

New study suggests link between foster care system and youth homelessness



A homeless person sits on the sidewalk as holiday shoppers admire displays in the windows of a downtown department store in Toronto on Sunday, Dec. 23, 2012. (Frank Gunn / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Jordan Press, The Canadian Press

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OTTAWA -- A first-of-its-kind study in Canada has painted a national picture of homeless youth and drawn a link to the foster care system that researchers say could be playing a more active role in keeping young people off the streets.

The study found nearly three out of every five homeless youth were part of the child welfare system at some point in their lives, a rate almost 200 times greater than that of the general population.

Of those with a history in the child welfare system, almost two of every five respondents eventually "aged out" of provincial or territorial care, losing access to the sort of support that could have kept them from becoming homeless, the study found.

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The result is that Canada is creating a group of young people who are at higher risk of becoming homeless because they lack resources when coming out of foster care, said Stephen Gaetz, the study's co-author and director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

The study released Wednesday comes months before dozens of cities will take part in the second, federally organized point-in-time count of the homeless population that will include a focus on young people.

The first federal point-in-time count last year asked respondents for their ages, but changes to the questionnaire are coming for the 2018 count to help communities that choose to put extra attention on targeting the youth homeless population including when someone first became homeless.

The survey also will now includes questions about immigrants and refugees, as well as gender identity to better help cities co-ordinate and plan services or, in the case of newcomers to Canada, whether there may be "an issue that can be addressed upstream."

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The Canadian Press obtained a copy of the updated questionnaire under the Access to Information Act.

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The first count last year included 32 cities. More cities have suggested they are interested in taking part in next year's count.

All of the data will feed into the Liberal government's anti-poverty strategy that will target vulnerable populations like youth. Mathieu Filion, a spokesman for Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos, said the government will look at the youth homeless study released Wednesday to see how its recommendations can be worked into the national anti-poverty plan.

The study is based on a survey of 1,103 young people who were homeless in 42 different communities in nine provinces and Nunavut.

There are about 6,500 young people between the ages of 13 and 24 homeless on any given night.

The report urges the federal government to focus on preventing youth homelessness -- particularly among Indigenous youth -- and on provinces and territories to focus on "after care" by providing support as needed until age 25.

"We're not calling out child protection services," Gaetz said. "We're not pointing fingers going, 'It's horrible what you're doing.'"

"Rather, we're saying this is an unintended consequence of a whole number of things, but it's something that we can identify as leading to bad outcomes when young people leave care."

New census data released last week reported some 43,880 youth in foster care in 2016, a decline of about 4,000 from the 47,890 young people Statistics Canada counted in 2011, the first time such data was collected for the census.

The problem is particularly acute for Indigenous youth, who in 2011 made up nearly half of the children in care nationally. Statistics Canada is set to release more census details about Canada's Aboriginal population later this fall.

The study says that the problems with Indigenous child welfare, which governments have vowed to tackle, highlight the need for structural reforms to the system.

"None of these approaches can be a one-size-fits-all approach," said study co-author David French, director of policy and planning with A Way Home, a national, anti-youth-homelessness coalition.

"So when you speak about Indigenous young people or young people who identify as LGBTQ2S, or new immigrant young people, each of them does require a targeted response underneath a specific strategy."

LGBTQ2S stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirit, the latter term referring specifically to members of the Indigenous community.

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