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Talking about Homelessness and School: Recommendations from Canadian Young People Who Have Experienced Homelessness

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Abstract: The primary research question driving this paper is the following: "What are the schooling experiences of young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness?" Through interviews with 28 young people in two cities in Ontario, Canada, the authors identified several common experiences, including the following: lack of available information that could help them cope with their housing difficulties; prejudice and bullying from other students, sometimes stemming from their housing problems but also due to factors such as racialization, gender identity, poverty, and substance use; and individual support from some teachers and support staff, although this was dependent on being in school. They proposed changes to help young people still in school, including the inclusion of non-judgmental information and guidance on dealing with poverty and homelessness in school curricula, educating school staff about the 'symptoms' of homelessness to help them identify students at risk, and creating more safe and supportive school environments overall.

Keywords: homelessness; housing insecurity; stigma; bullying; school support; Ontario

1. Introduction

Schools in Canada are publicly funded institutions that are supposed to be universally available to all young people. Children and youth between the ages of 5 and 16 are legally required to attend school or have other approved educational arrangements (e.g., home schooling). However, youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness face many unique obstacles when trying to stay in school. These obstacles are often specific to the province or territory in which they live because education policy in Canada is under provincial/territorial jurisdiction. This situation for at-risk or homeless students in Canada is distinct from the US, despite the proximity of the two countries. In the US, there is specific federal legislation aimed at finding students who are experiencing homelessness and supporting them to remain in school [1]. In Canada, the federal government's role in primary and secondary education is restricted, and there is no equivalent legislation.

Although a national Canadian survey of youth experiencing homelessness shows that young people want to complete their schooling [2], they do not always see schools and their staff as helpful resources. In particular, young people who have not been able to stay in school are difficult to find once they have left school; thus, most educational research focuses on young people in school. To further understand the schooling experiences of youth who have struggled with homelessness, we accessed young people who have left school and are at risk of or experiencing homelessness through drop-in centres in two different cities in Ontario, Canada.

Our findings suggest that youth may not be able to ask for help from school staff if they need it as they sometimes do not feel heard or believed. They also point out that there are limited discussions of housing problems in school, perhaps due to stigma and/or a lack of explicit inclusion in the curriculum or school policies. Despite positive experiences with some teachers and staff, young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness see schools

as another structural impediment to their well-being and point out that teachers and school staff may not be able to understand the problems with which they are dealing.

We worked with community organizations in two municipal regions of the province of Ontario to recruit 28 young people experiencing homelessness with whom the second author and a Graduate Research Assistant conducted interviews. Their ages ranged from 16 to 23; eight of them defined themselves as female, two as trans or non-binary, and the remaining eighteen as male. The majority (twenty-two) had been diagnosed with one or more mental health issues, and five had been diagnosed with physical disabilities. To answer our research question, "What are the schooling experiences of young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness?", we asked youth to reflect on their time in school, how they thought schools and staff might have better supported them, and what they thought should change to better support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness while in school. We will present some of the principal findings of the interviews and discuss some of the possible solutions that the interviewees proposed to help better support young people in schools and, thus, potentially prevent them from becoming homeless.

2. Literature Review

The specific problems of young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness have gained increasing attention in the last few decades in Canada. Some of this research, such as that by Stephen W. Baron, focuses on homelessness as a consequence of individual engagement with violence and criminality [3]. His work defines homeless youth as primarily 'on the street' or rough-sleeping, male, 24 years of age or younger, and not attending school. One of the core discussions woven through this literature is whether activities such as substance use, criminal violence, and victimization are a result of their precarious housing or determined by other characteristics and experiences of this group [4–6]. Some of the problems of this research include the fact that it is exclusively or primarily focused on young men and their interactions with the criminal justice system. Other work from this early period of research in the 1990s looks at a wider range of effects that homelessness has for young people, such as malnutrition [7,8], depression [9,10], and other health issues [11–13].

Increasing awareness of the extent and scope of problems for young people has led to research that looks beyond criminality and health, towards the underlying causes of youth homelessness. Stephen Gaetz points out that homeless youth are often victims of crime and other factors beyond their control [14]. He argues that the emphasis on homeless youth as "delinquent street urchins" [14] (p. 424) and perpetrators of crime pushes many of the reasons for their behaviors into the background. There are situational and social factors that may leave young people with few choices in their responses, and Gaetz has contributed to many articles and reports that explain these reasons [2,15–20]. Gaetz's research helped re-focus the broader field of youth homelessness studies in Canada onto the social and economic circumstances and away from the idea that individuals were primarily responsible for their housing situation. This is particularly important when trying to understand how young people who may have little ability to earn or access resources for their basic needs understand and try to navigate their social world. This shift in perspective also moved the research focus from young people who were involved in the criminal justice system to include those who are 'at risk' and who may be experiencing different levels of housing insecurity, whether they are criminalized or not. This requires people who are trying to protect children in the school system, such as social workers, teachers, and administrators, to differentiate between those who are 'at risk' from those who are experiencing homelessness and also recognize the experiences of 'hidden homelessness' that are particularly common among young people [21]. Focusing on youth who are already in crisis and have entered the shelter system leaves a significant portion of youth who are struggling with homelessness invisible [21,22]. The counts of homeless youth often miss both those who are staying with friends (couch-surfing) and those who are sleeping

outdoors or in other places that are "unsuitable for human habitation" [16] (p. 7). Even with these low estimates, Canadian data suggest that about 42,000 young people under the age of 25 experience homelessness every year [23] (p. 22).

Gaetz et al. [24] argue that it is necessary to achieve more than merely respond to young people in crisis, and this requires "working upstream" [15,25] as a primary means of preventing homelessness. This idea of working upstream has been imported from a successful project in Australia that has helped reduce youth homelessness [26] and is advocated by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and other allied organizations. Working upstream means addressing structural and systemic issues to mitigate some of the factors that may lead to homelessness. This includes the stigmatization of people experiencing homelessness that both comes from the external community and can be internalized within individuals [27,28]. By the time a young person is experiencing homelessness, they have often already had to deal with many problems and crises for which they would have needed support. The expansion of our understanding of homelessness through research has been accompanied by greater knowledge about the causes of and precursors to housing precarity. Schwan et al. use a social-ecological model that describes three main groups of factors that contribute to housing problems: structural factors, system failures, and individual and relational factors [20] (p. 3). Current research also increasingly includes knowledge generated by young people themselves about their circumstances that lead to housing problems rather than being solely focused on external perspectives and judgements about the behaviours and perceptions of young people [29–35].

Our research builds on this need for a social-ecological model that incorporates the experiences of young people who are the object of the research. The insights that young people bring to this topic reveal potential solutions that could be made available while they are in school. In particular, our research reports on the experiences of young people who have left school and their reasons for doing so. This group is difficult to reach and has unique perspectives that can contribute to projects helping young people remain in school and retain housing. There are examples of school-based projects to combat homelessness, such as those supported by Upstream Australia using their 'COSS' model [36], but similar programs are rare in Canada, and the current literature calls for much more to be done in schools to prevent homelessness [37]. Young people who experience housing problems or homelessness are a diverse group that includes students who are in both elementary and secondary schools and former students who have left school. There may be some commonality in that almost all young people are expected to engage with the school system, but the schools and school systems vary, and young people are aware of and must deal with some of these variations.

3. Research Aims and Methods

The research on which this paper is based is part of a larger project looking at youth homelessness prevention and schooling across Canada. The broad research goals are to map existing Canadian educational policies and responses to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to understand the impact of current educational responses and generate alternative ideas for policies, actions, and resources that might better support these youth. This project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and ethics clearance was provided by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board. The empirical data for this article come from two municipalities in the province of Ontario and are based on interviews with young people who had experienced or were experiencing homelessness at the time of their interviews.

Some of the researchers have lived experience of homelessness, and considerable effort was made to consult with young people who had lived experience in the design of the study and the methods used to reach out to participants. This helped mitigate some of the differences in social location between the relatively privileged positions of researchers and participants, although, as has been written about elsewhere, this type of research has both advantages and disadvantages [38,39]. These efforts included recruiting collaborators

and advisors from within universities and community agencies who did not regularly participate in the creation and implementation of academic research projects. Training and compensation were provided where appropriate.

Participants were recruited through organizations that provided services to youth experiencing homelessness. They were asked to participate in an interview and fill out a very brief demographic survey, where they were asked to choose a pseudonym, describe their age, gender and sexuality (in their own words), whether they had grown up in Canada, their status as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis persons, and whether they had been diagnosed with mental health or physical health issues. The survey and semi-structured questionnaire for the interview were developed with the assistance of youth in each of the two cities who had experiences with homelessness. One of the purposes for this was to ensure that the language used and the questions asked were sensitive to the trauma that many of these young people had experienced and reduce the likelihood of triggering further trauma. The research team also shared a list of resources that were locally available and appropriate for the age and circumstances of the participants. Because members of the research team also had experience with homelessness, this provided both a measure of sensitivity and also, sometimes, a further level of difficulty for the project team members in discussing issues and events that are, for many people, traumatic and defining moments in their lives.

The youth who participated in this research project were from two metropolitan areas in the province of Ontario in Canada. We contacted the majority through organizations that specifically serve young people who are experiencing homelessness or housing precarity as well as through additional contacts of members of the research team and previous participants. Many of the research participants chose their own pseudonyms so that they could identify their own contributions to the research with a name that had some significance for them while also protecting their identity. The pseudonyms used below are ValleyVille, JK, Timothy Coop, O'Neil, Monty, Dan, Billie, Elizabeth, Math, Nick, Greenskirt, Ktown, Missindependent, Jamaca, Geoff, Hybrid, RideauW, Jess, Josh, and Kylee.

The semi-structured interview guide included questions about current circumstances, such as asking about "an average day right now", as well as about participants' living situation and their own definitions of their life circumstances. Some participants chose to talk about their family history, but the questions were flexible enough to allow them to avoid topics they did not wish to discuss. The researchers specifically asked them to describe their experiences in school and whether they thought schools could do more to help students who were experiencing or were at risk of homelessness. This included asking them whether homelessness was discussed at their school as part of classroom instruction or in any other circumstance. The interviews were conducted in person during 2018 and 2019 in a space where the participants felt safe; the length of the interviews varied, as some participants were more enthusiastic than others. The participants were not pushed to continue the interview if they displayed reluctance or discomfort with the process. Each participant was paid a modest honorarium of CAD20 for their time, paid at the beginning of the interview to limit the degree to which the cash payment made them feel they must complete the interview.

The analysis of the transcripts was supported using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to look for themes arising from the stories that were offered by the participants about the housing and schooling issues they faced. This analysis is based on what Bent Flyvbjerg describes as phronetic research [40–42] that decentres the researcher and research questions and focuses on practical activities, knowledge, and values that are revealed through the participants' stories and descriptions of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This approach uses subjective perceptions and concrete examples from participants to explore the combinations of values and power relations that motivate people's actions in their social world. The purpose of this method of analysis is to faithfully represent the voices of the participants in a way that usefully connects the social worlds of youth who experience homelessness with a more academically informed understanding of the environment and situations in which they find themselves. The themes that we noted as

being most significant to their experiences in school were focused on the positive value of education, the support from some specific teachers and staff, the lack of information or discussion of homelessness, the 'symptoms' of homelessness, and bullying and violence both in and out of school.

4. Research Participants: Family Histories and Current Circumstances

Some of the youth-serving organizations in the two cities provided places to sleep, but the number of spaces was limited, and the youths we interviewed were sleeping in a variety of places, such as friends' or relatives' houses, temporary shelters, or on the streets. The majority had spent most of their lives near the community in which they were interviewed, but there were some who had spent years in different parts of Canada and at least one who had immigrated to Canada as a refugee. None of them were in school at the time they were interviewed, although their school experiences were often very recent, and some of them were working on alternative paths to complete their education. Some of them had managed to rent apartments or rooms, but these were often precarious and uncomfortable for several different reasons. The places they were able to rent were often shared with other people and unstable because of the young people's insecurity of income, over-crowding, low-quality buildings, and unresponsive property managers or landlords. ValleyVille, who was proud of the fact that he had "dug [him]self out of a hole", described being happy with his current housing, which had "a master bedroom, ensuite, walk-in closet and everything". This description of his living situation—a single room with some privacy—was among the best reported by the youth with whom we spoke.

The youth participants often shared stories about difficulties in their families of origin. Many of them had been primarily raised by one or both biological parents, although five reported that they had foster parents at some point. Four also stated during their interviews that one of their parents had died during their childhood, and the same number said that one or both of their parents had a drug or alcohol problem. Almost a third of these young people talked about some level of neglect and/or abuse from parental figures or parents who had simply left for significant lengths of time. These numbers are difficult to evaluate because they are self-reported by young people who are often still dealing with numerous problems in their lives and have frequently been bullied because of their appearance and behaviours. There seemed to be a tendency by the youth to downplay the severity of abuse, although some of the participants reported extreme incidents that led to their homelessness. For instance, one participant said they left home because "my father wouldn't let me go to school, socialize, nothing. I was locked in my room. Wasn't allowed to eat. He once beat the crap out of me with a metal bar. He didn't care about the sexual abuse with a family member, nothing". Not all young people were as open about their experiences, but it seems likely that all of them had experienced some form of trauma during the process of becoming homeless and surviving homelessness. One of the challenges of this research, as is common in projects with young people who have experienced homelessness [43], was how to deal with such disclosures ethically and with enough care to not cause further trauma. This typically meant that we only got to hear the information that the participants felt comfortable sharing at the time of the interviews; the interviewers would not, as a rule, probe for more information if there were ever signs of discomfort or reluctance to speak about certain issues.

Those who were living in shelters or in the streets had to expend a great deal of time and energy dealing with social services, looking after their basic survival needs such as finding food, and seeking out activities to fill the day. These activities sometimes involved pursuing employment and education and gave them opportunities to socialize with friends and other peers. Some of the shelters provided them with food, but they would not be allowed to stay in the shelter during the day. JK described their average day as "wake up around eight o'clock, be ready [for breakfast] by nine o'clock. I'd have to leave the shelter by ten. And then we can come back around twelve for lunch [...] and leave again. Come back around four o'clock and then dinner is around six". TimothyCoop was staying at a

place that did not offer meals, so he would wake up and go find food at other places that offered it and only return to his shelter to sleep at night. "I have no guarantee of food," he said, and he described how he could be refused food for days at a time if the staff did not like his behavior: "[I] got kicked out for 3 days. [The first day,] it's nothing but on that second day you get pretty hungry". He understood how difficult it is for staff, but he also pointed out that losing personal possessions in shelters, going hungry, and being stressed by the lack of a secure place to sleep often caused him to "snap for like those two seconds". He proposed that staff would perform better if they talked to the youth so they might better understand the pressures that their clients were experiencing.

If they were not staying in a shelter or the street, they were often staying in shared accommodation, and this took several different forms. Sometimes it meant that they were "couch-surfing" or staying with friends without necessarily paying any rent. The major problem they identified was that they often felt that they could only stay in one place for a limited amount of time before they would strain their relationship with their friend too much. O'Neil stated that "nobody is going to want you [to] stay at their house for very long. In the long run I maybe stayed at someone's house for 3 weeks at one time". Monty said that he usually found a place to couch-surf but also sometimes slept under a bridge, "for fun". Part of his rationale for doing this was that the police avoided him if he "kept up the more homeless look", which was an advantage as he had been hassled by the police before. However, obtaining food was often a challenge, and he said, "most of the time [he] would just go up to stoners and be like, hey you guys got any extra munchies?" Dan was also staying at a friend's place, where it sounded like more support was available, although he was welcome "for a while, just 'till I get my [own] place". Couch-surfing seemed preferable to sleeping on the streets, but it was still very precarious and meant that the youth had no personal space or security.

Many of them talked about how they had little control over their living situation. This was true for various situations in which they found themselves. Shelter spaces were often only temporary and limited in availability. Billie was staying at an adult shelter, for instance, and had no friends with whom she could stay. Several others reported how precarious their access to shelter beds could be if they were late for curfew. Both TimothyCoop and Elizabeth reported that they lost access to their beds because they did not make it back to the shelter in time. This can be particularly difficult when they are also required to leave the shelter during the day. Elizabeth narrated how she could get caught up in issues and relationships outside of the shelter that made it difficult for them to go back. "I left because I [...] had a boyfriend and he came down [from another city] and the first night I stayed out just to make sure he was okay. And then I tried to go back, and I couldn't [...] so I stayed out with [him] for a week until he went back [to his city]". The rules at the shelters are sometimes in conflict with what the youth need to do to preserve their relationships or friendships as well as making it difficult to make any money or navigate other aspects of their lives that can be very chaotic.

Even if they were paying for a place to sleep, they often expressed dissatisfaction with their living arrangements and the social world in which they found themselves. O'Neil managed to secure some work when he was in Toronto, but the place he was staying at was full of "a bunch of stupid people [who] did nothing but sit there and party". He ended up living in a moving trailer, and his co-workers supplied him with food and money when he needed it. Of course, this also indicates that, even though he was working, he was not paid enough to secure his own apartment. Math described how he lived in accommodation that was "like a rooming house" but it was "full of other people that [he doesn't] get along with", and he, therefore, spent his days outside his housing at libraries, youth centres, and friends' houses. Nick was in a similar type of housing, but he also described how there were "lots of bad influences walking around" the house. He remained because the rent was relatively low, and he could eat at home. Those who found places to rent were looking at the very bottom-end of the rental market and described how precarious their rental situations could be because of both landlords and co-renters. The ways in which they

described their housing situations suggest that there is often little to differentiate low-end rentals (including shared accommodation), shelter beds, couch-surfing, and sleeping on the streets. All of these are challenging, uncomfortable, and sometimes unsafe.

5. Schooling Experiences: A Mix of Good and Bad

5.1. The Positive Value and Experiences of School

Most of the participants talked about the positive value of education and the completion of a high school diploma as a necessary life step. They saw school as an important means of obtaining a decent job and achieving some of their dreams for the future. Monty wanted to finish school so that he could "get a job in the future [after he] sorts out other stuff in his life". Nick expressed just how important finishing school was by stating that "you can't get nowhere without that. [. . .] It's like life or death". Many of the young people looked beyond high school and were hoping to attend post-secondary education. O'Neil was concerned that just a secondary education was not enough to secure a job: "A high school diploma doesn't even get you a job anymore; you need [post-]secondary education—college". Several participants expressed hope that some post-secondary education would enable them to enter careers that would give them a regular income as well as help them feel more socially valued. Schooling could also be an avenue to learn skills and lessons that they felt that they were missing because of their disrupted home lives. Greenskirt described schooling as a way to learn the same stuff that "normal people" learn as they grow up. Education could be an avenue to a life that she aspired to but had largely seen from the outside.

A few of the participants had already graduated from high school, but most of them had dropped out before completing their diploma. The Ontario school system offers both a secondary school diploma and a certificate. The certificate is for students who have earned a minimum of 14 credits but leave school before earning the Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The diploma requires 30 credits (including 2 online credits), passing The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, and the completion of 40 "community involvement hours". The Ministry of Education website describes these hours as designed to help students "develop awareness and understanding of civic responsibility", and up to ten of these hours can be paid work [44]. Dan had received a secondary school certificate, but he expressed a strong desire to go back to school and upgrade to a diploma. His reasoning was that "if you don't get a diploma, you won't get a real job."

5.2. The Shortcomings of School

The lessons that they learned in school did not fulfill all the needs they had. The education that schools offered was typically limited in helping them deal with their life circumstances. Billie stated that school did not teach "everything you are gonna use in life but there are some things [. . .] that come in handy". JK had a relatively low opinion of what school offered—"I don't think school educates you worth shit"—but, nonetheless, wanted to obtain his diploma so that he could move on to other types of education that could be much more valuable. Ktown noted that his dad had dropped out of high school and was "super successful" so saw dropping out of school as a valid option depending on potential career paths. However, Ktown and many other participants were looking forward to receiving some sort of post-secondary education in college or university. They aspired to a variety of specific careers in nursing, welding, veterinary care, mechanics, and counseling. Billie looked forward to obtaining her diploma so she "could follow my career and live a happy life", but she also said that she often felt that she was on her own because she could not receive the personal attention from school staff that she felt she needed. Without this personal attention, it seemed more worthwhile to skip class and avoid the pressure of schooling to deal with other problems in life. Moreover, even if young people recognized the value of school and the possible benefits, they still had to deal with problems that were often part of the school social scene.

5.3. Bullying and Other School Problems

Bullying was reported by almost half of the participants, and, for some of them, it was so common that they assumed that, as Missindependent said, "everyone gets bullied in school". She considered the bullying she put up with to be routine because there are just students at school who are bullies. Jamaca said that they were bullied frequently in both elementary and high school, and they did not understand why: "[It was] just fucking random". Elizabeth said that she noticed that the bullying seemed to become less as she advanced in high school, but then homelessness created new problems and new reasons for people to bully her. She noted, in particular, that there was more bullying among youth who were experiencing homelessness. "It started as I became homeless. With the other homeless youth". What she was explaining sounded like it was partly about the fracturing of her social group that had formerly been focused on the shared experience of schooling. "[They] say things about me being homeless but they're homeless as well. It's just that they're going to school and I'm not". Bullies appeared to take advantage of inequalities to punch down on people close to them, and the ability to attend school regularly or not was one source of inequality. Elizabeth's experience of an abatement of bullying as she moved from elementary school to high school was similar to that reported by others, but her subsequent problems with housing led her to new experiences of being bullied because of her housing insecurity and the consequent effects on her appearance and school attendance.

Bullying sometimes led to behavioral problems such as increased aggression and further challenges at school. Timothy Coop described how his experiences of homelessness made life and friendships more complicated, led him to experience more bad treatment at school, and made him "a lot meaner". Nick described how he was violently beaten and bullied by one youth in elementary school, but that this changed when his mom died and then he "got mean" himself. He was being frequently bullied, and, when he violently retaliated, the bullying stopped. However, he also got suspended by the school for his actions. He noted that "it was like I failed the whole thing". In resolving the problem of being bullied, he was then faced with what he perceived as the unfair exercise of institutional power by the school. Geoff also found that years of bullying in elementary school eventually led him to become more violent in high school. By grade eight, "the anger really took off" for him, and he spent most of grade nine at home because of his violent response to bullying. Geoff eventually found ways to manage his anger more constructively and stayed in school with the extra support of a single teacher in grade nine who spent some additional time with him and treated him in a way that "made [him] feel like everybody else". Geoff attributed bullying and violence in school to a response to feelings of powerlessness in the youth doing the bullying as well as creating more feelings of powerlessness in the bullied. It sounded like he had participated in some anti-bullying work with staff from his description of how he came to this understanding.

6. School-Based Recommendations from Young People Who Have Experienced Homelessness

6.1. Increase Discussion of Homelessness

Young people were asked during the interviews whether homelessness was discussed in school and, if so, how it was talked about. Almost all the youth who responded to the question said that homelessness was not discussed in school. Elizabeth described a conversation she had at school about her own housing situation and how precarious it was, but the topic itself was not part of the shared school curriculum. Dan said that there was a day when his class "covered the topic of homelessness", but he was not in class that day and heard about it afterwards from his school buddy. Hybrid wondered if schools avoided the subject in part because "it's a very morbid subject," making it difficult to talk about. He observed that the life skills that were taught in school were only relevant for young people who were "very lucky and get to have parents and money and stuff and get to go to school and all that". Elizabeth also remembered asking a teacher about a homeless man she saw on the street who looked tired and sick, but she received no explanation about how somebody could end up in that situation or, perhaps more importantly, "how it could

happen to anyone, and things you could do to avoid it". From the perspective of the young people in our study, there was a lack of information and a clear discomfort from school staff when talking about homelessness.

The majority of the youth participants thought that it would be helpful to have more information and discussion about homelessness in schools and normalize it as part of the everyday possibilities in their communities. O'Neil questioned why it was not discussed: "I think it should honestly be something that is very well known, and I don't know why it isn't". ValleyVille argued that "awareness is a great start and that is step one—awareness that it can happen to you". Trainman thought that, perhaps, homelessness was not talked about in schools that were in 'nice' neighborhoods and that this reluctance was tied to the association between homelessness and drug use. Like discussions of drug use, it was not helpful to just hear that homelessness is bad. This is why ValleyVille talked about the need to have a "professional person" talk to students about homelessness and how to get out of it: "someone who knows what to do and how people heal". He described the need to accomplish two primary goals. One was to let students know that they were not alone in the challenges they faced. The other goal was to make practical knowledge about housing and living independently available to students and not assume that they would be taught life skills by their families. He described how frustrating it was to try and cook for himself when he "didn't know how to open a fucking can". ValleyVille suggested a class that he called 'Foods' that he thought would be great. "If you are interested and you don't know, you can take it, and proceed in school. You can get credit for it!" This idea of assigning credits for these types of classes adds an additional motivation for students to do well in the course and can also be seen as a recognition that some students have a great deal more to learn and put into practice than others.

Some of the youth theorized that the lack of information about homelessness was due to stigmatization of both the topic and people who experienced homelessness. They stated that increasing the discussion of and information about homelessness might help remove some of the ignorance and stigma around it. The participants primarily used the word stigma to denote both hostility towards people experiencing homelessness and ignorance of these experiences. They saw this type of stigma at play when schools in 'nice' neighborhoods refused to acknowledge that they had problems with homelessness. Ktown thought that people who had not experienced homelessness should learn more about it because understanding might lead to more compassion. "I don't really think they need to learn much about it other than don't be a dick to those people. Just because it doesn't happen to you doesn't mean it doesn't happen at all". The theory of stigma as the result of power inequality [45] can help us better understand what stigma means to these young people, how it impacts their lives, and why it can be difficult to observe in practice (the authors are currently working on another article from this interview data about stigma and bullying that will expand on this very relevant topic). As Greenskirt noted, "I was sort of young when it first started so I didn't know [it was a problem]". Math noted that "regular kids" could become homeless if "they got kicked out for no reason". Math was not saying that it could happen to anyone but was more specifically making the point that homelessness was not evidence of an inability to do well in school.

The lack of information and stigmatization of the topic of homelessness may also lead to a decline in support for people experiencing homelessness. Missindependent emphatically stated that "maybe we should help them instead of just judging them". She described how others treated homeless people as "gross" and "smelly" and, therefore, not worthy of care or help. Several participants noted that stigma and ignorance were not just found among other students or young people. Geoff observed how "even adults [...] know that there are homeless people but don't know what they're struggling with". RideauW admitted that they had this sort of perspective of homeless people when they were younger: "Growing up, I had this skewed vision of people who were homeless. That they were all drug addicts, and they all deserve to be where they've been". Experience and discussion with others had changed their perspective. It seems like a reasonable assumption, shared

by many of these young people, that talking about others' experiences in a school setting could help shift some of the assumptions and stigma around homelessness.

6.2. Know the Signs and Symptoms of Homelessness

As one of the central aims of carrying out this research was to prevent and reduce homelessness among young people, we asked the research participants to tell us how an adult in school might have been able to tell that they were at-risk or experiencing homelessness, a category which we describe as 'the signs and symptoms of homelessness.' The youth participants responded in many different ways, pointing to physical, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual signs that could indicate that a student was dealing with housing issues. They also differentiated between different phases of housing problems that young people often experienced. Most of the participants indicated that their housing issues varied considerably over time. They had periods of crisis, but they also managed to work out various ways to obtain food and shelter much of the time. TimothyCoop for instance said that he consistently attended school until grade 10 and then had a period of time when he was "in and out a lot" and "fully dropped out" some time in grade 11. More obvious signs of homelessness such as wearing the same clothes for many days in a row and being unable to wash themselves meant that the student was likely already in a crisis of some sort.

Several participants commented that they often had exhibited signs of being unusually tired or exhausted in school. Elizabeth suggested that this was one of the primary signs of precarious or absent housing. "A lot of the time, a lot of the homeless kids look extremely tired [to the point that] they can't walk properly, or it takes them a longer time to walk than others". The severity of this sort of exhaustion differed based on the starting point. For Geoff, his grades and his energy levels were dropping in class, and he dropped out of extracurricular sports and other activities as his housing problems worsened: "I was in football. I dropped out of that. I stopped coaching basketball. I just basically dropped every extracurricular". Unfortunately for him, this process was gradual enough that his teachers and staff did not notice or at least did not talk to him about it until just before he dropped out of school. Valleyville also pointed to declining attendance and being tired from having to work; however, he said that his grades actually went up a bit because of the additional effort he put into working with other students in his classes to stay on top of his studies. These young people often had a remarkable capacity to adjust to their circumstances at least for a while, which could make it difficult for teachers and staff to evaluate how their life was going outside of school.

There are other social symptoms that may be indicative of a student at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. As noted above, one of the common school problems that many of these young people described was bullying. Several of them specifically stated that they were bullied because of problems that they were having with their housing or family of origin. Bullying is a complex social activity that can be very difficult to interpret, particularly for people outside the social group. Even within the social group, young people sometimes gave contradictory interpretations of the relationships between themselves and their school peers. Jess described her schoolmates as both "kind and very shitty at the same time". She did describe some aspects of school as very supportive but also indicated that she felt differentiated from other students by her home circumstances including poverty. Josh also provided a mixed description of his peer group at school: "Some of them treated me fine, some of them treated me like garbage; picked on me all the time". He also described himself as a bit of a loner at school who kept to himself. When he stopped going to school, he said that nobody followed up to see how he was doing. These sorts of ambivalent relationships to school peers may be indicative of an inability to find a peer group that would help them encourage continued ties to the school system as a whole. Both Jess and Josh indicated that they appreciated some of the teachers and staff, but the ties (or lack of ties) to other students were also critically important.

Friendships with school peers were often complicated by housing problems. Billie described how she felt popular at school but felt that these friendships were limited. "They would be there during the day. Like if I was at school, everybody would be all together [...] but if I didn't have a place to sleep at night, I probably wouldn't be able to stay at their place. They seemed to care about my situation, but they really didn't". Monty was able to maintain friendships with people still in school but also had friends who shared his experiences with homelessness. Friendships among youths who shared housing problems was especially important as they could pass information on how to find shelter and food among each other. These connections provided both practical and emotional support. Dan was at a drop-in centre that he found through a friend who invited him there. Billie found supportive shelter when she "met a couple of people [her age] that lived this lifestyle [who] showed [her] around and they showed [her] what to do". Both Matt and Hybrid described their recent friends as "family", which may indicate the ways in which their experiences with homelessness were associated with estrangement from their families of origin as well as the distance they felt from their school peers and their experiences. The variety of peer and parental relationships is not surprising in diverse communities such as those found in Ontario, but it does mean that an outside observer cannot make assumptions based on how young people describe their family and friends, especially when their living situation is unstable. Young people may be moving among many different social groups as they try to find sustainable housing.

6.3. Make Schools a More Supportive Space

Although none of the young people we interviewed were currently in school, they often spoke positively about their time in school. For many of them, school was a reprieve from other situations in their life. Math described school as the "most safe space" they had. Even though they had problems with attendance, they found that the teachers were easy to talk to and expressed compassion and understanding about their difficult home or housing situation: "I would talk to my teacher about [stuff] and explain to him my situation at home [and] he was actually pretty good with me". Lynn described her high school as "always a safe place" and very supportive, although she also mentioned that elementary school felt much less safe. Both these young people also identified themselves as trans and found support for this aspect of their lives from both teachers and staff. They noted how easy it was to accommodate their preferred names within the school and described the staff as particularly helpful and supportive.

School could sometimes be a place where the participants could find support that they did not have in other aspects of their lives. Missindependent identified one of the most positive aspects of school as "having support from people that I didn't necessarily have at home". She clarified further that this happened despite her reluctance to ask for help from the school. School may not have been able to offer her some practical help such as securing food and housing, but the teachers and staff knew what was going on in her life and provided emotional support and understanding. "It was the support and the comforting that I really, really enjoyed at school". ValleyVille also experienced this sort of support and saw it given to other students as well: "I had freedom where I could just leave if I needed [...] and sometimes I would even be pulled aside and [teachers or staff] would tell me their side of loss as well". He found this treatment to be particularly helpful in his case and said that he did not abuse it because it was exactly what he needed at the time. He also saw them treat another student in a similar way: "Timmy was a foster kid, lost everything, his situation sounded 300 times worse than mine, and he had similar freedom. I just think [the teachers] thought the best way to have their students succeed is to give them what they need". The interview participants gave numerous other examples of teachers, staff, and principals who were often aware of the difficult situation of some of their students and provided compassion and support, including spending extra time and their own money to provide for these students.

Some of the students did recognize limitations to what the school system and its staff could provide. Kylee talked about her understanding of some of the limitations of what schools were supposed to provide: "[Problems with parents are] not technically their jurisdiction—as long as she's getting her credits". She had some compassion for teachers who had "to watch their students come in every day wearing the same clothes for six days in a row, obviously not showering in weeks. It has got to be heartbreaking". She had attended a high school that had a washer and dryer as well as showers that students could use if they needed; this is an excellent example of physical changes that could be made within schools that could make life easier for students experiencing homelessness or otherwise not receiving the care that they need. Elizabeth also noticed that some schools were limited by the sheer number of students. She went to one school where staff had the time to provide extra support but then moved to another school that was "busy, and the classes were usually really full". Students who most needed support to succeed in school are often the first to lose it when staffing levels do not keep up with enrollment.

A further limitation that some participants noted was the lack of practical knowledge about youth homelessness among teachers, staff, and other students. O'Neil appreciated the guidance counsellors that he had in school but also said that it would be helpful to have a counsellor who "actually understands homelessness [and] understands what's going on [for youth at risk of homelessness]". He observed that it took more than a few hours of learning and a night sleeping in a cleaned-up shelter to understand what it meant to be homeless. He supported people doing longer-term placements at drop-in centres where they could spend time with youth who were struggling with school and housing and learn more about how to talk with them and understand their situations and feelings. Teachers and counselors need to understand the stresses that some young people are experiencing, and this can be very challenging when youths may not want to admit how difficult their housing situations are, and teachers and staff are not sure how to help them even if they can recognize a problem.

6.4. Limitations of Recommendations

It is important to acknowledge that the perspectives of young people within the school system are only one part of the story of school responses to homelessness; an original goal of this research was also to interview teachers and school staff in both regions. However, school board ethics committees blocked our access in both boards, meaning that we cannot currently inquire into the important perspectives of school staff on their knowledge of youth homelessness and the barriers that they face in supporting the young people in their care. As noted in the literature review above, we do know from other research on policy documents in Canada that no province or territory currently has specific school-based policies regarding youth homelessness [46]. The perspectives of the young people we interviewed were limited by their specific life circumstances that sometimes pushed them out of the school system, and they were also engaged with other social systems and organizations that often had a profound impact on how useful school was for them. They were not necessarily aware of the limitations of school policies and procedures that are often decided at the level of the school board or the provincial Ministry of Education. The two geographic areas in which this research was conducted are diverse and separated from each other by at least an eight hour highway drive and under the jurisdiction of separate school boards. The results cannot necessarily be generalized even to the province of Ontario as a whole, and situations may vary considerably across the country. Nevertheless, there is a shared experience of housing problems and homelessness, and the individual narratives can give us clues and indications of where and how to make further inquiries, as well as some methods that may mitigate homelessness among young people anywhere in Canada.

7. Conclusions: Better School Support as a Form of Homelessness Prevention

From what young people have told us, it is clear that students who are experiencing homelessness often feel like the adults around them have little knowledge of their housing

problems. They also sense an unwillingness and discomfort to discuss this topic with students who could be helped by such a discussion. This desire to avoid the topic could be understood as a result of the stigma attached to homelessness; the effects of this stigma also seem to show up in incidents of peer bullying and other forms of social exclusion. This general lack of discussion about homelessness leads to a paucity of accurate available information. Without this information, young people may find it difficult to access potential resources, particularly youth-specific services in a field which tends to focus more on adults who are experiencing homelessness. How they can access resources can vary depending on whether they are 15 or 17, enrolled in school or not attending, employed or not. The uneven nature of these opportunities and challenges is due to structural factors and systemic failures. The structural factors include school systems that are not designed to provide support outside of a range of elements defined as educational. Systemic failures occur when school systems are unable or unwilling to adapt to deal with the impact that precarious housing and homelessness among students and their families have on the educational achievements of students.

The individual circumstances of each young person can vary widely. They may experience abuse at home or not. There are some statistical data that help describe young people who are more at-risk, but these are never definitive. Young people at risk of homelessness in Canada are more likely to be racialized or First Nations/Métis and Inuit; they are also more likely to identify as LGBTQ2S+. They are disproportionately diagnosed with mental health issues and are more likely to have a learning disability [2] (pp. 51–52). They are more likely to have come from foster care and/or from intergenerational poverty [47] (p. 14). However, none of these factors are definite markers of housing problems, and they are not a necessary cause or consequence of homelessness. It is important to keep in mind that poverty—lack of money—is one of the most prevalent markers of housing insecurity [20], but poverty is not necessarily visible in school. Problems that stem from other aspects of a person's life and identity make life more difficult, and it is often the combination of poverty and other factors that makes continued attendance at school challenging or impossible. These young people not only face barriers to finding work and earning money when entering the workforce at an early age but also often lack family and other social supports that could help them find housing and food. Young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are typically faced with taking on responsibilities for which they are poorly equipped. The fact that most of them continue to hold the school system, teachers, and staff in high regard speaks well to the ability of the adults in these systems to offer compassion and care. However, structural shortcomings and systemic failures mean that the school system does not provide resources and answers that should be addressed on a larger scale.

School systems can build on their strengths as a space where many young people can spend a great deal of time in relative safety. The young people in this study call for discussion and recognition as a necessary step to reducing stigma that lies behind an inability to access help and resources and escape a cycle of housing precarity and homelessness that often extends into adulthood. It may also help fight the bullying and mistreatment of at-risk youth that can push them out of school and away from other sources of help. On an individual level, reducing stigma through open discussions of homelessness and housing precarity will help young people experiencing homelessness deal with the extraordinary problems in their living situations. On an institutional level, reducing stigma and supporting school staff in knowing the signs and symptoms of homelessness will help everyone involved to recognize the scope and extent of the problem. Surveys can show us the broad numbers, but individual stories from young people can help us reimagine schools and their policies to provide solutions that will, hopefully, lead us to improve our responses to youth homelessness [16] and shift the entire system towards the whole-scale prevention and, ultimately, elimination of youth homelessness in the future.

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