STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH EXPERIENCING (OR AT RISK OF) HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS: LITERATURE REVIEW

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 2  
Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 4  
Methods ...................................................................................................................................... 5  
Findings ..................................................................................................................................... 5  
   Overview .................................................................................................................................. 5  
   Challenges for Youth Engagement and Outreach Strategies in Rural Areas ......................... 5  
      Invisibility of Rural Homelessness ......................................................................................... 6  
      Reluctance to Identify as Homeless ...................................................................................... 7  
      Geographic Context .............................................................................................................. 7  
   Variations in Local Responses ............................................................................................... 8  
Examples of Engagement and Outreach Strategies .................................................................... 8  
   Making Rural Youth Homelessness Visible ............................................................................ 8  
   Making Services Visible ......................................................................................................... 9  
   Integrating and Coordinating Service Delivery ...................................................................... 10  
   Utilizing Local Schools .......................................................................................................... 11  
   Building Cohesive Support within Communities ................................................................. 11  
   Exploring What Others Have Done: Examples .................................................................... 12  
Conclusions ................................................................................................................................ 12  
References ................................................................................................................................ 14
INTRODUCTION

When thinking about homeless youth, we tend to think of youth living on the streets in urban settings like Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. The reality is that youth become homeless in small towns and rural locations too, and the number of homeless rural youth in Canada is on the rise (Cloke, 2002; Kauppi et al., 2017). Given that most research and policy has focused on youth homelessness in urban communities, very little is known about the needs and prevalence of rural youth homelessness. Addressing this gap in research and service provision is critical given the unique and substantial challenges that rural youth homeless populations experience (Kauppi et al., 2017).

The Community Resource Centre of North and Centre Wellington (CRC) has collaborated with the Research Shop at the University of Guelph to design and conduct this literature review to explore strategies for effectively engaging with rural homeless youth. The County of Wellington is made up of seven municipalities, including Guelph-Eramosa, Erin, Puslinch, Centre-Wellington, Minto, Mapleton, and Wellington North and faces unique challenges related to homelessness due to the high proportion of rural and farming areas.

Rural homeless youth commonly face unique issues related to homelessness, including fewer housing options, limited access to transportation, lack of available services, fewer employment opportunities, and variations in local responses to homelessness (Edwards et al., 2009; Gaetz, 2013). In some cases, youth in rural communities may migrate to the urban centres to seek help, uprooting individuals from their homes and severing important social connections (Turner, 2014; Woolley, 2016). Individuals may not fit popular understandings of what homelessness looks like (e.g. living and begging on the streets) and may often find shelter in cars, on the periphery of town, in barns, or with friends and family (Gaetz, 2013; Turner, 2014). Referred to as “hidden homelessness,” this can limit the ability to identify individuals who may be experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness (Kauppi et al., 2017) and can impact levels of public recognition and action to provide appropriate support to populations in need (Turner 2014).

While several approaches for prevention, support, and responses to youth homelessness exist, these are typically developed and implemented in the context of homelessness in urban areas. There is less understanding of how to address youth homelessness and develop prevention strategies in ways that are specific to the needs and priorities of youth living in rural communities. As such, the CRC is looking to expand its outreach activities in rural Wellington County to provide support and services for
Strategies for Engaging Youth Experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) Homelessness in Rural Areas

Youth who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness. The goal of this literature review is to gain a better understanding of existing strategies or methods for identifying, reaching out to, and connecting with youth who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness in rural areas.

METHODS

Online searches of peer-reviewed and grey literature (e.g. reports, government documents, websites, and any other relevant resources) were conducted to identify relevant resources. Peer-reviewed resources were found through searching the following academic databases: ScholarsPortal, PubMed, Google Scholar and Primo Search Tool on the University of Guelph website. Resources from the grey literature were found through searching government and non-government websites, as well as through Google searches.

Search terms used to find these resources included: “rural youth,” “homelessness,” “at-risk youth,” “engagement strategies,” and “prevention strategies.”

All resources included for analysis meet the following criteria:

- Involve youth between 14-24 years of age (i.e. the target age group of the CRC)
- Focus on youth who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness
- Focus on a geographically rural or remote area
- Describe, review, and/or evaluate an approach(es) for engaging with rural youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness

FINDINGS

Overview

The resources included in this review were drawn evenly from both academic and grey literature. The majority of resources from the academic literature were published during the 1990s. Most resources from the grey literature were published during the 2000s, with some sources being published as recently as 2017. The majority of resources focused on youth experiencing homelessness in a North American context, and in rural Ontario in particular.
Resources indicate that although rural youth homelessness is on the rise (Cloke, 2002 & Farrin, 2005), very little attention and few resources have been directed towards understanding the needs of this group. Rural homeless youth experience many added challenges compared to urban homeless populations, including inadequate housing options, fewer employment opportunities and minimal access to social services. Research has documented that in rural areas, there are higher rates of parental alcohol and drug abuse, parental unemployment and domestic abuse, all of which can exacerbate the challenges faced by homeless youth (Edwards et al., 2009). Rural homeless youth also tend to be more mobile than their urban counterparts, due to the distance that must be travelled for services and the instability of available housing options (Kauppi et al., 2017; Gaetz, 2014). Research indicates that Indigenous peoples are particularly at risk when it comes to rural youth homelessness (Kauppi et al., 2017).

Overall, resources indicate that there is a lack of visibility and awareness of this segment of the population, and of the rural homeless population more generally (Cloke, 2000; other sources). Lack of visibility is attributed to several factors, including misconceptions about what homelessness might look like in rural settings; the reluctance of youth to identify as homeless; context dependency; and variations in local responses to homelessness. Resources that focus specifically on Wellington County (County of Wellington, 2014) and Guelph (Kauppi, O’Grady, & Martin, 2017 and Waegemakers and Turner, 2014) emphasize the need for wider outreach and access to services for youth throughout Wellington County to connect with and make visible rural youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

**Challenges for Youth Engagement and Outreach Strategies in Rural Areas**

Connecting with homeless rural youth and understanding their needs is complicated by the fact that rural homelessness is not as “visible” as urban homelessness (Hans & Raby, 2008). There are several factors identified in the literature that contribute to this reduced visibility.

**Invisibility of Rural Homelessness**

There are many misconceptions about what homelessness looks like. Research, policy and funding tend to be directed toward the most visible forms of homelessness, such as individuals sleeping in public places, utilizing shelters or begging on the streets, which are more relevant in urban settings. These misconceptions mean that issues surrounding urban homelessness tend to overshadow and inform discussions regarding
rural homeless youth, who may not be visibly homeless in a way that is recognized by research and policy. For instance, rural homeless youth may seek shelter by living in a car, with friends or family, or on the outskirts of town. They are often highly mobile, due to the distance that must be travelled to access services and the instability of available housing options (Kauppi et al., 2017). Calls for broader definitions of homelessness have been made (Blasi, 1990; Daly, 1996; Hutson and Liddiard, 1994; Watson 1989; Watson and Austerberry 1986), advocating for approaches to service delivery that may be more applicable in rural settings.

Reluctance to Identify as Homeless

Rural youth experiencing homelessness often try to remain invisible and avoid being labeled or identified as homeless. In rural areas, this might mean avoiding central areas and living on the periphery of town. Stigma and judgement are often attached to being homeless, particularly in small towns where anonymity can be difficult. Resources indicate that many unsheltered homeless youth do not want to be seen, let alone counted or interviewed. Many young people also have concerns that if they identify as homeless (e.g. through a point-in-time count) the services and assistance available to them will be limited. For example, in rural areas identifying as homeless may limit access to already insufficient housing options, employment opportunities and social services (Edwards, Torgerson, & Sattem, 2009). Homeless youth have also reported a lack of trust in the motives and ethics of service providers, leading youth to sometime avoid services altogether (Gaetz, 2014).

Geographic Context

The provision of services in rural areas can be complicated by factors such as population density and settlement patterns, with each context being unique. Some rural areas have shortages in accessible housing, employment opportunities and social services. Rural areas often have low population densities, which can lead to challenges for efficiency, sustainability and scale in designing services. Geographic distance can make it difficult to sustain and promote awareness of services for youth, meaning that youth may not know where to turn in times of need (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). Limited access to public transportation and the necessary distance to travel to access services can also impact rural homeless youth’s utilization of services (Edwards et al., 2009). In any case, the complex governance, social,
cultural, organizational and economic characteristics of any region will greatly impact the experience of rural homeless youth (Edwards et al., 2009).

Variations in Local Responses

Rural towns are still widely portrayed as places where the problems of the city simply do not exist, a stereotype that hides ongoing problems like youth homelessness. Key meanings have come to be associated with rural spaces like peace, self-sufficiency, and independence, which can be detrimental to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Where people are aware of the presence of youth homelessness, they may choose to ignore the issue to preserve their own idyllic view of their community. Some rural towns may carry high levels of stigma towards mobile or homeless peoples, seeing newcomers as a threat or a source of problems in rural life (Cloke et al., 2003). While such views are certainly not the rule, they are common to many small towns in Ontario as highlighted by the literature on youth homelessness (Edwards et al., 2009; Kauppa et al., 2017).

Examples of Engagement and Outreach Strategies

It should be noted that any attempts to reach out to rural youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness must first be rooted in the understanding that this is a diverse group of people. Many of these young people might be experiencing multiple and overlapping problems such as medical, substance abuse, and emotional and mental problems (Robertson & Toro, 1998). As well, the experience of rural homeless youth is highly context dependent, and can vary greatly according to the geographic, social, cultural and demographic characteristics of any region. The following section highlights some of the most promising engagement and outreach strategies that emerged through a scan of the literature on rural youth homelessness.

Making Rural Youth Homelessness Visible

Most successful engagement and outreach strategies focus on making rural youth homelessness and available services more visible. Often, such strategies begin with understanding and identifying the population in question in order to better understand their needs. Documentation and research efforts should take in a broad definition of youth homelessness in order to capture hidden homelessness, including transient populations who may be living in tents, substandard housing, couch surfing or relying on survival sex (Kauppi, 2017). Efforts should move away from ‘Point-in-Time’ counts of
homelessness, which may not work well for rural contexts, and instead recognize the diverse pathways through which homelessness and hidden homelessness often occur (Kauppi, 2017).

Research and outreach strategies can help to paint an accurate, on-the-ground picture of the real needs of rural youth homeless populations, including specific needs related to education, employment, housing and social skills training. This can help to identify people who are most at risk for youth homelessness in rural areas, including women, Indigenous peoples and the LGTBQ population (Kauppi, 2017). Once specific needs are identified, services can be designed and delivered to the subpopulations of homeless or at-risk youth that need them. Local documentation and research on rural youth homelessness can and should be connected to broader research and policy efforts in order to understand this diverse population and their needs.

Making Services Visible

There are different strategies that might be used to make services for homeless youth more visible, such as direct outreach to youth by service providers themselves, as well as coordinated messaging and advertising with other community organizations (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). Examples of strategies for improving the visibility of outreach strategies include:

- Street outreach when appropriate;
- Engaging youth at drop-in centres;
- Handing out bracelets with the service providers’ phone numbers at county fairs, high school sporting events, and known youth hangouts;
- Producing billboard, television, radio, and bus advertisements;
- Providing brochures and other resource materials where youth congregate; and
- Hanging posters in schools and clinics.

There were no identified patterns to the success of online engagement and outreach strategies with youth in rural areas. While Facebook was frequently used by youth, Twitter was not. Community organizations were typically skeptical of online strategies, but did not often give explicit reasons for their skepticism (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009).
Integrating and Coordinating Service Delivery

Youth homelessness is tied to many other issues, and requires comprehensive, holistic and tailored services that address both the immediate and long-term needs of homeless youth. In rural towns across Ontario there is a need for coordinated institutional mechanisms that offer emergency services for youth experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. However, alongside the delivery of emergency services it is necessary to address the long-term needs of youth, providing them with a pathway out of homelessness by connecting them to employment, housing and services.

Many resources called for a holistic and integrated systems-level approach (Winland et al., 2011) that addresses the multidimensional needs of homeless youth, including access to affordable housing supports, shelters and transitional housing units (Kauppi, 2017); access to transportation services; family-focused strategies; and social, physical and mental health support (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). In addition to serving those already homeless, interventions are needed to prevent homelessness among at-risk youth (Robertson & Toro, 1998).

One example of integrated service delivery in rural Ontario is the Cornerstone Landing Youth Service, a community-based non-profit that provides a continuum of care for homeless or at-risk youth. Through direct support and case management, youth have access to rental supplements, financial support, transitional housing as well as employment and education services within the community (Cornerstone Landing, 2018).

Another way of building support for youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness in rural communities is to form partnerships between community-based agencies and other organizations as part of a coordinated outreach strategy (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). The most common partnerships identified were between schools, law enforcement agencies, and child welfare programs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). Partnerships between community organizations and municipal governments were identified as a necessary component of all successful prevention, intervention, and outreach models. These partnerships can help offset or share the cost of funding outreach and engagement strategies (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009).
Utilizing Local Schools

Schools were described as invaluable partners in outreach strategies, both in terms of identifying youth struggling with homelessness, and in delivering services (Edwards et al., 2009). For example, for the Safe Couch Program, most of the data about rural youth homelessness came from in-school surveys which revealed how deeply concerning the problem was. Notably, youth were not likely to report that they were struggling with homelessness. Teachers identified the following signs of potential homelessness or precarity among their students: drop in grades; regular absence from school; and indications of stressful home situations (often including parental substance abuse).

Another example of school involvement in engagement strategies is the Niagara Resource Service for Youth in St. Catharine’s, Ontario, which developed the Youth Reconnect Program. This program was founded on the idea that youth should not have to leave their home or school in order to access services that would minimize their risk for homelessness. The Youth Reconnect Program accepts youth referrals from a tightly-knit network of schools, police officers, and social welfare agencies (The Homeless Hub, 2012). Once a young person is referred to the program, staff work with youth in their home communities to determine what their needs are and to develop plans to address them (The Homeless Hub, 2012).

Building Cohesive Support within Communities

Rural homeless youth may be reluctant to identify as homeless for fear of losing support from their community and experiencing judgement or shame. Many resources indicated that there is a need to build ongoing, cohesive support for homeless or at-risk youth within the broader community. Some strategies involved connecting youth experiencing homelessness with peers or mentors who previously experienced homelessness, and involving peers and mentors throughout the outreach and service provision process. Peer networking was seen as a great outreach tool, and accounted for large numbers of referrals of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness. A number of service providers focused exclusively on peer networking for their outreach strategies (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009).

Strategies can also target the cohesiveness of small towns, using the ‘rural idyl’ to create a sense of caring and responsibility for youth. Local education and awareness campaigns can be used to make visible the issue of rural homelessness to local residents and nurture a sense of responsibility towards caring for youth. Outreach
efforts should be targeted towards youth, but should also involve building education, awareness, and capacity among the wider community to support youth.

Many resources emphasized the importance of community involvement in creating safe spaces for homeless youth. The Safe Couch Program in the community of Cochrane, Alberta serves as a useful example. Community members supported this program by providing beds and meals to rural youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness as an alternative to isolating these youth in low-market housing. In turn, providing these safe spaces helped to strengthen connections between youth and their communities (Safe Couch Program, 2015). This can also help to begin shifting local attitudes towards rural youth homelessness and making the issue more visible to communities.

Exploring What Others Have Done: Examples

There are many examples across rural Ontario of homelessness outreach, prevention and service models that show great promise for addressing the issue of rural youth homelessness. For instance, several programs are focused on the prevention of homelessness, including the Lambton County Pilot Projects and the Homelessness Prevention Team in Sault Ste. Marie. Others focus on the provision of emergency supports, such as the Chatham Kent Homelessness Response Line and the Street Outreach Van in York Region, or the provision of housing alternatives, including the Cornerstone Landing Youth Service in Lanark County and the Raft in Niagara Region. While not directly related to rural youth homelessness, there are also various support programs targeted towards the provision of material supports, information workshops and mental health or addiction supports. These promising examples of service provision in rural areas can be used as models or starting points for the development of novel programs by the CRC, which can then be tailored to the local context.

CONCLUSIONS

The relative invisibility of rural youth homelessness means that understanding of this population and their specific needs has been neglected. Research has found that rural youth homeless populations have specific needs related to housing, services, transportation, education and employment that are different from urban homeless populations. Given the limited understanding of this population and indications that rural homelessness is on the rise, it is important now more than ever that research and policy initiatives are directed towards making visible and understanding the needs of rural homeless youth populations. Strategies might include:
• Making rural youth homelessness more visible by: understanding this population and their needs through research and documentation efforts; connecting with them through an outreach model that makes sense for rural youth homelessness; contributing to broader policy or academic research;

• Focusing on preventative services (e.g. counselling; family services, more affordable housing, income supports) and emergency services (emergency shelters, transitional housing, food banks…);

• Coordinating services and collaborating with those already doing similar work;

• Increasing public education, awareness, and outreach.

Many promising initiatives are already taking place across Ontario, and specifically within the Wellington County region, which can be replicated and tailored to new contexts. With sustained commitment, attention, and research the needs of rural homeless youth populations can be better understood and provided for.
REFERENCES


Beer (2003). Developing models of good practice in meeting the needs of homeless young people in rural areas.


