PERCEIVED NEEDS OF YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND PRECARIOUS HOUSING: YOUTH AND SERVICE PROVIDER PERSPECTIVES

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

Youth experiencing homelessness face a variety of significant challenges and rely on services to address many of their needs. When seeking to address these needs, there are two key sets of voices to consider: the voices of service providers, and the voices of the youth themselves. The present study aims to explore the needs of youth experiencing homelessness from these two perspectives, as well as to investigate whether any significant differences exist between the priorities of the two groups. Focus groups with youth experiencing homelessness and interviews with service providers were conducted in order to explore the challenges and needs of youth experiencing homelessness, and the qualitative data obtained was subjected to thematic analysis. The results showed several similarities, as well as several differences between the understandings of the two parties of the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. Overall, youth participants primarily discussed topics related to improving their quality of life while homeless, while service provider participants additionally focused on topics related to youth getting out of homelessness. Both groups of participants identified significant challenges with the accessibility of existing services, and emphasized the need for more services for youth specifically. The results suggest that some gaps do exist between what youth and service providers identify as the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, but that service providers value the voices of the people they serve. Another significant interpretation of the results is that neither service providers nor youth experiencing homelessness are fully satisfied with the support that is currently available, and that changes should be made.

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Introduction

The Demographic

Youth homelessness is a pervasive issue in Canada. Between 35,000 and 40,000 youth experience homelessness each year, and on any given night, roughly 6000 youth sleep outdoors or in shelters (Gaetz et al., 2016). Youth experiencing homelessness can be a difficult population to define, since various degrees of homelessness exist. The United Nations characterizes two groups of homelessness: the absolute homeless, and the relatively homeless. The "absolute homeless" includes individuals who use shelters or live outdoors. The "relatively homeless" includes individuals who live in unsafe housing or stay with friends and family for short amounts of time (Kelly & Caputo, 2007). The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness recognizes individuals who are precariously housed as "provisionally accommodated," which includes "those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure" (Rech, 2019). Individuals who are provisionally accommodated, as well as those who are "couch surfers" or staying in rooming houses, are referred to as the "hidden homeless." These individuals are often not counted in statistics on homelessness (Rech, 2019).

The population of youth experiencing homelessness is diverse. In Canada, youth experiencing homelessness are generally defined as individuals aged 12-24 who do not have a stable or adequate place of residence (Kidd & Davidson, 2006). Some Canadian programs and initiatives for youth include individuals up to age 30 (Kelly & Caputo, 2007). For the purpose of this study, "youth" will refer to individuals aged 18-24. Certain sub-populations are

overrepresented among the youth homelessness population. There are consistently more male youth than female youth accessing shelters (Cauce et al., 2000; Gaetz et al., 2014). Youth who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community are over-represented (Prendergast & Telford, 2002; Gaetz et al., 2014; Abramovich, 2016), making up 25-40% of youth experiencing homelessness compared to 5-10% of the general population (Gaetz et al., 2014). Indigenous youth are also overrepresented among youth who are homeless (Kidd et al., 2019). Among the homeless populations in Ottawa and Vancouver, Indigenous youth are represented at 15 times what would be expected based on the general population (Kidd et al., 2017).

Causes of Youth Homelessness

There are many reasons that a youth may become homeless, and the causes are often multi-faceted. Youth homelessness cannot be explained by one factor, but an amalgamation of system failures and structural factors (Gaetz et al., 2016). Three prevalent causes of youth homelessness are family problems (both challenges with youth behaviours and caregiver behaviours), economic problems, and residential instability (van Wormer, 2003). One consistent statistic is that youth experiencing homelessness are highly likely to have experienced abuse. Approximately 50% to 83% of youth who are homeless have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, neglect, or intense familial conflict (Hyde, 2005; Ferguson, 2009; Cauce et al., 2000). The population in question continually refers to abuse, family conflict, and violence as reasons for leaving home (Ensign & Bell, 2004; Altena et al., 2010; Mallet & Rosenthal, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2016). The use of drugs and alcohol by parents is often a contributing factor to this abuse (Hyde, 2005; Ferguson, 2009; Mallet & Rosenthal, 2009), with a higher than average proportion of parents experiencing substance abuse problems (Cauce et al. 2000). There are cases in which

youth are asked to leave home as a result of their own violent behaviour, however it is much more common for youth to be the victims of abuse by relatives (Mallet & Rosenthal, 2009). Parental abuse has been associated with an increase in risk-taking behaviours and mental health problems, with psychological abuse being particularly predictive of these issues (Haber & Toro, 2009).

Certain groups of youth may be at a greater risk for homelessness, including youth in or exiting foster care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). One study found that more than two fifths of participants experienced housing challenges after leaving foster care at 18, and that rates of homelessness exceeded 12.9%, which is the lifetime prevalence rate for a single episode of homelessness in the United States (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). Youth transitioning out of foster care may have challenges entering independent living without the proper financial or support systems in place (Hyde, 2005). Youth with a history of child protection have been found to report a lower quality of life, as well as an increased rate of suicide attempts (Kidd et al., 2017).

Youth who are members of the LGBTQ+ community are also at greater risk of becoming homeless (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009; Rosario et al., 2012), with one study finding that 48% of their study sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth had experienced an episode of homelessness (Rosario et al., 2012). One of the prevalent reasons for LGBTQ+ youth becoming homeless is familial rejection (Page 2017; Robinson, 2018), often leading to youth being kicked out of their homes as a reaction to their sexual orientation (Page, 2017). One study found that gay adolescent males were 5 times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have left home because of a conflict related to sexuality (Whitbeck et al., 2004). Youth who are LGBTQ+

with a history of foster care have reported additional challenges, including feeling isolated and lonely in the child welfare system, facing eviction, gender segregation within homes and shelters, and additional stigmatization (Robinson, 2018).

Challenges of Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Youth experiencing homelessness have high rates of mental health issues compared to the general population (Boivin et al., 2015). Members of this population are at a much greater risk for psychiatric disorders, and are twice as likely as youth with stable places of residence to have affective and anxiety disorders (Thompson & Hasin, 2012). They also demonstrate higher rates of conduct problems, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and suicidality (Martin & Howe, 2016). In the United States, up to 89% of youth experiencing homelessness have a psychiatric disorder (Kozloff et al., 2013). There is a high rate of comorbid diagnoses among this population, with one study reporting a rate of 35% to 38% (Zerger et al., 2008), and another study reporting a rate of 76% (Busen & Engebretson, 2007). Mental health problems and substance use have also been found to co-occur among youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz, 2013). Substance use is prevalent among youth experiencing homelessness (Kipke et al., 1997; Kelly & Caputo, 2007; Gaetz, 2013), with one study reporting 71% of youth participants having a substance abuse problem (Kipke et al., 1997). In a 2017 study, 35.2% of participating youth reported having at least one drug overdose that required them to be hospitalized (Kidd et al., 2017).

Typically, individuals who are homeless experience significantly poorer health than the general community (Dixon & Lloyd, 2005). Rates of HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are higher among youth experiencing homelessness than among their housed counterparts (Boivin et al.,

2005). Skin and respiratory illnesses, which are often contracted on the streets or in shelters, are also common among this population (O'Connell, 2004). When youth experiencing homelessness are sick with less serious illnesses, they face challenges finding places to rest. Youth have also reported feeling more vulnerable to physical danger when sick (Ensign & Bell, 2004). Because of a lack of prevention and early intervention, individuals experiencing homelessness also often have more advanced cases of illness than individuals who are housed (O'Connell, 2004).

Members of this population are likely to be involved in high-risk activities, including substance abuse, crime, dealing drugs, prostitution, and risky sexual behaviours (including survival sex) (Bantchevska et al., 2008; Altena et al., 2010). High-risk sexual behaviours among individuals experiencing homelessness have been linked to a higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV (Edidin at al., 2012). High levels of violence are reported among youth experiencing homelessness, with a large number of youth having experienced physical assault (Boivin et al., 2005). Male youth experiencing homelessness in particular experience high rates of physical violence on the street, while female youth experiencing homelessness experience particularly high rates of sexual violence (Terrell, 1997). The lack of resources and coping skills that youth experiencing homelessness have access to affects their ability to protect themselves from assault (Terrell, 1997). These statistics indicate a variety of needs that span various aspects of the lives of youth experiencing homelessness.

Youth experiencing homelessness often experience difficulty transitioning to adulthood without the necessary support. Youth who become homeless are forced to transition into adult roles quickly, but lose the opportunity to access many of the institutions that typically support this transition (Gaetz et al., 2014). With an extremely high school drop-out rate of 65% (Gaetz et

al., 2014), youth experiencing homelessness do not receive the support and mentorship needed to move into the workforce or adulthood as a whole. Individuals without stable housing often experience school instability, including having to switch schools often, which has been associated with poor academic performance (Thompson et al., 2010). Other contributing factors to high drop-out rates include high rates of behaviour problems, persistent tiredness, and challenges with interaction with adults among youth experiencing homelessness (Thompson et al., 2010).

Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness face additional challenges. Indigenous youth have been found to have a higher rate of suicide attempts (Kidd et al. 2017; Kidd et al., 2019), and are more likely to struggle with addiction and mental health challenges than their non-indigenous counterparts (Kidd et al., 2019). Further, the average age of the first episode of homelessness is lower for indigenous youth (age 15.67 years) than non-indigenous youth (age 16.09 years) (Kidd et al. 2019). While experiencing homelessness, indigenous youth have been found to experience greater physical victimization than non-indigenous youth (Kidd et al., 2019).

Youth identifying as LGBTQ+ also face unique challenges while experiencing homelessness. They face discrimination that their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts do not (Cochran et al., 2002; Abramovich, 2016), including in shelters and other services they use. This may be a result of staff working in shelters being undertrained in LGBTQ+ challenges (Abramovich, 2016). Discrimination makes it difficult for these youth to find safe places to live (Abramovich, 2016). LGBTQ+ youth have been found to experience increased levels of physical victimization (Cochran et al., 2002), sexual victimization (Whitbeck et al., 2004), and higher levels of mental health problems than the general youth homelessness population (Cochran et al., 2002; Whitbeck

et al., 2004). In one study, more than half of GLB (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) participants reported at least one suicide attempt (Whitbeck et al., 2004).

Needs of Youth Experiencing Homelessness

The challenges that permeate the lives of youth experiencing homelessness result in a variety of needs. Researchers and stakeholders in the area of youth homelessness have identified several key needs of the population. There is a need for early intervention for youth experiencing homelessness due to the fact that mental health issues may be less pervasive at a younger age (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010). The need for mental health treatment services for youth experiencing homelessness is recognized by researchers (Slesnick et al., 2008; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Kidd et al. 2017), but funding and service provision in this area are lacking (Slesnick et al., 2008). Due to the high rates of trauma and abuse experienced by these youth both before and after becoming homeless, trauma-informed services are considered to be extremely important (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Bender et al, 2015). There is also a need for services that address the developmental and cultural diversity of youth experiencing homelessness (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010).

Research has shown a general agreement among service providers and that housing is the most urgent need of youth experiencing homelessness, and that this should be the greatest priority (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010). The “Housing First” model, created by Pathways to Housing in the 1990s, advocates providing permanent housing without sobriety or psychiatric treatment as a condition. The model was created based on the belief that housing is a basic human right (Tsemberis, 2010). Landlords have reported incentives for renting to Housing First participants, including the opportunity to contribute to their communities and the guarantee that

rent would be paid (Aubry et al., 2015), which could contribute to housing stability for tenants. Housing First has been associated with increased housing stability in youth experiencing homelessness who are living with mental illness (Kozloff et al., 2017). In a 2014 study with adult participants, Peer Supportive Housing was found to be a successful alternative for individuals who had continued to experience housing instability within the Housing First Model. In this housing model, structure, rules, and in-home visits by a support team are included. Superintendents are also peer support workers. Participants reported increased stability in financial, medical, and psychological aspects of their lives, leading to the ability to once again engage in positive relationships (Yamin et al., 2014).

Little research exists that considers the needs of youth experiencing homelessness according to the youth themselves. Past studies have shown that a positive relationship exists between treatment satisfaction and treatment outcomes among adolescent and adult populations (Barber, Tischler, & Healy, 2006; Gros, Gros, Acierno, Frueh, & Morland, 2013), indicating the importance of the youth voice. In a 2013 study by Gros et al., researchers explored the relationship between treatment satisfaction and treatment outcomes in veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder using the Charleston Psychiatric Outpatient Satisfaction Scale. Satisfaction with treatment was found to be a significant predictor of treatment outcome (Gros et al., 2013). One of the arguments for the importance of the youth voice is that more effective services are likely to be developed when considering the opinions of the young people using them (Cavet & Sloper, 2004). In a 2019 publication, Schoenfeld, Bennett, Manganella, and Kemp described the importance of meaningful engagement with the youth voice. The study referred to the risk of "tokenizing" youth by offering them a role that lacks significance (Schoenfeld, Bennett, Manganella, & Kemp, 2019).

Past studies have indicated that youth experiencing homelessness emphasize the need for positive relationships and connections with service providers (Altena et al., 2014; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Heinze et al., 2010; Leonard et al., 2017; Steward et al, 2010). In a 2014 study by Altena et al., a sample of 308 youth experiencing homelessness filled out questionnaires regarding their experiences with services. The results showed that client-service provider relationships were the most strongly correlated with overall evaluation scores of services. When youths' opinions about services are taken seriously by service providers, it is likely that their commitment to those services will increase (Altena et al, 2014).

Many positive experiences with services reported by youth involve rapport with clinicians and service providers, including feeling respected by and connected to the professional (Adkins et al., 2017; Altena et al., 2014; Dixon & Lloyd, 2005; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Steward et al, 2010). Positive experiences reported by youth have also included instances of therapists remaining neutral and empathetic (Adkins et al. 2017). In one study, youth who felt satisfied with the services they received reported significantly higher levels of hope for the future (Hughes et al., 2010). In a 2010 study by Steward, Reutter, Letourneau, Makwarimba, and Hungler, participants were asked to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the services they accessed. Caring staff who treated youth experiencing homelessness as "people" was a strength identified by almost 70% of participants (Steward et al, 2010).

Youth experiencing homelessness have emphasized a need for services that address their everyday needs (e.g. a place to sleep or eat a meal) over service design or other types of services (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Martin & Howe, 2016). In particular, access to safe housing has been shown to be a major concern among youth experiencing homelessness (Gharabaghi &

Stuart, 2010). Transportation has also been reported as a service that youth experiencing homelessness would use frequently if available (Martin & Howe, 2016). In a 2016 study by Martin & Howe with youth experiencing homelessness, participants were asked to rank on a 4-point scale how often they would use a variety of services. Transportation services were identified as the service they would use the most if they were available. This was ranked higher by participants than medical services, meals, government assistance, educational services, and job/training placement (Martin & Howe, 2016).

Barriers to Accessing Services

Youth experiencing homelessness face barriers to accessing services. In one study, a high proportion of youth reported being unable to access help for addictions, which was associated with characteristics including homelessness, violent victimization, and aboriginal ancestry (Phillips et al., 2014). Youth have reported challenges accessing medical care when sick, including being questioned about their ability to consent when underage, feeling unable to navigate a complex healthcare system, or having to access clinics in unfamiliar areas (Ensign & Bell, 2004). Feeling judged or not being taken seriously has been reported by youth as a barrier to inter-service referral, as has a lack of communication between services resulting in youth having to re-tell their stories (Black et al., 2018). Youth have also reported facing challenges with inappropriate referrals, as well as feeling that services were not providing what they felt they needed (Black at al., 2018). This finding indicates the importance of the voices of youth accessing services. While youth experiencing homelessness have recognized a need for mental health services, they have cited a lack of trust and negative experiences with health professionals as a barrier (Adkins et al., 2017). In particular, youth experiencing homelessness have reported feeling that service providers did not take their words or views seriously (Adkins et al. 2017).

Existing research supports a need for mental health services for youth who are homeless, as well as underuse of available services for this population. According to youth, the existence of services is not enough - these services must be available through accessible means such as drop-in centres of outreach initiatives (Martin & Howe, 2016). A 2010 study by Stewart et al. explored the challenges of youth experiencing homelessness through interviews. Participants identified "information" as a key need. This included individualized, age-appropriate information about the services available to them. Participants also identified help accessing these services as an important need, and reported being unable to access this type of help (Stewart et al., 2010).

Service providers have identified challenges for youth including inflexible eligibility criteria for services, as well as resource and funding shortages (Esparza, 2009; Black at al., 2018). Various factors have been found to limit the number, quality, and accessibility of services for youth experiencing homelessness. Research has suggested that the need for services in a geographical area is not predictive of the quantity of services available (Esparza, 2009). Rather, the service availability is related to the availability of funding, with wealthier cities investing more in services (Esparza, 2009).

Objective

The aim of this study was to compare what youth who are homeless identify as their needs with what service providers identify as the needs of youth who are homeless, in hopes of identifying any gaps that may exist between the perceptions of the two parties. This information could be used to improve services offered to youth experiencing homelessness, as well as to inform further research in this area. Since little research exists that considers the perception of youth experiencing homelessness themselves, another objective of this study was to provide

youth experiencing homelessness with the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Methods

Participants

The youth sample included 10 participants between the ages of 18 and 24, of which 50% of participants identified as female, and 50% identified as male. Participants came from a variety of racial or ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasian (40%), Canadian Indigenous (40%), Arabic (10%), and Mixed (10%). 70% of participants self-identified as homeless, while 20% self-identified as precariously housed, and 10% selected "none of the above." When asked to specify how often they accessed community support services, 10% selected less than once per week, 40% selected 1-3 times per week, 20% selected 3-5 times per week, and 30% selected more than 5 times per week. One participant discontinued his participation partway through the focus group. These individuals were recruited by word of mouth, as well as by front-line workers at the Restoring Hope youth shelter.

The service provider sample included 4 service providers that work with or in relation to youth experiencing homelessness. This sample was recruited by email and word of mouth within the City of Ottawa.

Procedures

Data collection included semi-structured interviews with the service provider sample, and focus groups with the youth sample. Two focus groups were conducted at the Restoring Hope youth shelter, where youth were invited to participate and compensated with a $10 Tim Hortons gift card for their time. Following recruitment at the Restoring Hope youth shelter, participants were invited to attend one of two focus groups. At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the participants, reading aloud to accommodate varying levels of literacy. The researcher addressed any questions, and distributed the demographic questionnaires (see Appendix B). The focus groups consisted of open-ended questions (See appendix A), and participants were encouraged by the researcher to respond openly. The focus groups ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length. Audio-recordings were taken of each focus group using a digital recorder.

Interviews with the service provider sample were conducted at locations convenient for the participants, including at their places of employment and by video. The researcher provided and reviewed the consent form with participants, which was done by email for the video interview. Interviews were one-on-one, with the exception of the third interview which was done by video with two participants. This interview was conducted virtually because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 45 minutes in length, and audio-recordings were taken using a digital recorder.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis, a method used to identify and analyze themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis can be used to

identify patterns across data related to lived experience, and can be used effectively with a variety of sample sizes (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Based on Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the following steps were used in our thematic analysis: 1) The data was transcribed by the researcher. Following transcription of the audio-recordings, the researcher familiarized herself with the transcripts and began to outline potential themes; 2) The researcher used a semantic approach to generate initial codes as she coded each data set line-by-line; 3) The researcher began to classify codes into potential themes; 4) The researcher reviewed the codes and themes in order to ensure that each code extract was associated with the appropriate theme. Some themes were added, modified, collapsed, or removed at this stage; 5) The researcher reviewed all themes and codes in order to ensure that they were coherent, and developed a clear name for each theme; 6) Compelling examples were chosen and included in order to demonstrate each theme to produce a report of the research analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Focus groups were conducted with a sample of youth experiencing homelessness, and interviews were conducted with a sample of service providers working in the field of youth homelessness. The following results were identified through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Youth Focus Groups

Qualitative Data

Several themes were identified through the thematic analysis performed on the qualitative data. The following are descriptions of themes identified in the verbal responses of participants.

Question 1: What are some of the challenges you face as a youth experiencing homelessness?

Theme 1: Basic needs. Youth participants identified several basic needs that were challenging to fulfill. This included feeling cold, hungry, and tired. Tiredness was a common theme, with participants reporting difficulties finding places to sleep, as well as not having enough time to sleep. One participant explained, "Sometimes shelters, sometimes their bedtime is like 12, and then instead of compensating they wake you up at like 7, it's just way too short hours to sleep." Another participant explained that it was difficult to work without enough sleep, saying, "When you leave work you have to go to bed, and then you have to wake up at an early time, struggling to find somewhere to sleep that's warm, that you'll get enough sleep."

Theme 2: Mental Health & Self-Esteem Challenges. Several participants reported high levels of stress and anxiety. Participants also reported low self-esteem, referring to feeling like failures, feeling insecure, feeling stuck, and comparing themselves to others. One participant stated, "You can't be happy because you're in this predicament." There were multiple instances of participants expressing a desire to change while talking discussing feelings of inadequacy.

Theme 3: Negative Perception and Treatment. Participants identified society's perception of the homeless population as one of their significant challenges. This included feeling judged, "thinking everyone's judging you all of the time no matter what."

Theme 4: Housing. One participant described the challenges of being a college student without stable housing, saying that sometimes she slept at the college. She described difficulty focusing on her schoolwork without a stable place to sleep. Another participant stated, "People need to find places first, so they can start studying. So they can focus."

Theme 5: Relationships. Participants discussed challenges with finding and maintaining positive relationships while homeless. They expressed difficulties making real friends, finding

people who would be honest with them, and finding people who could provide a sense of family. They also reported feelings of loneliness, and feeling a consistent need to help others. As one participant put it, "You won't be able to find a real person."

Theme 6: Service Accessibility. The accessibility of services was described as a challenge, with service hours in particular being a frustration for participants. One participant expressed frustration about a shelter service he used not being open all days of the week.

Question 2: What are some of the particular needs that you have as a youth experiencing homelessness?

Theme 1: Basic Needs. Basic needs emerged once again as a prevalent theme. These needs included accessible sources of food, clothing, sleeping bags, blankets, tents, showers, and hygiene products. Participants referred to the importance of having warm clothing and blankets during the winter in Ottawa.

Theme 2: Housing. Participants expressed frustration with being unable to secure stable housing. Themes included rent being too high, housing being inconsistent, and challenges finding roommates they could trust.

Theme 3: Substance Use. Participants discussed struggling with substance use and addiction. One participant stated that she needed recovery in order to move forward, saying, "In order to like get off the streets and to start helping myself, I need to stop doing drugs." Another participant acknowledged the need to "want to stop doing [drugs]" in order to recover. Participants reported feeling that addiction was misunderstood within their support system, with one participant expressing,

> "All these support systems that are saying that like, you know what, it's okay like addiction is totally normal, no it's a disease. It's a disease and not very many people on

the streets understand that, or even admit to it. A lot of the people who are the person running that group haven't even lived or experienced what we have."

Theme 4: Positive Relationships with Service Providers. One prevalent theme was the need for positive relationships with service providers. This included the importance of service providers understanding what participants were going through, as well as being taken seriously be service providers. One participant stated, "[You need] just someone who understands what you're going through right? Someone who's never been in that predicament doesn't know what the challenges that you face are right? So they just think – put a label or assume – you're going to label me but you're not going to help the problem? You're just going to become part of the problem."

Theme 5: Healthy Interpersonal Relationships. The need for healthy interpersonal relationships was a theme once again. Participants expressed particular difficulty finding people they could trust.

Theme 6: Transportation. Participants discussed the need for transportation while homeless. This included bus tickets, as well as transportation to school and work. One participant suggested, "They should have buses for homeless people to go to work or school, or anywhere you can get." Another participant stated the importance of transportation with the following example: "One time in Hamilton they didn't have bus tickets and it was way too far, so I just stayed home I didn't get that job. I could have had a house a lot sooner."

Theme 7: Recreation. The need for recreation emerged as a theme. Participants expressed that they wanted extra-curricular activities, which was elaborated on later in the focus groups.

Theme 8: Accessible Support. Participants expressed the need for accessible support. This included timely help, as well as help that was easy to find. One participant stated, "A lot of people don't know where to start, and when you do start it doesn't feel like you're getting the help that you need at the time that you actually need it."

Theme 9: Safety. Participants discussed the need for safety while homeless. They referred to the physical risks of sleeping outside in particular, with one participant saying, "The homeless thing is, people can do a lot of things to them. They're sleeping on park benches, stairwells, anywhere. People can get robbed, killed, raped, yeah." Another participant discussed taking people into his apartment while he had temporary housing in order to keep them safe.

Theme 10: Healthcare. The need for better healthcare was a prevalent theme. Participants reported having trouble finding doctors who would treat individuals experiencing homelessness, with one participant stating that doctors were "scared" of them. Another participant explained, "There's people out there that just want to get like you know check-ups like just in case, but they can't. Because they're not allowed in like certain doctor's offices because of the way they are." Several participants expressed frustration with this, including the exchange below:

> Participant 1: Other people who are at the doctor's office are like normal, they're clean, and then you know you have people out here and they don't really like-
>
> Participant 2: But at the end of the day, both same thing. They're human beings. You know?
>
> Participant 3: Mhmm.
>
> Participant 2: So there shouldn't be a difference between a homeless, and a rich, or a broke, or a something else.

Participant 1: Everybody should just treat everybody like the same way.

Participant 2: You know? Give respect, get respect.

Participant 1: Just because somebody looks different, acts different, you know has their own habits, have their own things that does not mean that they're not a human either. They still are a human, but they're acting different ways,

Participant 3: Mhmm.

Participant 1: And you know, they're doing their own thing, but like they're still technically human bro.

Question 3: What types of services are most important to you?

Theme 1: Food Services. One of the service types discussed by participants was food services. This included food banks and drop-in services.

Theme 2: Multi-Level Services. Participants discussed the importance of multi-level services that addressed their primary needs. This included daytime drop-in services, particularly drop-in services that allowed them to shower. Referrals were also cited as an important service within this theme, particularly through use of the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT).

Theme 3: Healthcare. Healthcare was identified as an important service. Participants discussed the importance of nurses, health centres, and outreach services.

Theme 4: Shelter. Participants identified shelters as an important type of service, particularly overnight shelters where they could sleep.

Theme 5: Employment & Education. Employment and education services were considered important. One participant referred to the employment services at a local organization called Operation Come Home, which offers employment initiatives specifically for youth

experiencing homelessness. Another participant referred to the importance of the same organization's education program, saying, "I'm actually trying to get past high school, and I feel like I can actually do it there." The importance of education support was attached to a sense of achievement, with one participant expressing, "I didn't think I'd be in this position by this age, but baby steps. That's what me and my dad say, baby steps."

Theme 6: Government Services. Financial support services such as Ontario Works were briefly referred to by participants as important. Participants also discussed the importance of services that would allow them to obtain identification documents (e.g. birth certificates, health cards), which are required to access many other services.

Theme 7: Recreation. Recreation emerged as a theme once again. Participants expressed the importance of recreational activities, including sports and other team activities. One participant stated, "Sports would have gathered people, now we have to do a focus group. Yeah do you know how easy it would have been if we were on the field? If you didn't have what we're talking about right now, none of us would be talking about what we're talking about."

Question 4: What makes a program or service effective or helpful?

Theme 1: Positive Experiences with Service Providers. The most prevalent theme was the importance of positive experiences with staff and volunteers. Participants referred to being able to talk to staff, fair treatment by staff, staff not making assumptions about their needs, and staff being responsible and professional as key components of these positive experiences. They also discussed the importance of patience, effort, and compassion on the part of individuals running support services.

When asked what makes a program or service effective or helpful, one participant answered, "When you can see they actually care. Like if you can see like oh, they're just here

because they fucked up their college degree or something, you can see they don't want to be here, it's like well why do you, why are you here why do you think you want to help me if you're just here?" Another participant answered, "They actually are like actually willing to work with you."

A third participant expressed frustration with virtue signaling among service providers, saying, "Or they're just here because they want to tell their family that, "Oh I work for homeless." So they want that title."

Theme 2: Fun and Recreation. The effectiveness of fun spaces came up in discussion. One participant referred to a program offered by a local organization called Youth Services Bureau that allowed youth to play games. The participant described the importance of laughter, saying, "Yeah, it was fun. And then like just everyone laughed, I don't know I like laughter. That's needed."

Theme 3: Fairness and Consistency. Fair and consistent rules were considered to be an important aspect of effective services. As one participant put it, "If [the staff] say one kid has to follow one rule, the other kids do too. Because some shelters I've been at, one kid got to do this, but other kids couldn't, because that kid was more like stable, and like more easy to deal with."

Question 5: What should there be more of for people in your situation?

Theme 1: Shelters. Participants discussed the need for more shelters, with one participant stating that she simply needed "warm places to stay." They also discussed the need for more youth-specific shelter options.

Participants expressed frustration with having to separate from their partners to sleep at shelters, suggesting that emergency shelters for young couples would be a solution.

Theme 2: Housing Support. The need for more housing support was a prevalent theme. This included actual housing, housing workers, and supportive landlords who are willing to accept individuals experiencing homelessness. One participant expressed that her challenges with housing predominantly had to do with landlords, stating, "I think we have enough housing workers and stuff like that. I have funding. It's hard to get a house because the landlord is like why would we take you over someone who's stable?"

Theme 3: Recreation. Participants discussed the need for more recreation services, particularly sports teams. One participant explained, "I think [we need] teams, team sports for especially the guys with a lot of energy. Walking around all day being bored gets me in a lot of trouble."

Theme 4: Improved Accessibility. Participants discussed the need for more accessible services, particularly services with wider age restrictions. Several participants expressed concerns about not being able to access youth-specific services for long enough, with one saying "The adult shelters are death." Participants also described difficulty finding places to due to the low client capacities of youth shelters.

Question 6: Are there any programs that don't exist that you wish did exist?

Theme 1: Low-Barrier Peer Support. One participant shared her dream to create a low-barrier, accessible peer support service. This included speaking to a counsellor with lived experience (peer support), being allowed to consume marijuana, and an office that she described as a "chill pad." She described a judgement-free zone for advice and empathy.

Theme 2: Transition Services. Participants discussed the need for transition services. This included transition support between youth and adult services, with one participant stating, "I'm saying this as a 20-year-old, but I don't think the quick age-out's the best thing."

Participants also expressed a desire for transitional housing for youth on waiting lists for permanent housing.

Theme 3: More Healthcare. Participants expressed a need for more healthcare. This included being able to access community health services more days during the week, as well as their desire an accessible walk-in clinic for youth experiencing homelessness.

Theme 4: More Support for Basic Needs. The need for more practical support services was identified. This primarily included more laundry and shower services. One participant also suggested that restaurants should donate their leftover food to programs that feed youth experiencing homelessness.

Question 7: Are there any programs that do exist that you don't find helpful?

Participants did not identify any existing services that they did not find helpful, however they identify services that they felt needed improvements. These programs included welfare and the Ontario Disability Support Program. One participant explained, "Some of the workers would be like, just pretty much like here, you can't do this or you can't do that or they won't help you like with extra money or that kind of stuff. Like there's some good people, the system there is just a bit messier, especially when they're taking away more money now with the new government, that's happening soon I'm not sure when it's happening, but I know it's happening."

Participants also stated that shelters for youth should be open more consistently, and expressed that shelters needed more funding.

Participants discussed factors that make existing programs less helpful than they could be. This included feeling like staff did not care about them, and expressed that they preferred services where they felt cared about.

Question 8: Is there anything that you would like service providers to know?

Theme 1: Positive Experiences With Service Providers. The most prevalent theme within this question was the importance of positive experiences with staff and volunteers. This included the importance of empathy, understanding, genuineness, good intentions, and support. Statements made by participants included:

"Don't discriminate against us."

"We can read their body language very well"

"Just someone to talk to. More people to talk to, who understand."

"Someone who listens and doesn't just yeah and like moving onto the next question."

"If I'm like having a panic attack or something, I don't want to see one of the staff or someone like laughing in the back because I've seen it before."

"Some people just don't know like, our pains."

"We don't like to be laughed at."

"We want you, we want somebody to be able to come up to us and try to help us. We don't want people to feel sorry for us. We want people to help us."

Theme 2: Service Hours. Participants discussed the importance of having services they could access at all hours of the day.

Question 9: Is there anything you would like to add?

Theme 1: Positive Experiences With Service Providers. Several participants made final statements about the importance of positive experiences with service providers. This included the importance of staff members' intentions, their treatment of clients, their connections

with clients, and their genuine care for clients. One participant simply stated, “Be better,” while another expressed, “Care more.”

Participants’ frustration with virtue signaling came up again, with one participant stating, “Just because you’re helping homeless people doesn’t mean you’re a good person. If you’re helping homeless people, you’re helping them to help them. You’re not helping them to make you feel good about yourself. You’re helping them to help them. It’s the intentions behind it, not what you are getting from it.”

Theme 2: Recreation. The importance of recreation was reiterated. One participant explained the importance of being able to relieve stress through playing cards with staff members and volunteers, while another stated that he wanted sports teams.

Theme 3: Appropriate Support and Referrals. Participants discussed the importance of receiving help for what they specify they need help for. They also expressed the importance of inter-agency referrals to ensure they are able to get the help they need.

Service Provider Interviews

Four service providers working in the City of Ottawa were interviewed. Several themes were identified through the thematic analysis performed on the qualitative data. The following are descriptions of themes identified in the verbal responses of participants.

Question 1: What are some of the challenges youth experiencing homelessness face?

Theme 1: Housing. Participants identified a lack of housing, particularly affordable housing, as a challenge of youth experiencing homelessness.

Theme 2: Health & Addiction. Participants identified mental health challenges and substance abuse (including drugs and alcohol) as significant challenges.

Theme 3: Barriers to Support. Challenges related to accessing services were considered to be significant. This included challenges navigating the healthcare system, being placed on long waitlists, lacking documentation required to access support, being unaware of available services, and not having enough youth-specific services available. Participants also discussed barriers for youth who want to access services. One participant explained, "For [youth] to access Ontario Works, often they will have to be in school to get their money. And for some of them, it's just not realistic, like with what they're struggling with to be kind of balancing school with that at the same time necessarily."

Another participant explained that youth face challenges accessing services because of their age, saying, "A lot of things might require like a legal guardian or a parental figure, um to help them with certain things, to access certain services. So if they're not connected to a Children's Aid Society worker, or at HCBM, or a mental health worker, or have somebody in their family that they can trust to help them access these services, that might be another challenge for them because of their age."

Another barrier to accessing support identified by participants was distrust of authorities. One participant explained, "They're not trusting of CAS workers, they're not trusting police officers. Like, other people in the system that have failed them basically, but not necessarily failed them, but are perceived as having failed them."

Theme 4: Education & Skills. Participants discussed challenges with education and skill development for youth experiencing homelessness. Skills identified as lacking included social skills, developmental skills, and conflict resolution skills. One participant expressed the impact of incomplete education on youth competing in the job market, stating, "They would be

challenged in terms of competing in the labour market with other young people that are the same age as them, because they likely haven't completed high school."

Theme 5: Relationships & Community. Participants expressed that youth experiencing homelessness struggled to find positive community, and that they faced challenges with positive relationships. This included youth feeling isolated, youth not being accepted by their communities, and strained familial relationships.

Theme 6: Safety. One prevalent theme was the belief that youth experiencing homelessness struggled to find safety. This included concerns about victimization by their older counterparts, safety from violence, safety from the natural elements, and the risk of being victims of crimes.

Theme 7: Mistreatment. Participants discussed the mistreatment of youth experiencing homelessness, including being disrespected, being misunderstood, and not being taken seriously when seeking help.

Question 2: What are some of the particular needs of youth experiencing homelessness?

Theme 1: Health & Addiction. Healthcare and addiction support were considered to be significant needs. This included accessible physical healthcare, access to medication, accessible treatment centres for addiction, and mental health support (specifically for trauma). One participant explained, "Most of them have ended up homeless as a result of a traumatic event, whether that's through the crown ward system of CAS or something that happened within their original family. So counselling is number 1 for them, probably deep-rooted counselling, like trauma counselling."

Addiction support within the city of Ottawa was considered by one of the participants to be a challenge. The participant explained that most of the youth seeking addiction support are unable to find beds at treatment centres within the city, unless they are under the age of 17.

Theme 2: Basic Needs. Participants identified some of the basic needs of youth experiencing homelessness, including shelter, emergency supplies, sleep, and consistent and nutritious sources of food. One participant described the importance of the type of food offered by services, saying, "Not junk food, but nutritional, access to nutrition. I really like that often there will be like cereal with milk, and they'll get their milk in."

Theme 3: Education & Skill Development. Education and skill development were identified as needs. This included the opportunity for alternative education, such as night school or GED courses. Skills identified as needing to be developed included learning to handle money, learning to communicate with authority figures, and learning to communicate with landlords. One participant explained, "A lot of people usually develop as they grow up supportive people, that they might lack just like handling money, or how to talk to like a landlord or anybody that's in a position that might be like an authoritative position, or like a position of power, I find a lot of the youth might lack those kind of skills, just because they haven't had somebody to like show or teach them how to. I see a lot of youth like they, get paid, let's say they're on ODSP [Ontario Disability Support Program] or OW [Ontario Works], or let's say they get money from CAS [Children's Aid Society], a lot of them just blow it."

Theme 4: Relational Needs. Participants discussed the importance of finding positive community for youth experiencing homelessness, as well as the importance of having someone to advocate on their behalf. One participant explained, "If they need to be hospitalized for

example they lack family members to advocate for them, so they often aren't retained in hospital for that reason."

Theme 5: Safety. Safety was a prevalent theme. This included immediate safety, having a safe place to sleep (one participant identified a "safe place" as either a safe shelter or an apartment), and security. One participant described the dangerous situations that youth may find themselves in as a result of financial need, saying, "Sometimes because of lack of money they might find themselves in situations that are risky, or maybe affecting their just like their wellbeing, so you know, I don't want to go into great detail, but we know like usually youth can get in trouble for this, or put themselves in positions that might cause other people to take advantage of them, just so they can have access to things they can buy with money, or money itself."

Theme 7: Financial and Legal Needs. Participants identified both the general financial and legal needs of youth experiencing homelessness. This included the need for income, as well as help for legal issues that youth might be experiencing.

Question 3: What are some challenges you face as a service provider?

Theme 1: Funding & Resources. Participants discussed the lack of funding and resources available for services. This included a lack of sustainable or renewable funding, One participant explained the impact of this challenge, saying, "We're always scrambling for resources, and what that means is that we don't have the same level of capacity that other organizations have in terms of having for example an IT department, or an HR department, or a fundraising department, or a public relations department - we don't have any of those things, we have to do it all here ourselves."

Theme 2: Staffing. Staffing challenges were identified as a result of funding challenges. This included low pay, long hours, and high staff turnover. One participant explained, "We try to have a really good environment and a workplace culture here, and provide incentives that are non-monetary but at the end of the day, it's hard to hold onto people because they are expected to work harder than most other places."

Theme 3: System Gaps. Participants discussed challenges with gaps in the community support system. These gaps included a lack of communication between support agencies, youth experiencing homelessness being unable to access identification documents, and a general lack of understanding among the "system" of the difficulties youth face accessing these documents. One participant explained, "It might be more difficult for somebody who's under 24 to access documents that they might not have on themselves, or ever had. And then it's really hard for them to get these documents because you know, they may have never accessed that resource before. Maybe they never accessed income on their own, because they always relied on someone else. Whether it's a parent or guardian, foster home, whatever. So I think it just like the system itself may not realize how difficult it is for somebody that's homeless and young to get certain things done for themselves." Another participant explained that accessing identification documents was particularly difficult for youth without an address where they could receive mail.

Gaps within the healthcare system were also identified as a challenge. One participant explained,

> "Even with the mental health services and stuff, yeah the call line might be available 24/7, but when they need access to the hospital often it's like, like my experience with the hospital is that people will go and then by the time that they're seen, the crisis part, like the crisis is not necessarily there because they're not necessarily in need of like, like a

> suicide intervention for example. But at the same time, all the underlying struggles haven't gone away, and it's going to resurface again quickly. So a lot of times like the, I guess it's another gap. Because it's like, there needs to be a way to get people help faster."

Theme 3: Lack of Services. Participants identified challenges with having a lack of services to refer to that are specifically for youth experiencing homelessness (including shelters), and struggling to get clients timely help as a result. One participant explained,

> "It kind of often times looks like on paper there's lots of resources out there, but when you're trying to find something, you know some sort of high-level mental health help for youth we work with that kind of need something intense, it's often waiting lists and there's often not a lot of immediate help out there. We end up putting a lot of youth on waiting lists which can be really frustrating. So I'm finding it's like this when it comes to housing, addiction treatment, mental health supports. Those are the big ones that I find a big challenge to get them immediate help.

Theme 4: Practical Limitations. Several practical limitations were identified as challenges. This included service hours, location accessibility, and not being able to provide support for every issue. One participant described this as wanting to be a "one stop shop" for youth experiencing homelessness, but understanding the infeasibility of this. Participants described having to refer to other services as a challenge.

Theme 5: Providing Care for Clients. Participants discussed challenges associated with providing effective care for the youth accessing their services. This included caring effectively for intoxicated clients, caring for sick clients, providing immediate crisis intervention, and making decisions related to client care.

Theme 6: Personal Challenges. Several personal challenges related to being service providers were identified by participants. These challenges included having patience with clients and the system, feeling discouraged, and feeling unable to help enough. One participant explained, "Sometimes I feel like it's a never-ending kind of battle."

Question 4: What types of services are most important for youth experiencing homelessness?

Theme 1: Housing. Participants identified housing support as an important type of service. This included access to a housing worker, someone to help them with apartment showings, and connections to landlords.

Theme 2: Health and Addiction Support. Participants discussed the importance of healthcare and addiction support. This included mental health care, physical health care, and addiction treatment. One participant stated, "You need to have really good mental health supports for youth, so that they can immediately start working on that, because otherwise their situation will likely just get worse. They'll get more entrenched on the streets. Same with addiction supports."

Another participant expressed the importance of accessible physical health care, saying, [There should be] community centres that offer health centres inside of them where youth can get normal checkups, or you know from walking around outside all day, they might have a lot of wet feet, or like ingrown nails and things like that, so they can go see someone and feel comfortable and safe knowing that they'll get that."

Theme 3: Education and Employment. Education and employment services were identified as particularly important. One participant explained,

> Employment I would say is number 1 because that is something that would have a significant impact on their future. So if they're not gonna get into, they're not gonna get

> access to a subsidized housing unit for 5 – 10 years, the only other way out of poverty, and to break of the cycle that they're in is to either complete high school and go to college and university, or to find work and be able to support themselves in a market rent apartment.

The same participant went on to say,

> Employment's number one, well school's number one, but realistically a lot of the youth here are not going to complete high school and go onto university. So employment's number two because that's the only way out of poverty.

Theme 4: Community and Structure. Participants identified the importance of offering positive community, as well as supports that provide youth experiencing homelessness with some level of structure. One participant explained, "A lot of the youth when they have that structure of going from one place and then they go to the next drop in…so they're like accessing the services, they're also like building consistent relationships."

Theme 5: Multi-Level and Practical Services. Participants discussed the importance of multi-level services that offer practical support. This included intervention and drop-in programs that offer safety and food. Participants also identified the importance of programs that offer clothing and hygiene supplies.

Theme 6: Shelters. Shelters were identified as an important service. This included emergency overnight shelters, as well as daytime drop-in shelters.

Theme 7: Recreation. Services offering recreation were identified as important for youth experiencing homelessness. One participant referenced a drop-in art program offered by Ottawa Innercity Ministries. Another participant stated,

> It would be great though to see some kind of recreational program for youth, to help them focus on things that are not all responsibility and maybe something more comforting, you know? Where they can go play basketball, or go play soccer, and just burn off some of that extra energy that they might have built up from stress or a long day, or you know just something other than being outside.

Question 5: What makes a program or service effective or helpful?

Theme 1: Client-Centredness. Participants identified the positive impact of client-centredness within programs and services. This included focusing on client needs, including clients in planning, and considering client satisfaction as the primary measure of effectiveness. One participant explained, "You always want to be asking the clients, whether that's formally or informally depends on what program they're enrolled in, whether they're achieving the goals that they wanted to achieve when they came to the program in the first place."

Theme 2: Staff. The attitudes, professionalism, and approaches of staff were identified as important contributors to a program or service's effectiveness. This included having a well-balanced staff, employing a team approach, willingness to engage with clients, and withholding assumptions about clients' needs. One participant explained the importance of believing in clients, saying, "You [should] have a strong belief that clients can move forward, especially youth, and even though they're in a bad situation today that doesn't mean they're going to be there forever." Another participant described the importance of serving clients as a common goal among staff members.

Theme 3: Need. Participants expressed the importance of ensuring that a program or service was filling a gap. One participant explained that services should not be duplicated, and that services should fill gaps identified by clients. As explained by one of the participants, "If

[the youth] can get that need met somewhere else, they should be referred to that place, and it's not necessarily a good idea to do the same things in every organization, and continuing to do those things year after year when youth have identified that it's no longer a priority for them."

Theme 4: Type of Support. Participants discussed the importance of the type of support offered within programs and services. They expressed the importance of peer support, individualized support, and strength-based support. One participant expressed, "We're trying really hard to look at everything through a strength-based lens. How can we build on the strength that these youth already have? Rather than looking at their deficits and trying to fix them, because we find that doesn't generally work."

Theme 5: Collaboration. Collaboration between agencies, external support, and community-mindedness were all identified as contributors to the effectiveness of programs and services. One participant explained, "I think just like a lot of partnerships and connecting different agencies and local communities together to help get the youth to where they need to get to, is an important thing to ensure that things are running smoothly and running well, and cover all areas of the youths' needs to get them to a successful place in their lives."

Question 6: What limits how effective or helpful a program or service can be?

Theme 1: Relationship with Clients. The importance of a positive relationship with clients was briefly addressed. One participant stated the importance of showing clients respect, stating, "I think the youth don't want to go somewhere where they feel they're not respected, so showing a lot of respect to clientele that are coming in is really really important in developing a really good reputation with them."

Theme 2: Funding. Participants discussed the limits that inadequate funding places on programs and services. One participant expressed frustration with funding for Ottawa-specific services, stating,

> I think in Ottawa what can be really frustrating is short-term government grants can really limit it. Um, we're lucky in some ways here because we don't really get grants, we don't – that's not our main funding. Which is frustrating sometimes because a grant can be extremely helpful. But what I've noticed is that other agencies will start this awesome program, they'll have success, but then their funding is not renewed or gets cut, and then suddenly they don't have this program anymore. So sometimes it's as simple as funding, and not having that kind of sustainability.

Theme 3: Attitude and Approach. The attitude and approach of staff members was identified as a significant limit to the potential success of programs and services. Participants identified a negative workplace culture, not focusing primarily on clients, being client deficit-focused, and choosing the wrong types of help for clients as inhibitors to success.

Theme 4: Unforeseen Circumstances. One limit identified was that of unforeseen circumstances, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. One interview took place during the pandemic, and one of its participants stated,

> I think right now things are even more than limited than they usually are, so it's harder to be considered successful right now. So I think right now success looks more like getting people through the current times, rather than you know, right now we can't go, "Oh well have you thought about going back to school?" Because it's pointless to be asking those questions when it's not even accessible to the kids who are at home.

Question 7: What types of help should there be more of for youth experiencing homelessness?

Theme 1: Health and Addiction. Participants identified health and addiction supports as a type of help that there should be more of. This included physical health care, mental health care, and addiction treatment. In particular, participants expressed the need for long-term rather than limited counselling, as well as more affordable counselling. One participant described the importance of compassion within the healthcare system, saying, "[They need] health services that don't make the youth feel like people aren't listening. Because it seems like a lot of them feel like, well going to the hospital is pointless, because they're just like kind of being dismissed, because I guess young people aren't supposed to have those problems."

One participant expressed the need for more addiction support for youth, saying,

> I find if a youth is young enough usually you can get them into rehab, uh, once they're over 18 or especially once they're over 21, that's when I find a lot of the young people I'm working with are actually ready for rehab, and there's not that many options. And those options are very limited because of long wait lists. And even to get a youth into the detox program, it's very rare that I've successfully gotten a youth into the detox program because they're always full. So that can be very frustrating, when a youth comes to you saying, "Hey, I want to get sober," and you can't find them a bed at detox, you can't get them into rehab, and so they just have to wait, and you try to come up with a safety plan, you try to get them outpatient treatment or um outpatient addictions counselling, but what they really want is at that moment to go, like on TV you just – you just go to rehab. And while maybe that doesn't work all the time, I think it would be great to have more options for youth to actually go into outpatient treatment, youth and young adults I should say,

> because there just doesn't seem to be as much offered as you would think. Especially as much as the public would think.

Theme 2: Housing. Participants discussed the need for more housing support services. This included the need for more supportive housing, as well as more affordable housing. One participant explained the need for support within housing, stating, "[We need] more affordable housing so that a youth can find somewhere safe to be, that has a lot of support wrapped up in that because there's so many youth that are living on their own for the first time, some sort of supportive housing or having workers come in and teaching them skills."

Theme 3: Integrated and Accessible Services. Participants discussed the general need for more accessible, integrated services. One participant explained the siloed nature of support services for youth experiencing homelessness, saying,

> The different systems and sectors should not be as siloed, so when a young person is trying to navigate through a system or multiple systems, they should only have to tell their story one time to one person. And then somehow, that information should get, should cross sectors into the areas in which they're trying to receive supports in, without them having to repeat that over and over again, and doing multiple intakes in every single organization, with uh multiple different people who are then referring them to multiple different places. So that kind of a system is fragmented, and it doesn't work well, whether it's the justice system, the housing system, the OW system, the ODSP system, I mean they're all operating independently and in silos.

The consistency of services was also identified as a challenge. One participant explained, You don't really have that longevity of getting to know your counsellor or therapist, and sharing, like you always have to fill the person in because they're new. You don't get to stick with the

same person. And for the youth that we run into most of the time have already trust issues with adults in their lives, so it just doesn't make it a realistic thing for them to do. Same thing with just like consistency in services, something might be operating and then it might lose its funding and then they're no longer serving their program.

Theme 5: Financial. The need for more financial support services for youth experiencing homelessness was mentioned briefly.

Question 8: Are there any services or programs that don't exist that you wish did exist for youth?

Theme 1: Recreation and Self-Expression. One participant discussed a desire for more spaces where youth experiencing homelessness could express themselves, including recreation programs and spaces with privacy. The participant explained that youth within her program had shared this need, saying,

> Some of the things that the youth have told us, and there's a book out that was written that uses, that has a lot of our youth in it, and some of the things that they would say in that book, is that there's no place for them to go where they can yell and scream. They have no place to live, and so if they go and – if they're outside and they yell and scream, they'll get picked up by the police, or somebody will call the police. So there's no place for them to go just to act the way they want to act in a private place, where they can be safe where they can you know have some privacy to themselves.

Recreational activities were identified as important, with one participant identifying the need for funding, equipment, clothing, and shoes for these types of activities. She also identified the need for youth experiencing homelessness to express their aggression safely, saying, "They would like to have like a place where they would have like a punching bag for example, where

they can punch as much as they want and to get their aggression out without getting in trouble for it."

Theme 2: Medical. Two participants discussed wanting a middle-ground medical service to exist between front-line support and paramedics. This was explained as follows:

> We could call and be like, "Hey we have someone with epilepsy or diabetes or we think they might have broken their leg, but they don't want to go to the hospital, could you like, because we're not really qualified to do all of the triaging and that kind of stuff." I feel like sometimes we're doing the health sector work and we're not even trained in it, you know first aid is so basic, like, it's the oftentimes where you know, I fix up people's hand wounds in the middle of the night and stuff. And so it'd be really cool to have a doctor that's kind of on-call, that you know, maybe they're just like for the youth shelters or something.

Theme 3: More Accessible Services. The accessibility of services emerged as a theme. One participant expressed, "I think there are programs out there that are really good that exist, there just needs to be more of them, and they need to be easier to get into."

Question 9: What do you feel like inhibits the creation of new or better services?

Theme 1: Fear and Risk. Fear was identified as a barrier to service creation. This included fear of change, fear of losing funding, fear of not being innovative enough, and fear of not being effective. Risk was also identified as a barrier, with one participant stating, "You don't necessarily have all the evidence, so some people don't want to take the risk to start something new."

Theme 2: Funding. Participants identified a lack of funding as one of the main barriers to the creation of services. One participant explained,

> I think having that seed money to start something new is hard, because a lot – well there's a lot of funders and grant programs, and they want to give money to start new programs. So, if you have an idea for a new program you might be able to get that seed money, but to keep it going is really, really hard. Because a lot of grant programs I know about want to start a program for one year, and maybe keep it going for three [years], and then the idea is that you create a sustainability plan so that you become a sustainable program. Well that's really hard. That's really hard in the non-for-profit sector, so that's why we see a lot of programs die away or fade.

Another participant explained that funding was difficult to secure without adequate statistics. She explained,

> A lot of funders want the statistics, but what we often have is like the anecdotal evidence, so we have like the little stories of like how something impacts somebody. But people always want to know well are they turning out to be, you know like, whatever. What you know, society considers to be a valuable, contributing member.

Theme 3: Buy-in. Participants explained the challenge with securing buy-in from the community. This included getting politicians to believe in a prospective program or service. One participant explained, "I feel like you always have to make people believe in basically what's right."

Question 10: Are there any programs or services that do exist that you don't think are helpful?

Participants did not identify any programs or services that they did not consider to be helpful, but expressed concerns relating to several programs and the sector as a whole. The themes that emerged from these concerns are listed below.

Theme 1: Accessibility. Participants expressed concern with the accessibility of programs, explaining that supports were often too difficult for clients to gain access to. This included long waiting lists, narrow criteria for clients (e.g. narrow age requirements), and inaccessible locations.

Theme 2: Safety of Housing Programs. The safety of housing programs was a concern. One participant expressed, "I worry about some housing programs that exist that a lot of the young people who I work with that get housing get – get housed in this kind of housing specifically for them, and yet it doesn't seem very safe, it's definitely not supportive and so I wonder what's wrong there."

Theme 3: Service Provider Burnout. The risk of burnout among service providers in the homelessness sector emerged as a concern. One participant explained,

> Just being in this type of field, the burnout rate for workers is so high, that like sometimes it might just be time for like a switch in a person's role. They might have exhausted all they can for that role, so when somebody else comes in they might be reenergized, and ready to improvise like whatever needed to be switched over or changed. Or sometimes even the population's needs might change just with time, and the era, the generation. So I think, I don't think it's necessarily a program that's not working, I just think sometimes it's like little things that can be fixed with either renovation, or somebody just needs a break sometimes. Sometimes people just burn out.

Question 11: What would you like youth experiencing homelessness to know?

Theme 1: Availability of Support. Participants wanted to express that support is available for youth experiencing homelessness. One participant said, “Look for community, because that is going to be really helpful and even if they feel like they don’t fit in, or they don’t have community, to keep searching for it, don’t give up, because that can really really help you when things are bad.”

Another participant said, “The services are there for them to use, they’re not specifically for anyone, everybody’s allowed to use it and it’s a space for them.”

Theme 2: Their Value. The value of the lives of youth experiencing homelessness was expressed by several participants. One participant stated, “we care about them, that we value them as human beings, we think they’re worth it.”

Another participant referred to the value of their experiences, saying, “Their experience is not only to be viewed as a negative thing, but also as a building block to show how resilient and powerful they are. And just that the skills that they learned from their experience really go a far way.”

Theme 3: Hope. Participants wanted to pass on a message of hope. One participant stated that she wanted youth experiencing homeless to know that their situation is temporary, and that they can get out if they are motivated to. Another participant said, “Their life is 100% like the main reason that we’re, we do what we do, right? We want to see them get better, get out of the situations that they’re in into more positive, safer spaces, and that they can do it.”

Discussion

When evaluating the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, it is important to consider two sets of voices: those of service providers in the youth homelessness industry, and those of the youth themselves. Little past research exists that considers the needs of youth

experiencing homelessness from their own perspectives. The present study explored the responses of service providers and youth participants to a variety of open-ended questions. The identification of similarities and differences in the perspectives of youth and service provider participants may have implications for future research, as well as potential for improving services for youth experiencing homelessness.

Present vs. Future Orientation

One overall theme within the results was youth participants' tendency to focus on present life while homeless, and service providers to focus on both the present situation and the future of the youth. Service provider participants were more likely to discuss avenues out of homelessness in-depth, such as education, employment services, skill development, and housing. Youth participants did occasionally discuss their futures, especially in the area of housing, but these topics were addressed much more briefly. The discussion among youth participants was more likely to focus on basic needs, their experiences with service providers, and shelters. A possible explanation for this difference is that youth experiencing homelessness are often in survival mode, wondering where their next meal, cup of water, or bed will come from. Without the fulfillment of these basic needs, it may be difficult for these youth to picture a future, or to feel motivated to move beyond their concerns about the present moment. It may also be difficult for youth experiencing homelessness to imagine a future that requires these basic needs to be fulfilled (e.g. having adequate sleep to function effectively at work).

Positive Experiences with Service Providers

One outstanding, recurring theme from the youth perspective was the importance of positive experiences with the staff and volunteers providing them services. This is consistent with past findings that youth experiencing homelessness emphasize the need for positive relationships and connections with service providers (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Heinze et al., 2010; Leonard et al., 2017). In the present study, discussion surrounding positive relationships with service providers was more prevalent among youth participants than discussion surrounding their basic needs. While service provider participants did acknowledge the importance of positive relationships with clients, it was a less prevalent topic. Service providers identified this need through discussion of respecting clients, having hope for clients, believing in clients, and taking clients' needs seriously. The prevalence of this topic of conversation among youth participants cannot be ignored. It emerged as a theme under several topics, including the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, the effectiveness of programs and services, things that youth participants wanted service providers to know, and the open opportunity to provide additional comments. For youth experiencing homelessness, positive experiences with service providers are a key component of effective support.

Youth participants were clear about their ability to sense the genuineness of a service provider's intentions. The emergence of virtue signaling as a topic suggests that youth experiencing homelessness do not want to be served by people with self-focused motivations, and that such motivations can negatively affect the relationship between services providers and the youth accessing services.

Further research that considers what specifically constitutes a positive experience or a positive relationship with a service provider may be beneficial. Staff and volunteers may be able to define this themselves, but the perspective of youth experiencing homelessness would be

helpful in order to improve these individuals' experiences. More positive experiences with service providers could also have a positive impact on trust in authority figures and professionals, which has been identified as a challenge for youth experiencing homelessness (Adkins et al., 2017).

Basic Needs

When specifically considering the challenges that youth experiencing homelessness face, one theme identified by youth participants that service provider participants did not discuss was their basic needs. Although services exist that provide food and shelter, youth participants described feeling cold, hungry, and tired regularly. Exhaustion as a result of not getting sufficient sleep at shelters was an especially prevalent theme. Although shelters for youth exist, youth participants did not feel that these services were allowing them enough time to rest. Inadequate sleep has been linked to deficits in attention, cognition, alertness, and emotional regulation (Worley, 2018). If youth experiencing homelessness are expected to seek education and employment, adequate sleep is necessary. This is an area in which shelters cannot continue to compromise if they wish to support individuals experiencing homelessness in their development.

The desire for more support services that basic needs expressed by youth participants is consistent with past research (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Martin & Howe, 2016). The need for more hygiene services, particularly showers, that came up several times throughout the focus groups with youth participants was an area of discussion that was not addressed in depth by service provider participants.

Recreation

The prevalence of recreation as a theme among youth participants suggests that youth experiencing homelessness lack spaces to be young people. The description by one participant of how he "gets into a lot of trouble" without anything to do is an indicator of the importance of this expressed need for fun. Recreation did come up when one of the service provider participants was asked whether there were programs or services that did not exist that she wish did exist, however the participant expressed that this was something she had heard from youth she worked with. She emphasized the importance of youth having somewhere to go to "yell and scream" where they would not be picked up by the police. This type of privacy craved by any adolescent is not currently an option for youth experiencing homelessness. While a housed youth may have the option to hit a punching bag, or even to punch a hole in their bedroom wall in more extreme circumstances without fear of arrest, youth experiencing homelessness may not have a safe avenue to release built-up anger. It is clear that there has been recurring expression of a desire for recreational activities among youth experiencing homelessness. Further research in this area could be beneficial in order to identify what types of recreation programs have the most positive effect on the quality of life of youth experiencing homelessness.

Accessibility and Barriers

Accessibility was a prevalent topic for both youth and service provider participants. Frustrations with age restrictions and low-capacity youth shelters, as well as fears about staying at adult shelters were present. Concerns surrounding the accessibility of services for youth experiencing homelessness are consistent with past research (Ensign & Bell, 2004; Martin & Howe, 2016). The identification of the need for more accessible addiction support in particular by service provider participants is also consistent with previous findings (Phillips et al., 2014). In

order for youth experiencing homelessness to benefit from the services offered to them, services must be accessible. The identification of transition services as a need by youth participants speaks further to issues with service accessibility. The desire for transition services seemed to be driven by dissatisfaction with the quick, rigid age-out rules of youth services. The dream described by one youth participant of a judgement-free peer counselling service suggests the need for more low-barrier services for youth experiencing homelessness. Past research has shown a correlation between peer support and positive gains among youth experiencing homelessness (Kidd et al., 2019). An easy-to-access, safe space with peer support was something that this participant had only experienced in her own imagination.

Issues with professionals working in support capacities were also identified as accessibility problems. This included distrusting authority figures, as well as discrimination by healthcare professionals. Youth participants in the present study described having trouble finding doctors who would treat them, and felt that this was because of they were experiencing homelessness. These negative experiences with and lack of trust healthcare professionals is consistent with past research, and have been identified as barriers to accessing services (Adkins et al., 2017).

Service providers did not struggle to identify barriers to the creation of accessible and effective services for youth experiencing homelessness. Challenges with funding for services have been well-documented (Slesnick et al., 2008; Esparza, 2009; Black at al., 2018). There was a clear barrier involving funding applications identified in the present study, with funders requiring specific statistics that are sometimes not possible to provide. Simpler processes for obtaining funding could be a way to address this issue. Following the initial funding of a program or service, sustaining the program or service with temporary funding in the non-profit

sector was also identified as a challenge. The process of funding programs for the homeless population may be an important topic for future research.

Buy-in from the community, including politicians, was identified as another barrier. The importance of community support is evident, and may be an avenue for addressing the fear of failure identified by service providers. Individuals who wish to support services for youth experiencing homelessness through advocacy and/or funding should know that there is an urgent, consistent need for support.

Housing

The need for more housing support was identified by youth and service provider participants. Past research has shown that service providers believe housing to be one of the most urgent needs of youth experiencing homelessness (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010). Interestingly, discussion related to housing came up more often for service provider participants than youth participants. This finding suggests that youth experiencing homelessness may prioritize immediate needs while homeless over getting out of homelessness. The concern expressed by a service provider participant about the safety of some housing programs was significant. The safety and effectiveness of housing programs for youth experiencing homelessness in the City of Ottawa is an area in which further research could be beneficial.

Safety

Youth and service provider participants' discussion of safety as a challenge for youth experiencing homelessness is consistent with past research, which has shown high levels of risk-taking activities among youth experiencing homelessness (Bantchevska et al., 2008; Altena et al.,

2010). It was clear that youth participants had a specific understanding of the dangers of living on the street, including the risk of violence and theft. Service providers addressed this issue from the perspective of offering services that could provide safety, but service providers and youth agreed that there was a need for more. Although drop-in and shelter services may provide temporary safety, participants identified a lack of such services for youth experiencing homelessness. With safety being a prevalent concern, youth experiencing homelessness need more spaces to go where their safety is guaranteed. The safety of adult shelters for youth has been questioned, with one youth participant referring to adult shelters as "death." This emphasizes the need for more youth-specific programs, services, and emergency shelters in the City of Ottawa.

Healthcare and Addiction Support

Both youth participants and service provider participants identified challenges with healthcare and addiction support. As discussed under "Accessibility and Barriers," youth experiencing homelessness face challenges accessing these types of support. Service providers alike face challenges with making referrals, with a lack of addiction support in particular available for youth between 16-24 years of age. When youth experiencing homelessness are motivated to seek addiction treatment, not having treatment available has the potential to be detrimental. When placed on a waiting list for treatment, individuals facing addiction either drop out of the list or wait for their turn for treatment. In general, individuals facing addiction have a low tolerance for waiting (Kaplan & Mira, 2000).

The issues discussed regarding healthcare for youth experiencing homelessness were prevalent. Concerns regarding both physical and mental health care were identified by both

youth and service provider participants. The expressed need for trauma-informed mental health support is consistent with past research, which has shown that youth experiencing homelessness experience high rates of abuse and trauma (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Bender et al, 2015). One service provider participant's emphasis on the lack of consistency in mental health services suggests the need for longer term counselling for youth experiencing homelessness. Being forced to recall stories of trauma repeatedly to new clinicians creates the potential for re-traumatization. This lack of consistency may also contribute to the lack of trust in healthcare professionals that already exists among youth experiencing homelessness, as was suggested by a service provider participant.

The suggestion of creating a middle-ground healthcare service so that service providers do not have to perform medical care brought up much for consideration. The first is that some service providers are currently serving beyond their job descriptions, including providing medical care for youth who do not want to go to the hospital. The second is an aversion among youth experiencing homelessness to the idea of hospital care, which is consistent with the theme of distrust in healthcare professionals. When hospital care is not absolutely necessary, service providers who do not feel equipped are providing care for these youth. Implementation of a mobile care team, or an "on-call" doctor as suggested by the participant in the present study, may be an effective way to address this issue.

Care and Compassion

The themes that emerged when asked, "What would you like service providers/youth experiencing homelessness to know?" and "Do you have anything to add?" were quite similar for youth and service provider participants. While youth participants expressed "Care more," service

provider participants expressed, “We care about them.” Youth participants focused specifically on their need for the care and compassion of service providers, and service provider participants focused on the value that they saw in the people they served. It is clear that service providers do care about their clients, and that they do wish to serve them well. This further emphasizes the importance of including the voices of youth experiencing homelessness in conversations surrounding their care. It does not seem to be the case that youth experiencing homelessness and service providers explicitly disagree about any challenges or needs, but that communication between the two groups could be improved.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. Data was collected in the city of Ottawa with service providers who work in the city, as well as with youth accessing one drop-in shelter location. The results obtained in different geographical locations, as well as different shelters, could vary. It is possible that youth accessing different services could have different priorities. For example, youth who have access to a wide variety of daytime drop-in services may view them differently than youth who do not have access to such services. Service providers in different locations may have varying views on the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. For example, service providers working in a rural setting may identify different needs than those working in an urban setting.

The youth participant sample size, while unpredictable, was small. Many of the youth participants were acquainted with each other, resulting in the possibility of influencing each other’s answers to focus group questions. Participants may have felt drawn to appeal to their peers within the focus groups, which also may have influenced their answers. The researcher who collected the data is a frontline worker at the youth shelter where the focus groups were

held. It is possible that previous relationships with youth participants may have led them to feel comfortable to answer questions, however this also had the potential to influence their answers.

A final limitation that must be taken into consideration is the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the stakeholder interviews took place during the pandemic, which had the potential to influence the thought processes and answers of the stakeholders interviewed. Some of the challenges and needs identified by service provider participants in this case may have been specific to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

When it comes to services for youth experiencing homelessness, it is clear youth and service providers have a common goal: to create or access a space that benefits the youth that use the service. In order for a service to benefit its clients, it must address the needs of these clients. The results of the present study demonstrate the importance of including the voices of youth experiencing homelessness along with the voices of service providers to work toward this goal.

While youth experiencing homelessness and service providers who serve these individuals have common goals, some of their priorities diverge. Youth experiencing homelessness prioritize positive relationships with service providers, which is important for those providing services to take into account. Youth participants also expressed a strong desire for recreation, or opportunities to just be young people. As could be expected, youth experiencing homelessness and service providers agreed about various needs, including their safety, shelter, and the need for more accessible services. There were no themes identified that indicated a clear disagreement between youth experiencing homelessness and service providers,

but divergence in some of the results indicates a potential need for better communication between the two groups. This may be accomplished through the amplification of the youth voice. Youth experiencing homelessness are not indifferent about their challenges and needs, and have much to say. Likewise, service providers do not seem to be indifferent about the needs of the people they serve. Both parties have plenty of input regarding the challenges and needs of youth experiencing homelessness, as well as what could be done differently. The voices of youth experiencing homelessness and the voices of the service providers who are dedicated to their wellbeing are undoubtedly louder and more powerful when they are speaking in unison.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table 1
Questions asked during focus groups with youth participants.

What are the particular needs of youth experiencing homelessness?
What types of services are the most important for you?
What makes a program or service effective or helpful?
What types of help should there be more of for individuals in your situation?

Are there any services or programs that don't exist that you wish did exist?
Are there any services or programs that do exist that you don't find helpful?
What would you like service providers (shelter staff, drop-in staff, counsellors, housing workers, social workers, etc.) to know?
Is there anything else you would like to add?

Table 2
Questions asked during interviews with service provider participants.

What are the particular needs of youth experiencing homelessness?
What are some of the challenges you face as a service provider?
What types of services are the most important for youth experiencing homelessness?
What makes a program or service effective or helpful?
What limits how effective or helpful a service can be?
What types of help should there be more of for youth experiencing homelessness?
Are there any services or programs that don't exist that you wish did exist?
What do you feel inhibits the creation of new or better services?

What would you like youth experiencing homelessness to know?
Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B

Figure 1
Youth demographic questionnaire.

Youth Demographic Questionnaire

How old are you?

□ _____

What is your gender?

□ Male

□ Female

□ Other

Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background?

□ Asian

□ Black or African American

□ Hispanic or Latino

□ Indigenous Canadian

□ American Indian or Alaska Native

□ Caucasian (White)

□ Other. Please specify: _____

Are you a citizen of Canada?

□ Yes, born in Canada

□ Yes, born abroad of a Canadian parent or parents

□ Yes, a Canadian citizen by immigration

□ No, not a Canadian citizen

Are you currently…?

□ Employed for wages

□ Self-employed

□ Unemployed

□ A student

□ Military

□ Not able to work

Do you self-identify as…?

□ Homeless

□ Precariously (temporarily) housed

□ Recently homeless

□ None of the above