

RESEARCH BRIEF: How the youth protection system can help prevent homelessness

Many homeless youth in Canada have one thing in common: they all come into contact with a provincial youth protection system on their path to homelessness. These institutions are mandated to step in when children and adolescents need protection, providing vital services such as housing until they turn 18. But how do young people's experiences with these systems support or undermine their housing stability, both while in care and after they age out?

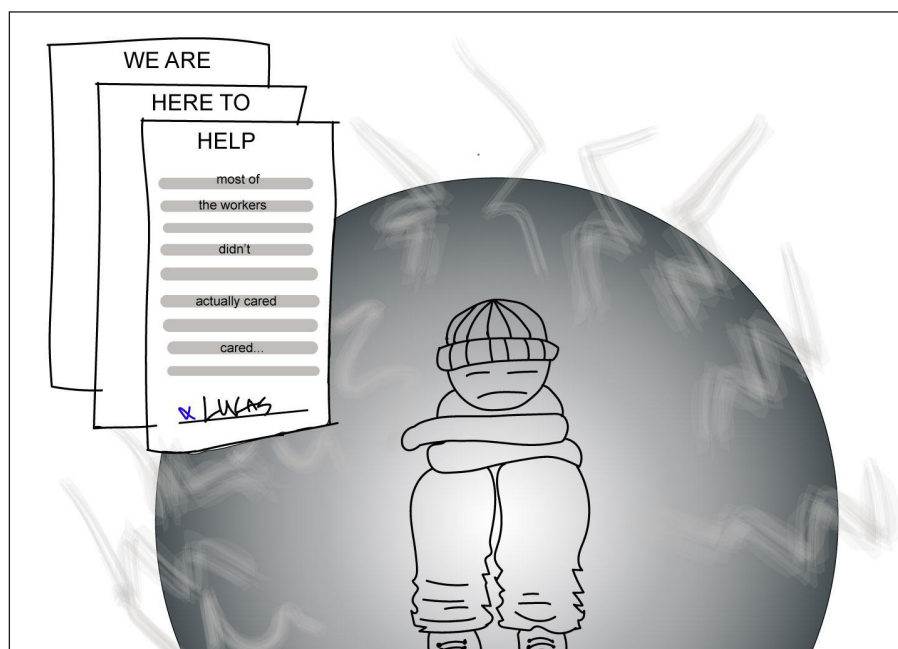
In 2019, the Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR) interviewed 37 young people who had experienced homelessness in Montreal to learn more about what led to their struggles with housing precarity. Many of those young people shared how they found themselves homeless after losing eligibility for Quebec's youth protection system at

age 18. Some also described being denied youth protection services at earlier points in their lives, when needing to escape unsafe situations at home.

Hearing these young people's stories makes it clear that youth protection systems have a critical role to play in preventing youth homelessness.

We interviewed 37 youth with experience of homelessness.

Of those, 14 identified child protection as an institution that directly or indirectly shaped their experiences of homelessness.



The Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR) worked together for two years in Montreal, Quebec. Comprised mainly of youth who had experienced housing precarity and homelessness, the group documented the experiences of young people with Quebec's public institutions – from schools to hospitals to prisons – to show how those institutions are contributing to the housing crisis facing the province. In doing so, YARR also showed how these institutions can do better. YARR calls on everyone who serves in a public institution to understand that their work is integral to the realization of young people's right to housing.



Findings – Points of Failure and Possibility

YARR chose to present its findings as “Points of Failure and Possibility.” Below, YARR shares the main points of failure and possibility identified by young people concerning the child protection system.

Points of Failure

Service cut off at 18

The young people YARR interviewed said abruptly losing youth protection services at age 18 was a key factor that pushed them into homelessness – particularly for those youth who had been housed in provincial youth centres. After depending on the youth protection system for vital services such as housing as children and adolescents, youth immediately lose eligibility for those services the day they turn 18. Youth said it is unrealistic to expect all young people to be ready to live independently at that age.

“At 18, if you don’t integrate like everyone else, it’s too bad. You’re on the streets then. And they don’t care. Their mandate is over,” one youth shared.

Lack of transitional supports

Youth also shared that residential services provided by the provincial youth centres did not adequately prepare them to transition to life on their own after turning 18. Without support to meet their basic needs independently, they found themselves on the street.

“I turned 18, they kicked me out, and I didn’t know what to do,” one youth said. “I can’t even cook an egg ... you end up in the street, you have nothing.”

“Runaways” denied protection

Youth shared that parents’ reports of a missing child are

taken more seriously than young people’s reports of abuse. After running away from home to escape abuse, the police and the youth protection system treated youth as missing children and returned them to their families. Their reasons for fleeing were not given serious consideration and their requests for youth protection services were denied.

“It was either you come back home, or you’re on the streets,” one youth said. “I was really powerless.”

Institutional inaction

Youth described routinely showing up to school covered in bruises, sobbing or displaying other clear signs of distress before becoming homeless. Despite this, educators failed in their duty to alert the youth protection system that these young people were unsafe. Even when youth raised concerns about their safety with school personnel directly, no action was taken.

Points of Possibility

Homelessness as grounds for protection

Although homelessness is not grounds for protection in all provinces, according to the Youth Protection Act, “runaway” youth are eligible for protection in Quebec. This means the youth protection system could play an active role in preventing youth homelessness. To actualize this potential, youth must be

able to access or refuse youth protection services or seek legal emancipation from parents or guardians.

Youth as rights holders

Youth described a cycle of fleeing unsafe situations at home, only to be returned to their families when their parents reported them missing. Youth should have the power to decide for themselves what happens to them in these situations.

To that end, one major point of possibility is to position homeless and “runaway” youth as rights holders, with the power to make their own decisions about whether to access or refuse youth protection services.

Streamline emancipation process and enable access to justice

Youth shared that bureaucratic hurdles prevented them from accessing social assistance when they became homeless. Youth aged 16 and older can qualify for financial support under Quebec’s social assistance program if they legally emancipate from their parents’ custody. But the process for doing so is too complex for most young people to navigate. One key point of possibility is to provide youth who choose this option support to legally emancipate and apply for social assistance when they show up at homeless shelters or seek housing support services.

The Youth Action Research Revolution was made up of: Laurence Adamovicz, Shayana Narcisse, Maxime Plamondon, and Mickey Watchhorn, research assistants from Dans la Rue in Montreal, Quebec. Project co-leads were Jayne Malenfant and Naomi Nichols, then both from McGill University (Naomi has since moved to Trent University). In its first year, the team also included students Emanuel Guay (UQAM), Emanuel Rioux (Université du Montréal) and Sophie Doyle (McGill).