

Gaps and Barriers Facing Homeless Youths in Vancouver

The problem of youth homelessness, writes SPARC BC researcher **Nick Istvanffy**, is a growing and poorly understood problem in Vancouver. SPARC BC recently completed a study of housing and support services for youth in the city.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS A GROWING social issue in Vancouver, and has been the subject of significant controversy and debate about appropriate solutions. In 2006, Covenant House Vancouver engaged with SPARC BC to complete a *Youth Services and Gap Analysis* study. The goal of the study was to identify community needs for youth services across the housing and support continuums in Vancouver.

The research included a literature review complemented by an inventory of existing services, and a series of interviews and focus groups with Covenant House staff and homeless youths.

Community-Based Research

When doing research on the needs and experiences of community members, especially vulnerable populations, it is imperative to ensure that people are able to provide their input without risk to themselves, and without fear of exploitation. SPARC BC researchers also make strong efforts to ensure that people who do participate in research projects are fairly compensated for their knowledge and expertise.

Nobody knows the needs and challenges faced by homeless youths better than the youths

themselves. Unfortunately, a common error in research projects is to focus attention on experts and service providers, while ignoring the people who actually access the services and programs in question. Experts and service providers do have an important perspective on community issues in any context, however at SPARC BC we have always found it worthwhile to seek out and empower the voices of persons who are often overlooked in research projects. In the case of this research project, the homeless and formerly homeless youths who participated in the focus groups provided significant insights into the challenges faced by homeless youths in Vancouver and elsewhere.

Literature Review

The literature review sought to outline the scope of existing research on the experiences and needs of homeless youths, with a particular focus on mental health and addiction services.

The review explored the range of terms used to describe youths, all of which reflect slight differences in understanding of homeless youths' experiences and situations. These include:

- “Runaway youths”—a term that tends to

emphasize the history of violence, abuse and family breakdown that often cause youths to seek shelter elsewhere.

- “Homeless youths”—a term that focuses on the specific circumstances youths find themselves in when they are on the streets. Homelessness is seen to mediate between individual characteristics and experiences on the street.
- “Street involved youths”—a term that recognizes that life on the street is not exactly the same as homelessness. It is the activities that youths become involved with and the people they associate with that together mediate between individual youths and their experiences on the street.

The review identified four categories of barriers to mental health and addiction services for youths: individual, structural, multiple and clustered barriers. Individual barriers reflect personal challenges, while structural barriers reflect systemic challenges facing individual youths in need of supports. Many authors recognize that homeless youths tend to confront multiple barriers ‘clustered’ around the state of homelessness. These can include concurrent disorders on the part of the individual and systemic barriers such as institutional hurdles, exclusion of marginalized populations and others.

The review also separated the barriers identified into six roughly discrete categories. They

include:

- Barriers related to personal characteristics of the youths (e.g. age, gender, sexuality, personal history).
 - Barriers related to youths’ social groups and institutions they interact with.
 - Barriers related to homelessness, as well as other housing related barriers (e.g. vacancy rates, landlord/tenant relations, availability of affordable housing).
 - Barriers related to mental health and addiction services (e.g. hours of operation, attitudes of service providers).
- Barriers related to the urban environment (e.g. street safety, the sex and drug trades, policing).
- Other barriers, such as adult-centrism and the stigmatization of homeless people.

Gap Analysis: Results of the Interviews and Focus Groups

The project team conducted a series of in-person interviews with Covenant House staff as well as focus groups with youths staying in their emergency shelter or transitional housing programs. The consultations explored gaps in services, and barriers to accessing existing services for youths in Vancouver.

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Gaps & Barriers

Shelter

- No low-barrier youth shelter in Vancouver
- Insufficient youth shelter beds
- A need for specific shelter services for young women and for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) youths
- Shelter services or support for pregnant and parenting young mothers
- Shelter services for young men and women leaving the sex trade
- A need for housing support workers to aid youths who have left the streets
- A lack of affordable housing in Vancouver
- A need for transitional housing for youths with mental health concerns

Mental Health & Addictions Services

- A need for more drug and alcohol counselors, and more structured drug and alcohol counselling are needed in Vancouver
- Mental health services are inadequate in the community, and the need exists for increased and more accessible services for youths
- A need for increased dual diagnosis beds at St. Paul's hospital
- A lack of integrated case management approaches including emergency rooms, doctors, psychologists and social workers
- A lack of addictions treatment and detox facilities designed for youths, with specific youth programming & goals

Other Supports and Prevention

- Lifeskills training is needed for youths, particularly when aging out of care
- An absence of after-shelter support and housing support were identified as significant barriers to a successful transition from the streets
- In-school prevention programs
- Significant barriers to accessing Income Assistance, necessitating more advocates to support youths navigating the system
- Inadequate Income Assistance rates, making safe, secure housing impossible to access and increasing barriers to stabilization and exiting street life
- Ongoing reassessments as youths access community services
- Education about violence and the elimination of violence
- Improved communications between community service providers, and integrated service planning

Homeless youths in Vancouver and elsewhere in British Columbia are not currently receiving the supports and assistance they need to exit the streets and re-integrate into community life. While existing service providers are struggling to meet these needs, it is clear the increased capacity and a broader range of housing, support, treatment and prevention programs are needed to actually address and reduce youth homelessness. ■