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Assessing Youth Homelessness in Lethbridge, 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 Lethbridge 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 to which all stakeholders agree. 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. Based on their current life circumstances, their schedules frequently do not align with program timetables and agency schedules. The youth require assistance to manage their homelessness, but do not know which are the best agencies for their needs. 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: spinning a negative experience into a positive outcome demonstrates their resilience. It may however keep others from pursuing and accessing much needed resources. Every agency intake is a stark reminder of their situation, which may lead the youths to re-experience trauma while simultaneously drawing them out of a self-identified comfort zone.

Support workers fail to identify mental health issues. Instead they describe confused and overwhelmed youth who will grow out of this particular stage or eventually develop mental illness. Those mentally ill homeless youth who lack a proper diagnosis are unable to access services. Further to this the youth do not see mental health as an issue. Accordingly, with two sides generally ignoring the issue it would seem as though we cannot respond effectively.

The youth and the stakeholders both exhibit a poor grasp of the types and numbers of available programs. The youth are impatient and have unrealistic expectations of how the system can help and they feel like they are a burden to society. Such feelings are compounded by overworked caseworkers' inability to thoughtfully respond. This is discouraging. At the same time, agencies working with the youth have yet to fully acknowledge the magnitude of their street schedules and continue to operate for the most part on a 9-5 daily 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 each participant would approve. This could assist them with successfully transitioning into effective renters and maintaining their relationship with support workers to whom they have

grown close. Preferably youth homelessness as a policy concern needs to be separated from adult homelessness programming, the latter of which was identified as better funded. The youths know they have limited programs available.

There are addition issues that demand consideration. The youth are worried that their lack of identification could be debilitating; and that accessing the required ID is difficult. The 'system' does a poor job of establishing its mandate to the youth. As an example, homeless youth are seeking parental guidance and emotional support. Then they feel abandoned when support workers jettison them from agencies/programs due to various demands (i.e., aged out, timed out). Many of the youth suggested that the system was attempting to convert them into hardened adults. As worldly as the youth may appear in most case they lack the skills needed to effectively manage and end their homelessness. This is logical when we factor in most of the stakeholders concentrated on the 18-24 age group (i.e., the ones they could best aid at this stage).

The youths lack the skills needed to effectively manage and end their homelessness. There are few programs for youth homeless couples (or adult partnerships, for that matter) as homelessness is considered an individual issue from a policy perspective. We have yet to concede how social stigmatization regarding "the homeless" – social markers internalized early in their lives – influences youth self-esteem and their pursuit of supports (i.e., they've been preconditioned to see homeless individuals as undesirable). This necessarily impacts support worker attempts to seek out and assist a population that actively seeks to remain invisible due to this stigmatization. Rural homeless youth in Lethbridge also feel that urban society ignores them, and they struggle to access supports or to penetrate the urban youth homeless social networks many have come to depend upon for survival.

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge is this: the youth and stakeholders both envision the same outcomes – ending youth homelessness. The breakdown occurs when front line workers and agency administrators stop listening to the youth. In sum, we do not develop youth homeless policies based on their experience but rather on our bureaucratic perception of what needs to be done.

The theme that came through loud and clear concerned the lack of communication between agencies, the city, and the province. 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 poorly exploited. Instead *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. As an example, currently there is no agreed upon definition of youth, youth homelessness, or how to systematically deal with the issue of youth homelessness.

Multiple agencies do their best to respond. There is however no central coordinating body to assist in 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 as 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 that a uniform screening, referral, and intake process is needed to ensure that the youth entering the system have access to targeted services irrespective of their first point of contact (Bond, 2010; Nichols, 2014).

A centralized virtual database is required that can connect everybody involved in the fight against youth homelessness. An independently operated, equal access centralized data and/or information hub can help harmonize these multiple agents' mandates while improving the flow of information. The goal is to avoid amplifying inter-agency competition but rather to development complementary agendas. Establishing community-based development agencies that can avoid being drawn into community politics clouding issues is the goal.

PART A: OVERVIEW

1. Introduction

In 2007 Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach and the Province of Alberta announced that a 10-year plan to coordinate initiatives to address provincial homelessness would be created. In addition to establishing the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, the Province committed more than $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 provincially, 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/community integration 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 Lethbridge 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 Lethbridge approach, we find they align 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 skips the transitional stage to place homeless people directly into permanent housing (this can be private apartments and/or permanent supportive housing). More generally, in the Lethbridge context, there is a noticeable lack of 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 mandate directed at youth homelessness specifically does not exist.

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[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.

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 frequently geographically dispersed and non-communicative. Each agency also 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 report is to explore these issues within the Lethbridge 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 who have been assigned the task 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 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 homelessness and their experiences; 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 Lethbridge 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 five youth and one administrative focus group, and conducted 19 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). “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 four 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 enables the organization and categorization of data from which central themes are 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 policy-making and programming for youth homelessness. 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, and how early intervention programming can be utilized to halt youth homelessness before it becomes an issue.

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 Lethbridge? 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 Lethbridge region social services system? Is the Lethbridge 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(s) of the data collected.
5. Explaining to participants their right 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 provincial 2006 homeless and shelter counts indicated that 10% (n=840) of the more than 8,400 homeless Albertans were young adults. Though the exact numbers elude us it has been estimated that 11% are families with school age children, which could enhance 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 projected 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) and youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are considered the fastest growing segment of the national homeless population (Karabanow & Kidd, 2014).

That being said provincial data offer a rough albeit incomplete picture 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 in 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 2013 Lethbridge Homeless Census revealed that a total of 22 children and youth (under 18) were homeless but sheltered at Blackfoot Family Lodge and Harbour House (YWCA), Woods Emergency Youth Shelter, including two youth who claimed that they were staying at the Emergency Shelter, and one with a parent. The number of children living homeless has decreased by 13% from 2012, but an 88% increase in youth (ages 13-18) living in homelessness was identified. More specifically, of the total 114 homeless individuals enumerated for the Lethbridge Homeless Census seven youth were identified. This is a noteworthy increase from 2012, when one youth was counted. All of the youth reported being homeless less than six months, with one being new to Lethbridge within the past year (Social Housing in Lethbridge, 2013).

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 exists 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 fully represented in policy or by elements of popular culture 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 youth homeless as less personally volatile and 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).

In sum, similarities have been identified between adult and youth homeless issues and services, but distinctive interventions are required. 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 a policy perspective (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). Additionally absent 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). Frequently discussed in the academic literature is mental illness, both prior to and after becoming homeless, which most agree 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 generally have 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 causes 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 youth 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 cope within this context speaks 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. 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.

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 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.

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 are living independently of parents and or caregivers and who 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. 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 exploring: 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 applied to those Lethbridge youth we 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 highlighted next, as was a detached 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, and many demonstrated little concern at this population's absence. The more tolerant youth who spoke with us indicated that the youth homeless community and general Lethbridge attitudes make it difficult for LGBTQ2 youths to remain in town, and this in turn frequently leads them to relocate to what they perceive to be more socially accepting centers such as Vancouver.

6.1.2 Impact of Local Services and Agencies

It was difficult for the youths to specifically comment on the impact of local services and agencies due in part to an 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 to establish an exit strategy. This may appear to be a somewhat trivial distinction for all agencies currently are searching for the end to youth homelessness. But to the youth this is an important distinction. As also demonstrated by the literature, the youth live complex lives that demand creative scheduling. This is no different in Lethbridge where they expend tremendous social and economic capital to manage existing lifestyles while also attempting to cultivate exit strategies. The youth therefore required greater delineation of available services.

Lacking a comprehensive understanding of the available supports notwithstanding the youths acknowledged that the associated municipal homeless programming was at best underfunded. For example, it was not unusual for the youth 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 a feeble excuse to stifle the services they desperately require. In this case a sense of re-victimization occurs: already feeling abandoned by their immediate family, and dealing with negative foster system encounters, the youths 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 cases money becomes a symbolic feature 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 often led them 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 youths who lacked the benefit of being brought up in an environment where these practices were considered normal they demonstrate impatience leading to a frustrating experience. We observed that the paperwork is also a symbolic and practical reminder of one's current homeless state and the lifestyle's associated risks and deficits. Therefore, the longer you sit for an intake interview, for example, or to fill out forms the more it hits you: you are homeless and dependent on others at a time when you both want *and* need to become independent. A paradox is evident: although avoiding the intake stage helps the youth to avoid the associated trauma they are enhancing their vulnerability and thus opening themselves up to additional traumatic experiences.

The youth are incredibly perceptive. They explicitly noted a difference between stakeholders who are in this line of work for the work, 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 and they do not understand fully the resources (i.e., time, energy, money) that are required. 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 lead them to privilege their personal experiences over all information. They are impatient and want to see immediate change. The incremental, strategic, and (frequently) proven approach 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 required 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 the youth that support workers are more likely to engage. For example, the majority of Lethbridge homeless youth are male with a growing cohort of Aboriginal youth fleeing their reserves for the city, or who were born and/or are long-term Lethbridge residents. The majority of youth were not in high school (i.e., dropped out or were forced out due to being homeless). There is a commonly held perception that homeless youth invariably come from broken and dysfunctional homes. But 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 LGBTQ2, which is understandable due to the associated stigma. It would however be wrong to suggest that there are no LGBTQ2 homeless youth in Lethbridge. 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 as 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.

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 lack financial management skills and frequently misjudge how much it costs to live. These are basic skills sets that are developed incrementally over an extensive period of time. We would however suggest that it is not impatience *per se* that is at issue but rather youth actions 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

The lack of basic skills concerned most support workers and agency 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 it, the youth live a rhythmically different lifestyle that at times does not correspond to a typical 9-5 workday. As an example, a composite of several youth we spoke with is offered. Many youth using the local shelter and/or couch surfing wake up early (around 6 a.m.) – either to leave their current residence or to conform to the shelter schedule. They arrive at school at 8:30 and attend classes until roughly 1 p.m. They may then go to work from 2-9 p.m. and then return to the shelter or their residence for the evening. They may not able to visit with caseworkers during the day or attend life skills classes in the evening. 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. The youths are most often available for weekend meetings but often find the people they need to contact are inaccessible. This scenario is played out daily in Lethbridge 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 also appear absurd. Responding to daily concerns often means that the youth do not have many options; or, more significantly, they remain unaware of what is available. In terms of employment, there is little conversation about specific jobs but rather amorphous discussions about getting ‘a job’.

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.

Perhaps the most challenging issue that leaves the youth at risk is their desire to remain invisible. This is intentional and is attribute to personal safety strategies designed to ensure minimal street conflicts while simultaneously reducing how conspicuous the homeless youth feel. This makes assisting the youth managing their homelessness difficult. The literature on youth homelessness suggests that upwards of 80% of homeless youth are hidden and do not publicly seeking assistance. In Lethbridge, frontline workers combating this concern can be seen traversing the city daily seeking out homeless youths to provide them with information about local services and resources. The youth occasionally will “allow” themselves to be found. However, the skill sets they have developed over time that allow them to remain invisible are superior to front line workers’ observation skills, and this enables them to stay invisible for considerable periods of time. One support worker confirmed these trends: “[homelessness is] hidden here. It's just a lot better here and we’re trying to you know were looking for these people and trying to seek them out to provide them with services or information.”

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 (individuals who have experienced at least one year of homelessness; or have 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 are reluctant to admit that they are homeless. This became apparent during the interviews. But it also became obvious that the youth who deny their homelessness are represented in these three categories of homeless individuals. For our purposes we concluded that unique variants of homelessness first needed to be highlighted the goal being to improve our understanding of the various existing sub-groupings, as articulated by the youth. This in turn forces us to expand upon the above listed narrow categories and to take 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 acknowledging a typology developed by Dr. Paul Toro and his co-researchers from a sample of 250 youth from Detroit that identified three subpopulations of homeless youth, is critical (Toro, Lesperance, & Braciszewski, 2011):

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 about their behaviors/concerns prior to becoming homeless might have been helpful. This contact 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 of the youth indicated that having access to information about homelessness and the available regional supports 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 further demands 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. Then there are chronic homeless youth who sleep outdoors. One grouping could be described as local youth homeless, or youth who consider Lethbridge their home and who will for the majority of their time on the streets remain nearby family and friends. On the other hand several youth in the city originated in other centers, or even provinces, and moved to town in search of resources and a permanent home community. Therefore, describing these youth as transient is perhaps inaccurate. Rather they are what we'd describe as insightfully mobile – youths who travel between centers to find work and access programs and for personal stimulation/excitement, to name a few reasons. They are frequently individuals who lack a permanent sense of home and who in turn seek out stability and a sense of community, along the way tapping local resources as they travel. This should be considered a feather in the cap of local service providers considered approachable. Regrettably, these youth tend to compromise resource availability for those described as local youth homeless.

3) Post-homeless: the ultimate goal is to see the youths permanently housed. And with greater frequency we see youths transitioning from the streets *vis-à-vis* programs such as Housing First. But we tend to 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 become forgotten individuals. They suggested that support workers consider a youth's move into permanent housing to signify the end of a crucial relationship they desire to maintain. For homeless youth this break can be emotionally debilitating. Most were also quite practical in suggesting that they lack the skills needed to successfully run a household. In this regard the majority 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, and by association mainstream work schedules that tend to reflect a 9-5 workday. All of this makes for a difficult transition into permanent housing. With this in mind there is an evident need for social interaction and follow-up is. An argument can be made that the youth do need to fail for fear of never developing the requisite skills sets. However, the financial and emotional costs of failure for individuals already suffering from low self-esteem must be gauged. Also, there is a need to consider and even try to 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 see themselves as homeless?

As briefly discussed above those youths interviewed are generally divided on the question as to whether they consider themselves, to be homeless. Part of the reason for this divide has to do with what how the youths interpreted the concept of homelessness. In particular, there were literally as many definitions of homelessness for every person we interviewed.

As an example, we let it be known that we wanted to speak with youth who were currently homeless youth and/or those who had previously experienced homelessness. Then when we asked the volunteer 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 for most inevitably meant that they were living without shelter. If they were staying with friends, or the local shelter, or even in a car the youth did not believe that they were homeless. They also 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 returning home.

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 incompatible. This demands a flexibility of behavior that is astounding and habitually jarring to those in search of personal stability. In such cases the youths may forego interacting in areas that extend beyond their social 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.

Elaborating on this perspective the youth identified a central and paradoxical element of home that conflicts with the previous assessment that home is shelter. Home rather is 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 abusing or had at one time abused drugs or alcohol, or both, which is a common 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 in a tenuous environment.

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. As a result the youth attempt to disassociate their homeless state from what they perceive as the *real* homeless people – drunks and drug abusers who lost everything due to personal negligence. From the youths' perspective they believe their homelessness occurred for reasons beyond their control. While some may suggest that they played a minor role in their outcomes, for the most part their current state of being is blamed on other people's actions (or lack thereof). The youth detest being reminded that they are homeless, which occurs daily as they seek out help. As such, the stigma associated with being homeless is a factor that compels the youth to shy away from accessing services.

Consequently, seeking out the services that needed to help manage homelessness or develop extrication strategies does not occur due to its stigmatizing effect. In this case, by refusing to admit to being homeless the youth are attempting to empower themselves by taking a negative experience and spinning it in a way that highlights their survival skills.

Ironically, the centralization/concentration of Lethbridge services in the downtown is problematic. From a bureaucratic perspective concentrating services for ease of client access is considered advantageous. In response a lexicon, or social shorthand has developed among the youth. For instance, to indicate you're working with a specific individual or agency is symbolic of fading resiliency or a sense of lost identity. The youth in this study who admitted to being homeless appeared to demonstrate less hope than those who refused to admit to being homeless. Admittedly this conclusion is based less on scientific scales of evaluation and more on reading the participants' body language during one-on-one interviews and evaluating in total the participants' responses. We are comfortable making this conclusion, however. It was also evident that those lacking hope either confront their lifestyle and develop exit strategies, or they fall deeper into a more pronounced state of chronic homelessness. Interestingly, those who have hope could best be described as simultaneously naïve and aware of their situation.

6.6 What are the mechanisms employed 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 Lethbridge who want to live close to friends and family frequently couch surf. Those lacking close friends or a strong social network tend to sleep rough or use the local youth shelter. Youth who express embarrassment at their situation move around (the city, region or province) quite often. Movement thus becomes a safety mechanism: never sleeping rough in the same place on consecutive nights can helps one avoid being profiled, attacked, or exploited by the more experienced and/or violent members of the adult (and youth) homeless community. Inner-city movement is needed to access certain services and resources. For those more adventurous or desperate youth movement between cities and even provinces acts as a resource acquisition strategy and helps the youth establish secure bonds with other homeless youth who will likewise lend a hand to 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.

We discovered that communications networks (CNs) play a vital role amongst homeless youth. They are broken into two primary types of networks: (1) community CNs, which act to guide the youth to local supports, caring agencies, and comfortable sleeping sites (sheltered and rough), that also helped to forge a disparate collection of youth into a self-described community; and, (2) provincial CNs, which alert the youth to cities they describe as 'traveler cities', which are accommodating urban centers considered flush with youth-specific programs that may currently be inaccessible or not available in their current host-city thus demanding travel. For instance, in a related study exploring youth homelessness in Medicine Hat we found that the youth generally avoid Lethbridge owing to its Adult Shelter's reputation (Belanger, 2014). Many of the youth we spoke with indicated that they were hesitant about traveling to Lethbridge for fear that they may have to use the shelter. CNs and local information about traveler cities influenced personal travel decisions.

Although the CNs are informed by a tenuous blend of fact and rumor this did not keep homeless youth from employing that information in their decision-making processes. In one memorable exchange, a Medicine Hat youth interviewed indicated that s/he heard you could stay at the Lethbridge Adult Shelter while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, where it was not unusual for “something to happen.” Reflecting on this, s/he further indicated that s/he preferred the Medicine Hat Shelter because “they have cameras and stuff like that so you know [you're okay]. And everybody there is very civilized. They’re all there just to stay and not, you know, wreak havoc or anything. They just go about their business.” These CNs are duly influenced by the friendships the youth develop in Lethbridge and other centers, which can accurately be described as street kinship networks.

A survival technique involved youth mapping the city in two distinct ways. First, they physically map the city according to services (i.e., where to have showers, access sundries, safe overnight sites, restaurants where the youth can ‘hang out’ at night). Second, they map the city according to available resources, but more specifically in terms of when the resources are and are not available. Knowledge of how the youth temporally map the city is vital for mobile support workers searching out the youth. The mapping project is quite complex for street life frequently demands staying up all night and then trying to catch up on the sleep during the day. Many youth still try and attend school or seek employment during this time. As a result many forego meetings and appointments with case and support workers, or medical professionals, in lieu of pursuing other more personally significant activities. As such, by understanding how the youth map their environment it may be easier to adjust the timing associated with programs and their locale for the youths’ benefit.

Reflecting on previous comments about insightful mobility, the youth divide Alberta’s cities into traveler cities and cities they choose to avoid. Lethbridge is not considered a traveler city even if its location on vital transportation routes means plenty of homeless youth stop here during their travels. Youths visiting travelling cities tend to put down roots for longer periods than those youth passing through. The youth homeless population can therefore be separated into two primary groups: local homeless and traveling homeless. Consequently the larger youth homeless community is fluid and apt to change as it accommodates traveling homeless. It should be noted that the local and traveler homeless youths are both inherently mobile groups, whether that mobility is confined to the city, orbiting rural communities, or provincial or extra-provincial traveling cities. For that reason movement – while an important coping mechanism – tends to confound support worker attempts to seek out the youth to offer them supports, and more importantly to impress upon them the need to try and remain sedentary for the purposes of finding a secure home and employment. The concern is that mobility becomes a normal part of life leading the youth to experience difficulties when it comes time to transition from a highly mobile homeless state into sedentary, housed individuals. Learned mobility skills such as these are unfortunately difficult to ‘unlearn’ after a period of time.

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 both emotionally and economically costly. Abandoning support networks is an emotionally daunting and economically questionable task, for often the jobs the youths secure fail to pay enough to allow for the fruitful transition into another locale. More often than not the youth promptly leave their newfound community seeking out unsubstantiated opportunities they heard about from friends and strangers. Notably, the youth are less apt to move if they have been able to foster strong, local social relationships that provide the youths with a sense of permanency and belonging – even if 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. The youths indicated that if they were being treated better and felt as though had gained support worker and government employee respect they would be more likely to remain in Lethbridge.

As could be expected the youth at times participated in criminal acts that ranged from simple theft to prostitution to illegal squatting and drug dealing. As could also be expected the youth did consider their actions to be criminal but rather acts of survival. There is an interesting sense of morality being described by the youth who already feel like social cast-offs. In one way their actions are deemed appropriate responses to acquiring a share of what they are owed. For the most part however the youth do recognize that according to the "law" their actions are considered criminal, but they rationalize them as a means of survival. In terms of prostitution, which was apparent in the interview responses of both males and females, the act often did not result in an exchange of money but rather was pursued as a means of obtaining food or temporary shelter (i.e., safety sex).

The youths we interviewed were personally/emotionally withdrawn, which we interpret as a means of sending a clear message that discussing their emotions was off limits. Youth are a vulnerable group of developing adolescents and young adults prone to confusion and mood shifts. They have yet to fully mature and have difficulty reconciling their lifestyles with the multiple issues they confront daily. Add to this the fact that there is little down time associated with being homeless – that is, one must not drop their guard while remaining vigilant about their surroundings – and what we have is a stressed-out group of individuals who lack the requisite skills to manage their emotions and homelessness or to create effective and lasting exit strategies. This leads to moments of disassociation ranging from mild detachment from one's immediate surroundings to severe detachment from physical and emotional experiences.

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 youth 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). In addition, 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 of the need to reinforce Aboriginal community-based prevention and healing programs to prevent youth homelessness.

Lethbridge's location on key north-south and east-west travel routes means that Aboriginal youth will periodically stop and take advantage of local programs and resources. The location nearby two large reserve communities means that Lethbridge is attractive to youth leaving the reserve for the city, which in turn can lead to homelessness. What was intriguing is that the Aboriginal youth that we spoke with — 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 surface similarities it is clear that the youth are not able to articulate the impacts of systemic barriers evident in low educational and employment outcomes. It is clear that the youth are beginning to confront these issues in their complaints about a lack of Aboriginal-specific youth homeless programs. Yet when asked to compare how they are treated Aboriginal youth indicated that they have similar advantages to non-Aboriginal youth.

Aboriginal youth homelessness is unique. While there are similarities to non-Aboriginal youth homelessness, in particular the youth need to acquire the requisite skills essential to live on their own, or to complete their education school, they also demonstrate specific needs that can challenge individuals not versed in Aboriginal politics. For instance, the choice of moving from a reserve into the city means that the youth are consciously separating themselves both emotionally and geographically from kinship networks that previously provided a sense of identity and social stability. A profound sense of social dislocation can quickly materialize upon arriving in the city, and this means that the choice of programs and individual responses must be carefully developed. What was initially considered a site of opportunity can quickly become an isolating environment for those with low educational attainment rates and a lack of employment skills.

Additional issues such as who may be considered a status or non-status Indian must be factored into our assessment. Status Indians, for instance, may be entitled to programs that exclude non-status Indians. In most cases, documentation proving status is needed to access the aforementioned programs. This is not an unusual situation for most youth do not possess their social insurance cards (or it is quickly lost), but for Aboriginal youth who generally do not possess these basic documents, their ability to access supplementary programs can be further undermined if they are unable to demonstrate status. Upon acquiring these documents they are forced to navigate an added level of bureaucracy in the form of their home community's Band Council, which is frequently in charge of shaping youth program applicability and the associated funding formulas.

Aboriginal youth who end up in the state's care frequently find that they are placed in non-Aboriginal foster families. In an environment such as Lethbridge, which has been identified as racially charged and at times unaccommodating toward Aboriginal peoples, these youth find themselves living in homes where negative attitudes about Aboriginal people proliferate (both consciously and unconsciously). Add to this the conspicuous nature of being the only Aboriginal family member and the youth find themselves in a baffling living situation. In their opinion the system has very little to offer them, which in turn means that they must access culturally insensitive programs, or their foster family may be hostile towards Aboriginal people. Add to this the fact that skin color indicates visible difference it becomes apparent as to why Aboriginal specific programs are needed. In most cities across Canada high Aboriginal homeless rates combined with statistically confirmed family breakdowns and recent state intervention leading to high rates of Aboriginal children being removed from their homes and placed in non-Aboriginal homes that these programs will become all-important in the near future.

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 Lethbridge, the Lethbridge Police Services (LPS), and in the local schools, to name a few. The goal was to develop a front-line perspective of the issues confronting homeless youth to expand upon how this community frames the issues; how response strategies are developed; and how closely they resonate 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 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 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 that youth as young as 12 years of age were living on Lethbridge'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 knocked on respective agency doors – is already a reality. Bureaucratic approaches are necessarily reactive and consequently less preventative in scope. Those working within the system more often champion preventative approaches for working with the youth homeless. This paradox – a reactive system/model peopled by individuals utilizing preventative frameworks – demands reconciliation.

The one issue that everyone highlighted (and thus agreed to) was 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. The lack of funding leads youth to being situated into rigid administrative and institutional categories due to cost considerations, which regularly compels service providers to bend the rules to ensure youth have access to services to which they might otherwise be disqualified. This risks reinforcing youth marginalisation and disenfranchisement for those who do not meet agency/service criteria. Funding will always be a concern; therefore, it is important to utilize the tools at our disposal to help stretch available dollars. Another issue everyone agreed on was the need to terminate duplication of services. At the same time not one individual was able to fully articulate how this should unfold for no one had a complete grasp of how the system truly operated. As an example, no one could indicate how many agencies in

Lethbridge specifically deal with youth homelessness. There were multiple definitions of youth homelessness presented with ages ranging from 12 to 34. There is therefore a need to map the agencies thereby providing an overview of who is doing what. More to the point, an effort is required consolidating data and developing 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. In sum, 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.

The majority of those to whom we spoke consider the youth to be miniature adults who in a few years will make the transition from homelessness into productive members of society. This may occur organically (i.e., just happen) or with agency support. Either way they are most often presented as individuals who are on the cusp of maturity. This could be due to the fact that the homeless youth they work with appear worldly and in many ways resistant to an unstable and potentially violent lifestyle. Perhaps the support workers are mistaking youth strategies to manage homelessness as a form of social seasoning that has them prepared for adulthood. In most interviews amazement at how quickly the youth are able to acclimate to street life was the norm. This is due to resiliency and adaptability inherent to being a youth, which enables them to quickly assess and assimilate into their environment. When we factor in the youth's stories about the length of time to acclimatizing and the stress and the fears linked with entering into and living this lifestyle it is clear that quick acclimation is not the case. The lack of discussion about childhood development is telling.

Frontline and support workers simultaneously expressed dismay at how naïve and ill-prepared the youth were for the trials and tribulations of the streets. For instance, as suggested the youth were seen as incredibly resilient, able to sleep rough while maintaining relationships all the while going to school and working in their efforts to exit homelessness. They were also presented as uninformed and unknowledgeable regarding available services needed to help them in their quest to become housed. The tensions are stark and frequently played themselves out in terms of how youth were identified in specific circumstances: 1) those in need of assistance; and, 2) those who are better equipped to survive as a homeless individual. Frontline workers construct the youth in specific ways to assist in their job. We must also take into account that most agencies are strapped for cash and are compelled to limit their resources at a time when the youth homeless populations are growing, or at the very least have reached unexpected thresholds.

A lack of centralized data repository was identified as an obstacle to developing better programs. Yet several stakeholders expressed a certain suspicion and at times even opposition to employing or relying on statistical data, highlighting its limited applicability or efficacy as it directly relates to their duties. This may in many ways explain why there is so little tracking data available. It is understandable considering that the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) ratings are commonly not fully representative of current youth needs. Frontline workers are unconsciously privileging personal interpretation over identified trends when in fact we should be encouraging who could best be described as a mixed methods approach to developing response strategies. We are breeding in subsequent generations of front-line workers a corporate belief in the inefficacy of employing statistical data. This strikes at the heart of developing comment intake practices and housing data that everyone may access.

Such systemic attitudes must be challenged early and processes put in place countering current trends.

7.2 What are the demographics?

The stakeholders we interviewed generally established the core group of youth homeless in Lethbridge as between the ages 18-24, which has the most interaction with stakeholders and consume the greatest resources. Most acknowledged that the provincial age range for youth (13-25) was acceptable. However, youth before the age of 18 were considered too young to impart the requisite life skills and hence were seen as at an age where their homelessness required management (i.e., foster and group homes). Youth after the age of 24 were deemed adults and as such more likely to be able to successfully manage their homelessness and develop exit strategies without substantial local agency assistance. The 18-24 grouping was considered the most appropriate cohort to direct resources at due to their ability to learn new information and build basic skills. In a way they were considered not too old and not too young. In sum, 18-24 represents a perfect age, and the stakeholders for the most part have unconsciously internalized the belief that this age bracket demands (i.e., deserves) the greatest level of resources. The stakeholders also identified a need to develop programming for new Canadians (immigrants) and Aboriginal youth (the latter are assumed to have drug and alcohol issues). There was limited 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. We must note that front line workers 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 however is the time it takes to develop the relationships that draw the youth to specific programs. Funding is often outcomes-oriented, or at the very least it fails to take into account the costs of the outreach required to attract the youth (many of whom do not believe they are homeless. This should be considered an important period of youth education). This leads to what we 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, remain on the outside looking in.

This puts youth at risk, especially when ensuring ongoing operations comes to outweigh program delivery. The Province of Alberta’s inherently chaotic administrative model encourages best practices *vis-à-vis* funding competition, which leads to inter-agency competition while also compromising one’s ability to effectively respond to those youth already in care. Each agency has it 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 restricted to caring for specific sub-groups of the 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 youths may be turned away at their most vulnerable time thereby shattering whatever level of trust they had mustered towards mainstream society.

We would also argue that a lack of front-line understanding about youth mental health places homeless youth at risk. For instance, when listening to the digitally recorded interviews the youths' speech patterns suggested mental health issues. The following are excerpted from a research assistant's field notes:

> **Youth #1** - This interview sticks out significantly. Peaks and valleys pattern again, but more so in an excitable way where it seems like the thoughts are getting away from the individual. This youth gets stuck on an idea, and there is almost a cyclical quality to the narratives. A couple of times the youth uses the third person, but randomly and out of place in such a distinct way that I didn't hear it as a figure of speech. The youth expresses irrational paranoia about certain situations but brushes off other significantly more dangerous situations.
>
> **Youth #2** - This interview stands out in a different way than the others. It seems that the youth understands the literal consequences of his/her actions and why s/he is on probation, but not necessarily the implications of any behavior. The youth sounds disconnected in a different way than the other (this may be linked to his/her background, but again flips back to this disconnect between understanding the implications of behaviors).
>
> **Youth #3** - A lot of the narratives have an excitable, cyclical quality with imbalanced rationality and a degree of paranoia. Responses build and become more fantastical as the interview continues, and thoughts seem to escape the youth at certain times. S/he expresses paranoia throughout the interview more significantly than any other youth in that there always seems to be someone that hates him/her or is out to get him/her.
>
> **Focus Group #1** - Speech patterns have a distinctly aggressive quality, and also follow the peak and valley pattern. At certain points I found it difficult to distinguish the youth's voice from another group member because it dropped to a different register and the youth responded in a significantly different manner (though I know it was because of specific details from other times in the interview). S/he seemed to have difficulty following the conversation at times, and would ask that a straightforward question be rephrased.

What is surprising is that we lack insights about youth homeless mental health – even though the youth are quite open to discussing their mental health issues. Youth act out due to situation specific issues such as not wanting to live at home or substance abuse or trouble with authority. What we rarely identify is that these issues may be mental health-related rather than simply behavioral difficulties. The agencies cannot be faulted for lacking the resources to hire people with adequate backgrounds needed to help diagnose mental health issues for the system is structured in a way that until the front line/support workers identify a mental health concern the available avenues to recovery remain obstructed. The youth are thus handicapped by the process they've been seeking help from due to their lack of deep knowledge of their personal mental health concerns and the lack of front line education needed to help identify those who may be presenting with or at-risk of mental health problems.

Related to the issue of mental health is the general lack of medical health support that homeless youth experience. As front-line workers attest, getting medical assistance is difficult. Finding a personal doctor or dentist is a challenge for most people, but for homeless youth it is an almost impenetrable barrier to improved health. An important concern relates to how many front line/support workers lack the requisite background to identify the symptoms of mental illness. It is therefore suggested that workshops be delivered annually or biennially to provide upgrading toward their ability to identify mental illness and thereby direct the youth to the appropriate services and supports.

Many indicated that we need to expand our understanding of youth homelessness by tracking trends more aggressively, and that a common intake is a crucial time to establish data sets. Restructuring, coordination, and rebranding what youth homelessness is and means, and our attendant response strategies, can help alleviate significant barriers while allowing us to better measure the changes. For example, youths who do not self-identify as homeless would see little value in homelessness programming. We need to know why.

From a frontline perspective all youth are for the most part considered equal when they enter into the system. This is not to suggest a lack of youth heterogeneity exists, or that it is being ignored. Rather, what we see is that each youth enters the system assigned with what could best be described as a blank slate. That is, the goal is to establish a working relationship with each youth without relying too heavily on the youth's personal history as a guide. The goal is to avoid prejudicing frontline workers attitudes and undermining youth attempts to secure the needed resources to exit homelessness. The youth deem it a useful approach – they do not want to be pigeonholed by their history. Yet they railed against being lumped together into one category and wanted their individuality respected, as personal history is an important part of their identity. They were telling us that not all youth were equal, that they were unique individuals, and that they wanted to be treated accordingly. Youth attempts at asserting independence and desires to be seen as unique come head-to-head with the practicalities of front-line work that demand generalities about the youth be employed due to the high numbers being served at any one time (i.e., we cannot possibly serve each youth individually). The unintentional homogenization of a dynamic group of youth therefore occurs.

Heavy caseloads further aggravate attempts at individualizing supports. Take how we determine the length of stay at agencies and various programs as an example. The youth may stay at various Lethbridge agencies for anywhere from two weeks to roughly 45 days after which they are reintegrated into foster care or they need to find independent housing. With the advent of the Housing First program the latter should become less of an issue. In the former instance what we observe is youth entering into a safe haven only to discover rigid and nonnegotiable timelines to exiting. This becomes a barrier to relationship building: if you know you're only going to be staying at a certain agency for 14 days what could possibly compel you to open up to a stranger who will be asking you to leave due to financial limitations? The mobile nature of youth homelessness further confounds our response strategies. Homeless youth are constantly in search of adequate accommodations. This search, as the youth in this project will attest, leads to a lifestyle of constant movement. Internalizing ongoing mobility as a normative behavior can be traced to regular movement between foster homes, for example. Beginning at an early age the youth are imprinting a custom of constant movement. (A front-line worker indicated that those youth who have grown up in the system – who lived in foster homes or at an early age were removed from their homes by social services – are better prepared to secure the help they need from the appropriate agencies.)

It happens to promote in the youth passivity situated in contrast to the practical need to develop the appropriate life skills needed to survive on the street. Whereas once on the street the youth must become and remain proactive, getting involved with the system leads them to becoming increasingly dependent as they linger awaiting an agency placement or program acceptance. A tension exists between remaining simultaneously proactive and dependent that is oftentimes difficult to reconcile and should be factored into any assessment that involves evaluating aggressive behaviors and/or abusive outbursts directed at frontline workers. These acts of frustration are likely a response to being pushed and pulled in different directions, and further highlight the clash between proactively managing one's homelessness and passively allowing others to help set your trajectory toward exiting homelessness. The youths are results-driven, meaning that when a specific strategy does not work they are apt to move on and adopt an alternative strategy. This can be seen in the movement between houses and traveling cities.

Front line workers and agency administrators project a curious level of optimism that demands attention. Specifically, workers and administrators frequently suggest that in cases where they are personally unable to provide the appropriate supports that the system is more than capable of meeting those needs. In essence, they are convinced that the system as it is structured is able to effectively respond to even the most complex youth needs. This thinking has led local agencies to arguably become too inwardly focused to a degree that, for example, we tend to ignore how Lethbridge homeless trends impact or are impacted by regional rural homeless trends – even though many of the urban youth homeless did not originate in the city: a minority immigrated into Lethbridge from surrounding rural communities. We often overlook the fact that the similar issues leading urban youth to abandon their homes also exist in rural communities, which are then compounded by regionally unique factors.

Rural youth moved to Lethbridge with the hopes of finding needed supports unavailable in their community. The youth for that reason appear to willingly abandon their existing social networks for what is a foreign community they have a passing knowledge about (similar trends are evident with Aboriginal youth leaving the reserves). It takes time to acclimate to this new environment, which often times is debilitating for those youth requiring immediate attention. In certain cases where the youth are unable to travel into the city, or are restricted in terms of their travel back and forth, they must seek out accommodations in their community which requires couch surfing, sleeping rough, squatting in garages, sheds, and barns, or staying awake all night on the streets until local services such as the library open.

Here we see Lethbridge agencies have become focused on the issues confronting their community to the exclusion of these satellite communities. The municipal agencies have done an admirable job of embracing a systems approach to ending local homelessness that regrettably does not involve or embrace those regional communities. Something as simple as a youth moving to Lethbridge to find work to escape a situation where technically they were housed could quickly spiral into homelessness due to limited employment opportunities and a lack of knowledge of how to navigate a larger urban center. Therefore, any municipal systems approach to homelessness must take into consideration surrounding communities that act as a feeder system of youth and their accompanying concerns. Lethbridge for that reason must be considered a hub drawing in youths along service access corridors (i.e., highways and roads). In sum, the current systems approach speaks to a localized, urban response that has yet to acknowledge regional rural communities.

At the same time many youths we spoke with expressed concerns that the system, as it currently operates, is preparing them for a lifetime of as opposed to mitigating homelessness. Frontline workers lament the lack of or limited skills sets demonstrated by the youth they also identify as entitled. The system, many suggest, plays to these dynamics and is not preparing the youth to exit homelessness. One of the key issues identified is the need to prepare the youth with the proper skills required to exit homelessness while at the same time impressing upon them that they are not entitled to anything other than what they work for and achieve. Many front-line workers demonstrated a sense of frustration and at times outright resentment towards youth they consider to have received all the material items they've ever wanted. There appears to be a generation gap at play here: many of the youth have cellular phones; they know that failure to attend school has few repercussions; they know they can stay at home alone after school; their clothes and food needs will be met. Whether or not this colors frontline worker perceptions of homeless youth or plays out in terms of response strategies or how relationships are formed is not yet known. However, human nature suggests that these resentments are influencing the front-line worker/homeless youth relationships and how policy is consequently interpreted and applied.

It was frequently highlighted that various intake instruments such as the SPDAT do not effectively capture the youths lived experience and as such their program requirements. As a result, the front-line workers often ignored these ratings in lieu of conducting their own personalized assessment; or they went with their "gut feeling" when it came time to assigning resources or directing the youth to specific programs and agencies. Frontline workers rely on their intuition, which is a powerful tool. It was however not uncommon to hear the frontline workers speak about their specific goals in relation to the youth they were assisting. In this instance, it seems as though the youth's needs are being interpreted according to the workers interpretation of what the youth need. There is a fine line here for that is what most front-line workers are responsible: interpreting their charges' needs. The intake process is confusing for the youth. By seeking help they have to relive trauma. And many believing in their resilience and progress find that after taking the SPDAT that they have underestimated their level of calculated homelessness, which can be demoralizing.

One example sheds light on this process. A youth seeking assistance in Lethbridge sat down for an intake process and was clearly scared to answer many of the SPDAT questions. It took the worker several attempts to complete the intake because the youth felt that s/he at times was not properly answering the questions while at other times s/he did not want to answer for fear of reducing the score. The youth in this instance tied their sense of self-worth to the SPDAT score and in doing so intentionally provided specific responses to the questions that s/he believed undermined his/her sense of identity. At the same time the caseworkers needed truthful answers. This subtle sparring match was a time-consuming battle of wills that eventually was resolved. Unfortunately, the process of assisting this individual frustrated the worker while simultaneously compromising the youth's fragile sense of self-worth. In this case a paradox of re-traumatization is evident: to escape a trauma-filled lifestyle that compromises an individual's ability to improve their personal situation those individuals must relive traumatic events that chip away at a tenuous sense of self-worth.

One unanticipated issue had to do with youth access of supports. As mentioned, it has long been the practice to consolidate government and attendant offices in the downtown as a cost-cutting measure and to ensure supports are located nearby one another. In many ways this one stop shop is an effective means of ensuring access to multiple offices in one visit. Lethbridge has applied similar thinking, where a majority of the government supports devised to aid homeless youth are located in the city core. On the surface this appears an effective strategy. However, for the homeless youth who already feel conspicuous and are dealing with low self-esteem and other issues, being forced to enter the downtown is a traumatic event. Even though our best intentions suggest that concentrating resources is the most and cost-effective means of reaching a larger proportion of homeless youth, the stigma associated with entering the various downtown agencies is often so overwhelming so as to convince the youth to seek alternative strategies. Stigma of this type is not unusual amongst homeless youth.

If the youth already feel somewhat invisible, and try to remain invisible as a means of ensuring personal safety, they often confront moments where they would like to become visible. This occurs when a youth attempts to personally connect with another individual for personal or professional reasons (i.e., employment). This is a delicate balancing act for youth who are used to trying to remain invisible for safety or other reasons, which is an assertion of agency and their independence. However, in certain situations the youth are willing to bring down their defensive shield, if you will, for the purposes of opening themselves up to potential relationships which in turn demands that they once again become visible. Many of the social workers and many of the youth agree that in these situations it is absolutely essential that their advances be accepted and that we respond to attempts at building relationships. What we see in these brief moments of vulnerability, unfortunately, is a lack of reciprocation resulting in the youth feeling invisible. Hence, it is one thing to actively try and remain invisible – and these are acts of agency and independence. It is another to be made to feel invisible, which undermines personal self-esteem and identity development.

PART D: DISCUSSION

8.1 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 to which all stakeholders agree. 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. Based on their current life circumstances, their schedules frequently do not align with program timetables and agency schedules. The youth require assistance to manage their homelessness, but do not know which are the best agencies for their needs. 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: spinning a negative experience into a positive outcome demonstrates their resilience. It may however keep others from pursuing and accessing much needed resources. Every agency intake is a stark reminder of their situation, which may lead the youths to re-experience trauma while simultaneously drawing them out of a self-identified comfort zone.

Support workers fail to identify mental health issues. Instead they describe confused and overwhelmed youth who will grow out of this particular stage or eventually develop mental illness. Those mentally ill homeless youth who lack a proper diagnosis are unable to access services. Further to this the youth do not see mental health as an issue. Accordingly, with two sides generally ignoring the issue it would seem as though we cannot respond effectively.

The youth and the stakeholders both exhibit a poor grasp of the types and numbers of available programs. The youth are impatient and have unrealistic expectations of how the system can help and they feel like they are a burden to society. Such feelings are compounded by overworked caseworkers' inability to thoughtfully respond. This is discouraging. At the same time, agencies working with the youth have yet to fully acknowledge the magnitude of their street schedules and continue to operate for the most part on a 9-5 daily 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 each participant would approve. This could assist them with successfully transitioning into effective renters and maintaining their relationship with support workers to whom they have grown close. Preferably youth homelessness as a policy concern needs to be separated from adult homelessness programming, the latter of which was identified as better funded. The youths know they have limited programs available.

There are addition issues that demand consideration. The youth are worried that their lack of identification could be debilitating; and that accessing the required ID is difficult. The ‘system’ does a poor job of establishing its mandate to the youth. As an example, homeless youth are seeking parental guidance and emotional support. Then they feel abandoned when support workers jettison them from agencies/programs due to various demands (i.e., aged out, timed out). Many of the youth suggested that the system was attempting to convert them into hardened adults. As worldly as the youth may appear in most case they lack the skills needed to effectively manage and end their homelessness. This is logical when we factor in most of the stakeholders concentrated on the 18-24 age group (i.e., the ones they could best aid at this stage).

The youths lack the skills needed to effectively manage and end their homelessness. There are few programs for youth homeless couples (or adult partnerships, for that matter) as homelessness is considered an individual issue from a policy perspective. We have yet to concede how social stigmatization regarding “the homeless” – social markers internalized early in their lives – influences youth self-esteem and their pursuit of supports (i.e., they’ve been preconditioned to see homeless individuals as undesirable). This necessarily impacts support worker attempts to seek out and assist a population that actively seeks to remain invisible due to this stigmatization. Rural homeless youth in Lethbridge also feel that urban society ignores them, and they struggle to access supports or to penetrate the urban youth homeless social networks many have come to depend upon for survival.

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge is this: the youth and stakeholders both envision the same outcomes – ending youth homelessness. The breakdown occurs when front line workers and agency administrators stop listening to the youth. In sum, we do not develop youth homeless policies based on their experience but rather on our bureaucratic perception of what needs to be done.

Centralized Coordination

The theme that came through loud and clear concerned the lack of communication between agencies, the city, and the province. 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 poorly exploited. Instead *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. As an example, currently there is no agreed upon definition of youth, youth homelessness, or how to systematically deal with the issue of youth homelessness.

Multiple agencies do their best to respond. There is however no central coordinating body to assist in 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 as 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 that a uniform screening, referral, and intake process is needed to ensure that the youth entering the system have access to targeted services irrespective of their first point of contact (Bond, 2010; Nichols, 2014).

A centralized virtual database is required that can connect everybody involved in the fight against youth homelessness. An independently operated, equal access centralized data and/or information hub can help harmonize these multiple agents’ mandates while improving the flow of information. The goal is to avoid amplifying inter-agency competition but rather to development complementary agendas. Establishing community-based development agencies that can avoid being drawn into community politics clouding issues is the goal.

9.0 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 to warehouse data. This can help with regional systems planning.

4) Restructuring, coordination, and rebranding what youth homelessness means, and our response to it, can potentially alleviate significant barriers.

5) 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.

6) Ensure services are structured in a way that youth can understand.

7) Reviewing internal service delivery criteria to ensure that service providers do not contribute to youth homelessness.

8) Develop a preventative, early intervention based approach in addition to services for youth once on the street.

9) 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.

10) Greater acknowledgement and attention of youth mental health concerns. Drug, alcohol, and behavioral difficulties may be attributable to mental health issues.

11) Systems models developed in cities *must* reflect on how orbiting rural communities influence service delivery. Hence systems approaches should not exclusively be urban focused.

12) Counseling for front line and support workers to ensure work-life balance and avoid burnout.

13) Homeless youth committee to help inform local agencies regarding appropriate and timely response strategies.

14) Money for youth bus passes to enable better municipal movement for work and education.

15) Map the local agencies and their existing relationships. This will help avoid duplication and encourage inter-agency cooperation and the creation of complementary programs.

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