Article

Making Homes in Un-Homelike Places among Young People in Vancouver: Implications for Homelessness Prevention

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Abstract: This article explores the experiences of young people navigating an evolving system of housing and homelessness services in Vancouver, Canada. Despite recent shifts toward Housing First policies and calls for prevention-oriented initiatives, many young people continue to rely on temporary emergency accommodations. Amid a surge in youth homelessness and unstable housing in Vancouver, our study examines young people's "homing" strategies across time and place and temporary and more permanent living environments. We draw from an ongoing ethnographic study that began in 2021 and has involved over 70 interviews and 100 h of fieldwork with 54 young people aged 19 to 29. Our findings emphasize that feeling at home extends beyond having a roof over one's head for an extended period of time. A focus on homing strategies—that is, the day-to-day practices, routines, and forms of sociality that generate a sense of stability and care even in un-homelike places—highlights how young people can be better supported in making themselves at home in the places where they live, potentially preventing returns to street-based homelessness. This study contributes insights to youth homelessness prevention policies, urging a strengths-based approach that aligns with young people's needs, priorities, and desires for homemaking.

Keywords: homing; home; homelessness; young people who use drugs; prevention; temporary housing

1. Introduction

This article examines the experiences of young people who use drugs (ages 19 to 29) as they navigate an expanding system of housing and homelessness services in Vancouver, Canada. Vancouver's policy response to homelessness has historically reflected broader trends in North America and Europe, with a focus on addressing homelessness primarily through shelters, safehouses, and short-term transitional housing [1,2]. More recently, in 2017, as part of its *Rapid Response to Homelessness* program, the City of Vancouver invested in the expansion of Housing First-inspired supportive housing projects aimed at providing more permanent pathways out of homelessness [3,4]. This was an important shift away from managing homelessness toward providing low-barrier access to housing with integrated primary care, mental health, substance use, and social (e.g., life skills training) services intended to help prevent residents from returning to homelessness [5]. According to the *Rapid Response to Homelessness* framework, supportive housing in Vancouver must include 24/7 staffing and provide daily meals, access to free or low-cost laundry services, group and individual life skills programming, and social and recreational programs. Staff in supportive housing buildings are formally tasked with connecting residents to community programs and education and work opportunities, as well as income and disability assistance [4]. The objective has been to swiftly provide housing for individuals facing homelessness or at risk of homelessness and particularly individuals who struggle with mental health and substance use challenges [6]. Distinct from earlier approaches, individuals can reside in supportive housing without being required to maintain abstinence from

substance use or engage in treatment [7]. While these programs serve young people over the age of 18, there is currently no dedicated supportive housing for minors in Vancouver.

As part of its comprehensive housing strategy, the City of Vancouver has outlined a "Housing Continuum" that extends from low-barrier shelters and transitional housing for people experiencing homelessness to affordable independent rental housing and homeownership [8]. Along this continuum, there are a number of options available to young people who use drugs. Youth homeless shelters offer temporary accommodation, typically in dormitory-style settings, and provide access to basic necessities and linked services to young people under the age of 25. Safe houses for youth offer discreet and secure emergency housing for individuals between the ages of 16 and 18 who are exiting unsafe situations. Safe houses are meant to transition young people rapidly into more stable and long-term forms of housing. Transitional homes for youth are temporary and highly structured group living situations in apartment or detached market rental housing that are designed to assist young people transitioning out of government care, unstable housing, and substance use treatment and recovery programs. In Vancouver, this type of housing often requires young people to maintain abstinence from substance use and access connected educational and vocational programs meant to foster an eventual transition into independent housing. Supportive housing facilities offer permanent or long-term housing units supplemented by on-site support services that include substance use and mental health treatment and life skills training, providing residents with ongoing assistance to ideally maintain housing stability. Much of Vancouver's supportive housing stock is modular housing, rapidly deployable prefabricated housing units typically consisting of self-contained studio or one-bedroom apartments. Modular housing typically offers similar support services to supportive housing. Most of Vancouver's supportive and modular housing is not specifically designed for young people, but those over age 18 may live in units in adult buildings. Young people over the age of 18 also reside in government- and privately-owned single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels. Many of these single-room dwellings with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities were built in the early 1900s, and their physical conditions vary widely [9]. While government-owned SROs are subsidized, rent for privately owned SROs regularly exceeds the shelter allowance from social assistance payments, and residents are frequently subject to eviction [10]. Despite the recent move toward a Housing First-inspired approach, most government spending and policy attention in Vancouver continues to be primarily oriented toward temporary emergency accommodations along the housing continuum, such as shelters and transitional homes [11].

Across North America, the number of people experiencing homelessness and unstable housing has continued to grow dramatically since the early 2000s. Vancouver recorded a 32-percent increase in street-based homelessness between 2020 and 2023, the largest spike observed since formal counts began in 2005 [12]. Eight percent of those counted were under 25 years old, and a third of those counted had a history of government care involvement. Indigenous people are overrepresented in all levels of the child welfare system and in homeless counts in Vancouver and the rest of Canada [13–16]. As Métis scholar Jesse Thistle [17] (p. 6) has noted:

> Indigenous homelessness is not [only] defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities.

Indigenous experiences and definitions of homelessness may be unique from those of settlers, and it is likely that many metrics and prevention policies do not adequately account for these more holistic definitions of home and homelessness. Indigenous young people have been at the center of national residential school and contemporary government care policies that have collectively removed them from their homes, shaping intergenerational experiences of homelessness [18]. Both Indigenous and settler young people often expe-

rience "hidden homelessness" (i.e., staying or "couch surfing" temporarily with friends or extended family members) and are therefore excluded from street-based homelessness counts. Thus, the number of young people under 25 years of age experiencing unstable housing is likely much higher than formal counts reveal [13,19]. The growing number of young people experiencing unstable housing and homelessness in places like Vancouver highlights the inability of Housing First models to definitively reduce homelessness independently of other policy and programming shifts.

Efforts to shift Canadian homelessness policy toward a prevention-oriented model are currently underway, and the potential for large-scale implementation across provincial jurisdictions needs to be explored in terms of the impacts on young people [20]. This is especially true for young people who use drugs and are experiencing structural oppression along overlapping axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. As our team has described elsewhere, young people's drug use patterns are powerfully shaped by the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual harms associated with seemingly "endless" cycles of street-based homelessness and unstable housing [21,22]. These harms are compounded for those whose cycles of residential instability include time spent in institutions such as foster care and group homes, correctional facilities, and hospitals [23]. According to a 2023 provincial coroner's report, more than half of the 353 toxic drug-related deaths of young people under 29 years old took place in the housing environments described above or in public settings associated with unstable housing [24,25]. In other words, the harms associated with young people's substance use and housing instability often extend into the housing environments ostensibly designed to address experiences of homelessness.

In 2019, the Government of Canada committed to a national prevention-oriented response to homelessness called *Reaching Home*, with key objectives that include a 50% reduction in chronic homelessness by 2027, targeted support for Indigenous people, and developing coordinated systems of access in provincial and municipal contexts to connect people to local housing services [11]. A coordinated access system involves establishing defined community access points and a common assessment tool to better prioritize and match the needs of individuals and families with available housing interventions [26]. This policy response has important implications for prevention because it recognizes the need to disrupt the link between the involvement of Indigenous and other young people in government care and homelessness and housing instability. It also recognizes that reducing the number of young people entering homelessness requires better coordination between the homelessness sector and other systems of care (e.g., government care, mental health services). *Reaching Home* relies on public health conceptualizations of homelessness that target particular populations with evidence-based resources that increase in intensity according to levels of risk and are aimed at connecting individuals to stable homes [27].

Reaching Home is an important step toward creating a multifaceted prevention-oriented response to homelessness in Canada. Yet, important questions remain regarding what constitutes a "stable home" or even home more broadly among young people who have experienced residential instability across their lives [28]. In order to understand the impacts of prevention-oriented homelessness policies on young people in settings like Vancouver, it is necessary to examine what stability and home mean to them as they navigate multiple living environments. Indeed, a growing body of literature has examined the relationships between home, homelessness, and housing, including among young people [29–32]. Careful ethnographic attention to the strategies that people living in un-homelike environments utilize to create provisional senses of home has demonstrated that homelessness is often much more than the absence of a physical dwelling, and "home" and "homelessness" are not mutually exclusive [33–37]. For those with inconsistent access to a physical dwelling, senses of home are often shifting constellations of meanings, routines, and material objects that span public and private settings [36–40]. Home and homelessness can be "reciprocally linked through people's impulse and need to . . . enact dwelling practices despite the absence of a home" [39] (p. 184). Importantly, previous work reveals that homelessness is not

experienced passively by young people, but rather as an ongoing attempt to create senses of home [38,41,42].

In this article, we center young people's experiences as they inhabit and move between nodes in Vancouver's expanding system of housing and homelessness services. Following Paolo Boccagni [43], we describe young people's "homing" strategies in these settings, as well as during periods of street-based homelessness. Boccagni [43] (p. 585) defines homing as "a set of home-related routines and practices, and . . . an underlying existential struggle toward a good-enough state of being at home". A focus on homing provides a vantage point into young people's attempts to bridge the types of homes they experienced in the past and are experiencing in the present with those they aspire to experience in the future. The emphasis on good-enough states of being at home is important in the context of homelessness prevention because it highlights both the fragile circumstances in which home is achieved and those in which "a need or desire for home is articulated without being met" [43] (p. 593).

We also examine parallel experiences of "unhoming" among young people, including losses of home as a result of getting "kicked out", eviction, fleeing violence, and aging out of systems of care and supervision [44]. As Peter Somerville has argued, homelessness encompasses deprivation across physiological, emotional, territorial, ontological, and spiritual dimensions, including losses of bodily comfort, love, privacy, rootedness, and hope [45]. These multidimensional experiences of homelessness and processes of unhoming continue to be powerfully racialized in our setting. The service and policy landscape "'holds up' only some subjects as they practice home, while it 'pulls under' racialized others" [46] (p. 937). A focus on both unhoming and homing processes underscores the oftentimes racialized estrangement, uprootedness, and alienation that many young people must contend with alongside continual attempts to make homes for themselves in the city [45,46].

Youth prevention policies can draw from young people's homing strategies—both those that result in finding a "real" home, even temporarily, and those that reflect unmet desires—to build a strengths-based approach that seeks to support young people in moving toward the homes they desire. While we agree that prevention policies must go beyond a reliance on crisis-oriented homelessness services, our work underscores how rapid rehousing efforts may also be insufficient if they do not accommodate the kinds of homes that young people's strategies are oriented toward. Young people's homing strategies alert us to day-to-day practices, routines, and forms of sociality and care that powerfully shape senses of stability and home, even in un-homelike places and in the face of various processes of unhoming. Youth homelessness prevention can attend more closely to homing strategies to better enable the capabilities of young people to create homes that allow them to move toward the futures they want for themselves [47].

2. Materials and Methods

This article draws from an ongoing qualitative and ethnographic study led by the first author that began in 2021 and explores young people's experiences navigating unstable housing, homelessness, and "institutional circuits" that include shelters, government care homes, hospitals, juvenile and adult criminal justice facilities, and residential detoxification, treatment, and recovery sites [48–50]. As we have argued elsewhere, supportive and modular housing in Vancouver has increasingly become part of these wider institutional circuits that young people who use drugs must circulate through [50]. This study on housing, homelessness, and institutional circuits is embedded within a longitudinal program of qualitative and ethnographic research led by the second author that examines young people's substance use, care, and housing trajectories in Metro Vancouver. Collectively, we seek a more nuanced understanding of the individual, social, institutional, and historical contexts that shape young people's movements in and out of homelessness and their experiences during those periods when they are ostensibly housed. Our objective is to identify critical moments in young people's housing and homelessness trajectories when intervention could

strategically bolster their homing efforts and prevent them from entering or returning to unstable housing and homelessness.

2.1. Interviews and Fieldwork

To inform this analysis, the lead author conducted 78 qualitative semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews with 54 young people aged 19 to 29 who have current or past experience with unstable housing (see Table 1). He also conducted 10 interviews with housing service providers working in shelters, transitional homes, and supportive housing programs. This study included approximately 100 h of fieldwork in the places where young people were living, spending time, and accessing services. Many of the interviews took place at a frontline research office in downtown Vancouver, but interviews also occurred in fieldwork settings, such as public parks, youth-dedicated drop-in centers, and the housing environments where young people were living. Participants were recruited via the second author's networks and also via the distribution of recruitment postcards to interested young people in the aforementioned fieldwork settings. In order to participate in this study, young people needed to be between 14 and 29 years old, have experience with substance use in the past six months, and have lived in a form of non-market rental housing in the past year. We chose this age range to align with the lower end of the age ranges at the youth-dedicated drop-in centers we frequented, although the youngest person to participate in this study was 19 years old. The upper end of this age range encompasses experiences of aging out of government care and the majority of youth services in our setting, which generally occurs around age 25, and the aftermath of these experiences. We defined non-market rental housing as encompassing youth and adult shelters, transitional housing programs, supportive and modular housing, SROs, as well as residential detoxification, treatment, and recovery programs.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Baseline Characteristic	Sample	
	n	%
Gender		
Cisgender	46	85
Transgender	6	11
Nonbinary	2	4
Woman	19	35
Man	33	61
Ethnicity		
Indigenous	25	46
White	16	30
Black, South Asian, Multiracial	13	24
Housing Type		
Street-based homelessness	10	19
Youth shelter	11	20
Transitional home	10	19
SRO	6	11
Supportive and modular housing	14	26
Market rental	3	5
Institutional involvement		
Government care	26	48
Criminal Justice	15	28
Acute mental health care	15	28

N = 54. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 29 years old, and the average age of participants was 23 years old.

During interviews, young people were asked about their experiences navigating unstable housing and homelessness in Vancouver across time and place. Participants were asked to reflect on how their housing situations intersected with movements through government care, criminal justice, and acute, mental health, and substance use care systems. Each participant was also asked how they defined "homelessness" and "home" in relation to the experiences they shared with us and were invited to provide opinions on the practical and policy changes that could be made to address their specific challenges. Interviews ended with a question about what each young person's "ideal" home looked like. All interviews and many fieldwork activities were recorded and generally lasted between 1 and 2 h. All participants received a CAD 40 honorarium for their time and were asked to provide written informed consent before participating [51]. Service provider participants were asked to describe their experiences working with young people across time and place and about their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities faced by young people navigating housing instability in Metro Vancouver. Ethical approval for study activities was received from the Providence Health Care/University of British Columbia Behavioral Research Ethics Board (H21-02315).

2.2. Analysis

Data collection and analysis for this paper took place concurrently over the course of the study period and were guided by critical ethnographic and community-based participatory action research frameworks [52,53]. Critical ethnography extends the insights of conventional ethnographic approaches by building on the situated knowledge of participants to critique existing bodies of knowledge and suggest new ways of understanding particular phenomena [54]. Relatedly, community-based participatory action research leverages meaningful partnerships with marginalized communities in order to create more equitable research relationships and works to address social inequities that are identified by community members [55]. For this study, we worked extensively with our research program's Youth Health Advisory Council (YHAC), which is composed of young people with lived and living experiences of homelessness, housing instability, intensive substance use, and entrenchment in institutional circuits [50,56]. Throughout the course of this study, we met with the YHAC at least bi-weekly to discuss experiences related to housing, homelessness, and homelessness prevention, ensuring the ongoing relevance of our lines of inquiry and findings to young people who are actively navigating the interventions we describe herein.

Fieldnotes and interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized before being coded using NVivo software. In collaboration with the YHAC, we created an initial coding framework that included broad descriptive themes (e.g., "street-based homelessness", "moving between systems"). Over the course of this study, we worked with the YHAC to refine our codebook and evolving analysis of the data. The theme of homing surfaced during our meetings with the YHAC, as well as over the course of a two-day housing summit with 34 youth that we organized in collaboration with the YHAC in October 2023. During planning for this event, the YHAC insisted on a move away from "damage centered" [57] research that highlights the myriad forms of marginality that young people experiencing unstable housing and homelessness endure. Instead, they challenged us to focus on how young people are able to create provisional senses of home in un-homelike settings. With this in mind, we returned to the ethnographic and interview data we had collected since 2021 and found numerous instances in which young people described homing strategies. That is, they described the day-to-day practices, routines, and forms of sociality that allowed them to achieve a good-enough home characterized by senses of stability and social connectedness, even while experiencing street-based homelessness or explicitly temporary living arrangements. These moments of good-enough home could be short-lived and interrupted by the realities of poverty, substance use, mental health crises, and processes of unhoming. We worked with the YHAC to understand how brief moments

of home and broader homing strategies could be better supported by interventions designed to prevent homelessness.

3. Results

At the time of their first interview, the young people who participated in this study lived in a range of circumstances that included street-based homelessness, couch surfing temporarily with family and friends, youth-dedicated shelters, transitional homes, private and government-owned SROs, supportive and modular housing buildings, and, in a few cases, private market rentals (see Table 1). Homing, in these contexts, had both spatial and temporal dimensions. Homing was enacted in the present moment but also tended to be oriented toward future achievements and past experiences of home and unhoming [43]. We have organized our findings to reflect these temporal dimensions of homing and unhoming. First, we attend to the past, during which many young people experienced being kicked out of family homes and cycling through a series of foster care and group homes. Second, we examine how young people were able to make homes in un-homelike places in the present moment. Third, we turn to young people's aspirations for future homemaking and the obstacles they faced as they moved toward what comes next.

3.1. Unhoming

Young people often described leaving family homes that were characterized by unsafety and instability. They recalled experiences of being forcibly kicked out of family homes or leaving under circumstances of relative chaos. This was the case for Toni, a 24-year-old Indigenous woman who, at the time of our first interview, had just secured privately-owned SRO housing after many years of street-based homelessness. She described being kicked out of her mother's house when she was 16 years old as follows:

> I think if my mom hadn't kicked me out, I might have been able to beat the addiction right in the beginning. And, you know, even finish high school and go on to college. My mom had abandoned me, pretty much, is how it felt. I already don't have my dad in my life—so, no Dad, no Mom. Like, no family. I was like, I'm all alone. Who's going to tell me right from wrong? Who's going to be like, 'Hey, you can't do this, this isn't okay'? Like, 'Something's going on with you, can I help you?' I didn't have that.

Many young people framed their experiences of being kicked out or leaving childhood homes as escapes from places that no longer felt like home. Yet these escapes were often simultaneously a painful process of estrangement that involved the uprooting of the day-to-day practices, routines, and forms of sociality that had previously constituted a fragile sense of home [58]. Put another way, leaving even an imperfect home involved leaving behind a place characterized by senses of familiarity and connectedness. Toni asserted that leaving was ultimately not her own choice and that avoiding being kicked out could have prevented her substance use from escalating in ways that continued to foreclose her future.

After being kicked out of her mother's house, Toni moved in with her aunt (who was, at that time, living in a trailer) but was soon removed by child protective services and placed in government care. She reflected that while she was officially removed from her aunt's home to provide her with a more stable and safe home, Toni once again encountered significant instability and unsafety upon entering government care. As she recounted:

> I got forced out of my aunt's place and they stuck me in care, and then my first foster parent kicked me out because of addiction and my refusal to go to church. I'm not religious. It was very like, 'You have to go to church every Sunday'. I'm Indigenous. You're going to force an Indigenous person to go to a Catholic church? So, she kicked me out. During that transition, like, going from my first foster parents to my second, um—the second place is where my addiction got really, really bad.

In her second foster care placement, Toni was hospitalized numerous times for mental health and substance use-related emergencies. Toni explained that on one occasion, she returned to her foster care home only to realize that the family had not noticed that she had been in the hospital for a week. Soon afterward, Toni left that foster care home and began couch surfing with friends and sleeping on the streets for several months until she finally secured a room in a privately owned SRO.

Toni did not romanticize the circumstances she had endured while living with her mother and then her aunt. However, the instability, cultural unsafety, and neglect she endured while moving through foster homes contradicted the notion that these places were stable and safe homes. Previous research has argued that the imperative of child protection services to provide apprehended children with a more stable roof over their heads and greater physical and psychological safety obscures the social network disruption that fundamentally undermines young people's sense of being in "real" homes [59]. Toni's story and our broader research findings similarly underscore how experiences of social rupture complicate the notion that home is simply a stable and safe place to live where basic needs are met and there is an absence of violence. Rather, many young people experienced moving through foster care and group homes, as well as being kicked out and running away, as a loss of homes that were simultaneously "space[s] of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear" [60,61] (p. 136).

3.2. Homing in Un-Homelike Places

The young people we spoke with expressed a marked difference between being housed in the sense of physically having a place to stay and sleep, and having a home [62]. They often spoke about how they created a sense of home in places they lived only temporarily, such as youth shelters. One way that this was achieved was by enacting day-to-day practices and routines that "attain a sense of comfort, even a sort of familiarity and belonging in spaces that are not [typically conceived of as] welcoming, safe, or familiar or that are in worlds that [also potentially] "undo" them" [63] (p. 169). These were indispensable ways of creating senses of predictability and order amidst enduring experiences of temporal uncertainty, which we have defined as a "painful and frustrating inability to move through time in desired ways despite the promise of greater stability that housing is supposed to engender" [50] (p. 2). Through these homing strategies, many young people were able to establish a fragile "good-enough" home that existed alongside ongoing experiences of violence, economic precarity, and frequent substance use and mental health-related crises.

Being able to stay in one place, even for more than a few months, could contradict the state of (oftentimes forced) mobility that characterized many participants' childhoods and experiences of street-based homelessness, as well as experiences navigating housing services in Vancouver—a city with the highest rate of eviction in Canada [64]. Residents of SROs and social housing are especially vulnerable to eviction because they often lack access to provincial tenancy protections [64,65]. As Toni explained when reflecting on her move into a privately-owned SRO after a period of street-based homelessness:

> I've moved around so much in my lifetime that when I first moved into my place I was living out of a cardboard box. I refused to unpack. I was like, I'm probably going to get evicted or, like, something's going to happen so I'm going to have to move, right? And then I finally got to a place [the SRO] where I was like, okay, I'm going to be here for a while. I can unpack. And I, like, set my stuff up. And I was like: home.

Similar to many other young people in our setting, Toni kept their belongings in a cardboard box to protect them across a series of moves between foster homes, shelters, treatment and recovery facilities, the streets, and SROs [22]. In this context, unpacking the cardboard box at the SRO was a powerful homing strategy that signified Toni's intent to make a home there. The fragility of this home was shaped by the open drug use and violence occurring in her building. Toni had used drugs intensively in the past but, at the time of her move into the SRO, was working on recovery, including by regularly attending

Narcotics Anonymous meetings. She had created a daily routine that involved attending meetings and limiting her substance use to cannabis and, occasionally, alcohol. Witnessing open drug use and violence in her building made her worry constantly that "something was going to happen" to her housing, resulting in yet another move. Nevertheless, Toni concluded, "[For now] *I can shower here and lock my door and lay in bed and, like, play with my cat and, like, cook some food and just relax*". Toni seemed to have found a good-enough home in the present that nevertheless felt under future threat, demonstrating that homing is always "intimately connected to a belief in the security of future trajectories, which—when threatened—[reconfigure] what home means in the present" [45] (p. 10).

As Toni and a number of other young people described, unpacking and displaying personal objects could be powerful homing strategies that create a sense of stability [40]. Many young people have experienced losing their belongings while moving from place to place, and displaying personal objects could be a way of anchoring themselves in the present [33]. This was the case for Clara, a 23-year-old white woman who was living in a supportive housing building on a floor designated for young people aged 19 to 25 at the time of our first interview. Clara described how, when she first moved into her supportive housing building, she painted her room, put up posters and shelving, and decorated her space. Since leaving her family home when she was 16 years old, Clara had lived in several youth and adult shelters, two different SROs, and a market rental suite and had also experienced periods of street-based homelessness. Clara reflected that across many of these places, it had not been clear to her whether decorating her room was an option. Indeed, young people's previous experiences cycling through multiple housing and homelessness situations meant they were often unable to make themselves at home in these ways [66].

In addition to being able to unpack and decorate, having access to amenities that facilitated certain kinds of daily routines powerfully supported young people's homing strategies. Dawn, a 21-year-old South Asian woman, had recently moved from a group home (where she had to share a room with several other young people) to a youth transitional home at the time of our first interview with her. As she reflected:

> I chose the [transitional home] because it was my first very own apartment. It's a bachelor suite. [It has] a kitchen, not a kitchenette, but like a kitchen kind of thing: oven, fridge, microwave, and then where you do your dishes. And then there's an open space for your bed and everything. But I got a bunk bed because I wanted more space down below. Oh yeah, and you got your own bathroom with a tub, which is amazing!

For young people like Dawn, Clara, and Toni, homing aspirations included desires to cook and do dishes, have a bath, choose and arrange furniture, and decorate. These practices and routines are perhaps reclamations of what Susan Fraiman [67] (p. 158) calls "domesticity in pieces" that have often been "shattered under the pressure of homelessness". Such practices and routines were critical homing strategies because they made living environments feel like more than just a physical roof and four walls. For many young people, "normal" domestic routines in particular allowed them to focus not just on where they currently lived (which could often be a temporary situation) but on how they wanted to live and feel at home in a general sense. Domestic routines were one way that young people attempted to establish predictable daily rhythms and senses of stability that had, for many, never been available to them. Putting these sorts of routines in place also enabled some young people to turn their focus to creating deeply desired social connections and relationships.

3.3. Homing as Social Connectedness

Young people's homing strategies often involve attempts to create an "intimate sense of normality associated with home" in conditions that are perceived as non-normal, including through particular forms of sociality [43] (p. 594). In particular, close relationships with friends and romantic partners who shared experiences of residential instability and substance use and mental health challenges could powerfully engender a sense of being at

home in un-homelike places [68]. This was especially the case for young people who lacked supportive family relationships and had experienced fragmented connections with other young people in the foster care and group home settings they cycled through [65,66,69,70]. Curtis, a 23-year-old Black man, had recently moved into an SRO in the same building as his romantic partner at the time of our first interview. He explained that home was inextricably connected to being with others and, in particular, his romantic partner. Reflecting on his housing and homelessness experiences, Curtis concluded "*you can be in a pretty shitty place but have good people with you, and its fine*". After spending eight months in jail, Curtis connected with a romantic partner who then invited him to live in her SRO unit. Curtis spent almost all his time with his partner, and the couple often visited our frontline research office together. After a few months of living together, housing agency staff at the SRO offered Curtis his own unit on a different floor of the building, which he reluctantly accepted. Although he still lived in the same building as his partner, Curtis confided "*I don't want to move in somewhere and be by myself. I don't like being alone. And I kind of feel like that sometimes* [in the SRO]". Curtis longed first and foremost for the sense of home that he had created with his romantic partner in their shared SRO room.

Cristina, a 24-year-old Indigenous woman who was living in a privately-owned SRO at the time of our first interview with her, similarly reflected on how close social relationships helped her feel safe and loved while experiencing street-based homelessness for several years, as follows:

> I tried to be with people as much as I could. There used to be a little crew of us [sleeping outside together] and it was awesome. We had—we used to call them 'cuddle puddles' and it's where, like, at some point when the daytime is over, we would all meet up at one spot at night and do the cuddle puddle thing—[cuddling together] like penguins and stuff, right? It's really fun and you actually feel loved and stuff for a bit.

Cristina mentioned multiple other instances when the social connections she made had created a sense of home in un-homelike places. She recounted living in a tent city in an urban park as a member of a group of people who cared for each other. Cristina affectionately recalled an instance when a resident who had received a large sum of money organized a large gathering for the tent city residents rather than spending the money on themselves. The residents also organized an area in the center of the tent city where they gathered bottles to recycle to generate income. Cristina reflected that these practices and routines helped to establish a feeling of social connectedness and care. At a certain point, she left the tent city and moved into a transitional home for women. Cristina initially felt excited about her new unit, but certain aspects of her living situation felt less homelike than her previous experiences on the streets and in the tent city, which she described as follows:

> It was weird for me because [the transitional home] was an all-women's thing and I was the only one who wasn't a sex worker. So, like—I was having everybody look at me weird when I'm not [involved in sex work]. So, for the first year of living there, like when I got [the housing placement], I would mainly just go back to the tent city and just use [the transitional home] as like a storage unit, you know what I mean?

While from an official perspective the transitional housing placement was much more secure than the tent city, it did not generate the sense of routine, social connectedness, and care that, for Cristina and others, created a sense of good-enough home in un-homelike places. Cristina continued to spend time away from the transitional home, and ultimately her unit was given to someone else. The tent city was eventually dismantled, and she circulated between several youth and adult shelters before securing a unit in the SRO, where she was living at the time of her interview.

Cristina's perception that the streets and tent city offered possibilities for homemaking that were lacking in her more "stable" housing placement was something that a number of

the housing providers we interviewed also mentioned. For example, as Arthur, a social worker who worked with a transitional housing program, reflected:

> We have the tent cities because people feel safer in their community than they do behind four walls and a door. There's no use putting someone who's 22 years old who has [never lived on their own] in a place, whether it's supported or not, if they have no idea where to start [with making a home there].

Many housing providers recognized that most of the housing available to young people did not adequately generate the forms of sociality that the latter deeply desired and were essential to homing. They saw that the success of housing programs—in the sense of creating the conditions that will encourage young people to stay for extended periods of time and stabilize various aspects of their lives—often hinged on the extent to which these programs could foster a sense of social connectedness among residents. In reality, as we have described previously, supportive housing buildings could actually further isolate young people from each other by prohibiting access to multiple floors and through strict guest and overnight visitor policies [22,23,50]. As Rachel, a youth worker at a different transitional housing program from Arthur observed, a sense of isolation in housing units could accelerate substance use and mental health crises and increase the likelihood of eviction or a young person's own decision to return to the streets and tent cities (as happened with Cristina). Rachel reflected as follows:

> It's hard when young people move in [to their own units] because their friends become family out there [on the streets and in tent cities]. So, it's tough when you move somewhere new and you don't really know where you kind of fit or belong. It's easy to relapse [on substances] really fast.

Yet, homing strategies could also include the social worlds that young people created with support staff in the places where they lived. Young people frequently articulated how relationships with staff were not just a means of connecting them with various resources, including more permanent housing [71]. Instead, young people often remarked on the senses of social connectedness that they fostered with certain staff members—in particular, those who talked to them about their personal lives and future aspirations in ways that resembled family members and friends. Such relationships were not confined to housing with integrated staff, such as supportive, modular and transitional housing, but could also be formed in un-homelike settings, such as shelters and residential treatment centers. For example, Chad, a 20-year-old Indigenous man, described being assigned a housing worker when he began staying at a youth shelter. Chad explained that his experiences with homelessness were shaped by a difficult relationship with his mother, who insisted on the two of them living together despite the fact that they had both been evicted from their shared housing several times following altercations. The housing worker helped Chad to successfully navigate this relationship with his mother and helped him to secure his own market rental apartment. Chad was ultimately evicted from the apartment following a substance use relapse and had returned to living in shelters during the time of our interviews with him. However, he emphasized "*I still call* [the housing worker] *to this day. He's, like, actually one of my good friends*".

It is important to acknowledge that relationships with housing staff and workers were not always equanimous and often involved interpersonal conflict. However, participants frequently positioned their relationships with staff and workers alongside their friendships and romantic relationships in ways that suggest the former constitute part of a broader "human infrastructure" that fosters homing in un-homelike places [72]. Toni, introduced above, recounted a story about the importance of staff relationships while living temporarily in a low-barrier women's shelter. As she explained:

> The support staff were really friendly and they honestly are what made it feel like an actual home. They were super sweet. I remember around Christmas time we were in the kitchen area and, like, blaring music and we had wrapping paper everywhere with presents and the staff were sitting there with us, like, wrapping.

> And it was really sweet because it just felt like a family and a home. It was the first Christmas where it was stable and it just—it felt like home.

Even in this un-homelike shelter environment, Toni experienced the routine of wrapping presents and the festivities of preparing for Christmas with staff as a form of sociality that evoked a sense of being at home. It was the relationships with staff and the practices and routines that they undertook together (in this case, related to Christmas) that created a good enough sense of home in the present and oriented Toni to the kind of home that she wanted for herself in the future. Like for Chad, the women's shelter staff also played a critical role in helping Toni secure market rental housing, which she lived in for a year following her time at the women's shelter. Toni was evicted from this rental suite when she adopted a cat—acquiring pets being another essential homing strategy among many of the young people we talked to—which was a violation of her rental agreement. Toni recalled that she pleaded with the landlord to accept a larger pet damage deposit or to allow her to make other arrangements for the cat after receiving the eviction notice. Ultimately Toni left the rental suite with "*her cat, a bag of clothing and some food*" and spent the next several months couch surfing, staying in shelters, and spending periods sleeping outside until eventually moving into an SRO, where she was living during the period of our interviews with her. Critically, Toni emphasized that she had not been able to find a good enough home and the sense of social connectedness that characterized this since leaving the women's shelter.

3.4. Homing and What Comes Next

Young people's attempts to make homes in un-homelike places ran parallel to their aspirations and attempts to move toward more permanent future homes. Participants' descriptions of desired future homes varied but often involved descriptions of places from which they could even more effectively develop "normal" day-to-day practices, routines, and forms of sociality. Dawn (introduced above) described the kind of home she wanted for herself as follows:

> A place to use [drugs] without, like, any guilt or shame, and to have friends over when I want to. And then the independence of, like, shopping for myself, grocery shopping and, like, learning how to do that.

For Dawn and many others, homing aspirations encompassed both practices and routines like grocery shopping, as well as greater self-determination in relation to drug use and socializing with friends. Alternatively, Jackson, a 22-year-old Indigenous man who was staying at a youth shelter at the time of his first interview, longed for a home characterized by the daily routines of school and work. Jackson moved into a transitional housing building in downtown Vancouver directly after leaving government care when he was 19 years old. His tenancy was supported by a provincially-funded Agreement with Young Adult (AYA) subsidy that covered the costs of rent and tuition as long as he was attending a recognized education, rehabilitation, or job training program. Jackson explained that, initially, he was looking forward to this transition from government care to transitional housing but soon began experiencing anxieties about traveling to school each day via complicated bus routes. He began missing school regularly and using alcohol intensively. Jackson eventually stopped going to school altogether and his AYA was terminated, which meant that he also lost his unit in the transitional housing building. When trying to imagine what home might look like in the future, Jackson reflected:

> I would like to start with school first to get back on the AYA program. And get, like, a day job and then work on my schooling at night. Yeah. And then try to get, like, extra money from, like, AYA and from the job and then eventually just rent my own place.

For Jackson, homing necessarily involved re-establishing the kinds of practices and routines that he had been attempting to undertake while living in the transitional housing building. Unlike Dawn and others whose homing aspirations involved a significant

amount of independence from the outset, Jackson's homing aspirations are perhaps better characterized as beginning from a place of support (i.e., help via an AYA and with getting to school each day), with a future transition to greater independence (i.e., renting his own place). Indeed, Jackson reflected during an interview that it might have been easier to keep attending school if he had continued living in his foster care home instead of moving to a transitional house downtown.

While many young people were optimistic that they could eventually find a "real" home, others articulated a powerful sense of being stuck in their current un-homelike living situation and processes of unhoming [21,61]. These feelings could be powerfully compounded by the fact that young people age out of most youth-dedicated services when they turn 25 years old. As Maria, a youth worker at a shelter, explained:

> It's very heartbreaking to work with all these youth who age out of government care [at age 19] and don't have any family. Who do they go to? And then I can only work with them until they're 25 and it's almost like a replication of that aging out [at 19]. It breaks my heart.

Aging out often powerfully undermined young people's homing strategies because it represented an abrupt rupture in the practices, routines, and forms of sociality that they were sometimes able to establish in youth-focused programs. For participants who were nearing aging out, or who had already lost access to services, this shift was characterized by the kind of instability and processes of unhoming that many had experienced across their childhoods and housing and homelessness trajectories in Vancouver. For young people who had already aged out of government care, the prospect of losing access to sources of support a second time was particularly disquieting. Selina, a 23-year-old white woman, was living in an abstinence-oriented transitional home and considering moving into a market rental suite supported by a subsidy at the time of our first interview with her. She recalled how leaving government care precipitated a tumultuous period of street-based homelessness that coincided with an intensification of her substance use. She was very worried about moving into market rental housing without any staff support, particularly given that she had only been working on her sobriety for one year after many years of intensive substance use. As Selina explained:

> I'm trying to just, you know, move forward and focus on the next steps and everything like that—like with my housing. But I almost feel like [market rental housing] would be too much independence and too much, like—just lack of support for me right now. I do like having support and I feel like it's important. I don't know if I even ever want to be 100% independent.

Staff at the transitional home where Selina lived believed that she was ready to move into market rental housing, in large part because she had been able to establish daily routines and maintain abstinence from substance use for one year. Yet for Selina, moving out of the transitional home and into market rental housing meant dismantling her fragile social world with staff that had been essential to homing over the past year. Selina was intimidated by the prospect of developing new social relationships and routines in market housing.

4. Discussion

Our study contributes to previous work that shifts the focus away from home as housing (i.e., a physical structure) toward home as a set of day-to-day practices, routines, forms of sociality, and aspirations that both foster homing in the present and orient young people toward the homes they want in the future [62]. Homelessness prevention policies have often too narrowly defined homelessness as rooflessness and neglected to consider how young people also experience it as a lack of the predictable daily rhythms and senses of social connectedness and care that engender stability [33]. Building on previous work that has examined homemaking in un-homelike places such as tent cities, the streets, and temporary shelters [31,40,73], our study encompasses not only young people's homing

strategies aimed at modifying housing environments (e.g., through decorating) but also the establishment of "normal" practices, routines, and forms of sociality with friends, romantic partners, and support staff in these places. A focus on these homing strategies across multiple housing and homelessness settings has a number of policy implications for creating a robust youth-oriented homelessness prevention framework in Vancouver and elsewhere.

4.1. Policy Recommendations

Firstly, our findings align with calls to incorporate Indigenous definitions of home into Canadian homelessness prevention policies by highlighting the importance of responding to the homing strategies of Indigenous young people [74]. As Thistle has argued, the Canadian government must contend with the fact that "hundreds of years of colonialism have eroded, undermined, and supplanted Indigenous cultural practices and their inclusive concept of home", which encompasses young people's abilities to participate in sustaining cultural, social, emotional, and intimate relationships [17] (p. 16). Definitions of homelessness that focus on the absence of physical housing do not adequately address disconnections from these kinds of relationships, including via traumatic childhood experiences of unhoming through government care involvement. Indigenous young people in particular must continue to contend with a policy landscape that disproportionately undermines the homing strategies of racialized others [46]. In general, research demonstrates that Black and other young people of color, as well as 2S/LGBTQIA+ and migrant young people and young women, are less able to enact homing strategies compared to other young Canadians because of a lack of access to gender-affirming, culturally safe, and antiracist housing programs [75–77]. Considerations of race, gender, and social justice and equity must be at the center of prevention policies and practices designed for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness [78]. Housing services for Indigenous young people must center relationship (re)building, including hiring Indigenous staff members to support young people in achieving desired senses of connectedness and care. Hiring practices could also include what Jessie Lund et al. [79] call a "cultural wellness mentor", a person who ensures that Indigenous young people have access to cultural activities and desired forms of sociality and ceremony (e.g., smudging, sweat lodges and sharing circles, time with Elders). This person could also actively connect young people with Indigenous-focused housing, work, and school programs.

Secondly, our findings underscore how we can better support young people's homing strategies in both temporary (e.g., shelter) and permanent (e.g., supportive housing) housing situations. We argue that attending to these homing strategies is crucial to preventing returns to street-based homelessness and unstable housing. Specifically, our findings demonstrate that when young people are unable to make homes for themselves in the places where they find themselves living for periods of time, they often eventually either face eviction (e.g., as a result of substance use and mental health crises often linked to enduring senses of homelessness or as a result of broken guest, visitor, and pet policies) or they make the decision to return to the streets and encampments where desired forms of sociality, social connectedness, and care are possible [21,22,64,80–82]. Funded programming in both temporary and permanent accommodations can support young people in unpacking their things and making spaces their own through decorating and, when possible, arranging furniture to their liking [33]. Each young person could be assigned their own small shelving area or end table for displaying personal items. Programming can focus on supporting young people in undertaking everyday domestic practices and routines, such as cooking, eating meals, washing dishes, showering, and doing laundry and other chores, as well as larger undertakings such as attending school and work every day. Young people told us that it was often the ability to enact these sorts of daily rhythms that created a sense of stability and home, even in uncertain circumstances [81,82]. While some young people desired ongoing support to create and sustain daily practices and routines, other participants wanted more independence and autonomy, including in relation to

substance use [65,78]. Housing workers should, therefore, actively and regularly open up conversations with young people to determine how they can best help them to feel at home where they currently are and plan for particular kinds of homes in the future [83]. At the moment, this kind of support tends to be concentrated in supportive and transitional housing environments but should be made available across the housing continuum to better foster homing and prevent returns to street-based homelessness.

All housing interventions should also be designed to support desired forms of sociality and senses of social connectedness and care, which encompass friendships, romantic relationships, and relationships with staff and workers in the buildings where young people live. Among young people experiencing substance use and mental health challenges, studies consistently highlight the crucial role of social relationships in providing emotional and material support and reducing isolation amid housing instability [84–86]. There should be funded programming that supports young people with (re)building and maintaining connections with family and friends who come to visit the places where they are living. Strict visitor regulations in many housing services may inadvertently undermine one of young people's most essential homing strategies, contributing to returns to street-based homelessness rather than ameliorating these [68]. In addition to supporting visits, there are opportunities for housing programs to incorporate peer- and youth-led activities, including those that focus on routines such as regularly cooking and eating and playing sports and games together. Housing design should prioritize communal spaces with open layouts and flexible seating, explicitly promoting lively sociality [87]. Regular planned activities and events should also involve socializing and collaboration between young people and staff and workers. For example, funding should be available for group hobbies and entertainment such as music, sports, video games, and cultural activities that bring young people, staff, workers, and other trusted adults together [73].

Thirdly, we assert that a focus on young people's homing strategies offers an alternative prevention-oriented framing that more powerfully aligns with their needs, priorities, and desires. Young people in our setting have called for a dedicated housing system that responds to the unique and diverse needs of young people (including minors) who use drugs, are navigating complex mental health challenges, and are in recovery from substance use [88]. One way to incorporate young people's homing strategies into such a system is the establishment of youth housing advisories that actively involve young people in decision-making processes related to housing and program design and implementation. In addition to influencing policy, design, and programming, these advisories could also provide critical opportunities for peer support, networking, and friendships among young people with similar experiences, fostering desired routines, forms of sociality, and senses of social connectedness and care.

Finally, by examining young people's homing strategies, our study aligns with the objectives of a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. This framework asserts that adolescence involves a critical period of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social growth [89], requiring interventions and programming that promote positive long-term development in these areas [90]. Recent studies have posited PYD as a fundamental component of homelessness prevention and housing interventions designed for young people. For example, Stephen Gaetz [91] argues that Housing First services for youth can adopt a PYD framework to focus housing interventions on young people's strengths and goals, sources of social support such as family members and friends, and facilitating access to educational and professional opportunities. Other studies have asserted that a PYD framework could help prevent young people from leaving government care and entering directly into homelessness by re-orienting programs to focus on young people's autonomy in relation to their housing [92]. The homing strategies we describe can also be supported by the application of the homelessness (re-)entry prevention model described by Martin Seager, known as the psychologically-informed environment model [93]. This model foregrounds the benefits of fostering consistent attachments among small groups of housing residents and a "professional family" of staff members in housing environments,

strongly resonating with the homing strategies we identified. Taken together, these models can support young people's homing strategies as they move toward adulthood and a vision of home that is not just focused on physical locale but rather on the extent to which housing environments nurture behavioral, emotional, and social growth [91,94]. Importantly, the senses of home, stability, social connectedness, and care that are created by these kinds of approaches often mean that young people actively want to stay where they are, in some cases also determining that this is a good (i.e., relatively stable) time to work on substance use and mental health challenges. This is why it is also critical to adopt flexible age limits across all youth housing programs to ensure that young people have the time and support they need to develop the day-to-day practices, routines, and forms of sociality that allow them to more successfully navigate substance use, mental health, and housing challenges.

4.2. Conclusions

In sum, by acknowledging and building on young people's existing homing strategies, youth homelessness prevention policies will support their substantial strengths in navigating challenging circumstances, as well as their deep desires for different kinds of futures. For the young people who participated in this study, home is never a finished project but rather an ongoing process of making and unmaking in the present that also often weaves together past experiences of unhoming and future homing aspirations [95]. Supporting young people's abilities to enact daily practices and routines and forms of sociality and care need to be a central objective of homelessness prevention so that young people can continue to move toward the kinds of homes and futures they desire.

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