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Homeless Youth and the Search for Stability

Jeff Karabanow, Sean Kidd, Tyler Frederick and Jean Hughes.
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Prior to the 1980s, the term homelessness was rarely used as the catchall term it has become for a variety of social dislocations affecting a diversity of population groups, young and old. The industrial revolution gave rise to what was known for a long time as homeless and transient men. A 1960 report with that title by Toronto's social planning council defined the homeless man as "one with little or no tie with a family group and who was thus without the economic or social support a family home normally provides." These 1960s homeless men were housed. The report describes where they lived, in the flophouses, rooming houses, and cheap rentals in rundown areas adjacent to the central area.

By the 1980s, realities changed into what ought to be called houselessness, an absolute lack of housing accommodation for a wide variety of demographic groups. Rising property values, gentrification, and cuts in social services and social housing produced more unhoused people who are now a diverse group, lacking not only a family home environment, but housing itself.

There is now a great deal of literature describing the issues associated with young people who are unhoused. There is very little research, however, on interventions leading to the transition to personal and housing stability for homeless youth. This is due in part to the complex nature of the highly individualized needs and the instability inherent in a group that is heterogeneous and comprised of many subcultures. Thus, most services are crisis oriented.

This book achieves its aim of helping us – social workers, policy makers, engaged citizens – to better understand the actual transition processes out of youth homelessness. How does that transition happen, what services are helpful, and what happens after youth leave the streets? The short book is the result of a study of 51 youth in their early 20s living in Halifax and Toronto and who were followed over the course of a year as they worked towards stability in terms of their personal, educational, and financial lives. The book is organized, as the authors note, in diverse chapters.

What do I mean by *diverse* chapters? Here are some examples. Chapter 5 is a graphic (comic book style) presentation highlighting common substantive themes that emerged in the study. It was created by the young people who participated in the study with the help of a professional artist. It is a successful example of creative dissemination of key findings for a very broad audience. Spoiler alert: the last scene, “I now know that I’m on the right track... but, of course, there’s still a long way to go.” (But, do social workers read comic books?)

Diverse chapters yes, but a logical presentation. Chapter 2 is on the street-exiting processes and the trajectories of those settling into a stable but still very fragile housing situation, followed by a chapter that focuses on four case studies that shed light on specific stages in the street-exiting process. This is the core of the presentation of the findings. As the authors note, housing in itself does not lead to a sense of stability, but “it definitely influences feelings of health, happiness, and security.” However, they add that “with a fair degree of uniformity,” the youth they studied are generally not flourishing, despite having stable housing. Post-homelessness supports are necessary. In some cases, there are mental health or addiction issues. Being homeless exposes one to violence and adversity, and often trauma and victimization. In terms of practice, the authors discuss the pressing need for enhanced interventions, including the ability to assess complex traumatic experiences.

Chapter 4 steps away from the specific findings to discuss how the research was summarized and presented, avoiding the norm of a traditional seminar or forum. An arts-based strategy for a public event was used, with the comic book as part of the process. The book itself is part of that process. This is more a methods chapter on reaching diverse audiences.

Chapter 6 is a brief discussion of, and advice on, the ethical and practical issues confronted when doing a longitudinal study of youth and the general messiness of fieldwork. The concluding chapter reflects on the findings. Given the centrality of appropriate housing in the transition out of homelessness, about 25% of the youth lost their housing during the study. In their discussion of the four main reasons why, the authors present specific recommendations for service providers and policymakers that focus practice and resources on prevention and stabilization strategies, so as to prevent the damaging and costly cycles of homelessness.

In summary, this is a unique book. It presents findings relevant to service providers and policy makers on an under-researched aspect of youth homelessness, and it speaks to researchers about difficulties and lessons learned in carrying out this kind of research. It is clearly written, free of jargon, and short. This is a very helpful and informative book, indeed essential, for social agencies and service providers who work with homeless youth. It is also relevant to policy analysts working on programs relating to homelessness and housing stability, and for researchers who

want to be more creative in dissemination of their findings. Most large research projects like this one end with a seminar attended by a few and the publication of a couple, hard to find or understand, journal articles. The authors, who are professors of social work, nursing, and clinical psychology, along with their research assistants, and the subjects of the study, have gone well beyond that. More scholarly research should end like this one, with an accessible book for a broad audience.

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