



Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Preventing youth homelessness

**An international review of
evidence: Executive
summary**

**Kaitlin Schwan, David French, Stephen Gaetz,
Ashley Ward, Jennifer Akerman, & Melanie Redman**

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- Works with public services to access, generate, evaluate and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges; and
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Introduction

This report offers a concise summary of the findings detailed in the full evidence review, *Preventing youth homelessness: An international review of evidence* by Schwan, French, Gaetz, Ward, Akerman and Redman (2018).ⁱ It affords an overview of the typology used; a summary of the evidence; and a summary of the recommendations. The evidence review was guided by the following questions:

- Which factors (or patterns of factors) are known to increase risk of youth homelessness?
- Which policies and programmes are effective in preventing youth homelessness?
- What are the characteristics of effective strategies to prevent youth homelessness?
- What evidence is still needed to support the prevention of youth homelessness, and how might it be generated?

A typology for youth homelessness prevention

We argue that any youth homelessness prevention intervention must occur within the context of: (1) the immediate *provision* of housing to youth experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, or (2) the immediate *protection* of housing for youth at risk of homelessness. We adopt the Gaetz and Dej (2017) typology to structure the review, which we also suggest may be useful to structuring policy thinking on youth homelessness prevention.

Typology of homelessness prevention

Structural Prevention	Dismantling policies, legislation, practices, and systems that contribute to housing precarity for youth and their families, and replacing these with policies designed to increase economic security, housing stability, and social inclusion for all people.
Systems Prevention	Addressing institutional and systems failures that contribute to the risk of homelessness- whether by directly undermining the ability of individuals to access services that would stabilise their housing, or through lack of planning and co-ordination with other services.
Early Intervention	Policies, practices, and interventions that help people who are at extreme risk of, or who have recently experienced, homelessness retain their current housing or rapidly access new and appropriate housing.
Eviction Prevention	Programmes and strategies designed to keep people at risk of eviction in their home, and help them avoid becoming homeless.
Housing Stability	Initiatives and support that enable people to exit homelessness in a timely way and never experience it again.

Source: Gaetz and Dej (2017)

Summary of findings

Structural prevention

Interventions focused on reducing poverty, increasing incomes, and improving access to affordable housing for families in poverty can effectively reduce the risk factors of youth homelessness. Preventative interventions which mitigate the structural drivers of homelessness (e.g., through the provision of financial support to help people with low incomes meet housing costs), are more successful at stabilising housing. Research also suggests that structural prevention (e.g. increasing the affordable housing stock) is often the foundation upon which other types of prevention can be effective.

Systems prevention

The evidence base for the systems prevention of youth homelessness is scant in some areas, and there are methodological challenges to attributing causal links between particular forms of systems prevention. However, the most robust evidence exists for interventions within child welfare, including interventions that nurture family and natural supports, expand post-care services, and prepare youth for independent living. Research also indicates that unsupported transitions from care, custody, and in-patient healthcare institutions, directly causes homelessness for many youth. Effective interventions to support youth during these transitions include: timely youth-led discharge planning; family mediation and reunification before, during, and after exits from public systems; financial and housing support following exit from care or prison; trauma-informed case management; prison diversion programmes; and improved access to mental health and addiction services for youth and their families / carers.

Early intervention

Research and evaluation are just beginning to catch up with the effects of the many promising early intervention models and programmes in communities around the globe. Intervening early when youth are identified to be at risk of homelessness is critical to positive short- and long-term outcomes for youth, with some research also indicating cost savings. There is population-based evidence supporting the efficacy of school-based interventions to tackle social, medical and financial problems that can lead to homelessness. Respite housing, combined with family mediation and reunification supports, can also be effective. Evidence further indicates that young people and their families benefit enormously from early access to trauma-informed mental health and addictions supports. Extensive research is however needed to better understand the efficacy of early intervention programmes on youth homelessness prevention, the relative contribution of individual programme services to observed outcomes, and the outcomes of early interventions for particular groups of youth.

Eviction prevention

The evidence base for eviction prevention is both small and variable. This makes it difficult to compare the relative efficacy of interventions. There is very limited knowledge on eviction and foreclosure prevention specifically for youth, making it difficult to determine: (1) what interventions are most effective for youth, (2) what factors affect the efficacy of these interventions for youth, (3) how youth from diverse marginalised populations respond to different preventative interventions, and (4) the most effective mechanisms for engaging young people in eviction and foreclosure prevention. However, across the eviction and foreclosure prevention literature, the strongest evidence exists for: (1) financial supports for tenants; (2) legal supports, advice, and representation; and (3) comprehensive financial, housing, health, mediation, and case management supports. Evidence suggests that eviction is most effectively prevented by providing immediate, concrete resources (i.e., housing, financial support).

Housing stabilisation

Housing stabilisation is improved for youth by increasing access to housing subsidies and monetary supports, as well as building skills in financial management. The strength of the evidence supporting Housing First and Housing First for Youth suggests this model holds promise. A spectrum of housing options should be offered, and programmes should be tailored to meet the developmental needs of young people. Support services should be available to meet the diverse needs of young people, and should be tailored per the expressed needs of each youth. The length and intensity of services should also be determined by the young person and support should be sustained for a period after youth access housing. Trusted, respectful, and therapeutic relationships between young people and the professionals supporting their transition out of homelessness are critical to achieving housing stability.

Key recommendations

The following recommendations are intended as a guide to government policy and investment in the pursuit of preventing youth homelessness.

Action across government

- Develop a National Research Agenda on Youth Homelessness in order to advance a cross-systems focus on youth homelessness prevention, organised according to the prevention typology above.

- Develop a cross-systems assessment and screening tool to identify, assess, and respond to the needs of youth at risk of homelessness. To assess progress towards the prevention of youth homelessness, develop an evaluation framework for councils and agencies/organisations to assess their progress towards youth homelessness prevention.
- Work across government to dramatically increase the public's awareness of available services, supports, benefits, and entitlements for children, youth, and families at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Support public system professionals that work with children and youth (e.g., teachers, doctors) to actively educate young people on available supports and services, as well as their rights and entitlements.

Health and social care

- Implement 'zero discharge into homelessness' policies, by which all young people leaving healthcare or social service institutions should be engaged early and often in planning processes that address their housing stability and necessary wrap-around supports.
- Champion and implement youth-friendly models of harm reduction within care placements (e.g., foster care, group homes) and post-care (e.g., post-care transitional housing) that focus on reducing risk or harmful effects associated with substance use and other behaviours.
- Create after care provision that commits to the provision of ongoing support (as needed) to youth in care until the age of 25, provided through existing youth-serving providers. Any care guarantee should be evaluated annually to assess its efficacy at improving housing stability for youth post-care.

Education

- Support councils and schools to implement school-community partnerships aimed at delivering interventions capable of preventing youth homelessness. Partnerships should include schools, healthcare, mental health supports, and community-based social services, and focus on early identification of housing precarity and other issues, preventing early school leaving due to housing precarity, family mediation and trauma-informed supports, and other appropriate services.

Criminal justice

- Ensure youth being discharged from the criminal justice system are engaged in planning processes early and often, and provide them with a range of housing options. Planning should explicitly address employment, education, health and mental health, life skills, and social inclusion and connection with family, friends, and community post-care.

- Review existing youth criminal justice policies to determine how they contribute to housing precarity or homelessness for young people. Engage the Wales Youth Justice Advisory Panel within the review to ensure youth voice and experiences are reflected in policy improvements.
- Provide youth-centred education and advocacy on legal and human rights, coupled with tools and pathways to access legal supports when young people's rights are violated. This should be done in collaboration with appropriate public bodies, such as the Children's Commissioner in Wales.

Housing

- Strengthen current homelessness legislation to focus on preventing youth homelessness, as well as activities focused on youth discharges from public systems (e.g., health, child welfare, justice).
- Provide investments to support the implementation of youth-focused, evidence-based models of housing, such as Housing First for Youth. These models should be grounded in principles of youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination.
- Ensure 'duty to assist' legislation appropriately and effectively responds to the needs and rights of young people, guaranteeing children and youth receive the same protection as adults.
- Embed a focus on prevention within existing youth homelessness services.

¹ For a full reference list of the sources cited in this document, please consult the full report.

Author Details

Kaitlin Schwan, PhD, is a Senior Researcher at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness at York University. Working in partnership with youth with lived experience of homelessness, her research focuses on youth homelessness prevention and the prevention of homelessness for women and girls.

David French is the Director of Policy and Planning with A Way Home Canada. Working with all orders of government, communities, and youth-serving organizations, David nestles his work in honouring the voices of young people and building trust and understanding across the issue. His work has led to important and transformative policy solutions across Canada.

Stephen Gaetz, PhD, is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University and is the President and CEO of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Homeless Hub. Dr. Gaetz plays a leading international role in youth homelessness prevention and knowledge mobilization in the area of youth homelessness.

Ashley Ward, PhD, is the Lead Researcher in the *Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab* (Canada). Working closely with a number of community partners, she oversees the research and evaluation activities for a series of demonstration projects across Ontario and Alberta, Canada.

Jennifer Akerman is a graduate student researcher at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness' and is currently pursuing a Master of Public Health in Social and Behavioural Health Sciences at the University of Toronto.

Melanie Redman is the Co-Founder, President, and CEO of A Way Home Canada. An international leader on youth homelessness policy, planning, and practice, Melanie is currently leading an international consultation process to refine and build consensus on the Canadian-made Housing First for Youth programme model.

For further information please contact:

Andrew Connell or **Jonathan Webb**

Wales Centre for Public Policy

+44 (0) 29 2087 5345

info@wcpp.org.uk

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