**Pathways into Youth Homelessness**



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What do we know about how young people become homeless? While the answer to this question may sound simple, in reality, it’s very complex. This blog aims to explore the root causes of youth homelessness based on past and emerging research.

In order to address youth homelessness effectively, especially if we want to prioritize prevention, we need to understand what causes youth to become homeless in the first place. This understanding helps to identify best practices and propose appropriate program interventions. Without this knowledge, policies aimed at preventing and ending youth homelessness may not achieve their intended outcomes. Additionally, if we do not prevent youth from becoming homeless, in time, they may become chronically homeless adults.

Research has found that youth experiencing street-level homelessness are more likely to become victims of [criminal activities](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/safe-streets-whom-homeless-youth-social-exclusion-and-criminal-victimization), [sexual exploitation](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213411001128), and [substance abuse](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/young-people-drug-use-and-family-conflict-pathways-homelessness). With precarious living situations, youth experiencing homelessness often engage in [quasi-legal economic activities](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/34-street-survival-gendered-analysis-youth-homelessness-toronto) and informal strategies to survive, such as panhandling and squeegeeing. In many cases, their [physical and mental health](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002764207311990) declines, leading to increased doctor visits and hospitalizations. This cycle self-perpetuates, making it more difficult for youth to secure stable housing and exit homelessness. Clearly, this is not what Canada wants for its youth, considering that [Canada spends close to $300 billion on social outcomes](https://mcconnellfoundation.ca/report/inspiring-rd-practices-in-canadas-social-impact-sector/) such as improved well-being, building capacities in communities, and program delivery per year. With this amount invested in the issue, it’s expected that youth homelessness should be managed more effectively in Canada.

**Youth Homelessness vs. Adult Homelessness**

Youth homelessness is different in many ways from adult homelessness. One way that homelessness for youth differs is that when young people leave home – either by choice, necessity, or force – they often have not yet developed the range of skills required to live independently. In most cases, youth are financially dependent on their families. Another difference is that the sudden departure from their home can lead youth to disengage from school, meaning that their circle of support, including friends, is disrupted and sometimes lost. This will have detrimental impacts on a young person’s development and transition to adulthood.

For the most part, research over the past 40 years has attempted to capture these differences when explaining the causes of youth homelessness.

**Individual and Relational Causes**

[Researchers have long argued that youth family life is a main cause of homelessness for youth](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/youth-homelessness-canada-implications-policy-and-practice): traumatic childhood experiences such as physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse; dysfunctional family relationships including conflicts, divorce, and a history of incarceration; and substance abuse within the home. In some cases, conflicts between youth and their families arise due to [gender identity or sexual orientation](https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/cjfy/index.php/cjfy/article/view/16579). Additional causes include disengagement from school (for a variety of reasons), mental disorders, and substance use problems among youth. Collectively, researchers have labelled these causes as [“individual” causes or “relational” factors](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/roadmap-prevention-youth-homelessness). Individual and relational factors have profound impacts on young people’s well-being while contributing to an increased risk of homelessness.

**Structural Causes**

However, individual factors are not the only causes of youth homelessness. “[Structural](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0038038514564436?journalCode=soca)” causes also play a role. Some examples of structural causes include: insufficient supply of affordable housing, income disparities, a low minimum wage, unemployment, and poverty.

These factors appear at the societal level and are indirectly related to individual characteristics. They are caused by social and economic conditions that create an environment where at-risk households are more likely to experience challenges with managing daily life. At-risk households are more vulnerable to changes in economic conditions and market fluctuations as they often include low-income, under-resourced families with unstable employment (e.g., part-time jobs), and/or with disabilities. Some other structural causes are related to [discriminatory practices](https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/legal-justice-issues/discrimination) against Indigenous and LGBTQ2S youth; for example, some property owners simply infringe upon the rights of youth to have housing while some other owners do not rent their place out to them.

**Systems Failures**

Sometimes, ineffective policy and service delivery contribute to youth homelessness. The [*What Would it Take?*](https://www.homelesshub.ca/WhatWoulditTake) study asked young people with lived experience of homelessness: what would it take to prevent youth homelessness in Canada? Youth shared that if there had been some supports available including legal, health care, and/or social services, they could have ended up not being on the streets. Research has also demonstrated the high percentage of homeless youth who have reported previous involvement with [child welfare services](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/child-welfare-and-youth-homelessness-canada-proposal-action-0). This is often the case among vulnerable subpopulations, including [Indigenous youth](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740919312654). These gaps in service delivery point to disconnects in planning for youth who are transitioning from publicly funded institutions like detention centers and foster care. Often, these institutions are not prepared to respond effectively to meet the needs of youth when they age out or are being discharged. Therefore, these youth are not provided with the necessary supports to find secure, stable housing. Many of them are left without any supportive programs to help them lead an independent life. These inadequate and disconnected service and program delivery are “[systems failures](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/roadmap-prevention-youth-homelessness)”.

**Pathways into Homelessness**

Over the past decade, new research has emerged, which has impacted our understanding of the ways that lead to youth homelessness. [Instead of focusing on “causes”](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14036096.2012.756096), research tells us that perhaps it is time to consider “[pathways](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/pathways-homelessness-understanding-how-both-individual-and-structural-factors-contribute)” into homelessness. This way, we are not looking for a universal one-size-fits-all explanation of youth homelessness. Rather, based on real accounts from youth who have experienced homelessness, we have come to understand that causes of homelessness are unique for each young person. Youth with different ethno-racial backgrounds and different gender and sexual orientations may experience homelessness in different ways. The pathways approach provides us with the necessary knowledge about how and when we should intervene. It paints a wider picture that tells us about missed opportunities. It helps us to recognize in what ways and when we could have intervened and prevented youth from becoming homeless. For instance, if a young person recounts that a conflict with their family led them to leave home, this indicates what we need to focus on and when. If there had been [family and natural supports](https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/family-and-natural-supports-framework-enhance-young-peoples-network-support) available to mediate conflicts and rebuild relationships, we could have simply avoided the young person becoming homeless; or [when we learn from youth](https://www.homelesshub.ca/YouthWithoutHome) that many have experienced homelessness for the first time before the age of 16, this points us to prioritize prevention at a critical age milestone.

With pathways analysis gaining wide credibility and use, we start to understand and capture the inherent complexities involved in youth life prior to becoming homeless. This understanding helps us reflect on cultural and social contexts to provide services and support programs that are aligned with a young person’s unique needs. In order to propose effective policy interventions, we need to account for the unique life histories of young people to capture the conditions that have led them to become homeless. What is argued to be most helpful is to document youth pathways or individual “journeys” into homelessness. Instead of merely focusing on “individual” characteristics, “structural” factors, or a combination thereof, this new direction of research is promising given that it focuses on charting the life histories of youth as journeys preceding homelessness while probing their experiences after homelessness has occurred.

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