Youth at Risk of Homelessness in an Affluent Toronto Suburb

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines the characteristics and needs of 69 youth who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness at Pathway's Home Base Youth Drop-In Centre in the affluent suburb of Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada.

Methods: A semi-structured interview examined demographics, characteristics, living arrangements, family characteristics, substance use, mental health, criminal activity and educational experiences of the youth in this sample.

Results: The majority of youth came from economically advantaged families and were currently residing with their parents, but were substantially more at risk than their mainstream peers in measures related to youth homelessness. The majority of Home Base youth had left home and school prematurely, been arrested in their lifetime, and used at least one illicit drug in the past 12 months. A substantial number of youth had been imprisoned, experienced physical abuse, and exhibited depressive symptomatology and suicidal ideation.

Conclusion: Although living mainly at home and in a relatively affluent suburb, these youth have many attributes related to homelessness and may progress to homelessness without intervention.

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Youth homelessness is an understudied area in the Canadian context. Estimates on the enumeration of homeless youth vary depending on the criteria used. It has been estimated that there are about 150,000 runaways in Canada,¹ while within the nation's biggest city, Toronto, the estimates of street youth vary greatly, from 5,000 by a Coalition of Youth Work Professionals to 12,000 by the Evergreen Drop-in Centre.²

Limited Canadian research has been conducted in the area of homeless youth. Studies of a national scope have been limited by using small convenience samples and covering a broad topic area,³ which makes it difficult to get a comprehensive view of the antecedents and lifestyles of Canada's homeless youth. Most studies on this group have been focussed in large urban centres, such as Toronto.^{4,5} The few studies that have been completed tend to focus on one aspect associated with youth homelessness, such as substance use, delinquency, or food scarcity.^{4,7} This study differs in that it is examining a variety of risk factors and associated features related to youth homelessness in an affluent, suburban population.

Pathway's Home Base Youth Drop-In Centre is located in Richmond Hill, Ontario in the municipality of York. Homelessness has only recently been recognized as an issue within York Region,⁸ and therefore the municipality is just beginning to develop programs and procedures to deal with this issue. However, homelessness is a growing condition within the region. A study by Crosslinks⁹ determined that a disproportionate number of York region's homeless are youth. Of the enumerated homeless individuals, 54.4% were under 25 years of age compared to 37% of residents in that age group in York Region's general population.

Home Base provides a variety of services to youth (13-24 years old) who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless. "At risk of homelessness" is defined as being highly susceptible to becoming homeless due to economic, personal or familial situations.¹⁰ Previous literature has determined that homeless youth are a heterogeneous group who come from a variety of backgrounds and are exposed to different risk factors that predispose them to becoming involved in a street lifestyle.³ A model developed by Brannigan and Caputo¹¹ indicated that street youth lie along a continuum,

ranging from 'curbsiders' (youth who spend a lot of time on the street and participate in activities associated with street life, but still live at home) to 'entrenched street youth' (youth who live in very marginal lifestyles and are extensively involved in the street).

The data presented were collected during an evaluation of the services at Home Base. Inquiries focussed on factors associated in the literature with youth homelessness: level and type of homelessness, family characteristics, victimization, substance use and abuse, mental health, criminal activities, and educational experiences. This paper seeks to determine the risk factors and associated features of youth homelessness in an affluent suburban population.

METHOD

Sample

The participants were consecutive users of Home Base Drop-In Centre over a 4-month period (Sept-Dec, 2002) (N = 69). These youth were homeless or at risk of being homeless. The only qualifications for participation in the study were that a) participants be between 13-24 years of age, and b) youth had to have been using the Centre for at least 2 weeks in order to properly evaluate the services. Participants under 16 years of age were required to obtain written parental consent prior to participating in the study and completed a slightly different survey than older participants. One participant was outside of the age range (31 years), but was included because he was a frequent user of the services at Home Base. The mean age of the participants was 18.06 years (SD = 2.50) and the gender split was 62.3% male and 37.7% female. There was a high response rate (89.7%) of those approached. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Hamilton Health Sciences.

Measures

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format with most items having structured responses. Most of the questionnaire items were taken from previous research instruments to ensure reliability and to allow for comparisons with other data sources.^{11,12} A panel of front-line staff members and five Home Base clients evaluated the instrument for face validity and comprehensibility. Three widely used psychometric scales were utilized in the ques-

TABLE I

Demographics (N=69)

Current Housing Situation	Percentage (n)
Parent(s) / guardian(s) home	52.2% (36)
Own apartment / rented room	15.9% (11)
Transient (with friends, shelters, correctional facility, etc.)	31.6% (22)
Male	62.3% (43)
Age	
<16	8.7% (6)
16-20	73.2% (50)
>20	18.7% (13)
Community of Origin	
Richmond Hill	73.9% (51)
York Region	15.9% (11)
Greater Toronto Area	8.7% (6)
Other	1.4% (1)
Main Activity	
Working at a job	34.8% (24)
Looking for work	11.6% (8)
Going to school	29.0% (20)
Other*	24.6% (17)

* Included: recreation, "hanging out", and being in a correctional facility.

TABLE IIa

Youth Characteristics by Homeless Status

Characteristic	Currently Homeless or Homeless in the Past 12 Months % (n)	Never or Not Homeless in the Past 12 Months % (n)	OR (95% CI)	p value
Physically Abused	12.9 (8)	12.9 (8)	0.64 (0.21, 2.02)	0.45
Alcohol Use				
< once a week	27.5 (19)	14.5 (10)	1.72 (0.64, 4.61)	0.28
≥ once a week	30.4 (21)	27.5 (19)		

TABLE IIb

Youth Characteristics by Homeless Status

Characteristic	Currently Homeless or Homeless in the Past 12 Months n (X, SD)	Never or Not Homeless in the Past 12 Months n (X, SD)	t value
Substance Abuse			
Responses on CAGE scale	37 (1.35, 1.23)	27 (0.67, 1.07)	2.32*
Total Problem Index (TPI)	37 (2.49, 2.01)	22 (2.14, 1.72)	0.68

* p<0.05 (2-tailed)

tionnaire. These were the CAGE Scale,¹³ a 4-item screening index for alcohol abuse where 2 or more positive responses indicate an alcohol problem in the past 12 months; 8 items from the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST),¹⁴ an instrument for assessing the extent of problems related to drug misuse in the past 12 months; and the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D),¹⁵ a 20-item self-report scale which measures depressive symptomatology in the general population over the past 7 days. The questionnaire content covered 8 main areas: demographics, living arrangements, family characteristics, victimization (omitted in the under 16 interviews), substance use and abuse, mental health (depression and suicide ideation), criminal activities, and educational experiences. Log regression analysis was utilized to indicate

differences between currently homeless and non-homeless participants.

Participant recruitment

The research assistant recruited participants from within the Centre through approaching individuals and posting signs on the premises. The interviews took place within a private area in the Centre on an individual basis. Interviews were conducted anonymously. Youth who completed the interview were given five dollars for their participation.

RESULTS

Demographics

Respondents tended to be young, male, and from the Town of Richmond Hill (Table I).

TABLE III**Youth Characteristics: Comparisons with Other Study Samples**

Substance Use	Studies		
	Home Base Youth (n=69)	OSDUS Students (n=4,211)	Toronto Street Youth (n=145)
Alcohol Use			
Past 12 months	91.3%	65.6%	93.0%
≥ Once a week	42.0%	11.2%	47.0%
Every day	4.3%	less than 0.5%	6.0%
2+ CAGE*	28.5%	5.0%	46.0%
Drug Use			
Past 12 months	87.0%	33.5%	93.0%
Cannabis	81.2%	29.8%	92.0%
Ecstasy	40.6%	6.0%	
Cocaine / Crack	30.4% (either or both)	4.3% / 2.0%	64.0% / 39.0%
Total Problem Index (TPI)	22.1%		24.0%

* 2 or more positive answers on the CAGE scale

TABLE IV**Family Characteristics by Homeless Status**

Characteristic	Currently homeless or homeless in the past 12 months % (n)	Never/not homeless in the past 12 months % (n)	OR (95% CI)	p value
Parent Education				
< Secondary	25.9 (15)	30.4 (7)	1.71 (0.56, 5.21)	0.34
> Post-secondary	34.5 (20)	27.6 (16)		
Family Finances				
≤ average	45.6 (31)	21.3 (19)	2.04 (0.69, 6.07)	0.24
> average	11.8 (8)	7.7 (10)		
Family Functioning				
Negative (poor)	30.9 (21)	13.2 (9)	2.59 (0.95, 7.10)	0.06
Positive (good)	26.5 (18)	29.4 (20)		
Parental Intoxication				
Frequent	9.7 (6)	9.7 (6)	0.67 (0.19, 2.36)	0.53
Infrequent (sometimes – never)	48.4 (30)	32.3 (20)		
Family Composition				
Intact family	11.8 (8)	8.8 (6)	1.01 (0.31, 3.32)	0.99
Non-intact family	45.6 (31)	33.9 (23)		

Measures of homelessness

When asked where they had slept during the last 7 nights, the majority of respondents reported spending all 7 nights in a parent's or guardian's home (Table I). Longer-term measures of homelessness revealed that 48.0% of respondents had been without a permanent residence for at least a few days in the past 12 months; 46.4% of participants had spent at least one night outside when they left home in their lifetime; and 72.5% had left home at some point in their lives, ranging in age from 7 to 22 years at first departure ($X = 14.92$ years, $SD = 2.66$). The largest respondent group who had left home would be categorized as "throwaways",^{16,17} having been thrown out of their homes because of their behaviour.

Youth problems*Physical Abuse*

A substantial number of respondents (25.8%) reported physical abuse (Table IIa).

Substance Use and Abuse

Comparisons of tobacco, alcohol and other drug use and abuse were conducted using data from other studies. The comparison groups consisted of i) Ontario Secondary school students who had completed the 2001 Ontario Student Drug Use Survey¹² ($N = 4,211$), and ii) a sample of Toronto street youth from a study by Smart and Adlaf³ which examined substance use and abuse among this population. Drug and alcohol use among Home Base youth tended to mirror the findings among Toronto street youth, but differed greatly from the Ontario students on all measures (Table III). There were no significant differences between Home Base youth who were currently or recently homeless compared to those who were not recently or never homeless, with regard to substance use and abuse, except on CAGE scale scores. Youth who were currently or recently homeless had significantly higher mean scores on the CAGE scale than their comparison group,

indicating a higher level of problematic alcohol use (Table II a & b).

Depression and suicidality

Of the Home Base sample, 10.1% reported scores indicative of a high risk of depression according to the CES-D scale, 24.6% had seriously thought about committing suicide in their lifetime, and 20.3% had attempted to commit suicide at least once in their lifetime.

Contact with police

The majority of respondents indicated that they had had contact with the police (92.8%). Over three quarters (75.4%) of participants reported that they had been questioned but not picked up by police, while 62.3% of respondents reported having been arrested or taken into custody, in their lifetime. This percentage differs substantially from the general Canadian population in which only 4.1% (100,861/2.47 million) of youth (ages 12-18) were charged with offenses in the year 2000.¹⁸ The most frequently reported charge categories in the Home Base sample were 'theft or shoplifting' (34.8%), and assault (27.5%). Almost half of the Home Base youth sampled (46.4%) had been in jail, prison or a juvenile correctional facility overnight in their lifetime.

Education

Over half of the sample (55.1%) indicated that they were not attending school (traditional or alternative programs) at the time of their interview. The majority of Home Base respondents indicated that they had problems at school. More than 4 out of 5 (82.6%) reported having been suspended from a school in their lifetime, with the largest response group (44.9%) being those suspended 'more than 3 times' in their lifetime (Range: never to > 3 times).

Family characteristics

Participants' descriptions of their prior or current home life were almost evenly split between negative and positive descriptors (Table IV). The majority of respondents came from families where at least one parent had attended a post-secondary institution and rated their family financial situation as "about average" or higher. The majority of respondents (53.2%) indicated that they had seen their parent(s) intoxicated

ed on alcohol or drugs at least once, and 19.4% of the youth indicated that this occurred "frequently" (Table IV).

DISCUSSION

Demographically, the youth at Home Base seemed typical of the affluent lifestyle of York Region. Most clients also reported currently living at home, although 48.0% reported some level of homelessness in the past 12 months. The Home Base youth differ significantly from their 'mainstream' peers on a number of factors. It cannot be determined in this study whether these factors were antecedents to homelessness or to being at risk of homelessness, or whether they arose during or as a result of previous homelessness or the risk of becoming homeless. There are also no significant differences between characteristics of recently homeless and never homeless youth in the current sample, except CAGE scale responses, which indicates that those youth who are not yet homeless possess similar characteristics to their transient peers, and are therefore at possible risk of progressing to homelessness.

Levels of substance abuse and criminal activity were substantially higher among Home Base youth than among their 'mainstream' peers. Across all substance use measures, the Home Base sample indicated more problematic behaviours than their OSDUS cohorts and mirrored the frequencies of the Toronto street youth sample, indicating that they are engaged in substance use at a level similar to homeless street youth in downtown Toronto. The majority of Home Base respondents had also been involved with the criminal justice system. Both of these activities could be directly related to leaving home prematurely, particularly for "throwaways" who were the largest respondent group who had left home in this study.

Mental health is an important factor among this sample as a considerable number of Home Base respondents are at risk for depression, have a high level of suicide ideation, and have experienced physical abuse. Mental illness is relatively frequent among homeless individuals, and depression, in particular, has been reported as significantly higher among street youth than among 'mainstream' youth.^{5,19,20}

The majority of Home Base participants had negative school experiences and had

left school prematurely, factors which are frequently mentioned in the literature on homeless and other at-risk youth.³

It should be noted that there are some limitations to these data. The sample size is small and all the data are based on self-report measures by the youth themselves. However, this information does provide a unique perspective on a previously 'invisible' population.

Previous research has stated that homelessness is a result of a number of antecedents.^{3,8,20} Home Base youth display many of the documented factors associated with becoming and being homeless, but most would be categorized as 'curbsiders', being at risk of homelessness. However, without intervention, these youth may progress to homelessness.

Preventive measures to keep these youth from spiraling down into homelessness should focus on school, family, and community level interventions. The report of negative school experiences is common in street-involved youth,³ therefore interventions which target youth who are isolated or disconnected from academic settings could impact the progression to homelessness. Family interventions, such as counselling, could also halt the progression to homelessness, as many youth are thrown out of their homes due to inappropriate behaviour. Intervening in these family situations early could prevent the escalation into a homeless situation. Finally, community interventions, such as drop-in centres, which offer youth positive alternatives to criminal activities and substance abuse, could also impact the

level of youth homelessness by reducing these risk factors.

With multiple risks, a multiple-service approach is required in order to meet the needs of youth at risk of homelessness. These findings suggest that multifaceted programs need to be more geographically widespread and in many more 'atypical' communities, particularly middle-class areas, than at present.

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RÉSUMÉ

Contexte : Cette étude porte sur les caractéristiques et les besoins de 69 jeunes sans abri, ou risquant de devenir des sans abri, pris en charge par le centre d'hébergement et de dépannage pour les jeunes Pathway's Home Base, situé dans la banlieue fortunée de Richmond Hill (Ontario).

Méthode : Au moyen d'entrevues semi-directifs, nous avons examiné le profil démographique, les caractéristiques, les conditions de logement, le contexte familial, la consommation de drogues, la santé mentale, les activités criminelles et l'expérience scolaire des jeunes de l'échantillon.

Résultats : La majorité des jeunes venaient de familles aisées et habitaient actuellement chez leurs parents, mais ils étaient beaucoup plus vulnérables que leurs pairs de la population générale, selon les critères mesurant la clochardise chez les jeunes. La majorité des jeunes clients de Home Base avaient quitté la maison et l'école prématurément, s'étaient fait arrêter au cours de leur vie et avaient consommé au moins une drogue illicite au cours des 12 mois précédents. Un nombre considérable de jeunes avaient été incarcérés, été victimes de violence physique, présentaient des symptômes de dépression et avaient des idées suicidaires.

Conclusion : Bien qu'ils vivent principalement au domicile familial dans une banlieue relativement fortunée, ces jeunes présentent de nombreux attributs liés à la clochardise; en l'absence de toute intervention, ils risquent de rejoindre les rangs des sans-abri.

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To be assured of publication in the next issue, announcements should be received by **September 15, 2004** and valid as of **October 31, 2004**. Announcements received after **September 15, 2004** will be inserted as time and space permit.

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