A Review of Literature on Youth Homelessness: Canada, Nova Scotia, and Pictou County

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Pathways

Abuse
Several Canadian studies also show that nearly 70% of homeless youth have experienced some form of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. Some of these studies have also broken down this statistic and found 40% of girls and 19% of boys left their homes because of sexual abuse (St. Thomas University, 2006). This national statistic is reflected in research done in individual provinces. For example, a study of youth homelessness in Calgary (Calgary homeless foundation, 2009) found that 71% of youth have experienced abuse or neglect in the past. Of these, 43% said they had experienced physical abuse at home, 29% stated neglect, and 52% reported experiencing emotional abuse. They also found that 47% of street youth had been physically assaulted by a family member.

The national statistics are also reflected in those collected in Nova Scotia. Our largest urban area is the city of Halifax, so naturally this is where the bulk of youth homelessness research has been conducted. In Halifax’s Report Card on Homelessness (2009), it was found that 86% of street youth had experienced family conflict, violence, or abuse.

Family Breakdown
Experts say that majority of street youth in Canada do not leave happy home to go live on the street. There are many street youth who say that they left home because their parents were not able to care for and protect them, and therefore they have lost respect for their parent(s) or guardian(s). Others report leaving home because they had an argument with their parents (St. Thomas University, 2006).

In a study conducted in Calgary, it was found that 54% had witnessed domestic violence, while another 54% reported being affected by their parents having problems with substance abuse (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). A study in Ontario (TYPS, 2003) found that 16.4% of youth left home because of divorce issues, and another 39% said they left home because of arguing with parents or family and 20% had left because of their parents’ substance abuse.

In Nova Scotia, family breakdown is listed as one of the main causes of youth homelessness in all of the literature reviewed in this report. The Chignecto-Central Regional School Board and Youth Action Committee (2003) saw that family difficulties were a prominent factor affecting youth homelessness. They also found that while some youth were forced out of their homes by authority figures, many homeless youth in this province were also told to leave by their guardians.

Specific research for Pictou County was difficult to find due to the lack of absolute homeless to interview in the few studies conducted in the area. In the final report of the Homeless Youth
It was found that many relatively homeless youth in Pictou County say they have no one to look up to as a positive role model.

**Child Welfare**

62% of homeless youth interviewed in Calgary (CHF, 2009) reported a family history of contact with Child Welfare and 52% of this group had been placed in care as a result. A report from St. Thomas University (2006) states that youth involved in the foster care system are eight times more likely to be at risk of homelessness. This report also suggests a link between homeless youth leaving home early and become sex workers, and youth having lived in at least one foster home. A study conducted in Lanark County, Ontario (TYPS, 2003) reported that youth leaving alternative care, such as foster care, are 60 times more likely to become homeless than other youth. Raising the Roof (2008), stated that 68% of all street youth in Canada have come from foster care and group homes.

Koeller (2007) found that many street-involved youth have a mistrust for social service agencies, like Child Welfare, because of negative experiences in their past. Other literature pertaining to this province also cites involvement in Child Welfare services as a precursor to youth homelessness.

Research specific to Pictou County does not show evidence to support or deny national and provincial findings in this area.

**Education**

According to research at St. Thomas University (2006), students who drop out of high school are ten times more likely to become homeless than those who go on to graduate. They also link the lowest educational attainment to homeless youth who become sex workers. A study in Calgary (CHF, 2009) says that of youth who have become homeless, 45% had been kicked out of school, suspended, or had dropped out.

In Nova Scotia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (2009), it was reported that youth in Nova Scotia who are unable to achieve a high school education are also more likely to face poverty and are at risk for homelessness.

There have been no connections reported in the Pictou County literature reviewed, between education and youth homelessness.
Economic Factors
A national study conducted by Raising the Roof (2008) found that 63% of street-involved youth had grown up in a family that found it hard to maintain housing, and half are still having difficulty keeping consistent housing themselves. In another study, conducted in Lanark County, Ontario (TYPS, 2003), 15.7% of homeless youth interviewed reported money issues as the reason they felt they had to leave home.

When it comes to the economic factors that influence youth homelessness, they seem to be more prominent when focusing on Nova Scotia and Pictou County, in comparison with the rest of the nation. According to the Halifax Report Card on Youth Homelessness (2009), Current legislation in Nova Scotia allows the province to emancipate young people who are government wards at 16 years of age. These youth are likely to have difficulty accessing basic provisions and supports because they are generally no eligible for income assistance until they are 19. To make matters worse, youth under 19 are often denied housing due to their age, leaving them with few to no options for up to three years.

In rural Nova Scotia, there is a lack of availability of safe affordable housing. Many properties are in an extreme poor state of repair, and slum landlords with rental properties in terrible condition are common. It is also common for multiple families to be sharing housing. Poverty is an underlying cause of housing affordability problems, and with rising taxes and the cost of utilities, low income groups are at increased risk. There also seems to be stigma and discrimination that limits access for low income groups to affordable market housing. Migration away from rural areas also seems to create a variety of social and economic problems. Helping agencies in Pictou County also report that public housing is poorly managed, with long waiting lists despite existing vacancies (Robertson and White, 2009).

HEALTH & RECREATION

Homeless youth have similar levels of health care needs when compared against the overall homeless sample but were more likely to have past or present problems with addiction. They also have a higher prevalence of dental treatment needs. About 43% reported a childhood mental illness diagnosis; another 57% reported having seriously thought about attempting suicide and 38% had attempted suicide (CHF, 2009). Compared to children with permanent homes, homeless children suffer more from lack of educational opportunities, infection, obesity, anaemia, injuries, burns, developmental delays and incomplete immunization; youth suffer more injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health problems, and pregnancies (St. Thomas University, 2006). 34% found that they were only sleeping a few hours or hardly at all (TYPS, 2003). Once homeless, youth can experience a range of physical, psychological and emotional health problems related to unsanitary and precarious living conditions, inadequate nutrition,
violence, substance use, risky sexual behaviours, low self-esteem, and ongoing societal rejection and economic marginalization (Begin, Casavant, Chenier, and Dupuis, 1999)

Youth on the street are at higher risk for health problems like STDs, HIV, and Hepatitis. Youth who lack access to the meaningful programming of youth centres often resort to high risk activities because of being idle with nothing to do. There are few social services available or trusted by rural youth in evenings and on weekends (TYPS, 2006). Youth often resort to self medication in order to survive. For example, some youth use drugs to stay awake all night, in order to be able to protect themselves from predators on the street (Raising the Roof, 2008).

Substance Use
94% of youth reported having used a substance (tobacco, alcohol, or drugs) in the past 2 weeks; 29% reported starting using alcohol or drugs prior to age 12; 57% started between ages 12 and 15; and only 14% started after age 15- youth start using drugs at an early age (CHF, 2009). Alcohol, marijuana, and hashish are the most used substance among homeless youth in rural areas. Many also reported using “magic mushrooms. Only 7.4% of youth surveyed are non-smokers (TYPS 2003). More than half of the youth reported substance abuse and addiction as a way coping with homelessness and what causes relapse into street life (Raising the Roof, 2008).

Mental Health
34% of street youth suffer from high levels of depression. Almost half of those who are depressed reported attempting suicide at least once A Montreal study between 1995 and 2000, reported an alarming rate of death among street youth mostly caused by suicide and drug overdose. The homeless youth mortality rate was 11 times higher than the rate of the general population of Quebec (St. Thomas University, 2006). Youth tend to not have sufficient ID to receive medication needed or have not been formally diagnosed. It is estimated that 1/3 of street youth suffer from depression or PTSD and have a high rate of suicide (Raising the Roof, 2008). Small towns and rural areas tend to have higher rates of suicide than urban areas do (TYPS 2006). 46% admitted considering or attempting suicide; twice as many females than males. Only 33% said they sought help; 2/3 did not go for help after thinking about suicide. 23% felt that they had mental health issues, only 30% of these are undiagnosed (TYPS, 2003).

Pregnancy
About 20% of male youth and 33% of females reported engaging in obligatory/survival sex; 45% of females and 13% of males have been asked to be involved in prostitution; about half (48%) of youth reported having been pregnant or having caused pregnancy (CHF, 2009).
When it comes to rural areas like Pictou County, there seems to be significantly higher levels of teen tobacco use in relation to larger urban areas. It is also evident that the overall health status of Canadians living in the most rural and remote parts of Canada is lagging behind that of urban residents. This is also reflected in homeless populations.

**Crime and Violence**

75% of those surveyed in the 2006 Calgary Youth, Health, and the Street Study reported being the victim of violence on the street and 62% reported they had been violent towards others while on the street.

34% of homeless youth reported to have been attacked or stabbed with a knife. More than two-thirds of homeless youth have been threatened with serious harm. Among Canadian street youth, 47% reported being physically assaulted by a family member. Some street youth are afraid of adult homeless shelters. They have reported experiencing violence, and others have reported having their belongings stolen; most homeless adolescents studied indicated that they felt safer staying on the streets in peer network (street families) (St. Thomas University, 2006).

69% of youth had been charged with a crime in their lifetime; of these, 79% had been charged as a young offender, 48% as adults; about 75% spent time in jail/detention; 89% of homeless adults have been in jail (CHF, 2009). Homeless youth find it very difficult to meet their basic needs, so many resort to prostituting, stealing and other forms of crime to support themselves. In provinces like Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and BC, police harass street youth relentlessly, ticketing and arresting them for panhandling, squeegee’ing or loitering (St. Thomas University, 2006). The peak times for the commission of crime by youth are between 2 and 6pm, when youth are left to their own devices (TYPS, 2006).

50% of those surveyed had some type of negative interaction with the legal system; 34% said they have an up-coming court date; 36% had been in custody, and 20% were on probation at the time of the survey. In comparison, other studies have shown that only 14.5% of youth in general have had involvement in delinquent activities. Half of these youth had been arrested nine or more times. 50% of youth felt that police harassed them more frequently because they were homeless. Those in urban centres are more likely to sell drugs, panhandle, or prostitute themselves to make money; this could be why they are more noticed in urban areas (TYPS, 2003).
Education, Employment, and Income

Youth in focus groups suggested that the school system should spend more time on life skills as part of the regular curriculum: how to rent and keep an apartment, how to budget and shop for groceries, how to find and maintain relationships with health professionals, how to parent, and how to find and keep a job -- would serve all youth well, particularly young people who are homeless, youth who will be homeless when their foster care ends at age 18, or those who do not have healthy role models or family support and are moving out of the parental home (St. Thomas University, 2006)

Youth in rural areas have a lower incidence of post-secondary education. High school drop-outs are more prevalent in smaller communities. A sense of alienation and isolation influence the decision to leave school. After school programs in urban areas reduce the feelings of alienation and isolation (TYPS, 2006). Their education suffers because their primary focus is survival; depending on friends and their communities. Nearly 46% of those surveyed felt that their housing situation has had affected their school performance (TYPS, 2003). 62% interviewed had dropped out of school; 73% were not currently employed. 44% said they wanted to address the barrier of employment issues; 28% wanted to address educational support. (Raising the Roof, 2008)

When asked if they would like to find paid employment, 83.4% of homeless males and 87.8% of homeless females said “yes.” 35.5% would do just about any job and 51.8% felt that any job was better than welfare. Reasons that street youth give about why they do not have work include: no fixed address, lack of work experience, and no phone (St. Thomas University, 2006). Transportation was cited as a key issue in being able to take home an income; in rural areas public transportation, like buses, does not exist (TYPS, 2003)

Homeless youth find it very difficult to meet their basic needs, so many resort to prostituting, stealing and other forms of crime to support themselves. 36% of street youth earn money by panhandling or squeegee’ing; 19% do break and enters or sell drugs; 18% receive social assistance; 17% are employed, and 10% do sex trade work (St. Thomas University, 2006).

For unemployed youth, 36% said they receive money from their parents; 26% said from odd jobs; 11% from friends; 9% from social assistance; and 9% from panhandling. 6% of interviewees said that they were currently selling drugs to earn money. A lack of money, affordable housing, and community supports leads youth to get creative in how they support
themselves financially. Those in urban centres are more likely to sell drugs, panhandle, or prostitute themselves to make money; this could be why they are more noticed in urban areas (TYPS, 2003).

**Barriers to Exit**

Invisible homelessness is the most common form of homelessness in Canada. The invisible homeless are people in unsafe housing which does not meet health and safety requirements; people doubled up with friends and family members, sometimes illegally; or individuals doubled up with strangers or casual acquaintances to escape the street. Invisible or “hidden,” homelessness is the most common form of homelessness in Canada. The “hidden homeless” are those living in cars and motels, and bunking with friends. They are people living in unsafe housing and those staying with family members, sometimes illegally (St. Thomas University, 2006).

Many homeless young people have lost respect for their parents or caregivers for failing to provide them with due care, nurturing and protection from abuse and family violence. As a result, these youth no longer accept the possibility of reuniting with their families. Life on the street can therefore become a solution to an intolerable family situation and other living environments (St. Thomas University, 2006). Homeless youth describe their experience as lonely, terrified, unloved, always afraid, miss what I had, no hope, expect the worst. ‘Street Culture’ makes it hard for youth to learn mainstream norms; it makes them easily influenced, makes it difficult to say no to peers when asked for money or other things; they become entrenched and it is difficult to return to mainstream society (Raising the Roof, 2008).

**Economic Factors**

A lack of affordable and supportive housing options appropriate for youth and barriers to access existing opportunities prevent youth from exiting homelessness. The lack of job readiness, education or experience also affects their ability to make progress (CHF, 2009). Reasons that street youth give about why they do not have work include: no fixed address, lack of work experience, and no phone. The “homelessness” that these youth experience often goes beyond the lack of shelter and includes the lack of employment and skills, low educational achievement and little social support. If affordable housing was available, 30-40% of homeless individuals would have a place to live (St. Thomas University, 2006). Once assistance is obtained, it is still difficult or impossible to cover all costs of living (TYPS, 2003).

Youth found that landlords do not generally accept teens as tenants. Lack of money, age, lack of affordable housing available, unemployment/underemployment, and drug use were the top
reasons given by youth for not being able to obtain proper housing. Youth found that landlords did not want to fill out the necessary forms for youth to receive social assistance (TYPS, 2003).

**Gaps and Problems in Services**

There are gaps in child welfare and protection services for youth who are 16-18; those aging out of the foster care system. The eligibility criteria for income assistance for youth under age 18 make it difficult for them to collect benefits. There are additional gaps in social services for those with mental health problems, addictions and dual diagnoses. Lack of discharge planning from correctional facilities is also an issue (CHF, 2009).

Compared to homeless adults and families, homeless youth have a significantly smaller number of shelters available. The foster care system often fails to help youth deal with the problems that caused them to leave home. When young people leave foster care and become homeless, they usually lack the support networks that other people rely on. Having no fixed address means being excluded from all that is associated with having a home: a surrounding neighbourhood and a set of established community networks (St. Thomas University, 2006).

Many social support services are inaccessible and not geared toward the transitional age group. Homeless youth feel that they are denied basic human services, taken for granted by society and feel that they have been stonewalled when trying to access services like social assistance. Homeless youth in Lanark found that the services that were available to them were often underfunded and extremely limited.

Youth found many local services appear unable to connect with the homeless youth. Youth reported needing help with daily living skills; more than 84% said that they would make use of a 24-hour help line that could give them information on a wide variety of housing issues. They especially felt they needed help finding out how to deal with landlord problems and concerns. Physical location of social assistance offices and needing to take time off from school are barriers to accessing these services. There are very strict criteria to get social assistance at 16 and 17; a family investigation is conducted to determine extreme circumstances, the youth requires someone 18 or older, as a trustee to receive the money; they must attend school full-time (missed classes results in loss of benefits). A permanent address is needed to receive full benefits; no money to pay for rent and deposit and few landlords will cooperate with waiting for payment (TYPS, 2003).
Solutions & Best Practices

The CHF (2009) believes that the National Government should adopt an inclusive definition of youth homelessness. Access needs to be increased to children and youth services supports for youth under the age of 18. Our country needs to improve access to transitions to independence supports for older youth up to age 24. We need to adopt a zero discharge into homelessness policy in foster care, group homes, health and correctional facilities. It is also suggested that housing stability outcomes are developed to ensure that this policy is implemented (CHF, 2009).

Canada needs to improve the accessibility and availability of a continuum of housing for homeless and ‘at risk’ youth, and ensure that all youth have access to street level supports and youth emergency shelters. Our government, in collaboration with communities, must ensure supports for homeless and at risk youth are adequately resourced and qualified to service complex, high acuity clients (CHF, 2009).

We need to make the creation of addictions treatment and detox facilities targeted for youth a priority in this country. It is necessary that access to income and rent supports for youth transitioning to independence is efficient and accessible. We need to ensure appropriate case management supports are available for youth to prevent and end homelessness, particularly focused on discharge points (CHF, 2009).

One suggestion made by the CHF (2009) was the implementation and resourcing of a Homeless Management Information System to facilitate the development of common intake and assessment processes for all youth. They also suggest that the development of youth-focused Housing Locators and Landlord Liaisons initiatives would add to this system.

The CHF (2009) conclude that we, as a country, need to develop multi-faceted, intensive models of support that are youth-focused and based on individual needs. They recommend improving mainstream service co-ordination, enhancing case management, and developing a national strategy to address mental health and addictions treatment.

Investing in youth makes sound economic sense; by providing critical educational and employment training and opportunities, access to stable, secure housing and by helping them to develop essential life skills, launches them on a positive path towards becoming contributing members of society (CHF, 2009).

When street involved youth were asked what they needed to leave the street, 26% said financial assistance, 22% good employment, 19% affordable housing or rent assistance, 12% supports and incentives, 4% said they needed nothing, 3% would need treatment for substance abuse problems. These are all things that should be offered universally across the country (CHF, 2009).
St. Thomas University (2006) concluded that the best way to prevent youth homelessness is to stabilize families. Focus group research with parents and youth concluded with the idea that we need more education in the school system about homelessness to help those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and to help reduce the stigma they feel among students who are not at the same risk. The youth in these focus groups suggested that the school system should spend more time on life skills, such as grocery shopping, budgeting, and dealing with landlords, as part of the regular curriculum. These skills would serve all youth well, particularly those who are homeless, youth who will be homeless when their foster care ends at age 18, or those who do not have healthy role models or family support and are moving out of the parental home (St. Thomas University, 2006).

In 1992, the United Nations issued a “Resolution on the Plight of Street Children”, expressing concern over amount of street children, and the marginalization and acts of violence against them. The Resolution called for international cooperation to deal with the needs of homeless children and for enforcement of international child rights laws. Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) declares that “States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.” Homelessness contradicts every one of those rights (St. Thomas University, 2006).

Experts of Raising the Roof (2008) feel that if supports are offered in the home town, youth are less likely to move to larger urban areas and therefore some of the high risk behaviours would decrease. There is too much money being spent on putting young people through the justice system and not enough on teaching them to be healthy and responsible (Raising the Roof, 2008).

We need to look at the health indicators that differ across the urban-to-rural gradient. One belief is that youth centres are an example of a way to foster resilience in high-risk youth and the ones who frequent them will be less likely to participate in substance use (Raising the Roof, 2008).

In order for strategies to fight Youth Homelessness to be effective, we must involve youth, particularly those who are experiencing, or have experienced homelessness. We also need to involve those whose role it would be to liaise between homeless youth and existing services. We need to gain support for resources that are best connected with homeless youth, and build on those services (CHF, 2009).

The CHF (2009) suggests transitional housing arrangements, in the form of dorm-style buildings, to assist youth to get from homelessness to independent living. In their interviews, they found that most youth wanted to have services accessible in the building like counsellors and most wanted services available in person or by phone 24 hours per day. There was a prominently expressed need for independence and a need for help to get there (CHF, 2009).
There is a need for secure, long-term and flexible funding to enable successful programs for street-involved youth to continue to develop and grow. The ideal would be to have a “one-stop barrier-free access to services within their own community”. These services would include, but are not limited to: educational opportunities and grant programs, programs that target early school leavers, and job training and employment opportunities (Raising the Roof, 2008).

Raising The Roof (2008) expressed the need for national housing strategy that includes a continuum of housing specifically for street-involved youth. This continuum could include youth shelters, transitional housing, co-op housing, safe and affordable housing, as well as supportive housing for youth leaving child protection, foster care and group homes. They believe that Youth participation in program and services development is essential. Supports offered to homeless youth and youth at risk should be culturally appropriate, meaningful, and intensive.

It was suggested that street-involved youth could build self-esteem and develop life skills through mentorship support. Youth need guidance and by providing these supports now, we can prevent homeless youth from becoming homeless adults. It is essential to provide the right interventions at the crucial moments in a young person’s life, in order for them to go on to lead a healthy and productive life as adults. Programs that provide stability, opportunity, and support have been proven to help youth to overcome the negative effects of being homeless and support them in their future (Raising the Roof, 2008).

We need leadership and collaboration among our federal, provincial, and municipal governments in developing a Canada-wide plan to address youth homelessness. We need to develop distinct policies around youth homelessness to address the unique needs of this population. Another suggestion made by Raising the Roof (2008) was to encourage the private sector to partake in developing innovative solutions

There needs to be system reform so that there are comprehensive, youth-focused supports for youth leaving care. Youth need to continue to have supports in place after they have left the care of foster homes and group homes. We need provincially and federally coordinated funding to support these needs (Raising the Roof, 2008).

The professionals within Raising the Roof (2008) believe that by developing a supportive framework, we would be able to encourage the private sector to help out with creative solutions to youth homelessness, like job training and employment opportunities in a supportive environment. We could also help to stabilize homeless youth by putting supports in place that will allow the youth to continue living at home, and also to support youth to live outside of the home if home is not a safe place.

Non-traditional approaches to education and identifying learning needs would be beneficial to youth who are entrenched in street life. It would be supportive to provide some form of transportation for youth to access services, to put culturally specific supports in place, and insure
that programs and supports are needs-based, easily accessible, and youth-focused. It is important to take care of the youth’s basic needs first and use harm reduction techniques. We need a youth housing continuum and supports to help youth to transition out of homelessness, including a housing option for youth discharged from correctional facilities (Raising the Roof, 2008).

In conclusion, we need to have youth-centred and youth-friendly interventions that use a variety of agencies and connect with services that are flexible and accessible. We need to coordinate funding provincially and federally to support the needs of our communities and to foster collaboration between government departments and community stakeholders.

Rationale for a Youth Resource Centre in Pictou County

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) asserts that “States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development” (United Nations, 1989). Homelessness denies each one of those rights.

Emerging gaps in emergency response are: lack of consistency, risk factors and liability, expansions of mandates, lack of funding support, transportation, resource coordination and communication, and lack of longer-term solutions. Pictou County, like other communities of Northern Nova Scotia, has identified a lack of 24-hour resources, a lack of shelter options for youth at-risk, a lack of true understanding of the need in the community, a lack of youth specific resources in the community, and a lack of transportation for youth not living in larger centers, as barriers in combating youth homelessness (Robertson & White, 2009).

Invisible or “hidden,” homelessness is the most common form of homelessness in Canada. Our country’s homeless population is increasing in size and is composed of a higher proportion of teenagers, women and their children compared to previous decades. Canada is now at the point where nearly a third of our country’s homeless are 16-24 years of age. That's about 65,000 young people without the stability of a place to call home (St. Thomas University, 2006).

National estimates say that it costs $30,000-$40,000 per year to keep a youth in the shelter system and emergency beds are extremely limited given the size of the youth homeless population (CHF, 2009). A youth resource centre in Pictou County would help to decrease the number of homeless youth in our community by using prevention techniques. By linking at-risk youth with the appropriate services and supports, we can work together to keep youth at home when it is safe to do so and support youth living outside of the home when it is not.
It is not cost-effective for our health care system to leave this problem unresolved. A rough estimate suggests Canadians are spending about $1-billion a year in taxes to deal with the homelessness crisis. The health care costs of a homeless person are approximately $4,714 a year; an average Canadian citizen uses $2,633 per year in publicly-financed health care services (St. Thomas University, 2009).

Too much money is spent on dealing with young people in the justice system and not enough on teaching them to be healthy and responsible. Youth Crime occurs most often during the hours between the end of the school day and the end of the work day (2pm – 6pm), when youth are left to their own devices. Youth are also more likely to commit crimes when they are desperate, either for income or for attention. There are many youth who end up in our justice system who could have avoided being there. The cost of keeping one youth in detention is estimated over $250 per day or $100,000 per year and many of these incidents of crime could have been prevented (TYPS, 2006).

Access to housing and other supports is further limited based on age and child welfare status. For youth who are between 16 and 18 years of age without previous status, there is no organizational or provincial mandate to keep them off the streets. There is a gap in service in our community where these youth are too old for child welfare, and too young for adult welfare. Sure, there are options for youth to apply for adult welfare, but first they must have a permanent address and an adult to sign for them. These requirements alone are hindering, considering that a youth who is already homeless would not have access to these resources. There is also the likelihood that youth do not realize that this is an option for them, and or they do not know how to begin the application process (TYPS, 2003).

Studies have shown that landlords do not generally accept teens as tenants. Their lack of money, their age, lack of affordable housing available, unemployment/underemployment, and drug use were the top reasons given by youth for not being able to obtain proper housing. Youth in focus groups suggested that the school system should spend more time on life skills as part of the regular curriculum (St. Thomas University, 2006).

Some subjects that have been suggested are: how to rent and keep an apartment, how to budget and shop for groceries, how to find and maintain relationships with health professionals, how to parent, and how to find and keep a job. Teachings like these would serve all youth well, particularly young people who are homeless, youth who will be homeless when their foster care ends at age 18, or those who do not have healthy role models or family support and are moving out of the parental home (St. Thomas University, 2006).

Our teachers have enough to worry about with helping our young people to obtain a quality education around the academic subjects. Therefore, if there is no time or resources in our school system to deal with these issues, then there needs to be something else put in place to help at-risk
Youth. A youth resource centre would be a major step toward preventing youth homelessness, and the shelter component could help youth who have no other options.

At least 40 – 50% of homeless youth in cities are originally from other areas of the country and many of those are from small towns and rural areas (TYPS, 2006). Pictou County Roots for Youth Society believes that problem prevention needs to start at home, in small towns. If supports are offered in the home town, youth are less likely to migrate to larger urban areas and thereby reduce some of the high risk behaviours.

Agencies in Pictou County say that service gaps include no emergency shelter and lack of affordable housing. Agencies were in agreement that the government needs to invest in housing or increase income assistance. They also recommend taking a collaborative community approach. Also among their recommendations were to acquire funds to establish a youth shelter and to develop an emergency response protocol that allows young people to stay in their home communities (Robertson & White, 2009).

There are services in Pictou County that aid in dealing with some of the underlying issues related to Youth Homelessness. However, we feel that there is a need for a one-stop-shop where youth can be linked to the services they need, and to fill in the gaps that exist in those services.

The closest shelter that we have for homeless youth is nearly 170 kilometres away from our community, away from support systems, away from where our children’s roots are planted. Youth aged 16 to 18 years, without child welfare status, are being shipped to larger urban areas like Halifax because there are services there for youth. But what happens if those resources do not pan out? To become homeless in a rural town should not mean to be ripped out of your community and replanted in a strange place where nobody knows your name. We want our youth to stay in Pictou County where they have access to family, friends, church, and community centres who can help them to get to adulthood safely. The only options for a youth leaving home forced or willingly and with nowhere to go are to find a low-cost temporary shelter like a hostel (the only one we have is in Pictou which is seasonal and prefers its guests to be 18 or older). Homeless youth need the same things all children and youth thrive on. They need roots, security, protection, commitment, understanding, and a great deal more patience than most kids. They need opportunities and choices.
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