access to housing and other resources. These inequalities are captured in our data, which indicate that people do not benefit from government services in equal ways.

For example, the distribution of educational opportunities reflects race- and class-based inequalities present in the city of Montreal. Many racialized youth and youth living in poverty are completing their high school diplomas in one of the city’s outreach schools or within its severely underfunded adult education system, often with thousands on waiting lists (Fédération des Cégeps, 2006). The (2011) Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse found that youth from immigrant families and certain minority groups – that is, particularly youth with Caribbean backgrounds – are more likely to be diagnosed as special needs (17.7 per cent) and sent to special classes than the



Artwork by YARR member Shayana Narcisse.

general rate of identification for all students (8.9 per cent). In addition to their disproportionate representation in special education programs and workplace learning streams, young Black men and women are frequently streamed into linguistically focused Welcome Classes (Classe d’accueil) in Quebec (CDPDJ, 2011). In Canada, Black and Indigenous young people are disproportionality represented among young people in all forms of state “care” (from foster care, group homes, and supervisory cases) (Government of Canada, 2016; Maynard, 2017; National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2017; Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2015) compared to the general population. Furthermore, all aspects of the criminal-legal system (from front-line policing stop-and-search practices, to sentencing and probation) disproportionately impact the lives of Black and Indigenous men and women in this country, including the lives of those growing up in Montreal (Maynard, 2017; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011).

Finally, we observe that young people experiencing housing insecurity and poverty are more likely to report negative interactions with other State systems (e.g., youth justice, education and child protection) than young people in the general population (Gaetz et al., 2016). For the above reasons, we have endeavoured to pay attention to the unequal ways state policies and practices are deployed. Our research team represents considerable gender, racial, cultural, linguistic, class, (dis)ability, and sexual diversity. The analysis we offer reflects the diverse lived knowledge we brought to

bear on this project as well as our commitment to tracking intersecting and historically situated patterns of inequality, rather than simply focusing on general trends among housing precarious youth.

## **What We Did**

Building from young people's experiential knowledge of the public sector organizations and processes that punctuate and give shape to their lives, we wanted to identify specific inter-institutional and policy junctures – in provincial or federal education, child welfare, (mental) healthcare, criminal-legal, and housing systems – that shape conditions of housing precarity for youth. We tried to to answer the following three questions:

1. What have been/are young people's experiences with State systems – public (K-12 and post-secondary) education, the criminal-legal system, child welfare, health and social welfare systems – and how have these experiences shaped/been shaped by conditions of housing instability?
2. What institutional and social junctures (service interactions, policies, programs, interventions, processes) do young people identify in their histories as points of system promise and/or points of system failure?
3. What are the policy and legislative contexts which shape the practices, discourses, and programs young people describe?

### **Phase One: Research Training and Policy/Legal Analysis**

To start answering these questions, we did policy and legislative analysis with the help of two law students (Sophie and Emmanuel!) who worked with our team for the first eight months. This stage of the work was a way for us to all learn from each other: The legal students would give us legal lessons on different aspects of the law we identified as relevant (based on our own experiences) – e.g., municipal bylaws and ticketing practices, child and family law, constitutional law (e.g., rights and responsibilities of people and governments), and education law. The legal lessons were a chance to learn how legal systems work, how laws are written and how they comprise legislative frameworks, and – most importantly – for members of the team to recognize their own experiences of particular institutional processes (e.g., ticketing) in relation to laws and policies. In this way we were able to identify important gaps between law as written and theorized and law as it gets applied and experienced by people.

### **Phase Two: Data Collection/Talking with Youth**

About six months after the start of the project, we conducted 64 interviews with 38 individual youth about their experiences in different institutions.

Aligned with our commitment to self-determination, we tried to make the interviews open, using a simple prompt:

*Knowing this project is about how government systems could work differently to prevent youth homelessness, can you tell us why you wanted to participate?*

The assumption behind this basic prompt was that every youth who reached out to us did so because they have a story they want to share about how their experiences in school, the child welfare system and so on contributed to (or did little to resolve) their housing precarity, in whatever way was important to them. For some youth, this meant we did up to three interviews – we thought it was important for those of us who have a lot of experience in institutions to take the time to get to know each other and not have to squeeze everything into one hour together. Over time, we constructed institutional histories from young people’s own standpoints and recollection. We wanted to learn about their interactions with different institutions or organizations, from their very first memories to the present day.

### **Phase Three: Data Analysis, Making a Codebook, Navigating COVID**

Once these data were coded by our research team (see diagram on next page), we began to engage in collective analysis. Due to COVID-19, this work has largely taken place virtually. The pandemic meant that we were paying even more attention to what everyone on our team needed to stay involved in this project – making sure that we weren’t pushing the research ahead without checking in with one another. We began by identifying institutional “points of failure and points of possibility” (Sauvé et. al, 2018) within the interview data, focusing on systematically reviewing each system youth pointed to (e.g., we began this work by reviewing all of the data that had been coded with education-related codes). Focusing on points of failure/possibility served as a simple orienting framework to enable us to pay attention to broader systemic barriers that young people encounter in their agentic efforts to be well. Once we had identified institutional points of possibility/failure in each system as a group, Jayne and Naomi produced institutional histories for each interviewee who identified a particular set of institutional relations that had shaped their experiences of housing instability. Shayana and Maxime took these histories and produced graphic illustrations that illuminate



*COVID-19 necessitated the use of virtual meetings. Clockwise from top-left: Naomi Nichols, Jayne Malenfant, Shayana Narcisse and Mickey Watchorn. Maxime Plamondon joined by phone.*



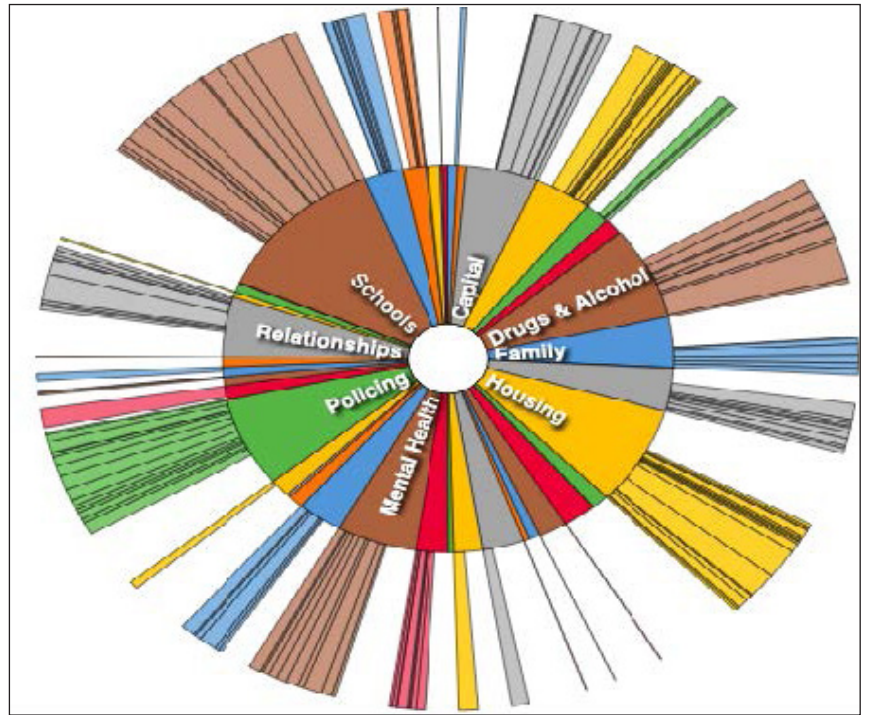
key trends.

Specifically, we were interested in identifying policies and practices that fail to prevent housing instability or homelessness as well as those that have the potential to do so. Provisional analyses were brought back to the youth team for their constructive feedback and the findings below reflect the outcomes of this process.

### **Peer Research: What it is and why it matters**

A critical piece of this project was the recognition that firsthand experience of homelessness—as it happens in different ways for different people—is integral to understanding youth homelessness and our responses to it (and why they may or may not work). From the very beginning, this project wanted to both value lived expertise and create important connections across experiences, especially in the form of peer research and peer support. Through highlighting our own lived experiences, we wanted to go against the tendency of homelessness research to make our voices invisible or just “numbers,” and bring attention to the things young people know that are often missing from official narratives about youth homelessness. We based this in the principle that we are all experts of our own realities. We also know firsthand how urgent this issue is. We’ve lived it (or are living it), and many of those we care about are still living it.

Five of the six members of our team have experiences of youth homelessness and housing precarity, and these experiences were shared over six months of team meetings in 2018 while we learned and developed our approach to research—an approach we wanted to make sure was aware of the traumatizing history some of us had with research, rehashing our pasts, or “consulting” on projects that didn’t try to make real changes for youth. We wanted to tackle the stigma that can come with having experienced homelessness, and highlight our strength and knowledge. For every interview but three, we made sure at least one co-interviewer had lived experience of homelessness — a strategy that recognizes the immense value of building ties across shared experience.



*A visual representation of the analytic codes developed by the YARR research team and the frequency with which they appear in YARR’s interview data. The eight most common codes are labeled; these are the topics youth spoke about the most often.*

## What We Learned

The Youth Action Research Revolution organized its findings as points of failure and points of possibility for each public institution studied. In the following, we summarize the points of failure and opportunity for the youth protection, education, and health care systems.

### Youth Protection System

The points of failure highlighted in this research summary correspond with those illuminated by the (2016 and 2019) Without a Home surveys and the (2019 and 2020) results of the Étude sur le devenir des Jeunes Placés (EDJeP) project. Specifically, our research affirms that instability in care (e.g., high numbers of residential placements and many different social workers), as well as highly routinized institutionalized environments combined with the abrupt cessation of services at 18 years age, will be disastrous for many young people who age out of youth services, profoundly unprepared for the challenges of autonomous life. Indeed, our team questions the assumption that autonomy and independence are better outcomes than social connection and inter-dependence for emerging adults. In addition to the points of failure that align with what other studies have previously revealed, our research also suggests that institutional inaction is another structural determinant of youth homelessness. Youth-serving institutions that fail to report young people's accounts of abuse at home to the Director of Youth Protection and the failure of youth protection workers to investigate young people's claims are just as likely to lead to homelessness (and at an earlier age) as the abrupt termination of services at 18 years of age.

The following are the **key points of failure** that arose in our interviews with youth:

- The termination of youth protection services at 18 years of age
- Residential instability within the care system
- Poorly supported transitions from highly institutionalized environments
- Spending years on the streets after aging out of the Youth Protection System
- Institutional inaction (a failure to investigate)
- Youth-serving institutions that misinterpret, fail to acknowledge and/or do nothing to intervene when young people are in distress and/or are precariously housed
- Failing to believe young people's accounts
- Treating "runaways" as missing children without serious consideration for the reasons they run
- A lack of coordinated, housing-led, youth-centred protective actions
- A statutory failure to position youth as rights-holders, capable of voluntarily seeking or refusing protective services

Young people's accounts of their institutional histories also point to

promising institutional and policy processes that could be leveraged to prevent youth homelessness. As it's currently written, Quebec's Youth Protection Act contains provisions through which youth homelessness could be interpreted as ground for protection, opening the doors to voluntary agreements with young people seeking protection and support during adolescence. Additionally, the processes through which young people are able to legally emancipate (between 16 and 18 years of age) in order to apply for social assistance and access other social services for adults (e.g., housing support) could be modernized (e.g., so as not to be conditional on marriage) and effectively streamlined to enable youth to better utilize this legal channel to actualize their rights to housing, education and work. To realize this potential, we must commit to improving access to justice for youth – for example, by funding accessible and youth-friendly legal services so that youth know and can actualize their rights. The following are the **key points of possibility** YARR identified:

- Legal grounds for the protection of homeless youth
- Streamline system for legal emancipation
- Improved access to justice for youth
- Improved coordination between emancipation process, welfare eligibility, and low-barrier housing supports for minors

### **Health, Mental Health and Addictions Systems**

A key finding of this research, which is affirmed by other studies (Gaetz, Schwan, Redman, French & Dej, 2018) is that health and wellbeing promote housing stability. On the flip-side, homelessness and housing precarity deteriorate young people's health and well-being. Investing in housing supports, without attending to young people's expressed health and wellness needs is short-sighted, just like discharging a young person from health services to the streets is likely to fundamentally destabilize any health gains achieved through treatment. Young people's institutional histories with health, mental health and addictions services have been shaped by a disconnect between the normative assumptions that underpin the delivery of services and the realities of acute poverty and homelessness (e.g., health system processes assume a person has a home to recover in and a phone where they can be reached when they become eligible for services). Furthermore, fundamental and growing gaps between young people's expressed needs and the health system's capacity to address these needs remain unresolved, diminishing young people's timely access to health services and appropriate evidence-based treatment options. The following are the key **points of failure** youth identified:

- Mainstream services that assume a baseline of material and social supports, which do not reflect the realities of precariously-housed youth
- Standardized service delivery models that systematically fail to anticipate and work for particular groups

- Standardized service utilization processes that systematically exclude people who use drugs, trans people, and/or people without housing
- Gaps between service capacity, service volume, and service need
- Lack of timely access to high-quality, evidence-based treatment
- Program models and accessibility criteria that do not anticipate nor address profound material deprivation (e.g., homelessness)
- A lack of evidence-based treatment options for addressing intersecting mental health and substance use issues

Young people’s accounts also reveal important **points of possibility** that should be amplified to ensure young people experience healthy development once housed and, conversely, the housing and social stability required for healthy development. These are:

- Destigmatizing continued street-involvement
- Continuity of care, flexible, accessible and coordinated service provision, including access to housing
- A quiet, safe and non-stigmatizing place to de-escalate when a person is in a crisis

You can read a more detailed account of our findings regarding health care and homelessness in Quebec in this journal article: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/21568693221082206>

## Education

According to the literature on education and youth homelessness, the most common barriers that young people encounter while experiencing homelessness in schools include symptoms of sleeping rough (e.g., coming to school late or not at all, sleeping in class), improper nutrition, undiagnosed health and mental health issues, and absences. This leads to estimations of drop-out rates for homeless youth to be at least 8x the national average (Gaetz et al., 2016). While these barriers all presented themselves in our interviews, we wished to focus on what institutional processes were happening before, during, and between youth’s experiences of homelessness to ask, how can we better support youth in schools before and as they experience homelessness?

In the interviews about young people’s schooling, we began with their very first experiences in schools and worked forward from these early memories to



Illustration by YARR member Shayana Narcisse.



today. By working in this way, we see how schools could be, though rarely are, sites of prevention and support. Many young people described educational barriers long before they first experienced homelessness.

Significantly, all but one of the 38 youth we interviewed discussed their trajectories in educational institutions after we prompted them to share any institutional encounters they felt were relevant to their experiences of housing precarity.

*Youth felt:*

- They didn't have ways to communicate with teachers or schools; either about the conditions they were experiencing (i.e., absences because of instability at home), what interventions they needed
- They couldn't respond if interventions or punishments were ineffective, because teacher's weren't listening
- Not being heard led to them losing faith in reaching out to teachers and school staff

*Youth described:*

- Murky and unclear institutional processes
- Blaming themselves for their educational disengagement (as resulting from their own laziness or feelings of "fuck it") but simultaneously explaining they were the targets of interventions and actions that pushed them out of schools
- Teachers implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) blaming them for their homelessness/precarity
- Unclear or unfair mechanisms to access support and accommodations
- Having no opportunities to explain why a proposed intervention wouldn't work because they couldn't respond if interventions or punishments were ineffective, because teachers weren't listening

*Youth shared:*

- Frustration that even when teachers were open and trying to work with them, teachers "couldn't do anything," either due to a lack of knowledge or capacity, leading to youth being hesitant to seek support in the future and/or lose hope that any supports were available
- That reaching out to a teacher often led to interactions with police or damaging interactions with social workers, which frequently meant young people were less likely to reach out in the future as well
- They were denied mental health, financial, or other supports because they weren't able/willing to provide parental consent, they were LGBTQIP2SAA, or because they were "not trying hard enough"

Many issues within schools seemed to stem from a disconnect between what youth were experiencing and what schools were imagining (and enforcing) as the ideal student. Interventions, classes, subjects and structures (e.g., the organization of the school day, school policies like the code of conduct) were



seen as at odds with or inconsequential to many young people’s everyday experiences. Especially for youth who were experiencing poverty and for those who are racialized or who identified as LGBTQIP2SAA, schools were described as places where they faced multiple forms of discrimination and unjust treatment (e.g., punishments for being unprepared for class or failing to attend, rather than non-judgemental inquiries about a young person’s life; assumptions about drug-use; and/or failing to respond to young people’s reports of bullying on the parts of teachers and other students).

Clearly, young people see schools as influential institutions; unfortunately, for youth who already experience intersecting forms of exclusion in schools and in other public systems (e.g., poverty, racism and housing insecurity), the influence is not always positive. The following are the **key points of failure** we identified:

- One size does not fit all
- Learning disability and mental health (mis)diagnoses
- Unclear institutional processes and personal narratives of failure
- Not being believed
- Institutional inaction
- Damaging institutional action



Illustration by YARR member Shayana Narcisse.

The interviews with youth pointed to significant barriers to educational participation. They suggest that school staff’s failure to identify and support youth who may be at-risk of or experiencing homelessness means schools fail to serve as sites of homelessness prevention, even though all young people in Quebec must participate in school until they are 16 years of age. Our project also highlights the following **points of possibility**:

- Alternative and flexible education programs (like École Emmett Johns)
- Having wraparound and/or flexible supports to accompany school (especially financial, mental health, legal and food supports)
- Noting early points of interventions (bullying, intellectual or mental health problems)
- Time (to build relationships, to access supports, to explore options, to navigate diagnoses and treatment)

- Respect (relationships built on trust and respect)
- Multiple points of entry (having youth-centred interventions, having supports for family to engage)
- Youth-led learning, life, and career objectives (including art programming and life skills)
- Knowing how to “work” the system
- Having an advocate or champion who understood institutional context

The most common response when we asked what worked, or what might work, when supporting youth experiencing homelessness in schools, was professionals using their judgement. Many young people talked about getting “lucky” because they connected with a professional who was willing to take on extra tasks to ensure they accessed supports or built strong relationships. While interventions may have some success on an individual basis (for example, students finding one teacher who “got” them or was able to connect them to services) there are currently no policies addressing youth homelessness in schools in Québec.

## **Something to think about: Complicating peer support**

There is a theme in the literature on youth homelessness, “runaways” and “street youth” about the importance of preventing youth from becoming “entrenched in life on the streets” (Sohn & McKitterick, 2019). The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness a comprehensive proposal outlining the needs and actions that must be taken to prevent youth homelessness, frames this as an ethical imperative: “Requiring youth’s situations to worsen, or for them to become more deeply entrenched in homelessness to access services and supports, is unethical and causes the need for more intensive and long-term interventions than responding to early signs of distress” (Gaetz et al., 2018, p. 64). “Entrenchment” is also seen as a definitive barrier to exiting homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018; Karabanow, 2004).

We recognize that street-involvement increases a person’s exposure to criminal victimization (O’Grady, Gaetz & Buccieri, 2013), on the one hand, and police surveillance and criminalization on the other (Douglas, 2014), and it seems clear that youth should be supported to quickly access housing and other essential supports. But we have come to view young people’s continued participation in street life as potentially protective — not just for housed youth, but also for those who are still spending considerable time on the streets. Many youth we spoke with linked their participation in street life to stability, particularly in the face of ongoing issues with food security, efforts to make money, and struggles with mental health.

[Instead of using/in the absence of access to services] I just look at my friends and say, “Hey man, this is really bugging me, help me.” And then if they’re like, “I can’t help you with this. Ask him. He’s going through the same thing.” And it works. - Casey

Many spoke of giving back, and of benefiting from friends with more stability who continued to offer support, guidance, and opportunities for peer learning. Youth described developing dumpster diving and food-sharing networks, supporting one another in the face of ongoing police brutality and profiling, and supporting one another directly as well as offering advice for how to navigate opaque bureaucratic structures. Our team sees potential in these informal opportunities for mutual aid and learning; indeed we suggest peer networks might actually play an important role in combatting isolation and forms of social discrimination among homeless and formerly homeless youth, as well as connecting young people with viable service pathways, including (but not limited to) housing. During weekly meetings and group discussions, members of our team consistently suggested that the way to prevent homelessness was to build stronger, more inclusive and supportive communities.

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation One: Listen to children and youth**

Rather than assuming a young person is lying, service providers, youth workers, educators and other professionals should always begin with the assumption that youth are telling the truth. This openness is much more likely to create the honest, trusting relationships young people say will encourage them to access services and support, participate in programs and retain their faith in public systems. For many youth, not being believed leads to long-term mistrust in institutions, less likelihood they will reach out when something is wrong, and interventions that are not suited to their needs.

*What does this look like in practice?*

- Ensure there are multiple ways for young people to engage in services, and multiple point people youth can reach out to for support (including third party)
- Take the time to build trusting and transparent relationships with youth
- Listen to young people with an open mind and avoid assuming they’re lying, or dismissing claims of abuse, bullying, etc., as over-reactions, melo-drama, lies or false accusations
- Be transparent about legal obligations before inviting youth to share

(e.g., duty to report), so that youth are not blindsided by any potential outcomes

- Amend the Youth Protection Act so that young people who are 16 years of age, and disclose that they are unsafe can self-determine next steps (e.g., not necessarily report to police or child protective services if their safety can be achieved via other avenues — e.g., access to safe housing).

### **Recommendation Two: Ensure youth are able to access basic income**

For youth experiencing homelessness and housing precarity, sources of income may not be accessible in the ways they are for adults—youth may be unable to secure jobs, and youth under 18 may be unable to access social assistance. Youth who want to continue to participate in education and training must be supported economically to do so.

*What does this look like in practice?*

- Simplify legal emancipation process for youth 16-18 years of age
- Guarantee all emancipated youth have access to stable income, healthcare benefits, book fees and tuition waivers for post-secondary
- Ensure stable income support throughout post-secondary
- Abolish student debt

### **Recommendation Three: Dismantle white supremacy**

White supremacy is not only about intentionally racist actions. When legislation and policy, services and service pathways are developed without keeping racial inequalities in mind, they end up being created by and for the white, Québécois majority. Although these policies and services are framed as colour-blind or post-racial, they actually reinforce racial inequalities by invisibilizing whiteness as a racial category and naturalizing it as the norm. Current debates around systemic racism in Québec and its institutions (for example, in the proposition of Joyce's Principle) demonstrate the ways white supremacy can go unacknowledged.

*What does this look like in practice?*

- Deliver youth-led anti-racism and implicit bias training to help workers across institutions understand how they may be perpetuating stereotypes (E.g., <http://www.futureancestors.ca>)
- Actively recruit and hire staff in frontline positions of every youth-serving organization that reflect the cultural, racial, linguistic and gendered diversity of Quebec
- Build cultural safety into programming, recruit, hire and sustain diverse staff teams with whom youth can engage
- Acknowledge the prevalence of institutionally racist and white

- supremacist ways of working across every public system
- Seek to identify and redress institutional and policy processes that entrench and sustain white supremacy (i.e., the norming or centring of whiteness as a default post-racial category)

### **Recommendation Four: Value lived experience knowledge in the same way that other forms of expertise are valued**

Lived experience knowledge is important to ground work in the ongoing and shifting realities of homelessness. It must be included to facilitate professionals understanding what it might be like to be young and precariously housed; recognize the signs that a youth may be homeless, at-risk of homelessness or living in unsafe conditions; respond with empathy and action to support young people to identify and address their housing and other needs (e.g. income support; find their own trouble spots and how they may respond in trauma-informed and supportive ways).

*What does this look like in practice?*

- Prioritize lived expertise during admissions to teacher's college, social work programs, nursing and other health fields, youth work, law and so on
- Create lived experience scholarships to enable post-secondary participation
- Hire people with lived experience to share their expertise with healthcare workers, police officers, shelter workers, teachers (and other professionals) in ongoing ways
- Have robust peer supports across different systems and ensure peer workers are adequately trained in institutional and policy navigation and paid a living wage (e.g. peer support in hospital emergency rooms; peer outreach; peer mentorship and legal supports; peer accompaniment)
- Ground policy decisions in engagement with lived expertise
- Ground program and intervention development in engagement with lived expertise

### **Recommendation Five: Simplify institutional and socio-legal processes and make sure they are clear and accessible to everyone**

Make sure that all people understand their rights and responsibilities under the law, and that young people have access to free and timely socio-legal advice so that they can effectively self-advocate and ensure their rights are upheld in their institutional interactions. Ensure that all young people and all public and social service professionals can understand and effectively navigate institutional and socio-legal processes so that they can access the things they need to live the lives they want and/or support young people to



effectively self-advocate and get their needs addressed.

*What does this look like in practice?*

- Continue and expand legal clinics for youth (to contest tickets, ensure they are able to access social assistance, etc.) and connect with youth before they experience homelessness
- Peer and public education about institutional processes and how to navigate them
- Ensure support staff are able to understand socio-legal processes and advocate with youth
- Make institutional processes transparent and easier to navigate
- Have waitlist targets (one month or less) to ensure youth get access to essential medical and social services
- Ensure all services are housing-led. This means, coordinating access to housing for those who need it, as part of any intervention that seeks to address other health or social issues

**Recommendation Six: Recognize that some groups of people in Quebec are less likely to get their needs met in our public institutions than others**

(E.g., Indigenous people seeking healthcare services; Black people seeking healthcare services; Trans\* people seeking crisis beds or sheltering services; people seeking addictions and mental health support; English-speaking people seeking mental health support).

*What does this look like in practice?*

- Create multiple pathways to programs and services, and targeted programs that attend to the specificities of under-served groups
- Service pathways must connect to time-sensitive, evidence-based, and appropriate services (not waitlists for services that take years and can be impossible to access without consistent access to internet, telephone, or a home address)
- Ensure that all young people have access to the material stability required to benefit from health, social or legal interventions (e.g., do not discharge a young person from child protection, rehabilitation programs or inpatient healthcare situations without ensuring they have stable housing and an income)
- Devise, test and administer interventions that allow young people to address concurrent mental health and substance use disorders. Demanding abstinence means that youth do not get access to either

## **Recommendation Seven: Youth self-determined information sharing across ministries/services**

Young people should be seen as the rightful owners of their administrative data or institutional information. When seen from this vantage point, they should determine how and when this information is shared with other service providers. Instead of paternalistic privacy and information management practices that privilege the protection of institutions and view children and youth as passive recipients of services, we recommend that institutions impose a rights-based approach to information sharing, which values young people's own desires and concerns regarding their case-file and other data.

*What does this look like in practice?*

- View young people as rights-holders when it comes to the information about them that institutions collect. Ensure they have access to this information and decision-making power in terms of how it is used and shared
- Ensure no youth exists the youth protection system without a hard copy and digital copy of all essential identification
- Rather than asking people to repeat their traumatic life experiences as a means of establishing eligibility for services, allow them to request a transfer of information (e.g., case-files, administrative data, psycho-educational screens) from one institutional context to another

## **Conclusion**

This research summary shares some of the findings of our three-year participatory youth research project conducted in collaboration with Dans la Rue, a multi-service agency that serves street involved youth in Montreal and which is leading provincial efforts to prevent youth homelessness in Quebec. Our research highlights key patterns of institutional exclusion, discrimination and neglect that currently threaten young people's intersecting human rights (e.g., to housing, health, education, and work) and entrench a range of social inequalities youth experience.

In this first research summary document, we focused on things that the Youth Protection, Health and Education Systems could do differently to ensure their actions contributed to preventing youth homelessness. We built our analysis from young people's own experiences of these systems, and sought to identify key structural drivers or determinants of homelessness and housing precarity that have intersecting institutional and systemic roots. Structural determinants of youth homelessness are the economic, systemic, and society (including institutional) factors that contributed to patterns

of housing instability and extreme poverty young people described to us (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). A key dimension of this study was the prioritization of lived experience knowledge, both on the research team and in terms of data collection, analysis and the presentation of our findings. As much as possible, we have sought to privilege young people's own accounts of their experiences with institutions as a way of grounding our analysis and recommendations in their expert knowledge.

Our assumption is that lived expertise is a key source of knowledge in any effort to address a complex social, political and economic problem like homelessness and that young people who have experiential knowledge of homelessness are experts and rights holders. This means young people should be involved in the process of making decisions and redesigning institutional systems to better meet their needs, particularly as the province of Quebec moves to develop its own youth homelessness prevention strategy.

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