



## SYSTEM PATHWAYS INTO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

# CASE STUDY: HOUSING

In 2013/2014, a research project titled *System Pathways into Youth Homelessness* interviewed 22 youth (aged 18-29) who have been homeless and 12 individuals working in front-line agencies, policy developers, and Government staff.

## WHAT YOUTH TOLD US

### Many houses, few homes

The youth who participated in this research had extremely unstable housing histories. Mobility, for many of them, started at a young age with multiple placements in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). To prevent frustration and re-traumatization, we did not try to determine exactly how many foster homes, group homes, and emergency placements the 18 youth who were in the care of CFS had experienced. Since they left CFS care or their family home the participants had lived in 7.7 places on average. They spent, on average, 7.8 months in each place (this average drops to 5.3 months if the only participant with a stable, five year group home placement, is removed from the calculation).

First attempts at independent living were, for many of the youth, unsafe and unhealthy. One youth was introduced to drugs at his first residence: "I went to the rooming house, like smoked a bunch of crack 'cause I didn't know what it was." Others moved in with a partner upon first aging out of care. Often, the relationship broke down within the first year, leaving female youth particularly vulnerable: "we started getting into a lot of arguments and some of them got physical between us... [I left and went] straight to Winnipeg."

At the time of the interviews, almost half of the participants were couch surfing (living temporarily with friends or family members) and slightly more than one quarter lived in rooming houses. One now lives in an apartment and two were in Manitoba Housing. Two participants were absolutely homeless, living in shelters or on the street.

### Independence and interdependence

The youth we spoke to sought shelter in a variety of places, often relying on relationships with family, former foster parents, friends, friends of friends, and partners. Several participants talked about moving from place to place as a form of independence. When asked why they moved, words like "freedom" and "escape" were used. Some fled abuse, some experienced evictions, some left out of fear related to safety, and some left due to poor quality of housing. "I was stuck paying \$475 for a suite in a rooming house that had holes in the ceilings cut out, big gaping holes and black mould and bed bugs and ugh. Yeah that was a crappy place." Other moves were related to relationship break-down, or the youth wanted to prevent fights with or dependence on family and friends. Only seven of the 22 participants used various mission and homeless shelters in the city. Those who did use

the shelters were older than the other participants. One young woman spoke of being ashamed to stay at a shelter: "I thought to myself like I was a failure 'cause I didn't have no home after that and I had to go [to the shelter]. That was like my last resort that I think that's the lowest you could ever be is in a shelter."

### Accessing shelter and housing

In addition to living with friends and family, the youth participants also had assistance from friends and family to find private rental housing. Informal support networks were therefore of utmost importance for most of the youth. The housing they found was inadequate. One young man said "they got me a room ... and then a few days later I got jumped, beat up, so I've just been staying at Main Street Project." Another interviewee described leaving his rooming house because: "just like well crack heads are unpredictable you know ... there was like needles getting thrown into the vents and stuff."

Emergency shelters and subsidized housing programs, like other formal programs, were described as being difficult for them to navigate. One young woman described trying to stay at an emergency homeless shelter: "to be allowed in there, you can't be homeless and then the next day have a home ... and then be homeless again ... you have to be homeless for like a really long time ...

but they weren't really helpful people, they wouldn't take you in right away, they would make you call all these other numbers. They'd expect you to do all these things and everything else and it's like you can't do it and especially when you're on a pay phone."

Seven of the participants were applying to Manitoba Housing and two were currently living in Manitoba Housing. Those who had applied noted the long wait times. Others did not apply because the possibility of getting housing seemed too remote, explaining "it's pretty much a waste of time and you can wait up to a year for them to tell you that you're not in their program."

"I was stuck paying \$475 for a suite in a rooming house that had holes in the ceilings cut out, big gaping holes and black mould and bed bugs."

*Youth participant*

## WHAT AGENCY WORKERS TOLD US

### Transitions

The agency workers we spoke to recognized that major transitions caused anxiety for youth, especially the transition out of the care of CFS at the age of 18. The youth they work with might not have the trust or communication skills to discuss these transitions with support staff, so they make plans on their own: “they latch onto somebody because they have to. They couch surf, get in a relationship, go back to their parents.” Staff at resource centres frequently meet youth two weeks before their 18th birthday with no plans for their future: “when we start working with kids, they are not prepared at all. We’re getting them at the end, [when their social worker is] like ‘oh my god, I have to do something with this kid.’ We’re getting them in crisis mode because they know that in six months they will have nothing, nowhere to live, no income.”

Inappropriate housing in the first transition from CFS or a family home was identified as a cause of further challenges. When youth do not get extensions of care, they often only receive income from social assistance. The low benefit rates lead youth to live in rooming houses. “To get out of a rooming house is difficult. A lot of times addictions [follow]. They could get evicted at any time, they don’t know their rights. They get evicted over and over again and it becomes very difficult because they’re on the bad [renter] list.”

### Preparation and resources

In addition to the need for communication and pre-planning with youth, workers told us there are simply not enough appropriate places for youth to live in. A CFS staff member said, “when our kids age out of care and then they move to the city, they end up in second-stage housing in the inner city or core area, where many kids are taken advantage of. They struggle in the neighbourhood and don’t have many informal positive supports.”

Interview participants told us the youth they work with lack resources to access appropriate housing. Beyond income requirements, many youth are missing identification documents, references and the skills to fill in a rental applications. The limited rental housing availability in Winnipeg was identified by a majority of agency workers as being a significant challenge. Landlords were said to be hesitant to rent to youth for both practical reasons like knowing the young person cannot afford the rent and judgments about the youth’s level of responsibility. One worker told us: “landlords choose who they accept or don’t, youth coming

from care are the last on that list. They don’t have a history of rental which is a strike against them. They rarely have co-signers and may not have a job, so even if they have their rent guaranteed at the beginning [because they are receiving an independent living allowance], once that money goes away, the landlord is very concerned. EIA rates don’t cover even half the rent.”

### Independence and choice

While most of the agency staff we interviewed believed people within CFS recognize the need to better transition youth, a number of them said consistent action is still missing. According to one person with extensive knowledge of the Child Welfare system, “as we move to caring for adults under the child welfare guise there are some growing pains. When youth are 18 [or older], we are not the guardian. We care for them, but we don’t have legal power and authority. So how do you keep rules in a home, yet allow youth to make decisions? It’s hard to make that mental shift for places that have always only cared for youth under 18.” The interviewee

“They end up in second-stage housing in the inner city or core area, where many kids are taken advantage of.”

*Front-line agency worker*

noted that the number of youth on extensions of care has grown dramatically in recent years, yet the options for independent living for young adults remain limited. A frontline worker linked this limited choice

and inflexibility to youth leaving the housing they might have: “when I’m talking to CFS saying it’s not safe for [the youth] to be in a particular place, they won’t go back, I’m surprised how little flexibility there is in terms of other housing. [CFS will] tell me that’s all there is, there’s nothing else they can get even if the youth refuses to go there.”

### Emergency shelters

Emergency shelters were described as being inappropriate for youth. One participant explained that a main shelter for youth has a three day maximum stay, which can be positive because youth should not be staying there for long periods. But for youth in care who do not want to return to their group home or foster home, there is no where else to go. Adult shelters were also said to be unsuitable. “Waiting in line to get in first thing in the morning... some of our youth are intimidated just standing in line with adults. Only being in one area [of the city] is also an issue because of turf lines. Kicking people out at six in the morning is not an incentive, it doesn’t support the youth in getting work or anything like that.”

## ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Issue:** The young people we interviewed in this research moved many times after they first left the care of CFS or their family home, often because the housing they found was inappropriate. Agency workers agreed there is a severe lack of appropriate, affordable, safe housing for youth.

**Recommendation:** Independent living for young adults must be in a good home with appropriate supports based on the needs of the youth, not program requirements. Funding from government to increase the supply of housing specifically for youth is needed. Government and non-profit housing providers should partner with agencies

who support youth to provide housing, support, and eviction prevention.

**Issue:** Youth continue to age out of the care of CFS without a realistic plan for housing. Even if youth do not receive extensions of care, and do not want to engage in transition planning with CFS, they will likely require support with housing within a year.

**Recommendation:** Youth should not be discharged from the care of CFS without linking them to a range of options for appropriate housing and supports. The youth should be able to re-engage with CFS to receive support with housing if initial placements do not work out.