



Unhoused Youth in Québec: From Exclusion to Access





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ABSTRACT

Across Canada, over 35,000 at-risk youth face the many difficulties and uncertainties posed by a lack of stable housing (Gaetz, 2014). The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness defines unhoused youth as those “who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence” (Gaetz, 2014). Given the broadness of this category and the range of experiences that fall underneath it, the issue of unhoused youth in Québec is multidimensional—there is no single cause and no single solution. Youth homelessness can present itself in a myriad of ways, with some situations being less visible and harder to track than others. Moreover, the entry points and challenges of youth homelessness are different from those experienced by adults. In order to create effective strategies, a research approach that is conscious of the specific and diverse realities of homeless youth is required. This policy brief aims to outline some of the circumstances that are likely to precipitate housing instability and bring light to the conditions that these youth grapple with. By understanding these realities, we are better equipped to endorse policies that can alleviate their struggle and provide access to meaningful services.

THE ROOT CAUSES

Every young person that experiences homelessness has a unique narrative, but we can often attribute their situation to a combination of several factors. **Individual and relational factors** may include issues relating to dysfunctional family dynamics (abuse, neglect, broken ties), mental illness, and struggles with addiction. In a survey of Québec’s unhoused population, 15% of respondents attributed their homelessness to conflict with a parent (Ministère de la santé et de services sociaux, 2018). There are also **systems-level factors**, such as a lack of support for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system or out of incarceration, failures in the healthcare system, and difficulty accessing other youth protection services (QHPPC, 2018). A study conducted within the Québec foster care system reported that 13 months after leaving their foster homes, nearly one in five youth had experienced homelessness and a third found themselves in unstable living situations (EDJeP, 2019). Lastly, there are several **structural factors**. These refer to the broader political, economic, social and environmental conditions which can make an individual more or less prone to marginalisation. For unhoused youth, these structural factors can encompass issues such as chronic poverty, under/unemployment, newcomer status, a lack of affordable housing, and discrimination (as it pertains to visible minorities, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ+ youth) (QHPPC, 2018). For example, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are significantly overrepresented amongst homeless youth across Canada, estimated to make up 25-40% of the unhoused youth population (Gaetz, 2014).

WHAT DOES YOUTH HOMELESSNESS LOOK LIKE?

One of the major difficulties in understanding the breadth of youth homelessness is the fact that youth often employ survival strategies that keep their situation hidden. This may entail renting rooms in hostels or boarding houses, living in ‘squats,’ or staying with friends. These youth may also

live with parents or relatives, but face a looming risk of losing their shelter (MIS, 2022). Depending on their situation, these youth may shift between various housing situations—and it is this instability of status which defines their homelessness. It is estimated that in Canada, 81–86% of homeless youth experience this reality, which is referred to as **situational homelessness** or being **temporarily disconnected** (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz, 2015).

However, some unhoused youth may identify with **episodic homelessness**, or be referred to as **unstably connected**. This demographic deals with more tumultuous housing situations, and are likely to experience longer and more frequent episodes of homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2015). Finally, there is a smaller subset of youth that identify with **chronic homelessness**, also called **chronically disconnected**. While they represent a smaller percentage of homeless youth, they tend to have more compounded needs and have the heaviest reliance on the resources in youth services. They are perhaps the most visible face of homelessness, characterised by longer stints spent out on the street (Conseil jeunesse de Montréal, 2017).

Suffice to say, homelessness can pose many debilitating risks to the physical and mental well-being of a young person. They are often disconnected from familial support systems and subjected to a number of competing stresses relating to their everyday survival (Conseil jeunesse de Montréal, 2017). When placed in these desperate situations, unhoused youth are at a greater risk of experiencing exploitation, sexual violence, and overall peril for their physical safety and security (Dans la rue, 2023). A study of unhoused youth in Montréal found that they are especially prone to “psychological distress, substance use and mental disorders, and premature mortality caused by suicide and drug overdose.” Despite this heightened vulnerability, their access to and use of mental health resources is very limited (Abdel-Baki et al, 2019).

CURRENT INTERVENTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address such a broad and complex issue, the solutions for youth homelessness must be equally wide-ranging and intersectional. Indeed, multiple parties in the provincial government, the municipal government, and non-profit networks have developed programs that seek to provide interventions in the form of school programs, employment training, and transitional housing (Curtis, 2021). One remarkable example which combines all these elements are the Écoles de la rue. Managed by the Regroupement des écoles de la rue accréditées du Québec, these schools are for youth who have recently had to drop out of their educational institutions, who felt marginalised within those networks, or who required psychosocial support integrated into the pursuit of their education (CDEADCF, 2022). Apart from emergency health services, the city of Montréal has also created the Réseau d’intervention de proximité auprès des Jeunes de la rue, an outreach service network that aims to connect youth with mental health resources, among others (Abdel-Baki et al, 2019).

Y4Y Québec recommends the following actions:

- For municipalities to develop, with the collaboration of academic and aid organisations, research opportunities that prioritise the inclusion of youth with lived experiences of homeless-

ness as research assistants. This project is not only a means to re-center the current body of research with a youth perspective, but to provide opportunities for these youth to gain career experience and to become active members of the structures built to support them. With an emphasis on the nuanced pathways to housing instability and the ways in which youth can support communities of their peers, this research would seek to combat the stigmas associated with unhoused youth and create new frameworks for youth-led change.

- Based on the aforementioned research projects, create educational resources and training for teachers, staff, and students on the realities of youth homelessness. Schools are and continue to be meaningful sites of early intervention for young people experiencing homelessness. By disseminating this knowledge, schools can help reduce stigma and bring visibility to the varied forms of homelessness that youth may encounter. From a more critical lens, it also gives educational workers the tools to become more aware of the ways in which state institutions tend to exclude unhoused youth.
- For governing bodies and aid organisations to broaden the continuum of care for young people ageing out of the welfare system by creating a widely accessible mentorship program for these youth. Mentors are volunteer adults from the community, who agree to help guide these young people into adulthood through regular meetings and being supportive of their personal development. The admissibility criteria for this program should be open enough to accommodate all youth transitioning out of care, rather than those seeking emergency aid or those seeking assistance with “acceptable” life projects. Current services in Québec, such as the Programme qualification des jeunes, can only be accessed by young people deemed to be more “at-risk of marginalisation or negative developmental outcomes than their peers” (Boyer-D’Alesio, 2022). On the other end of the spectrum, services like Projet Clé are only available to youth that are pursuing post-secondary studies and considered to be on a ‘positive’ pathway to adulthood (Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2023). This leaves service gaps for those who fall in between these categories. In order to create early interventions for these youth and to help them avoid homelessness, they should be able to access these forms of care without having to prove how “dire” or “promising” their situation is. In developing this mentorship program, it is important that it makes itself available to all transitioning youth, recognising the broad spectrum of their realities. In addition, the program should prioritise taking on mentors who have also experienced the foster care system or youth protection services. Studies have shown that mentors with shared experiences can inspire feelings of belongingness and understanding with young people previously in care (Boyer-D’Alesio, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The pathway out of youth homelessness must be rooted in compassion and understanding for the needs of youth in distress. This policy brief outlines the complex conditions that lead to youth homelessness, while also attempting to provide a picture of the varied experiences of unhoused youth. With this in mind, Y4Y’s recommendations envision a youth-led approach to creating

awareness and solidarity for those at risk of housing instability. While the current system creates ways for young people to access the right resources, there remains more to do in order to support them through the different stages of homelessness and to rebuild their sense of autonomy and self-esteem. From early intervention and long-term reintegration strategies, the fight against youth homelessness can only be won with the cooperation of multiple community bodies and their ability to listen to the youth they serve.

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