Final Report

Youth Homelessness: Including the voices of youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in northern Manitoba

2018

Prairie Research Centre

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness in small towns and cities may not be as obvious and may manifest differently than in larger urban centers. Currently homelessness is often an issue in almost every community in Canada, including the north regions (Kading & Walmsley, 2018). The growth of homelessness is often the consequence of systemic issues such as colonization, poverty and racism. One critically impacted group are youth. In particular, Indigenous youth who have experienced the child welfare and criminal justice systems or a lack of opportunities in their original northern communities. For many, the pathways of adversity began in childhood and translated into early experiences of severe marginalization. It often culminated with living on the streets and general housing instability. The structural causes of youth homelessness and the systemic challenges faced by youth as they navigate through services are underexplored, particularly in a northern context. Youth homelessness is a complex problem in today's world. Addressing it can be difficult and requires a true community vision and movement that goes beyond any one agency or partnership.

This study used a community based participatory research approach to examine youth homelessness and housing instability in northern Manitoba. The focus was the inclusion of the voices of youth in research and the exploration of future plans to prevent and address youth homelessness. The principal investigators worked collaboratively with service providers, youth, municipal government workers, community members, researchers and students from local universities.

PARTNERSHIPS

Boys and Girls Club of Thompson
Keewatin Tribal Council – Youth Wellness and Education
Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre
Manitoba Government
Macdonald Youth Services
Northern Health Region – Aboriginal Health Services
Pride North of 55
R.D. Parker High School – Youth Aboriginal Council
Thompson Youth Build
Futures Program (alternative high school for youth at risk)
Marymound North Youth Services
Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO)
Probation Services

ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT

INTRODUCTION

There is a knowledge deficit on youth homelessness that perpetuates the invisibility of this topic and limits the prioritizing of youth as a critical group in homelessness policy. This is particularly true for Aboriginal youth who are the majority of youth at risk. On a broader scale, we wanted to promote the process of participatory research to action with youth, policy stakeholders and service providers with the result being positive changes regarding social policies as they impact Aboriginal youth. Overall, this research project has a double loop of aims. The first loop is engaging and including youth voices and the second loop is the building of relationships between youth and other partners to work together to address issues affecting youth. In this way, youth voices, knowledge, experiences, desires and approaches are counted as important ingredients to any plan that includes youth.

This research comes directly from knowledge gained over several years throughout our research on university community engagement and work with community organizations on several issues such as homelessness. During this time we conducted community café consultations, weekly breakfast dialogues, photovoice with homeless people, as well as conducting two Point in Time (PiT) homeless counts (Bonnycastle et al., 2015; Bonnycastle et al., 2016a) in Thompson. Community and service providers had access to this research which increased awareness about homelessness in northern Manitoba. Later, by working with adults living on the street or without a stable home, we became aware that homelessness is also an issue for youth in northern and remote communities. This tends to be more invisible to the community as youth tend to couch surf and move from place to place. They also often don't see themselves as "homeless" because couch surfing is what they have always experienced.

Our intent was to conduct research that would create the space to collaboratively and respectfully work with youth so their knowledge and life experience would be heard by and taken into account by service providers and policy makers as well as the broader Thompson community. We acted as co-researchers, along with the youth and those working directly with youth at risk. The "Organization of this Report" (page 3) outlines this project from the collaborative creation of the research questions and objectives, the methods used to engage youth

and service providers, the research findings and recommendations and work towards a community action plan on youth homelessness.

This research has been developed in collaboration with diverse service providers who have contributed with this project in diverse ways. Both the University of Manitoba and the University College of the North have developed this research which includes faculty and students and also the Research Ethics Committees from both universities who both approved the development of this research.

At the sunset of writing this report, an article about youth homelessness was published on July 31, 2018 by the local newspaper, the Thompson Citizen (Graham, 2018). The fact that the newspaper was interested in writing about this project and this issue shows the impact of conducting research. Raising awareness was one of the outcomes as very few would have identified youth homelessness and housing instability as an issue in the community because it has not been obvious to most community members.

RESEARCH QUESTION/OBJECTIVES

Research Question/s

I. What are the characteristics of youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in Thompson, Manitoba?
What are their pathways to homelessness? Where are they from and how old are they? What percentage of the population in Thompson are homeless youth?

II. Which participatory research methodologies are culturally and age appropriate in order to include the voices of homeless youth in addressing homelessness in Thompson?

III. From the perspective of youth at risk, what can be done to begin to address the problem of youth homelessness in Thompson?

Objectives
To develop a community-engaged qualitative and participatory action research project with homeless or at-risk youth along with local organizations:

1. To use participatory research methodologies to gather data in order to understand and identify the factors that put youth at risk of homelessness in Thompson.
2. To conduct a needs assessment to identify the needs, supports, current services and gaps for youth at risk in Thompson.
3. To develop a collaborative community action plan based on the findings of the three research questions

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz et al., 2013). These distinctions between the two are significant when considering research and responses. Gaetz (2014) puts forward the following definition of youth homelessness, referencing the above definition by CHRN:

Youth homelessness is a sub-population of homelessness and refers to young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers and importantly, lack many of the social supports deemed necessary for the transition from childhood to adult hood. In such circumstances, they do not have a stable or consistent residence or source of income, nor do they have adequate access to the support networks necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood. (pg. 13)

Three typologies of youth homelessness have been identified to help map homelessness among youth: temporarily disconnected, unstably disconnected and chronically disconnected (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz et al., 2013). Temporarily disconnected is a short-term experience of younger youth who have "more stable and redeemable relations with family members, and are more likely to remain in school" (Gaetz et al. 2013). Unstably connected homeless youth have:

A more complicated housing history, and [are] likely to have longer repeated episodes of homelessness. They are more likely to be disengaged from school and will have challenges obtaining and maintaining employment. Most will have retained some level of connection with family members and are less likely to experience serious mental health or addictions issues compared to chronically homeless youth. (pg. 8).

Chronically disconnected homeless youth have the most complex needs and use the most youth homeless sector resources.

This group of young people will experience long term homelessness, repeated episodes, and will more likely have mental health and/or addiction issues. They will have the most unstable relations with their families, and in some cases, there will be no connections at all. (Gaetz, et al. 2013, pg. 8)

Focusing on adolescent development Gaetz (2014) and others (Barker, 2012; Barker, 2014; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Gaetz et al., 2013; Saewyc et al., 2008) emphasize the development, learning and mentoring which typically occur during adolescence as part of a young person's (successful) transition into adulthood and independence.

Many if not most young people who become homeless are working through the challenges of adolescent development, including physical, cognitive and identity development. This includes efforts to develop meaningful relationships, engage in fulfilling activities and figure out what exactly they want to do with their lives…For

those who are homeless, however, there is usually no time or the necessary supports in place to allow this development to occur in a safe and supported way. (Gaetz et al. 2013, pg. 3)

Focusing on the uniqueness of the street youth compared to homeless adults Gaetz (2014) points out:

Street youth, unlike homeless adults, leave homes defined by relationships (both social and economic) in which they were typically dependent upon adult caregivers. Becoming homeless then does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather leaving a home in which they are embedded in relations of dependence, thus experiencing an interruption and potential rupture in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community. (pg. 7)

These relationships within family and community, including schools, are significant to a young person's transition into adulthood (Barker, 2012; Gaetz, 2014; Saewyc et al., 2008). In Barker's (2012) study on family social capital and resilience among homeless youth in Australia he noted that,

the lack of trust between the young person and their family prevented the family from providing support. This may be the result of a family member having breached the norms of trust. Yet it could also be the young person's behaviour that led the family to no longer trust them. (pg. 737)

The causes and trajectories of youth homelessness are unique, as well as the experiences of homeless youth. Youth journeys into homelessness are diverse and multiple, and rarely the cause of a single event (Barker, 2012; Berstein & Foster, 2008; Gaetz, 2014; Karabanow, 2004). Gaetz writes:

When we talk about pathways into youth homelessness, it is important to note, first that there is a great diversity of factors that may contribute to a young person leaving home and second, that homelessness is rarely experienced as a single event and may be the end result of a process that involves multiple ruptures with family and community and numerous episodes of leaving, even if for short periods. (pg. 10).

Most homeless youth do not seek or chose to be homeless, most are "pushed into it, either because their parents explicitly 'kicked them out' or home, or because abuse of family conflict forced them to leave" (Berstein and Foster, 2008 pg. 3). Three key causes of youth homelessness as identified by Gaetz (2014) are individual/relational factors, structural factors, and institutional and system failures. Gaetz draws on existing research which consistently shows "difficult family situations and conflict as key underlying factors in youth homelessness" (pg. 11). Canadian research shows high numbers of homeless youth come from homes "where there were high levels of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, interpersonal violence and assault, parental neglect and exposure to domestic violence" (pg. 11). (Barker, 2012) notes that in Australia "the breakdown of family relationships is a central factor that contributes to youth homelessness" (pg.

736). In regard to childhood and adolescent development Gaetz points out that "childhood abuse, trauma and living in a constant state of fear have long-lasting consequences for brain-development, decision-making, the formation of attachment and positive social development" (pg. 11).

Structural factors contributing to youth homelessness as identified by Gaetz (2014) include poverty, under-employment and lack of housing stability (pg.11). He writes:

> Many young people who are homeless come from families defined by extreme poverty. This undermines the health and well-being of young people, impacts on their educational engagement and attainment and may lead to their leaving home at an earlier age because of the inability of their parents to support them. (pg. 11)

Patrick (2014) points out that "the Ontario Child and Family Services act does not distinguish between poverty and neglect" (pg. 37). Discrimination also contributes to homelessness, and exacerbates poverty, observed Gaetz (2014). Aboriginal, black and sexual minority youth are all over-represented in homeless youth populations (Gaetz, 2014).

Institutional and system failures in systems of care and support include child protection, health and mental health services, and corrections(Courtney et al., 2014; Gaetz, 2014). As noted in several studies that the child welfare system does not lead to independence for all and many aged-out youth become homeless at 18 (Gaetz, 2014; Karabanow, 2004). This is not true for all youth as some youth who face the same factors do not become homeless.

Coates & McKenzie-Mohr (2010) write,

> many services target homelessness itself as the core problem, and as a result provide interventions that focus primarily on accessing housing, re-admission to school, and securing employment training or actual employment. However, as severe and serious as homelessness is, for many youths being homeless is symptomatic of longer-term and deep-seated social and personal realities. (pg. 66)

Homeless youth note Coates and McKenzie (2010) need temporary shelter and short-term counselling as well as assistance to deal with family, school and personal problems. For many homeless youth, the home they left either by force or choice was not a safe haven of love and care (Barker, 2012; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Karabanow, 2004; Saewyc et al., 2008). And the streets provide no guarantee of safety or absence of trauma as noted by Coates and McKenzie (2010), "while exposure to stressful experiences frequently occurs prior to a youth becoming homeless, traumatic experiences also occur as a consequence of being homeless" (pg. 68). LGBTQ2S youth have additional challenges to secure safe and affirming places to live caused by family rejection, inadequate social services, and discrimination in housing, employment, and education (Abramovich, 2012; Abramovich, 2013; Abramovich, 2016; Shelton et al., 2018) or run away from home due to their sexual orientation (Saewyc et al., 2008). There is an overrepresentation of LGBTQ2S young people caused by many factors, including the lack of studies and the sex binary approach of collecting data by service providers.

Canada's northern communities also have their own set of characteristics that impact homelessness. Some characteristics specific to Canada's north include remote geographical areas, harsh climate, a small population base and inadequate access to services (Qulliit Nunavut Status of Women Council, 2007). Northern communities are also challenged by numerous social concerns such as addictions, domestic violence, poverty and intergenerational trauma. Often services and resources are lacking and residents may be required to travel for medical care and social services. Often the lack of social supports and income in the larger medical and service hub city contribute to housing instability (Brannen et al., 2009; Christensen, 2012; George & O'Neill, 2011; Qulliit Nunavut Status of Women Council, 2007).

The city of Thompson, Manitoba is situated within a sub-Arctic region. The winters are long and harsh and housing accessibility and availibility fluctuates along with the price of the nickel. The Vale Nickel mine (formerly Inco) is the reason that the town is situated where it is.

The growth of homelessness is often the consequence of systemic issues such as colonization, poverty and racism. One critically impacted group are youth. In particular, Indigenous youth who have experienced child welfare (Christensen, 2012), criminal justice or a lack of opportunities in their original northern communities. Due to extreme weather conditions, youth homelessness is typically not highly visible as they tend to couch surf with friends or family (Robertson & Toro, 1999). For many, the pathways of adversity began in childhood and translated into early experiences of severe marginalization. It often culminated with living on the streets and general housing instability. The structural causes of youth homelessness and the systemic challenges faced by youth as they navigate through services are underexplored, particularly in a northern context.

The City of Thompson has carried out three Point in Time (PiT) homeless counts. The 2018 count found 97 people living on the street; 94.5% identified as Indigenous, the vast majority were from First Nations communities in northern Manitoba and 58% of participants reported that they were younger than 30 years old, when they experienced their first episode of homelessness (Bonnycastle & Deegan, 2018).

Mobility from rural to urban centres or from northern to southern communities is a dynamic experienced in different parts of Canada. This is a common pattern for both adults and youth to migrate to urban centres where there are more services available (Bonnycastle et al., 2016b; Christensen, 2012; Forchuk et al., 2010; Gray et al., 2011; Karabanow et al., 2014; Skott-Myhre et al., 2008; Stewart & Ramage, 2011). There is also high mobility from rural First Nations reserves. (Peters & Robillard, 2009). This causes socio-spatial tensions between rural reserve life and urban life instigated by the lack of economic, social and cultural resources or poor housing conditions on rural reserves and remote communities (Olsen, 2016; Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2015). Studies further suggest that this migratory pattern also exists for Aboriginal people who are reported to frequently move between their home reserve and urban areas (Bonnycastle et al., 2016b; Brown et al., 2007) (Baskin, 2007; Belanger, 2013; Peters & Robillard, 2009)

METHODOLOGY

The approach throughout this study has been to use a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. This approach emphasizes the collaborative aspects of research fostering co-learning and capacity building among all partners (Shdaimah et al., 2011) and collaboration between the researcher and the community. This means a collaborative approach was taken throughout the project with researchers, community groups and youth to generate ideas on how to address youth homelessness in their community. CBPR seeks some type of change for those living with problems (Anderson, 2006) and promotes 'praxis', the act of action and reflection in which researched people have voice through a participatory and dialogical process of knowledge-action (Freire, 1995). We also have used an appreciative, non-intrusive approach when interviewing individuals and small groups (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). An appreciative approach took the form of asking questions in a positive "looking to the future" manner instead of coming from a deficit approach.

The following diagrams (Figure 1) shows the three phases through which we developed this project:

Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Phase I
- Ethics
- Building relationships with service providers
- Inventory of services, programs and resources
- Hip Hop event with youth
- Mapping

Phase II
- Service providers survey
- Youth survey
- Youth count

Phase III
- Community consultation
- Initiation of a Community Action Plan on youth homelessness
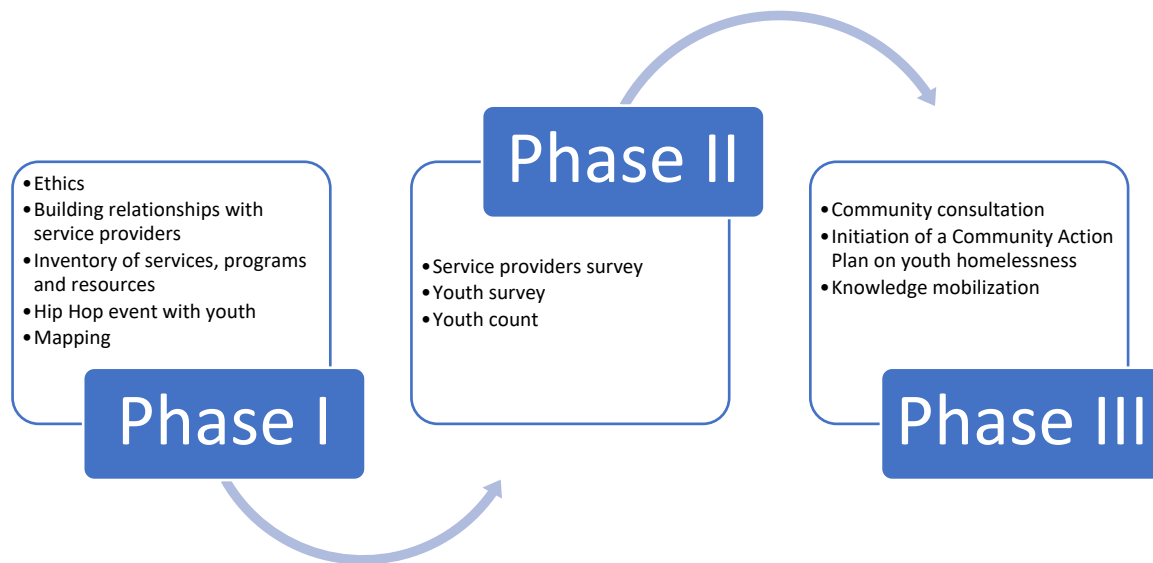- Knowledge mobilization

Figure 1-Community based participatory research

This project was developed in three phases, phase one included a community café and focus groups to generate dialogue and build relationships. Phase one also included the creation of an Inventory of Youth Services and Programs as well as a Hip Hop youth event where information and stories were gathered from youth. The second phase included the Youth Count and this was conducted between May 11-19, 2016. The Youth Count greatly contributed to the information gathered in phase one by providing some demographics and statistics. Phase three focused on the development of a collaborative community action plan for youth who are homeless or experiencing housing instability including Thompson and the surrounding communities. During the final phase of the project we developed several focus groups with community organizations to begin to outline a community action plan to address youth homelessness in Thompson.

Methods

Community Café Consultations

Focus groups have been the major approach that we have used to engage youth and service providers in discussion about youth homelessness in Thompson. These focus groups have followed the format of community cafés, which were relaxed dialogues among a variety of participants. This method is based on the principle that the best ideas and solutions often occur outside of formal structures such as in coffee and tea breaks, over dinner (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Cassidy et al., 2013). During community café conversations we recreated an informal environment where the discussion was focused on key questions relevant to the participants. The community café focuses on the power of conversation because it was through conversation that

we were able to recognize participants' personal values, share knowledge and understand the world around participants. The community café consultation is one way of creating a conversational space where youth are not only included but are central to the discussion. Conversational spaces provide the opportunity to see the bigger picture and to reshape the dominant structures that often limit conversational relationships in the community (Greene, 1995, p. 10).

At the beginning of this research project, we held two community café consultations to identify participants' perspectives about youth homelessness and housing instability in Thompson; priorities; issues of concern; pathways and causes; available resources and services for youth and ideas for plans to address this issue and prevent youth homelessness in Thompson. Approximately 60 youth and adults participated in the initial conversations. The data from the community cafes was the first needs assessment on this issue. It was used to develop more specific questions in subsequent research activities such as surveys and a youth count.

Additional community café consultations have been developed in order to complete a survey, data analysis and knowledge dissemination of the youth count and begin to outline a community action plan to address youth homelessness in Thompson.

Perception surveys and interviews with youth and service providers
A survey was developed with youth and service providers who attended the two focus groups to explore the main pathways that result in youth homelessness and housing instability in Thompson. We held a community café to collect specific data on the issue and pathways of youth homelessness. Participants were youth (15) and service providers (30) who completed a survey.

In addition to demographic questions, we asked participants several questions to explore if they felt that youth homelessness was an issue in Thompson, causes or pathways to youth becoming homeless, knowledge about places for youth to stay, programs and services for youth and changes that participants want to see in Thompson to support youth and their families. From a list of possible causes of youth homelessness, participants scored each of them through the use of a Likert Like scale with 1 being of the highest importance to the participant and 5 being of lowest importance. Data obtained from the perception surveys was used to work on an inventory of resources and services for youth and mainly for the design and content of the youth count later in 2016.

Inventory of programs and services for youth
The main purpose of the inventory was to identify the needs, supports, current services and gaps for youth in Thompson. This information was collected through a review of agency web sites, reports, brochures, other accessible documents and by phone. The initial information was complemented with interviews with service providers. This information will be accessible for youth and partner organizations. In addition, this will be included in the development of the community action plan.

<u>Using art, music and dance to engage youth in research</u>
"They come for HipHop – but stay for the healing" was a workshop developed by the "Blue Print For Life" (http://www.blueprintforlife.ca/about/founder/) on February 20 and 21, 2016. This was a modified version of the 'The Social Work Through Hip Hop' (http://www.blueprintforlife.ca/services/social-work-through-hiphop/) where youth learn to dance, while also discovering themselves and their own culture. This workshop was a participatory research activity designed to engage youth on issues related to homelessness and housing instability in Thompson. Participants included six youth, an Elder and a number of service providers. Surveys were completed, and qualitative data was gathered. This event was a collaboration between the University of Manitoba, the University College of the North and 3 service agencies.

The workshop started with dance, which was a major focus of the workshop. There were a variety of activities such as a) brainstorming on youth barriers and challenges, anger, insecurity, addictions, trauma; b) power of words (expressing stress through arts) through poems and stories; c) completing a youth survey; and d) mapping. Youth used mapping to collect data about how youth perceive and use different areas in Thompson. This combination of work on stomp, dance routines, stories, music used by Blueprint For Life" helped to prepare youth to work on mapping.

The research assistants were also involved in the design, planning and promotion of the focus groups on both days. They also participated in the focus groups which was important to build relationships with young participants. Additionally, research assistants were responsible for collecting data including surveys and mapping. An important role of research assistants was to take notes and reflect on the development of the focus group and how dance and music were helpful to engage youth in participating in research.
The project facilitator was responsible for organizing and coordinating the event as well as contacting agencies and youth groups to participate in the event. She promoted the event using different methods and 14 youth registered in advance.

<u>Mapping</u>
Consistent with CBPR (Israel et al., 2008), mapping follows its principles to maximize engagement in the research and promote the inclusion of youth voices. Mapping also functions as an empowerment strategy as well as a vehicle for enhancing the communities in which they live (Santo et al., 2010). It was used in this research to identify barriers and factors that might contribute to youth homelessness and housing instability as well as to include youth voices to identify other needs and gaps from their own perspective. This spatial data complements other data gathered through surveys and interviews about physical spaces that are important for youth in terms of risks or supports. Youth engaged in dialogue to identify and locate different places on the map and also shared their lived experiences. We used a large map of the Thompson area and used pins with sticky notes (similar to flags) of different colors to locate places youth feel most

at home, don't feel safe, where they gather with friends, go for help when needed, and other places they feel are important for youth.

Youth Homelessness and housing instability count

The youth homelessness count was developed in the spring and took place over a week. It was a census of the youth who were not only on street but also those who were living temporarily with friends, relatives, or other facilities that are different from their own parents or custodian's homes. The count included demographic data and additional information that helped the city of Thompson to have a first assessment of youth homelessness and housing instability and to generate dialogue with different service providers and youth to develop a community action plan. The youth count was designed with partner agencies and youth who collaborated with this activity (Bonnycastle & Simpkins, 2017).

Community Action Plan

The goal of the Community Action Plan (CAP) is to work collaboratively with service providers, youth, government, policy makers, private sector and community at large to develop a shared vision, action framework and grounding principles needed for effective systems' integration, policy, programs, services aligned and integrated at different levels in Thompson, the northern region, connection between northern and southern Manitoba, provincial authorities and federal initiatives. The idea is to promote and work together to reduce and prevent youth homelessness through community based participatory action research that includes individuals, families, and communities.

This is the beginning of a process of working with the partners, building some engaging community activities and collecting some information throughout the development of this project. Increasing community awareness of youth homelessness and housing instability will contribute to the development of a future CAP.

Social Media

A facebook page "Housing instability for northern youth" was created by the research assistants to post current events and articles about youth homelessness and to create a network within Thompson and area: https://www.facebook.com/groups/548768081952161/

The main goal is to raise awareness about youth homelessness and to examine the experiences, challenges, needs and gaps that exist for male and female youth, as well as the kinds of supports needed to prevent youth homelessness in Thompson and Northern Manitoba communities. Another goal of this page is to help build networks with individual service providers, and agencies in Thompson, so that we may create an inventory of services, programs, and resources that are available to youth in Thompson. This information will be disseminated to the public for their use and reference.

In addition, this facebook page is used by the research team to promote the project activities, disseminate relevant information about youth homelessness and housing instability and connect

with youth and community. We have increased the number of members and dissemination of information.

FINDINGS

This project has been an exploratory study of youth homelessness and housing instability in Thompson through the use of different participatory research methods. The project started with two focus groups with youth, service providers and community members. These focus groups helped us to collect data to develop the initial categories of pathways of youth homelessness and housing instability and the changes that community and youth want to see in Thompson. These categories were used in the development of a) a perception survey with service providers and youth; b) develop general questions to interview youth and service providers; c) mapping places where youth congregate; d) inventory of resources and services for youth; e) develop a youth count and f) begin development of a community action plan.

The following story shows the complexity of youth homelessness and helps us to make meaning of the numbers that will be presented in this section. This is the story of a young person who has experienced housing instability throughout their life:

> *It is very stressful not to have a home. We lived in a basement for a while... a friend of my mom's. It was so unpleasant. She yelled at me ...wanted me to clean for her. It's really not great to live on people's couches... not knowing where you will be going next...I had to drop out of 2 schools... which is the reason why I'm now taking classes in grades 9, 10, and 11... We lived in Thompson for about 3 years... then moved to Winnipeg... slept on couches of friends and family. It was terrible because they would make you feel like you now "owed" them. They would ask for money... and my mom wasn't working. We didn't have any money. We had to go on welfare... We did stay at the family shelter for a while and that was okay... but it wasn't a home. The last time I felt like I lived in a real home ... I was 9 years old and we lived in Prince Albert... At one point I was in 4 different schools in 3 provinces in 2 years... We lived in Toronto for a while because that's where my mom's boyfriend lived. He was abusive...and violent. My mom sent me to Prince Albert to live with my grandfather till she sorted things out. But there were 9 people living with my grandfather. My brother was with my other grandfather... Then I lived with an uncle in Thompson. My uncle drank a lot and I knew I couldn't stay with him for long.* (interview 1)

Perception Surveys, Interviews and Youth Count

Several service providers completed the perception survey including the city of Thompson, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Crime Prevention Branch, some schools, Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO), Northern Region Health Authority (NRHA), probation services, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Thompson Crisis Centre, Youth at Risk Network (YARN), YWCA, and private practitioners.

Diverse youth completed the perception survey including 7 (47%) male, 6 (40%) female and 2 (13%) LGBTQ youth. The age ranged between 16-29 years old and 93% were identified as

Indigenous and 7% non-Indigenous person. 67% of the participants were attending school and 33% were not attending schools. From the 15 youth participants, only 13 responded to the question about whether they felt that youth homelessness was an issue in Thompson and 11 (73%) considered that homelessness is an issue for youth in Thompson. Whereas, 29 (96.7%) of service providers affirmed that youth homelessness and housing instability is an issue in Thompson.

These two surveys confirmed the need to develop a youth count to gather much needed quantitative data on youth homelessness. In 2016, the University of Manitoba and the University College of the North with the support of the city of Thompson conducted its first Youth Count on the issue of housing instability and homelessness. As a first Youth Count, a modified Stephen Gaetz's (2014) definition was used for the homeless youth count. Through this study, a survey was developed. It was intentionally kept short to encourage youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability to participate and assure support from different service providers to help with the recruitment of youth. The major modification was changing the age range and adapting the definition of youth used by local and Indigenous organizations working with youth in Thompson. The Thompson Youth Count was component of this project "Youth Homelessness: Including the voices of youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in northern Manitoba". The Youth Count was carried out between May 11th to 19th, 2016. 69 surveys were completed by youth between the ages of 16 – 29. Participants include those who identified as female, male, transgender and LGBTQ youth. A complete report can be accessed from: http://homelesshub.ca/resource/city-thompson-youth-homelessnesshousing-instability-count-2016. The following is a summary of statistics:

- *69 female, male, transgender, and LGBTQ youth between the ages of 16-29 were surveyed in Thompson.*
- *There were more females (57%) than males (38%) who identified that they were experiencing homelessness or housing instability.*
- *Average youth surveyed was 22.3 years old.*
- *85% identified as Indigenous.*
- *47% of youth come from communities outside of Thompson.*
- *46% said that they were either in foster care or had been involved with foster care.*
- *52% said that they had been involved with the criminal justice system.*
- *50% of Indigenous and Metis youth did not have a stable place to stay on a regular basis.*
- *87% said that housing instability was an issue for youth in Thompson*

Pathways to Youth Becoming Homeless
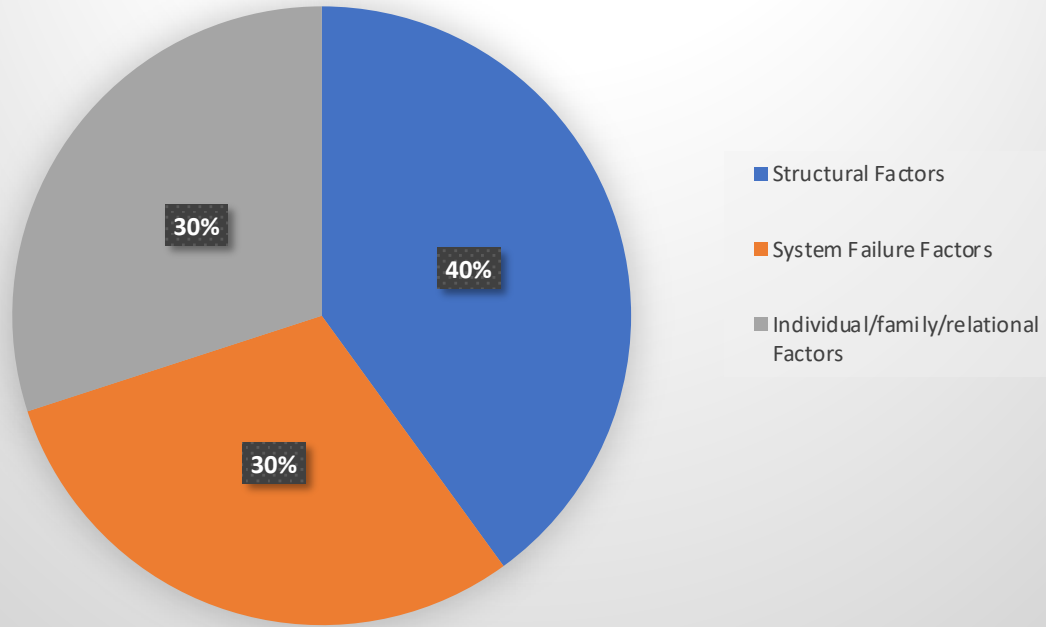
Source: Youth count 2016

Figure 2-Pathways to youth homelessness

FACTORS, CAUSES, PATHWAYS TO YOUTH BECOMING HOMELESS		
Structural	**System Failure**	**Individual, Family, Relational**
Lack of housing, high rent & co-signer issues: 36 (52%)	Involvement with criminal justice system: 26 (38%)	Dysfunctional family life: 39 (57%)
Poverty: 26 (38%)	Aging out of care: 24 (35%)	Parental addictions: 25 (36%)
Intergenerational trauma: 13 (19%)	Lack of activities for youth at the community: 18 (26%)	Mental health issues and alcoholism: 12 (17%)
Parents are homeless: 12 (17%)	Physical health and disability issues: 7 (10%)	
Racism: 10 (14%)		
Sexual identity 5 (7%)		

Source: Youth count 2016

Figure 3-Structural, systems and individual/family causes of youth homelessness

The above graph and table show the results of the youth count regarding factors, causes and pathways to youth becoming homeless. They show that 40% of the causes of youth homelessness or housing instability are structural factors. The major causes include lack of housing, poverty, intergenerational trauma, parents are homelessness, racism, sexual identity, high rent and co-signer issues. The graph and table also describe that 30% are caused by systems failure, which includes involvement with the criminal justice, aging out of care, lack of activities for youth and physical health. Similarly, 30%, of individual, family and relational factors are pathways of homelessness including dysfunctional families, parental addictions, mental health and alcoholism (figures 2 & 3)

Structural factors
The youth count showed that "lack of housing" issues was the major cause among structural factors (52%) that contributed to youth homelessness (figure 3). This issue was perceived higher through the perception survey that showed 77% percent of service providers (27) and 80% of the youth (12) considered the lack of housing as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness.

A service provider asserts,
> [housing] it's always going to be an issue here, given that we are the hub for the north and that we're always getting people from other communities, coming here for medical, or for whatever the case may be, family or whatever, and they end up just on the street... ["Getting stuck here": interviewer voice] ...Yeah, yeah exactly. I mean I don't want to say that it's sad because a lot of the people choose to stay here. Whether Thompson is set up to address that portion of it, I'm not sure. Uhm, I know that housing is at a premium. It's expensive and there is very little available that is affordable. Uhm...so I'm sure that's part of it. Uhm...yeah, I think it's just really important to be at the table. Uhm, you know with other agencies who are engaged and with the city. (interview 2)

Poverty was the second cause among structural factors that contribute to youth homelessness (Figure 3). The perception survey showed that seventy-three percent of service providers (22) and 67% of the youth (10) considered poverty as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness.

Intergenerational trauma was the third cause among structural factors that contribute to youth homelessness (figure 3). It was also highlighted by seventy-seven percent of service providers (23) and 67% of the youth (10) who gave a similar response and considered intergenerational trauma as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness.

> "... it's hard for Aboriginal people to get jobs. Even the people at welfare don't treat you well". (interview 1)

Other structural factors were parents are homelessness (17%), racism (14%) and sexual identity (7%). These factors were identified in the perception survey with service providers and youth.

Systems Failure

> [It's hard to get help from] …. *Family and friends in my mental state… hard to get help from adults, teachers because I have to be careful about what I say. I don't want to get taken away from my mother. I love her so much. I'm afraid the CFS will take me away if they know I have a mental health problem… I don't have a health card… our lives have been so crazy…things like getting a health card doesn't happen. I don't have any ID. For a while I was seeing a psychologist and a physiatrist and was on 3 medications. Now there is no money so I can't get medication and I don't have a health card. We went to the hospital once and we were told it would cost $400.00 so we left. My mom cried because we had no money. Sometimes we didn't have money for food… (interview 1)*

Youth are a vulnerable group particularly when there has been the involvement with child and family services. Their age and lack of services or resources increases their risk of becoming part of the invisible homeless. When a service provider was asked what services and programs are in the community to meet the needs for some vulnerable youth, she replied:

> *…. you know that's a really tricky question because even when you just say vulnerable youth, I like to think of all youth as being vulnerable… It's not just youth that are in care or kids who are skipping school…. All kids are vulnerable. (interview 2)*

The youth count showed the involvement of youth with the criminal justice as the major cause among systems failure factors that contribute to youth homelessness (figure 3). It was also perceived by seventy-three percent of service providers (22) and 67% of the youth (10) who gave a similar response and consider the involvement with the criminal justice system as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness.

Aging out of care was the second cause among systems failure factors that contribute to youth homelessness (figure 3). Comparable responses were given by sixty-seven percent of service providers (20) and 67% of the youth (10) who considered aging out of care as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness.

Other systems failure factors included a lack of activities for youth in the community (26%) and physical health and disability issues (10%).

Individual, Family, and Relational Factors
The youth count showed a dysfunctional family life as the mayor cause among individual, family and relations factors that contribute to youth homelessness (figure 3). It was also perceived by seventy percent of service providers (21) and 53% of the youth (8) who considered a dysfunctional family life as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness.

Escaping parental addiction or abuses was the second cause among individual, family and relation factors that contribute to youth homelessness (figure 3). Similar perception was expressed by seventy-seven percent of service providers (23) and 67% of the youth (10) who

considered escaping parental addictions or abuses as a high to moderate cause of youth homelessness. A youth commented,

> *For a while my mom had a drinking problem (she doesn't now). There were times I needed support and I would be shaking and upset… I would call a friend and ask for a place to stay. I'd rather sleep outside than be around people drinking. (although I have never had to sleep outside) … Addictions! I think that's the biggest reason. Youth will run away rather than live with adults with addictions. It's too stressful. (interview 1)*

Other individual, family and relational causes were mental health and alcoholism (17%) as well as drugs and addictions. A youth affirmed,

> *Despite everything I am proud that I have survived… that I am here. I no longer self-harm. I haven't attempted suicide for a long time. I have attempted suicide many times. I now have hope for the future.*
>
> [The hardest part of being homeless was] *… feeling that I don't belong anywhere. I couldn't express any emotions. I was always afraid of being kicked out because I have a mental health issue (diagnosed with border-line personality disorder). I had to be so careful… I was in fear all the time. Someone we were staying with said "be quiet, I can't have any of that crazy stuff here" … which made me feel bad.* (interview 1)

The above quote is an example of the challenges faced by service providers when supporting youth and their families. Mental health issues were highlighted by focus group participants talking about a community action plan. They said, *"Mental health issues are on the rise with this young population. It is difficult to access mental health services without a proper diagnosis. Most cases the diagnosis given is alcohol and or substance abuse psychosis and referred for treatment and may be prescribed medication for schizophrenia."*

Mapping

The following map (figure 4) includes the places youth identified for fun (red), education (green), youth are at risk (Purple), places for youth to stay (blue) and places participants live (yellow). Building a map was a fun and interactive activity. Using this approach to collect data helped to create the geographical data to be included in the community action plan.

Youth pointed to the map and identified places that are fun and teen-friendly such as the recreation center, skate park, Friendship center, bowling alley and the mall. They also included 7 schools, 2 French schools, Wapahnohk Indigenous focus, Burntwood, Westwood, Juniper, East wood, RD Parker Collegiate, the University College of the North, Echoe alternative high school and Youth Build. The community centers pointed out on the map were the Boys and Girls club, the pool, the Westwood mall and the Giant Tiger mall. Youth knew some girls and boys' group homes such as MYS- Marymound group homes, Hudson house for boys. If they need a stable place they can go there. A youth commented, *"I try to go home (reserve community), hitch hike back to friends, there is not really anywhere for youth to go…"*
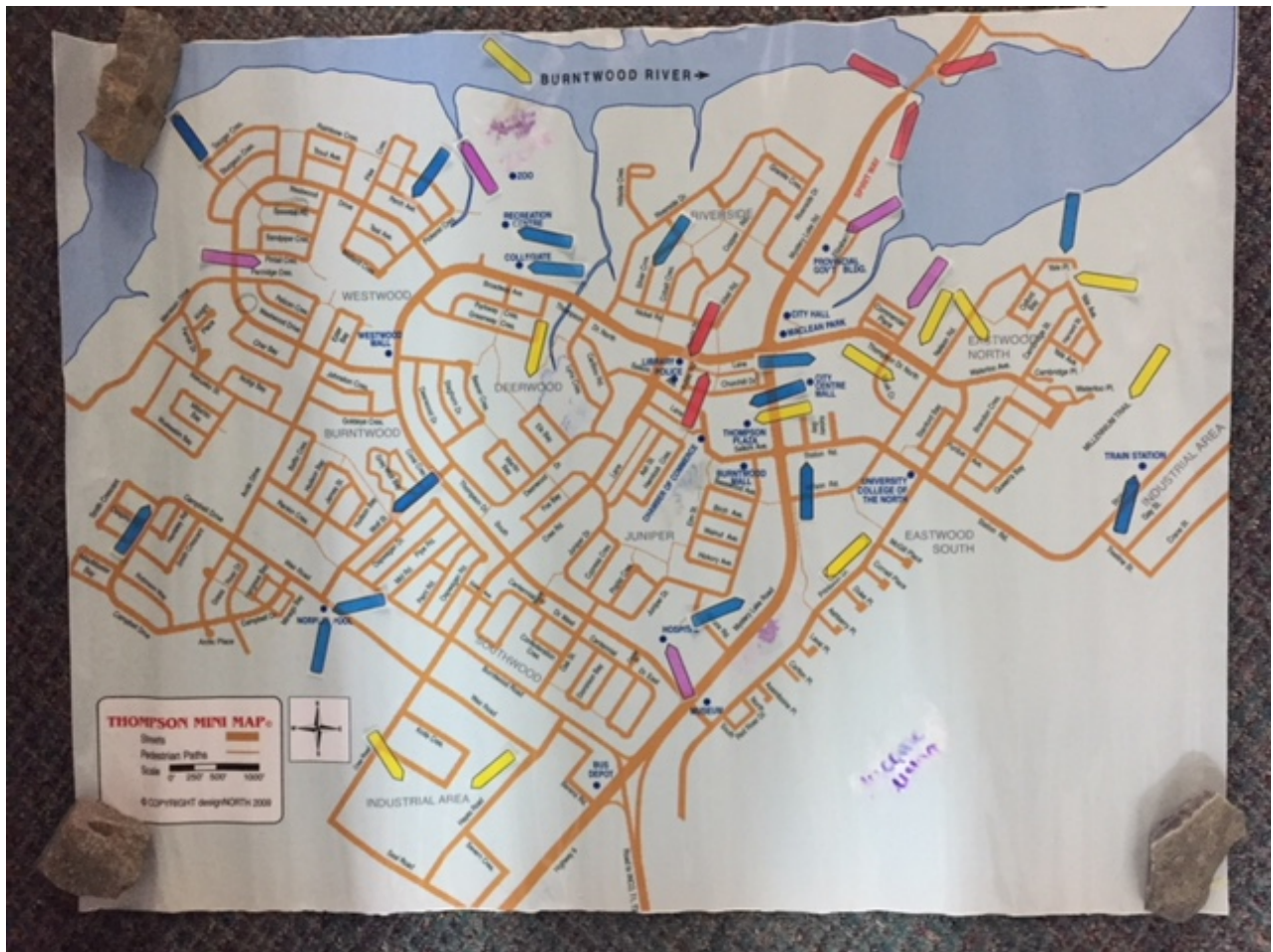
Figure 4-Thompson mapping: youth experience/perception of areas in Thompson

Mapping also helped to brainstorm ideas about places and services that youth would like to build such as a new dance studio that is affordable for children and youth. They also suggested a waterpark, a better one for older kids; fun mountain; skyzone; trampoline; upgrade splashpad; waterslides; sledding at city hall; skatepark; zipline. Overall, youth wanted more affordable activities that keep youth more active, engaged in field trips and promote arts such as spray painting, murals and dance.

Towards a Community Action Plan /Policy Recommendations

"We need independent housing for starters. But more so, there needs to be help for youth caregivers like my mother. If they lose their children, who supports them? It's the adults that need help so they can support their children". (Youth interview #1)

CHANGES YOUTH WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN THOMPSON

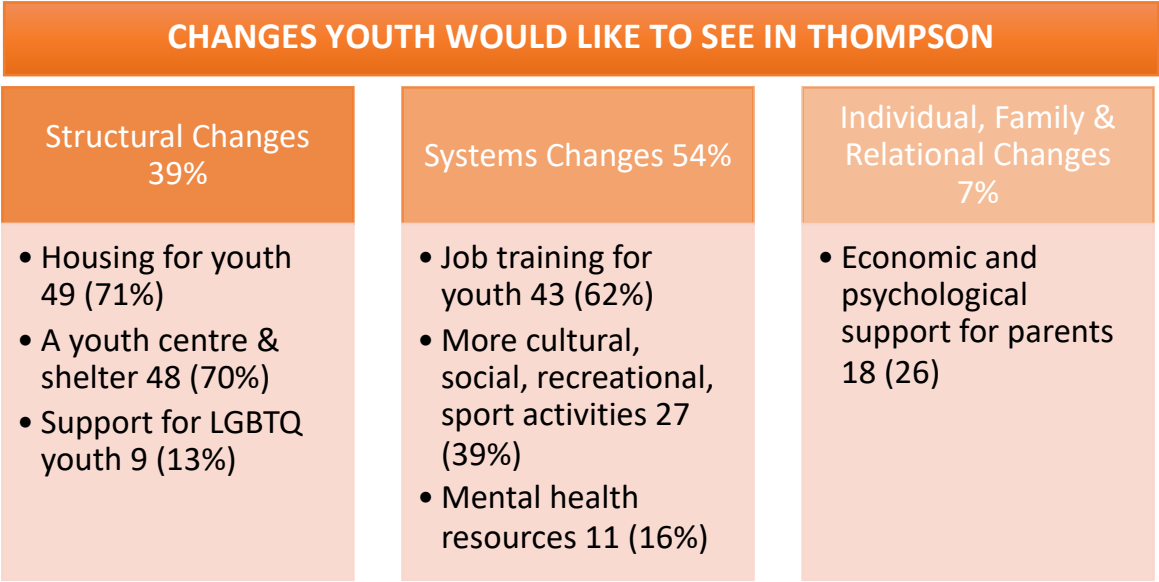| Structural Changes 39%	Systems Changes 54%	Individual, Family & Relational Changes 7%
• Housing for youth 49 (71%) • A youth centre & shelter 48 (70%) • Support for LGBTQ youth 9 (13%)	• Job training for youth 43 (62%) • More cultural, social, recreational, sport activities 27 (39%) • Mental health resources 11 (16%)	• Economic and psychological support for parents 18 (26)

Figure 5-Changes youth would like to see in Thompson

System changes account for 54% of the changes that youth want to see in Thompson to reduce and prevent youth homelessness. These changes include job training, more activities for youth in the community, more services and resources in mental health and addictions for youth, better access to schooling, work and income generation. 39% of youth highlighted the need to have housing for youth, the creation of a youth center and a shelter, more support for LGTBQ and marginalized youth. Also 7% of youth would like to have more psychological and economic support for parents and children such as pregnant mothers or young men as primary care givers, supports for those with disabilities, supports to improve communication and family relationships.

It is necessarily to have more support for parents, as affirmed by a service provider,

> *We are called a service but we don't actually have any services for kids. So sometimes we let the worker know if they're really young. So right now, there's one kid who's going missing pretty regularly who is age 12… So we'll be in touch with the social worker, the Child and Family Services worker. As well as the foster parent. I think it's the Mom actually. So, they are trying to work with the Mom, to try and keep this kid safe…*

Two focus groups were held to begin to outline the first community action plan on youth homelessness. These gatherings brought together a broad cross section of community members to begin the development of a community action plan. Findings are included in the City of

Thompson Youth Homelessness Instability Count 2016 report (Bonnycastle & Simpkins, 2017). Feedback from the focus groups reinforced some of the findings from the 2016 Youth Count: Youth want a safe place to go when they need it, a center that is open 24hrs a day, where they can drop in, sleep, and access resources, youth housing options and employment and training information.

DISCUSSION

Engaging Northern Youth

The research activities conducted with youth throughout this project were meant to build trust as well as to collect data and offer a space for youth to discuss their experiences. There were often challenges accessing youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability, and therefore the survey findings might not be representative of all youth in the city of Thompson. While some activities were well attended, others may have had only a few participants. There are many reasons for this. Youth will often only attend if their friends are also attending, if trust has been built already and there is interest in the event itself. Youth are often part of the hidden homeless population, those who couch-surf from place to place, not wanting to draw attention to themselves (Saewyc et al., 2008). Youth also often don't consider themselves to be homeless as moving from place to place has just become a part of their upbringing and their lives.

Students' experiences

Throughout this project, undergraduate students were hired as research assistants. Most of them were in a similar age group as the youth participants. Unfortunately, there are no graduate programs in Thompson, which is a limitation when wanting to hire research assistants at a higher level of education. However, the limitations, students had the opportunity to participate in different research activities. The following are comments from some research assistants:

> *The conference with blue print for life was good. I really enjoyed myself ... I found that very interesting to sit there on the floor with the youth and talk about the city of Thompson and what their thoughts are on the areas of Thompson. The dancing was also very enjoyable and it seemed to me that the youth really liked the dancing part of the conference. Watching how the youth were so engaged with the dancing was refreshing, and seeing the adults participate in the dancing was great as well.*

> *Over the last four months being able to work on this research project has been an amazing privilege. Having the opportunity has allowed me to learn the ins and outs to some extent of how we as social workers go about learning about those*

around us. In planning these two events I think we as team did as best we could to try and ensure everything ran smoothly.

Working on the Youth Homelessness Research project has been a valuable experience for me. I have enjoyed playing a role working on the project. I think there's a lot of unsaid ideas and feelings that we, the research assistants, have that we'd like to express. I think we're all hesitant to take leadership on the project. For me, specifically, I feel that I often worry about managing my time between the project and my own personal school work. I also feel that I'm not able to commit as much time and energy into the project as I'd like to. Having no car for transportation is also a big barrier for me personally as I have no way of really going to service providers that are further out from my home in the community on my own time. This makes me unable to take on a leadership role, even though I'm not adverse to the idea.

From my involvement with this research I have learned that homelessness and housing instability has a broader meaning beyond living on the street. I did not realize that young people were affected by homelessness because I never saw young people in the "downtown area". This has helped me realize that homelessness is often invisible to those unaffected by it.

The above testimony affirms the advantages of including students in research and it has also helped us to continue learning about the difficulties of developing research in small communities. There are additional factors to consider in the design of research such as local transportation for research assistants or short-term commitments to avoid conflicts with their school and family responsibilities.

Pathways to Youth Homelessness

- The main causes of youth homelessness and housing instability identified by participants was a dysfuncational family life and/or lack of housing. In most cases these two causes are interconnected.
- Additional causes identified by participants were: being involved with the Criminal justice system; poverty; parental addictions; aging out of care; lack of activites for youth; intergenerational trauma; parents are homeless; mental health issues; racism; physical health; sexual identity; high rent and co-signer issues; and substance abuse such as alcoholism.
- This study revealed the importance of providing support to parents who may be experienencing poverty, mental health issues and substance abuse issues so that they can support their children.
- All participants provided feedback that there is a strong need to support youth and

families in Thompson. This project focuses on including the voices of youth in discussions about homelessness and housing instability. What we heard was that housing for youth was the first priority, then the creation of a youth centre and shelter and then job training for youth. These all demonstrate concrete examples of ways to support youth.

Community Based Participatory Research Methods

This research project was designed to capture the youth perspective and engage young people in CBPR through the use of participatory methods that allow youth and adults to interact and engage youth to voice their perspectives while at the same time contribute to community awareness of this issue. The use of focus groups through community cafes helped facilitate this interaction and also created a friendly and supportive environment for youth to share their concerns, experiences and provide perspectives for future developments.

The use of the youth count provided a first report and quantitative data on the issue of youth homelessness and housing instability in Thompson. The data generated can serve as a baseline for the assessment of this issue, provide evidence of the problem, help to increase awareness among community, politicians, service providers and could also contribute to the development of future initiatives. In addition, it is an opportunity to educate youth, families and communities on the inherent complexities of the youth homeless pathways.

Using methods such as the 'Blue Print for Life' and the mapping exercise have the potential to engage youth in conversations that concern them. It has the potential to create the opportunity of building relationships with adult supporters and an opportunity for adult supporters to gain access and insights that only young people can offer.

Youth Count

This was the first time that Thompson conducted a youth count developed in a colloborative way. Some of the lessons learned that could improve the work of future youth counts:
- Strengthening the promotion and recruitment of the youth count to engage agencies and the public in completeting the survey.
- Increasing efforts to include as many youth as possible to become involved in the design of the survey as well as in the data collection.
- Develop strategies that strengthen the commitment and participation of local agencies to apply the survey with the youth that they work with.
- Assuring the quality and integrity of the data by planning the count in a way that surveys are completed with the help of volunteers or staff.
- Coordinating with the School District and the School Board in advance to include youth who are attending school who are experiencing housing instability or homelessness.

Relevance for Teaching Curriculum and Practice

- Both the co-investigators teach courses in Research Methodology. The experience of using innovative approaches to participatory research and data gathering are used as examples within these classes.
- Research assistants have participated in all phases of this project. They have experienced other ways of knowing and learning outside the classroom.
- Students have developed research skills and increased their knowledge of conducting research and working directly with marginalized groups.

Contributed to the Mandate of UCN and UM

- Sponsoring an event for youth at risk helps to strengthen UCN and UM's mandates of engaging with the community and particularly in investing in youth in Thompson.
- Educating the public about the benefits of participatory research with regards to social issues in the north.
- Research about youth homelessness that is distinct to a northern region and a largely Aboriginal population.

All these results are in keeping with UCN and UM's mandate to develop research capacity in the north and on issues relevant to northern Manitoba:
  (a) Building research capacity about northern/Aboriginal and Indigenous issues and aspirations.
  (b) Northern Manitoba region interacting with national and global communities

Contribution to Communities and Partners

- The potential development of a community action plan to eliminate and address gaps regarding youth and housing instability in northern Manitoba.
- Educating the community about the benefits of participatory research and University – community collaboration and engagement.
- Collecting data and generating needs assessments reports that can be useful for future youth programs and initiatives.

How the Research will be Sustained or Carried Forward

- This project provided valuable information to begin the development of a collaborative community action plan based on the findings of the research questions
- In keeping with the principles of participatory research we adapted our objectives so that a committee of service providers can now take the research findings and recommendations and create a collaborative community action plan. This work continues with a research team member and community groups.

LEARNING LESSONS/LIMITATIONS

The development of this research project illustrated to us that a large commitment of time is required to engage youth to be involved in research. We also learned that limiting the age of participants to 18-29 excluded other adolescents 12-18 years old. This is a group that might need to be included in future research considering the potential risks of youth at this age. The ethics for this group requires the involvement of their parents and or legal guardian, which increases the complexity and time in the development of the research and also reduces the number of participants.

Hiring students as research assistants has been a challenge as they very often have complex lives and familial priorities which meant that they had little time for research. They understand the benefits of being research assistants to gain experience and add this to their resume, but we often had to change our strategies for keeping them involved and interested in the project at different stages.

Keeping partners involved for a long period of time also has been challenging as they often have a high staff turnover as well as limited budgets and staff. An alternative might be developing a small-scale research project for a short period of time that can gain the commitment of service providers and also potential participants.

CONCLUSION

There is a strong need to support youth and families in Thompson, Manitoba when addressing homelessness and housing instability. Including the voices of youth in discussions about homelessness and housing instability is crucial when looking at solutions. Participants in this study recommended the following priorities: providing housing for youth, the creation of a youth centre and shelter and job training for youth. These recommendations demonstrate concrete examples of ways to support youth and their families in addressing homelessness. Work on the Community Action Plan to End Youth Homelessness continues with service providers and community members with funding granted by Manitoba Research Alliance.

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION ACTIVITIES

Canadian Conferences
Bonnycastle, M.M. & Deegan, L.A. (2018). Understanding youth homelessness in rural and
    small town: youth voices. National CASWE-ACFTS Conference. Regina, SK, May 28-31,
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Bonnycastle, M. M., & Simpkins, M. (submitted August 2018). Research Relationships:

Collaboration, Reflection and Sustainability in a Northern Canadian Resource Town. The Northern Review (Spring 2019).

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