the
homeless hub
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Foyers and Transitions to Adulthood

IN ADAPTING the Foyer to your community, it is important to recognize the degree to which this approach to accommodation and support is built on an understanding of the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult. Fidelity to this orientation means that the work of the Foyer is not simply to help young people become independent and self-sufficient, but to help them successfully transition to adulthood.

The purpose of this toolkit is to draw on our knowledge of youth homelessness in order to enhance our thinking around the types of accommodations and supports that best suit young people's needs.

In this section, you will learn:

- *Key features of adolescent development;*
- *Factors that impact on young people's ability to obtain and maintain housing;*
- *Challenges faced by young people leaving care; and*
- *Transitions to adulthood and the role of the Foyer.*

Does age matter?

Do we really need specialized services for young people who become homeless? One of the key arguments in support of the Foyer is the necessity of recognizing the needs of adolescents and young adults as unique and worthy of attention. The causes of youth homelessness are different from the causes of adult homelessness, and as such the solutions should be distinct, as well. So, in thinking about appropriate models of accommodation and support for young people, we really need to understand the challenges associated with the transition to adulthood and how these impact on the experience of homelessness.

While the pathways to homelessness are varied and unique, one thing that unites all young people in this situation is their attempt to secure housing at a very young age, with minimal or no family support, limited resources and very little experience with independent living. These challenges become more complicated the younger one is, and if one faces discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, or because of racism, problems become compounded. Here, we outline several challenges that young people face:

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS LIMIT ACCESS TO HOUSING: SUPPLY, INCOME, EDUCATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Perhaps the key factor that makes solving homelessness a challenge – regardless of a person's age – is the lack of affordable housing in Canada. In the almost two decades since Canada cancelled its National Housing Strategy, the affordable housing supply has not expanded, the cost of housing has increased, and at the same time, for most Canadians, incomes have stagnated or declined.

These problems become even more acute the younger you are, as one's youth can lead to discrimination. In a tight housing market, for instance "many private landlords (believe) that street-involved youth are a risky investment, assuming that young tenants will fail to pay rent, damage property, and leave without notice"[1]. Add to this homeless youth's poverty and inexperience, and it is clear that these youth are at a competitive disadvantage when trying to rent an apartment.

Even if a young person is in a community where there is some rental housing available, youth generally do not have access to full-time, well paying jobs that would provide them with the necessary income to *pay* for housing. The fact that homeless and marginalized youth often fail to complete high school means that they are not competitive in the labour market. Typically, the only type of employment available to youth these days is low paying, part-time and dead end work. This explains why so many housed youth continue to live at home well beyond their teen years, often punctuated by periods of independent living followed by moves back to the parental home.

> PERHAPS THE KEY FACTOR THAT MAKES SOLVING HOMELESSNESS A CHALLENGE – REGARDLESS OF A PERSON'S AGE – IS THE LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN CANADA.

LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CARE

One of the major causes of youth homelessness is the unsuccessful transition of young people from institutional care to independent living. Research consistently tells us that a high percentage of young people who become homeless have had *some* involvement with **child protection services**, including foster care, group home placements or youth custodial centres[2]. The underlying problem is that many young people who leave care fail to make a smooth transition to adulthood and independent living because of underdeveloped life skills, inadequate education, and lack of supports and resources (including income) that we know most young people rely on when moving into adulthood. Some voluntarily leave care because of bad experiences in the system. Other youth 'age out'* of the foster care system and are left to fend for themselves, not having been adequately prepared for independent living at such a young age. Difficult transitions from care often result in negative outcomes such as homelessness, unemployment, lack of educational engagement and achievement, involvement with the justice system, lack of skills and potentially, a life of poverty.

Young people who experience **mental health problems**, and are discharged from mental health inpatient care without adequate housing are also at increased risk of homelessness. We do know that the onset of some mental health issues, such as schizophrenia, typically begin when people are young, and often as teens. The problems are often worse for homeless youth, as mental health issues can be both a cause of, and a consequence of youth homelessness. Furthermore, poor systems planning sometimes results in the discharge of young people from health care facilities directly into homelessness. Once on the streets, accessing appropriate care and support can be that much more difficult due to young people's lack of family support, financial support and the knowledge required to navigate systems. As a result, the mental health of homeless you can deteriorate.

Leaving corrections facilities or – for younger teens – **juvenile detention** centres can also present challenges for young people seeking employment and housing. We know from extensive research that young people who are homeless are, on average, more criminally involved than housed youth[3], and we also know that many of those leaving custody are discharged directly into homelessness, without adequate planning and support[4]. When faced with this situation, there is the risk that youth will reoffend and / or experience enduring homelessness[5].

Young people leaving institutional care – whether child protection, corrections or health care – are in need of transitional supports if we wish to increase their life chances and reduce the risk of homelessness. Youth exiting these systems often exhibit high needs in other areas, including addictions, mental health and education, for instance.

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* Child Protection legislation is a provincial responsibility, and there are significant jurisdictional differences meaning that the actual age at which the State remains responsible for young people in care varies from province to province. In Ontario, for instance, young people 'age out' at 18, but can also voluntarily withdraw from care at the age of 16.

Step by Step Crimea Road building (UK)
www.stepbystep.org.uk/news-info/prel/UKHousingAwards2012.htm

ONE OF THE MAJOR CAUSES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS THE UNSUCCESSFUL TRANSITION OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM INSTITUTIONAL CARE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING.
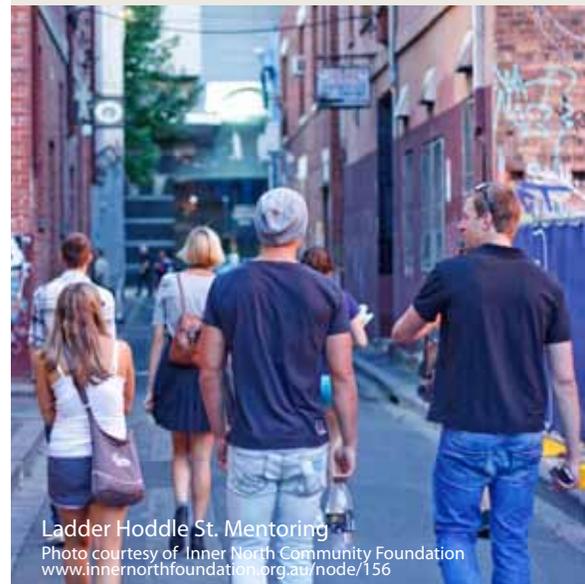
Ladder Hoddle St. Mentoring
Photo courtesy of Inner North Community Foundation
www.innernorthfoundation.org.au/node/156

BBC Connect and Create program
www.foyer.net/level3.asp?level3id=188

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

The defining feature of young people who are homeless is in fact their youthful age. Age matters for many reasons, not least of which is their continued development as adolescents. And there are big differences between a young person who is 16 and homeless, and one who is 24. These differences can be further complicated by gender, sexual orientation and ethno-racial background.

Theories of adolescent development often describe the transition from childhood to adulthood, even in relatively stable environments, as one that can be challenging and potentially problematic[6]. Whether referring to physical, cognitive or social maturation[7], the developmental tasks associated with "becoming" an adult are many, and are distributed across a range of social, psychological and biological domains. As part of this process, young people assume greater responsibilities in the areas of education, income, accommodation, social relations, health and mobility. Adolescence can also be thought of as a series of "firsts", often associated with adulthood: a first kiss, first relationship, first sexual experience, first job, getting a drivers licence, making doctors' appointments, experimentation with substances, etc. There is no set process for these explorations, and different young people will encounter these firsts in different ways, sequences and according to specific cultural and contextual conditions. All of these developments are overlaid with cultural and legal proscriptions that allow certain kinds of autonomous decision making and actions to occur, and on what timelines. Typically these changes, which incrementally prepare youth for independent living, are supported by adult supervision and guidance both within and outside the home. Accompanying this is a commitment to education as a central institutional support.

While there is considerable evidence that most teens actually move through adolescence without significant emotional, social or behavioural challenges, can we confidently say this about homeless youth? Unfortunately, young people who become homeless are typically shut out of the normal process of adolescent development that so many of us hold as essential for a healthy transition to adulthood. Many lack trusting relationships and experiences with adults; between 60-70% come from homes where they were victims of physical, sexual and emotional abuse[8]. Youth who become homeless leave home without the necessary skills and experience, without financial support and importantly, without their home of origin to fall back on if things go wrong. It is also true that homelessness often simultaneously forecloses the opportunity to participate in the institutions that frame what many would deem to be a successful transition to adulthood, including education, getting a part time job while living at home, and recreational activities.

Homelessness often thrusts young people into adult roles at an accelerated rate, and the expectation is that they seek housing, pursue employment or training (education is usually off the table), and learn quickly to make good decisions. How, and whether a given young person who experiences homelessness is really able to make that quick transition to living independently is open to debate. One of the key factors that distinguishes youth homelessness

The Fraserburgh Herald. Thursday 9 February 2012 12:26
www.fraserburghherald.co.uk/news/stevenson-centre-to-tackle-overcrowded-1-2107140

from adult homelessness is that most young people leave home with *no prior experience* of obtaining and running a household. Few will know what it means to sign a lease, deal with a landlord, pay rent and make the right purchases to maintain their home. Allowing friends to move in, having parties that may get out of control, and an inability to properly maintain their apartment may lead to tensions with landlords.

ONE OF THE KEY FACTORS THAT DISTINGUISHES YOUTH HOMELESSNESS FROM ADULT HOMELESSNESS IS THAT MOST YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVE HOME WITH NO PRIOR EXPERIENCE OF OBTAINING AND RUNNING A HOUSEHOLD.

So, *age does matter . . .*

. . . and the younger one is, the more adolescent challenges complicate one's transition to independence. We know that many young people become homeless during their mid-teens or even earlier. In a recent study in Toronto[9], over 60% of young people in the sample (250 youth) had left home before they were 18. The consequences of leaving home at such a young age are many, and have a direct impact on an individual's ability to obtain and maintain housing. The first thing to note is that our laws and institutions are organized in such a way that an individual's rights and privileges are clearly determined by their age. For instance, in some provinces, young people under the age of 18 may have greater difficulty accessing benefits (such as social assistance) if they cannot establish their independence from their parents. Some provinces have also established a lower minimum wage for those under the age of 18[†].

Finally, there is compelling evidence of the longer-term consequences that result from leaving home at a younger age, including higher rates of criminal victimization and trauma and longer periods of homelessness[10].

In sum, for young people who become homeless, the challenge of moving from childhood to adulthood is not only truncated, but qualitatively different than is the case for most teenagers. A clear distinction needs to be made between youth homelessness and adult homelessness. This suggests that we need to also consider different solutions to youth homelessness.

And in thinking of housing options for youth, we must necessarily consider their youthful age, lack of experience, poverty and discrimination, and for some, experiences with child protection services or involvement with the law. Young people who become homeless, then, require programming, resources, supports and perhaps most significantly, a service model that allows them the time to grow and learn – and make mistakes – that are typically deemed necessary for housed adolescents who are making the transition to adulthood. Obtaining safe and affordable housing when you are young is not easy in the best of circumstances. It is particularly difficult for young people who are homeless.

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† It is worth pointing out that there are significant differences between provinces in terms of age of majority, and eligibility (and access) to youth and adult programming.

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