


Sofas, Shelters and Strangers:

A Report on Youth Homelessness in Niagara



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**A Report Prepared for the
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Executive Summary



The growing number of homeless youth in Canada—some estimates suggest that youth represent one third of all shelters users (Laird, 2007)—makes youth homelessness a concern for every municipality. The following report outlines the design, methodology, findings and recommendations of a study of the causes and impacts of youth homelessness in the Regional Municipality of Niagara conducted between February 2009 and February 2010. The report outlines the findings from a study of 40 homeless youth and 20 chronically homeless adults who became homeless when youth. The goals of the study were:

- To find out more about the nature of youth homelessness in Niagara, particularly its causes and impacts.
- To explore the connection between becoming homeless at a young age and later adult chronic homelessness. The possibility that homeless youth may become chronically homeless adults makes youth homelessness a special concern.
- To examine youth homelessness across Niagara's diverse geographic mix of small urban, small town and rural areas and determine whether and how youth homelessness looks different depending on geographic location.
- To use the increased knowledge of the causes and impacts of youth homelessness to develop responses that better meet the needs of homeless youth.

This project was not intended to enumerate the homeless youth in Niagara, but to explore the causes and impacts of youth homelessness among youth, including the impacts that may still be there for homeless adults. Interviews were conducted with 40 homeless youth across the Region,

10 each in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls/Welland, Port Colborne/Fort Erie and West Niagara.

There were two follow up interviews conducted with 30 youth located a second time and 15 youth located a third time. In addition, 20 adults were interviewed who are chronically homeless and who became homeless as youth.

Key Findings for Youth

- The families of origin for the youth in the study reflect a range of income levels, with 42% of youth describing their financial situation while growing up as average, 21% as above average and 37% as below average. The majority of parents were working full time, though their levels of education are below the average for the Niagara Region.
- Youth in the study demonstrate a strong commitment to education in their current and future planning, but they also identify significant barriers to achieving their educational goals. These barriers include financial costs and difficulties with school itself. A very high proportion of youth report attending special classes in school which suggests a higher rate of learning difficulties among the group than among youth in general.
- The connection of youth to school over the course of the study was sporadic and compromised by mobility and unstable housing. Attendance at school was higher for the female youth than the male youth.
- Prior to becoming homeless, most youth experienced significant childhood stress in the form of parental conflict and divorce, experiencing/witnessing abuse, and parental substance abuse. Youth experienced multiple childhood stressors while growing up with the average number being five.

- The average age at which the youth in the study became homeless was 16, although a number of youth became homeless very young with the youngest becoming homeless at 11. Those youth who had been abused had become homeless at a younger age. Because the females in the study had higher rates of abuse than the males, the females became homeless on average at a younger age and were more likely to be chronically homeless.

- The immediate cause of homelessness for 55% of the youth was conflict, abuse, and/or substance abuse on the part of parents. For 25% of the youth the immediate cause was conflict over youth behaviour, for 20% conflict with roommates or landlords and two became homeless after difficulty adjusting to a family move.

- Youth were very mobile over the course of the study, with those located for second and third interviews having moved an average of 3 times during the study. Youth in West Niagara were more mobile than youth in other areas since they tended to be couch surfing rather than staying in shelters. Many youth did not make the transition to stable housing during the course of the study, but changed types of housing and rental units between interviews.

- Many youth have experienced a lifetime of housing mobility, with significant family disruption, frequent moves and/or changes in guardian. 55% of the youth in the study already met the definition of chronically homeless and another 17.5% had experienced unstable housing while growing up. Only 27.5% of the youth were experiencing their first or second episode of homelessness when they were interviewed.

- Homeless youth report insufficient income to find an apartment on their own and sharing with other youth can put their own housing at risk. Landlords who are reluctant to rent to youth is also a significant barrier in trying to obtain housing.

- On average youth report at least two per-

sons in their lives who provide “a great deal of support” and/or with whom they are in daily contact. Youth report relying on peers for social support more than parents.

- Youth tend to be unaware of services that are available to them and report not knowing where to go for help when first homeless. Most youth first turn to informal housing arrangements before they connect with shelters.

- The future goals of homeless youth reflect mainstream goals of a job, an income, and an education. For homeless youth an additional goal is finding a safe and secure place to live.

- Youth express the need for adult emotional and social support and for adult guidance in putting together a plan for their future.

Key Findings for Adults

- The adult population first became homeless on average at age 16.

- The cause of the first homelessness episode for the adult population was abuse, conflict and substance abuse on the part of parents for 40%, abandonment or death of a caregiver for 20%, a combination of an abusive home followed by conflict over youth behaviour for 20% and conflict over youth behaviour for 10%. Fewer of the adults were homeless as a result of their own behaviour than is true for the youth.

- The level of childhood stress experienced by the adults was significantly higher than for the youth, especially in the areas of parental conflict, parental substance abuse, and childhood abuse. The rate of childhood sexual abuse is much higher for the adult population than for the youth. In addition, two additional stressors of abandonment and death of a family member were found among the adult population.

- This specific subset of homeless adults more closely resembles homeless youth than other homeless adults in terms of the initial causes of homelessness. Adult homelessness is generally

caused more by economic factors than is the case for this group of homeless adults.

- The majority of adults stated that childhood events had an impact on their homelessness as adults. It is significant that 100% of those who had been sexually abused said yes to this question while 50% of those who had not been sexually abused said yes to this question.
- At the time of the interview 55% of the adults were staying in shelters, 35% were renting and 10% were in longer term boarding situations.
- Adults cited the most significant reasons for continued homelessness as the end of a relationship, their own substance abuse and a lack of income.
- Shelters, income support, day programs and addictions treatment are important resources for the adult homeless population.

Key Finding

Before undertaking this study the connection between becoming homeless at a young age and later adult chronic homelessness intuitively seemed to be a direct one. Becoming homeless while young was assumed to be a traumatic event that had impacts which carried over into adult life. The most important finding of this study is that becoming homeless as a youth is usually the consequence of ongoing childhood trauma and not the primary cause of the trauma. As tragic as homelessness among youth is, what is more tragic is the family situations that have put youth on the street. It is these family situations that appear to be what carries over into the lives of chronically homeless adults. This speaks strongly to the need to help youth (and adults) deal with childhood trauma in addition to dealing with their shelter needs.

Recommendations

A number of initiatives on behalf of homeless youth have been implemented in the last five years in Niagara and gaps in services have been addressed. As we develop recommendations for further improvements in services it is important to acknowledge the dedicated work on behalf of homeless youth by service providers. The specific nature of the response by service providers to the findings in this study should emerge from consultation with service providers. Therefore the first recommendation is the following:

1. Given the interconnectedness of issues as they relate to homeless youth it would be important that the various systems in which youth are involved – education, shelters, drop in centres, income assistance, juvenile justice, addictions – are brought together to discuss a continuum of services for homeless youth in light of the findings of this study.

The findings of this study do, however, provide some general direction for service responses which are outlined below.

2. Youth need stable housing in order to remain in school and they also need assistance with their own school performance issues. Having learning difficulties assessed and receiving assistance for specific learning issues would be important for school completion.

3. The impact of abuse and family conflict on youth and particularly on chronically homeless adults gives a clear mandate for services to youth (and adults) to provide opportunities for care and for healing from abuse. Services should provide a continuum of care which includes addressing

social, emotional and instrumental needs, not just shelter and employability.

4. The youth in the study identify their own need for adult support, and best practices from other studies indicate that adult support is key. “Effective youth initiatives connect young people with adults who care about them, who take time with young people, who advocate and broker on their behalf, who guide them, who connect them to the broader institutions of society, and who have the training and professional skills to help them thrive and grow.” (Eva’s Phoenix Toolkit)

5. Many youth are not transitioning to stable housing once they leave youth shelters. These findings indicate the need for assistance over an extended period of time. For example, youth need transitional supports to obtain and maintain stable housing and reconnect to school and connect to needed services. This could take the form of transitional services that follow youth or a transitional housing facility.

6. Substance abuse issues are significant for the youth and adult population. Substance abuse among youth is much less connected to their homelessness than for chronically homeless adults. This suggests that youth who begin substance abuse early, often in response to family situations, need help with overcoming addictions so that they do not carry this forward into their adult life.

7. Although youth in West Niagara identify The Fort as an important drop in resource, they do not have access to a youth shelter in West Niagara and are couch surfing and very mobile. Youth in West Niagara either need access (e.g. trans-

portation) to shelters elsewhere in the Region or shelter services closer to where they live.

8. Youth were unaware of services available when they first became homeless and this was true for both the youth and the adults. In addition, most youth do not turn to shelters when first homeless. Efforts need to be made (e.g., through the education system) to better inform youth of shelter services and to assist them to connect to services.

Background



The growing number of homeless youth in Canada—some estimates suggest that youth represent one third of all shelters users (Laird, 2007)—makes youth homelessness a concern for every municipality. This study of youth homelessness in Niagara was undertaken between February 2009 and February 2010 to fulfill several goals which are outlined below:

- To find out more about the nature of youth homelessness in Niagara, particularly its causes and impacts.
- To explore the connection between becoming homeless at a young age and later adult chronic homelessness. The possibility that homeless youth may become chronically homeless adults makes youth homelessness a special concern.ⁱ
- To examine youth homelessness across Niagara's diverse geographic mix of small urban, small town and rural areas and determine whether and how youth homelessness looks different depending on geographic location.
- To use the increased knowledge of the causes and impacts of youth homelessness to develop responses that better meet the needs of homeless youth.

This project was not intended to enumerate the homeless youth in Niagara, but to explore the causes and impacts of youth homelessness among youth, including the impacts that may still be there for homeless adults.

Although this report will seek to summarize and report the common characteristics of 40 homeless youth in Niagara, it must be remembered that each youth's story is unique and that there is significant diversity among the youth we interviewed with regard to their circumstances

and pathways. There is also sombre tragedy behind the stories of both the youth and the adults which, while difficult to take in, must be faced for the sake of homeless persons.

Context

It is important to place this homelessness study in the context of homelessness in Canada. Homelessness in Canada has been a serious issue for about the last 25 years and the timing of the problem reflects the withdrawal of first federal and then provincial governments from the provision of social housing and more recently, significant reductions in income support programs in Ontario (Hulchanski, 2009; Laird, 2007). Adult homelessness tends to have economic causes, that is a poverty so deep that even poor quality housing is not affordable (Hulchanski, 2009; Laird, 2007).

It is important to note that the causes of adult homelessness and youth homelessness are different. In a large panel study of homelessness in Ottawa, for example, the most common cause of homelessness for adults was economic while the most common cause of homelessness among youth was family conflict (From Homeless to Home, 2008). The connection between youth homelessness and abuse/violence/family conflict has been well documented (Clarke & Cooper, 2000, Regional Municipality of Waterloo, 2007; Vengris, 2005, Klowdasky, et.al., 2006, Karabanow, 2009). Youth homelessness is best explained by the interaction of structural causes and personal vulnerabilities. Personal vulnerabilities for youth include family disruption, conflict and abuse while structural causes include high levels of youth unemployment and lack of community services (Chamberlain & McKenzie, 2004).

The adult population of homeless persons in this study is a very specific subset of all homeless adults. These are adults who first became homeless when teens and who are now chronically homeless. The findings will show that the causes of homelessness among these adults more closely mirror the causes of homelessness among youth than among other homeless adults. Their personal vulnerabilities mirror the vulnerabilities of youth in terms of family disruption, conflict and abuse. So it is important not to draw conclusions about adult homelessness in general from this particular subset of homeless adults. They can, however, serve as an indication of where homeless youth may end up as adults if there is not timely intervention for homeless youth.

Methodology/Study Design

This study was funded by Niagara Region Community Services. The lead investigator was Stephanie Baker Collins, PhD; Project Manager was Elizabeth Masswohl and the project was managed by Susan Venditti at Start Me Up Niagara.

The study was designed to fulfill the goals above of examining youth homelessness in four different quadrants of the Niagara Region and to pay particular attention to the link between teen homelessness and later chronic adult homelessness. There were two populations included in the study. The first was homeless youth and the second was homeless adults who were chronically homeless and had become homeless while youth. By including these two populations, the project had an opportunity to explore the relationship between youth homelessness and adult chronic homelessness.

Survey Instruments

Survey instruments were designed to achieve these goals and drew on survey instruments used in other youth homelessness and adult homelessness studies (Aubry, et al. 2007; Gardiner & Cairns, 2002; Serge et al., 2002; Springer, Roswell

& Lum, 2006). Survey instruments included a youth questionnaire, a follow-up youth questionnaire and an adult questionnaire. Youth were asked questions about demographics, education, employment, income, parents' employment and income, social support, childhood stressors, current and past housing situation, services, and future dreams. Adults were asked about demographics, childhood stressors, youth housing history, adult housing history, services and factors contributing to homelessness.

Stephanie Baker Collins presented a summary description of the research project to two local committees in January, 2009, the Niagara Homelessness Advisory Committee and the Youth Without Secure Housing Committee. Assistance was sought from the agencies represented in recruitment of participants. The draft survey instruments were circulated and suggestions for changes to the survey instruments were incorporated. Ethical approval for the instruments, recruitment and interview process and consent forms was obtained from York University where Dr. Baker Collins was an associate professor. Participants received an honourarium for participating in the study.

Recruitment and Sampling

40 homeless youth were included in the study with specific targets for four areas of the Niagara Region. Ten youth each were interviewed in the following regional quadrants:

- St. Catharines
- West Niagara
- Niagara Falls/Welland (4 from Welland and 6 from Niagara Falls)
- Fort Erie/Port Colborne (4 from Fort Erie and 6 from Port Colborne)

It should be noted that not only were the regional quadrant targets met, but there was good representation from each city in quadrants with more than one city.

The youth population was interviewed for the first time from mid-March through May, 2009. Youth were eligible for the study if they were

between 16 and 25 years of age, had been homelessness during the previous year and had first become homeless as teens. The intent of the study design was to conduct two follow-up shorter interviews at approximately three months and again at six months to determine the housing situation of youth at those times and to determine whether they had achieved housing stability. The mobility of the youth during the study meant that finding youth both for the first interview and subsequent interviews took longer than anticipated. There were 30 youth who were interviewed a second time, and these interviews ranged between three to seven months later with an average of four months between first and second interview. There were 16 youth located a third time and these interviews were done between 7 and 11 months after the first interview, with an average time of 10 months after the first interview.

In addition to the 40 youth who were interviewed, 20 adults were also interviewed. Adults were eligible if they were 30 years of age or older, met the definition of chronic homelessness, and had first become homeless as teens. Thirteen of the adults came from St. Catharines (13), and there were 4 adults from Port Colborne, 1 from Welland, 1 from Niagara Falls and 1 from West Niagara.

Recruitment for participants was undertaken by the Project Manager, Elizabeth Masswohl. Elizabeth began to hang out at various community agencies to become a familiar person with the youth and build trust. This connection proved very important in successfully recruiting youth to participate. It was also of value in relocating youth for follow-up interviews. The success of the challenging targeting plan is owing to Elizabeth's persistence in pursuing youth, whose schedules and ability to keep appointments were sporadic, her work with front line agency staff to locate youth, and the cooperation and assistance of agency staff in helping to locate youth. Locating youth was particularly challenging in rural areas

and smaller towns where there are few services with which youth regularly connect. In addition, finding adults who met the definition of chronically homeless and who had become homeless as teens was a difficult task, helped by establishing trust with this population and receiving the assistance of agency staff in recruitment.

The Youth Without Secure Housing Committee acted as an advisory committee to the study and regular reports of progress on the study were made to the committee. Their support for the study and the assistance of agency staff during the recruitment process is much appreciated. The project management and general support by Start Me Up Niagara is also appreciated as is the funding of this project by the Regional Municipality of Niagara.

The results of the survey of homeless youth will be presented first followed by the results of the survey of homeless adults.

Youth Homelessness

Homeless Youth Demographic Description

The youth will be described initially with regard to their age, gender, income, employment and education. Descriptions of their housing circumstances will be undertaken in a later section of the report. With regard to gender, 17 of the youth were female and 23 were male. The average age of youth when interviewed was 18 years old. The youngest age at the time of the first interview was 16, the oldest youth was 23. The majority of the youth, 35 or 88%, were born in Canada. Of the five who were not born in Canada, two had lived in Canada since they were very young (3 and 5 years old), and the remaining three had lived in Canada from 2 ½ years to 4 years. 35 youth described their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, 1 as African Canadian, 1 as Jamaican and three as Aboriginal.

Youth Income

At the time of the first interview, 25 youth reported a source of income and 15 youth reported having no income. Of the 25 youth with income, the primary source of income for 14 is Ontario Works, for 6 paid employment, for 2 ODSP, for 1 Employment Insurance and for 2 others Extended Care Maintenance from Family and Children's Services (FACS).

At the time of the second interview, 25 of the 30 youth had a source of income. The primary source of income for 15 is Ontario Works, for 7 paid employment, for 2 ODSP, and for one Employment Insurance and 1 other Extended Care Maintenance with FACS.

The amount of income from OW income ranged from \$216.00 to \$600.00 a month, with an average of \$487.43 for those receiving OW. Income from paid employment ranged from \$150.00 a month for less than 10 hours a week to \$2000.00 a month for full time work. The average monthly income from paid employment is \$1025.00 a month.

Youth Employment

Ten of the youth were employed at the time of the first interview, with three youth working on an occasional basis, three working 10 hours a week or less, 1 youth working 21-30 hours and three youth working more than thirty hours a week. Nine of the youth report regular income from employment, with the three youth working more than thirty hours a week reporting weekly income of between \$300 and \$400.

At the second interview, 8 of the 30 youth were working, with 1 youth working less than ten hours, 2 working 11-20 and 5 working 21-40 hours a week.

TABLE 1 - **Family financial Status**

Financial Status while growing up	Number of youth	Percentage
We were poor	8	21
We had a below average income	6	16
We had an average/middle class income	16	42
We had an above average income	7	18
We were wealthy	1	3



One question included on the follow up questionnaire which was not part of the first interview was a question about whether the youth have ever had a job. Of the 30 youth located for a second interview, 26 or 86% have had paid work in the past.

Mother's Employment

The employment status is known for 34 mothers. (There were 6 youth who did not live with their mother for most or all of their childhood.) Of the 34 mothers, the majority of mothers were working full time (21 of 34, or 62%), two were working part-time, one was self-employed, five were on social assistance, one was looking for work, two were full-time homemakers, and two were in school full-time.

Father's Employment

The employment status is known for 30 fathers. (There were 10 youth who did not live with their father for most or all of their childhood.) Of the 30 fathers, 20 or 67% were working full time, one was working part-time, three were on social assistance, three were retired, one was applying for disability and two were in jail.

Family Financial Situation

Youth were asked to describe their financial situation while growing up. The following financial status was reported by the youth (N=38 for this table since two youth did not know their financial status). The largest group of youth (42%) report their childhood financial status as average, 21% above average or wealthy and 37% below average or poor.

It is important to note that the family's perceived financial status does not correlate with the age at first homeless, or parental separation and

divorce or frequent parental arguments or child abuse. Nor does it track with parents' employment status. Among the very poorest group, however, are higher rates of parental long term employment and parental substance abuse and an earlier age at which youth were first homeless.

Parents' Education Levels

In terms of mothers' education levels, of those who are known, 38% had less than a high school diploma, 24% had a high school diploma, 12% had some college and 26% had a college or university diploma. Mothers had higher education levels than fathers. In terms of fathers' education levels, of those who are known, 58% had less than a high school diploma, 10% had a high school diploma, 19% had some college, and 13 % had a university or college diploma. The numbers of parents with less than a high school diploma appears higher than on average in Niagara, while the numbers with a college or university diploma appears lower than on average in Niagara.ⁱⁱ

Youth Education

At the time of the initial interview, 18 of the 40 youth (or 45%) were in school. When age is factored in, of the participants who are high school age, that is 18 years old or younger (23 participants), 70% are in school. Of those not in school, all but one participant plans to go back. There is a gendered dimension to school attendance, with 76% of girls in school and only 22% of males in school.

At the time of the second interview, 9 of the 30 youth (or 39%) who were interviewed a second time were in school. The gendered pattern continues with 43% of females in school and 19% of males. It is important to note that the youth in

school at the second interview are not necessarily the same youth as had been in school at the initial interview. There is evidence of a sporadic attachment to school, which is understandable given the mobility of the youth during the study. Of the 30 located for a second interview, 11 had been in school at the first interview, six were still in school and five were no longer in school. Three youth who were not in school at the first interview were in school at the second interview. By the third interview some of the same youth are still in school, some are no longer in school and several youth who were not in school at the first two interviews are now in school.

Although their ability to remain in school is compromised by unstable housing, it is clear that education is important to the youth in the study. Of the 22 youth who are not in school at the initial interview, 18 or 82% plan to go back. The plans to go back to school are still high at the second interview, with 75% of the youth who are not in school planning to return to school.

Future Prospects for Education

Youth were asked two questions about their future education, a question about what level of education they thought they would achieve and a question about what level of education they would like to achieve.

When participants were asked what level of education they thought they would achieve (their

expectations), the majority (75%), expected to achieve a college education, training school or education in the military. Of these 30 youth, five expressed doubt about their ability to complete college, but hoped to get some college education. It is unclear whether youth see college and university as the same educational path but only two of the thirty used the term university. All others used the term college or apprenticeship. Of the quarter of the youth remaining, nine hoped to complete their high school diploma and one youth was not planning to go past Grade 9.

When participants were asked about what level of education they would like to achieve (their goals), the majority (75%) gave similar responses to their expected achievements, i.e. their goals and their expectations matched fairly closely. For one quarter of participants, their desired education level was more than they expected to achieve. One respondent stated that just finishing grade 12 will be hard because she must support herself, so her expectation is a high school diploma. Her education goal is to go to college and become a paediatrician.

Although most of the young people in this study were aiming for a college education or training school diploma, the barriers they saw in the way of achieving their aims were significant. The barrier mentioned most often (by 40% of youth) was a lack of money for further education.

TABLE 2 - **Barriers to Further Education**

Barriers to further education	Number of youth facing this barrier
Money	16
Lack of housing	7
Lack of motivation, attendance issues	6
Lacking high school diploma	3
Transportation	3
Depression and stress	3
Fights, hanging with wrong people	2
Other	7

Educational issues were listed by 9 youth which included attendance problems, motivational problems and the lack of a high school diploma. Their current housing situation was also a barrier mentioned by seven youth. Other barriers mentioned by youth include transportation, depression, hanging with the wrong people, lack of language skills, not knowing the credentials, fear of losing family, health concerns, memories, drugs, and mental health issues. Only four youth did not identify any barriers to further education.

Included in the questionnaire was a question as to whether youth had ever been in a special class in school. A high percentage of youth, 58%, reported that they had been in a special class when they were in school, such as credit recovery, remedial programs, behavioural modification or other special programs. An additional youth reported that they have a learning disability but avoided special classes so as not to stand out. This would raise the percentage of youth who have a learning disability or attended a special class to 60%. It is not known the extent to which being in a special class reflects learning disabilities, emotional/be-

havioural problems or developmental problems, but the rate is high enough to cause concern and begs further investigation. As a point of comparison, 2.4% of the Canadian population has a learning disability, 2.1% an emotional disability and .7% a developmental disability (2009 Federal Disability Report). As another point of comparison, the Progress of Canada's Children (2006) reports that 3.3% of children in Canada under the age of 15 have a disability. Among school age children (5 to 14 years), chronic conditions and learning disabilities are the most common. ⁱⁱⁱ

Childhood Stressors

One of the most important findings from this study is that there is not one primary reason to explain why youth become homeless. Rather, there are multiple reasons which converge in the lives of youth, and one of the consequences of these multiple traumatic events is that youth may become homeless. The first indication of multiple, converging causes can be seen in the responses to a question about the presence of stressful events in the lives of youth. The index Childhood Stres-

TABLE 3 - **Childhood Stressors**

Childhood Stressor	Number of Youth	Percentage of Youth
Frequent parental arguments	26	65%
Experienced/witnessed abuse	26	65%
Parental separation and/or divorce	24	60%
Youth substance abuse	24	60%
Parental substance abuse	23	58%
Youth physically or sexually abused	20	50%
Long term parental unemployment	19	48%
Youth sent away from home	18	45%
Spent time in a foster home	14	35%
Spent time in custody	13	33%
Experience cultural conflict within family	10	25%
Spent time in a group home	6	15%
Witnessed abuse	6	15%

sors is intended to measure the number of traumatic events that youth were exposed to during childhood and adolescence.^{iv} There were 11 childhood stressors that were included in the questionnaire. All but one of the youth in the study experienced multiple stressors and the average number of stressors experienced was 5.

The stressor “experienced/witnessed abuse” was disaggregated to determine how many youth were abused themselves. There were 26 or 65% of youth who experienced and/or witnessed abuse. 50% of the 40 youth interviewed experienced abuse. The primary form of abuse experienced by youth was physical abuse, with 4 youth reporting sexual abuse in addition to physical abuse. Youth who were abused became homeless at a younger age than youth who were not abused.

The results of the childhood stressor index indicate high levels of stressful events in the lives of homeless youth in this study. Parental conflict and/or divorce, substance abuse and abuse were all experienced by over half of the youth. What makes it more difficult is that for many youth these factors occur together. Many youth both experienced and/or witnessed abuse and experienced parental substance abuse and frequent conflict. Of the 26 youth who experienced and/or witnessed abuse, 77% report frequent conflict between their parents, and 19 or 73% also had

parents who abused drugs or alcohol.

Youth also reported high rates of substance abuse of their own but this does not correlate with becoming homeless at a younger age. The average age of first homeless is almost identical for youth who used substances and those who did not.

In addition to the number of childhood stressors, the nature of the stressors experienced by youth is important. For example, as noted above, youth who experienced abuse became homeless at a younger age than those who did not. In a subsequent section it will be noted that youth who were abused are also more likely to be chronically homeless.

Age at First Homeless

For the entire population, the average age at first homeless is 15.83, the median age is 16. A number of youth were homeless at a very young age. One female was homeless at age 11, two females at age 12 and 3 females and 2 males were homeless at age 14.

Youth who experienced abuse were first homeless at a younger age on average than youth who were not abused. The average age for first homeless for youth who were abused is 15, while for those who were not abused the average age is 16.7. It can be seen in the table below that on average the females were younger than the males

TABLE 4 - Age at First Homeless

Age at first homeless	Sex		Total
	Female	Male	
11	1	0	1
12	3	0	3
14	3	2	5
15	0	4	4
16	7	7	14
17	1	5	6
18	1	2	3
19	1	3	4
Total	17	23	40

TABLE 5 - **Primary Factors - Youth Homelessness**

Primary Factors	Kicked out by parents	Youth left	Total
Primary factor was abuse, substance abuse or mental health issues on the part of parents	13	9	22
Primary factor was conflict with parents over youth's behaviour	4	6	10
Total	17	15	32

in terms of age at first homeless. The mean for females is 15.00, for males 16.43. Since the rates of abuse are higher for females (59%) than for males (43%) it is likely that they are homeless at a younger age because of being abused.

Immediate Cause of Homelessness

We can see from Table 5 that for 32 youth, the primary immediate cause of homelessness was conflict in the home. The majority of this conflict (69%) was caused by parental behaviour, including parental abuse, parental substance abuse and/or parental mental health issues. For ten youth, the conflict in the home was over their own behaviour, including conflict with their parents, their relationships with peers, and/or their own substance use.

For the remaining eight youth, four youth became homeless after conflicts with roommates or with their landlord. Two youth experienced parental moves and difficulties in making the adjustment to a new location. One of these youth was “jumped” several times in the playground of the new school, and another youth was sent back to Canada (from Europe) to finish high school here with no financial support. One youth was living with a brother and was kicked out after a fight with his brother, another youth lost his housing when his parents divorced and neither parent had room for him.



Housing Mobility During the Study

As noted in the introduction, the design of the study was to follow youth for approximately six months over the course of the study and thereby determine to what extent they had achieved housing stability during that time. Originally the intent was to conduct follow up interviews to the original interviews at three months and again at six months. Because locating the youth proved more difficult than anticipated, the time between the original and follow up interviews was generally longer than three months. The average time between the first and second interviews was just over four months and between the first and third interviews was almost ten months. The result is that youth were followed for a longer period of time than initially anticipated which is of benefit when trying to determine youth pathways during the study.

Youth Housing at Time of First Interview

The youth participants in the study had all been homeless at some point during the past year. They were not necessarily homeless at the time of the first interview. The following chart shows

where they were living at the time of the interview by regional quadrant.

Most youth are either living in shelters or are renting an apartment at the first interview although almost a quarter are couch surfing. Although three youth are living with their parents this does not translate into stable housing for two of them since these situations are difficult for the youth, with one involving parental substance abuse and one involving parental mental illness where the youth consistently couch surfs when things get bad at home.

For those youth who were in a temporary housing situation at the time of the interview (youth shelter, couch-surfing, motel or abandoned house) the table shows that youth in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls/Welland are using youth shelters and are not couch-surfing. Most youth in West Niagara are couch-surfing, with one youth in an abandoned house and only one in a youth shelter.

It should be noted that although a substantial number of youth were in shelters when interviewed, their housing history shows that most youth first turn to informal arrangements when they become homeless, couch-surfing, staying on the street or some other informal arrangements. Less than one quarter of the youth interviewed turned to a shelter first when they became homeless.

TABLE 6 - Youth Housing at Time of First Interview

	St. Catharines	Niagara Falls/Welland	Fort Erie/Port Colborne	West Niagara	Total
Youth Shelter	6	5	2	1	14
Renting	4	3	3	1	11
Couch Surfing			2	7	9
Parents		1	2		3
Transitional			1		1
Motel		1			1
Abandoned house				1	1
Total	10	10	10	10	40

TABLE 7 - Youth Housing at Time of Second Interview

	St. Catharines	Niagara Falls/Welland	Fort Erie/Port Colborne	West Niagara	Total
Youth Shelter			1		1
Renting	5	4	3		12
Couch Surfing		1	4	3	8
Parents		1	1	1	3
Transitional	1			1	2
Motel				1	1
In custody	1				1
Grandparents				2	2
Total	7	6	9	8	30

Youth Housing at Time of Second Interview

At the second interview only one youth is in a shelter which is not surprising since shelter stays are time limited. There are 12 youth who are renting, 8 are couch surfing, and three are with their parents, though two of these youth are different than the youth who were with their parents at the first interview. One youth in rental housing has secured an apartment based on coming up with first and last month's rent which he did not have at the time of the interview so this rental situation may not hold. Also one of the youth with parents is in a volatile situation involving parental mental illness and the youth couch-surfs when things are bad at home.

Of the 10 youth who we did not locate again for a follow-up interview, there is some knowledge about their situation from other youth or from contact via Facebook. There are three youth who we know are still quite mobile and do not have secure housing. There are four youth who appear to have moved back home. Another youth is now living 12 hours away so we know this youth did not return home but the stability of his current housing is unknown. There are two youth about whom we do not have any further information. Current knowledge suggests that three do not have stable housing yet, four seem to have returned home, and there are three for whom we do not know the stability of their housing.

Youth Housing at Third Interview

Although there were fifteen youth interviewed a third time, there is information about the housing situation of other youth who were not located for an interview, either from the youth themselves in the course of trying to set up an interview or via shelter staff who are aware of the housing situation of the youth. Therefore, we have follow up information on 21 youth. Their housing situation over the course of the study is outlined below and demonstrates considerable mobility.

There are three youth who were housed and in the same housing situation for all three times. An additional two youth were housed at the second interview and remained housed in the same situation at time three. An additional eight youth were housed at time three though they were not housed at time two or were housed in a different housing situation. Of the youth whose housing situation is known at time three, 11 are renting, five are couch surfing, two are in transitional housing, one is in custody, one in a shelter and one is with grandparents.

It is clear from the youth interviews that one cannot draw conclusions about the stability of the housing by the type of housing. We cannot conclude, for example, that youth who are with their parents are in stable housing situations. Of the five youth who were with parents at some point in the study, only two youth were in stable

TABLE 8 - Youth Housing at Time of Third Interview

Youth ID	Time One	Time Two	Time Three
1	Renting	In custody	In custody again after renting for a bit
3	Shelter	Transitional housing	Same transitional housing
4	Shelter	Different shelter	Same shelter as Time Two
6	Abandoned house	Renting	Different rental
7	Shelter	Shelter	Renting
8	Renting	Same rental	Same rental
9	Couch surfing	Renting	Different rental
10	Couch surfing	With mother	Couch surfing
11	Couch surfing	Motel	Couch surfing
15	Renting	Couch surfing	Renting
17	Renting	Same rental	Same rental
18	Couch surfing	Couch surfing	Renting
24	Shelter	Renting	Rooming house after some time in custody
27	Shelter	Rooming house	Renting in Toronto
28	Renting	Same rental	Same rental
29	Renting	Boarding with family	Grandparents
30	Shelter	Renting a room	Couch surfing
31	Shelter	Transitional housing	Transitional housing
32	With father	Couch surfing	Renting
35	Renting	Same rental	Couch surfing
37	Motel	Renting	Couch surfing

home situations. We also cannot conclude that youth who are renting are in stable housing situations. For example, one rental situation consists of two youth who are paying \$750 in rent for a room in a house where the landlord is dealing drugs and has offered them drugs. A more common difficulty is needing to share housing with other youth to afford rent, but having to engage in risky sharing options where there is conflict, substance abuse and / or theft of belongings.

To determine youth mobility over the course of the study, of the 30 youth we found a second time and the 15 we found a third time, we counted

TABLE 9 - Regional Areas

Regional Area	Average # of moves
West Niagara	5.25
St. Catharines	3.14
Niagara Falls/Welland	2.16
Port Colborne/Fort Erie	3.33

ed the total number of times they have moved. The number of moves refers to the number of moves we could document. For a number of youth this meant a conservative estimate since there were, for example, a series of couch surfing arrangements which could not all be counted.

If we examine the mobility of youth compared to the area of the Niagara Region in which they live, we see a significant mobility among West Niagara youth compared to other areas of the Region.

TABLE 10 - Number of Moves

Number of moves	Number of youth
No moves	3
1 move	4
2 moves	6
3 moves	4
4-6 moves	6
7 or more moves	7
Did not find again	10

We saw earlier that West Niagara youth tend to be obtaining shelter through couch-surfing. Since couch-surfing is a very temporary housing solution and lasts only as long as friends are willing to let you bunk with them, it makes sense that West Niagara youth would have moved more than youth in other areas who tend to be renting or staying in shelters. As one West Niagara youth stated: “I don’t feel comfortable mooching off of friends. I stay two or three days, after that you are overstaying your welcome.”



Reasons for Continued Homelessness

Youth were asked at the first interview: “What would you say is the main reason why you don’t have a place of your own to live in right now?” The reason offered most often by youth (26 youth or 65%) is “money”. For some youth, but fewer over time, “money” meant a lack of any income. Fifteen youth did not have any income at the time of the first interview. Youth are being assisted to obtain Ontario Works by shelter staff and by the second interview, only four youth reported being without income. Several youth describe being in limbo regarding Ontario Works. Their parents will neither support them, nor sign off on Ontario Works.

“Money” as a reason for continued homelessness refers not just to the presence or absence of income but also to the level of income available on Ontario Works. The amount of income makes obtaining housing difficult. One youth states:

“I’ve been looking, but prices are too high for me even to consider.”

For most youth, their income is insufficient to live on their own, so they share housing with other youth they have met in the shelter or on the street. This option is problematic for many since their living situation involves bunking with other youth who they may not trust or whose substance abuse problems complicate their own lives. Six youth mention the people they are hanging out with or living with as problems that are putting their own housing at risk. One of these youth and five additional youth openly expressed a desire to live on their own. At the time of the second interview, all but one of the youth who were renting were sharing their accommodation. Only one was living alone.

One youth lost housing and possessions:

“I had my own place..., even had my own car, nothing much, but it was mine. My room mates had cocaine problems. They sold my stuff, one day I came home and I was locked out.”

Another youth states the challenge in this way: “Finding someone I can trust as a roommate. I am terrified to trust because I don’t know who I can. Everybody I put trust in ends up shooting me down.”

Not all youth want to live on their own, however. Two youth said they don’t want to live alone due to being so young or afraid of being alone because of past trauma. They recognize their own need for help.

“I don’t want to be on my own, I’m not ready for it. I would probably die. I don’t want to be alone with so much responsibility at my age. I want to live with a supportive adult.”

Another significant difficulty named by youth as a cause of continued homelessness is issues with landlords. 15 youth mention difficulties finding landlords who will rent to young people. Most youth state that landlords are reluctant or refuse to rent to them. This issue goes two ways. Some youth state that landlords they encounter have had trouble with youth in the past not paying rent and now don't want to rent to them. "There are people who ruin it." They are then lumped in with all youth.

"Landlords judge young people as partiers, don't think they will come up with the rent on time. Young people without places to stay don't have in mind parties and wrecking stuff we have in mind a place to stay so we can sleep and eat, not have to sleep on the streets. Not a whole lot of landlords understand that I think."

A number of youth (7) mention unemployment and lack of jobs in the same breath with lack of income. One youth states: "It's kinda like double sided sticky tape. You get stuck. I can't really have a job without a stable address, can't get a stable address without a job."

Other reasons for continued homelessness mentioned by several youth include their troubled relationship with parents, their own mental health issues, their own substance abuse and their own attitude or behaviour which gets them into trouble or a lack of motivation. More often these comments are accompanied by a recognition of a lack of options available. For example: "Motivation. You gotta do something. You've got to work to get what you want. can't find work."

Several youth also mentioned discrimination due to age and one youth mentioned discrimination due to racism. The age discrimination is expressed in the statement as follows:

"Age, people are judgmental. I can tell in five seconds if some one is going to rent me a place because they get that look. Also if you are on assistance you have this form and you have to get them to sign it. Once you show them that it's impossible."



Lifetime Housing Mobility/ Disruption

One of the purposes of this study was to explore the connection between becoming homeless at a young age and adult chronic homelessness. One of the unexpected findings was the substantial mobility of the youth while they were still quite young. Perhaps this finding should have been expected since other studies of youth homelessness note that homeless youth have histories of "violence, abuse, and disruption" in their family life (Klowdasky, Aubrey & Farrell, 2006, p. 422). The connection between youth homelessness and abuse/violence/family conflict is well known (Clarke & Cooper, 2000, Regional Municipality of Waterloo, 2007; Vengris, 2005, Klowdasky, et.al., 2006, Karabanow, 2009) but perhaps less well known is the connection between youth homelessness and family instability and disruption. Karabanow (2009, p. 4) describes this disruption as follows: "family instability, including numerous transitions and moves (i.e., divorce, separation, introduction of stepparents and stepchildren, moving residences, changing cities, and shifting living arrangements)."

Benoit et al. (2008) undertook a study which examined the living circumstances of homeless youth (entitled *Risky Business*) and a follow up study which looked at a randomly selected group from the same geographical area (entitled

Healthy Youth Survey) to compare the life-course transitions between the two groups of youth. In comparing the two groups they found that street youth experienced considerable disruption in their family life in their early years. By their 13th birthday less than one quarter of the youth who ended up on the street were in the same living situation as they were in their first year of life. In contrast, interviews with youth in the mainstream control group showed that 60% had lived in only one family situation by their 13th birthday.

For the Niagara homeless youth, we find that only six of the 40 youth (or 15%) had lived in the same living situation for their entire youth prior to becoming homeless. The majority of youth (85%) had experienced either changes in family make-up through divorce, had been sent back and forth between parents, had lived with other family members, and/or spent time in the care of FACS. And three of the six youth who had remained in the same living situation had witnessed or experienced abuse in their parental home. We could conclude that only three of the homeless youth had experienced family stability before becoming homeless.

Another way of describing lifetime housing mobility for the Niagara youth is to look at their

housing instability in addition to family instability. As noted above, most youth in the study had already experienced substantial disruption and mobility in their family life when interviewed. Sometimes this mobility had already resulted in numerous episodes of homelessness while still in their teens. Other youth had very disruptive childhoods in terms of numerous moves and changes in caregivers, but this did not result in frequent homelessness. To distinguish between these various housing histories, we developed three categories that better enabled us to describe youth's housing history. Youth were designated according to three categories: first/second time homeless, unstable housing, chronic homelessness.

1. First/second time homeless

There were 11 youth who had been homeless once or twice at the time of being interviewed. For these youth, whatever family instability they had experienced, it did not result in becoming homeless. Some had faced family disruption at an early age (two were 14 at the time) but were sent to live with other family members.

2. Unstable housing

Seven youth were deemed to have unstable housing histories. These youth had experienced

TABLE 11 - Youth Experienced Abuse 'Sex' Housing History Crosstabulation

Youth experienced abuse * sex * Housing History Crosstabulation					
Count					
Housing History			sex		Total
			Female	Male	
first/second time	Youth experienced abuse	Yes	0	2	2
		No	3	6	9
	Total		3	8	11
Unstable	Youth experienced abuse	Yes	2	2	4
		No	0	3	3
	Total		2	5	7
Chronic	Youth experienced abuse	Yes	8	6	14
		No	4	4	8
	Total		12	10	22

lengthy episodes of unstable housing which included 3 or more moves in location and/or 3 or more changes in guardians.

“My mom didn’t like me, she sent me to live with my auntie. My auntie didn’t like me, sent me back to my dad, and they kicked me out a week after so its kinda like I didn’t really care because I was getting sent everywhere you know.”

3. Chronically homeless

Over half of the youth (22 or 55%) fit the definition of being chronically homeless at some point in their young lives, that is, homeless for a period of six months or greater and/or homeless three times within a year. Some were chronically homeless at the time of the first interview, others had been chronically homeless in the past but were experiencing some stability in their housing at the time of the first interview or follow up interview. This means over half of the youth had been chronically homeless as youth.

The following statements by youth speak to the disruptive life many of the youth have experienced:

“When I was a kid we moved around a lot. My mom didn’t like staying in one place and she moved us around because she was trying to hide us from our dad. She did everything she could to keep us away from him because he used to beat her every day and us.”

When cross tabulations are completed on the data, there are important indications of the nature of the relationship between childhood trauma and lifetime housing mobility. For example, it was noted earlier that youth who themselves abused become homeless at a younger age than youth who are not abused. It is also the case that the females in the study were abused at higher rates than the males. Both of these factors also impact the likelihood that youth will be already chronically homeless at the point of the study.

What the table above is telling us is that 18% of the first/second time homeless youth experienced abuse, that 57% of youth whose housing was unstable experienced abuse and that 64% percent of youth who are chronically homeless experienced abuse. The females in the study are far more likely than the males to be chronically homeless which suggests a strong link between abuse and chronic homelessness. Of the females, 59% were abused compared to 43% for the males. And 71% of the females in the study are chronically homeless compared to 43% of the males.

Social Support

Social support for youth from relationships was measured in two ways, one by presenting youth with a list of persons who might be expected to provide support (mother, father, boyfriend/girl friend, other family member, friends, teacher and other) and asking youth about the level of support they received from these persons. The second measure asked youth to identify their most important relationships and whether they have daily, weekly or monthly contact with these persons. In the first measure youth were asked about specific persons listed above and whether they received a great deal of support from them, a little bit of support, or no support. The responses to these questions indicate that peers such as boyfriends/girlfriend and friends are named as persons from whom youth have a great deal of support somewhat more often than parents. In fact youth name other family members as providing a great deal of support more often than either

TABLE 12 - **Numbers of Persons per Youth who Provide 'a great deal' of Support**

	# youth	Percentage
No persons who provide a great deal of support	5	12.5%
One person with great deal of support	5	12.5%
Two persons with great deal of support	13	32.5%
Three persons with great deal of support	6	15%
Four persons	7	17.5%
Five persons	3	7.5%
Six persons	1	2.5%

parent. 19 youth indicate they have a great deal of support from friends, 18 youth have a great deal of support from a boyfriend or girlfriend, 14 have a great deal of support from other family members, 10 from fathers and 9 from mothers

When support from mothers and fathers is combined, there are four youth who have a great deal of support from both parents, 11 youth who have a great deal of support from only one parent, 8 who have a little bit of support from both parents, 8 who have a little support from only one parent, 9 who have no support from either parent. It should be noted that three of the youth are parents themselves. One female has a child who is in foster care. Two males each have a son with an earlier girlfriend and the girlfriend has custody. One youth indicated he could not afford a lawyer to pursue visitation rights. The other's relationship with the son is not clear.

Social service agency staff appear on the chart although they were not included in the list pre-

sented to youth. Youth were asked if there was anyone else they wished to add to the list of those who gave them social support. Most youth listed social service agency staff or school personnel. Persons mentioned included shelter staff from the Raft and Nightlight, Nakita at the Fort, Lindsay, Tony at Start Me Up Niagara, and probation officers. School personnel included guidance counselors and a vice principal. Two youth also mention a former foster family as a source of support.

Most youth have several people from whom they receive a great deal of support. The average number of persons who provide a great deal of support is 2.4 persons. There are five youth, however, who report that they have no person in their lives from whom they receive a great deal of support.

The second question about social support asked youth to name the most important person in their lives, second most important and so on. They were then asked whether they had daily,

TABLE 13- **Level of Support from Relationships of Youth**

	Level of support by number of youth			
	A great deal	A little bit	Not at all	No such person
Friends	19	15	4	2
Boyfriend/girlfriend	18	5	4	13
Mother	9	14	8	9
Father	10	11	8	11
Other family member	14	15	8	6
Teacher	8	6	8	18
Social service staff	13	4	N/A	N/A

TABLE 14 - **Youth's Most Important Relationship (in numbers of youth)**

	Most important	2nd most important	3rd most important
Boyfriend/girlfriend	13	6	1
Mother	9	3	6
Father	4	5	5
Friend	8	14	6
Brother/sister/ other family	2	4	7
School staff	2	3	2
Social service agency staff	2	3	4

weekly, monthly contact with that person. In this measure the youth themselves are indicating their most important relationships whereas in the previous measure they were responding to a list provided to them.

There were only two youth who had no one in their lives that they were in daily contact with. Most youth had two or more persons that they were in daily contact with, with the average being 2.65 persons.

Peers (friends and boyfriend/girlfriends) outnumber parents and other family members in terms of the most important and second most important relationships for youth. By the third most important relationships, parents outnumber peers.

The importance of peers over parents is not surprising given the prevalence of family conflict for the youth in the study. But it is also the case that young people in general name their friends as very important in their lives and indicate they can talk more easily with their friends than with their parents (Progress of Canada's Children 2006).

Relationships are very important to the youth in this study. In a subsequent section where youth are asked about the best and worst aspect of their lives right now, the most frequently mentioned positive aspect by far is relationships, with 68% of the youth identifying a relationship as the best thing in their lives at the time of the interview.

Regional Differences

The section below will report on youth services by regional quadrant. One of the goals of this study is to determine whether the causes and impacts of youth homelessness vary by area of the region. Comparisons between regional quadrants were made for age at first homeless, number of childhood stressors, social support, education, housing history, family financial situation, mother's and father's employment and number of moves during the study. There are not significant regional differences for these variables except that more youth in Port Colborne/Fort Erie reported their family financial situation as poor and more of the youth in Port Colborne/Fort Erie are chronically homeless. There is also a difference between areas of the region for the average number of moves as reported above.



What Youth Want and Need

Services

Youth were asked about services for homeless youth, both what services they use and what services they feel are missing. It should be mentioned at the outset that there is a general lack of knowledge about services on the part of youth and they were not able to articulate in much detail the specific services they need. Consistent across the region were reports by youth of being unaware of services when they were “younger” and homeless. This finding is not surprising, since other studies of homeless youth report a general lack of knowledge on the part of youth about services available (McLean, 2005; Social Planning, Policy, and Program Administration, 2007). Conclusions about missing services can be more fruitfully drawn from observing youth mobility and lack of housing stability during the course of the study and by observing the services that youth use. Findings around the services that youth are using will be reported by regional quadrant.



1. West Niagara

In West Niagara the service used most by youth is the Fort, with half of the West Niagara youth mentioning the Fort. Other services mentioned include the Niagara Centre for Youth Care, FACS, Community Living, hospitals and doctors, the sexual assault centre, OW, credit recovery, school counsellor, probation officer, addictions recovery services and the Success Program for school completion.

When asked about services not available, several youth mentioned the need for a youth shelter in Grimsby and a drop in center that is open longer hours. The Fort is the service used most by West Niagara youth, but they identify the

short hours as a problem. Services are available in St. Catharines but not in Grimsby. One youth stated, “I’m scared to go to the city but I would like those things.”

“If they had somewhere to stay in Grimsby, a drop in house. There are a lot, a lot of homeless kids in Grimsby. They’re all hiding out. I know lots. A shelter would be nice. A phone 24/7. The Fort definitely helps a lot, but they have to leave at nine and the place opens up at three. So if you are sleeping in a corner and you are waking up and waiting until three and then you have to leave at nine.”

A youth with cystic fibrosis mentioned health services that were needed such as an oxygen tank, a warning system for severe breathing problems, and supportive housing.

Other services needed but not available were help with career goals, a place to get short term financial support, help with finishing school, and more money on welfare.



2. Fort Erie/Port Colborne

The services mentioned most often by homeless youth in Fort Erie/Port Colborne were Port Cares (mentioned by four youth), OW, youth outreach worker Lindsay, the Raft, and Nightlight. Other services mentioned were Hope House, FACS, counselling, school, school vice-principal, probation officer and Out of the Cold and the Second Chance program. One youth stated:

“If it weren’t for Out of the Cold to tell the truth we’d be dead today there would be

no way that any of us would have survived with out Out of the Cold. Winters are getting worse. I praise, seriously praise, Out of the Cold. A warm meal every night, warm breakfast. A lot of people kind of look down on that but what they're doing is saving lives – they are saving people from imminent death."

The only service mentioned by youth that was needed but not available was transportation. Youth also mentioned that they did not know about services, such as OW, when they were younger and needed them.



3. Niagara Falls/Welland

The service used most often by Niagara Falls/Welland youth was the Nightlight shelter. 80% of the youth in this area of the Region mentioned the shelter, the highest percentage local service use of any agency in the study. Youth had high praise for the services available and the staff at Nightlight. Other services mentioned were OW, Hope House, and YMCA employment search.

In terms of services needed that were not available youth mentioned help with getting a drivers license, schooling that is more helpful to the kind of job they will have, and addiction services close by. A number of youth said they have the services they need. Again youth stated that they were unaware of services that were available when they were younger:

"When I was younger I didn't think there were this many services out there. I thought if I needed things they weren't there."



4. St. Catharines:

The Raft and OW were services mentioned most often by youth in St. Catharines (both mentioned by three youth). Other services mentioned included FACS, school, guidance counselors, the Nightlight, Out of the Cold, Project Tie, youth probation, Tony at Start Me Up Niagara, and youth support worker Lindsay.

In terms of services needed, several youth mentioned increased income so they could afford to buy food while on OW and/or Extended Care Maintenance. Other services mentioned were help renewing forklift license, a lawyer to help get more visitation with son, more jobs and help finding a job.

Again youth mentioned being unaware of services available for them:

"I was in Toronto – at Covenant House. I went back to Toronto because I knew about the shelter from the TV commercials. I didn't know there was a shelter here until I went to Covenant House and they told me about this place and helped me get back here."

Service Use Summary

Youth shelters were the service mentioned most often by youth in this study with the Nightlight shelter mentioned by 12 youth and the Raft by 5 youth. Outreach/drop in services are also important as the Fort, a drop in centre in Grimsby, was mentioned by 5 youth, Port Cares by 4 youth and outreach worker Lindsay by 3 youth. Although youth report that income on OW is insufficient for rent and food, they also identify OW as an important service, with 9 youth mentioning OW as one of the most important services that have been of assistance to them. Services mentioned by four youth include FACS

and school services for high school completion. Other services mentioned by several youth include counselling, addictions services, Hope House, Niagara Centre for Youth Care, and Out of the Cold.

Practical Plans and Adult Support

It was mentioned earlier that youth had difficulty articulating the specific services that they need or identifying specific services that were missing in response to questions about services. However, they have a clear picture of what is important in their future if they are to achieve stable housing. Youth were asked what kind of home they would like in the future and then asked what it would take for them to get there. (Their dreams about home will be reported under a later section.) Another question which addressed a similar theme was the question, “What would help you the most right now?” In response to these questions youth were more articulate about what they need. The answers to these questions are reported below.

There are two dimensions to the youth responses to questions about what is needed. One dimension is more material and practical and the other dimension is social and emotional. In terms of the practical/material dimension, homeless youth plans for the future, in many ways, look like the plans of youth who are not homeless. Almost all of the youth (36 or 90%) mention a job and/or money and/or an education as key components of a stable future. Most youth mention more than one and their answers indicate that they recognize how they are connected to each other. Youth expressed needing a decent job to have money for adequate housing. Or they indicated they need money for adequate housing so they can get back in school or find a decent job. They need an education to get a good job. And they may need money to get an education. What is different in their responses from youth who are not homeless is that the need to find a decent place to live is connected to being able to achieve the other goals of an income, a job and an education.

In terms of the social and emotional dimension of youth articulation of needs, the need for adult guidance, friendship, social support and assistance in making decisions comes across strongly in the answers to these two questions. One dimension is the need for adult support as can be seen in the following comments:

I just don't like to be alone. I'm terrified to be alone. I need a person. I need money and I need to know how to pick the right people to trust. Just need help to find it. Like support from a family, someone to go back to for holidays... also Easter was a very tough day for me cause it was my first holiday on my own. So it was... it sunk in... I have no family, my friends wanted to invite me over but their parents said no, this is a family thing ...

Another dimension in the responses is the need for guidance and assistance in getting on their feet and planning for the future as expressed in the following comments;

An instructional worker to show you how to better your life, kinda help you sort your life out.

Get some help to plan to go to college to do what I want to do. Have someone to talk to me. I need help to decide and plan. I need help.

Probably having a guardian. I don't like just being able to do what I want. I miss having

a parent to tell me what I can and cannot do, teach me to cook, tell me to do chores.

If they had like a house kinda like a shelter but not really, but where they could pay rent kinda like with college students where they have a sorority house and just have an older person that would help out there or something. "

Although youth described a desire to be able to have their own apartment, this does not mean a desire to be on their own with no support from adults. They clearly see their own need for guidance and transitional help to obtain stable housing, and pursue a job or an education. Only a couple of youth already see themselves as alone and needing to make their own way without help, as expressed in the following comment:

"I'm not relying on help 'cause I know I have to do it all by myself and think about it by myself."

The need for adult support in the lives of youth is expressed very well by Linda McLean, (2005) in a recent study of homeless youth in Calgary:

Homeless youth cannot be assisted to return to a state of independence, because almost all of these young people entered a state of homelessness directly from living situations in which they were financially and emotionally dependent on adults for care and support. To focus solutions to youth homelessness on the provision of housing options that emphasize independence, or the premature transition to independence, is to deny the legal and moral obligations we have to protect, care for and support these young people. (McLean, 2005, p. vi)

The Best and the Worst Thing in My Life

One of last questions asked of homeless youth was: What is the best thing in your life right now and what is the worst thing?

Given that many youth lack stable housing and sufficient income, it is not surprising that relationships are by far the most prevalent answer to the question about what is the best thing in their lives at the moment. Relationships are mentioned by 27 youth (or 68%) as the best thing in their lives at the moment. For most youth, these are relationships with their peers. Half the youth (20) indicate the "best thing" is their relationship with a boyfriend, girlfriend or friends. Nine youth mention their relationship with a family member (mother, father, grandparents or siblings) and three youth mention their relationship with their own child.

Relationships for homeless youth are both a source of support and a source of stress and conflict. One youth expresses this double edged nature of relationships by mentioning his relationship with his girlfriend as both the best and the worst thing in his life:

"I'm tempted to say the same person. Sometimes a relationship can make homelessness easy, but sometimes not. We've been through a lot together for kids our age."

Of the youth who point to other "best things", 5 mention school, 4 mention having their own place and 3 mention their pets.

Understandably, the "worst thing" for homeless youth is being homeless. 30% of the youth indicate that being without a place and being on their own is the worst things in their lives. And 20% indicate that the pain of lost of family relationships is the worst thing. This pain is expressed in the following statement:

"Not having family. Having someone you barely know by your side and not having people you've known all your life – for 16 years not even

there any more. That's a hard thing. It's pretty hard to lose your family."

The material/practical issues referred to earlier also surface in responses to this question. Five youth mention difficulty in paying bills, four mention not having a job, four mention the difficulty of staying in school when they lack sufficient income and two refer to transportation as problem. Other "worst things" mentioned by youth include addictions by three, one a chronic illness and one a mental illness.

Your Future Dreams

In their responses to the question "In the long term, what kind of home would you like?" youth distinguish between their "dream" home and a more realistic path. The following statements provide an example:

"Five bedrooms, one for each of the kids, a baby room for any unexpected ones that come along. A pool. Two cars in garage, big windows looking over a beach. That's a dream house. I'd settle for a one bedroom apartment."

"Right now I want an apartment so I have a place to live. But definitely when I get older I figure a great big house."

For most youth, even their dream home is a modest one and size is not the most important feature:

- A nice, simple house with a backyard and a garden.
- Just a house. I don't care if it's a big house or small as long as its nice.
- I'm not really looking for anything big, I'd be happy with just a place.

Other youth dream big:

- Big. A lot of bathrooms. Pool. Probably on a beach. In the country. I could live in the country.
- A big house with a pool and a studio. I want

everything. A big walk in closet, a bed that's in my floor, a water bed.

- A big kitchen, a big backyard, a pool. A garage and stuff like that. A flat screen in the bathroom.

Youth also mention the intangible qualities that a nice home brings (quiet, clean, safe, in good repair):

- Cozy. A sanctuary. Someplace I can go and just be myself. Get away from the crazy world and loud noises, busyness and just BE.
- Bright inside. Not a ghetto, not broken up. A place where you could raise a family. A good neighbourhood. Lots of rooms so people I need to take care of could stay with me.
- A small place, an apartment. With frilly curtains. Clean. Carpeted. A place like my mother had when I was a kid because it makes me feel comfortable.

A few youth could not see past the immediate future and so they described what they need right now:

"I would like to have a nice small apartment and share it with my friend. At least have food and everything..."

"Any kind of roof over my head. A bed to lay on every day. (When asked if she has a dream) No not right now. I just want to get a place."

The hopes and dreams of youth were also captured in a question which asked where they see themselves in one year and in five years. Here the pattern is similar in some ways to youth answers to questions about the kind of supports they need, with one key difference. In those earlier responses youth spoke of needing money, jobs and a place to live. In looking one year into their future they speak of school, jobs and a place to live. School is mentioned most often by youth and cited by 27 youth (70%) of youth as a part of their future. Most youth see themselves finishing high school around the one year mark and are hoping to be

in college at the five year mark. It is important to note that for the youth in the study education is seen as an important part of their future even though their mobility during the study made their attachment to school difficult. Another 23 youth (58%) speak about wanting a good job in the future, with several youth describing the job they would like to have. And finding a place to live is an important part of the future for the youth, with 53% expressing a desire to be in their own place at the one year mark with the words, "having my own place" are used by a number of youth. Another youth states:

"I hope I get back in with my grandparents or get a nice stable place around here-not on couches every night."

10 youth envision being married and/or having kids within five years or for the youth that are parents, being reunited with their own children. One youth, with a serious chronic illness, pictures himself in the hospital in five years.

In answering this question, a number of youth mentioned how hard it is to look into the future. Most could manage one year but 11 youth mentioned that five years in the future is too far to look ahead. Commenting on the difficulties of planning ahead:

"In one year. I don't know. Everything I think of is negative because of where I am right now. I don't think positively. I'm not even thinking if I'm going to be alive next year. I play it day by day. Minute by minute I plan out my day. From right now I don't know what I'm going to do next."

What is significant is that the above quote comes from a youth who is homeless at the first interview. At the second interview, when housed, the youth's outlook is very different:

"I'm not nearly as depressed now, it's just so much easier, you know you sleep in a bed, it is so much better. Since I got a place, it's easier, like applying for a job while you're on the streets is impossible, 'cause you're struggling so much to find a place to sleep, find food to eat, it's way too hard when you're homeless, but now I can go out every day and apply for a job."

In a poignant comment on the future, one youth speaks to the goal of being a good parent, in contrast to his own youth experience:

"When I have a kid, or if I have a kid, I'm gonna be a way different parent, I'm gonna give him as much as I can. And if I don't have money to give him, I can at least give him love, that's what a kid really needs, he needs love, that's all he needs, to pay attention to him, to do stuff with him that doesn't cost money to go to a park and take your kid to the park or go play soccer with your kid, right."



Adult Homelessness

The second population under study in this project was a subset of homeless adults. These are adults who are chronically homeless and who became homeless as teens. The purpose of these interviews was an examination of the relationship between youth homelessness and chronic homelessness from a retrospective of chronically homeless adults who became homeless as teens. These were qualitative interviews that mapped episodic homelessness, and also focused on the cause of the first homeless episode. The adult population was drawn from those 30 years of age or older

in Canada, and 16 indicated their race-ethnicity was Caucasian, three Aboriginal and one African Canadian. Their current age ranged from 30 to 56, with the average age at 43.

Age at First Homeless

The age at first homeless ranged from 12 to 19, with an average of 16 years old. The frequency of childhood stressors was so high in most categories (parental conflict, abuse, parental substance abuse) that it was meaningless to test for correlations between age at first homeless and those childhood stressors that had been related to age at first homeless for the youth population.

The reasons for first becoming homeless for the adults are similar to the youth with the exception of several new categories. There were youth who grew up in abusive and conflictual

TABLE 15 - **Primary Factors - Adult Homelessness**

	Kicked out by Parents	Youth Left	Total
Primary factor was abuse, conflict and substance abuse on the part of parents	2	6	8
Combination of abusive home followed by youth behaviour issues	2	2	4
Primary factor was conflict with parents over youth's behaviour	2	0	2
Youth homeless when abandoned by caregiver or upon the death of caregiver	4		4

participating in a variety of shelter programs in Niagara who meet the definition of chronic homelessness and who first became homeless under 20 years of age.

Demographics

Most of the adult participants (16) were male and four were female. There were no regional targets for the adult population and 13 adults were from St. Catharines, 4 from Port Colborne/Fort Erie, 2 from Welland/Niagara Falls and 1 from West Niagara. All of the adults were born

homes, but whose initial cause of homelessness was their subsequent behaviour including getting into trouble with the law. In addition, there were adults who first became homeless when they were abandoned by the primary caregiver or experienced the death of the primary caregiver.

There were two adults who did not fit into any category above. One left FACS after being in multiple homes and running away frequently. Another left FACS to live with a much older woman and became homeless when he left this relationship. Because of the high rate of childhood abuse

in this population, the number of youth who were homeless due to behavioural problems of the youth themselves is significantly lower than for the youth population.

Childhood Stressors

There were 11 childhood stressors included in the questionnaire. The question about witnessing and/or experiencing abuse was disaggregated to

81% of those who experienced or witnessed abuse having parents who also abused substances. And 55% of the adult population experienced all three of these stressors during their childhood.

The most disturbing finding is the very high rate of childhood sexual abuse among the adult population. Twelve or 60% of the adult population were sexually abused as children, with some of them also experiencing physical abuse. Two of

TABLE 16 - **Childhood Stressors - Adult Homelessness**

Childhood Stressor	Percentage of adult population experiencing this stressor
Experienced and/or witnessed abuse	80% (65%)
Frequent Parental Arguments	75% (65%)
Problematic Parental Substance Use	70% (58%)
Experienced Physical and/or Sexual Abuse	65% (50%)
Parental Divorce or Separation	65% (60%)
Problematic Substance Use by Youth	60% (60%)
Youth sent away from home	45% (45%)
Time spent in foster home/group home	40% (35%)
Time spent in custody	40% (33%)
Long-term parental unemployment	30% (48%)
Cultural conflict within the family	10% (25%)

indicate how many adults were themselves abused as youth. Numbers in parentheses are youth figures for comparison.

The percentage of the adult population which experienced childhood stressors is higher among the adults in almost all cases except for long term parental unemployment and cultural conflict. Especially significant are the high rates of parental conflict, parental substance abuse and the adults witnessing or experiencing abuse. As with the youth population, parental substance abuse and abuse of children co-occurred, with

the adults experienced physical abuse but not sexual abuse. Compared to the youth population, the rate of sexual abuse is much higher in the homeless adults who were interviewed. 50% of the youth population experienced abuse with 10% experiencing sexual abuse. 65% of the adult population experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, with 60% of the adults experiencing sexual abuse.

Most of the adults experienced numerous stressors as children with the average number being 5.40 stressors. This result is slightly higher than the average for the youth sample, where the average number was 5.07.

Two stressors which were not included in the quantitative portion of the questionnaire, but which emerged in the interviews were abandonment as youth and the death of a family member as a youth. There were five adults who were abandoned in their youth by adults and left to fend for themselves. As an example, at age 4 one participant had his father move to another city for work, and his mother dropped the three children off at a friend's house and never returned. The children, including the participant, were taken in by FACS. Other examples are similar. There were five youth who experienced the death of a close family member during their youth or early adulthood. One youth was in a car accident in his teens in which his sister was killed and he began drinking heavily in response. When these stressors are added to the others, the average number of stressors rises to almost 6 per adult (5.90).

Although these two stressors were not part of the original list of stressors in the questionnaire, their importance is signified by adult responses to the question of whether there are any other stressors they would like to mention that were not in the list. Six of the adults mention other stressors and all but one of these adults had experienced death and/or abandonment as children. The additional stressors mentioned all refer back to childhood citing both childhood suffering and never having dealt with issues of death and abuse.

Substance Abuse

The rates of parental substance abuse in the childhood of the adult population is high, at 70%. It is not surprising that substance abuse on the part of the adults, either when young or later in life, is also high. 60% of the adults said that they engaged in problematic substance abuse when they were youth, and as adults, 80% said that substance abuse was a contributing factor in their homelessness. Of the 16 adults who indicated substance abuse was a contributing factor, 75% of them grew up in a home where their parents abused substances.

One participant described how his mother

“used to do drugs a lot” and he “started smoking weed at age nine”. Another youth whose father was a heavy drinker said that his dad introduced him to alcohol at age five.

Impact of Childhood Stressors

The adults were asked if any of the things that happened to them as children contributed to becoming homeless? The majority of adults (80%) responded that yes, their childhood events had contributed to their homelessness. Those who were sexually abused were far more likely to say yes to this question than those who were not. All of the adults (100%) who were sexually abused as children answered yes to this question, while 50% of those who were not abused answered yes.

One adult indicates that a normal childhood was not part of his upbringing:

“I believe it has a great deal to do with the fact that I never spent more than two months in any school I ever went to because my father was running from the law. So now that I am an adult it just seems normal for me to bounce around because this is the way my life was from the f moment I remember living. It doesn't seem abnormal because my whole life has been the same, school to school, house to house, apartment to apartment. So me having a place and then having to come to a shelter for a month while I transition into another place doesn't seem abnormal to me and it should.*”**

That's f* sad, my life isn't going to get any better until I stop."***

Given the significant childhood trauma of this population, the question becomes whether adult substance abuse issues and mental health issues are secondary to childhood trauma and not the primary cause of adult homelessness. Participants describe the pattern in this way:

"The inferiority that I felt and disbelonging...led me to self medication, self medication led me to the streets."

Other participants relate their current alcohol use to their use of alcohol when young to deal with traumatic events:

"With being homeless when I was younger it's probably a trend. You know, I was drinking, maybe if I wasn't drinking when I was younger, maybe I wouldn't have drank so much when I was older. That's probably a big factor."

"Just because I was broken from the core of my person, I was always suicidal, I was never happy; I always wanted to be drunk...I was just broken at the core of my person, so that's how I say it contributed to it, it just took

me in a whole different route."

Four adults said that childhood stressors did not contribute to their homelessness. These four indicated it was their own substance use, or lack of financial judgement or going down the wrong path that explains their homelessness. One states,

"I had a chance at a good life. My parents were willing to pay for college, anything I wanted, right, it was me that had the wrong friends, went down the wrong path."

There are two adults who also indicate yes but do not point to childhood trauma. One adult says his youth experiences helped him learn to be independent and another indicated that shifting group home policies when a youth, led to homelessness. Although not naming childhood trauma was clearly a factor. This is a youth who was abandoned by FACS at 15 because she missed a court date and she ended up being dropped off at a rooming house whose inhabitants were primarily adult males with whom she had sex to avoid being raped and beaten.

Adult Living Situations

Adults living situation at the time of the interview: Adults were asked where they had slept most often in the last month. Most of the adults interviewed (11 or 55%) had spent most of the last month living in a shelter. Of these 11, six had moved at least once in the last month. Several combined couch-surfing with friends with their shelter stay and several had been in a treatment centre, mental health safe bed or another shelter prior to being in the shelter where they were interviewed. Seven of the adults (35%) were living in their own apartment. Two were in long term boarding with one in a motel and one in a group home.

TABLE 17 - **Adult Living Situations**

	Number of adults	Percentage
Living in a shelter	11	55%
Living in an apartment	7	35%
Long term boarding, group home	2	10%



Factors in Continued Homelessness for Adults

Adults were asked about factors contributing to continued homelessness in two ways. First, the following open-ended question was asked: “Looking back over your life, what would you say contributes most to your homelessness?” The most common responses to this question referred to adult substance abuse (11) and events that happened in childhood (8). Childhood events included abuse, not having a place to go to when homeless, lack of self worth, being abandoned by

adult homelessness was to give participants a list of potential contributing factors and ask them to indicate whether or not they were factors in their own homelessness. The following table shows that the end of a relationship and substance use issues are the highest. Lack of income and lack of employment were also for factors more than half of the adults.

11 adults mentioned factors in addition to those listed as contributing to their continued homelessness. The additional factors cited include changing government policies, medical problems due to an accident, sexual abuse (2), spousal abuse, working but spending money on drugs, age and skill sets affect employability, lack of budgeting skills, family dysfunction, and liking the outside (2).

TABLE 18 - **Significant Factors - Adult Homelessness**

Significant contributing factor to homelessness	Percentage of adults who said yes
End of a relationship	80%
Substance use issues	80%
Lack of income	75%
Lack of a job	65%
Insufficient education	45%
Mental health issues	45%
Time spent in detention centre or prison	40%

the foster care system and failing to have learning disabilities and a medical condition properly diagnosed and treated. A few adults connected their childhood experiences to their adult substance abuse:

“I’d have to say my childhood. I just never, I’ve just always been broken inside and therefore the drugs and alcohol have been the way I’ve coped with who I am, that’s been my main thing.”

Other issues mentioned as factors in continued homelessness by an adult included mental health issues, a bad temper, lack of employment, and foster care policies.

The second measure of factors contributing to

Services

Adults were asked to think back on times of homelessness and identify services or help that they needed at that time but that was not available. Most adults indicated either that there were services needed that were not there or spoke of their own lack of knowledge of services or of how to ask for help. Six adults spoke of not knowing where services were when they were younger and/or of not knowing how to ask for help. More participants mention process issues such as knowledge of services and access to them than name particular missing services:

“I believe there were a lot of places out there that could have helped me when I was younger, but I was just unaware of them, how to enter that place, how to let them in on my situation.”

Several participants referred to difficulty accessing services that are available due to government bureaucracy. All of these references were to obtaining particular allowances from social assistance. They indicated that to obtain assistance you need to know what is available and how to ask for it and what the correct terms are (e.g. moving allowance rather than start-up kit).

Several participants referred to services that are available now that were not available years ago, such as the Raft, homeless shelters or Housing Help. One individual spoke of a helpful case worker (at Hope House) and indicated if she had had a worker like that when she was young things could have been different. Other services that are named as missing are life skills training and the dentist.

Five indicated either that the services were there if needed or that “if you want help you can find it”. These individuals referred to using detox services, the Wesley Centre in Hamilton, and meal programs.

We do have an indication of what services are being used by adults from the qualitative portion of the interviews and because individuals were interviewed at service agencies where they are receiving assistance.

Shelters were the service being used most often by the adult participants. Shelters used most often included Southridge, the Salvation Army and Out of the Cold. Income assistance programs including ODSP and OW were used by half of the adults (50%). Day programs were also being used by 45% of the adults, with Start Me Up Niagara mentioned most often followed by Port Cares.

Alcohol and drug treatment programs had been used by over half of the participants (55%). Other services used by more than one person included FACS (5), mental health services including CMHA and Gateway (5) and social workers (3). Services used by an adult participant included Housing Help Centre, Women for Women, soup kitchens, Project SHARE, UIC, Niagara Regional Youth Home, Community Care, Wesley Centre, church programs, YWCA women’s shelter, Hope House, and AIDS Niagara.



Summary of Findings

The following section summarizes the considerable amount of data presented above into a number of key findings.

Key Findings for Youth

- The families of origin for the youth in the study reflect a range of income levels, with 42% of youth describing their financial situation while growing up as average, 21% as above average and 37% as below average. The majority of parents were working full time, though their levels of education are below the average for the Niagara Region.
- Youth in the study demonstrate a strong commitment to education in their current and future planning, but they also identify significant barriers to achieving their educational goals. These barriers include financial costs and difficulties with school itself. A very high proportion of youth report attending special classes in school which suggests a higher rate of learning difficulties among the group than among youth in general.
- The connection of youth to school over the course of the study was sporadic and compromised by mobility and unstable housing. Attendance at school was higher for the female youth than the male youth.
- Prior to becoming homeless, most youth experienced significant childhood stress in the form of parental conflict and divorce, experiencing/witnessing abuse, and parental substance abuse. Youth experienced multiple childhood stressors while growing up with the average number being five.
- The average age at which the youth in the study became homeless was 16, although a number of youth became homeless very young with the youngest becoming homeless at 11. Those youth who had been abused tended to become homeless at a younger age. Because the females in the study had higher rates of abuse than the males, the females became homeless on average at a younger age and were more likely to be chronically homeless.
- The immediate cause of homelessness for 55% of the youth was conflict, abuse, and/or substance abuse on the part of parents. For 25% of the youth the immediate cause was conflict over youth behaviour, for 20% conflict with roommates or landlords and two became homeless after difficulty adjusting to a family move.
- Youth were very mobile over the course of the study, with those located for second and third interviews having moved an average of 3 times during the study. Youth in West Niagara were more mobile than youth in other areas since they tended to be couch surfing rather than staying in shelters. Many youth did not make the transition to stable housing during the course of the study, but changed types of housing and rental units between interviews.
- Many youth have experienced a lifetime of housing mobility, with significant family disruption, frequent moves and/or changes in guardian. 55% of the youth in the study already met the definition of chronically homeless and another 17.5% had experienced unstable housing while growing up. Only 27.5% of the youth were experiencing their first or second episode of homelessness when they were interviewed.

- Homeless youth report insufficient income to find an apartment on their own and sharing with other youth can put their own housing at risk. Landlords who are reluctant to rent to youth is also a significant barrier in trying to obtain housing.
- Youth report relying on peers for social support more than parents. On average youth report at least two persons in their lives who provide “a great deal of support” and/or with whom they are in daily contact.
- Youth tend to be unaware of services that are available to them and report not knowing where to go for help when first homeless. Most youth first turn to informal housing arrangements before they connect with shelters. They are also not able to name specific services that they need although important information about missing services can be drawn indirectly from youth experiences.
- The future goals of homeless youth reflect mainstream goals of a job, income, and an education. For homeless youth an additional goal is finding a safe and secure place to live.
- Youth express the need for adult emotional and social support and for adult guidance in putting together a plan for their future.

Key Findings for Adults

- The adult population first became homeless on average at age 16.
- The cause of the first homelessness episode for the adult population was abuse, conflict and substance abuse on the part of parents for 40%, abandonment or death of a caregiver for 20%, a combination of an abusive home followed by conflict over youth behaviour for 20% and conflict over youth behaviour for 10%. Fewer of the adults were homeless as a result of their own behaviour than is true for the youth.
- The level of childhood stress experienced by the adults was significantly higher than for the

youth, especially in the areas of parental conflict, parental substance abuse, and childhood abuse. The rate of childhood sexual abuse is much higher for the adult population than for the youth. In addition, two additional stressors of abandonment and death of a family member were found among the adult population.

- The majority of adults stated that childhood events had an impact on their homelessness as adults. It is significant that 100% of those who had been sexually abused said yes to this question while 50% of those who had not been sexually abused said yes to this question.
- At the time of the interview 55% of the adults were staying in shelters, 35% were renting and 10% were in longer term boarding situations.
- Adults cited the most significant reasons for continued homelessness as the end of a relationship, their own substance abuse and a lack of income.
- Shelters, income support, day programs and addictions treatment are important resources for the adult homeless population.

Key Finding

Before undertaking this study the connection between becoming homeless at a young age and later adult chronic homelessness intuitively seemed to be a direct one. Becoming homeless while young was assumed to be a traumatic event that had impacts which carried over into adult life. The most important finding of this study is that becoming homeless as a youth is usually the consequence of ongoing childhood trauma and not the primary cause of the trauma. As tragic as homelessness is, the primary trauma in the lives of youth is the family situations that have put youth on the street. It is these family situations that appear to be what carries over into the lives of chronically homeless adults. This speaks strongly to the need to help youth (and adults) deal with childhood trauma in addition to dealing with their shelter needs.

Recommendations

A number of initiatives on behalf of homeless youth have been implemented in the last five years in Niagara and gaps in services have been addressed. As we develop recommendations for further improvements in services it is important to acknowledge the dedicated work on behalf of homeless youth by service providers. The specific nature of the response by service providers to the findings in this study should emerge from consultation with service providers. Therefore the first recommendation is the following:

1. Given the interconnectedness of issues as they relate to homeless youth it would be important that the various systems in which youth are involved – education, shelters, drop in centres, income assistance, juvenile justice, addictions – are brought together to discuss a continuum of services for homeless youth in light of the findings of this study. The findings of this study do, however, provide some general direction for service responses which are outlined below.
2. Youth need stable housing in order to remain in school and they also need assistance with their own school performance issues. Having learning difficulties assessed and receiving assistance for specific learning issues would be important for school completion.
3. The impact of abuse and family conflict on youth and particularly on chronically homeless adults gives a clear mandate for services to youth (and adults) to provide opportunities for care and for healing from abuse.
4. The youth in the study identify their own need for adult support, and best practices from other studies indicate that adult support is key. “Effective youth initiatives connect young people with adults who care about them, who take time with young people, who advocate and broker on their behalf, who guide them, who connect them to the broader institutions of society, and who have the training and professional skills to help them thrive and grow.” (Eva’s Phoenix Toolkit)
5. Many youth are not transitioning to stable housing once they leave youth shelters. These findings indicate the need for assistance over an extended period of time. For example, youth need transitional supports to obtain and maintain stable housing and reconnect to school and connect to needed services. This could take the form of transitional services that follow youth or a transitional housing facility.
6. Substance abuse issues are significant for the youth and adult population. Substance abuse among youth is much less connected to their homelessness than for chronically homeless adults. This suggests that youth who begin substance abuse early, often in response to family situations, need help with overcoming addictions so that they do not carry this forward into their adult life.
7. Although youth in West Niagara identify The Fort as an important drop in resource, they do not have access to a youth shelter in West Niagara and are couch surfing and very mobile. Youth in West Niagara either need access (e.g. transportation) to shelters elsewhere in the Region or shelter services closer to where they live.
8. Youth were unaware of services available when they first became homeless and this was true for both the youth and the adults. In addition, most youth do not turn to shelters when first homeless. Efforts need to be made (e.g., through the education system) to better inform youth of shelter services and to assist them to connect to services.

The last word in the study goes to a homeless youth who made this comment: “Homelessness is only a problem if you let it be. It’s only a problem if you don’t do something about it - society as a whole doesn’t do something. Its two parts: they have to ask for the help and there has to be somebody there to help them.”

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Endnotes

ⁱIn an earlier study on the barriers to employment for homeless persons in Niagara (Homeless Employment Access, 2006), it was found that adults who had become homeless as teens were more likely to be chronically homeless as adults. This study is designed to explore that relationship.

ⁱⁱThe report, *A Legacy of Poverty? Addressing Cycles of Poverty & the Impact on Child Health in Niagara*, indicates that 18.1% of those in the 35-44 year age range in Niagara have less than a high school diploma and 30.1% of those in the 45-64 year age range have less than a high school diploma. And 38% of those 35-44 have a college or university degree with 31.3% of those 45-64 with a college or university degree.

ⁱⁱⁱA study of homeless youth in Calgary (Maclean, 2005) reported a similar finding and states:” We conducted no formal or clinical assessment of youth participants in the course of this research, however, our contacts with youth led us to suspect relatively high rates of either learning or developmental disabilities among the homeless youth population, p.54).”

^{iv}The index for this study was adopted from a similar index used in studies on homelessness in Ottawa and Windsor. The index originated in the Statistics Canada National Population Health Survey.



