ADDRESSING RURAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN WELLINGTON COUNTY

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE RURAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS COMMITTEE OF WELLINGTON COUNTY

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Amanda Jenkins* and Amanda Amaral**
*Research Shop Project Manager
**Research Shop Intern

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Contributors
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INTRODUCTION

In Canada it is estimated that between 150,000 to 200,000 people are homeless with 20% of this homeless population between the ages of 16 and 24 (Gaetz et al., 2013). In partnership with the Rural Youth Homelessness Committee of Wellington County in Southern Ontario, the aim of this literature review is to help address issues surrounding rural youth homelessness in Wellington County. The Rural Youth Homelessness Committee (RYHC) was established to reduce youth homelessness throughout Wellington County. Organizations involved in the committee are service providers for homeless youth. Currently, these organizations include the Community Resource Centre, Wyndham House, Mount Forest Health Team, Upper Grand District School Board, Family and Children’s Services, 2nd Chance, GW Legal Clinic, County of Wellington, East Wellington Community Services, and North for Youth.

The County of Wellington consists of 7 municipalities including Guelph-Eramosa, Erin, Puslinch, Centre-Wellington, Minto, Mapleton, and Wellington North and has unique issues related to homelessness due to large rural and farming areas. Since rural areas typically have fewer housing options for homeless youth compared to urban areas (Edwards et al., 2009; Skott-Myrhe et al., 2008) youth often resort to sleeping in barns, abandoned farmhouses, cars, and tents (Edwards et al., 2009; Elias, 2009). Often this housing is precarious where youth move around frequently resulting in homelessness in rural communities becoming hidden (Schiff, & Turner, 2014). In addition, within rural areas some homeless populations including indigenous and youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bi-sexual, or Queer (LGTBQ+) may be less visible making it more difficult to address homelessness for these populations. Therefore, in light of these concerns, questions that informed this literature review included the following:

1) How can we understand how many youth are experiencing homelessness in Wellington County?

2) How can rural homeless youth be supported in Wellington County?

3) What prevention interventions may be successful in reducing youth homelessness in rural communities?

To address these questions, resources from both academic and grey literature were used to inform this literature review. Literature was chosen based on whether it met one or more of the following requirements: the research addressed youth homelessness (we define youth as unaccompanied individuals aged 16-24), the research addressed rural
homelessness in communities within close proximity to Wellington County, and/or the research included indigenous and/or LGBTQ+ homeless populations. Due to limited and scare literature on rural programs for homeless youth, we also extended our literature search to also include programs offered in larger cities such as Toronto and Niagara. Findings are presented according to the questions that inform this literature review. Additional subheadings are included to help organize these findings.

In addition to the literature review, informal phone consultations with two landlords in Wellington County were conducted to further understand housing barriers rural homeless youth face. We present these findings following the literature review.

DEFINITIONS AND WORKING TERMS
Definitions and terms used in this literature are informed by the Rural Youth Homelessness Committee of Wellington County and the broader literature on rural youth homelessness. These definitions and terms include the following:

Homelessness: A multidimensional problem stemming from a variety of complicated issues. We describe homelessness as either absolute or relative.

Indigenous: The term Indigenous is a term used to describe members of three distinct cultural groups within Canada including Metis people, First Nations, and Inuit (Assembly of First Nations, 2002). The term Indigenous will be used interchangeably in this report with the following terms: Aboriginal, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (as is consistent with the terms used by authors cited in this report).

LGBTQ+: An acronym that includes but is not exclusive to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and ally. This acronym is used to represent a community of people whose gender or sexual identities share political and social concerns (KWCS, 2017).

Youth: For the purposes of this project, we define youth as unaccompanied individuals aged 16-24.

Youth Experiencing Absolute Homelessness: Living unsheltered in spaces not intended for living e.g. on the street, under a bridge; or staying in emergency shelter.

Youth Experiencing Relative Homelessness: Living sheltered in precarious, informal or transitional spaces, or living in sub-standard conditions and at-risk of housing loss, e.g. couch surfing, staying with family members or friends.
FINDINGS

1) HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND HOW MANY YOUTH ARE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

Understanding how many youth are experiencing homelessness is described within the homelessness literature as being a difficult task especially within rural areas. This is due to several reasons including homeless youth being mobile and transient with many youth often looking to friends for shelter (Bradley & McLaughlin, 2015). As well, according to Bradley & McLaughlin (2015) youth are often not found in homeless shelters in rural areas due to limited shelters being available compared to urban cities. In addition, the process of counting youth who are homeless may have additional challenges due to some homeless youth not wanting to be found. Based on the limited literature presently available on counting youth in rural areas, we present two methods below that have been used in providing estimates of homeless youth.

Point-In-Time Count

The Point-in-Time (PIT) count is a common method in the homelessness literature in counting homeless youth. PIT provides a snapshot of the number and characteristics of individuals who are homeless in a given night (Dunton, 2012). When counting homeless youth, Dunton (2012) notes it is important to account for the following places: emergency shelters and transitional housing programs, temporary hotel or motel accommodations, and faith based providers. As well, she states counting unsheltered homeless youth is additionally important in places like known locations where youth congregate for the night, soup kitchens, health care centres, and outreach teams. Partnering with organizations that offer services to homeless youth is another approach she suggests in gaining an accurate count of homelessness. Speaking with law enforcement officials can also aid in identifying locations where youth reside (Dunton, 2012). Furthermore, publicizing a count within a community prior to conducting it is another strategy (Dunton, 2012). For example, hanging posters in areas where homeless youth are will help inform them of counts that are being conducted.

Conducting PIT counts with youth can also be challenging due to some homeless youth not wanting to be found (Bradley & McLaughlin, 2015). Therefore, in encouraging homeless youth to participate in PIT counts, some literature has described success in providing honorariums to youth as incentives. Based on a report by the Canadian
Observatory on Homelessness (2016), the use of honoraria in PIT counts should have an approximate value of $5 and should not exceed $10 due to ethical issues around coercion. However, the value of honoraria should be based upon the length of PIT surveys and the time youth are contributing. Aside from cash, donated gift cards from community coffee shops and grocery stores or necessities such as winter clothing, toothbrushes, condoms, granola bars, toiletries, and transit tokens are noted as also being appropriate as honoraria (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

A report that published results from a PIT count in Wellington County also provides suggestions of how to accurately count homeless youth in rural areas. In their count of homeless youth in Wellington County, a PIT count survey tool was used to record the agency that was visited by the research team and an estimated number of homeless youth who visit that agency based on information provided by workers at the agency. Based on data from this PIT count, 29 youth were identified as being homeless in Wellington in April 2014 (Wellington County Point in Time, 2014). Of these 29 youth, 26 were experiencing relative homelessness and 3 absolute homelessness. Using survey tools such as the one in this report may provide a more accurate count by keeping a record to help reduce duplicate counting (Wellington County Point in Time, 2014).

Agencies that are important to involve in counts include schools, agencies, and organizations that provide programming, services, and support to homeless youth (Wellington County Point in Time, 2014).

**Snowball Methodology**

Another method for counting rural homeless youth is through the snowball method. This method assesses the number of homeless youth by using available resources to contact homeless individuals who then provide information and names of other individuals whom they know as being homeless (Dunton, 2012). However, common challenges noted in the literature for using this method with a rural youth homeless population include youth being transient and the limited number of services and shelters available to youth in rural areas making it more difficult to find and speak to homeless youth (Bradley & McLaughlin, 2015). However, there are also recommendations of how the snowball method can be adapted to a rural setting. This includes involving social workers, school guidance counsellors, and other rural community supports when using the snowball method to help identify homeless youth. Bradley and McLaughlin (2015) note working with staff at schools can especially help to identify youth struggling with
housing that researchers may otherwise not be able to identify. This can help provide a more accurate number of youth who are experiencing homelessness.

2) HOW CAN RURAL HOMELESS YOUTH BE SUPPORTED?

Supporting homeless youth has been identified within the homelessness literature as essential in helping to reduce youth homelessness and precarious housing. Supporting rural homeless youth is especially important in enabling youth to access available services which can be difficult in rural areas in comparison to urban cities. Presented below are various approaches that have been successful in providing support to homeless youth based on the following needs: 1) Support for Homeless Youth Accessing Basic Necessities, 2) Support for Addressing Homeless Youth Trauma, Mental Health, and Addiction Problems, 3) Support for Indigenous and LGBTQ+ Homeless Youth Populations and 4) Support for Homeless Youth in a Collaborative Approach.

Support for Homeless Youth Accessing Basic Necessities

Increased Access to Food Programs

Homeless rural youth often do not have enough food with many youth being unable to meet their basic daily caloric and nutrient requirements (Gordzinski et al., 2011). Being able to afford food may also be a more significant issue in rural areas due to food tending to be more expensive than in urban cities (Grodzinski et al., 2011). While many cities and townships offer charitable food programs and services to help support youth in accessing food, there have been several challenges noted in the literature around these food programs and services (Gaetz et al., 2013). Based on a study on homeless youth in Toronto, youth who received meals and snacks from food programs did not appear to be better off than youth who foraged for food on the street (i.e., panhandling, eating discarded food, obtaining food from others, or stealing food; Youthworks, 2009). This was a result of limited and uncoordinated times food was offered through food programs to youth living outside homeless shelters in Toronto (Youthworks, 2009). Dachner and Tarasuk (2013) offer several strategies to support homeless youth who may not stay at shelters in attaining enough food. The first strategy is ensuring food is an integral part of programs for homeless youth. While food is generally offered through programs during agency hours (i.e., Monday to Friday during the day) this often does not meet youth’s nutritional needs on a daily basis. Offering food beyond these hours
may provide greater accessibility of food for youth who don’t stay at shelters. In addition, providing facilities to youth where they can prepare their own meals and acquire basic staples such as cooking oil to facilitate meal preparation is suggested by Dachner and Tarasuk (2013) as encouraging independence. This strategy may be especially appealing to youth who find charitable meal programs as passive or even demeaning (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2013).

Transportation Services

Within rural areas transportation has been noted as a significant issue for homeless youth due to long distances, lack of public transportation, and winter weather conditions (Grodzinski et al., 2011). As a result, accessing social support services in addition to grocery shopping and laundromat facilities is extremely challenging (Grodzinski et al., 2011). In addition, taxi services are often not an option due to high costs and limited availability. Lack of transportation was also noted by homeless youth, interviewed as part of a study on homelessness in Wellington County, as a significant barrier in accessing resources and potential employment opportunities (Young, 2014). Due to a lack of public transportation in rural areas, these youth felt the opportunities needed to succeed in life and overcome homelessness could only be found in larger city centres like Guelph, Ontario (Young, 2014). One strategy that has been implemented by the County of Wellington to address lack of public transportation is the Wellington Transportation Services. This volunteer driver program, funded by the County of Wellington and implemented by the Community Resource Centre, helps rural homeless youth access support services that are essential in preventing homelessness. Other solutions in addressing transportation issues in rural Ontario for homeless youth include promoting the use of carpooling through online websites, collaborating with drivers who transport seniors and disabled community members to extend their services to transport youth, and expanding transportation services such as bus routes or shuttles into rural areas (The Ontario Rural Council, 2017).

Homeless youth in rural areas may also face challenges in attending school due to lack of transportation. Solutions that have been noted in the literature specifically for rural communities include contacting community members to transport youth who identify as homeless to and from school, arranging for school staff to transport youth, offering reimbursement to community members such as retired individuals who are willing to transport youth, and asking bus dispatchers to extend current bus routes to accommodate for homeless youth (National Centre for Homeless Education, 2008).
Creating awareness about transportation issues for homeless youth such as speaking to families in the community, advising school boards, and contacting homeless shelters is further noted by the National Centre for Homeless Education (2008) as helping to find solutions in a collaborative approach.

Increased Role of Schools in Education and Outreach

Schools are noted in the literature as being an important institution in supporting rural homeless youth. In a report on rural youth homelessness in Wellington County, youth expressed interest in schools having a larger role in raising awareness around youth homelessness (Young, 2014). Greater awareness was suggested through events like yearly assemblies or a “Youth Homelessness Awareness” month. In this report, youth also indicated they valued the support offered by school guidance counsellors, school social workers, and child and youth counsellors (Young, 2014). Working with school boards has also been stated in grey literature as helpful in identifying at-risk youth and connecting them with community services (Grodzinski, Londerville, & Sutherns, 2013). Informing youth of available services may be especially important within the County of Wellington based upon a recent report conducted on homeless youth who indicated they were not aware of the services available to them (Young, 2014). Providing information about support services in locations that youth frequent, such as schools, is noted by Young (2014) as helping to create awareness about services and how youth can access them.

Programs that help homeless youth complete their education are also important in supporting youth. Programs in Canada such as the ‘Youth without Shelter Stay in School Program’ in Etobicoke, Ontario help homeless youth succeed in school and life by providing them with support and guidance from staff as well as safe housing, clothing, food, hygiene products, and counselling. Youth are expected to maintain their grades, attend classes regularly, and complete household tasks at their place of accommodation (Youth Without Shelter, 2017). School staff such as guidance counsellors can help play a role in supporting youth by referring homeless youth to these programs.

Employment and Life Skills Training

Providing education on practical life skills is noted by Young (2014) as important in youth development such as becoming more self-sufficient finding employment to support themselves. Based on a recent report released in Ontario, homeless youth
expressed concerns about difficulty attaining and holding a job due to feeling they lacked the maturity, stability, and accountability necessary for employment (The Ontario Rural Council, 2007). In addition to lacking life skills, homeless youth have expressed feelings of hopelessness and a lack of self-confidence (Youth Without Shelter, 2017). Programs such as the Life Skills and Employment Program offered through Youth Without Shelter in Etobicoke, Ontario help homeless youth by offering life skills workshops and support based on individualized needs (Youth Without Shelter, 2017). Life skills training includes but is not limited to communication and interpersonal skills, learning how to cook, maintaining personal hygiene, and time management. This holistic approach is tailored to youth depending upon their strengths, weaknesses, and desires in learning specific skills. The program also draws upon different partner agencies who work with homeless youth and who offer expertise in various skills. Based on feedback from 1381 homeless youth who attended the program between 2016 and 2017, 98% stated they felt they learned relevant life skills information (Youth Without Shelter, 2017). Providing life skills training may therefore help support rural homeless youth find employment.

Youth Shelters and Safe Shelter Alternatives

Youth shelters have been noted in the literature as helping to create a safe space for homeless youth. These shelters enable homeless youth to meet and spend time with peers as well as interact with positive adult role models who work at the shelter (Young, 2014). However, due to low population levels and a large geographic area, Grodzinski et al (2011) state it is not realistic to open a youth shelter in Wellington County due to financial limitations. Grodzinski et al (2011) offer the alternative solution of a “Host Home Program” for Wellington County to support homeless youth. Based on a program offered by Bridging the Gap Halton, the Host Home Program provides youth between the ages of 16 to 24 with a home-based alternative to emergency shelters for up to four months. In a Host Home youth have private sleeping corridors with access to washroom and laundry facilitates and are offered breakfast and supper in return for a small per day fee. To be admitted to a Host Home youth are pre-screened for addiction and mental health problems and must agree to abide by rules and curfews set by the host. While Host Home programs offer support to many homeless youth, Schiff and Turner (2014) note supportive housing that does not accept homeless individuals with mental illness and addictions issues is problematic. This may be especially problematic given the high number of mental illness and addictions problems in Canada among homeless youth.
(Gaetz, 2014). Therefore, Schiff and Turner (2014) argue for a greater need of specialized supportive housing for youth facing these problems. In cases where homeless youth are turned away from housing programs Schiff and Turner (2014) note many youth migrate from more rural areas to larger city centres where housing supports may be offered and which accept individuals with mental illness and addiction problems.

Support for Addressing Homeless Youth Trauma, Mental Health, and Addiction Problems

Treating Youth Trauma

McLean (2005) notes homeless rural youth are often survivors of various forms of trauma and abuse including emotional, physical, economic, and sexual. For example, in a study conducted by DiPaolo (1999), trauma experienced by homeless youth included child sexual abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and exposure to neighbourhood and domestic violence. These circumstances have been reported as contributing to homelessness or precarious housing (DiPaolo, 1999; Kawabanow, 2009). Klodawsky et al. (2006) state that this trauma and abuse is often not addressed due to a narrow focus in Canada on youth independence and employability when addressing youth homelessness. Klodawsky et al. (2006) therefore argue for a more multidimensional approach that involves treatment of trauma and abuse as well as integrating emotional, practical, and social needs of rural homeless youth. A multidimensional approach may be especially important for specific homeless youth populations such as Aboriginal youth who are noted by Schiff and Turner (2014) as potentially suffering from interrelated issues of domestic violence, trauma, gang violence, addiction, and incest.

Homeless youth who were interviewed as part of a report on rural youth homelessness in Wellington County indicated unresolved family issues as a significant contributor to homelessness (Young, 2014). Family conflict has also been stated as being a significant contributor to youth homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2013). While the majority of research on youth homelessness identifies family conflict as a key underlying factor for why youth are homeless, the role of family members as part of the solution in addressing youth homelessness is often ignored (Gaetz et al., 2013). Research has shown youth learning how to build healthy relationships with family members and resolve family conflict is important in preventing youth homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2013).
Addressing Mental Health and Addiction Problems

Research has shown that mental illness is both a cause and result of youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2014). While 10 to 20% of young people within Canada have been reported as having a mental illness, this rate is reported as being higher among youth who are homeless. According to Gaetz (2014), 40 to 70% of homeless youth within Canada have a mental illness. Suicidal thoughts and self-harming behaviours such as cutting are reported by Gaetz et al. (2013) as being prevalent among homeless youth with mental health problems based on a report on homeless youth living in Toronto, Ontario. In addressing mental health issues, Gaetz et al. (2013) note that literature on mental health interventions for homeless youth is extremely limited. Based on this literature, approaches such as ecologically based family therapy, which involves both individual and family sessions and focuses on emotion-regulation, decision-making, and other interpersonal factors, has been shown to be successful in not only treating mental health issues but also reducing substance use (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005). Other ways to support homeless youth who have mental health issues include employing workers trained in assessing mental health issues at different services offered to homeless youth. This would enable a more streamlined approach in referring homeless youth to access mental health care and hospital-based services (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Additional issues have also been written about in the homelessness literature as being interconnected with mental health. In particular, substance use has been noted as an increasing problem among aboriginal homeless youth (Saewyc et al., 2008). Some evidence has shown that treating mental health and addiction problems concurrently is important in seeing successful outcomes (Watson, Carter, & Manion, 2014). Harm reduction programs, which promote and facilitate the safe use of substances as a way of reducing substance use-related harm, can help address health issues experienced by Aboriginal youth and youth more broadly (Erickson, 1997). Harm reduction programs that target homeless youth include Eva’s organization located in Toronto. This program focuses on providing a non-judgemental environment for homeless youth who are dealing with addiction issues. This program includes a harm reduction team who offer individual and group counselling while providing education on strategies for safer drug use. Associated programs include the SPOT (Satellite Peer Outreach Training) program which is a peer to peer education program where youth who have a history of substance use are hired to educate and provide information to youth currently experiencing addiction problems (Eva’s, 2017).
Support for Indigenous and LGBTQ+ Homeless Youth Populations

Providing Culturally Appropriate Supports for Indigenous Youth

Programs and services offered to Aboriginal youth are argued by Saeqyc et al. (2008) as needing to be culturally appropriate. This includes programs and resources for individuals who identify as Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, Metis, and/or Inuit. According to Saeqyc et al. (2008) resources should include access to Aboriginal counselors to address issues that Aboriginal youth may face including sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. Since Aboriginal youth face high levels of discrimination, Saeqyc et al. (2008) note agencies providing support for homeless Aboriginal youth need to also provide anti-discrimination training to their workers. This training is essential in ensuring workers are able to address their own biases, offer fair and equal treatment, and help reduce stigma towards Aboriginal youth (Saeqyc et al., 2008).

Connecting with indigenous culture has also been shown in some homelessness literature as an important factor in Aboriginal homeless individuals’ healing journeys (Stewart, Elliot, Kidwai, Hyatt, & Research Team, 2013). For example, part of this healing journey may be recovering from addiction issues (Stewart et al., 2013). Offering cultural services such as speaking to Elders or providing indigenous ceremonies in addition to other services may further aid in addressing issues such as addiction that contribute to Aboriginal youth homelessness (Stewart et al., 2013).

For many Indigenous peoples, homelessness is more than just a lack of suitable accommodations (The Homeless Hub, 2017c). Having a home means being connected with cultural traditions as well as people, animals, plants, spirits, and the earth (The Homeless Hub, 2017c). As such, it is important to develop and implement homeless services while keeping this cultural perspective in mind (Bent, Josephson, & Kelly, 2004). Support for Indigenous youth who are experiencing relative or absolute homelessness may also look different for youth on reserves compared to off reserves. Canadian Census data in 1996 showed that Indigenous rural youth who are off reserves experienced similar housing conditions and issues as the general population (Milbourne & Cloke, 2006). However, 15% of households on reserves were in crowded conditions, 23% were in need of major repairs, and 12% were both crowded and in need of repairs (Spurr, 2001). In addition, it is challenging for youth on reserves in Canada to obtain or maintain permanent housing since they can not legally own or rent property on reserves.
(Milbourne & Cloke, 2006). It is important for homelessness services to be informed by the unique housing experiences of Indigenous homeless youth on and off reserves.

Providing Programs Tailored to LGBTQ+ Youth

While there has been extensive research conducted on youth homelessness in Canada, limited research has been conducted on LGTBQ+ homeless youth and the challenges they face (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). Based on this research, homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ+ and live in rural areas may face additional challenges than LGBTQ+ youth living in urban areas. Some of these challenges are around service providers in rural areas not being equipped or trained to help LGBTQ+ homeless youth (Price, Wheeler, Shelton, & Maury, 2016). In addition, youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are stated as being at a higher risk of homelessness due to homophobia and transphobia they experience at home and in shelters (Abramovich, 2013). In fact, one study found that after coming out as LGBTQ+, one third of these youth were physically assaulted in shelters or foster care (Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001). As a result, many of these youth view living on the street as a safer alternative (Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001).

The City of Toronto Need Assessment survey also found that LGBTQ+ youth make up a relatively large proportion of youth in shelters (The Homeless Hub, 2017d). In addition, challenges around coming out, burdens of social stigma and discrimination, and everyday stresses of life impact LGBTQ+ homeless youth to the extent that it may be a contributing factor to the higher rate of suicide and mental health issues among this population (Cull, Platzer, & Balloch, 2006). Recommendations from a report conducted on LGBTQ+ youth homelessness suggest the following ways to provide support: homophobia awareness training for staff working at services for homeless youth, safer housing, offering specialist support services, and providing referrals to support groups tailored for LGBTQ+ youth (Cull, Platzer, Balloch, 2006). Price et al. (2016) also stress the importance of enabling homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ+ to stay within their communities as a way of supporting them. Rather than uprooting LGBTQ+ homeless youth to urban communities where they can access services specifically for the LGBTQ+ population, Price et al. (2016) state these services need to be brought to them. Providing LGBTQ+ friendly services such as family reunification counselling services with counsellors who specialize in working with LGBTQ+ youth is important in strengthening supports for this population in rural communities (Price et al., 2016).
Support for Homeless Youth in a Collaborative Approach

Individual Case Management

Individual case management, a collaborative approach to support homeless individuals move forward with their lives, has shown to help support homeless youth (Bender et al., 2015; Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). In this approach, a trained case manager assesses the needs of the youth and helps to arrange, coordinate, and advocate for the access and delivery of services and programs designed to meet the youth’s goals (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). Objectives of the program overall include empowering youth by drawing upon their strengths and capabilities, promoting an improved quality of life, and ultimately reducing the risk of homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). Homeless youth who participate in case management are noted in the literature as being more likely to acquire and maintain stable housing, obtain employment, and improve social adjustment. Additional benefits of youth who participate in the program include improved interpersonal relationships, increased self-esteem, and decreased displays of antisocial behaviours (Wagner et al., 1994).

Some studies on case management for youth have shown to be successful when this approach is tailored to youth interests such as technology. For example, a study conducted by Bender et al. (2015) used a variation of individual case management called Electronic Case Management (ECM). In this approach, homeless youth were provided with pre-paid cell phones and assigned a case manager who provided four phone sessions every 2 to 3 weeks over a 3-month period. Communication between the case manager and homeless youth took place through texts, email, and Facebook. Based on this study, 80% of youth who participated in the study described ECM in positive ways including the program being convenient and making a positive change in their life (Bender et al., 2015). This approach may appeal to homeless youth in rural areas where a lack of public transportation can be a barrier to attending in-person meetings as part of a case management program. In addition, some literature has shown homeless youth have difficulty keeping in contact with service providers because they become disengaged (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010). Therefore, engaging youth with alternative approaches such as combining technology with services like case management may be more successful in supporting homeless youth.
Wraparound Programs

Wraparound programs are a multifaceted approach in supporting homeless youth and their needs. As suggested by the name, the program aims to “wrap” around youth individualized services and social support networks rather than placing them in restrictive and less flexible programs (National Wraparound Initiative Advisory Group, 2003). For example, *High Fidelity Wraparound Supports* program by the Calgary Homeless Foundation’s Plan to End Youth Homelessness provide support to youth through various means. This includes supporting youth by working with schools, family counsellors, family reconciliation programs, and social support programs (Collins, 2013). As part of the individual case management approach, trained caseworkers are assigned to youth in order to provide support and services that are individualized to address specific needs. This is done by forming a team of individuals who can support youth in achieving their goals. Often individuals who form the wraparound team are chosen by the case workers in collaboration with the youth and can include teachers, family, relatives, friends, neighbours, and service workers (Hull Services, 2017).

Success of this program depends upon the case worker assisting the youth through four phases (Hull Services, 2017). In the first phase, *Engagement and Team Preparation*, establishing trust and a shared vision among the youth and wraparound team members is critical. This phase which lasts between 2 to 4 weeks includes conversations with the youth and team around needs, strengths, and visions. Phase two, *Initial Plan Development*, involves building trust and mutual respect while creating an initial plan with the youth. Team cohesion and shared responsibility in helping youth achieve these goals are emphasized during this phase which takes place over 1 to 2 meetings. In phase three, *Implementation*, the plan is implemented by the wraparound team with progress of the youth being continually reviewed. In the final phase, *Transition*, plans are developed for the youth to make a transition from the wraparound program to supports in the community.

Wraparound programs have been reported as being successful in supporting homeless youth. For example, a wraparound service in Brandon, Manitoba has helped guide 100 clients since April 2015 to supportive services with 75% of these individuals being under the age of 30 years old (Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Program, 2016). With 50% of individuals who access services in Brandon identifying as Aboriginal (Robinson, White, & Patchkowshi, 2012), wraparound programs may also be important in helping to reduce youth homelessness for this population.
3) WHAT PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS MAY BE SUCCESSFUL IN REDUCING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Prevention rather than a focus on emergency shelter is stressed by Collins (2013) as critical in addressing rural youth homelessness. Preventative services may be especially vital in rural areas where there are often less rental and housing options compared to urban areas (Milbourne & Cloke, 2006). Many effective strategies in preventing youth homelessness have been written about in the homelessness literature and will be explored in this section. The strategies and services that will be reviewed in this section are organized by the following headings: Identification and Assessment of At-Risk and Homeless Youth, Reaching At-Risk Youth through School and Peer Programs, Temporary Housing Strategies, and Obtaining and Maintaining Permanent Housing.

Identification and Assessment of At-Risk and Homeless Youth

Identification of At-Risk Youth

In order to help prevent rural youth homelessness, it has been noted in the literature that agencies should first identify and connect with youth who are at risk. One way of identifying at-risk youth in Canada is through core housing need estimates produced by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (Milbourne and Cloke, 2006). These estimates are published every five years using the Census of Canada as well as annually using the Canadian Income Survey and can provide information around households that are in core housing need. Households are considered to be in core housing need if they spend more than 30% of their gross income to pay for alternative acceptable housing and if their housing meets one or more of the following criteria: the house requires major repairs, the house does not have enough bedrooms per occupants (i.e., crowded), or costs related to the house are more than 30% of an individuals' gross income (CMHC, 2014). Individuals can be deemed as at-risk for homelessness when they need to spend more than 50% of their gross income on their housing (Milbourne and Cloke, 2006). Individuals from low income households may be especially at risk for homelessness (Milbourne and Cloke, 2006). One way to determine low income households is through the low-income measure (LIM), which is “a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted household income, where adjusted indicates that household needs are taken into account.” In summary, core housing need estimates and LIM can be used to identify youth who may be at risk for homelessness.
Another way of identifying and connecting with at-risk youth is through organizations and agencies, such as correctional facilities and child protective services, that are often in contact with these youth (Skott-Myhre et al., 2008). Ideally these types of organizations and agencies should have educational and referral information about homelessness prevention and interventions so that they can identify and better assist at-risk youth (Centrepoint, 2001 as cited in Skott-Myhre et al., 2008). For example, youth often become homeless after being discharged from youth correctional facilities and child protective services. As such, these organizations could strategically prevent homelessness by supporting at-risk youth before discharge, perhaps by creating discharge plans or connecting youth with mentors (Culhane et al., 2011; Gaetz, 2014; Haber & Toro, 2004). In addition, many schools have homeless liaisons who help identify and support at-risk youth by matching these youth with appropriate services, such as shelters or family mediation. Other organizations and support persons that may be in contact with at-risk youth and could help identify at-risk youth include the following: school and family counsellors, teachers, food banks, helplines, recreational facilities, hospitals, mental health facilities, and religious institutions (Centrepoint, 2001 as cited in Skott-Myhre et al., 2008).

Coordinated Assessment

Coordinated assessment is argued to help reduce youth homelessness by providing supports and resources to persons upon entry into homeless services and programs (Gaetz, 2014; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). Coordinated assessment, also known as coordinated intake, is a standardized approach in assessing a person’s current situation including the services and programs they currently use and ones they may require in the future. Coordinated assessment is conducted in an attempt to fully understand a person’s situation which then helps inform the services and supports to best meet their needs.

Coordinated assessment is achieved when agencies use the same standardized tools to assess a person upon intake either at a common location (e.g. assessment facility) or by using the same method (e.g., support worker) (Gaetz, 2014). Examples of forms and tools used to make these assessments can be found online through the National Alliance to End Homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017). In order for coordinated assessment to be successful individuals who conduct the assessment should consider all aspects of a person’s life including their current situation, needs,
services utilized, family and support systems, environmental factors, and the services and programs they may need in the future (Gaetz, 2014).

**Reaching At-Risk Youth through School and Peer Programs**

**School-Based Programs**

School-based programs and services may be effective in reducing youth homelessness since high schools are a point of contact for at-risk youth (Beer et al. 2003; Haber & Toro, 2004). In conjunction with homeless programs or agencies, and depending on a high school’s resources, these programs can take the form of: adult education and career development, child care, economic and social services, family support services, transportation, legal services, health services, and mental health counseling (Haber & Toro, 2004). One high school-based program in the Niagara region called “Youth Reconnect” was created specifically to address rural youth homelessness and has been shown to be successful in reducing youth homelessness (Youth Reconnect Works, 2014). Youth Reconnect collaborates with high schools within Niagara region and works with teachers and administrators to identify at-risk and homeless youth (RAFT, 2014; Youth Reconnect Works, 2014). Forty percent of youth in the Youth Reconnect program are referred by their schools because they are experiencing relative homelessness or are at risk for absolute homelessness (Youth Reconnect Works, 2014). The program prevents homelessness and supports youth by helping them secure regular housing, maintain school attendance, and build social and safety networks within their own communities (Youth Reconnect Works, 2014). The program also provides life skills training, mentoring, advocacy, and family mediation (Youth Reconnect Works, 2014). A program evaluation of Youth Reconnect found that 80% of youth who completed the program were in regular housing and 86% of these youth found housing in the area they were from (Youth Reconnect Works, 2014).

**Peer-Based Programs**

Peer-based or helper programs provide at-risk youth with support through one or more of the following methods: counselling, mediation, talks, presentations, advocacy, tutoring, and helplines (Caputo et al., 1996; Skott-Myhre et al., 2008). Programs can be provided through various organizations such as schools, shelters, and agencies that support or have regular contact with at-risk or homeless youth (Caputo, Weiler, & Green, 1996). These programs are facilitated by peers (often called peer helpers) or
staff in safe and non-judgemental environments. Peer helpers or staff persons are usually youth or individuals who have experienced homelessness and who can be good role models for at-risk youth. Strong support systems and training are crucial for peer helpers and staff in assisting them in their helper roles.

Some researchers caution that peer-based programs should be carefully developed to avoid the potential for “deviancy training” between participants (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Haber & Toro, 2004). Deviancy training is “the reinforcement of deviant and/or antisocial behaviour by peers” (Haber & Toro, 2004, p. 153). Deviancy training during peer programs can be circumvented by carefully supervising programs and peer helpers, and by mixing at-risk and prosocial peers together into the programs (Ang & Hughes, 2002; Dishion et al., 1999).

Temporary Housing Strategies

Transitional Housing

Emergency homeless shelters are often set up to help transition youth to stable housing. However, homeless youth are frequently still developing independent living skills which may make this transition challenging (Quilgars et al., 2011). In addition, a lack of income and adult support can result in homeless youth having difficulty in securing stable housing. Collins (2013) notes transitional housing can play an important role in assisting youth to move from emergency shelters to more stable housing. Defined by Novac, Brown, and Bourbannais (2004, p. 2) as an “intermediate step between emergency crisis shelter and permanent housing”, transitional housing is temporary and can take on different forms. These may include single room occupancies and multi-unit apartments to help youth develop independence, self-sufficiency, and transition to long-term housing (Regional Municipality of Halton, 2006). These services may also provide case management or mentoring programs that include treatment, employment training, or education to further remove barriers to maintaining permanent housing in the future (Ansell, 2001; Caton, Wilkins, & Anderson, 2007). Moreover, similar to transitional housing, some homeless assistance programs offer hotel, rental, or housing vouchers for people who are in crisis and about to become homeless (Milbourne & Cloke, 2006).
Respite Services

Respite services have been shown to be an effective means of preventing youth homelessness, especially in rural areas that lack other viable housing options (Gaetz, 2014). The purpose of these respite services is to prevent homelessness by providing youth with temporary accommodations when they need a break from their families during periods of conflict or require shelter while looking for other long-term accommodations (Gaetz, 2014; Quilgars et al., 2001).

A large majority of youth become homeless primarily due to ongoing family conflict that escalates until the youth decides to leave or is kicked out (Gaetz, 2014). Therefore, respite services are an especially effective preventative measure as they provide youth with a place to take a break from situations or environments where there is conflict (Gaetz, 2014; Quilgars et al., 2001). They also provide youth a place to stay while searching for new long-term accommodations if family conflict escalates and they need to leave their homes (Gaetz, 2014).

An example of a successful respite service includes St. Basil's “Time Out” project offered in Birmingham, UK. Based on data from this program, 78% of youth who used their service, which included shelter and family mediation, returned to their family homes after two weeks (Gaetz, 2014). Another example of a successful program offering respite homes is Bridging the Gap, which services youth in the Halton region in Ontario (Bridging the Gap, 2010). Bridging the Gap offers host homes that include private sleeping accommodations, meals, as well as washroom and laundry facilities to youth at-risk for homelessness for up to four months.

Family Mediation Programs

Family mediation, counselling, and reconnection services have been shown by some studies to have positive benefits in both supporting and helping to reduce rural youth homelessness (Collins, 2013; The Homeless Hub, 2017b; Winland et al., 2011). These services aim to resolve conflict and strengthen relationships between at-risk youth and their family or caregivers. Reported benefits of these services include renewed or improved family relationships, more active involvement with family and the community, moving from the streets into housing (back home or other accommodations), and better understanding of any mental health issues within the family (Winland et al., 2011). Reconciliation with family members has been shown to be especially important for homeless youth to help heal relationships with family and build supportive and healthy
adult relationships (Collins, 2013; Winland et al., 2011). Building these relationships are instrumental in preventing at-risk youth from becoming homeless and helping homeless youth return home or move to stable housing.

It is important to note that mediation or reconnection may not be suitable or safe for every at-risk youth (The Homeless Hub, 2017b). Canadian research shows that 60 to 70% of youth who leave their homes have experienced abuse or neglect within their households (The Homeless Hub, 2017b; Winland et al., 2011). Therefore, agencies and services must first assess a youth’s home situation before attempting to mediate conflict, restore relationships, or return a youth home. That being said, even if it is not safe or feasible for a youth to move back home, strengthening relationships with family members or caregivers can have a positive impact on a youth’s development and wellbeing (Winland et al., 2011).

Obtaining and Maintaining Permanent Housing

Employment Programs

Lack of money and unemployment are contributing causes of homelessness for rural youth. In general, rural areas usually offer less employment opportunities compared to urban areas (Beer, Delfabbro, Natalier, Oakley, & Verita, 2003). Moreover, in a study of rural youth homelessness in Ontario, youth reported that difficulties in obtaining and maintaining housing were due to lack of money (75%) and unemployment (25%; Transitions Committee, 2003 as cited in Skott-Myhre et al., 2008). Employment programs may therefore be an effective means of reducing homelessness by helping youth secure jobs and earn stable income (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). The United States’ Department of Labour offers many such programs for youth. For example, Job Corps, which targets homeless youth as well as other at-risk youth, provides workforce training and education to youth between 16 and 24 years of age (Toro et al., 2007). Yearly program evaluations found that, compared to a control group, Job Corps participants were more likely to be living independently 4 years after program enrollment. Employment programs have also been shown to help youth who are transitioning out of child protective services, such as foster care and youth being discharged from correctional services (Toro et al., 2007).
Evictions Prevention and Planning

Another effective method to prevent youth homelessness is through evictions prevention and planning programs. These programs provide emergency funds for housing as well as support for at-risk youth (The Homeless Hub, 2017a; Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne, 2011). A rent bank is an example of a prevention and planning program which provides at-risk individuals with emergency loans for overdue rental payments to avoid eviction due to unpaid rent (The Homeless Hub, 2017a; Culhane et al., 2011). Similarly, some programs provide loans to individuals who are facing eviction or foreclosure to help them secure new housing or rental accommodation (Shinn, Baumohl, & Hopper, 2001). In addition, some programs provide at-risk individuals with emergency funds to help cover overdue or upcoming utility payments, or to avoid or restore disconnected utilities (The Homeless Hub, 2017a; Culhane et al., 2011). There are also programs that offer legal aid and mediation to tenants or homeowners and their landlords or mortgage brokers to work towards resolving issues and avoid eviction or foreclosure (The Homeless Hub, 2017a; Culhane et al., 2011). In addition, some programs advise tenants of their rights and responsibilities in the case of eviction or threat of eviction (The Homeless Hub, 2017a). As an example, an eviction prevention program in Connecticut, that offers a range of services, found that for nearly half of their cases, mediation between tenants and landlords was successful in preventing imminent eviction, without using emergency funds from the program (Shinn et al., 2001).

LANDLORD CONSULTATIONS

To gain additional information around barriers to youth housing, several landlords within Wellington County were contacted to gain their perspective about renting to homeless youth. Landlords were asked to participate in a short 5 to 10 minute phone survey during a time that was convenient for them to discuss the following questions: 1) What would deter you from renting to youth? and 2) What would help you rent to youth? Landlords who were contacted were individuals known to the Rural Youth Homelessness Committee in Wellington County including some landlords who have worked with the Committee previously in providing housing to homeless youth. However, due to various reasons including lack of interest, availability, and difficulty contacting landlords the research team was only able to speak to two landlords who agreed to participate. Based on these two phone consultations, several issues arose in regard to why they were reluctant to rent to homeless youth including the following:
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- Not receiving rent money from tenant (resulting in repercussions including tenant being evicted and landlords unable to pay for their properties)
- Lack of communication with tenant (i.e., tenant not returning phone calls or texts)
- Experiencing verbal and physical threats from tenant
- Damage to property

When asked how these issues could be addressed and what would increase the likelihood of landlords within Wellington County renting to homeless youth the following recommendations were suggested:

- Tenant receives help with paying first and last month’s rent
- Follow-up from Rural Youth Homelessness Committee regarding tenant such as seeing how they are doing, if rent is being paid, and if there are any issues arising
- Providing counselling and education to homeless youth around managing money
- Designating an individual at the Rural Youth Homelessness Committee as a contact person for landlords to discuss issues that may arise from renting to homeless youth
- Having a guarantee from the Rural Youth Homelessness Committee or an agency within the county that rent will be paid when renting to homeless youth
- Support for homeless youth in finding long term employment so they can pay for rent

While there are limitations in only reporting on data from consultations with two landlords, these consultations still provide some insight into why some landlords within Wellington County may be hesitant to rent to homeless youth. Addressing these issues may help to increase the likelihood of landlords willing to rent to homeless youth in Wellington County.

CONCLUSION

The issues addressed in this literature review are important given that it is estimated between 150,000 to 200,000 Canadians are homeless with 20% of this homeless
population between the ages of 16 and 24 (Gaetz et al., 2013). However, this number may be underrepresented. According to Grodzinski et al. (2011) understanding the magnitude of the homelessness problem is challenging because rural youth homelessness, in comparison to urban homelessness, is more difficult to quantify and measure. This is partly due to rural homelessness being concealed or hidden (Grodzinski et al., 2011). In addition, some researchers have argued understanding the extent of homelessness in rural Canada is simply unknown (Schiff & Turner, 2014). As such, identifying ways rural homeless youth can be supported and understanding how to prevent homelessness and precarious housing are critical in addressing the homelessness problem in Wellington County.

REFERENCES


