

Putting an end to child & family homelessness in Canada ^[1]

Author: Gulliver-Garcia, Tanya

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Full report PDF ^[2]

Executive summary

Imagine waking up in a strange place one morning and not knowing where you are, not recognizing any of your surroundings. Your mom takes you and your siblings to a cafeteria-style dining hall where you eat a bit of breakfast before taking a bus to school. After classes finish, your mom meets you in the schoolyard and you take transit across the city to another strange building for the night. This time, you are sharing a bed with your younger sister, your brother is on the couch and your mom sleeps on the floor of the living room. Yet you know you were lucky to be out of the shelter tonight and in a friend's house. Tomorrow you know the process will repeat itself.

This could be the life of one of hundreds of children who are homeless in Canada right now. For homeless kids, the loss of stability is enormous. While many homeless families are able to access some "permanence" in emergency shelters, others are more transient, staying in temporary shelters and with friends. The disruption to their lives results in many negative consequences, both in their childhood and as adults. Yet, when most people think about homelessness in Canada, they picture an older, single man sitting on a street corner. Indeed, this image is often perpetuated through media and various charitable fundraising campaigns. However, homelessness is much more complex and involves several different facets and populations groups.

Every night in Canada approximately 35,000 people are homeless; 235,000 unique individuals on an annual basis. For every person who is absolutely homeless, there are at least three more who fall into the hidden homelessness category (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014). Homelessness is a disaster in this country, one that has been recognized by the United Nations. If we fail to act soon, this problem is only going to get worse.

Family homelessness (and therefore homelessness amongst dependent children and youth) is a significant, yet hidden, part of the crisis. Some researchers have identified visible homelessness as only the "tip of the iceberg" of what is a much larger and critical, affordable housing problem in Canada. Numerous studies have shown that many families are forced to live in overcrowded, sub-standard housing and regularly make the choice between paying the rent and feeding the kids.

Family homelessness is largely underpinned by structural factors, including inadequate income, lack of affordable housing and family violence. Following the withdrawal of government housing programs and decreased supports, more families are turning to emergency shelters (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 27).

Raising the Roof's Child and Family Homelessness Initiative is a comprehensive, three year examination of homelessness affecting children and their families across Canada. Much of the research that has been done on homelessness focuses on the adult or youth populations, but family homelessness makes up a significant percentage of the overall homeless population in Canada. Families are also one of the highest risk groups for homelessness given the extreme levels of poverty, food insecurity and housing unaffordability in this country.

The Initiative began with an environmental scan of agencies responding to child and family homelessness, followed by interviews with over 40 service providers, community advocates and academic researchers. This led to the development of our conceptual framework for ending child and family homelessness through the areas of Primary Prevention, Systems-Based Responses and Early Intervention Strategies. Each of these areas is discussed in detail in the body of the full report. We have also identified eight pillars which are connected to all three of the framework components. These are:

- Poverty/Income
- Affordable Housing
- Child care
- Food (In)security
- Discrimination
- Intimate partner violence (IPV)
- Children's Mental Health and Family Wellbeing
- Stigma

We then partnered with eight community organizations from across Canada and interviewed 103 agency staff members and 36 family members who were accessing services at the agencies. In September of 2015, we hosted a two-day Summit with 30 National representatives and 20 Provincial representatives and shared some of the preliminary findings from our research. Attendees were invited to participate in facilitated group discussions and those discussions have been incorporated throughout this report. Their critical insights were taken into consideration as we moved towards developing a set of best practices and recommendations for programs responding to child and family homelessness.

The three areas that make up our framework and the eight pillars are, in many ways, inseparable. If we build affordable housing but do not address Intimate Partner Violence, we will not completely stem the flow of women and children into homelessness. If we only look at downstream solutions instead of prevention we will always be in a reactive mode to the crisis.

We have also dedicated a significant portion of this Initiative to children's mental health. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, approx. 1.2 million Canadian children and youth (1 in 5) are affected by mental health, yet less than 20% will receive appropriate treatment (MHCC, 2016). These numbers are higher for children and youth experiencing homelessness. Studies into youth homelessness have shown that 40-70% struggle with mental health issues compared to 10-20% of housed youth (Gaetz, 2013). Children who are homeless – and their mothers – deal with a wide range of emotional impacts that often go unnoticed and/or untreated because of the transient nature of their lives and housing instability.

Almost half of children (47%) who were homeless had been diagnosed with anxiety, depression or withdrawal, compared to only 18% of children who were living in stable housing (Hart-Shegos, 1999; National Centre on Family Homelessness, 2011; Zima et al.; 1997).

For children and youth experiencing discrimination – such as those who are from Indigenous, racialized or LGBTQ2S communities – the issue is even starker. Suicide amongst young people is the second leading cause of death – representing approximately one-quarter of deaths for those aged 15-24. For Indigenous males the suicide rate is 126 per 100,000 and for Indigenous females it is 35 per 100,000. This contrasts with the rates for non-Aboriginal youth of 24 in 100,000 for males and 5 in 100,000 for females (Health Canada, 2015).

Solving homelessness amongst children, youth and their families means we can also greatly reduce adult homelessness. Growing up in poverty, encounters with the criminal justice or child welfare systems, experiencing trauma and abuse at a young age as well as being from a racialized or Indigenous background, are all risk factors for homelessness. It is incumbent upon us to take a stand for children to prevent an ongoing, self-perpetuating cycle.

Through this work we hope to develop practical tools and resources that can be used by community organizations and government to encourage promising practices. To that end we have also generated recommendations – both short and long-term for communities, service providers and governments at all levels.

Related link: Exclusive: Family homelessness on the rise ^[3]

Region: Canada ^[4]

Tags: child poverty ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/16/02/putting-end-child-family-homelessness-canada>

Links

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