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## HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA: A CONTEXT FOR ACTION

*“Homelessness costs the Canadian economy \$7 billion annually. This includes not only the cost of emergency shelters, but social services, health care and corrections”*

– The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013 Report

There is a homelessness crisis in Canada. Far too many Canadians do not have a safe and appropriate place to call “home”. The need for affordable housing has never been greater.

According to a recent report by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 200,000 Canadians will experience homelessness this year.<sup>1</sup> On any given night, 30,000 people are homeless in Canada and 20% of these people are youth who are especially vulnerable to the dangers of living on the street.<sup>2</sup>

The needs of homeless youth are often overlooked in traditional solutions to homelessness, most of which provide just shelter and affordable housing. As a result, many homeless youth do not develop the necessary life skills such as creating a household budget, cooking, paying rent and gaining work experience. Providing youth with greater access to affordable housing in isolation of youth support services will not effectively address their homelessness in the long term. This is why housing *and* skill building programs are of the utmost importance in taking the right steps toward solving this deeply entrenched societal issue.

One thing is clear: youth homelessness is a complex issue. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, there are strong indications that ending youth homelessness isn’t just wishful thinking; it’s an achievable objective.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The Canadian Homelessness Research Network defines youth homelessness as young people, between the ages of 12 and 25, who do not have stable, permanent, appropriate housing or the immediate means, prospect or ability to acquire housing. However, ‘youth’, ‘homelessness’ and ‘youth homelessness’ can be defined in many different ways.

Unlike other socio-economic issues such as access to primary education or basic health care, it is difficult to measure the scope of youth homelessness. However, some progress has been made in outlining the causes, severity and costs of this issue.

The pathways for youth into homelessness are diverse. There is consensus in the scholarly literature on this topic that some individual, structural and institutional factors increase the likelihood that a youth will become homeless. These factors are often experienced in combination with each other.

Individual factors related to incidences of family conflict, domestic abuse, mental illness (e.g. depression, schizophrenia), substance abuse and criminality, push youth to leave their homes.<sup>3</sup> As well, due to homophobia in their family, friends or other support systems, youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual are overrepresented in the homeless youth population at 25-40% (compared to 5-10% in the general population).<sup>4</sup>

Broader socio-economic factors that contribute to families not being able to support their own children include household or individual poverty, food insecurity and lack of affordable housing.<sup>5</sup> Discrimination, such as ageism or racism, can also constrain schooling, employment and housing opportunities for youth and contribute to homelessness.<sup>6</sup> For example, it is often difficult for low-income youth to access affordable housing because they are often perceived by landlords as being high-risk tenants.<sup>7</sup>

Institutional factors refer to the weaknesses of systems of care and support, such as mental health care, corrections, child protection services, in which lack of aftercare services contribute to youth homelessness.<sup>8</sup> When youth are discharged from mental health or correctional facilities, there are often inadequate support services to ensure that they will return to society as productive and successful individuals.<sup>9</sup>

While the experience of youth homelessness is diverse, there are some similarities in the way in which homelessness influences the lives of youth. A recent three-year study of youth homelessness in Calgary, Toronto and St. John's, conducted by Raising the Roof (a national organization focused on long-term solutions for Canada's homeless) found that out of the 689 street-involved youth they interviewed, 41% responded that substance abuse was a barrier they faced but wanted to address.<sup>10</sup> And, 71% of respondents said that they had previous criminal justice involvement.<sup>11</sup> Notably out of this group of homeless youth, 35% identified that a lack of essential life skills was a barrier.<sup>12</sup>

While this data is only from three Canadian cities, Raising the Roof postulates that it is fairly generalizable and representative of the wider Canadian youth homelessness population.<sup>13</sup> It challenges mainstream assumptions about homeless youth by demonstrating that most youth are the victims of circumstances and events beyond their control and stem from a combination of structural, emotional and institutional factors.

## **WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH?**

*"[Unlike other vulnerable, low income populations] youth are different because they have hope. You want to work with them while they still have hope and nurture that hope, so that they do feel that if they keep trying, their lives will be better"*

– Bill Gilligan, Executive Director, Community Development,  
Ottawa Community Housing Corporation

The homelessness crisis in Canada cannot be solved without addressing youth homelessness. By reaching homeless youth early and providing them with housing solutions and effective supports, preferably before they have been on the streets for more than two years, there is a greater likelihood they will not become chronically homeless adults.

Homelessness, particularly for youth, is a devastating experience. At that age, they have their lives in front of them to learn, love and experience life. Living on the street, and the related health and safety

risks of doing so, severely limit the ability of homeless youth to live their lives to the fullest and become happy, independent adults.

It is also vital to focus on youth because they face age-related legal barriers that homeless adults do not face. If homeless youth are legally minors (e.g. under the age of 18), they are the responsibility of a parent or legal guardian.<sup>14</sup> As minors, they are unable to make decisions about their own well-being. This can be particularly important when a minor's legal guardian does not have their best interests at heart.

While helping youth transition out of homelessness can improve their emotional, physical and psychological welfare, doing so can also have wider socio-economic benefits. When living on the streets, youth are often food insecure, exposed to drugs, sexual violence or exploitation, and youth often cannot access the medication they need. Outcomes of these activities, such as untreated illnesses, exposure to unclean needles or sexually transmitted diseases, place a burden on the Canadian health care system. Moving out of homelessness and into a healthier lifestyle decreases the costs of healthcare, criminal justice, and social services.

When homeless youth are off the streets and living in stable housing, they are more likely to become economically productive citizens (e.g. hold regular employment, pay income tax). Having a home means that youth can put a contact address on their resumes. This makes employment opportunities more attainable. Regular, formal employment also decreases the likelihood of relying on illegal income generating activities, which may result in a prison sentence. Compared to living in social housing, which can cost around \$199 per month, it costs approximately \$4,333 per month to house a homeless person in a provincial jail.<sup>15</sup>

Focusing on the needs of youth is a key factor in addressing long-term solutions to homelessness in Canada.

## **PUTTING AN END TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: KEY APPROACHES AND STAKEHOLDERS**

*"Affordable housing is a necessary, but not sufficient solution to youth homelessness"*

*- Dr. Stephen Gaetz, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, York University,  
Director, Canadian Homelessness Research Network*

Putting an end to youth homelessness requires a strategic, coordinated and integrated response by corporations, the non-profit sector and all levels of government.

There are a myriad of non-profit organizations and government agencies working to solve youth homelessness. Traditional approaches, like homeless shelters, aim to address the immediate and short-term needs of homeless people by providing them with shelter and sometimes food and clothing. The Canadian Housing and Renewal Association estimates that housing a young person in an emergency shelter costs at least \$20,000 each year. This solution is both costly and ineffective in the long term, but new and innovated solutions are emerging.

One example, the Foyer model, is a holistic approach that combines affordable housing and support services. It has proven successful in urban and rural settings through the UK and Australia.<sup>16</sup> This model demonstrates that homeless youth need better support programs *and* better places to live in order to transition to adulthood.<sup>17</sup>

Notable non-governmental organizations which provide housing opportunities and support services (e.g. counselling, employment, life skills development) include Choices for Youth (St. John's, NL), Eva's Initiatives (Toronto, ON), The Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary (Calgary, AB), and Centre Residentiel et Communautaire Jacques-Cartier (Quebec City, QC). These organizations are representative of the importance of providing effective, holistic solutions to ending youth homelessness.

Other key stakeholders in the non-profit sector are national advocacy and research centres for homelessness, such as the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and Raising the Roof. Their work to conduct research and evaluate the effectiveness of various housing approaches creates powerful knowledge and evidence-based information used to advocate to government for better solutions.

One such report, "The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013", indicates that Alberta, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia<sup>18</sup> are developing strategic and integrated responses to youth homelessness. For example, under the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), the Government of British Columbia has created a 'youth agreement' that helps youth without a legal guardian, between the ages of 16 and 18, gain independence, return to school, develop work-related skills or become employed.<sup>19</sup>

While the Federal Government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy recognizes the different ways homelessness plays out in various communities there is an opportunity to include youth.<sup>20</sup> The program allocates resources and decision-making authority to local authorities to address homelessness in their own community.<sup>21</sup>

There are some municipal governments, including those in Vancouver and Calgary, which have committed to ending homelessness and are seen as policy thought leaders. For example, Vancouver aims to end homelessness by 2015, and has already far reduced homelessness by over 60%.<sup>22</sup> Their success has been premised on the municipal governments' innovative public, private and non-profit partnerships, which aim to increase the supply of affordable housing in Vancouver.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in 2008, the City of Calgary implemented a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, which is premised on increasing the supply of affordable housing and developing an integrated system of care.<sup>24</sup> This plan also includes specific policies and targets to end youth homelessness.<sup>25</sup>

Stakeholders across all sectors need to come together, increase coordination, sharing knowledge and best practices in order to deliver an effective and meaningful solution to help put an end to youth homelessness.

#### **THE HOME DEPOT CANADA FOUNDATION**

*"We've always been committed to helping affordable housing in Canada, and we know that you are more adversely affected the younger you are. By focusing our efforts on youth and housing, we can maximize our resources, help youth realize their potential and build brighter futures."*

– Paulette Minard, General Manager  
The Home Depot Canada Foundation

The Home Depot Canada Foundation has supported the issue of affordable housing in Canada since its inception in 2009. Over the last six years, it has invested more than \$10 million in housing and community improvement projects across Canada.<sup>26</sup>

In 2013, the Foundation made the decision to narrow its focus to affordable housing and youth after completing a scan of the affordable housing landscape in Canada. The Foundation's refined focus also aligns with its previous financial, in-kind and volunteer support of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, Habitat for Humanity Canada, and a variety of local housing organizations operating in communities from coast to coast.

To validate The Home Depot Canada Foundation's findings, Impakt Corporation, a leading corporate social responsibility consultancy, was engaged. Their research revealed that youth homelessness affects tens of thousands of Canadian youth every year, comes with an extraordinarily high personal and socio-economic costs, and is under-prioritized in terms of research-based policy and adequate funding. The research also found that the most effective approaches to solving youth homelessness combine access to housing and support services.

### **THE HOME DEPOT CANADA FOUNDATION'S RESPONSE**

The Home Depot Canada Foundation's commitment to ending youth homelessness in Canada is built on a growing understanding of the important relationship between affordable housing and support services for youth.

The Foundation's response will focus on improving places through renovation and repair projects, programs that harness the capabilities of The Home Depot and its family of suppliers to support life-skills development for homeless youth, increase understanding and awareness on the issue through research, and concentrate resources to create measurable progress. The Foundation will work collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders including non-profit, government and other corporations in this area to share knowledge and best practices in addressing solutions to end youth homelessness.

Beginning in 2013, The Home Depot Canada Foundation will take action in the following ways:

- Invest \$10 million over the next three years to build strong communities through an emphasis on ensuring that more homeless youth have access to housing that is safe and supportive
- Establish a thought leadership advisory council comprised of Canada's leading authorities on the issue to help shape their response
- Create a youth advisory council to ensure that their commitments meet the needs of homeless youth, as defined by homeless youth
- Support new research to better understand the circumstances and needs of homeless youth in Canada through more evidence-based data

### **TAKING THE NEXT STEP**

This Thought Leadership White Paper is the first step to informing The Home Depot Canada Foundation's role and purpose in the area of youth homelessness. Many questions remain unanswered and research conducted in support of this paper has revealed a number of interrelated questions that still need to be addressed.

In what ways are particularly vulnerable youth (e.g. Aboriginal youth) more at risk of becoming homeless? What are the best approaches to preventing and reducing homelessness among these groups?

What are realistic goals in terms of ending youth homelessness (when, where, how much, etc.)? How will progress be tracked against these goals?

Who are the optimal combination of non-profit, community, government and corporate partners?

What messages will resonate most with stakeholders from all sectors? Who will help to disseminate these messages as needed to increase awareness and motivate positive social change?

What is the optimal role for The Home Depot Canada Foundation itself? How will this evolve as needed to address the issue of youth homeless in the most effective ways?

This paper is the first formal analysis of the issue of youth homelessness undertaken by a corporate foundation in Canada. But it is only a starting point. The Home Depot Canada Foundation will continue to explore the best ways to harness and focus its resources to end youth homelessness.

**For more information:**

The Home Depot Canada Foundation

Since 2009, The Home Depot Canada Foundation has invested more than \$10-million to help improve homes and communities across Canada because we believe that good neighbours make great neighbourhoods. Our primary focus is to support housing initiatives that benefit Canadian youth because safe, stable, affordable housing matters. It is the cornerstone of vibrant, strong communities and is directly linked to helping youth realize their full potential and build brighter futures. Learn more: [www.homedepot.ca/foundation](http://www.homedepot.ca/foundation)

Impakt Corporation

Founded in 2001, Impakt helps corporations and not-for-profit organizations become social purpose leaders, by discovering and leveraging areas where they make unique and positive change in society. Learn more: [impaktcorp.com](http://impaktcorp.com)

The Homeless Hub

Launched in 2007 by the Canadian Homelessness Research network, this is a web-based knowledge-sharing network on homelessness, mental health and housing in Canada. This information center has been a key point of reference in drafting this white paper. Learn more: [www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)

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- <sup>1</sup> Stephen Gaetz, Jesse Donaldson, Tim Richter, and Tanya Gulliver (2013), *The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013*, Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, 5.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 5-7.
- <sup>3</sup> Stephen Gaetz, et al. (2013), "Introduction," in Stephen Gaetz, Bill O'Grady, Kristy Buccieri, Jeff Karabanow, Allyson Marsolis (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice*, Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, 3-4
- <sup>4</sup> Gaetz et al., *The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013*, 26
- <sup>5</sup> Gaetz et al., "Introduction," 4
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen Gaetz, and Fiona Scott (2012), *Live, Learn Grow: Supporting Transitions to Adulthood for Homeless Youth – A Framework for the Foyer in Canada*, Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, 6-7
- <sup>8</sup> Gaetz et al., "Introduction," 5
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Carolann Barr (2009), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Road to Solutions*, Toronto: Raising the Roof, 11, 13
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 13
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 11
- <sup>14</sup> Shirley B.Y. Chau, and Mike Gawliuk (2009), "Chapter 3.3: Social Housing Policy for Homeless Canadian Youth," in J. David Hulchanski, Philippa Campsie, Shirley B.Y. Chau, Stephen W. Hwang, Emily Paradis (Eds), *Finding a Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada*, Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto, 307-308.
- <sup>15</sup> Gaetz et al., *The State of Homelessness in Canada 2013*, 32
- <sup>16</sup> Gaetz and Scott, "Live, Learn, Grow"
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 9
- <sup>19</sup> "Youth Agreements." Government of British Columbia <[www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/youth/agreements.htm](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/youth/agreements.htm)>
- <sup>20</sup> Chau and Gawliuk , "Social Housing Policy," 322
- <sup>23</sup> Gaetz et al., *State of Homelessness in Canada 2013*, 33
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 35
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 36
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> The Home Depot Canada Foundation (2012), *Home Depot Canada Foundation 2012 Annual Report*, Toronto: Home Depot Canada, 2