

RESEARCH BRIEF: How schools can become sites of homelessness prevention

For many homeless youth, school is a struggle. Facing barriers like improper nutrition, lack of sleep and unaddressed mental health issues, homeless youth are eight times more likely to drop out of school than housed youth.

The impact of homelessness on young people's school life seems clear. But what about the other way around? How do young people's experiences in schools alleviate or exacerbate their housing challenges? And how might those experiences increase young people's risk of becoming homeless in the first place?

In 2019, the **Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR)** interviewed 37 young people who had experienced homelessness in Montreal to learn more about what led to their struggles with housing precarity.

All but one of the youth interviewed described their educational trajectory as key to understanding their housing story. And many described barriers and negative experiences in schools long before they became homeless.

Listening to these stories, the YARR realized: Schools must become sites of intervention and support for youth at risk of homelessness.

Interviewed: 37 youth with experience of homelessness.



All but one named their time at school as key to understanding their housing precarity. Many described hating school long before they first lost housing.



Schools must become sites of intervention and support for youth at risk of homelessness.

About YARR

The Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR) worked together for two years in Montreal, Quebec. Comprised mainly of youth who had experienced housing precarity and homelessness, the group documented the experiences of young people with Quebec's public institutions – from schools to hospitals to prisons – to show how those institutions are contributing to the homelessness crisis facing the province. In doing so, the YARR also showed how these institutions can do better. YARR calls on everyone who serves in a public institution to understand that their work is integral to the realization of young people's right to housing.



Findings – Failures and Opportunities

The YARR presents its findings as "Points of Failure" and "Points of Possibility." Points of failure are junctures in young people's lives where the actions of educators further isolate them and increase their risk of homelessness. Points of possibility are junctures where the opposite could be true: opportunities for educators to intervene in a positive way. Below, we share a summary of the primary points of failure and possibility identified by young people in relation to Quebec's education system.

POINT OF FAILURE Institutional Inaction

Youth shared a sense that even teachers who wanted to work with them didn't have the knowledge or resources to help them secure housing. Convinced their schools were unable to offer anything, they quickly learned to stop seeking support from them.

"They really can't do anything for you," one youth said. "They can be like, 'Here's a list of resources that we found for ya. Good luck.'"

POINT OF POSSIBILITY Flexible Learning Programs

Many youth stressed the importance of alternative and flexible education programs to achieving academic success. However, it was uncommon for youth to have access to alternative programming until they had already become precariously housed or homeless.

Providing alternative learning options as a preventative measure, instead of a crisis response, is a major point of possibility.

POINT OF FAILURE

Misdiagnosed or Undiagnosed

Youth described struggling to get appropriate diagnoses and treatments for their learning disabilities and health challenges.

When they did receive diagnoses or interventions meant to help, youth recalled feeling like the support came “out of nowhere” and didn’t reflect their experiences. Youth remembered being placed in segregated learning environments which didn’t meet their needs.

For some youth, educators’ inappropriate interventions led them to disengage altogether and start skipping school.

POINT OF FAILURE

Not Being Believed

Youth described multiple instances of educators not believing them when they shared their challenges. Youth remembered being told they were “too smart to be homeless,” for example.

For some youth, the doubt they encountered from educators made them question whether it was right for them to access supports or if they even deserved help.

POINT OF POSSIBILITY

Early Interventions

The young people YARR interviewed described hating school, skipping class, facing punishments and being bullied at school long before their first experiences of homelessness.

Educators should recognize these early indicators of a young person’s risk of becoming homeless, and offer supports and accommodations to help lower that risk.

Measures to address bullying, mental health challenges and learning disabilities should all be seen as part of a coordinated effort to prevent homelessness.

POINT OF POSSIBILITY

Time to explore options, build trust

The timing of offered supports came up repeatedly in our conversations with young people. Youth described losing access to certain supports because they didn’t take advantage of them quickly enough. They also described lacking the time to explore different options to see what supports might work best for them.

Discerning what a young person needs to stabilize their life can take time; **youth need to be able to access services at multiple points, in multiple ways, and at a time that works for them.**

This connects with another comment youth repeated: **the need for trusting relationships built over time.** Youth said they were more open to accepting supports or interventions if they were offered by someone they already trusted and respected.

POINT OF FAILURE

Unclear expectations and policies

Youth described coming up against opaque sets of expectations at school, and then being punished for not following them. They also felt their schools’ codes of conduct were applied inconsistently in ways that targeted them for discipline.

More broadly, youth expressed uncertainty about their schools’ institutional processes, and why they often led to inconsistent results.



Above Illustration and rat illustration by Shayana Narcisse.

The **Youth Action Research Revolution** was made up of: Laurence Adamovicz, Shayana Narcisse, Maxime Plamondon, and Mickey Watchhorn, research assistants from Dans la Rue in Montréal, Québec. Project co-leads were Jayne Malenfant and Naomi Nichols, then from McGill University and now at Concordia University (Jayne) and Trent University (Naomi). In its first year, the team also included students Emanuel Guay (UQAM), Emanuel Rioux (Université du Montréal) and Sophie Doyle (McGill).



RESEARCH FOR
Social Change
LAB

DANS LA RUE