

# Pursuing Justice:

## Bilateral Interactions Among the Criminal Justice and Housing Sectors for Preventing Youth Homelessness

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# Land Acknowledgement

This research project was conducted and written by settler researchers living and working on the traditional territories of many Indigenous nations, across the land that is now called Canada. Today, this land continues to be home to many diverse Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit, who have stewarded the land since time immemorial. The research team recognizes that Canada is a settler colonial society on Turtle Island, established and maintained through land dispossession, genocide, and forced assimilation. Further, we acknowledge that Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately impacted by issues of homelessness and criminalization, resulting from a long history of colonial state violence. Indigenous Peoples continue to experience colonization through oppressive mechanisms including carceral institutions, systemic discrimination, and the lasting effects of historical traumas. We have committed to understanding and dismantling these harms, and working against colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and white supremacy. Opening the door to understanding creates a more informed and compassionate society that recognizes the truths which pave the way for reconciliation.



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1 PLEA is located on the unceded and ancestral shared territory of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

2 Calgary JHS is on the hereditary homelands of the Niitsitapi (the Blackfoot Confederacy: Siksika, Piikani, Kainai), the Îyârhe Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina Nations. The City of Calgary is also homeland to Métis Nation Region 3.

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MAKING THE SHIFT<sup>INC</sup>  
youth homelessness social innovation lab



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# Executive Summary

The youth homelessness and justice sectors are inter-connected with one another. Yet there is limited consideration for what happens to youth who become justice-involved after they become unhoused or, what happens to them after they go through the youth justice system and require housing supports. These young people are arguably some of our country's most vulnerable, and as such we have a responsibility to create more positive pathways to safe, healthy lives that are free from involvement in either system.

The goal of the *Pursuing Justice* project is to explore the intersection of the youth homelessness and youth justice sectors through a solutions-oriented framework. To do so, we sought to improve our understanding of:

- **how the youth justice system** can reduce young people being discharged into homelessness; and,
- **how the youth homelessness sector** can support rapid and sustainable exits from homelessness to prevent youth from (further) involvement in the justice system.

The methodology of the project involved building the research team to undertake the three main phases that inform the final report: one survey, and two sets of virtual roundtables. The entirety of the study was supported by four Regional Coordinators (RCs), and a Youth Advisory Group (YAG).

The solutions offered in this report are guided by 5 key principles:

- ✓ **Decolonize Systems & Practices**
- ✓ **Uphold Housing as a Human Right**
- ✓ **Do Not Expand the Criminal Justice System**
- ✓ **Mitigate Interlocking Forms of Oppression**
- ✓ **Youth Voices Guide the Work**

The solutions demonstrate a scope of opportunity that different actors can take responsibility for – whether through advocacy, or changes at operational or policy levels. The solutions comprise of three main themes rooted in **service eligibility and access, funding and policy alignment, and coordinated service delivery and engagement**. Embedded within these themes are fourteen solutions to support improved policy outcomes as they relate to youth homelessness prevention. They are:

## **SOLUTIONS**

### **I. SERVICE ELIGIBILITY & ACCESS**

1. Establish more mechanisms to enable early and comprehensive discharge planning from youth justice
2. Empower service providers to respond with urgency
3. Establish a consistent definition of youth across sectors
4. Enhance and/or create access to services in rural communities

### **II. FUNDING & POLICY ALIGNMENT**

5. Increase discretionary funding, flexibility in eligibility
6. Pay and train staff better
7. Build cross-sectoral community collaboration
8. Structure funding frameworks to evaluate success from a youth-centered lens
9. Cross-jurisdictional collaboration between provincial/territorial and federal ministries
10. Indigenous equity and autonomy over funding

### **III. COORDINATED SERVICE DELIVERY & ENGAGEMENT**

11. Culturally appropriate services
12. Streamline practices to reduce complexities of navigating multiple systems
13. Build attachment to community and natural supports
14. Prioritize individualized plans for youth – one size fits none

Each of these 14 solutions contain 'pathways for changemakers' to initiate or advance progress. They are directed at the federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments, and community-based agencies to empower stakeholders across the systems of youth homelessness and youth to actively pursue steps towards meaningful change.

# Introduction

This research began with two questions: “What happens to youth who become justice-involved after they become unhoused?”; and, “What happens to youth after they go through the youth justice system and require housing supports?” These young people are arguably some of our country’s most vulnerable, and as such we have a responsibility to create more positive pathways to safe, healthy lives that are free from involvement in either system. This project evolved from a St. Leonard’s Society of Canada (SLSC) study which analyzed the trajectories of youth discharged from one open custody/detention residence in Ontario over a 5-year period (Desai, 2018). Despite the availability of active reintegration services, the study found 100% of these youth at risk of homelessness. In solidarity with this study and others which seek a paradigm shift for youth homelessness prevention, the goal of the *Pursuing Justice* project is to explore the intersection of the youth homelessness and youth justice sectors through a solutions-oriented framework.

To work towards solutions, it is imperative to recognize gaps that exist in the youth homelessness and youth justice sectors to improve our understanding of:

- **how the youth justice system** can reduce young people being discharged into homelessness; and,
- **how the youth homelessness sector** can support rapid and sustainable exits from homelessness to prevent youth from (further) involvement in the justice system.

Four objectives guided the study:

1. Advancing knowledge on homelessness prevention strategies for justice-involved young people by highlighting and discussing promising practices at virtual roundtables; and exploring how to ensure that addressing these challenges would not inadvertently further criminalize young people;

2. Improving scholars’ and practitioners’ understanding of the broader implications of the YCJA, including how custody diversions may unintentionally put youth at risk of homelessness;

3. Enhancing cross-sectoral knowledge for community-based service providers and government stakeholders; and,

4. Building capacity within the National Youth Justice Network (NYJN) to identify linkages between youth justice involvement and homelessness, and government stakeholders on homelessness prevention strategies for young people involved in the justice system; and, to build capacity within the National Youth Justice Network (NYJN) to identify the links between youth justice involvement and homelessness.

To achieve these objectives, the project sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do interactions between the youth justice and youth homelessness systems impact experiences of, and responses to, youth involvement in these two sectors?

2. By enhancing and mobilizing cross-sectoral knowledge for community-based and government stakeholders, how can identified linkages between youth justice involvement and homelessness support improved policy outcomes as they relate to homelessness prevention?

3. How can the impact of this multi-faceted research enable the National Youth Justice Network (NYJN) to advance its mission to strengthen youth-centered justice services in Canada through inter-agency collaboration, discussion of common issues, advocacy, and sharing information on best/promising practices and research?

Between April 2023 and March 2024, the research team conducted the three main phases of the *Pursuing justice* study across four regions: British Columbia, Prairies, Ontario, and Atlantic. The research consisted of:

- **Phase 1 (Summer/Fall 2023):** online survey, distributed across the four regions to inform the first research question about how interactions between the youth justice and youth homelessness systems impact experiences of, and responses to, youth involvement in these two sectors.
- **Phase 2 (Winter 2023):** half-day virtual roundtables in each region to address the main problem areas as revealed through the survey findings, as well as guided by the research questions.
- **Phase 3 (Spring 2024):** half-day virtual roundtables in each region to undertake a solutioning exercise based on the strategic problem areas identified in the first roundtables.

The entirety of the study was supported by four Regional Coordinators (RCs), as well as a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) to advise on project methodology (e.g. survey design), roundtable concept/questions to stakeholders, co-analysis of roundtable reports, and consultation on the final report.

The pathways and policies that contribute to youth homelessness and youth justice-involvement are as unique as the individuals they impact. Yet, all four regions shared similar frustrations, as well as starting points for solutions to effect meaningful change. Prior to implementation of change, however, it is critical to recognize that the operationalization of any of the proposed solutions must engage with the following 5 principles:

- ✓ **Decolonize Systems & Practices**
- ✓ **Uphold Housing as a Human Right**
- ✓ **Do Not Expand the Criminal Justice System**
- ✓ **Mitigate Interlocking Forms of Oppression**
- ✓ **Youth Voices Guide the Work**

The solutions presented in this report demonstrate a scope of opportunity that different actors can take responsibility for – whether through advocacy, or changes at operational or policy levels. The insights provided by the stakeholders covered a wide range of factors, but ultimately crystalized into three main themes rooted in:

- **Service eligibility and access,**
- **Funding and policy alignment,** and
- **Coordinated service delivery and engagement.**

Embedded within these themes are fourteen solutions to support improved policy and practice outcomes as they relate to youth homelessness prevention.

These themes and solutions get at the heart of what has long been recognized by scholars and practitioners: that the criminal justice system (CJS) and homelessness are intertwined, and only by responding to them in tandem will we advance change (Chesnay et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2016). Still, much of the research focuses on adult men. In order to address the pervasive problem of youth homelessness, the intersection of the criminal justice system with the homelessness and housing sectors must be a focal point. Over the last two decades, an increased understanding of youth’s experiences with the CJS and homelessness has emerged, in particular young people’s social exclusion (Nichols & Braimoh, 2018), interactions with police (O’Grady et al., 2013), experiences of victimization and exploitation (Gaetz et al., 2013; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2009), and the criminalization of youth homelessness (Boyd et al., 2015; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2009; Quirouette et al., 2016).

What is missing – and the knowledge gap this study attempts to bridge – is an understanding of how legislation, policies, regulations, and practices influence the bi-directional relationship between youth homelessness and youth justice. This absence is not surprising since legislation concerning youth and the CJS has undergone multiple significant transformations in the past forty years (Doob & Sprott, 2004). The unintended long-term implications of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) and its subsequent regulations and practices are only beginning to be understood. For example, while existing research demonstrates why youth who are homeless experi-

ence more conflict with the law than their housed counterparts (Baron, 2013; Quirouette et al., 2016), less is known about how policies and practices within the sectors themselves create conditions leading to homelessness. Ensuring that young people are not discharged from public systems, such as correctional facilities, into homelessness is central to youth homelessness prevention (Gaetz et al., 2018). The findings from this project highlight how the youth justice system serves as a key vulnerability point for young people experiencing homelessness, how policies and practices within the youth homelessness sector contribute to their susceptibility to involvement in the justice system, and most importantly, what can be done about it.



# Literature Review

The subjects of homelessness and justice system involvement, respectively, are varied and complex. For the purposes of informing this project, the research for this review prioritized studies analyzing the legislation, policies, and practices that influence and perpetuate the bi-directional relationship between youth homelessness and youth justice involvement. Invariably, this led to an analysis of the complexities of defining ‘youth’, as well as considerations regarding ‘emerging adults’. The review herein provides an overview of these definitions and highlights key themes in literature that provide context to the findings of this project.

## OVERVIEW: YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Within the context of this report, we use the *Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness*, which defines youth homelessness as “the experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 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 et al., 2016, p.1). Beyond visible indicators of homelessness, such as living on the street or staying in an emergency shelter, many young people are part of the hidden homeless population, that are couch surfing or living in unsafe, unaffordable, or inadequate accommodations (Gaetz et al., 2016). The largest national study on youth homelessness revealed that young people between the ages of 13 and 24 years account for 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016). On any given night at least 6,000-7,000 youth experience homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2023). Almost half (44%) of people experiencing homelessness state that they had their first encounter prior to the age of 25, with the majority experiencing it primarily within the age range of 15 to 19 (22%) (ESDC, 2022) with

gender-diverse people much more likely than cis gender people to experience homelessness for the first time before the age of 16 (Nelson et al., 2023). With an understanding of the prevalence and onset of youth homelessness, it is essential to understand the underlying causes and trajectories.

## Causes of youth homelessness

The pathways into homelessness for youth are multidimensional involving the interaction between **structural, systemic, and individual** risk factors (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz & Dej, 2017).

**Structural factors** are “broad systemic, economic, and societal issues that occur at a societal level that affect opportunities, social environments, and outcomes for individuals” (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 18). Structural changes in the economy, such as unemployment and lack of affordable housing, affect the entire population; however, youth who are precariously housed or experiencing homelessness are more deeply affected (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz & Dej, 2017). Some examples of structural factors leading to homelessness include:

- Poverty & the rising cost of living
- The housing crisis & lack of affordable housing
- Violence and colonialism experienced by Indigenous Peoples
- Discrimination & systemic inequities

**Systems failures** refer to situations where “inadequate policy and service delivery contribute to the likelihood that someone will become homeless” (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 19). This includes barriers and challenges within public systems that disproportionately impact youth being discharged from public facilities, aging out of services, or transitioning from the child to adult system (Gaetz, 2014). It also includes barriers to

accessing services that could prevent homelessness. Specifically, systems failures are:

- Barriers to accessing supports and services (e.g. age restrictions)
- Transitions from public systems into homelessness (including child welfare, youth detention, & hospitals)
- Siloing and gaps of services and funding between government departments and systems, as well as the non-profit sector

**Individual and relational** factors are the “personal circumstances that place people at risk of homelessness” (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 21). It is important to note that structural and systemic factors create environments conducive to the production of many individual factors (Gaetz et al., 2018). Individual and relational factors include:

- Personal crises (e.g. sudden job loss, house fire, or loss of a spouse)
- Trauma / Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)
- Housing insecurity
- Interpersonal & relational problems (including family conflict, violence, and abuse)
- Physical and mental health conditions
- Substance use challenges

The root causes of homelessness consist of the inter-relation between these three factors. Efforts to prevent and end homelessness must address all factors simultaneously in order to advance meaningful change.

Recognizing the causes and experiences of youth homelessness provides insights as to why youth may become involved with the justice system; however, it does little to resolve compounding challenges once

they are justice-involved. To meaningfully examine a starting point for solutions, it is critical to consider the basic structural frameworks that govern the youth legal system.

## OVERVIEW: CANADA’S YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA) is the federal legislation that governs the youth justice system for persons aged 12-17 years. This Act came into effect on April 1, 2003, replacing the previous *Young Offenders Act* (YOA). Several factors led to the implementation of this legislation, namely the ineffectiveness of the YOA, which was evidenced by the fact that Canada had the highest rate of youth incarceration in the Western world (DeGusti, 2008; Endres, 2004). As a result, one of the goals of the YCJA was to reduce the imposition of custodial sentences on youth by introducing extrajudicial measures (or diversion) for less serious offences. The YCJA amended the purpose of youth custodial sentencing to reflect the principles of rehabilitation and reintegration into society, thereby contributing to the long-term protection of the public (Department of Justice Canada, 2021).<sup>5</sup>

Presently, there are three age categories currently recognized by Canadian criminal law:

- **Child:** A person under the age of 12 who cannot be held criminally responsible for any offence.<sup>6</sup>
- **Young person:** A person who is 12 years of age or older but is less than 18 at the time of the alleged criminal offence.<sup>7</sup>
- **Adult:** Any person who is accused of a criminal offence on or after their 18th birthday.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that there are key interrelations between the Criminal Code and the YCJA: the

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5 **Key principles in youth sentencing** to achieve this purpose are: **Proportionality** - A sentence must be proportionate to the seriousness of the offence and the degree of responsibility of the young person; **Least restrictive alternative** - Using the **least restrictive alternative** capable of achieving the purpose of sentencing and the option most likely to rehabilitate and reintegrate the young person; **Denunciation and deterrence** - A sentence may also include the objectives of denouncing the criminal behaviour and deterring the young person from committing further offences; and, **Alternatives to custody** - A judge must first consider all available non-custodial options that are reasonable in the circumstances, paying particular attention to the circumstances of Indigenous youth.

6 *Criminal Code*, RSC 1985, c C-46, s.13

7 *R. v White*, 2014

8 *Youth Criminal Justice Act*, SC 2002, c. 1, s.140

Criminal Code is applied to all Canadians 12 years of age and older, including young persons, which means they can be charged with Criminal Code offences; however, Criminal Code provisions will not apply in circumstances that are explicitly laid out within the YCJA.<sup>9</sup>

When considering the scope of service provision to youth who require housing supports, how various systems conceptualize the term ‘youth’ reveals inconsistencies which contribute to broader systems failures. To summarize, youth justice legislation sets the scope from 12 to 17 years, however, the Canadian definition of youth homelessness establishes the age parameters from 13 to 24 years (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). The following section addresses the complexities in these definitions when factoring in additional systems such as child welfare across the provinces, and research on brain development that led to the concept of emerging adults.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITIES OF DEFINING ‘YOUTH’**

The Canadian youth homelessness and youth justice sectors illustrate the complexities of defining and responding to the lives of “youth” when a young person interacts across multiple systems and jurisdictions. Part of the varying systemic definitions of ‘youth’ comes from the changing understanding of brain and social development for young people. Research shows that both neural and social development are not fully mature by the age of 18 and that individuals develop at different paces. It is widely acknowledged that developmental processes continue until the mid-twenties. As such, the term ‘emerging adulthood’ describes the approximate period of development for individuals aged 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). This term describes the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which is grounded in Western societal expectations, such as the expectation to attend post-secondary education and the challenges in acquiring stable, well-paying jobs, which often delays typical adult milestones such as marriage and child-rearing (Lalonde et al., 2020).

More youth today are continuing to live with their parents, in part due to the deepening housing affordability crisis, but also because some young people are not developmentally ready to live on their own.

As societal norms continue to shift, young people transitioning to adulthood need supports and services that cater to their specific needs. However, this becomes difficult when chronological age is a defining feature of service eligibility or system intervention. While the youth justice system uniformly uses the chronological age parameters across Canada, other social systems vary. For example, Ontario child welfare legislation defines people under the age of 18 as children, while in Nova Scotia a child is anyone under the age of 19, and in Newfoundland and Labrador any person under the age of 16 is considered a child. In some provinces, people in their 20s can access extended care services through the child welfare system including financial support for housing (Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017; Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment Program, 2024). At some municipal levels, youth policies pertain to people between the ages of 14-29 years old (SLSC, 2022). When looking at youth shelters across Canada, while access requirements vary, they typically provide services for individuals ages 12 to 29 years old (ESDC, 2022). It is evident that ambiguity and nuance exist in age restrictions, impacting the provision of services. While these examples are not exhaustive and do not factor in additional systems such as education or health, they demonstrate the serious implications of age-based requirements and service cut-offs for young people. They also draw attention to the challenges service providers in the youth justice system have with incorporating the notion of ‘emerging adulthood’ in defining eligibility for service and intervention. Considerations, both legal and social, must be made to “look beyond chronological age and consider maturity” and adverse childhood experiences (St. Leonard’s Society of Canada, 2022, p. 15). These nuanced differences can have significant impacts when developing and refining policies.

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9 Youth Criminal Justice Act, SC 2002. c. 1, s.140

## **Aging Out of Public Institutions and Services**

The transition to adulthood is a complex, non-linear, multidimensional process, filled with uncertainties and challenges. Young people who have been previously involved in public systems, such as child welfare and youth justice systems, face heightened risks of experiencing negative outcomes as they ‘age out’ of these structured supports, including substance use challenges, low educational attainment (Lee & Berrick, 2014), high levels of unemployment and underemployment (Hook & Courtney, 2011), and housing instability and homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Courtney et al., 2019; Curry & Abrams, 2015). In a pan-Canadian study on youth homelessness, Gaetz et al., (2016) found that nearly sixty percent (57.8%) of young people experiencing homelessness had previous involvement with child protection services over their lifetime.

Similarly, young people exiting the youth justice system face challenges transitioning to independence. These difficulties can occur when being discharged from youth detention facilities, or when ‘aging out’ of the youth justice system and into adult-focused services or systems. Youth with adverse childhoods face particular struggles transitioning to adulthood that are not resolved on their 18th birthday. These youth face significant challenges, evidenced by the fact that youth ages 18-24 have the highest recidivism rates of any age group (Stewart et al., 2019). This age group also presents with the highest rates of disciplinary infractions in carceral facilities, institutional altercations, self-harm, suicide attempts, and admissions to segregation (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2017).

The abrupt end to many services at age 18, being institutionalized and subsequently unprepared to live independently (Nichols & Malenfant, 2022), lack of formal supports post-child welfare (Lalonde et al., 2021), and transitional and supportive housing models that are unable to meet the needs of youth (Munson et al., 2017) are all contributing factors of homelessness. Rather than providing interventions that support longer-term stability and person-centered approaches to mitigate risks, youth who are aging out of public systems and released from custody are at a heightened risk of housing instability and homelessness (MacDonald et al., 2020).

## **THE BI-DIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT**

### **Criminal Justice Involvement as a Cause of Homelessness**

Once involved in the criminal justice system, the risk of becoming homeless increases substantially (John Howard Society, 2021). Up to 30% of individuals incarcerated in federal and provincial institutions across Canada will be homeless upon release (National Housing Strategy, 2021). In a study of gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness, 33% indicated that criminal justice involvement contributed to their experience of homelessness, almost double that of cisgender women (Nelson et al., 2023). Additionally, a troubling trend exists among adolescents aging out of child welfare and exiting youth justice systems, with 50% finding themselves homeless within six months (Britton & Pilnik, 2018). A study conducted by St. Leonard’s Society of Canada looked at the trajectories of youth discharged from an open custody/detention residence in Ontario. Of the 45 youth admitted to the facility between 2012 and 2016, none had stable housing upon admittance and only three were identified as having a place to go when discharged (Desai, 2018).

It is not surprising that people who experience homelessness after incarceration have higher rates of recidivism (Nilsson et al., 2023). The link between low income, a lack of economic opportunities, homelessness and subsequent criminal activities and recidivism is clear. These activities often directly target survival strategies (John Howard Society Ontario, 2022). When youth return to the same environment that led to their initial arrest and when there are few services to support them, they are susceptible to being stopped and re-arrested, especially if they are known to the police and are on conditions or have a criminal record (Ti et al., 2013). This creates a revolving door between homelessness and incarceration.

### **Homelessness as a Cause of Criminal Justice Involvement**

Youth experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk of involvement in the criminal justice system due to pervasive surveillance and criminal-

ization. Deprived of the security and privacy afforded by safe, stable housing, they encounter legal scrutiny and enforcement, more so than housed individuals. Youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience conflict with the law due to engaging in survival-related criminal activity (Ti et al., 2013; Quirouette et al., 2016). Moreover, state interventions, such as child welfare, increase young people's vulnerability to criminal justice involvement (Boyd et al., 2015). One study indicated that 77% of young people who are homeless have had multiple interactions with police and 44% have been arrested (O'Grady et al., 2011).

Structural and systemic inequities compound young people's experiences with the criminal justice system. O'Grady et al.'s (2011) research on unhoused youth in Toronto revealed that more vulnerable young men were more likely to be involved in crime. For example, youth who lived in a group home before becoming homeless, slept in public spaces, were victims of theft and/or violence, and who were younger and/or had not completed high school, were more likely to have engaged in criminal activity.

The mental health and substance use challenges prevalent among youth who are homeless further their vulnerability to criminalization. Approximately 74% of youth experiencing homelessness report distress and mental health symptoms and about one-third report an overdose that required hospitalization (Kidd et al., 2021). Substance use disorders exacerbate interactions with law enforcement, as youth using illicit substances in public routinely attract police attention (Boyd et al., 2015; Ti et al., 2013). Youth may also engage in offending behaviour as a cause of their substance use. Lowered inhibitions resulting from substances, compounded with their still-developing brain, contribute to impulsive and potentially harmful actions (Moeller et al., 2016). Moreover, the need to finance substance use often drives youth to resort to criminal activity to obtain funds for this activity (Bender et al., 2012). This vicious cycle perpetuates their involvement in criminal behaviours, highlighting the need for comprehensive support and intervention to address the root cause of youth homelessness and its intersection with the justice system.

## THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF PRIORITY POPULATIONS WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Particular groups are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and the justice system involvement, including Indigenous youth, Black and racialized youth, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, and people living with disabilities and mental health challenges. This overrepresentation of priority populations stands as a significant equity and human rights concern requiring urgent intervention.

### Indigenous Youth

Indigenous youth have a greater likelihood of being caught at the intersection of homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system. They are more likely to interact with police, to be charged upon arrest (O'Grady et al., 2011), spend more time in pre-trial custody (John Howard Society, 2021), and receive longer sentences (Latimer & Foss, 2005) than non-Indigenous youth. Indigenous children account for over 50% of children in the child welfare system despite representing only eight percent of the national child population, a phenomenon known as the millennium scoop. Indigenous people also account for approximately one-third of youth in the justice system (Nickel et al., 2020). The numbers are magnified in custodial sentences, with Indigenous youth accounting for 50% of admissions to custody in the 2020/2021 fiscal year (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, regional variability exists; the Prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba), as well as northern cities in Ontario (Thunder Bay) have the highest rates of Indigenous overrepresentation in the justice system (Wiley et al., 2020). In Manitoba, although Indigenous children make up approximately a quarter of the child population (Government of Manitoba, 2012), they represent nearly 90% of children in care (Brownell et al., 2015), and over 80% of youth admitted to correctional services (Malakieh, 2020).

In a sample of 1,103 young people experiencing homelessness in Canada, over one-third (30.6%) identified as Indigenous (Gaetz, et al., 2016). Like the data within the justice system, researchers found higher rates of Indigenous representation in Western provinces (Alberta and British Columbia) (50%), compared to provinces such as Ontario (21.5%) and

the Atlantic region (21.9%). Lower representation of Indigenous youth was found in Quebec (6.8%). Indigenous youth linked their experiences of homelessness to colonial and interpersonal violence that Indigenous Peoples have endured and continue to experience (Schwan et al., 2018). This perspective aligns with the Indigenous definition of homelessness, which is defined as “a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews” (Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, as cited in Thistle, 2017, p.6). Indigenous homelessness is defined as a loss of ‘All my Relations,’ which includes healthy connection to social, cultural, spiritual, emotional, and physical relationships (Thistle, 2017).

The intersections of Indigenous youth homelessness and criminal justice are complex. For many young Indigenous people, prisons are “the contemporary equivalent of what the Indian residential school represented for their parents” (Jackson, 1989, p. 216). Breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness among Indigenous youth means addressing the root causes of colonialism and systemic racism.

## Black & Racialized Youth

A disproportionate number of youth caught at the intersection of homelessness and the criminal justice system come from racialized and newcomer communities. Racialized youth are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness, compared to the Canadian average (28% compared to 19%). Newcomer youth comprise 10% of the youth homelessness population (Gaetz et al., 2016). Research shows that Black youth are more likely to be placed in foster care (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018) and are twice as likely to transition to the youth justice system following involvement in the child welfare system than white youth (Boatswain et al., 2024). Youth can experience significant trauma

and distress by the child welfare system and ongoing mental health concerns (Rampersaud, 2022). The trauma responses Black youth may exhibit can be perceived as “aggressiveness”, “hostility”, “threatening”, and “dangerousness” (Konold et al. 2017; Watson & de Gelder, 2017) and as such, can trigger criminal justice involvement.

Black and racialized youth are over-criminalized and over-policed compared to white youth, and experience systemic racism and institutional discrimination at every stage of the criminal justice system (Jiwani, 2019). While living precariously, Black youth are more likely to be stopped by the police and face high rates of police brutality and use of force (Owusu-Bempah & Jeffers, 2021). Black youth are also more likely to be charged by the police and less likely to be given a caution or offered diversion programs, compared to white and other racialized youth (Samuels-Wortley, 2022). In 2016, Black youth ages 12-17 represented 20.6% of admissions to secure pre-trial detention in Ontario, while comprising 7.1% of the general population (John Howard Society, 2021). Black youth are also four times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth (John Howard Society, 2021).

## 2SLGBTQ+ Youth

Previous research has established that Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (2SLGBTQ+) youth are overrepresented among the homeless population (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; Goodyear et al., 2024). In Canada, 2SLGBTQ+ youth account for approximately one-third (29.5%) of the homeless youth population (Gaetz et al., 2016). Researchers who interviewed 2SLGBTQ+ youth ages 17-25 living in Montreal found three main trajectories that led them to homelessness: (1) experiencing homophobia and transphobia from family members and subsequently being evicted or ‘kicked out’ due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, (2) aging out of child protection services without a social network or safety net, and (3) fleeing from hetero-cisnormative<sup>10</sup> bullying at school in search of acceptance and belonging (Côté & Blais, 2021). Several studies from across North America

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10 Hetero-cisnormativity describes the assumption that “it is “normal” to be both heterosexual and cisgender and it is not normal (and therefore acceptable to be prejudiced toward) nonheterosexual and noncisgender individuals” (Worthen, 2016, p. 32).

note that youth who fit outside hetero-cisnormative ideals are often reluctant to access shelters and housing programs due to homophobia and transphobia perpetuated through discriminatory policies and practices (Abramovich, 2016; Abramovich, 2017; Côté, & Blais, 2019).

Further, there is significant overlap between 2SLGBTQ+ youth homelessness and justice system involvement. Research from the United States estimates that between 11-20% of youth in the criminal justice system identify as 2SLGBTQ+ (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012; Johnson et al., 2019; MAP, 2017). Youth who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ face an increased risk of interactions with the police, as well as experiencing cisheterosexism and discrimination from officers (McCandless, 2018). Research from the United States found that while in custody, 2SLGBTQ+ youth are at a heightened risk of sexual assault and harassment and are more likely to be kept in solitary confinement, compared to cisgender and straight people (Stammen & Ghandnoosh, 2022).

### Youth Living with Disabilities

Approximately 80% of youth experiencing homelessness identify having at least one disability (Collins & Schormans, 2023), including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) (Pedruzzi et al., 2021) and youth with traumatic brain injuries (Hughes, 2015). Young people with disabilities are also overrepresented in the justice system, particularly young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Development Services Group Inc., 2017; Pedruzzi et al., 2021). These youth are also disproportionately Black, Indigenous, Latino, male, and come from low-income households (Quinn et al., 2005).

Similarly, the child welfare system marks a significant overrepresentation of youth with disabilities. Approximately 45-53% of youth aging out of foster care have a clinically diagnosed disability, and another 10% have not been evaluated (Lee et al., 2023; McCauley, 2021; Slayter, 2016). Youth aging out of foster care with disabilities may be especially vulnerable to experiencing homelessness and incarceration (Lee et al., 2023). The highest rates of incarceration and homelessness are reported by youth with emotional, intellectual, or developmental disabilities (Lee et al., 2023; McCauley, 2021). The high prevalence of disabilities among youth experiencing homelessness and criminal justice involvement is evidence of the lack of specialized supports for young people facing multiple disadvantages (Pedruzzi et al., 2021).



# Methods

## BUILDING THE TEAM: REGIONAL COORDINATORS AND YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

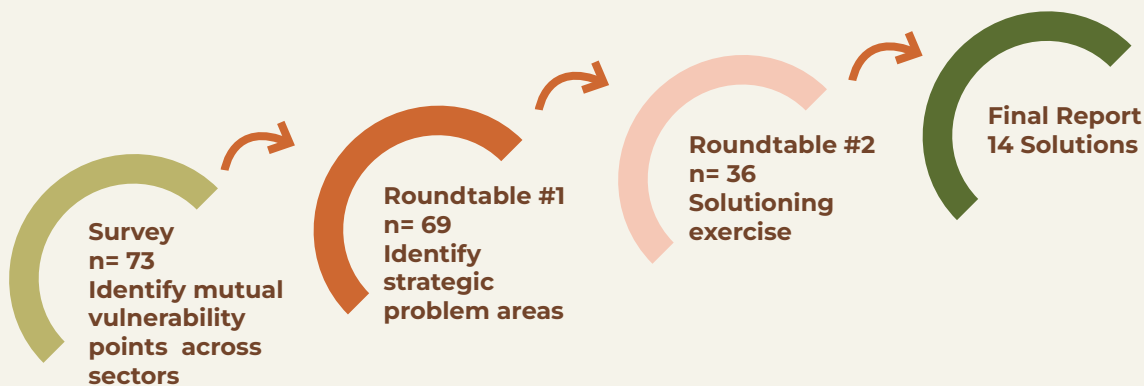
The research team comprised of academic researchers, community-based practitioners, and youth lived experts. Four Regional Coordinators (RCs) were recruited through the National Youth Justice Network (NYJN) for their direct service expertise, and to represent different Canadian regions. The RCs included: Tim Veresh (British Columbia), Deborah Nowakowski (Prairies), Kelly Nolan (Ontario) and Lucretia Brown (Atlantic). The RCs supported the development of the preliminary research materials, survey design and analysis, and the design, development, and co-facilitation of the roundtables.

The expertise and insights of young people with intersecting vulnerabilities across youth homelessness and justice involvement were crucial to ensuring the findings of the research aligned with

the experience of the systems on the ground and meet the needs of young people (Nelson, 2020). As such, four young people with lived experience worked with the research team as a Youth Advisory Group (YAG): Fialka Wolfblade (British Columbia), Neo Ferguson (Prairies), Ethan Woodcock (Ontario) and a fourth member (Atlantic) whose identity has been kept anonymous in this report. The YAG provided guidance on the research over the course of the project, participating in the roundtables if they chose, analyzing themes, and supporting the creation of the final report. Each of the YAG group members had pre-existing relationships with their respective RC who provided direct support to the YAG team members. YAG members were paid for their time and expertise related to the project.

## PURSuing JUSTICE PROJECT PROCESS

The project proceeded in three phases: Survey --> Roundtable 1 --> Roundtable 2, to inform a final report to capture the solutions provided through the various research methodologies.



Each step in the methodology provided the foothold for the next. The survey responses created the foundation for developing the first set of virtual roundtables, and the second set of roundtables worked through solutions to the problems identified in the first roundtables. Following each stage of this research process, the research team engaged the

RCs and YAG members to debrief and note key take-aways. This was an iterative data collection and analysis process, which allowed for data to be revisited on multiple occasions and to reach team consensus. All stages of the research process were approved by the Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University and York University.

## Survey

We developed a survey that explored how the youth homelessness and youth justice sectors interact. The goal of the survey was to identify mutual vulnerability points across these systems. The survey questions explored the type of services organizations offer, the demographics of the youth they serve, how they reach their desired outcomes, and the challenges they face in meeting youth's needs. The survey also asked open-ended and policy-based questions, such as how organizations are impacted by policies across all orders of government. The survey was administered through Qualtrics.

The research team, RCs, and YAG co-created a distribution plan for the four regions that included creating a database of youth justice and youth homelessness services in each region. This database was shared with the RCs and YAG members, along with the NYJN, who added additional service providers based on their network. Four rounds of survey distribution took place from August-November 2023. To ensure adequate representation across both youth justice and youth homelessness sectors, student volunteers called some organizations directly to inform them of the survey and confirm emails to send it to.

In total, 73 participants completed the survey. Figure 1 highlights the regional breakdown of survey participants. Figure 2 provides details of the service area captured by the work of survey participants.

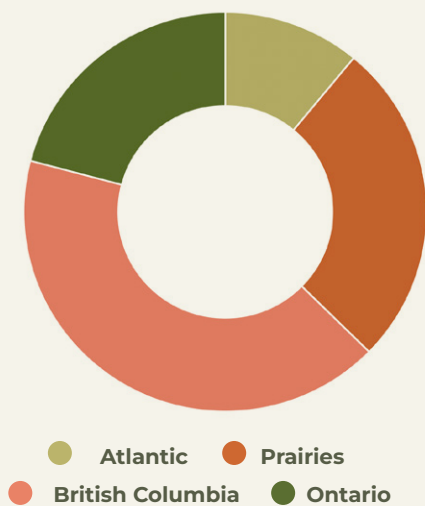


Figure 1. Regional Representation

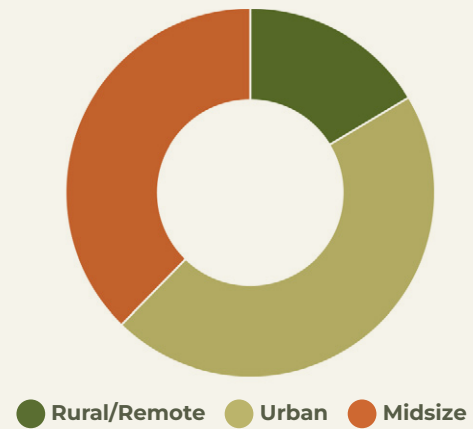


Figure 2. Service Areas

As depicted in Figure 1, there was strong representation across the four regions, with British Columbia having the most participants. Across all regions, most participants worked in organizations located in either urban (population of 500,000+) or midsize (population of between 50,000-500,000) service areas, with just over 16% of responses coming from rural or remote areas (population of less than 50,000) (figure 2). Most of the respondents, approximately 65%, were not-for-profit charities, and 12% were for-profits. Other services offered by the respondents were group homes, open custody correctional facilities, emergency shelters, non-residential supports and programs for justice-involved youth, and services targeted towards precariously housed youth (Figure 3). The majority of respondents offered programming for many different youth (e.g., Indigenous, Black, immigrant, disabled, 2SLGBTQ+, etc.), with some organizations noting they offer programming to all youth.

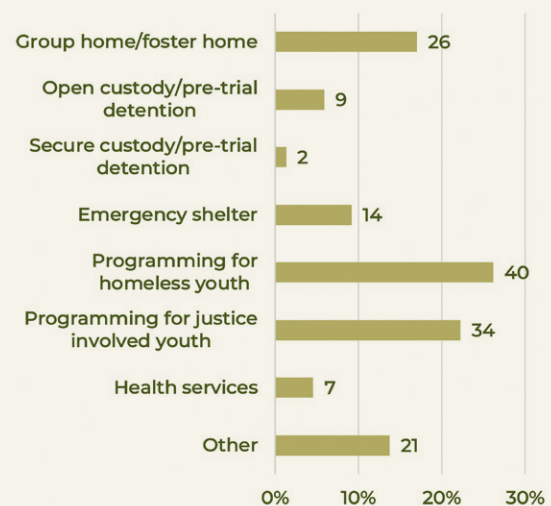


Figure 3. Organizations represented in the survey

## Roundtable One: Problem Areas

The first set of roundtables took place over Zoom in 3-hour sessions in November-December 2023 (one per region, N=4). These roundtables were co-facilitated by members of the research team and the RCs. Each of the first roundtables were enhanced by participation from at least one Indigenous Elder and/or expert from their respective region who began the roundtable by providing learnings they felt pertinent to the topic.

Drawing on the analysis of the surveys, the first set of roundtables sought to identify gaps and build consensus around notable challenge areas. The first set of roundtables were guided by the following questions:

- **What is happening when youth stop accessing services?**
  - ‘Aging out’ process vs. choosing to leave
- **What is happening in shared attempts to prevent youth homelessness?**
  - Navigation between services and youth with multiple barriers
- **What is needed to support service transition into housing?**
  - Youth-specific supports vs. adult-only options

Invitations were distributed to people who identified interest in participating in the survey, people working in the not-for-profit sector in both youth justice and youth housing services, and those working within the provincial public service and government. Three out of the four roundtables benefitted

from participation by their regional YAG member. Representatives from the federal government at the Department of Justice observed the first set of roundtables. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the representation of organizations across each region that participated in the first set of roundtables.

Once all four initial roundtables were complete, the research team analyzed the transcripts and organized the key points to inform the development of the second set of roundtables. These were shared with the RCs and YAG, who debriefed the key points with the research team and offered insights into the findings.

## Roundtable Two: Solutioning

Like the first set of roundtables, the second set of virtual roundtables took place over Zoom in 3-hour sessions and were conducted in March 2024 (one per region, N=4). Led by professional facilitators (Lansdowne Consulting), participants engaged in a series of activities and conversations to re-contextualize problem areas identified in the first set of roundtables. Specifically, participants worked towards building consensus on whether the strategic problem areas identified from the first set of roundtables were the right place to build on solutions. Once established, participants were invited to comment on sub-problems, followed by ‘ideation rounds’ to highlight what success in these areas would look like, and potential solutions grounded in policy, collaboration, and/or intersectional experiences to achieve that success. Collectively, the group concluded with focused discussions on the solutions determined to be the most promising. Ultimately, the goal of the second set of roundtables was to use a solution-oriented lens to inform region-specific and national solutions.

Participants from the first roundtable were invited to attend the second session. Targeted invitations were also sent to people or organizations that could lend critical insights and solutions to the proposed problems. Once again, YAG members were invited to participate in the roundtable if they

Table 1: Roundtable #1 Participants

REGION	HOUSING	JUSTICE	HYBRID	PROV GOVT	FED GOVT*	OTHER
BC	2	0	6	1	1	3
PR	7	0	6	1	2	6
ON	5	5	5	0	1	4
AT	5	0	2	2	1	4
<b>TOTAL n=69</b>	19	5	19	4	5	17

\* Observers

Table 2: Roundtable #2 Participants

REGION	HOUSING	JUSTICE	HYBRID	PROV GOVT	FED GOVT*	OTHER
BC	0	0	3	1	0	2
PR	5	0	3	2	1	4
ON	1	2	3	1*	0	1
AT	2	1	0	2	1	1
<b>TOTAL n=69</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>

\* Observers

chose, and two of them did so. Table 2 highlights the range of representation by sector at the roundtables, with a total of (N) people engaged on the ideation and solutioning exercise.

Following the second roundtable, we connected with the YAG members to debrief on the roundtables and gain their analytic insights into the solutions exercises. Then, members of the research team, the RCs, and the facilitators met on four occasions between November 2023 and February 2024 to thematically analyze and synthesize the findings from the roundtable.

## STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The use of mixed methods for this study allowed for insights emerging from the survey data to be more thoroughly explored through the roundtables. This approach allowed the research team to understand more deeply the intersections between the youth justice system and the homelessness sector. Specifically, the roundtables illuminated the broad institutional processes and structural barriers shaping young people’s experiences.

The research team acknowledges several limitations to this study. A major limitation of this study is that it was conducted only in English. This omission is im-

portant as the project sought to cover large parts of Canada. Relatedly, the province of Quebec and the territories were not captured in this research study. The variance among youth across the country is significant and so the findings from this research are not generalizable to all geographic areas, especially in Quebec and the territories. For instance,

Indigenous youth make up nearly 100% of the youth population in Nunavut (Wiley et al., 2020), a unique context that was not captured here. Even within the identified regions, the sample across the survey and roundtables was not representative of the entire province or region. For example, the roundtable participants stem from six cities across five provinces. The results of the survey and roundtables should be interpreted with these demographic details in mind. Further research should aim to intentionally include Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut.

Another limitation in our methodology relates to the sample population, which focused almost exclusively on service providers working in the systems of interest. As a result of this limitation, the study cannot explicitly speak to activities beyond the scope of this work (e.g., senior leadership, policy development, and legislation). Likewise, while the YAG were crucial to the success of this project, future research can incorporate youth participant voices as the main driver of data collection to add valuable insight into the issues.

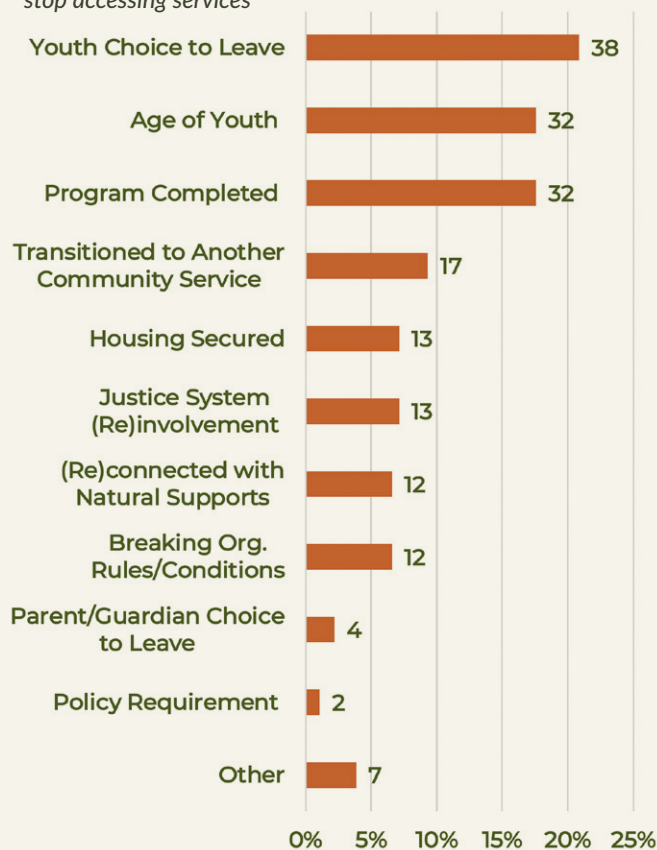
# Survey Findings: Cross-Regional Comparison

The purpose of the survey was to understand mutual vulnerability points for organizations supporting youth experiencing homelessness and/or youth involved in the justice system. Identifying policy, funding, and programmatic challenges allows for practical solutioning that reduces discharge from youth justice into homelessness and likewise supports sustainable exits from homelessness to prevent (re) engagement in the youth justice system. The survey acted as a snapshot of what is happening across the four regions, providing a broad scope of the youth homelessness – youth justice landscape. Finally, the survey results informed the key issues to discuss as we developed the strategic problem areas.

A key element to assessing the interactions between the youth justice and youth homelessness sectors is how and why youth use and leave organizations and programs. This is because research shows that being engaged with services and supports promotes positive youth outcomes (Kidd et al., 2019; Sisselman-Borgia, 2021), including for Indigenous youth (Toombs et al., 2021). Respondents noted the most common reasons for leaving were:

- Youth choosing to leave (21%),
- Aging out (18%), and
- Youth completing their program (17%) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Organizations' most common reasons for why youth stop accessing services

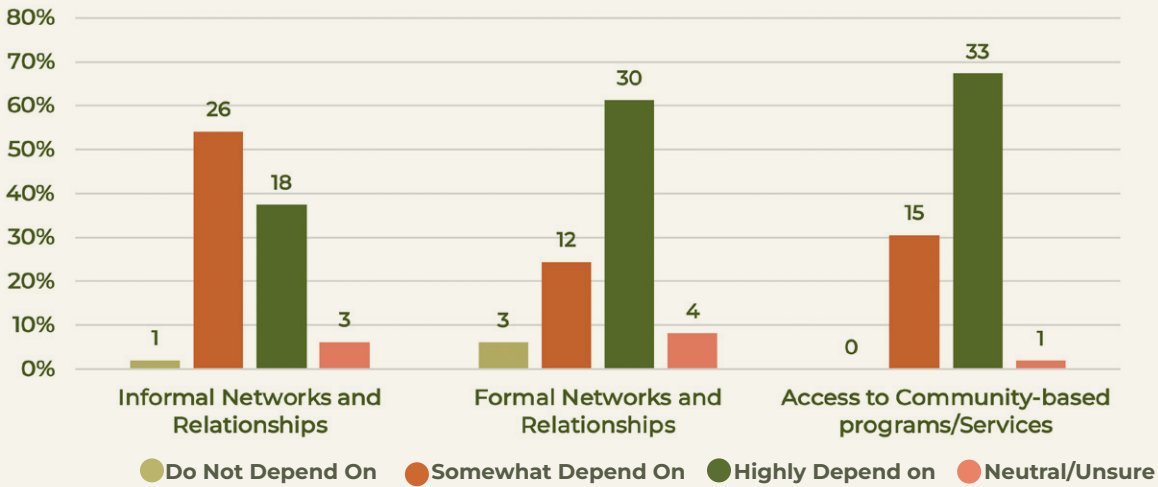


Once youth leave a program it is difficult to track them and assess how leaving impacted their housing and/or justice involvement. A majority of organizations (65%) are not able to track youth who stop accessing their services, primarily due to a lack of resources or policies that do not allow programs to track youth once they leave (i.e. correctional mandates). Of those organizations that do track youth once they leave, they estimate that an average of 60.7 % of youth are released into some sort of homelessness or unstable housing (i.e., unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated, at risk of homelessness).<sup>11</sup>

an average of  
**60.7 %** of youth  
are released into  
some sort of  
homelessness  
or unstable  
housing

<sup>11</sup> This figure is based on estimates provided by service providers who completed the survey, and do not come from an analysis of administrative data.

Figure 5. Extent to which organizations depend on certain relationships and services



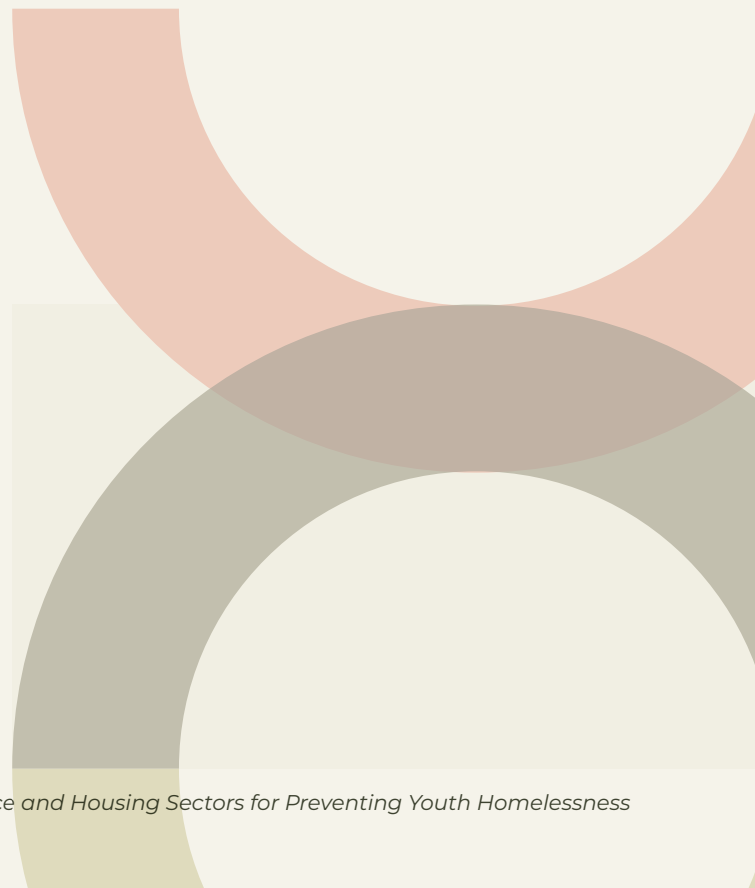
In an effort to prevent youth homelessness, 85% of organizations noted that they work with other sectors and have seen varied successes in doing so. Organizations noted key successes to working collaboratively, including:

- Better information sharing
- Creating comprehensive care plans that pull from multiple organizations to meet youths’ needs
- Working collaboratively across the community to address wider concerns
- Making connections with agencies to help find shelter, housing, and/or reconnection supports

When we asked participants what their organizations depend on to achieve positive outcomes for youth, 67% of respondents identified access to other community-based supports and services as crucial. Formalized networks and relationships, whether it be through law, policy, contracts, or memorandums of understanding were also seen as a high priority (61%), more so than informal, flexible networks and relationships, though these were also regarded as important (37.5%). Likewise, an organization’s ability to recruit and retain staff significantly impacts organizations’ ability to support youth.

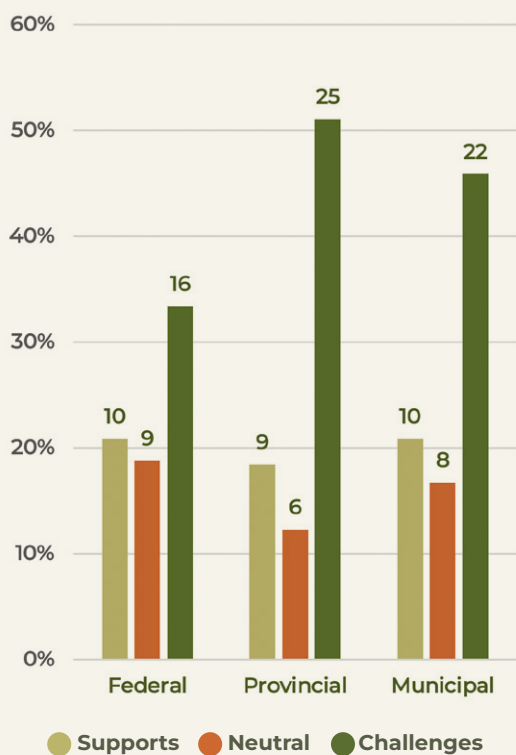
While participants were enthusiastic about the benefits of working collaboratively with other programs, organizations, and sectors, they also noted some challenges, including:

- Lack of staff capacity and resources to dedicate to working with other sectors, sitting on community groups, etc.
- Geographic limitations in rural communities with a lack of permanently available services to collaborate with



Participants identified policies across orders of government that they work with, such as the YCJA, provincial social assistance programs, municipal zoning laws, and public transportation policies for low-income riders, etc. as largely making the work of supporting youth more challenging, rather than facilitating their efforts. Cross-regional results showed challenges with federal, provincial, and municipal policies, with provincial policies presenting the most challenges and municipal policies providing slightly more support than the other orders of government (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Organizations' ratings of how policies impact the desired outcomes for youth



In this research, we sought to provide an analysis of cross-regional variation in their approaches to youth homelessness prevention among the youth justice and youth homelessness sectors. Survey results revealed no statistically significant differences in responses across regions. Local responses are absolutely necessary to meaningfully and appropriately implement youth homelessness prevention initiatives. Still, the findings from this survey provide evidence of the national scope of the problem for unhoused young people who may be involved in the youth justice system and the need for federal and provincial leadership in this area.



# Strategic Problem Areas

Throughout this research project, one sentiment was consistent across the regions – the need for truly affordable housing is urgent. As such, discussions about key problem areas, and subsequent development of solutions were grounded in the current landscape of the housing crisis. The research team and participants recognize that addressing the affordable housing shortage will above all, be the first step to implementing the proposed remedies. Canada is in dire need of safer, housing that is truly affordable to people with the lowest incomes to effectively meet the demands of the current housing crisis and subsequently remedy the problems that arise from being unhoused. To provide safe, affordable housing to everyone living in Canada, experts estimate that approximately 22 million housing units will need to be built by 2030, with a current shortfall of 3.5 million units (CMHC, 2023). Beyond this immediate need, the findings from this project establish a framework to address the root causes of homelessness and justice involvement among youth.

Tackling the housing crisis goes beyond the construction of more buildings (Infrastructure Canada, 2024). The risk factors related to justice involvement and the risk of homelessness cannot adequately be addressed until a youth has a safe place to live. However, as research demonstrates, attaining housing does not always lead to income security (Kidd et al., 2019), food security (Brothers et al., 2020), social integration (Thulien et al., 2019), and reduced involvement in the justice system (Kneebone et al., 2023). The problem areas and subsequent solutions acknowledge the necessary conjunction of housing with policies and programs that support youth to be independent and thrive in adulthood.

To arrive at solutions, it was critical to first examine the most problematic drivers towards youth justice system involvement and homelessness, based on results from the survey and first set of roundtables. Initially, the problem areas were presented to the second roundtable participants as five separate problem areas to work through.<sup>12</sup> There was widespread recognition from participants during the second roundtables' solutioning exercise that each of the strategic problem areas:

- Would benefit first and foremost from a supply of safe, affordable housing options that meet the demands of the current housing crisis; and,
- Have intersectional layers of structural and cultural barriers for Indigenous youth, racialized youth, queer youth, youth with disabilities, and other marginalized youth that require extra focus.

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<sup>12</sup> The five initial strategic problems areas were: service eligibility and access; integrated service delivery opportunities; policy and funding alignment; coordinated transitions; and, youth disengagement.

Bearing these considerations in mind, the final analysis resulted in a slight restructuring of the initial five 'Strategic Problem Areas of Focus' into the following three themes:

### 1. Service Eligibility and Access:

Participants in this research study reported the numerous policies and practices that prevent youth with justice system involvement from accessing housing and support services. Some of the biggest concerns were eligibility criteria, arbitrary age definitions, requirements for stable income, ID requirements, mandated school attendance, or other barriers due to probation or no contact orders. Other access issues were identified such as youth capacity to navigate complex systems effectively and efficiently, and a lack of culturally appropriate services/structures. Intersectional layers of structural and cultural barriers for Indigenous youth, racialized youth, queer youth, youth with disabilities, and other marginalized youth require extra focus.



**"[...] Then living in a tent for two months and just kept waiting for them to call me back and then they called me back saying yeah, we can't take you because, they just mentioned my record. [...] So, because of that record, I was stuck on, in the tent for a while in the rain, and all that."**

(Ethan, Youth Advisor)



**"[...] Homelessness is such a big issue in Labrador as well as within the Nunatsiavut communities. Coming home may not even be an option when it's time, because there's nothing there. There's no security. There may be restrictions put in place regarding a person in terms of no contact or stuff like that, so [the youth] can't access their family home... And so, they have to wait outside [of this community] long. So they're basically in custody longer."**

(Roundtable Participant, Atlantic)



**"There's certain aspects with some of our youth that have complex care needs that they actually get screened out as opposed to screening into services."**

(Roundtable Participant, BC)

## 2. Policy and Funding Alignment:

Currently, there are separate funding mechanisms and policies for youth justice and housing services, making it difficult to have a unified approach to responding to youth homelessness. Siloed funding contributes to the lack of coordination between services. This impedes the ability to provide seamless support for youth transitioning out of the justice system into independent living, as well as to support youth with housing supports to avoid criminal justice system involvement.

“

**“Teach youth basic needs who haven’t learned the basics. Not all youth have parents or ones who teach or help them with these things. There needs to be more than just one list for people to wait for housing. Start to fund out the support that everyone needs or these streets will be filled with homeless people who never should have or have to experience homelessness.”**  
(Ethan, Youth Advisor)

“

**“There are sections under the current Corrections Release Act that state that you cannot release, first of all, youth or an Indigenous person under Section One into homelessness, but it happens all the time.”**  
(Roundtable Participant, Prairies)

“

**“You can’t maintain these facilities to the level that they should be, and the funding is there in the beginning but how do you maintain it for the future?”**  
(Roundtable Participant, Atlantic)

### 3. Coordinated Service Delivery and Engagement:

There are limited opportunities and mechanisms to coordinate transition for youth connected to both the child welfare and criminal justice systems. This is also the case for joint initiatives between homelessness/housing and justice sectors to support youth comprehensively. Siloing and fragmentation within and across government departments and their related social systems, as well as the non-profit sector, contribute to poor outcomes for youth. Policies and barriers within social systems disproportionately impact youth being discharged from both youth justice and child welfare systems and subsequently leave youth vulnerable to homelessness. Youth may disengage if their needs are not being met. This could include cultural disconnection, the need for stimulation due to developmental stage, the need to build life skills, and desire for independence/control. They may also disengage due to peer influence, exploitation, and feeling unsafe.

The results of the analysis of the second roundtables, combined with the key considerations on housing supply and intersectional layers of structural and/or cultural barriers, establish the framework for the guiding principles on preventing youth homelessness and youth involvement in the justice system contained in the following section.



**“The first time I got arrested, I was probably 13 years old, and I remember once I went home, the connection with my family just wasn’t the same and I just felt like out of place. So, I don’t know, I went onto the streets and thought I could live a better life, like figuring it out for myself.”**

(Neo, Youth Advisor)



**“A lot of young people don’t necessarily even know where to go once they’re released from incarceration. And they’re going from, say, like the youth system to the adult system.”**

(Roundtable Participant, Atlantic)



**“We worked with trying to get into form more of an attachment with the organization rather than the attachment with the individual, because we’re fully aware that the individual could leave at any moment, and what we didn’t want to do is have that person doing all this great work with the youth, and then suddenly they leave, for whatever reason, and then that youth gets lost.”**

(Roundtable Participant, BC)

**“Right now, rent, gas, food, everything is so expensive it’s not fair for rent to be jacked up that high either. More resources for housing would help out too. Last year there was none. I couldn’t get help from anybody... they will open new places to eat and such. But no houses.”**

*– Ethan (Youth Advisor)*

# Guiding Principles

Participants identified that change within, and collaboration between, the youth homelessness and youth justice sectors need to be grounded in key, unwavering principles that inform policy, programs, interventions, and advocacy. **Implementing any of the 14 solutions must be done through an active engagement with the following guiding principles from the onset:**

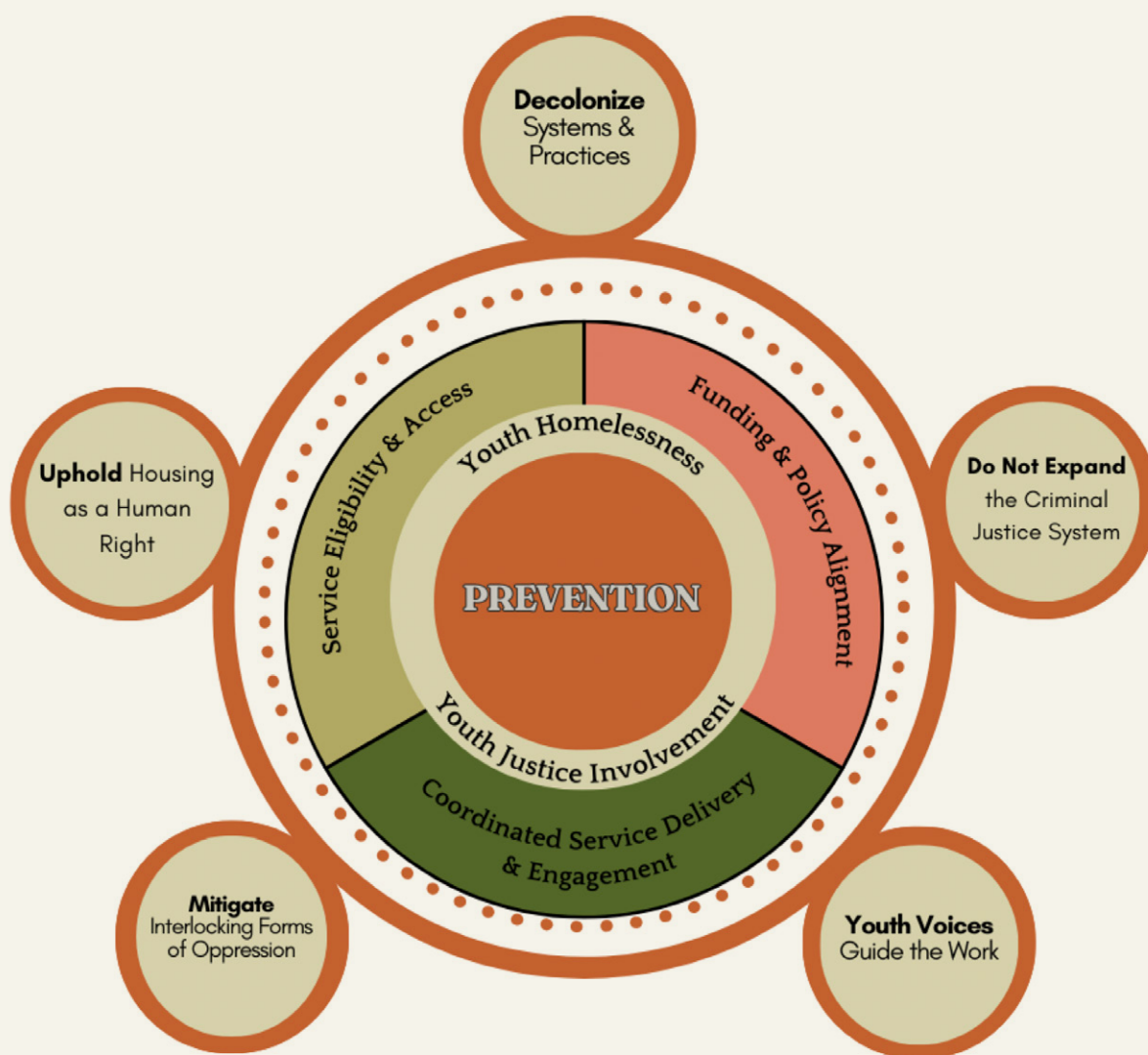


Figure 7. The 14 proposed solutions are grounded within five guiding principles.

**1. Decolonize systems and practices:** Using a decolonizing approach means undoing the harms of colonial, settler influence on equity deserving populations, including Indigenous Peoples, and actively working towards reconciliation to create a society that upholds the rights of all people.

**2. Uphold housing as a human right:** Everyone in Canada deserves safe, affordable, and adequate housing, including young people involved in the youth justice system. Assuring the right to housing will allow the bidirectional relationship between homelessness and justice involvement to be reduced.

Homelessness is a direct violation of human rights as legislated through the *National Housing Strategy Act* (2019), section 4:

It is declared to be the housing policy of the Government of Canada to

- a) recognize that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law;
- b) recognize that housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities;
- c) support improved housing outcomes for the people of Canada; and
- d) further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

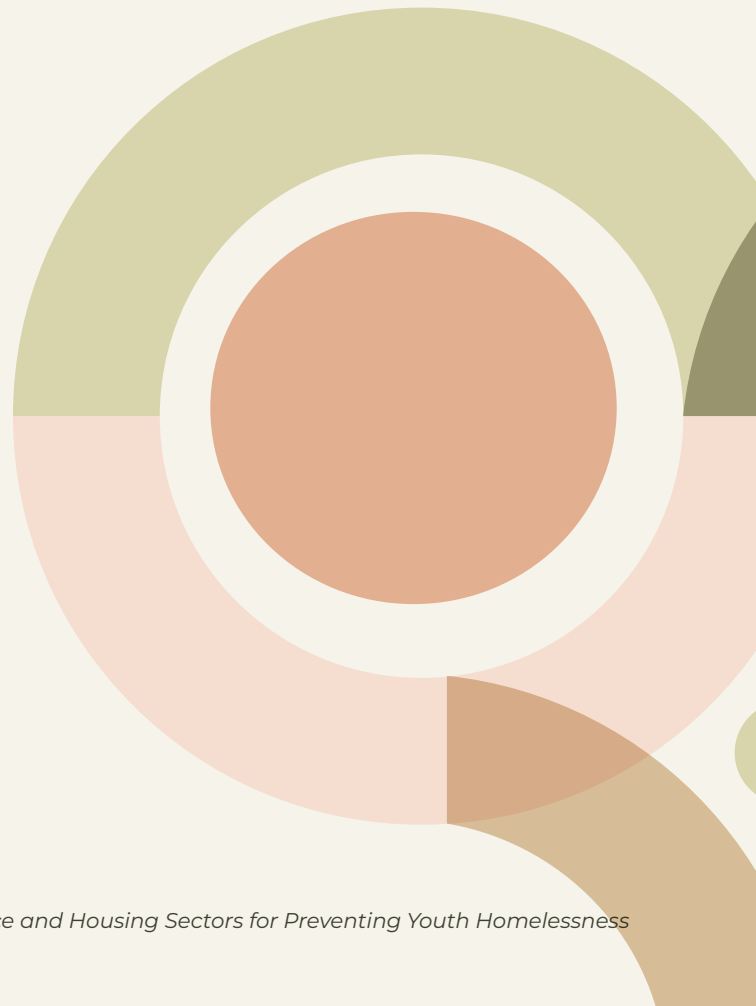
**3. Do not expand the criminal justice system:** Policies and legislation aimed at combatting homelessness may inadvertently perpetuate criminalization (Herring, 2021). In an effort to provide resources, it is important not to expand the carceral net and further criminalize youth. When designing housing, implementing new programs, and allocating funding, the issue of recriminalization and further criminalization should be considered. For example, program policies for group or family homes should evaluate when police are called to settle disputes, and what other resolution methods can be considered

**4. Mitigate interlocking forms of oppression:**

All the solutions were developed through an anti-oppression lens. This includes considering how programs and policies are experienced by Black, racialized, and Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, young women and gender-diverse youth, youth with disabilities, and youth from all equity-deserving groups.

Mitigating oppression also looks like integrating ways to enhance culture and community for youth experiencing inequities and making spaces and opportunities open, welcoming, and inclusive for all youth.

**5. Youth voice guides the work:** Effective change cannot occur without input from the people who are most impacted by the policies and programs. Developing youth partnerships is crucial to the sustainability and effectiveness of new initiatives to break the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. Youth collaborations can occur in a variety of ways, including hiring young people as consultants on projects, creating youth advisory committees, including designated youth spots on governance boards, and engaging young people in participatory research approaches.



**“I feel like decolonisation in this system might take a while, and some might not even care for it. But my concern is what does this look like in the justice system?? I think because of how people are about this kind of stuff we need to spell it out for them or else it will be them making the choice of what decolonisation looks like to them. I’d love to see [Indigenous] people working in the justice system more, we need more Elders to be able to go to those places and talk to youth about connecting with culture...It’s been proven, people not connected to culture tend to be more violent, more susceptible to addiction, and other things. Having [Indigenous] art programs, have a sweat lodge at these places, it’s been proven to help. Get youth connected with the land again is also important. Having medicine women or men come in and show them medicines from the land around them would probably do wonders. Incorporate these and many others I believe is what decolonisation means, allowing us to govern ourselves and the land... The teachings are happening again, that is what decolonisation is. And I hate how we use that word here cuz until natives are governing the land again this country is NOT decolonised.”**

**- Osean (Youth Advisor)**

# Solutions

The solutions generated from this project are consistent with literature that highlights the bidirectional relationship between youth homelessness and justice system involvement. The challenges for youth experiencing both homelessness and justice system involvement are interconnected, and stem from structural inequities, system failures, and power imbalances that directly lead to the marginalization and discrimination of young people in Canada. The three strategic problem areas framed the analysis for answering this study's research question, *'how can identified linkages between youth justice involvement and homelessness support improved policy outcomes as they relate to homelessness prevention?'* As a result, fourteen solutions emerged from the analysis.

# Addressing Strategic Problem Area 1: Service Eligibility & Access

**“I’d say that there’s lots of empty houses and buildings in our area that no one uses, that should be fixed up and made into affordable housing for people like us who struggle to afford rent these days. I feel like we would have a lot less homelessness if we were putting those people into subsidized houses and apartments. If there’s a shortage, they should be building more homes. Less people on the streets the better and safer it is for everybody.”**

*– Ethan (Youth Advisor)*

# Solution 1:

## Establish more mechanisms to enable early and comprehensive discharge planning from youth justice



**“Youth [need to have] collaboration for housing supports and such as soon they are incarcerated so that they aren’t having to wait till they are leaving to start searching.”**

– Osean (Youth Advisor)

Young people exiting the justice system need clear, thorough plans grounded in successful, sustainable transitions. Comprehensive discharge planning provides support across life domains including housing, employment, food security, physical and mental health, education, social inclusion, and life skills. The discharge planning process should use a person-centered approach and coordinate with the youth’s support team (caseworker, probation officer, teachers, social worker, caregiver etc.) and community support services.

The YCJA explicitly states that when a young person receives a custodial sentence, a youth worker must be assigned to assist with the development of a community reintegration plan (Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2002). However, this legislation pertains only to youth who are sentenced to custody. Young people in pre-trial detention who get released by the courts on bail or on time served do not always receive this support. While the time in the youth justice system during pre-trial detention can vary significantly, the risk of homelessness is a consistent threat. Youth need to be supported at every stage of the justice system. Discharge plans that begin at the time of admission, and which are revisited throughout the custodial term, will support sustainable transitions. However, initiating a plan, no matter how early, can only be effective when it is actionable. Many service providers are working on plans from ‘day 1’ but are significantly limited by the availability of transitional and other age-appropriate supports. This challenge is compounded by uncertainties related to the length of custodial stays.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Ensure the principles and intent of the YCJA related to discharge planning and reintegration services are adhered to and extend to pre-trial detention so that all youth are covered under legislation.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Where provinces/territories hold housing waitlists, establish a priority housing waitlist for homeless youth under the age of 25.

- Extend access to a young person’s “housing allowance” via social assistance policies while they are in custody/detention in order to retain their housing and prevent entry into homelessness upon discharge; and, ensure that amounts reflect realistic access to rental market averages.
- Develop/enhance youth-specific transitional housing programs that provide wraparound supports that are inclusive of justice-involved youth.
- Work with municipalities to fund programs that provide community reintegration services and transitional support for youth.

### **Municipal governments:**

- Where municipalities hold housing waitlists, establish a priority housing waitlist for homeless youth under the age of 25.
- Collaborate across different orders of government (e.g. Federation of Canadian Municipalities) to leverage more programs that provide community reintegration services and transitional support.

### **Community agencies:**

- Collaborate and co-develop policies and practices that allow for bed reservation at shelters when a youth is being released from custody among local youth homelessness and youth justice serving organizations.
- Create community-centered accountability mechanisms to ensure continued care upon discharge.
- Joint advocacy to municipal, provincial/territorial, and/or federal government.

## Solution 2:

# Empower service providers to respond with urgency



**“There’s a long waitlist, like, we have a youth on the list that’s very eager and very motivated that would be perfect for treatment and we’re looking at two or three months and she’s gonna be homeless while we’re waiting that two or three months so [...] making it to treatment is unlikely.” -**

*Roundtable Participant, Prairies*

Youth are at a vulnerable stage in their life where the timing of having their needs met can make a world of a difference. In particular, when a young person has uniquely urgent needs, the ability to coordinate a response to prevent justice system (re)involvement or homelessness should not hinge on wait times for support. The transition from a youth justice facility is an especially important time to capitalize on momentum youth may have developed while in custody. Timelines need to work for youth –and service providers need to be empowered to give them what they need, when they need it.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Maintain and/or create opportunities for service providers from across the country to engage in information-sharing opportunities related to preventing youth justice involvement (e.g. National Youth Justice Network) and youth homelessness. Ensure that representatives of the Government of Canada are engaged as observers (i.e. Department of Justice, Employment and Social Development) to be aware of the most urgent cases.
- Establish opportunities within the federal budget to develop a national plan for social service providers (including community corrections) to collect and publish data on factors driving urgent needs for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Inform sound policy decisions and investments by establishing capacity for obtaining evidence-informed insights from social services on factors that are driving urgent needs for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

#### Municipal governments:

- Develop youth rapid re-housing programs in collaboration with community organizations.

#### Community agencies:

- Assess the local demand for beds for youth being discharged from detention facilities to increase capacity, and eliminate waitlists and the risk of homelessness.
- Stay involved in the care of transitional-aged youth’s care until adult facilities/ programs/community have the capacity/jurisdiction to support them and complete a ‘warm hand-off’.

# Solution 3:

## Establish a consistent definition of youth across sectors



**“Is there a way to utilize more of a youth justice approach for young people between the ages of let’s say, 19 and 25, that really focuses on education, life skills, development, employment supports, and really focus on long term outcomes as opposed to completing a sentence by a specific set time and date?”**

*- Roundtable Participant, BC*

Uniform age definitions across sectors can create consistency in care for young people by improving collaboration between service providers. Revising age requirements away from chronological age and towards developmental age may also allow more youth to receive support, services and continuity of care based on their needs rather than age and can improve policies for youth and reduce interactions with adult systems.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Establish consistent language and age ranges for ‘emerging adults’ and ‘youth’ within and beyond the criminal justice system, to include cross-governmental entities and legislation (e.g. YCJA, Criminal Code) as appropriate.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Collaborate with municipal governments to ensure that provincially/territorially funded youth programs align with a consistent age definition of youth.
- Develop policies that allow for providers to offer youth-based services based on a readiness model rather than chronological age (e.g. transitioning out of the child welfare system)
- Work with community-based services to implement bridging policies for emerging adults.

#### Municipal governments:

- Ensure all youth services and organizations maintain uniform age definitions consistent with other orders of government.
- Ensure municipal youth committees are represented by youth services available locally.

#### Community agencies:

- Implement bridging policies for emerging adults.
- Allow flexible periods based on need and readiness rather than exclusively chronological age cut-offs (i.e. enable supports for youth under 16 and over 18) to ensure a successful transition to independence/adult systems.

# Solution 4:

## Enhance access to services in rural communities



**“Youth in rural areas should be able to access programs that align with what youth in urban areas are receiving so that they don’t have to leave their communities looking for these supports.”**

– Osean (Youth Advisor)

Challenges in accessing services faced by youth living in rural and remote areas can be mitigated in several ways. To ensure youth remain within their communities and close to their natural supports, programs and services should be expanded and accessible to everyone living within a specific catchment area (see The Raft, 2014). Rural youth face displacement from their home communities and supports when pushed to access services in other locations. In turn, this increases the service demands on urban centres to meet their needs. With many youth justice facilities facing closures across the country, the number of justice-involved youth displaced from their communities has increased significantly. Creating more upstream prevention investments in rural communities for youth housing supports creates protective factors against homelessness and justice system involvement.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Support Indigenous communities/bands to govern their own youth justice procedures to ensure that youth are not displaced and relocated away from family and natural supports.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Create partnerships between ministries to offer wraparound supports for youth and improve opportunities for community agencies to support navigation between services.
- Enable rural communities to play a bigger role in how services are allocated to young people.

#### Municipal governments:

- Ensure access to public transportation is low barrier/free for low-income youth.
- Create/increase opportunities for existing social service staff to address specific needs of rural youth to reduce pressures on urban centres.

#### Community agencies:

- Create outreach services and mobile/satellite supports for youth living in rural areas.

**“It’s not okay. I’m stuck in a one room that’s \$1500 a month. This one room is the kitchen, bedroom, living room. And I’m paying \$1500? For one room to live my life. That’s not okay either. God, youth need to live and not all youth can work a steady job. Nowadays a steady job doesn’t pay rent. Nothing is okay. I won’t even go to college ’cause I know with rent and everything that it won’t work out.”**

*– Ethan (Youth Advisor)*

# Addressing Strategic Problem Area 2:

## Funding & Policy Alignment

**“What needs to be done? ...I would say having more formal funding set in place with less harsh deadlines, and more funding for the people doing the work. Because if someone’s working 8 hours of their day helping kids – and sometimes with serious issues – and then they get less than living wage for a lot of [youth services]”**

*– Neo (Youth Advisor)*

# Solution 5:

## Increase discretionary funding, flexibility in eligibility



**“The lack of proper funding in the charity system is a big problem that a lot of places are having to face.”**

– Neo (Youth Advisor)

Youth should have access to social assistance programs without barriers. They should be eligible for financial support without having to be married or find someone to be their trustee. Access to financial resources is the first step to obtaining safe, adequate housing and youth should be provided this support, regardless of age.

Justice-involved youth should continue to receive full income during their time in custody. If their housing costs were being paid directly by the social assistance provider, it should continue to do so. Available reports suggest that youth are incarcerated for short periods, between 1-3 months.<sup>13</sup> Continuing to receive financial support while in custody can protect a young person from becoming homeless upon their release and gives them more options for accessing housing that is appropriate for their unique needs.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Ensure that federal financial assistance programs for Indigenous Peoples are accessible to Indigenous youth.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Ensure eligibility criteria for financial assistance programs<sup>14</sup> are broad enough to capture unique factors for youth experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.
- Ensure financial assistance policies allow for recipients to continue to receive payments if they are in custodial settings.
- Empower service providers to have more discretion in how available funding can be spent to support youth, for example, transportation costs for rural communities.

- Provide clear training/orientation opportunities for community services staff to become well-versed in applying for social assistance on behalf of youth.

#### Municipal governments:

- Develop youth-specific case managers for the delivery of financial assistance programs across community-based youth services.

#### Community agencies:

- Train staff to be well-versed in applying to financial assistance to support youth with the application process.
- Consider tracking cases where discretionary spending was or could have been more impactful.

13 Available data retrieved from: <https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/RCY-Missed-Opportunities-Jan2024-1.pdf>; and, <https://www.ontario.ca/document/because-young-people-matter-report-residential-services-review-panel/youth-justice-secure-and-open-custodydetention>

14 Financial assistance programs include social assistance and disability supports

# Solution 6:

## Pay and train staff better



**“The people are the program...so you have to be able to retain people who can create consistent, reliable relationships with the folks that we’re supporting.”**

*- Roundtable Participant, Prairies*

To increase retention and reduce high turnover rates, staff working within the homelessness and justice sectors should receive remuneration which reflects the hard work they do supporting youth with complex needs. Paying staff adequately, providing comprehensive benefits, and a pension plan contributes to employee wellness and retention. In addition, staff working with youth should also be provided with ongoing training and professional development to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to work with youth who have increasingly complex needs. Investments in front-line social service workers as essential workers will address the high rates of staff turnover, which presently creates barriers for youth who need to re-explain and re-engage with new people. Paying and training staff better enables youth serving systems to develop and maintain trusting relationships, which in turn can yield improved outcomes when providing interventions.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Ensure federally funded youth employment programs pay a living wage.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Establish budgets which enable community agencies to pay their staff a living wage and receive pensions.
- Ensure community agencies are resourced to provide ongoing professional development opportunities for staff that support youth.

#### Municipal governments:

- Ensure that all municipally funded youth-serving agencies have access to adequate training and support to meet the range of needs for local youth.

#### Community agencies:

- Prioritize investments in staff i.e. paid (at minimum) a living wage and receive pensions.
- Develop/participate in a community of practice that comes together to fulfill individual and group goals, by sharing best practices and creating new knowledge to meet these goals. This can involve creating shared opportunities for training staff.
- Conduct an environmental scan of pay grids to comparable services in the community, and report back to funders.
- Consider how implementing mandatory professional development hours for youth workers can improve their resilience and their ability to support youth.

# Solution 7:

## Build cross-sectoral community collaboration



**“Why not have somebody who is professionally trained and knowledgeable around the systems, as knowledgeable as we can be, to do some of that initial work rather than having our youth track all over the city trying to find things?”**

*- Roundtable Participant, Ontario*

To better support homeless and/or justice-involved young people in accessing multiple services, organizations can consider how to maximize opportunities for strong communication and collaboration. Coordination between agencies is essential to ensure youth receive the care and support they need. Organizational knowledge sharing, while ensuring youths' privacy where appropriate, can identify and thereby address gaps in service. Community collaboration should also be multi-organizational and consistent. Regular knowledge-sharing across community agencies can increase the extent to which key stakeholders understand the role that each sector plays in the care of a young person.

### Pathways for Changemakers:

#### Government of Canada:

- Leverage the principles and legislative capacity of the YCJA, which outlines using a multi-disciplinary approach to prevent youth crime,<sup>15</sup> to develop policy into partnerships between ministries and youth-serving organizations, which recognize the intersection of poverty, justice, and health.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Engage with municipal governments to ensure that youth-serving organizations have the capacity to collaborate across provincial sectors, including justice, housing, and health.
- Support the development of 'service navigators' to improve youth's access to services.

#### Municipal governments:

- Facilitate the development of ongoing community connection opportunities to provide a space for organizations to identify, collaborate, and respond to emerging community needs.
- Engage with provincial/territorial governments to ensure that youth-serving organizations have the capacity to collaborate across sectors such as justice, housing, and health.

#### Community agencies:

- Communicate and collaborate with other organizations regarding youth needs (i.e., support youth-centered services and outcomes, reduce redundancies/improve efficiencies in service delivery).
- Establish or enhance opportunities to work with service navigators who can improve the ability of youth to access services.

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15 The Preamble of the YCJA reads: “WHEREAS communities, families, parents and others concerned with the development of young persons should, through multi-disciplinary approaches, take reasonable steps to prevent youth crime by addressing its underlying causes, to respond to the needs of young persons, and to provide guidance and support to those at risk of committing crimes;”

**We should be looking at advocacy work to draw on data about stigma that's associated with youth that have been incarcerated, since landlords don't usually rent to youth who have been. It's hard for youth to find places to rent without supports – we need more of these types of supports throughout the province”**

*– Osean (Youth Advisor)*

# Solution 8:

## Structure funding frameworks to evaluate success from a youth-centered lens



**“If we’re not willing to test and learn and experiment, then we’ll never innovate.”**

- Roundtable Participant, Ontario

Youth-centered approaches to policy and practice provide the greatest opportunity for meeting their unique needs. Funding frameworks need to provide service providers with the flexibility to meet those needs. Rather than outcomes-based models of evaluation, accountability should be to the youth organizations work with.

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- Implement innovative evaluation tools for programs supported through Reaching Home<sup>16</sup> that are geared towards the needs of youth who are at risk of or are already justice-involved.
- Engage with provincial/territorial counterparts to consider how funding mechanisms should empower service providers and communities to utilize best practices for preventing youth homelessness.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

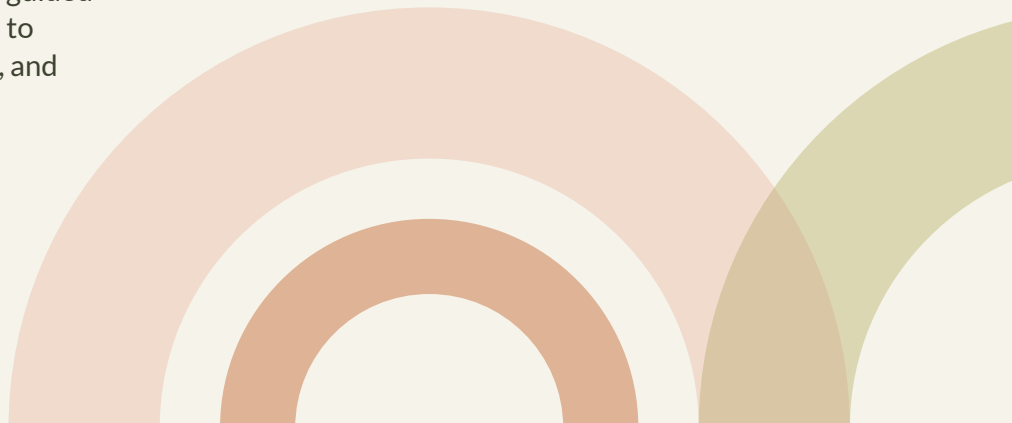
- Work with service providers and communities to develop funding evaluation mechanisms that are guided by person-centered approaches to preventing youth homelessness, and revise as needed.

#### Municipal governments:

- Work with community agencies to assess youths’ immediate short-term needs, alongside long-term projects for responsibly meeting housing targets.

#### Community agencies:

- Inform all orders of government about youths’ immediate short-term needs, alongside long-term projects for responsibly meeting housing targets that reflect local needs.
- Inform funders (e.g. through reporting requirements, knowledge mobilization opportunities) about measuring their own accountability to youth.



# Solution 9:

## Cross-jurisdictional collaboration between provincial/territorial and federal ministries



**“I just know, like working in a non-profit, sometimes I’m not bound by the same red tape that federal, provincial projects are.”**

*- Roundtable Participant, Atlantic*

Federal, provincial/territorial, and local governments should collaborate to ensure that all orders of government take responsibility for preventing youth homelessness and youth justice involvement. Fostering collaboration requires disrupting the competitive nature of funding and should be considered capital for the social system as a whole.

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- Using a ‘whole of government’ approach, assess which ministries can contribute to understanding and preventing youth homelessness for all youth, including those who are justice-involved.
- Maintain youth homelessness and youth justice-involvement prevention as a priority that will address upstream factors across other systems.
- Establish mechanisms that protect long-term planning and best practices created by community organizations from changes tied to shifts in government.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Increase cross-ministerial communication to ensure funding is targeted and efficient for preventing youth homelessness and justice system involvement.
- Develop policies and practices that enable consistent communication with municipal and federal counterparts.

#### Municipal governments:

- Advocate for developing and enhancing policies that enable consistent communication with provincial/territorial governments.
- Conduct assessments about the unique needs for housing youth and emerging adults when funding local housing infrastructure more broadly.

#### Community agencies:

- Engage with networks to inform different orders of government about youth justice and youth homelessness prevention.
- Engage with local city councillors, MPs and MPPs about the needs of youth and emerging adults and related challenges in service delivery.

# Solution 10:

## Indigenous equity and autonomy over funding



**“I believe the whole country needs to be able to be governed in a sense by Indigenous people in many levels of government.”** – *Osean (Youth Advisor)*

In alignment with reconciliation, Indigenous communities should have autonomy over their community, specifically in regard to the administration of justice and social housing delivery. It is important that the colonial continuum within housing be disrupted by resituating the definition of housing from a means of shelter to a relational connection. As such, Indigenous communities deserve the right to define, create, and fund their own social housing initiatives. There is also a need for a decolonial approach to the justice process that prioritizes a holistic framework which emphasizes the self-governance of Indigenous Peoples.

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- In alignment with the TRC Calls to Action, develop a national plan to eliminate the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in custody.
- Collaborate with Indigenous organizations to fund the development and implementation of an Indigenous justice system.
- Fund Indigenous communities to allow for self-governance of justice administration and housing delivery (e.g. The National Indigenous Collaborative Housing Inc.).<sup>17</sup>
- Co-create sustainable, equitable funding models informed by Indigenous knowledges, rights, self-determination and values.

#### Municipal governments:

- Where municipalities hold housing waitlists, provide separate social housing waitlists and policies for Indigenous Peoples.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Collaborate with the federal government to support the independence of Indigenous communities to be funded for youth justice and youth homelessness prevention.
- Provide equitable and stable funding to Indigenous communities to establish and implement their own community remedies as an alternative to imprisonment. Provide equitable and stable funding to Indigenous communities to develop and deliver community programs to young people to prevent youth homelessness and interactions with the justice system.
- Where provinces/territories hold housing waitlists, provide separate social housing waitlists and policies for Indigenous Peoples.

#### Community agencies:

- Support/advocate for the independence of Indigenous communities in ways that assist with the administration of justice and youth housing.
- Foster community awareness between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations about the local realities/needs of youth to promote allyship.

<sup>17</sup> <https://nichi.ca/>

# **Addressing Strategic Problem Area 3:**

## **Coordinated Service Delivery & Engagement**

**“As much as housing is important, it’s also important to take care of their traumas and addiction and much more.”**

*– Osean (Youth Advisor)*

# Solution 11:

## Culturally appropriate services



**“What’s stopping them from having an Indigenous court? [...] Newfoundland, Labrador [the] province itself is way behind in terms of truth and reconciliation as well as supporting Indigenous groups” - Roundtable Participant, Atlantic**

Services and supports for young people should be culturally appropriate, relevant, and responsive to their unique needs. Aligning supports with youths’ culture and beliefs allows organizations to build a trusting relationship with youth. Youth justice and homelessness/housing programs should include considerations for the “histories, traditions, beliefs, languages, and value systems of culturally diverse groups” (PNFCMH, 2003, p. 49). Most importantly, the services should promote a sense of cultural identity and belonging. Specifically, the YCJA emphasizes the need to “respect gender, ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences and respond to the needs of Aboriginal young persons and of young persons with special requirements” (*Youth Criminal Justice Act*, 2002, p. 6).

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- Leverage the principles and legislative capacity of the YCJA to explicitly prioritize culturally appropriate remedies, programs, and services at all points along the youth justice continuum, in accordance with the TRC *Calls to Action*.
- Allow Indigenous bands to govern justice services independently and empower them to support youth if/when they return to their home communities.
- Implement and invest in recommendations from Canada’s Black Justice Strategy and Indigenous Justice Strategy.<sup>18</sup>

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Ensure provincial and territorial settlement agencies are equipped to offer services to the specific needs of newcomer youth.
- Empower Indigenous communities to have the necessary tools/resources to support youth if/when they return to their home communities.
- Strengthen policies that enable service providers to adopt individualized plans and programs that are youth-centered.

#### Municipal governments:

- Ensure municipal services are multi-lingual and adapted to cultural contexts.
- Create or enhance opportunities for equity-deserving communities to co-develop solutions locally.

#### Community agencies:

- Hire staff/engage volunteers that reflect diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Provide cultural competency training to staff, which includes the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Indigenous rights.
- Advocate for or enhance opportunities for marginalized communities to co-develop solutions locally.
- Engage with partners from culturally-based services to assist with discharge planning.
- Prioritize/strengthen individualized plans and programs that are youth-centered.

<sup>18</sup> Canada’s Black Justice Strategy: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/cbjs-scjn/index.html>; The Indigenous Justice Strategy: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/ijr-dja/ijr-sja/index.html>

# Solution 12:

## Streamline practices to reduce complexities of navigating multiple systems



**“What policies should be removed for youth to access more stable housing is a huge question, but also an amazing one.”**

– Neo (Youth Advisor)

Youth need support to navigate the complex systems of justice and homelessness. Programs should have the capacity to provide aftercare and bridging supports to ensure that young people do not fall through the cracks when transitioning from child welfare to justice (or vice versa), aging out of systems, or transitioning to housing.

A single point of contact approach such as establishing ‘system navigators’ to offer aftercare, outreach, or liaison services would provide more organized, streamlined practices. Success in this area means youth will have an easier time obtaining resources (e.g., locating and signing up for services, etc.) so that they stay engaged with their support systems.

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- Create funding opportunities for provinces/territories and/or municipalities to embed system navigation services for youth involved in multiple systems, or by ensuring that funding opportunities targeted at youth justice and homelessness/housing organizations can independently establish system navigation services.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Work with federal and municipal government counterparts to establish system navigation capacity that will strengthen aftercare/liaison services between multiple services.
- Create regional system navigators for youth who are moving across multiple geographic areas.
- Provide training to system navigators within the region that focuses on youth involved in multiple systems.

#### Municipal governments:

- Work with federal and provincial/territorial government counterparts to establish system navigation capacity that will strengthen aftercare/liaison services between multiple services.
- Work with community agencies to establish or enhance drop-in services for youth and emerging adults.

#### Community agencies:

- Work with all orders of government to articulate the need to establish system navigation capacity that will strengthen aftercare/liaison services between multiple services.
- Review communication policies to ensure they do not create barriers to liaising with other systems, and prioritize communication of information between service providers and youth.
- Create more direct partnerships between youth justice and youth homelessness/housing services that prioritize sustainable and ongoing collaboration.

**Truthfully, I think youth detention centers or any places in the community even, should have a community building to teach and help with renters and first-time renters. Start up courses and programs to help youth and welcome youth who have gone homeless. This does not apply to just youth. I know tons of 20-year-olds who have been to youth detention centers, including myself, who would have or could have used the support that we don't have.”**

*– Ethan (Youth Advisor)*

# Solution 13:

## Build attachment to community and natural supports



**“But every young person that’s in our system [...] they would hands down say they’d rather be with a family somewhere, than to be out there on their own in their own place.”** - Roundtable Participant, Atlantic

The YCJA states that any measures taken against a young person who commits an offence should “involve the parents, the extended family, the community and social or other agencies in the young person’s rehabilitation and reintegration” (Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2002, p. 6). The same principle should apply to services and supports in the housing and homelessness sector (McMillan et al., 2020). Building and supporting existing connections to community/natural supports should be prioritized when working with youth, and ‘family’ should be defined by the individual young person. Creating a strong attachment village can protect youth against reinvolvement in the justice system or homelessness.

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- Leverage the principles and legislative capacity of the YCJA to be more explicit in the involvement of family and community.
- Support the development of policies and strategies that allow greater focus on family needs rather than youth exclusively.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Create or strengthen policies and provide funding for justice facilities for family reunification/mediation and other supports for families. This includes building capacity to strengthen supports to extended family members for Crown wards and youth in care who may not have immediate family members.
- Support service providers with funding that can engage family/caregivers to be involved in facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration.

#### Municipal governments:

- Work with community services to offer education for first-time renters and other youth and emerging adults accessing the rental market.
- Work with community services to offer start-up courses/programs to help youth understand what is available to them in the community. Enable youth to earn a certificate to boost landlord and tenant confidence.

#### Community agencies:

- Develop and prioritize policies that assist with re-establishing and mending family connections and supports that are youth-centered.
- Leverage wide-ranging community supports when working with a young person to ensure they can maximize connections that can support them fully.
- Engage family/caregivers in the case management planning process, where possible.

## Solution 14:

# Prioritize individualized plans for youth – one size fits none



**“Of course we need to care about this kind of thing, because youth shouldn’t be leaving incarceration into homelessness ever. Youth are our future and making sure that they are doing well and are housed will make sure that we don’t have to worry about them in the long run. The cost of taking care of them now than in the future would be worth it than worrying about spending more later.” – Osean (Youth Advisor)**

Viewing youth as individuals with unique backgrounds and needs means engaging in specialized planning that is centred around them personally. Increasingly, this entails enhanced support for youth with complex needs by building organizational knowledge and capacity that is tailored to them. It can also mean creating or enhancing programs that meet a wider range of needs (e.g. harm reduction vs. abstinence) and which are accessible to youth within the times that work for them (e.g. adjusting for evenings and weekends). Creating individualized plans with these adaptations in mind can be strengthened even further by leveraging community partners that can provide holistic plans and wrap-around support.

### Pathways for Changemakers

#### Government of Canada:

- Engage with provincial/territorial counterparts to consider how funding mechanisms can expand the range of services that can be offered to prevent youth homelessness and justice system involvement.
- Implement opportunities for sustainable funds and discretionary spending that will maximize the ability to meet the wide-ranging needs of youth, rather than funding them to be met at a minimum. This can be modeled after Jordan’s Principle,<sup>19</sup> and in accordance with the TRC Calls to Action, by focusing on preventing youth homelessness and/or involvement with the justice system for youth with complex needs.
- Ensure Indigenous communities have autonomy over funding to have discretion over how to best support youth from their community.

#### Provincial/territorial governments:

- Engage with federal and municipal counterparts, as well as service providers to consider how funding mechanisms can expand the range of services that can be offered to prevent youth homelessness and justice system involvement.
- Collaborate with community organizations to improve understanding/awareness of the complexities of serving at-risk and ‘hard-to-house’ youth (e.g., youth with arson or sexual offences) and provide organizations with resources to support them.

19 <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1568396042341/1568396159824>

### *Municipal governments:*

- Collaborate with community organizations to improve understanding/awareness of the complexities of serving at-risk and 'hard-to-house' youth (e.g., youth with arson or sexual offences) and provide organizations with resources to support them.
- Work with community agencies to identify the essential 'transition' components in transitional housing (e.g., prioritize a home-like environment, foster independent living skills, relationship building, and security conditions to mitigate risks).

### *Community agencies:*

- Enhance organizational capacity by building partnerships among services that provide focused supports for youth with disabilities and complex needs.
- Adapt policies to ensure they can meet the needs of individual youth, rather than the implementation of blanket policies. Complex needs are shaped by various intersecting factors including race, gender, language, newcomer status, etc.
- Adopt therapeutic approaches to intervention that emphasize trust, warmth, and healing.
- Focus on staff safety and provide training for working with high-risk behaviours.





# Key Considerations

The solutions gleaned through these research findings, and the wide range of identified stakeholders who action them, demonstrate the importance and timeliness of answering this study's research question: 'how can identified linkages between youth justice involvement and homelessness support improved policy outcomes as they relate to homelessness prevention?' The answers to this question were sought through the various phases of this cross-regional study, including a survey, multiple roundtable discussions with service providers, and engagement with youth advisors. The literature review also demonstrated that variations of this project's answers have been reinforced by other studies; and, undoubtedly have been discussed at community tables and across government consultations of all kinds.

Through engagement with the guiding principles, the fourteen solutions outlined in this report are embedded within three main strategic problem areas:

- **Service eligibility and access;**
- **Policy and funding alignment; and,**
- **Coordinated service delivery and engagement.**

Each solution contains 'Pathways for Changemakers' to initiate or advance progress. These pathways empower stakeholders across the systems of youth justice and youth homelessness/housing to not only be informed of the way forward, but to also actively pursue steps towards meaningful change. The many conversations which took place across the course of this study reinforce the need for homelessness prevention strategies for this population. By taking a solutions-focused approach, clear steps emerged

to support improved policy outcomes, and, perhaps more importantly, reinforced the value of legislative frameworks which exist to support action.

Fortunately, Canada has access to legislative tools such as the YCJA and the National Housing Strategy Act to address gaps in preventing youth homelessness and youth justice involvement. Furthermore, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action lay a foundation upon which the Government of Canada and other orders of government can respond to a shared commitment towards reconciliation, including a commitment towards Indigenous youth. Government initiatives such as the National Housing Strategy, Canada's Black Justice Strategy, the Indigenous Justice Strategy, and the Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism, all demonstrate places where this project's solutions can be cultivated from ideas into meaningful responses.

Provincial and territorial governments play a significant role in the systems which impact youth homelessness and youth justice involvement, especially given the role they play in homelessness and housing. Key considerations for this order of government involve taking a leadership role in ensuring access to safe, permanent, and truly affordable housing for young people. Likewise, provinces and territories should engage with federal and municipal counterparts, and actively consult and collaborate with community-based agencies to engage in ongoing processes to understand unique regional contexts, along with national trends. Municipal governments are tasked with taking a community-informed approach to their advocacy and investments. The solutions detailed herein offer tangible points from which to initiate action.

At the heart of the connection between youth homelessness and justice involvement are the people who work tirelessly to prevent youth from entering either system: community-based agencies. They are responsible for navigating both the complexity of bureaucracies which structure their services, and the complexity of the cases presented by the young people they support. Key considerations for these changemakers are grounded in enhancing or implementing processes that prioritize person-centered approaches, collaborating across sectors, and engaging with multiple orders of government to communicate needs for youth served and the staff who support them.

This project's findings clearly demonstrate that success in prevention will require cross-sectoral and cross-government collaboration that maintains prevention as a shared responsibility and achievable goal. Success will require increasing our collective comfort level in supporting justice-involved persons in this country – through homelessness prevention research, policy, and investments. If we are to be truly effective in homelessness prevention for 'all', there must be willingness to broaden inclusivity to recognize and support people within our communities who have experienced harm, as well as those who have caused harm – and recognize that many people fall into both groups.

This project was developed from the principle that all people across the country should have access to safe, truly affordable, and permanent housing; anyone's involvement with the justice system should not preclude or impede their ability to attain housing. The journey of conducting this study revealed a multitude of ways we can see this vision realized by taking an informed approach alongside a wide range of willing collaborators. We encourage anyone who is ready for change to consider how they can implement any of the solutions listed in this report. To do so meaningfully will take courage to uphold housing as a human right, while also incorporating decolonizing and anti-oppression strategies. It also means active consideration for not expanding the criminal justice system and including the voices of impacted youth in decision-making processes. This work is hard, but we can take inspiration from those who have lived through far too many years of broken systems who remind us that:

“**We need to work extra hard to make sure they do not fall through the cracks”**  
- Osean (Youth Advisor).

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