



# Recognizing the Role of Integrated Youth Services in Addressing Youth Homelessness

## HIGHLIGHTS

### Youth homelessness is distinct.

More responsive, tailored and age-appropriate prevention and intervention supports are needed that match the unique strengths and needs of youth as they continue to develop physically, mentally, socially and emotionally.

### Integrated youth services (IYS) networks such as Foundry are uniquely positioned to

offer youth experiencing homelessness or housing precarity a range of accessible health care, wellness and social services while also supporting safety and youth choice.

### Ultimately, youth homelessness is a preventable system issue.

A provincial youth homelessness plan is needed to ensure that young people receive the support they deserve so they can thrive.

## BACKGROUND

### Youth Homelessness Prevention: Supporting Young People to Thrive

More and more young people are experiencing homelessness<sup>a</sup> in Canada — 35,000 to 40,000 young people per year, or as many as 7,000 on any given night, are without a home<sup>1</sup>.

In surveys of individuals experiencing homelessness, nearly half reported that their first time was before the age of 25<sup>2</sup>. We know that the experience of homelessness at a young age can have serious impacts on one's physical, social and emotional well-being, with experiences of violence, exploitation and self-harm being common among youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>3,4</sup> The high degree of stress and trauma linked to experiencing homelessness can lead to, or increase, substance use as a way to cope, putting young people at risk of overdose and other severe harms in the current toxic drug crisis.<sup>3,5</sup> And yet, in many instances, homelessness appears as the safer or only available pathway for a young person without other options.

What is even more concerning is the knowledge that youth homelessness is preventable and that known system-level failures are the most significant contributors.

There is a lack of adequate services to recognize and support youth who are at risk of homelessness<sup>6</sup>. This is despite the fact that a majority of youth experiencing homelessness have had previous involvement in the child protection system and should therefore have already been connected to government services and supports.<sup>1</sup> There is also a shortage of safe, accessible housing for youth that meet a range of housing needs and levels of support (from social supports to more intensive care services and transitional and stabilization services).<sup>6,7</sup> In some smaller communities, there may not be any youth-specific shelters or housing at all.

Concurrent to the lack of safe, accessible housing and supports, common contributors to youth homelessness include family difficulties, mental health and substance use (MHSU) challenges, history of trauma (including intergenerational trauma) or abuse, and experiences of discrimination.<sup>2,8-10</sup> Notably, Indigenous youth are disproportionately impacted by system inadequacies including the racism, discrimination and colonial

<sup>a</sup> We use the term "homelessness" in this brief to reflect language most used in academic, government and community settings, recognizing that terms such as "unhoused" and "unstable/precariouly housed" may be less stigmatizing and/or may better reflect the experience of some young people. We also recognize that the term "homeless" may not adequately account for the experiences of Indigenous Peoples whose definition of "home", especially on their ancestral homelands, can extend beyond physical shelter. For the purposes of this brief, we use the Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness which "refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 12 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence."

## ABOUT US

Foundry is a provincial integrated youth services (IYS) network in British Columbia that offers a range of low-barrier and youth-friendly services for youth ages 12-24 in the areas of mental health, substance use support, peer support, physical and sexual health, and social services, including inclusive employment supports.

**“Youth homelessness is an issue of systems failures, not the failings of the young people experiencing it.”**

**A Parent’s Duty: Government’s Obligation to Youth Transitioning into Adulthood, BC Representative for Children and Youth<sup>11</sup>**

practices that are woven into schools, health care and social services, including the child protection system.

This policy brief reflects on and highlights ways that integrated youth services, such as Foundry, can better support the prevention of youth homelessness, both before it happens and by reducing the amount of time youth may be homeless. It draws on the extensive

work that has been done at the national level to understand this issue and strategize solutions, by organizations such as the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. This document is also guided by Foundry’s current experience providing services to young people and conversations with key partners in youth homelessness and prevention.

# Understanding Youth Homelessness

## Youth Homelessness Is Different from Adult Homelessness

Youth homelessness must be understood separately from adult homelessness, even while recognizing common themes or issues, such as the lack of affordable housing. For youth, key drivers of homelessness include family conflict and unsafe living situations, as well as inadequate transition support from government institutions, particularly the child protection system. A high proportion (83% in British Columbia) of youth experiencing homelessness are “hidden” — temporarily staying with friends, relatives or strangers (i.e., couch surfing) because they have no other options.<sup>3</sup> As they are not ‘on the streets,’ these youth are quite literally uncounted in homeless count monitoring efforts and less likely to be eligible for or able to readily access resources and supports, which are often designed for older adults experiencing chronic or longer-term homelessness. Furthermore, when it comes to accessing support, youth often do not have previous experience living independently or skills to navigate the requisite systems. As young people are still developing physically, mentally, socially and emotionally, the experience of homelessness can seriously impact their overall development, requiring more responsive, tailored and age-appropriate approaches.

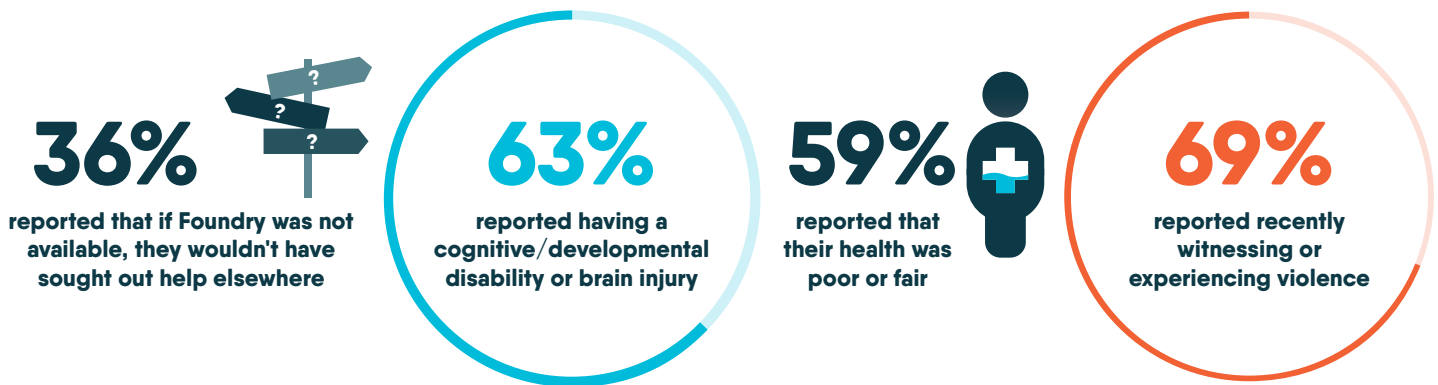
Without comprehensive and youth-specific supports, youth experiencing homelessness are at risk for harms that often intersect with and contribute to ongoing instability. Homelessness increases a young person’s risk of becoming involved with the legal system, dropping out of school and engaging in self-harm (including suicide).<sup>1,12</sup> Youth experiencing homelessness face high levels of violence and victimization, as well as poor health status, including poor nutrition, lack of rest, high levels of stress, injuries (including concussions) and increased exposure to communicable diseases.<sup>1,13</sup> At Foundry,<sup>b</sup> we see similar impacts — youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to have recently witnessed or experienced violence (69% compared to 37% of other Foundry youth), more likely to report their health is fair or poor (59% compared to 44% of other Foundry youth) and more likely to self-report a cognitive or developmental disability or brain injury (63% compared to 43% of other Foundry youth).<sup>c</sup>

- b This policy brief utilizes internal administrative data collected from youth who accessed Foundry services between April 2018 and December 2023. Youth experiencing homelessness (n=993) were defined as those who answered “yes” to being homeless or couch surfing in the past month and/or who indicated that their current housing was couch surfing, a homeless shelter, on the street or a single room occupancy (SRO). Information is provided by youth on a voluntary survey that is usually completed at the first visit.
- c Youth were asked if they had ever been told by a health provider that they may have fetal alcohol syndrome or spectrum or effects, learning disabilities, brain injury, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or cognitive problems.

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FIGURE A: INSIGHTS FROM YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS WHO ARE ACCESSING FOUNDRY



### Disproportionate Impacts: Youth from Equity-Denied Communities

The role of structural and social inequities, including discrimination and oppression, cannot be understated when looking at risk factors for homelessness. Indigenous youth represent between 40-50% of youth experiencing homelessness in BC<sup>1,3</sup> — a result of intergenerational trauma, racism and the harms of an ongoing colonial legacy that includes residential schools, the Sixties Scoop and child welfare practices. Moreover, in this context, homelessness, or a loss of home, not only includes lack of physical shelter but must be also looked at as displacement from ancestral homelands and disconnection from culture, community and spiritual practice.<sup>14</sup> Considering that Indigenous children and youth comprise more than two-thirds of youth in care in BC<sup>15</sup> and that 58% of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada have had child protection involvement in their lives,<sup>1</sup> the cumulative level of systemic harm faced is staggering. While the government has made some progress with respect to enhancing supports for young people transitioning out of the child protection system, more is needed.

Youth transitioning from other forms of institutional care are also at a higher risk of homelessness. Those leaving hospital stays or the legal system are at risk of homelessness due to poor transitional supports and lack of discharge planning.<sup>16,17</sup> Young people from racialized communities, newcomer youth, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and youth with cognitive and developmental disabilities are also significantly over-represented in homelessness numbers.<sup>1,3</sup> For gender-diverse youth in particular, traditional shelter and supportive housing spaces may not be safe or welcoming, with concerns around violence, harassment and discrimination.

Given these legacies, it is perhaps unsurprising that youth experiencing homelessness often avoid accessing services due to fears about, or negative past experiences with, individuals in authority, such as social workers or health care providers.<sup>3,6</sup> The McCreary Society's 2023 report, *Searching for a Place*, shows that among youth experiencing homelessness in BC who needed medical help, 35% did not access the care they needed.<sup>3</sup> Prevention and housing programs need to be informed by the distinct strengths, challenges and needs of equity-denied<sup>d</sup> populations and grounded in cultural, physical and emotional safety.

<sup>d</sup> The term "equity-denied" in this brief is used to describe individuals and communities who face barriers that hinder them from having access to resources and opportunities due to systemic discrimination and oppression. For more details on this and other terms relating to equity, diversity and inclusion, please see this resource: [Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#). Government of Canada; 2023.

# IYS Perspectives on Youth Homelessness

“So much of what Foundry is doing is prevention.”

Foundry Service Provider

## The Need for a Youth-Specific, Integrated Approach

As noted, contributors to youth homelessness span across sectors, including housing, child protection, health care, education and more. This complexity requires a cross-sector, system-level strategy. Yet currently, there is no provincial plan in BC for youth homelessness or a ministry that clearly oversees this issue. We see the need for a youth-specific integrated systems approach, with an emphasis on prevention, to address youth homelessness.<sup>6</sup> Supports for youth experiencing homelessness need to be framed in an approach that is inclusive, culturally competent, trauma-informed, relationship-focused and affirming of gender-diverse young people, with an emphasis on safety and self-determination.<sup>18</sup>

While Foundry’s model was initially aimed around early intervention for MHSU concerns, the need for IYS networks to look more closely at supporting youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness is becoming apparent. Recent 2023 survey data shows that 32% of youth experiencing homelessness in

BC who accessed programs and services had done so at Foundry.<sup>3</sup> Our own internal data indicates that nearly 4 out of 10 young people experiencing homelessness who accessed Foundry services would not have sought help elsewhere if Foundry had not been available.

Considering this information, IYS networks such as Foundry are recognizing how their services contribute to the prevention of youth homelessness. In addition to being lower barrier and accessible to youth, IYS networks strive to offer young people choice and feelings of safety that they may not find in other health care settings, as well as creating youth-friendly spaces and services grounded in trauma-informed and equity-based principles. They offer, in partnership with others, an array of services. With their integrated and wholistic community-based approach, IYS networks offer a valuable opportunity to support youth experiencing homelessness and provide earlier preventative support.

## Partners in Addressing and Preventing Homelessness

The following strategies have been identified as opportunities across the prevention continuum for IYS networks, including Foundry, to contribute to addressing youth homelessness. While some Foundry centres have resources specifically designed to meet the needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness, approaches and partnerships vary across the network. A consistent, resourced approach would support better system-level coordination and navigation, and it would ensure that young people across the province have equitable access to supports when they need them.

### Integrating IYS with schools and other community-based access points to care

Multiple, low-barrier access points to engage youth before or immediately after they experience homelessness are critical. Schools are particularly important points of access and collaboration. For example, **Upstream** — an early prevention program that uses a universal screening tool to identify at-risk youth in schools — saw a 40% decrease in the number of youth experiencing homelessness in Australia<sup>19</sup> and is now being piloted in several communities across Canada. Foundry centres regularly collaborate with local schools, housing services, hospitals, community centres and other access points to create easy pathways to care and ensure

**“It takes a very special type of landlord to be willing to rent to somebody who is under 19 or seen as high risk. We do a lot of vouching for youth.”**

**Foundry Service Provider**

that young people can receive appropriate and timely assessment and connection to services and supports. There is room to further improve and expand upon integration of these access points, by enhancing information sharing, referral processes and partnerships, to understand and quickly respond to community needs as they emerge.

### **Strengthening natural support systems**

The support of family<sup>e</sup>, friends and other caring adults (i.e., natural supports) has been shown to have a positive impact on the well-being of young people, helping prevent future homelessness.<sup>6,8,20</sup> While not all family relationships are safe and supportive, for many young people there is at least one adult — a relative, teacher, family friend or Elder — who is important to them. A nuanced, family inclusive approach to care that is directed by youth and recognizes the diversity of family ties, including intergenerational and kinship relations, can offer substantial benefits. As one example, the **Family and Natural Supports (FNS) program** through A Way Home Canada offers a framework for supporting youth at risk of homelessness to enhance their natural supports as a source of strength.<sup>21</sup> Offering support and training for service providers through programs like FNS, to enhance their comfort and competencies in working with families, is essential. There is an opportunity for Foundry and other youth-serving organizations to incorporate a stronger family inclusive lens in their services.

### **Offering wrap around support and services**

Developmentally appropriate wraparound support is essential to prevent first and subsequent experiences of homelessness among youth.<sup>22-24</sup> This may include health care, MHSU services, life skills training and other supportive services in addition to housing supports. Support for youth not in employment, education or training

(NEET) can help reduce long-term economic hardship and also strengthen self-confidence, sense of belonging and independence.<sup>25,26</sup> Youth transitioning out of the child protection or legal system especially benefit from these wraparound services.<sup>6,27</sup> IYS networks are a natural partner in offering appropriate, youth-specific services, from medical care and peer support to life and employment skills, such as through Foundry’s Work and Education program. In some Foundry centres, there are co-located housing-specific workers and similar supports to help increase accessibility — an element that has been shown to support successful implementation of youth homelessness interventions.<sup>28</sup> Some centres also directly operate youth-specific housing programs and offer wraparound support, further integrating care.

### **Making rent supplements accessible**

Whether youth are living alone, with their families or with roommates, financial assistance for housing can help reduce the risk of eviction and homelessness.<sup>30,31</sup> For rent supplements to be effective, it is important to prioritize accessibility, timeliness, equity and youth choice.<sup>6</sup> Several Foundry centres act as access points for provincial rent supplements for youth, but these offerings vary depending on individual centre or staff experience with the housing system. Stringent criteria for eligibility, lack of funding or lack of youth-specific, flexible implementation that allows for graduated approaches also contribute to limited use and availability. There is an opportunity to more widely and equitably distribute rent supplements from the current provincial housing system to youth, alongside additional services such as MSHU support and case management, where needed and desired by youth.

<sup>e</sup> At Foundry, family is defined uniquely by each young person and can include anyone supporting or advocating for their wellness. Family, whether by birth, choice or circumstance, holds a significant role in supporting a young person by fostering a sense of belonging and hope through their shared experience.

# Community Case Study: Kelowna—Collaboration, Innovation and Action

In 2018, the City of Kelowna launched a homelessness strategy entitled Journey Home. Through the convening process, youth organizations established a coalition (A Way Home Kelowna) and developed a youth-specific homelessness prevention strategy which shifted how the issue was approached in Kelowna. Both strategies are grounded in strong community partnerships and calls for action from service providers, government, First Nations, businesses, academia, people with lived experience and the public. Foundry Kelowna, operated by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Kelowna, has been a key partner, showcasing how IYS sites can be a part of youth homelessness prevention in their communities. We share just a few of the many ways they are doing this work:

- **Youth Housing Connected to IYS Wraparound Supports:** Foundry Kelowna provides access to age-appropriate wraparound supports to help youth in supported housing to focus on well-being, life skills and social inclusion. This includes primary care, MHSU services, case management and an inclusive employment program (Foundry Work and Education). CMHA Kelowna’s own youth housing offerings (including Bright Mindz, a 17-unit micro-suite initiative for transition-age youth; McCurdy Place, 18 units of supportive housing; and Housing First 4 Youth which leverages private market units) facilitate partnerships and service pathways for administrators, providers and young people alike.
- **Family-Specific Approach, Training and Positions:** CMHA Kelowna takes a family-focused approach by delivering a range of services and positions (including family navigators, FNS workers and family peer support workers), offering skill-building and training for staff, and supporting broader learning in the community with partners and clients on the value of family inclusion. Since early 2023, an FNS program has supported youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness to reconnect where possible with family and build essential natural supports. The program has been extremely popular and effective. Much of this family-focused work and the associated staff positions are enabled through time-limited grant-based funding.
- **Community-School Partnerships:** Upstream was identified as a top ten priority in Kelowna’s youth homelessness strategy. Led by BGC Okanagan, Upstream Kelowna has rolled out in a number of schools.<sup>29</sup> The program identifies youth who do not display outward signs of risk of homelessness or school disengagement and works to link them in a youth-friendly manner to wraparound supports provided by community partners, including Foundry Kelowna.

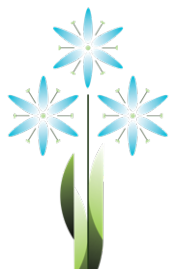


**“A youth had been unhoused for 3 years and hadn’t spoken with family for that entire time. FNS workers supported the young person and family to re-engage and start the process of rebuilding. Due to the support and engagement of FNS, the young person was able to travel home and see their family in person at Christmas for the first time in 3 years.”**

**Foundry Kelowna Service Provider**

# Recommendations

***When youth have stable housing, they can focus on wellness and building their futures instead of worrying about where they are going to live next week, next month or at the end of a time-limited program. Youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness deserve safe health care, accessible employment, education or training opportunities, and social and community connections. Integrated youth services, such as Foundry, are uniquely positioned to offer these services and supports. Based on what we have learned from researchers, advocates, service providers and the large body of literature on youth homelessness, we present the following recommendations for governments, system planners and policymakers.***



## **SPOTLIGHT: YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS**

The 2023 “Housing is Home” Youth Summit, hosted by the Youth Health Research Program at the BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU),<sup>32</sup> focused on the experience of young people (ages 17-24) with lived experience of homelessness and housing instability.

Youth voiced the need to create youth-centred housing options — places that they can personalize to feel more like home and that include social activities, a mix of private and communal spaces, and opportunities for connection and mentorship. Youth also spoke about the importance of inclusion-focused policies, programs and staff training to create safer, more welcoming and accessible shelter, housing and support services for young people, especially for those who face oppression and discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexuality and dis/ability.

## **1. Develop, implement and sustain a provincial youth homelessness prevention strategy.**

A youth-specific provincial strategy is needed to clarify mandates and responsibilities and to support an integrated systems approach to the prevention of youth homelessness.

This plan should be co-developed with youth, families and Indigenous Peoples. It should facilitate coordination between participating ministries and support community-level homelessness plans. In addition, the strategy needs to prioritize the following:

- Youth and young adults as a distinct and priority group for new and existing prevention and housing programs in BC including within BC Housing, Community Living BC and other supports for young adults.
- Processes and specialized services for youth groups impacted by systemic harms, including Indigenous youth, newcomer youth, youth with cognitive/developmental and other disabilities, youth under age 16, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and youth aging out of child protection or being discharged from other government care.
- A continuum of youth-specific housing options that offer youth choice and flexibility based on their current needs including a range of supportive housing, transitional housing and independent housing options, as well as incorporating evidence-based models such as micro-suites and congregate living with peer or staff support, such as the Foyer model.<sup>23</sup>
- Defined resources for the implementation of evidence-based prevention programs, such as school-based screening programs (e.g., Upstream).

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## **2. Dedicated youth housing outreach workers at IYS and youth-friendly community sites.**

Navigating the range of housing providers and services for youth experiencing homelessness is specialized and time intensive work that requires funding commitment, staff and administrative resourcing. Recognizing systemic harms and ensuring that resourcing is culturally agile, safe and humble is also critical. Dedicated outreach workers at IYS or similar youth-friendly, community-based sites, in partnership with local Nations or urban Indigenous organizations, would support young people accessing housing programs and ensure their specific needs related to cultural, physical and emotional safety are addressed. The workers would advocate for youth seeking housing and build relationships with housing providers in their community. This role would focus on both housing and prevention work with youth, administer rent supplements (i.e., through provincial programs such as BC Housing's Supported Rent Supplement program) and provide expertise and relief to other service providers who may not have the capacity to support this work.

## **3. Develop and implement a family inclusive approach in youth services.**

Connection with family and caring adults is important to the mental health and well-being of young people, particularly when they are struggling. Implementing a family inclusive approach within IYS and other youth-serving organizations, that is youth-directed and trauma-informed, can help to strengthen young people's relationships with their families and natural supports to help prevent homelessness. A family inclusive approach must also recognize the multiple definitions of family and the distinct cultural and safety needs of equity-denied communities including the importance of reconnecting youth to community and culture. For more information on this topic, please see Foundry's policy brief *Building Family Inclusive Youth Services* for more information.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge, with much gratitude, that our work takes place on land steeped in rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples today. We recognize that Foundry centres are situated on the traditional and unceded territories of many First Nations communities, and we are humbled and thankful to be able to carry our work forward with Indigenous Peoples who have been stewards of this land since time immemorial.

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