

## Article

# Unpacking the Discourse on Youth Pathways into and out of Homelessness: Implications for Research Scholarship and Policy Interventions

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**Abstract:** Youth homelessness presents a complex and persistent challenge worldwide, particularly affecting young adults between 16 and 24 years of age in the US and Canada. This population faces elevated risks of exploitation, victimization, and various health issues upon detachment from familial support structures. Understanding the multi-faceted nature of youth homelessness requires the consideration of individual, structural, and systemic factors within the socio-ecological model. Historically, when examining youth homelessness, traditional methods have concentrated either on individual factors contributing to homelessness or on broader structural issues within society. The emergence of the new orthodoxy attempted to bridge the apparent gap between individual- and structural-level factors by considering both to be equally significant, but it faced skepticism for its theoretical framework. In response, the “pathways” approach gained traction, emphasizing the subjective experiences and agency of youth experiencing homelessness. Departing from conventional epidemiological models, the pathways approach views homelessness as a dynamic process intertwined with individual life contexts. This paper navigates the scholarly discourse on youth homelessness and examines the distinct characteristics of the pathways approach. By exploring its implications for research and policy, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of youth homelessness and informs future prevention-focused interventions.

**Keywords:** pathways; youth homelessness; prevention; Canada



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## 1. Introduction

Youth homelessness has become a seemingly intractable challenge worldwide. In the US and Canada, young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 years are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness [1,2]. Once detached from their families and on the streets, youths are more likely to be victims of criminal activities, including human trafficking [3], and be exposed to a range of behavioral, physical, and mental health issues [4,5]. With precarious living situations, street-involved youths subsist on temporary and paid seasonal employment [6] and often rely on quasi-legal economic activities to earn money [7]. These informal money-making strategies range from squeegeeing and panhandling to survival sex trade, dealing drugs, stealing, and gambling, making it increasingly difficult for them to secure stable housing.

In response to the growing concerns over these young populations, research efforts have investigated the root causes of youth homelessness in order to identify best practices and program interventions to reduce homelessness and improve these people’s lives. Conceptualizations of the causes of youth homelessness often rest on the socio-ecological model, which posits that homelessness has essentially emerged as the outcome of a complex and intricate interplay between individual/relational risk factors, structural circumstances, and system(s) failures, which, together, play a profound role in young people’s experiences of marginalization and homelessness [8–10].

Individual factors refer to adverse personal circumstances such as family crises, exposure to violence, physical and sexual abuse, and trauma [4,10–12]. Structural causes, on

the other hand, are framed as occurring at the societal level and encompass, among others, poverty, unemployment, dynamics of child welfare institutions, and an insufficient supply of affordable housing [5,13–15]. Equally crucial, system failures refer to ineffective policies and service delivery programs that often contribute to an increased risk of homelessness among youth while posing barriers to exiting homelessness [16]. Fragmentation in planning for youth who are transitioning from publicly funded institutions such as detention centers and foster care can lead to the production of sustained and chronic homelessness [17], particularly among vulnerable subpopulations, including Indigenous youth [18,19].

However, accounts that solely focus on either individual pathology or structural factors appear to have received criticism. In response, the notion of the “new orthodoxy” emerged as an attempt to bridge the seemingly irreconcilable divide between individual and structural factors by treating the two as equally important [20–22]. It has been, therefore, suggested that individual and relational factors should be framed in relation to structural causes. Nonetheless, critics argue that the concept of the new orthodoxy removes agency from individuals experiencing homelessness [23] and only aids in understanding homelessness at a descriptive level [22,24]. In other words, while the new orthodoxy attempts to offer a useful lens for establishing a causal relationship between individual- and structural-level factors, it fails to provide a comprehensive picture of the context in which various risk factors could lead to homelessness. For example, Somerville [24] (p. 389) points out that, while not paying rent can result in eviction and ultimately homelessness, the underlying reasons for non-payment vary widely among individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds.

What has gained credence in the youth homelessness scholarship in recent years is the introduction of the “pathways” approach. While causes outline the factors which can lead to homelessness, pathways go beyond the causes and focus more importantly on the process of becoming entrenched in homelessness. The proponents of the pathways approach advocate for departing from epidemiological approaches and instead focusing on how individuals experiencing homelessness attribute meaning to context-specific circumstances. The pathways approach places an emphasis on subjectivity and human agency rather than treating homelessness as a mere object of research [24–26]. Thus, the pathways discourse focuses scholarly attention on the social construction of homelessness—the process by which individuals make sense of homelessness, or in other words, how they perceive and experience homelessness, which is subject to various factors, such as social, economic, and personal circumstances. In this sense, homelessness is understood as an episode or sequential events experienced in the larger context of an individual’s life.

This paper is situated within and further develops the scholarly contributions of the pathways approach to homelessness. I will start by surveying the existing literature on the causes of youth homelessness to prepare the context for a discussion of how the pathways discourse departs from previous approaches. I will also introduce the characteristics of such an approach and conclude by exploring the potential implications that this approach may have for homelessness research and policy interventions at large.

## 2. Contextualizing Youth Homelessness: What Do We Know?

Homelessness has emerged as one of the quintessential “wicked problems” of our time [27], defying solutions based on rational and scientific approaches [28]. As a complex and multi-faceted issue, youth homelessness in particular has garnered increasing attention, leading many scholars to produce evidence-based and empirically grounded research to inform policy agendas and identify strategies which could effectively target and reduce youth homelessness [29]. Recent scholarship has endeavored to understand the root causes of youth homelessness while building on the larger body of research on adult homelessness. Tracing the historical lineage of this research body, as it has developed over the past 40 years, points to the distinct, yet interrelated research streams that characterize the common approaches to understanding youth homelessness: individual factors, structural causes and system failures, the new orthodoxy, and the pathways discourse.

### 2.1. Individual Factors

Early research focused on the individual causes of youth homelessness and investigated the association between individual life circumstances and the occurrence of homelessness. These accounts universally identify the underlying causes of youth homelessness to be family conflict [2,4,30,31], drug use [10,32], school disengagement and low educational attainment [33,34], adverse childhood experiences, including trauma and physical and sexual abuse [35–38], and non-conforming sexual identities [11,39].

These individual causes are often reinforced by the long-standing discourse that places emphasis on individual agency, shaping how individuals perceive homelessness as a result of their own choices and decisions. In this sense, agency is defined as “the internal decision-making process that leads to the acts of a person, which will produce effects” [40] (p. 69). Individuals experiencing homelessness, therefore, have the capacity to shape and influence their own life trajectory with a degree of control [41]. They can consciously deliberate on the choices they make within the constraints of bounded rationality [42]. On this account, individuals experiencing homelessness are often blamed for their personal choice and are assumed to be either ill-equipped to acquire housing or resolved to be homeless—whether such an assumption is justified or not. For instance, in one ethnographic study, young people living on the streets in Los Angeles, CA, USA, recounted that, while fractured family relationships were often the primary cause leading to homelessness, they still retained a sense of agency when deciding to leave home [43].

Research on individual causes most often relies on the use of discrete, quantitative analyses to gauge the likelihood of risk factors associated with individuals and their perceived role in homelessness. These approaches are largely reductionist in nature in that they reduce homelessness to measurable dimensions and then propose solutions based solely on those dimensions. Such approaches seek to provide universal explanations for youth homelessness and often base their analyses on accounts of personal choice, which sometimes lends support to the narrative that renders those without homes as being unable to secure stable housing.

### 2.2. Structural Causes and Systems Failures

Despite the evident role that individual factors play in leading youth to experience homelessness, increasing attention has come to be paid to structural causes. Research suggests that societal and economic conditions create an environment where the inability to secure stable housing manifests in both youth and adult homelessness [20,44,45]. Explanations based on structural causes look beyond individual traits and emphasize social and economic dynamics that put vulnerable individuals, e.g., low-income, under-resourced families with unstable employment or disabilities, at risk. In keeping with the positivist worldview, studies underscoring the importance of structural determinants most often include economic analyses, which shift attention to the role of state and policy norms which directly impact the housing market and generate income disparities [5,13–15]. For example, studies have demonstrated that high rents [15] and a lack of affordable housing [44] are both correlated with increasing rates of homelessness.

Furthermore, some scholars have drawn attention to systems failures that, in conjunction with structural causes, contribute to the likelihood of young individuals experiencing housing precarity and homelessness [16,46]. Systems failures, as such, loosely refer to fragmented service and program delivery that stems from factors that include, but are not limited to, social equity barriers to accessing public health systems and problematic transitions from publicly funded institutions such as detention centers. Systemic discrimination is another factor in systems failures, resulting from long-standing cultural stigmas attached to gender minorities and 2SLGBTQA+ youth, which further perpetuate the experience of marginalization and inequitable access to services [47–50]. Similarly, involvement with child protection services is considered a high-level risk factor [17,51–54], specifically among vulnerable subpopulations such as Indigenous youth [18,19]. Disconnected and inadequate support for youth being discharged from the child welfare system often both leads youths

to find themselves unprepared to face the challenges of living independently and increases their risk of homelessness [55,56]. Essentially, what all this means in practice is that systems failures contribute to the production of chronicity as a state of ongoing exposure to homelessness, which makes it extremely difficult for youth to exit homelessness.

### 2.3. *The New Orthodoxy*

In an attempt to overcome the limitations of accounts which separate individuals from structural factors when explaining homelessness, the notion of “the new orthodoxy” emerged, which gives equal weight to individual and structural risk factors whose combination could lead to homelessness [57,58]. This line of research suggests that individual pathologies are only conducive to homelessness when contextualized and interpreted within broader societal conditions, cultural changes, and political climates [22,23]. Therefore, for instance, families and young individuals who are dependent on subsidized housing and rental assistance are far more susceptible to variation in the public housing supply, forcing them to be socially excluded from the rest of homeowners and renters [59,60].

The point of departure for the new orthodoxy within homelessness research was the rise of the neoliberal state in the 1980s, which was when the main viewpoints in the homelessness field developed in a manner that aligned with the principles of neoliberal governance [61]. With the dismantling of the welfare state came a series of neoliberal economic deregulation policies that shaped a condition of the privatization of space [62] and led to a decrease in the social housing stock. Consequently, in light of the new economic backdrop, attention was paid to susceptible households that lacked the wherewithal to secure or maintain stable decent housing. Particularly, younger populations, therefore, were predisposed to experience homelessness or “rough sleeping” [63]. The marriage between individual agency and structural forces thus became the new “consensus”, with the intention not to “apportion ‘blame’ or to ‘pathologise’ [emphasis original]” [40] (p. 81), but to account for the individual characteristics which make populations and subpopulations, including youth, vulnerable to the fluctuations in the housing and labor market which seem to occasion homelessness.

### 2.4. *The Pathways Discourse and Youth Homelessness*

Scholars have argued that the interaction theory of the new orthodoxy removes individual agency, disempowers individuals experiencing homelessness, and does not provide a clear expository framework that could explain how the assemblage of individual and structural risk factors together cause homelessness [23,24,64]. Because of these criticisms levelled at the new orthodoxy, research has turned its attention to individual life histories, documenting “pathways” into and out of youth homelessness [1,65]. The pathways approach to homelessness is, of course, not a novel concept and has been in circulation since the 1990s. For example, in one of the earliest pathways studies, Pinder [66] chronicles the life history of a particular man without stable housing in Brighton, England, and his pathway from early adolescence into chronic homelessness. The study unfolds meanings and experiences of being homeless from one man’s standpoint at a specific point in time, demonstrating the dynamic interaction between individual identity and societal influences.

Sommerville [24] points out that such an approach necessarily considers that homelessness is a multi-faceted phenomenon:

Homelessness is not just a matter of lack of shelter or lack of abode, a lack of a roof over one’s head. It involves deprivation across a number of different dimensions—physiological (lack of bodily comfort or warmth), emotional (lack of love or joy), territorial (lack of privacy), ontological (lack of rootedness in the world, anomie) and spiritual (lack of hope, lack of purpose). (p. 384)

This interpretation of homelessness, therefore, is at odds with epidemiological approaches that seek to equate homelessness with measurable constructs to provide universal explanations of the causes of homelessness. Mainstream studies on understanding homelessness have treated it with reductionist approaches where individual and structural factors

are enumerated without contextual analysis or consideration of personal life trajectories. For instance, involvement with the child welfare system has been identified as a potential risk factor that could contribute to youth homelessness. However, as Somerville [24] has exemplified, the mere recognition of such a risk factor does not provide a comprehensive understanding of why this could “make a young person vulnerable to becoming homeless later on” (p. 391). Therefore, looking at pathways, we can focus on charting the life histories of individuals from the period of their lives preceding homelessness to their experience of homelessness.

The pathways approach is highly relevant in understanding and making sense of youth homelessness, which is different, in many ways, from adult homelessness. Young people leaving home by choice, necessity, or force often have not developed the range of skills required to live independently, and, in most cases, they are emotionally and financially dependent on their families [67]. The sudden departure from their home can also lead youths to experience disengagement from school and the loss of their circle of support (e.g., friends), which, together, result in detrimental impacts on a young person’s development and transition into adulthood. Further, the experience of homelessness is unique for youth with different ethno-racial backgrounds, genders, sexual identities, and family structures. Given these underlying differences based on context-specific conditions, the pathways approach provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the ways in which individual and structural risk factors are intertwined and shape a young person’s journey into homelessness. This helps inform potential strategies and identify effective policies for preventing and ending youth homelessness.

### 3. The Characteristics of the Pathways Approach

The survey provided above of the existing bodies of research underscores the importance of the pathways approach to youth homelessness. In this section, I will concentrate on the characteristics of such an approach.

#### 3.1. *The Social Construction of Homelessness*

From an epistemological standpoint, policy makers and scholars alike have approached the issue of homelessness predominately from a positivist worldview. Grounded in hypothesis-driven conceptualizations, the positivist approaches are rooted in the belief that there are unique causal factors that contribute to homelessness and that those factors can be objectively identified with minimal interaction between the researcher and the research subject—in this case, individuals experiencing homelessness. As Fitzpatrick and Christian [60] note, perhaps such a strong positivist underpinning in homelessness research stems from the long-standing presence of disciplines such as psychology, which focuses on individual-level analyses.

However, in keeping with the social construction of reality in sociology [68], a particularly widespread conceptualization of homelessness has favored the social interaction between individuals and the external world, which develops one’s understanding of the social world in which homelessness manifests as a social problem. Such social problems, Blumer [69] (p. 298) argues, “are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup”. Within this context, scholars have pushed to the fore the social construction of homelessness as a highly useful framework for defining homelessness and identifying its causes and potential outcomes, as well as effective policy implications [24,26,70,71]. This framework underscores the importance of considering the social and cultural context shaping individuals’ experiences, narratives, and emotions within the realm of youth homelessness.

The pathways approach aims to understand the social significance of housing or the lack thereof across various scales [72]. Such an interpretation treats homelessness as a cultural phenomenon [24,73]. Further, while it is generally accepted that homelessness manifests as a social reality independent of the meanings which individuals attach to it, the



pathways approach highlights the significance of life narratives that are socially constructed by individuals through constant engagement with the social world. As Karabanow [11] (p. 4) notes, if one wants to understand homeless culture and elicit young participants' perspectives of their life histories, they have to be involved with and immersed in the field.

### 3.2. *The Whatness vs. Howness*

Historically, the mainstream approach has been to identify the “what” factors that lead to youth homelessness. Given its roots in psychology, early research generally found family conflicts and abusive family backgrounds to be the prime contributing factors to street-involved youth [32,43,74,75]. At the micro-level, studies suggest that family conflict could be due to several reasons, such as a familial history of substance and alcohol abuse [76]. In some cases, tensions arise when youths are rejected by their families for having a non-conforming gender or sexual identity [77–79]. Traumatic childhood experiences are yet another significant factor resulting from family breakdown (e.g., death, remarriage) and domestic violence within the home, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse [80,81].

While the existing literature has, in essence, captured the factors contributing to youth homelessness, it has predominately addressed the causes or the “whatness” of the issue of homelessness with little insight into “how” those factors have led to youth homelessness. The pathways approach, on the other hand, provides an equally important but often less appreciated perspective on youth homelessness by tapping into a young person’s relevant life domains wherein traumatic events and family conflict within the household unfold and shape youth narratives of marginalization, exclusion, and housing instability. In this way, we can unpack “how” the complex interaction between individual and structural factors contributes to and sustains homelessness.

To illustrate this process, in an early study, Tomas and Dittmar [82] surveyed and interviewed 12 women who accessed homelessness services of a day center in Brighton, England. The study advocated for a practical understanding of homelessness, where individuals play an active role in shaping and reconstructing their personal and social narratives over time. The study first found that physical and sexual abuse, being taken into care, and being moved by social services were the primary reasons for the women’s change of housing in their childhood. However, further probing into their lives through exploratory in-depth interviews brought to the fore their perceptions of safety, security, and dependence on others for the provision of housing. Even though the narrative of abuse was accompanied by frequent relocation, the women’s pathways into homelessness were marked by a constant sense of insecurity and lack of safety. Thus, the study unveiled how the experience of being physically situated in a home did not bring safety and security, to the point that they preferred staying in an abusive relationship with men because they felt safer and more secure than seeking help from social services, which they perceived as offering unsafe accommodation.

In a study conducted in Canada [83], 100 street-involved youths were recruited for an interview with respect to the presence of trauma in their lives, both before and during their first experience of homelessness. While the study focused in large part on the quantitative analysis of standardized survey instruments related to trauma, its findings pointed to a subtle understanding of the youth homelessness process:

for the large majority of the youth, homelessness was not the product of a single event, nor did it lead immediately to the streets. Rather, homelessness for most of the youth resulted in a number of different living arrangements that reflected the use, and perhaps even the “burning out”, of their available social networks. On average, a youth experienced 6 of the 9 living arrangements listed, reflecting a pattern of unstable and diminishing options. [83] (p. 74)

Such an understanding of youth homelessness is underpinned by interpretations that are far-removed from the reductionist approaches commonly adopted in mainstream homelessness research. Attempts to simplify the complex issue of homelessness into substantive elements or causes inherently produce stereotypes that offer little possibility of

unpacking the procedural aspects of homelessness. As much as research scholarship needs to ascertain what factors and causes, whether individual or structural, are at play, even more important for addressing homelessness is an understanding of how the interactive process between individual and structural factors unfolds.

### 3.3. *The Temporal Dimension*

The temporal dimension of homelessness is an important, yet often overlooked factor in understanding its complexities and implications. As Clapham [25] argues, pathways to homelessness can be a single event or multiple occurrences within an individual's housing journey. The pathways approach, therefore, comes to be understood "as a specific dimension of the life-time housing careers (or trajectories) of individuals". [84] (p. 2). Such a trajectory gives meaning to the personal experiences and consequent choices through one's life journey to homelessness.

Distinct pathways into youth homelessness often start and coincide with key stages in a young person's life course between the ages of 15 and 24 years [85], which is when youths are more likely to become entrenched in street culture [11]. The findings of the 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey in Canada indicated that 40.1% of youths were younger than 16 and 9.6% were under 13 when they first experienced homelessness [86]. This suggests that a significant number of young individuals encounter homelessness long before they are even eligible for assistance and support services. With youths accounting for 20% of the population experiencing homelessness, critical time interventions gain more credence since the housing situations of these young people change rapidly as they transition in and out of homelessness.

Kuhn and Culhane [87], in their seminal article, drew attention to the temporal dimension of homelessness and presented a typology of homelessness: transitional, episodic, and chronic. Populations experiencing transitional homelessness refer to younger demographics who typically use shelters for a single stay of a short duration before they transition into more stable housing with a lower likelihood of returning to homelessness. Episodic homelessness, on the other hand, refers to younger populations who are more likely to experience mental health challenges and substance abuse problems and who use the shelter system more frequently than the first category, but for no more than a few months in total. Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are the most frequent users of the shelter system. For them, shelters often function as a long-term solution to their housing instability rather than being perceived solely as an emergency response.

Building on the work of Kuhn and Culhane, Nooe and Patterson [8] have expanded on the concept of temporality, ranging from first-time and short-term to transitional, episodic, and chronic. They note that such a categorization inherently poses challenges to the ways in which homelessness is defined and thus addressed. However, in treating homelessness as a fluid concept and a "work-in-progress" which does not lend itself to definitional specificity, temporality could be framed within the pathways of a person's journey into homelessness, which include life-changing milestones and personal decisions.

Several studies have stressed the role that documenting the temporal sequence plays in providing a more in-depth, meaningful interpretation of individuals' experience of homelessness. Gaetz and his colleagues [86] argue that the pathways leading to homelessness are intricate and unpredictable, varying greatly for each person. They argue that it is important to understand how youths' cultural and intersectional backgrounds could profoundly impact their experience of homelessness. Martijn and Sharpe [10] investigated how individual trajectories characterized youths' journeys after experiencing homelessness. Using interviews with youth aged 14–25, the authors provided useful insights into how different sets of seemingly predetermined factors were likely to contribute to the onset of the first experience of homelessness. They found that, while traumatic events and family problems most often preceded homelessness, the majority of youth experienced further trauma, engaged in criminal activities, and developed additional psychological disorders after they experienced homelessness, which limited the youths' prospects of exiting home-

lessness. The authors underscored the need to “identify a pathway, rather than one single factor, that has had direct influence on the adolescent becoming homeless”. [10] (p. 9). The pathways approach considers the cyclical nature of homelessness for many younger populations, and, therefore, it provides an opportunity for a more meaningful approach to unraveling what underlies youth homelessness.

#### *3.4. Pathways into and out of Homelessness*

Our understanding of the pathways out of homelessness is limited, since, more often than not, researchers lose contact with youths when they exit homelessness. In the Canadian context, there is an emerging body of research that examines the ways in which youth transition out of chronic and episodic homelessness and into stable housing [11,76,88–90]. Generally, research points to the fact that the pathways into and out of homelessness are not a linear process, nor can they be reduced to a single event. For example, Kidd et al. [88] employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate how 51 youths, who had previously experienced homelessness, adapted to life after homelessness in two major urban centers in Canada. They found that the journey toward stability for these youths began with an initial phase of instability, followed by a struggle to make progress despite basic stability, and, ultimately, a phase of making tangible strides toward life goals, instilling hope and momentum. Similarly, Karabanow [76] explored the lives of youth surviving on the streets, finding that “contemplation” as a result of the first experience of a traumatic event (e.g., violence on the streets) was what initiated an attempt to stay away from homelessness. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 128 young people across six Canadian cities, the author found that the process of disengagement from the streets was far from a linear trajectory and that what motivated street youth to exit homelessness was often compounded by a myriad of challenges, including a lack of sense of self and inadequate support services. Contemplation was then followed by motivation to change, which often seemed to be a personal struggle. Yet, even when personal barriers were overcome, those youths needed to secure help from service providers to find stable housing and employment, as well as strengthen their relationships with family members. All these were necessary factors that led youths to be meaningfully integrated into mainstream society while helping them disengage with street culture.

The pathways approach can provide an overarching framework for designing policy interventions aimed at empowering youth to sustainably exit homelessness. Such interventions principally concentrate on rebuilding ruptured connections between youth and family support circles [91], reintegrating young people into mainstream society by creating a sense of social inclusion [76], and developing strategies that enable youth to successfully transition out of publicly funded institutions such as child welfare institutions [17]. Ravenhill [73] mentions four key catalysts that are related to the process of exiting homelessness: motivation (i.e., a bleak, hopeless future if nothing is accomplished), determination (i.e., something needs to be changed), sudden trauma or shock (e.g., sexual exploitation), and the presence of a caring individual (e.g., day care staff). While motivation and determination are the very first steps which individuals need to take to find their ways out of homelessness, they are nonetheless the most challenging. The author notes that the longer someone stays in a state of homelessness, the more difficult it becomes to provide them with help.

#### *3.5. Heterogeneity of Homelessness Experiences*

Even though traditional assessments of pathways into youth homelessness which center on reductionist approaches are illuminating, they nonetheless seem to operate on different tiers, meaning that they do not appear to portray the diverse ethno-racial backgrounds or the different socio-economic profiles of those experiencing homelessness. What is foundational to research on youth homelessness is the uniqueness and diversity of pathways that lead youth to experience unstable housing and chronic homelessness.



In a qualitative study conducted in two Canadian cities (Calgary and Lethbridge, Alberta), Miller et al. [92] interviewed 41 youths between the ages of 15 and 19 who were either experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The study's aim was to explore issues that were experienced by these youth, particularly by focusing on their challenges, coping strategies, future plans, and the experience of treatment by their friends, peers, educators, and service providers. The authors highlighted the need to approach homelessness that embraces a multiplicity of voices as "it is no longer possible to articulate a single silhouette of the homeless, but rather a diversity of profiles is needed". (p. 735). This underscores the key notion that youths' pathways into homelessness are unique to each individual, characterized and shaped by distinct circumstances and life events, reflecting the multi-faceted nature of human experience and socio-economic dynamics.

Considering the inherent differences between street youth in terms of gender and sexual identities as well as ethno-racial backgrounds, research has indicated that gender in informal economic activities can shape youths' experience and perception of homelessness. In the case of Toronto street youth, O'Grady and Gaetz [93] found that gendered differences manifested in the streets shaped how youths interacted with their peers, members of the public, and agents of control such as the police. Their study demonstrated that street culture necessarily created a gendered sphere in that male youth tended to participate more in the financially profitable sectors of the informal street economy, particularly in activities such as crime. On the other hand, female youths were less inclined to use shelters and hostels, had poorer health, and were more likely to access health services compared to males.

Instability seems to be an organizing theme that binds together individuals experiencing homelessness [94]. However, even in populations defined by instability and fluctuating housing conditions, the experiences and perspectives of homelessness vary considerably. Sometimes, homelessness is framed as a loss of a family member, severed connections with loved ones, and a test of resilience [95]. Given that homelessness transcends being a mere material condition and has physiological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions [24], the complexity of individuals' behaviors and choices necessitates an approach that can embrace the diversity of individuals with different racial backgrounds. This helps our understanding of the rationale behind the decisions made by youth over time in relation to the environment in which instability and homelessness manifest.

#### **4. Implications for Research and Practice**

The complexity of homelessness requires a multi-faceted research approach to inform policy responses aimed at developing programs to better meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. Of course, adopting the pathways approach should not deter current research efforts, but such an account could perhaps fill a gap in our understanding and be integrated into the existing body of research on youth homelessness. On the research front, this may have some explicit implications.

First, the pathways approach offers opportunities to adopt and incorporate new forms of engaged scholarship, such as the use of arts-based research, enabling the co-construction and co-production of knowledge. Emerging research in this area points to the power of arts, narration, and story-telling in the capturing, meaning-making, and thoughtful interpretation of individuals with lived experience of homelessness [96–98]. For example, in one study, Moxley and Feen [96] demonstrated how storytelling by women experiencing homelessness revealed different pathways, with arts-based methods allowing for a deeper understanding through the photovoice technique. Arts-based research approaches to capturing context-specific knowledge transcend the boundaries of conventional methodologies restricted by rigid frameworks and limited expressive capacities [99,100]. Specifically, arts-based inquiries have unpacked narratives that would otherwise be lost in homelessness research, particularly among Indigenous youth [101,102]. For example, based on a secondary data analysis of a participatory youth-led study, Wager and Ansloos [102] explored how the long-lasting effects of inter-generational trauma and the complex socio-political context have shaped the various pathways through homelessness experienced by Indige-

nous youth. Their findings demonstrated how arts-based research provided a medium for Indigenous youth to narrate the realities of being entrenched in homelessness, fostering a more nuanced understanding of how the intersection of colonialism, racism, and trauma contributed to their experiences of homelessness.

Second, in the context of youth homelessness, it is important to consider the notion of the life course as developmental theory [103,104], which draws attention to the role that social and cultural constraints play in shaping young peoples' choices. In other words, while young individuals may have the ability to use their human agency to choose their paths, their life decisions are contingent upon the opportunities and challenges present within the social and cultural structures, which, in turn, shape and influence their paths toward adolescents and adulthood.

From the perspective of life course as a developmental framework, the distinctive pathways experienced by various subpopulations, such as Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQA+ youth, and other marginalized groups, fluctuate over their lifetime, shifting along a continuum in response to changes in both the youths and their environment [105]. In this sense, the existing evidence base underscores the importance of prevention as a paradigm shift in responding to homelessness during the critical stages of adolescence [9,16,34,106,107]. Considering that the different routes leading to youth homelessness typically begin and align with important milestones in the life journey of individuals aged 15 to 24 years, the pathways approach could help both scholars and policymakers understand the need to invest in upstream and early-stage prevention-focused approaches to youth homelessness as they are more proactive and economically sound, aimed at upholding the dignity and welfare of youth while promoting social inclusion.

On the policy front, although further research is needed to explore how the pathways approach can be incorporated into mainstream policy development practices, the current paper offers some considerations for policymaking and service delivery. In line with Coates and McKenzie-Mohr [83], we can explore potential policy and service delivery implications at three levels: trauma-informed care and case management services at the individual level, cross-sector coordination and collaboration at the organizational level, and policy transformation at the societal level.

Starting at the individual level, trauma-informed care should be tailored to meet the needs of youths based on their individual pathways into homelessness, which requires culturally relevant technical assistance and training. For example, services offered to youths who leave the child welfare system might differ from those provided to youths experiencing substance abuse or suicidality. Wraparound supports should also consider the spectrum of intersectional identities such as Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQA+ youth, and other subpopulations that have historically been underserved and disenfranchised. The pathways approach aids in understanding how and when trauma-informed intervention programs can work best to prevent youth from experiencing homelessness. For example, while family conflicts are frequently referred to as primary reasons for youth to leave home, the pathways analysis could help service providers offer youths critical time interventions to rebuild relationships with their families before a crisis begins. Additionally, consistent with the key components of effective case management [108,109], case workers are encouraged to consider young people's pathways into homelessness and devise context-specific, equity-conscious, and person-centered services that cater to youth needs.

At the organizational level, the pathways approach highlights the importance of coordination between different homeless-serving sectors including law enforcement, the judicial system, public health, education, and child protection services, among others. A cross-sector collaboration could prevent duplication and fragmentation in the provision of services, while allowing for the utilization of available funding, facilities, staff, and other resources, ensuring that youths receive the most effective support where it is most needed. Particularly, considering the current policies rooted in the politics of scarcity, which prioritize ad hoc emergency responses, it is important to consider the diverse paths that lead to homelessness. Additionally, we need to recognize the importance of engaging

individuals with lived experiences of homelessness in the planning, development, and implementation of program responses. This recognition is key to developing sustainable solutions that foster long-term stability and well-being for youth.

At the societal level, policy transformation takes a considerable amount of time to materialize. In light of young people's unique pathways into homelessness, policymakers need to be mindful of the multiplicity of voices and diversity of values among youth as integral to proposing culturally informed strategies, particularly for increasingly over-represented youth subpopulations including Indigenous, racialized, and black youths. For example, at the policy level, one socially conscious approach could be incorporating an Indigenous perspective into child protection services [18,110]. This is a particularly important consideration for youth under the age of 16 [86]. Another consideration could be adopting and piloting replicable international best practices that have proven to be effective in reducing homelessness. For instance, Wales' innovative legislative mandate and legal duty to assist in preventing homelessness could serve as a model for implementation in a domestic context [106,111]. Strategic priorities can then be laid out to help community entities acquire the necessary tools to bring to the forefront the possibility of ending youth homelessness through preventive approaches.

## 5. Conclusions

The body of research on homelessness developed over the past 40 years has identified the common underlying causes of youth homelessness, focusing particularly on causes rather than the pathways as processes leading to homelessness. The pathways approach begins a dialogue about individuals' life histories in which agency and personal decisions, occurring within larger social and economic structures, take the center stage. Such an approach is underpinned by the social construction of reality, which helps understand young individuals' experiences and perceptions of homelessness—although homelessness as a social problem bears a material reality which cannot be overstated. What essentially distinguishes the pathways approach from reductionist approaches is that it pays due attention to procedures ("howness") rather than the mere substantive elements or causes of homelessness ("whatness"). Cross-sectional analyses cannot fully capture the diverse pathways that marginalized youth take to enter and exit homelessness, given the unique nature of each individual's life history. Another important characteristic of the pathways approach is the temporal dimension, which can generally be understood as experiencing homelessness as transitional, episodic, or chronic within the context of an entire life. Furthermore, this approach does not focus solely on the processes leading to homelessness but also on the circumstances that cause young people to exit homelessness. Finally, traditional assessments of youth homelessness pathways, though informative, sometimes overlook youths' diverse backgrounds, voices, and socio-economic profiles.

Future research can shed light on and contribute to the development of new ways to engage with youth with lived experience of homelessness, such as adopting arts-based research, to capture the meanings which youths ascribe to their journey through homelessness. Documenting the lived experiences of young people could engage communities in the co-production of knowledge, facilitating collaborative action towards sustainable solutions to end homelessness. This can mark the beginning of a new form of engaged scholarship with the aim of co-producing a body of knowledge that is relevant, culturally appropriate, and, more importantly, responds to the needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

Until the present time, most interventions have relied heavily on emergency responses. Across multiple levels of intervention, the pathways approach offers valuable insights for addressing youth homelessness. At the individual level, trauma-informed care and person-centered case management services tailored to youth with diverse pathways into homelessness, along with culturally relevant support services, can effectively address their needs. Organizationally, cross-sector collaboration ensures efficient resource utilization and comprehensive support provision, enhancing the effectiveness of services and maximizing impact. Finally, societal transformation largely depends on the moral preoccupations of the

dominant perspectives emerging in the field. By adapting international best practices to be implemented in local contexts and investing in prevention-focused interventions which embrace the diversity of voices, particularly those of over-represented youth subpopulations, we could foreground the possibility of long-term stability for vulnerable youth and ending homelessness.

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