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Assessing Youth Homelessness in Red Deer, Alberta

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this research report is to provide a specific overview of the following questions about youth homelessness in Red Deer from the perspectives of: (1) youth homeless; and, (2) stakeholders working with youth homeless; and/or those individuals responsible for the design and implementation of municipal youth homeless policies/strategies:

- 1) What is the scope of the problem?
- 2) What are the youth homeless demographics?
- 3) Can we identify factors that put youth at risk?
- 4) Do different categories exist? If so how do we generally define the problems?
- 5) Do youth see themselves as homeless?
- 6) What are the mechanisms employed to remain socially functional while in a homeless state?

The youth understand that they need improved life skills if they are to successfully exit the street, something all stakeholders agreed with. The main problem is that the youth have limited skills sets and resources available to them (the most important one being a lack of time) to grow these skills. Their schedules normally do not align with program timetables and agency schedules. The youth require assistance to manage their homelessness, but do not know which agencies to approach for help. Clarifying what resources are available is needed. Once engaged the youth do not want to be consistently reminded that they are homeless due to the associated trauma, and this is reflected in their seeking anonymity and avoiding agencies. Not admitting to being homeless is empowering for the youth: spinning a negative experience into a positive outcome demonstrates their resilience. It may however keep some from pursuing and accessing much needed supports. Every intake consequently becomes a stark reminder of their situation, which can lead the youth to re-experiencing trauma after they have been drawn out of a self-identified comfort zone. The youth feel commodified rather than valued community members. Support workers fail to identify mental health issues. Instead they describe confused and overwhelmed youth who will grow out of this particular stage, or later in their personal development, manifest mental illness. Those mentally ill homeless youth who lack a proper diagnosis are unable to access appropriate services.

The youths are the catalysts of communication and inter-agency dialogue. They are also caught in between (stuck in a liminal space) albeit very much aware of the role that they play in this political debate. Many have consequently become resentful that their misfortune is being exploited. The youth are impatient and have unrealistic expectations of what the system can do for them. They already feel like a burden to society, feelings that are exacerbated when they are led to feel that they are imposing on busy caseworkers' schedules. Agencies working with the youth have yet to fully acknowledge the influence their street schedules play and maintain an 8:30-5 weekday schedule. The youth may not be self-identifying as homeless because they are confusing homelessness with a lack of shelter. After care follow-ups do not occur once the youths are permanently housed, something they stated they would not oppose. This could help them successfully transition into permanent housing while helping them to maintain their relationships with support workers to whom they have grown close.

Despite the multiple intakes, there is very little data being produced for analysis or for tracking program and agency efficiency. Youth homelessness as a policy concern must be separated from adult homelessness.

There is a need to enhance communication and data tracking/management to better serve the youth *vis-à-vis* enhanced information flows. Stakeholders do not have a clear road map of the agencies working with the youth. Local capacity is thus undervalued and remains underexploited. Ad hoc strategies lacking theoretical or grounded foundations are the norm. The stakeholders indicated that a visioning process would improve the response to youth homelessness. Currently there is no agreed upon definition of youth, youth homelessness, or how to systematically deal with the issue of youth homelessness. No central coordinating body exists to assist with aligning multiple agency mandates. The process has thus been distilled down to its simplest form: a youth enters the system and our ideal outcome is to have the youth exit the system skills-prepared for social reentry. With this in mind the agencies have yet to articulate their mandates within the larger scope of ending youth homelessness. This field of independently operating agencies frequently duplicates services while at other times providing innovative services in an understated and frequently hidden manner. There is currently no central agency or community vision in place to help draw these disparate agencies into a common orbit. The stakeholders indicated the need for a uniform screening, referral, and intake process to ensure the youth entering the system have access to targeted services irrespective of their first point of contact.

The stakeholders asked for a coordinating body such as a youth coalition. There was also a declared need for statistical data to track agency and system effectiveness and a road map of agencies and their mandates to guide the youth to suitable programs and resources. What was being requested was a means of establishing a systems approach to ending youth homelessness. A centralized, virtual, and open access database is required that can connect everybody involved in the fight against youth homelessness. A centralized information hub of this kind could help to harmonize these multiple agents' mandates while improving the flow of information. The goal is to avoid amplifying inter-agency competition but rather to draw the agencies closer together.

A physical space is needed where the youth can find the necessary information and supports. A youth hub, for instance, can act as a place to access supports in a low-pressure environment. It also enables youth resistant to admitting their homelessness to slowly come to grips with their homelessness. The proposed centralized registry can be accessed at this site so that individuals working with the youth have access to pertinent details to help ensure that the youth do not have to be re-interviewed. Permitting the youth to come and go, a youth hub would provide a sense of community where the rhythms of everyday life are replicated thus instilling in the youth a sense of the importance/role that time plays. It could also partially mitigate the instability associated with being homeless. It is a space to engage the youth where they can feel accepted.

Currently there is an aversion to employing statistics and other forms of data, which may be attributable to the time and energy it takes to properly evaluate data. Many suggested that it is important to expand our current knowledge by tracking trends more aggressively, and that a common intake is a primary time to establish data sets that enable us to differentiate for instance the levels of freedom and interpretive flexibility of the various agencies. Restructuring, coordination, rebranding, all can alleviate significant barriers and begin to measure the changes.

PART A: OVERVIEW

1.0 Introduction

In 2007 Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach and the Province of Alberta announced the creation of a 10-year plan to coordinate initiatives to address provincial homelessness. After creating the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, the Province committed \$285 million that year to address immediate housing pressures. The Alberta government's affordable housing strategy led to the development of more than 11,000 units over the next five years. Homelessness remains a high profile issue, with a mandate to minimize and prevent homelessness. A range of projects, programs, and approaches has since been created leading to an increase in additional housing units, and the 'right housing' options and supports.¹

The Province of Alberta's 10-year plan to end homelessness focuses on implementing and improving housing first programs. The housing first philosophy understands poverty and lack of affordable housing to be the root causes of homelessness. As a result, housing first aims to transition individuals into safe, secure and permanent housing (Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2008). This five-stage model is promising. Its various phases encourage individual agency while offering the treatment needed to ensure successful transition to becoming a renter. Individuals and families do not need to demonstrate that they are 'ready' for housing and clients have some choice regarding the location and type of housing they receive. Supports are individually based and available upon request. Harm reduction helps to reduce the risks and the destructive effects of substance use and addictive behaviors. Finally, social integration into their community is the goal, which requires socially supportive engagement and the prospect of participating in meaningful activities (Gaetz, 2012).

In recent years cities such as and including Red Deer have been reporting diminishing numbers of homeless people, suggesting that the chosen approach is becoming effective. These programs in part offer what the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) describes as the infrastructure needed to prevent and shorten the homeless experience while assisting people to meet their basic needs; or directing individuals to other required support services. When we evaluate the Red Deer approach, we find it aligns nicely with the CAEH's 10 essential points to ending homelessness.²

There are however drawbacks such as extensive intake processes that can be off-putting to youth seeking immediate responses; a lack of shelter beds; and, once in the system, limited available units designated for homeless youth. The CAEH does not sponsor transitional housing, nor is it necessary for Housing First, which also skips the transitional stage to place homeless people directly into permanent housing (this can be private apartments and/or permanent supportive housing). In the Red Deer context, there is a noticeable lack of municipal youth-specific services. The Province of Alberta has initiated the process of crafting a framework to address youth homeless (Alberta Ministry of Human Services, 2012), but at this time a policy

¹ Comprehensive municipal and provincial planning approaches such as these are not widespread across Canada.

² According to the CAEH in order to end homelessness, a community needs a clear, deliberate, and comprehensive strategy. The 10 essentials to a successful Plan to End Homelessness are: planning; data, research & best practices; coordinated system of care; income; emergency prevention; systems prevention; housing focused outreach; rapid re-housing; housing support services; and permanent housing.

mandate directed at youth homelessness specifically does not exist.

As a result homeless youth must navigate a complex network of agencies, services, and individuals to meet their needs. Many agencies and services have attempted to implement youth-specific programming that unfortunately does not focus specifically on homelessness. Agencies offering youth homeless supports are often non-communicative and geographically dispersed. Each agency tends to operate individually, their programming frequently overlapping with what they deem to be their competitors. Outside of a general age range, defining what a 'homeless youth' is varies greatly among agencies. Each agency has specific criteria concerning the age range and anticipated youth needs (Lipsky, 1980).

The purpose of this research report is to explore these issues within the Red Deer context, the goal being to provide a specific overview of the following questions about youth homelessness from the perspectives of: (1) the youth; and, (2) stakeholders working with the youth; and/or those individuals in charge of designing/implementing municipal youth homeless policies/strategies:

- 1) What is the scope of the problem?
- 2) What are the youth homeless demographics?
- 3) Can we identify factors that put youth at risk?
- 4) Do different categories exist? If so how do we generally define the problems?
- 5) Do youth see themselves as homeless?
- 6) What are the mechanisms employed to remain socially functional while in a homeless state?

2.0 Methodology

Building on the work of Cooke and Belanger (2006), this project used qualitative interviews and focus groups and relied on contemporary formulations about relationships between people, places and identities, to develop a more nuanced approach to interpreting the youth homeless experience, and to better understand the interrelationship between current youth homeless trends; and their impact on service delivery and programming. A distinctive feature of this study is that results are based upon the views and perceptions of homeless youth and key stakeholders, which include service delivery agents, to obtain an on-the-ground outlook about these experiences regarding living and/or transitioning into a homeless state; to locate their experiences within and responses to social dynamics influencing this homeless experience; and to improve our understanding of the role social systems and service delivery models continue to play in perpetuating youth homelessness.

A research assistant in Red Deer attracted project participants by word-of-mouth, a process that was initiated by posting notices at municipal organizations and service providers, and utilizing youth social networks to grow a larger sample. We conducted 10 homeless youth interviews, held two youth and one stakeholder focus group, and conducted 15 stakeholder interviews. The data collection instrument was the person-centered interview, an exploratory, discussion-based method designed to “clarify the relations of individuality, both as output and input, to its sociocultural context” while eliciting behaviors and attitudes that suggest “hidden or latent dimensions of the organization of persons and of the sociocultural matrix and their interactions” (Levy & Hollan, 1998, p. 334). The participant voices, “tell the story” of the issues and concerns influencing their homelessness. Each interview lasted roughly one hour, and the participants’ short-answers (i.e., to questions posed during the interview) were noted “in the moment” (pen and paper and/or typed into a word file).

The interviews followed a format in which the researcher engaged each participant in a discussion while subtly posing, in no particular order, a number of pre-determined questions designed to keep the interviewer attuned to the major themes being investigated while eliciting the participants’ stories that, in this instance, act as a source of understanding and insight into personal decision-making (Cortazzi, 2001). Ferrier has argued, “knowledge is constructed by people and groups of people; reality is multiperspectival; truth is grounded in everyday life and social relations; life is a text, but thinking is an interpretative act; facts and values are inseparable; and science and all other human activities are value laden” (quoted in Mitchell & Egudo, 2003, p. 1). The focus group interviews, with approximately 4 people per group, served to engage participants in a dialogical exchange concerning findings from the person-centered interviews (i.e., voiced confirmation, contradictions, tensions, and insights regarding these initial findings).

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The lead researcher then reviewed and finalized the coding process using NVivo10 software, after which a thematic analysis was produced exploring youth homelessness. The coding process identifies important comments or interview moments prior to proceeding with data interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Encoding enabled the organization and categorization of data from which central themes were identified and developed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, and transcripts were read and re-read to ensure accuracy and thematic applicability to the original data.

To answer each research question, we triangulated three qualitative methods (person-centered interviewing, focus group interviews, and newspaper articles/Point In Time (PIT) counts/municipal reports) along with the application of two parallel data analysis processes (thematic or qualitative content analysis; and, critical discourse analysis). These approaches assisted us to identify and decode understandings about the efficacy of attempts to create youth-oriented policy and planning instruments that will assist these communities to advance in the domain of youth homelessness policy-making and programming. Thus, our proposed method aligns with both the theoretical frame and intent of the study: to understand the experiences of youth homeless seeking improved programming to mitigate homelessness, or access to services not available in their home communities; to determine their reasons for abandoning their home; to locate their experiences within and responses to social dynamics influencing the quest for a better life; and to further understand the role that urban officials and service-delivery agents play in mitigating and perpetuating identified youth homelessness.

Acknowledging the high rates of Aboriginal homeless amongst the Canadian homeless community we sought to explore the dynamics within this cohort. A specific group of questions was developed to elaborate this experience: under what conditions does an Aboriginal youth become homeless in Red Deer? What are the similarities or differences between the pathways for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth into homelessness? Does being Aboriginal predispose one to becoming homeless, and are there multiple/confounding factors? How do existing programs or the dearth of programs influence Aboriginal homelessness? What have been the Aboriginal youth experiences with the Red Deer region social services system? Is the Red Deer region social services system effective in addressing the needs of Aboriginal youth? And, would Aboriginal youth want anything under the current system changed and why?

2.1 Ethics

The proposed research involved human subjects. Ethical practices were strictly observed during this project. Ethics approval for the study was sought from the Human Subject Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge, which requires that all proposals involving research with human subjects adhere to the Tri-Council guidelines for Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. A second ethical pillar informs this research, specifically the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) Integrated Research Plan: Ethical Guidelines for Research (1996). Combined our ethical approach involves:

1. Fully explaining the purpose of the research, the risks/benefits of the research to participants, and the time commitments required so as to obtain fully informed written consent from all participants.
2. The strict confidentiality and security of collected data.
3. The elimination of all personally identifying information once data collection is complete.
4. The anticipated use of the data collected.
5. Explaining to participants their rights and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time.
6. Alerting participants to the website where they can see the final report for this study.

7. Providing participants with the names of the principal investigator, along with his institutional affiliation, and contact information for questions/clarification about the research project.

3.0 Homeless Youth: The Policy Environment

Youth homelessness has garnered improved academic attention in the last 15 years, and the Province of Alberta has acknowledged youth homelessness a key site of investigation and policy intervention. Still the issue remains a concern and demands an urgent response. Data collected in 2006 homeless and shelter counts indicated that of the more than 8,400 homeless in Alberta 10% (n=840) were young adults. Though the exact numbers elude us it has been estimated that 11% are families with school age children, which could grow current numbers by upwards of 1,500 individuals (children under the age of 13 and youth raging in age 13-23) (Alberta, 2014). It has been hypothesized that a full 80% of the youth homeless community remains invisible (e.g., sleeping rough, intentionally living apart from mainstream populations) (Raising the Roof 2004). Youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are considered the fastest growing segment of the national homeless population (Karabanow & Kidd, 2014).

Provincial data offer a rough albeit incomplete summary of the scope of the problem. Comprehension of these issues is superior at the municipal level due in part to annual point-in-time censuses (i.e., a 'count' of municipal homeless persons). The purpose of each census is to determine the estimated number of people who on the night of the count did not have "a permanent residence of which they could return." In this context most municipal officials expansively define homelessness to include people who are living on the streets, as well as those staying in emergency shelters, accordingly any individuals who did not have a permanent residence who would otherwise be living on the streets.

The City of Red Deer and Red Deer and District Community Foundation conducted a PIT homeless count for Red Deer in October 2012. A total of 279 people were enumerated as homeless: 37.1% were identified as youth under the age of 25. The count revealed that over 50% of the homeless youth self-identified as Aboriginal. Initial investigation combined with anecdotal evidence suggests that youth homelessness is a budding issue. Administrative data from the Youth and Volunteer Center Winter Inn program revealed over-representation of Aboriginal homeless youth in terms of service utilization. Between December 2011 and March 2012, 9 out of 34 youth served indicated Aboriginal identity (City of Red Deer, 2012). This evidence poses a major question: why is this ethnic group so overwhelmingly represented in the homeless population?

3.1 Definition of Youth

Youth in Alberta are defined as anyone between the ages of 13 and 25, even though the legal definition of adulthood is 18 years of age. Traditionally turning 18 was considered an easy transitional period at which time teenagers became adults. As the United Way has concluded, however, "This extended period of transition may be particularly difficult for vulnerable youth who are less able to draw upon family resources and this vulnerability is compounded when public policy has not been updated to meet these changing needs" (Doucette, 2010). For instance, despite the provincial definitions listed above there is a lack of bureaucratic agreement concerning the age range for youth (e.g., Employment and Immigration is 16-24;

Alberta Health Services is up to 24; Children and Youth Services [Youth Secretariat] is 13-22). Many non-profits serving youths reflect these trends, and age ranges vary from 5-20 to 18-30. Failure to align our definitions of what a youth is, if you will, is alarming. Such ambiguities have in turn forced us to adjust adult homeless strategies to accommodate youth homeless. This is evident in the *Plan for Alberta*, which mentions youth only five times albeit within a proactive context (i.e., there is a need to establish youth homeless-specific frameworks and a youth homeless strategy). Youth homeless, while not completely forgotten, are not represented as fully as the adult homeless population.

4.0 Youth Homelessness: Literature Review

**Note: this report has been structured so that readers may skip over sections 4 & 5.*

During the last two decades we have come to accept homeless youth as less personally volatile and/or purveyors of an individual lifestyle. Instead, we explain homelessness as a by-product of systemic issues (e.g., lack of employment), personal issues (e.g., family violence and/or dysfunction), social issues (e.g., poor educational performance), and health issues (e.g., addictions and mental health). Karabanow and Kidd (2014, p. 16) suggest that there is a “growing acceptance that youth are homeless because of reasons beyond their own control.” In sum, “today’s street kid is often thought to be fleeing an abusive, dysfunctional family life or a miserable institutional situation and finding refuge on the street or in a short-term emergency shelter” (ibid., 16). Youth homelessness is therefore unique when compared to homelessness among the general population (Alberta Ministry of Human Services, 2012; Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, 2008; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, 2012; Social Housing In Action Committee, 2009). A number of issues such as mental health, substance abuse, and lack of employment and/or employable skills are shared between the general and the youth homeless population. However, agency reports note that youths’ problems are most often associated with having experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse (Broadview Applied Research Group Inc., 2005; Clarke & Cooper, 2000; Higgitt, Wingert, Ristock, & Brown, 2003; McCarthy, 1995; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006).

Similarities have been identified between adult and youth homeless issues and services, and distinctive interventions are required. Interestingly, despite the impressive work done to date exploring the causes of and how to respond to youth homelessness, a prolonged discussion concerning our duty of care responsibility for homeless youth is conspicuously absent from the policy discussion (this is of special concern in light of revelations identifying street youth as frequently victimized) (Gaetz, O’Grady, & Buccieri, 2010; O’Grady, Gaetz, & Buccieri, 2010). Absent also is a dialogue about the moral implications associated with allowing youth homelessness to persist in what has been identified by international actors and likewise promoted by federal and provincial officials as an affluent and socially conscious society.

4.1 External Influences

Connecting homeless youth to criminality or delinquency has given way to acknowledging that youth more accurately are ‘running away’ from troubling environments (Karabanow 2003). This is influenced by unstable families whose parents abuse drugs and alcohol and have high rates of criminality (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999). Poverty tends to be

prominent, as does family dissolution (i.e., divorce, domestic violence) (e.g., Dadds, Braddock, Cuers, Elliott, & Kelly, 1993; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Ringwalt, Green, & Robertson, 1998). Physical, sexual and emotional abuse are commonly reported (Karabanow, 2003, 2004; Kidd, 2006; MacLean et al., 1999; Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, & Watters, 1998; Ringwalt et al., 1998). Educational and health outcomes consequently suffer, which impairs social development and engagement (Feitel, Margetson, Chamas, & Lipman, 1992; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Rotheram-Borus, 1993). The youths' self-proclaimed sense of insecurity resulting from numerous house moves (Buckner & Bassuk, 1997; Karabanow, 2004) and the frequent movement characteristic of the welfare system exacerbates issues (Edney, 1988a, 1988b; Morrissette & McIntyre, 1989). Mental illness is frequently discussed in the academic literature, both prior to and after becoming homeless and which street life aggravates (Craig & Hodson, 1998; Karabanow et al., 2007). Recent research estimates that approximately 20% of homeless youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning or two-spirited (LGBTQ2), and who in many cases are homeless due to abuse and/or family intolerance of their sexual orientation (Karabanow, 2008). More likely to experience street violence, they tend to participate in higher risk activities and demonstrate poorer mental health outcomes (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Kruks, 1991; Noell & Ochs, 2001). The youth as a result often perceive street life "as a safer and more stable environment than home" (Karabanow & Kidd, 2014, p. 18).

4.2 Life on the Street

Upon entering the street the youth frequently discover the difficulty navigating an environment of seeming freedom and personal security (Karabanow, 2006, 2008; Visano, 1990). This is confirmed by the large numbers of homeless youth who both lack shelter and confront food insecurity (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998). While it is perhaps foolish to imply that each homeless youth experiences the street similarly we are all the same able to generalize for the purposes of setting the overarching context.

Street life has been characterized simultaneously as a site of boredom and excitement, tolerance and rejection, violence and safety (Karabanow, 2003, 2006; Karabanow et al., 2007). Street youth live in this tenuous economic environment that is typified by a lack of employment opportunities demanding they support themselves by obtaining money from friends and family, panhandling dealing drugs, theft, prostitution and survival sex (i.e., sex to temporarily get off the street, for food) (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Kipke, Unger, O'Connor, Palmer, & LaFrance, 1997). Homeless youth are as a result vulnerable to physical and sexual assaults and other types of victimization (Karabanow et al., 2007; O'Grady et al., 2010; L. B. Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000). The youth present high rates of addiction (Adlaf, Zdanowicz, & Smart, 1996; Karabanow et al., 2007). Addictions are also attributable to mental illness, which manifests as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal behavior (Karabanow et al., 2007; Kidd, 2004; L. B. Whitbeck et al., 2000; Yoder, 1999). Notably suicide and drug use have been identified as the leading cause of death among homeless youth (Shaw & Dorling, 1998).

Significant resources (personal, emotional, financial) are employed to secure shelter, food, employment, and clothing, to name a few, in an attempt to establish personal stability and emotional support *vis-à-vis* extended social networks. A lack of local resources or a social breakdown frequently compels youths to travel throughout and between cities to find better

supports, to flee difficult personal situations, or to integrate themselves into new and different communities (Karabanow, 2006; Karabanow et al., 2007). The social stigma experienced plays itself out economically (e.g., difficulty finding employment and/or housing) (Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow, Ticknor, Hughes, Kidd, & Patterson, 2009; Kidd, 2003, 2004; Schissel, 1997) and emotionally/socially (e.g., feelings of alienation and/or not belonging) (Kidd & Davidson, 2006). This is pronounced for members of the LGBTQ2 community, but it must be understood that it is possible to experience multiple forms of stigma based on identity and personal activities (i.e., involved in sex trade, consistent drug use), all of which can compound feelings of alienation and social exclusion leading to poor mental health outcomes and risk of suicide (Kidd, 2006). That the youth homeless are able to cope is a testament to their resiliency, which is characterized by self-reliance, youth support networks, spirituality and caring for others (Karabanow, 2003, 2004; Kidd, 2003; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000; Rew & Horner, 2003; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001).

5.0 Defining Homelessness

Prior to proceeding we must define homelessness, as this influences our measurement format. There are statistical and cultural definitions of homelessness, for example, making it imperative to formally respond. How do we determine who precisely is homeless?

The Canadian Parliamentary Research Branch has with little success tackled this vexing question (Casavant, 1999). In lieu of one specific definition, it opted instead to generate three meanings for 'homeless' that are different, yet deemed essential categories that label people as belonging to a certain kind of homeless population. First, there are the chronically homeless, individuals who live on society's periphery and who often face problems of drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness. Second are the cyclically homeless group, or individuals who have lost their dwelling as a result of some change in their situation. These folks intermittently utilize safe houses and/or soup kitchens and often include women escaping family violence, runaway youths, and persons who are unemployed or recently released from detention centers or psychiatric institutions. Third are the temporarily homeless, or those who lack accommodations for a relatively short period; and persons who lose their home as a result of a disaster (e.g., fire, flood); and those whose economic and personal situation is altered by family separation or loss of job (Casavant, 1999).

Since then, various agency-specific definitions have been devised and/or proposed that utilize a continuum to measure degrees of homelessness. Hulchanski (2000) stresses however that such approaches enable government to avoid taking action for anyone who by definition may not be homeless, thereby masking an inherently political issue of homelessness as a statistical or definitional problem (also O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993). But what does it mean to be homeless? The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) developed the following working classification (Gaetz, 2012):

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioral or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative,

unpleasant, stressful and distressing.

Homelessness encompasses a range of physical living situations, organized here in a typology that includes:

- 1) Unsheltered, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;
- 2) Emergency Sheltered, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence;
- 3) Provisionally Accommodated, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, and finally,
- 4) At Risk of Homelessness, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

It should be noted that for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options might shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency.

Liberal definitions of homelessness such as this tend not to be the norm, as the majority of the academic, government, front-line agency, and grey literature tends to only statistically identify rough/street sleepers, while mentioning other forms of homelessness anecdotally (e.g., couch surfing). Consequently, while those youths sleeping rough are captured empirically (roughly 20%), the remainder are classified as 'hidden homeless', thus hindering attempts to generate an accurate national homeless rate or to capture rates of youth homelessness.

5.1 Youth Homelessness Defined

Notably the dominant definitions of homelessness do not account for youth, and, in particular, Aboriginal youth experiences. This in turn influences contemporary understandings of what contributes to youth homelessness. For our purposes, a homeless youth is any youth aged 13 to 24 who is living independently of parents and or caregivers and importantly lack many of the social supports that we typically deem necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood. In such circumstances, people do not have a stable or consistent source of income or place of residence, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to support networks to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood (Gaetz, 2014, p. 13).

PART B: FINDINGS - YOUTH

6.0 Youth Perspectives: Homelessness

Data was gathered through interviews with street youth currently experiencing homelessness and/or who admitted to being homeless in the recent past. These interviews offered a first-hand, street perspective of the issues confronting youth who were vocal and articulate about their concerns, and identified weaknesses in the current system. The following sub-sections provide a summary of the key youth responses to the questions posed that explored: 1) the scope of the problem; 2) youth homeless demographics; 3) factors that put youth at risk; 4) whether different youth homeless categories exist; 5) how we generally define the problems; 6) whether the youth see themselves as homeless; and, 7) the mechanisms employed to remain socially functional while in a homeless state?

6.1 What is the Scope of the Problem?

We began each interview by asking the youth why they were homeless. This question was framed to elicit open-ended responses that spoke to issues as wide ranging as: 1) direct causes; 2) the influence of supports and local agencies; and, 3) ways to escape homelessness. The following discussion elaborates their answers.

6.1.1 Direct Causes

The reasons identified by the literature examining the causes of youth homelessness generally apply to those Red Deer youth interviewed. The most common reason cited for leaving home was due to family instability resulting from one or both parents' drug and alcohol use. Abuse (physical and emotional) was next highlighted, as was the foster care system. The below discussion exploring the youth demographics will help elaborate more precisely these issues. Notably not one of the youth we spoke with self-identified as LGBTQ2. We asked other homeless youth about this noticeable absence. Many highlighted their satisfaction with this absence. The more tolerant youth who we spoke with indicated that the youth homeless community and general Red Deer attitudes make it difficult for LGBTQ2 to remain in town, leading them to relocate to what they perceived to be more socially accepting centers such as Vancouver.

6.1.2 Impact of Local Services and Agencies

It was difficult for the youth to specifically comment on the impact of local services and agencies due in part to their incomplete understanding of available supports. The youth were also unsure as to which services and agencies were available to help *manage* their homelessness, and which ones sought to help them *establish* an exit strategy. This may appear to be a somewhat trivial distinction for all agencies search for the end to youth homelessness. To the youth it is an important distinction. As also demonstrated by the literature, the youth live complex lives that demand creative scheduling. This is no different in Red Deer where they expend tremendous social and economic capital to manage and foster exit strategies.

Lacking a comprehensive understanding of the available supports notwithstanding the youths acknowledged that the local homeless programming was underfunded. For example, it was not unusual for the youths to describe how provincial funding strategies impact the scope of service delivery and the resulting intervention strategies. The lack of provincial funding is however deemed an illegitimate reason for strangling the services they desperately require. In this case a sense of re-victimization occurs: already feeling abandoned by their immediate family, and exposed to troubling foster care experiences, the youth see both the front-line agencies and the province as abandoning them based on fiscal restraints (i.e., they don't want to pay for us). In many case money becomes symbolic of their abandonment.

For those working with a specific agency or support worker the youth frequently found themselves burdened with what they considered extensive paperwork. This frequently led the youth to avoid working with agencies of any kind (i.e., seeking social services, generating resumes for a job application, filling out paperwork to attend school). For youth who have not had the privilege of being brought up in an environment where this is considered normal they demonstrate impatience leading to a frustrating experience. We observed that the paperwork is a symbolic and practical reminder of one's current homeless state and the associated risks. The longer you sit for an intake interview, for example, or filling out forms the more it hits you: you are homeless and now dependent on others at a time when you both want *and* need to become independent. A paradox is thus evident: by avoiding this stage you are traumatizing yourself by abandoning a potentially helpful context that is simultaneously a threatening environment.

The youth are incredibly perceptive. They explicitly noted a difference between people who are in this line of work for a job, and those who are in it to make a difference.

6.1.3 Extrication Strategies

The youth in this study aspire to greater things. They want to find steady employment, a permanent home and/or a return to school to make possible these outcomes. What we discerned is that the youth – notwithstanding their desires to move on with their lives – do not know how to make this happen. They generally know what they want, and they speak the language that support workers want to hear (i.e., I need to find work; I want to get my own place; I'm going back to school). Most of the youth we spoke with have been unable to fashion successful exit strategies, nor do they understand fully the time and energy that is involved to do so. The youth are what we would describe as strict empiricists: their time on the street combined with what they would depict as well-meaning workers piloting support-deficient programs leads the youth to privilege their experience over all others. They are also impatient and want to see immediate change. The incremental, strategic, and (frequently) proven approach that front-line support workers embrace does not always resonate with youth, who lack the skills to facilitate rapid changes to an endemic problem. The youth may be aware of how the system works, and what is perhaps needed to disengage from the street. When they factor in everything that is needed of them it can however appear overwhelming.

6.2 What are the Demographics?

The youth homeless community is a multi-cultural and dynamic entity that makes establishing a profile of the typical homeless youth difficult. Certain common characteristics offer us insights about which youth support workers are more likely to engage. For example, the majority of Red Deer homeless youth are male with a small but growing cohort of Aboriginal youth fleeing their reserves for the city, or who were born and/or are long-term Red Deer residents. The majority of youth were not in high school (i.e., dropped out or were forced out once homeless). There is a commonly held perception that homeless youth invariably come from broken and dysfunctional homes. Roughly half of those interviewed left what could best be described as middle class homes (i.e., no significant dysfunction). Drug and alcohol use was commonly cited with marijuana and beer identified as the 'go to' substances. Harder drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine were mentioned, but none of the youth admitted to currently using these substances (although roughly 1/3 had used these drugs in the past). None of the youth self-identified as LGBTQ, which is understandable due to the associated stigma. It would however be wrong to suggest that there are no LGBTQ2 homeless youth in Red Deer. Finally, a large majority of the homeless youth admitted to suffering from one or a number of mental health afflictions including but not limited to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Obsessive Compulsion Disorder (OCD) and depression.

6.3 Can we Identify Factors that Put Youth at Risk?

As assertive and knowledgeable that the youth at times appear we must never lose sight of the fact that these individuals are still developing mentally and socially. The facade of emotional confidence and social competence masks the fact that the youth still require assistance.

One factor is that street youth frequently demonstrate absolute naïveté about what is needed to effectively manage their lifestyle. They are often uninformed about the roles that support workers and agencies play in their lives (i.e., are the workers friends, de facto parents; are the agencies there to nurture or simply to provide avenues of independent discovery?) or how to properly interpret these relationships. The youth are impatient and lack poor scheduling and time management skills. They habitually lash out when their requests fail to garner an immediate response. Moreover, they do not know how to manage money and underestimate how much it costs to live. These are basic skills sets that are developed incrementally over a extensive period of time. We would however suggest that it is not impatience *per se* that is at issue but rather responses that are informed by a way of looking at the world that is grounded in personal experiences that interpret time in new and environmentally specific ways

Lacking basic skills concerned most support workers and agencies administrators. The youth acknowledge this is an issue, indicating that there appears to be consensus on next steps. What we discovered however is that those involved – youth and the system, for lack of better terms – work on different clocks. That is, the youth live a rhythmically different lifestyle that at times does not correspond to a typical 9-5 workday. As an example, one youth we spoke with who frequently resides at the local shelter and/or couch surfs gets up everyday around 6 a.m. – either to leave the home he is residing at or to conform with the shelter schedule. He arrives at school at 8:30 and attends classes until roughly 1 p.m. He goes to work from 2-9 p.m. and then heads to the shelter or his residence *de jour*. He is unable to visit with his caseworker during the day nor is he able to attend classes to improve his life skills. Visiting a dentist or optometrist

is out of the question and while the medical clinics are open during the weekends they usually are quite busy. He is available for weekend meetings when the people he needs to connect with are inaccessible. This scenario is played out daily in Red Deer and it impacts the greater part of the homeless youth that we interviewed.

Similar concerns are evident when we evaluate the terms of the program schedules the youth are offered. The programs are devised to help the youth manage their homelessness and to develop the skills needed to successfully disengage from the street. These programs are only successful if the youth are willing and able to accommodate. However, youth survival strategies may not involve learning how to cook, or getting an Interact card at this stage in their lives. Therefore, allocating the personal resources required to participate in these programs may not take precedence. To put it bluntly, for youth living a day-to-day reality, entering into a two-year program may seem nonsensical. For that matter a 30-day intake evaluation may appear irrational. Daily concerns often mean that the youth do not have many options; or they remain unaware of what is out there for work. There is little discussion about specific jobs but rather amorphous discussions about getting 'a job'. This could have to do with the skewed notion of time that has been suggested.

Youth homeless tend to remain in potentially destructive personal relationships that paradoxically engender a sense of community. The youth seeking help often find that they are then forced to withdraw from and abandon this community. These peer groups assist with youth survival, yet they can act as barriers to leaving the street. This is a delicate balancing act when we consider that the youth frequently cycle between housed and homeless as they grow the skills needed to get off the street. Knowing that they will most likely return to the street abandoning this group too quickly can put the youth at risk street. The more individuals and resources a youth has access to, the more easily and likely they can meet their needs if the formal service delivery sector fails them.

6.4 Do Different Categories Exist? If So How Do We Generally Define the Problems?

As discussed in Section 5 we need to develop a definition of homelessness to better account for the number of homeless youth and to develop appropriate programming. Homeless youth have for the most part been classified as chronically homeless (individual that has experienced more than one year of homelessness; or has experienced more than four episodes of homelessness in the last three years), episodically homeless (individuals who experience repeated incidences of homelessness), and/or transients (individuals who lack stable local connections [i.e., school; housing] and who move in and out of homelessness repeatedly). As discussed below the youth do not consider themselves homeless. At least that is what they will tell you. Yet during the interviews it became clear that the youth are represented in these three categories of homeless individuals. Yet there are some unique variations that need to be identified for the purposes of improving our understanding of what we would describe as sub-groupings, as articulated by the youth. These expand the above categories by taking into account how, for example, education and employment inform episodic or transient homelessness, or how legal difficulties lead to chronic homeless states.

1) Housed (pre-homeless): this period is vital in terms of prevention, meaning that we need to remain vigilant identifying at-risk youth prior to their street engagement. Within this context a

typology developed by Dr. Paul Toro and his co-researchers (Toro, Lesperance, & Braciszewski, 2011) from a sample of 250 youth from Detroit and identifying three subpopulations of homeless youth, is critical:

- a) *Low-risk youth* tend to be younger, maintain more stable relationships with their families and school, and experience the least amount of homelessness over time;
- b) *Transient youth* have less stable connections with school and housing as they moved in and out of homelessness repeatedly, but still did not have prominent mental health or substance abuse problems and retained relationships with their families; and
- c) *High-risk youth* are more likely to have dropped out of school, have unstable relationship with their families, struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues, and experience long stretches of homelessness.

The youth are not able to fully comprehend whether they fall into any of the three categories. Yet the majority indicated that someone speaking to them prior to becoming homeless about their behaviors/concerns may have been helpful. This has to be accomplished however with the goal of assisting the youth as opposed to trying to diagnose an issue for the purposes of activating response strategies that the youth suggest stigmatize rather than assist. Several for the youth indicated that having access to information prior to becoming homeless would have been welcomed.

2) Homelessness: individuals managing their homelessness with the intent of developing exit strategies distinguish this complex period. It represents several variants/stages of homelessness that demand specific responses. It also requires that we stop speaking about homelessness in standardized terms. For instance, the youth described themselves as subsistence/managed homeless. They are couch surfers who do not believe they are homeless. There are chronic homeless youth who sleep outdoors. One grouping could be described as local youth homeless, or youth who consider Red Deer their home and who will remain in the city to be nearby family and friends. Several youth in Red Deer originated in other cities, even provinces, seeking out resources and a permanent home community. These individuals branded Red Deer a traveler city, which are accommodating urban centers considered flush with youth-specific programs currently inaccessible in the youth's current host-city, demanding frequent travel. Accordingly, describing these youth as transient is inaccurate. Rather they are insightfully mobile and travel between centers to find work, access programs, for personal stimulation/excitement, to name a few. They are also individuals without a permanent sense of home in search of stability and a community, and who tap local resources along the way. This should be considered a feather in the cap of local service providers who are deemed approachable. Regrettably it also tends to compromise resource availability for those described as local youth homeless.

3) Post-homeless: the ultimate goal is to see the youth permanently housed. And with greater frequency we see youth transitioning from the streets *vis-à-vis* programs such as Housing First. We also overlook the fact that successfully exiting the street often requires numerous attempts, and that it is not unusual for the youth to cycle between being homelessness and being housed (see Karabanow, Carson, Clement, & Crane, 2010). The youths we interviewed who experienced

this cycle told us that once they were housed they felt as though they had been forgotten. They further suggested that the move into permanent housing is considered by support workers to be the end to a relationship that the youths nevertheless consider important and ongoing. For homeless youth this can be emotionally debilitating. But they were also quite practical in suggesting that they lack the skills needed to successfully run a household. Most did not know how to manage money or pay bills or even how to shop for groceries. The street schedule the youth live by is at variance with that of a housed individual, which makes for a difficult transition into permanent housing. As such there is still a need for interaction and follow-up. An argument can be made for the need to frequently fail, thus learning by doing. However, the financial and emotional costs of failure for individuals already suffering from low self-esteem must be gauged. There is a need to consider and even evaluate how the sudden lack of communication with support workers impacts the youth, and how to provide them with follow-up services with the goal of cutting down and/or ending the number of times cycling from housed to homeless to housed.

6.5 Do Youth Consider Themselves to be Homeless?

Prior to a homeless youth accessing help s/he must acknowledge their homelessness. It is vital to therefore explore how the youth define themselves. For example, we let it be known our desires to speak with current homeless youth and/or those who had previously experienced homelessness. Yet when we asked the youths if they believed themselves to be homeless the majority invariably responded 'no'. Even those who had been kicked out of their homes or who had voluntarily left a difficult situation, and who were living in a shelter or on the street stated that they were not homeless. The reasons for this vary. For one homelessness did not inevitably mean living without any shelter. The youth believed that the community they live in and the personal relationships they develop offer a sense of stability, hence a feeling of home. Many were of the belief that their situation was temporary, and as such was not open to definition. In such cases the youth anticipated one day reconciling with family and moving home. Then there are instances such as one youth claiming that he could not define what being homeless meant because he had never lived in a stable home. Thus he had nothing to compare it to. But he also stated that he did not know what it was like to live on the streets because he was not homeless. At this moment this youth is caught in between: he self-defines as not being homeless but he is uncertain of what home represents. Despite living on the street he is certain that the streets are not his home. A clear sense of personal marginalization is evident.

Elaborating on this perspective the youth identified a central element of home as a site that provides a sense of personal safety, where you do not have to think about leaving or being pushed out. Home is where you do not have to worry and you can relax. With this said the youth homeless do not have the luxury of escaping the stressors of street life, and this in turn means that they have few options available to help manage personal issues. Drugs and alcohol therefore enter their lives. The majority of the youth homeless we interviewed pointed out that they were currently or at one time had abused drugs or alcohol, or both, a not uncommon escape strategy employed to deal with negative relationships and behaviors. What is evident is that the youth have an impoverished view of what a home means that is broken into two categories: 1) the unattainable dream reflecting a complex, multi-layered environment

encouraging personal safety, nurturing and development; and, 2) the current reality of the street grounded by the need to personally survive.

The youth map multiple worlds that they are expected to successfully navigate as they move towards exiting homelessness. These include current homeless and mainstream societies, and the various subcultures inherent to each community. What is evident after speaking to the youth is that their environment made up of unique societies displaying distinctive social norms and mores that are often incongruous. This demands a flexibility of behavior that is astounding. It is disjuncting to those individuals seeking personal stability. In such cases they may forego interacting in areas that extend beyond their comfort zone, which leads many of the youth to identify particular sites within the city's confines as home despite the lack of bricks and mortar shelter. In this case, ironically, homelessness may be a strategy of remaining in one's home city, or a familiar part of the city, even if they are not able to claim permanency of residency. These sites are essential safe zones, if you will, that allow the youth to escape the gaze of people on the street.

Perhaps the most significant rationale keeping the youth from admitting homelessness is the stigma associated with being homeless. It is a complex phenomenon that manifests itself in various ways. People look at you oddly. The police vigilantly monitor your activities. In stores you are closely observed in anticipation of committing a crime. The youth disassociate being homeless with what they perceive as the real homeless people – drunks and drug abusers who lost everything due to their own negligence. From the youths' perspective they believe their homelessness occurred for reasons beyond their control. While some did suggest that they played a minor role in their outcomes, others were identified as being primarily responsible for their current state of being. The youth hate being reminded that they are homeless, which occurs daily as they seek out help. As such, the stigma associated with being homeless is also a factor that compels the youth to shy away from accessing services. Consequently, seeking out the services needed to help manage homelessness or develop extrication strategies does not occur because it further stigmatizes the youth. By refusing to admit to being homeless the youth empower themselves by taking a negative experience and spinning it in a way that highlights their survival skills.

6.6 What Mechanisms are Used to Remain Socially Functional While in a Homeless State?

The strategies utilized are developed according to each individual's homelessness experience. For instance, youth from Red Deer who want to live close to friends and family couch surf. Those who are disconnected from similar social networks often sleep rough or use the local youth shelter. Youth who feel embarrassed at their situation move around quite often, both within and between cities. Movement is a safety mechanism: never sleeping rough in the same place helps one avoid being profiled by more experienced and sometimes violent members of the homeless community. Movement within the city is needed to access certain services and resources. For those more adventurous or desperate youth movement between cities and even provinces is a resource acquisition strategy and helps the youth establish secure bonds with other homeless youth who will help ensure their safety. To be sure ideas of homelessness are thus unique and are often informed by the desire to retain what are perceived to be stable social networks at the expense of remaining with unstable or unsafe family units.

The lack of local employment combined with the youths' limited employability (i.e., no work experience and/or job skills) leads many into a lifestyle of mobility as they seek out work. Many find work but the jobs are often located far from home. Social instability consequently becomes a concern for moving away from family and friends and other social networks is costly both in terms of emotional and economic capital. Leaving support networks is a daunting task, and frequently the jobs the youth find do not pay enough to allow for the fruitful transition into another community. Notably the youth quickly leave seeking out unsubstantiated opportunities they heard about from friends and strangers. The youth are less apt to move if they are able to foster strong, local social relationships. This provides the youth with a sense of permanency and belonging even though these relationships may be unstable and potentially destructive. Finally, individuals working in the private and public sector and faith based community are considered part of the youths' larger social network, and they indicated that if they believed they were being treated well and were better respected by support workers and government employees that they were more likely to stay in Red Deer.

6.7 Aboriginal Youth

Children and youth are the fastest growing segment of the Aboriginal population: in 2001, the median age of Aboriginal peoples in Alberta was 23 years of age, as compared to 35 years of age among Albertans as a whole (Canada 2005). While the knowledge of general trends is important, a deeper understanding of how homelessness specifically impacts subgroups such as Aboriginal youths is needed. Baskin (2007) has identified Aboriginal youth at higher risk of becoming homeless as compared to other youth in Canada: they are seriously overrepresented in the homeless youth population (roughly one-third) and the hidden homelessness rates are high (Patrick, 2014). Furthermore, they experience high rates of mental health concerns, including depression and conduct disorders, both of which are confirmed pathways to homelessness (MacNeil, 2008; Les B. Whitbeck, Yu, Johnson, Hoyt, & Walls, 2008). Ruttan, Laboucane-Benson and Munro (2008) established that homeless Aboriginal youth experienced poverty, health problems, systemic bias, and the effects of historical trauma, and have advised reinforcing Aboriginal community-based prevention and healing programs to prevent youth homelessness. What was intriguing is that the Aboriginal youth in particular - and every other study participant - did not believe that their cultural or socio-economic background influenced their homelessness. The Aboriginal youth indicated that they experienced similar pathways to homelessness. Despite these parallels it is evident that neither the Aboriginal nor the non-Aboriginal youth are able to fully articulate the impacts of systemic barriers evident in low educational and employment outcomes on their homelessness. It is clear however that the youth are beginning to confront these issues in their complaints about a lack of Aboriginal-specific youth homeless programs in Red Deer. Yet when we asked them to compare how they are treated the Aboriginal youth indicated that they have similar advantages to non-Aboriginal youth.

PART C: FINDINGS - STAKEHOLDERS

7.0 Stakeholders' Perspectives: Youth Homelessness

Similar to the youth data gathering process interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. These individuals worked as support workers or agency managers/administrators, with the City of Red Deer, the RCMP, and in the local schools, to name a few. The goal was to develop a front-line perspective of the issues confronting homeless youth the goal being to expand upon how this community frames the issues; how response strategies are developed; and how closely this resonates with the youths suggested changes. The following sub-sections provide a summary of the key stakeholder responses to the questions posed exploring some of the same questions: 1) what is the scope of the problem; 2) what are youth homeless demographics; and, 3) what factors that put youth at risk?

7.1 What is the Scope of the Problem?

Whereas the youth have specific ideas as to why they may be homeless, or more accurately from their perspective inconsistently housed (they are as discussed above not homeless in their opinion), the stakeholders have specific ideas about why the youth are homeless. Generally speaking the stakeholders consider the youth to be escaping troubled homes or they are individuals who are experiencing drug and alcohol issues related to/or to deal with feelings of social alienation and exclusion. There was little consideration given to the fact that the youth homeless may be dealing with mental health issues. Field workers and provincial officials acknowledged the heterogeneity of youth homelessness while identifying youth as young as 12 years of age were living on Red Deer's streets.

As could be expected the stakeholders interpreted our questions through what we would describe as a bureaucratic lens: they evaluated the existing system's strengths and weaknesses within the context of youth homeless policy. In doing so the causes of youth homelessness were condensed into the above listed categories, and homelessness – that is, at the point in time that the youth knock on their respective agency doors – is already a reality that needed to be dealt with. In such cases bureaucratic approaches are necessarily reactive and consequently less preventative in scope. Those working within the system more often espouse preventative approaches for working with the youth homeless. This paradox – a reactive system peopled by workers utilizing preventative frameworks – requires reconciliation.

We would also argue that the lack of front-line understanding about youth mental health could potentially put homeless youth at risk. For instance, even though mental health was mentioned from time to time, listening to the digitally recorded interviews highlighted several instances in which mental health issues were evident in the youth's speech patterns. The following is excerpted from a research assistant's field notes from a Red Deer focus group:

RDeer FG - Significant peaks and valleys in speech patterns and a youth gets caught on an idea and MUST finish the story, even when interrupted or told to stop by others. Self-identifies as having Bipolar disorder and ADHD, but does not seem to be attending to this. The stories have a similar fantastical quality as some of the other youth, and s/he seems clearly disconnected from the implications of behaviors.

Everyone we spoke with highlighted that the current lack of youth housing options is incapacitating. There is therefore a need to grow existing housing stock to respond not only to local homeless issues but to also accommodate the growing youth homeless cohort. Minimal discussion was directed at identifying local best practices. This suggests that support workers and agency administrators are operating within a garrisoned bubble. The evidence suggests that this is a funding-related issue and not due to inter-personal animosities. In particular, how can one learn about best practices when funding for travel to conferences or the time needed to study these issues does not exist? Agency administrators must devote substantial amounts of time to ensuring their annual funding envelopes are filled. Accordingly, agency survival – and the continued existence of jobs for dedicated employees – periodically takes precedence over youth needs. In such cases the individuals to whom the agencies accept responsibility for are ignored in lieu of pressing operational issues. This breeds inter-agency competition between groups that are now (in their administrators' minds) fighting for a portion of a fixed funding pool. Whether or not this is the case is not the issue. What is important to note is that the aforementioned competition leads to limited interaction, snuffing out the potential for creating viable partnerships that could lead to merging assets in pursuit of additional funding.

The youth are situated into rigid administrative and institutional categories due to cost considerations that force service providers to bend the rules to permit youth access to services they might otherwise be considered ineligible. If we fail to offer supports to these youth we risk reinforcing their marginalisation and disenfranchisement. Funding will always be a concern; therefore, it is vital to utilize the tools at our disposal to help stretch available dollars. Every person interviewed emphasized the need to end the duplication of services. At the same time no one was able to fully articulate how the system worked. As an example, no one could indicate how many agencies in Red Deer specifically deal with youth homelessness. Then there were multiple definitions of youth homelessness presented with ages ranging from 12 to 34. Mapping out the agencies is needed so everyone working with homeless youth know who is offering specific services. More to the point, an effort is required to consolidate data and develop overlapping definitions of youth homeless if we are to get a handle on the issue, avoid duplication of services, while more effectively responding to client needs. This would also encourage inter-agency interaction rather than competition as we collectively work towards ameliorating the concerns. There is a need to develop similar intake and evaluative instruments and understandings so that we can begin to speak to the issues in more collectively accurate terms.

7.2 What are the Demographics?

The stakeholders we interviewed generally established the core group of youth homeless in Red Deer as between the ages 17-21. This age group is the one they interact with most readily, and consumes the greatest amount of resources. Most acknowledged that the provincial age range for youth (13-25) was acceptable. However, youth under the age of 17 were considered too young to learn the requisite life skills. Consequently, their homelessness required management (i.e., foster and group homes). Youth after the age of 21 were considered adults and as such more likely to successfully manage their homelessness and develop exit strategies without substantial agency assistance. The 17-21 grouping was considered the most

appropriate cohort to direct scarce resources at due to their ability to comprehend new information and build basic skills. In sum, 17-21 represents a perfect age, and the stakeholders for the most part have unconsciously internalized the belief that this age bracket demands/deserves the most attention and the furthestmost level of resources. The stakeholders identified a need to develop programming for new Canadians (immigrants) and Aboriginal youth (the latter are universally assumed to have drug and alcohol issues). There was no mention of LGBTQ2.

7.3 Can we Identify Factors That Put Youth at Risk?

The stakeholders once again spoke to the systemic difficulties they experience, which in turn impacts their ability to respond to the youth, thus putting them at greater risk. Front line workers we must note are the main point of contact between the youth and the system, and they play a significant role trying to reconcile these worlds through the implementation of cost effective and representative programs. For instance, there is a need to secure youth buy-in (i.e., gain trust) for most programs. What funders repeatedly overlook is the time it takes to develop the relationships that lead the youth to enter a program. Funding is often outcomes-oriented, or at the very least it fails to take into account the costs of the outreach required to draw in the youth (many of whom do not believe they are homeless. This should be considered a period youth education). This can lead to what we would describe as programmatic homelessness whereby those youth who do not fit existing program criteria, or who distrust the system to a point that they refuse to engage, thus remain on the outside looking in.

This puts youth at risk, especially when ensuring ongoing operations outweighs program delivery. The Province of Alberta's inherently turbulent administrative model encourages best practices *vis-à-vis* funding competition, which in turn leads to inter-agency competition while also compromising one's ability to effectively respond to those youth in care. Each agency also has its own operating mandate, which often means that administrators are restricted to dealing with youths who meet agency-specific criteria. Consequently, a tunnel vision approach to diagnosing issues develops, which means that while some of the supports appear responsive to youth needs, others display a lack of understanding or appreciation for those at-risk and hard-to-house youth. Support workers who acknowledge the heterogeneity of the youth homeless community are at the same time restricted to caring for specific sub-groups of the youth homeless community based on funding formulas informed by agency mandates. Within this context agency-specific hierarchies are established that may not reflect the youth homeless community's needs. In this instance, high-risk groups that need more one-on-one attention may be shut out of services. Hence several youths may be turned away at their most vulnerable time thereby shattering whatever level of trust they had mustered towards mainstream society.

Support worker beliefs add a layer of complexity. Take for example the fact that none of the stakeholders interviewed suggested trying to reunite the youth with their families. Research has demonstrated that between 33-66% of youth can be reunited with their families thus avoiding homelessness and cutting costs (Winland, 2013). During our interviews families were portrayed as a nuisance to be avoided, and that the youth left the home for good reasons. In such cases reconciling youth and family was not considered a worthy or cost-effective strategy. Certain agencies refuse youth who may have drug, alcohol or mental health issues (or concurrent disorders) or warrants/legal troubles. That being said the unique character of youth

and adult homelessness – and our inability to separate the two into distinctive policy spheres – means that youth programs are often ad hoc in scope. Specified youth programming is needed. Lastly, despite studies illustrating that upwards of 56% of homeless youth struggle with their mental health, and that 75% face barriers to housing (The Learning Community, 2014), there was a noticeable lack of attention paid to youth homeless mental health.

Related to this issue is the fact that even though the stakeholders personally recognize the youth homeless community to be heterogeneous, the youth themselves are portrayed in fairly homogeneous terms. They are frequently branded substance abusers, but rarely are they recognized as having mental health concerns. When mental health was acknowledged it was usually presented in the language of ‘developmental difficulties’ or ‘behavior and attitude problems’. The youth are therefore being asked to comprehend the scope of their situation *and* act in a reasonable, socially acceptable manner while they develop a personalized exit strategy. Yet they are considered impulsive and in need of adult guidance. For instance, the stakeholders often highlighted that the youth left home because they did not want to follow the rules. Yet the youth indicated that they need more structure to help manage their homelessness. In all the paradoxes become more apparent thus demonstrating the gap in understanding that exists between those offering and those accessing the programs.

PART D: DISCUSSION

8.0 Discussion

What was perhaps most surprising was how similarly the youth and the stakeholders envision what youth homelessness means and how to effectively respond. Similarly a common message from the stakeholders focused on the lack of centralized coordination and how the existing system is (potentially) negatively impacting the youth. The subsequent sub-sections summarize the key findings by juxtaposing youth and stakeholder responses.

Youth vs. Stakeholder Response

The youth understand that they need improved life skills if they are to successfully exit the street, something all stakeholders agreed with. The main problem is that the youth have limited skills sets and resources available to them (the most important one being a lack of time) to grow these skills. Their schedules normally do not align with program timetables and agency schedules. The youth require assistance to manage their homelessness, but do not know which agencies to approach for help. Clarifying what resources are available is needed. Once engaged the youth do not want to be consistently reminded that they are homeless due to the associated trauma, and this is reflected in their seeking anonymity and avoiding agencies. Not admitting to being homeless is empowering for the youth: spinning a negative experience into a positive outcome demonstrates their resilience. It may however keep some from pursuing and accessing much needed supports. Every intake consequently becomes a stark reminder of their situation, which can lead the youth to re-experiencing trauma after they have been drawn out of a self-identified comfort zone. The youth feel commodified rather than valued community members. Support workers fail to identify mental health issues. Instead they describe confused and overwhelmed youth who will grow out of this particular stage, or later in their personal development, manifest mental illness. Those mentally ill homeless youth who lack a proper diagnosis are unable to access appropriate services.

The youths are the catalysts of communication and inter-agency dialogue. They are also caught in between (stuck in a liminal space) albeit very much aware of the role that they play in this political debate. Many have consequently become resentful that their misfortune is being exploited. The youth are impatient and have unrealistic expectations of what the system can do for them. They already feel like a burden to society, feelings that are exacerbated when they are led to feel that they are imposing on busy caseworkers' schedules. Agencies working with the youth have yet to fully acknowledge the influence their street schedules play and maintain an 8:30-5 weekday schedule. The youth may not be self-identifying as homeless because they are confusing homelessness with a lack of shelter. After care follow-ups do not occur once the youths are permanently housed, something they stated they would not oppose. This could help them successfully transition into permanent housing while helping them to maintain their relationships with support workers to whom they have grown close.

Despite the multiple intakes, there is very little data being produced for analysis or for tracking program and agency efficiency. Youth homelessness as a policy concern must be separated from adult homelessness.

Centralized Coordination

There is a need to enhance communication and data tracking/management to better serve the youth *vis-à-vis* enhanced information flows. Stakeholders do not have a clear road map of the agencies working with the youth. Local capacity is thus undervalued and remains underexploited. Ad hoc strategies lacking theoretical or grounded foundations are the norm. The stakeholders indicated that a visioning process would improve the response to youth homelessness. Currently there is no agreed upon definition of youth, youth homelessness, or how to systematically deal with the issue of youth homelessness. No central coordinating body exists to assist with aligning multiple agency mandates. The process has thus been distilled down to its simplest form: a youth enters the system and our ideal outcome is to have the youth exit the system skills-prepared for social reentry. With this in mind the agencies have yet to articulate their mandates within the larger scope of ending youth homelessness. This field of independently operating agencies frequently duplicates services while at other times providing innovative services in an understated and frequently hidden manner. There is currently no central agency or community vision in place to help draw these disparate agencies into a common orbit. The stakeholders indicated the need for a uniform screening, referral, and intake process to ensure the youth entering the system have access to targeted services irrespective of their first point of contact (Bond, 2010; Nichols, 2014).

The stakeholders asked for a coordinating body such as a youth coalition. There was also a declared need for statistical data to track agency and system effectiveness and a road map of agencies and their mandates to guide the youth to suitable programs and resources. What was being requested was a means of establishing a systems approach to ending youth homelessness. A centralized, virtual, and open access database is required that can connect everybody involved in the fight against youth homelessness. A centralized information hub of this kind could help to harmonize these multiple agents' mandates while improving the flow of information. The goal is to avoid amplifying inter-agency competition but rather to draw the agencies closer together.

A physical space is needed where the youth can find the necessary information and supports. A youth hub, for instance, can act as a place to access supports in a low-pressure environment. It also enables youth resistant to admitting their homelessness to slowly come to grips with their homelessness. The proposed centralized registry can be accessed at this site so that individuals working with the youth have access to pertinent details to help ensure that the youth do not have to be re-interviewed. Permitting the youth to come and go, a youth hub would provide a sense of community where the rhythms of everyday life are replicated thus instilling in the youth a sense of the importance/role that time plays. It could also partially mitigate the instability associated with being homeless. It is a space to engage the youth where they can feel accepted.

Currently there is an aversion to employing statistics and other forms of data, which may be attributable to the time and energy it takes to properly evaluate data. Many suggested that it is important to expand our current knowledge by tracking trends more aggressively, and that a common intake is a primary time to establish data sets that enable us to differentiate for instance the levels of freedom and interpretive flexibility of the various agencies. Restructuring, coordination, and rebranding can ease significant barriers and begin to measure the changes.

9.0 Conclusions

At this time housing supports and housing first projects for youth are few and far between. While the causes and homelessness experiences vary between individuals and the adult/youth homeless population, the principles underlying the provision safe, secure, affordable, and supportive housing are equally applicable. The youth must feel as though compassion guides the provision of services rather than being a problem in need of resolution (i.e., we view youth from a deficit perspective). Allowing for personal relationships to develop between youth and service providers not only has the greater probability of leading to youth buy in for existing programming, but it will also enable stake holders to better understand the youth's position in all of this, and how to provide for the creation of positive and long lasting change. After all, if the stated desire is to end youth homelessness, we must then take it upon ourselves to both allow youth to tell us what homelessness means to them, and to reflect upon how larger social structures, relationships of power, and individual relationships contribute to the problem. Right now ongoing discussions between agencies tend to focus on government funding, which necessarily means that its less about the youth and more about how the organizations are financially hindered and how this exacerbates youth homelessness. All project participants indicated that they believe a systems approach to youth homelessness is the most effective means of ending youth homelessness and that such a strategy centers on: 1) creating a common data base to help coordinate local agencies and warehouse data; 2) establishing a youth centre/hub to allow the youth access the necessary resources while providing them the time needed to reconcile themselves to their situation; and, 3) help the youth establish the skills sets needed to successfully disengage from the streets. Notably policies and programs must be developed based on youth homeless needs.

10.0 Recommendations

- 1) Align intake instruments needed to ensure commonality of data sets to enable client tracking. This will also lessen the youth trauma experienced with multiple intakes.
- 2) Intake instruments should be designed to expedite the process for youth thus ensuring fewer youth avoid or opt out of programming.
- 3) Create a common database to help coordinate local agencies and warehouse data. This can help with regional systems planning.
- 4) Continue to identify and address gaps in and barriers to services in order to best respond to the complex and ever changing needs of youth.
- 5) Ensure services are structured in a way that youth can understand.
- 6) Reviewing internal service delivery criteria to ensure that service providers do not contribute to youth homelessness.
- 7) Develop a preventative, early intervention based approach for youth once on the street.
- 8) Youth/family relationships should be considered reconcilable. Reconnecting with family and community programming helps to mitigate youth homelessness, and should be considered in this instance.
- 9) Systems approach to coordination and programming centered with one key agency.
- 10) Greater acknowledgement and attention directed to youth mental health concerns. Drug, alcohol and behavioral difficulties may indeed be attributable to mental health issues.
- 11) Agencies that house youth overnight must be encouraged to not turn away homeless youth for behavioral issues; or another level of response is required.
- 12) Youth (and likely many adults) do not know about available programs. Pamphlets promoting what's available may be a good first start. Also an agency mapping exercise is needed.
- 13) Establish a homeless youth advisory committee to inform the creation and implementation of programs and other supports.

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