

Hidden in Our Midst: Homeless Newcomer Youth in Toronto – Uncovering the Supports to Prevent and Reduce Homelessness

**Final Report
November 2014**

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Submitted to:
Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) –
Homelessness Partnering Secretariat

Canada 

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

Youth homelessness is an escalating concern nationwide, with young people under 24 years of age representing the fastest growing segment of Canada's homeless population (Koeller, 2008). It is estimated that youth represent one-third of Canada's homeless, approximately 65,000 individuals (Stewart et al., 2010). In a recent survey of 244 homeless youth in Toronto, nearly one quarter indicated that they had been born outside of Canada (Gaetz et al., 2010). Racialized, immigrant, newcomer youth are also over-represented within what has been termed the 'hidden homeless' population (Greenberg & Matinez-Reyes, n.d.; Preston et al. 2011;). Hidden homelessness occurs when individuals have limited housing options and are left with little choice other than to stay with friends or family (Preston et al., 2011). There is existing research that demonstrates an over-representation of immigrants, especially newcomers, who experience hidden homelessness (Fiedler, Schuurman, & Hyndman, 2006; Preston et al., 2011).

To date, there has been a dearth of research that specifically explores the cross-section of youth homelessness and newcomer status. As a result, there is a current lack of knowledge on the pathways into homelessness for young people who are newcomers to Canada, and how their experiences differ from those of the overall youth homelessness population. It is understood that age, gender, race, and sexual orientation are among the multitude of factors that shape a young person's experience of and pathway into homelessness. For newcomer youth however, it is the juncture of these factors, in addition to the presence of language and cultural barriers, lack of status, personal ties and history in Canada that uniquely situate them amongst the most vulnerable of homeless youth.

1.2 Purpose

This study was developed in partnership between the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, representing an initial attempt to assess the needs of the newcomer youth population within the context of homelessness prevention and reduction in Canada. Using the City of Toronto as a case study, knowledge gained through this research was intended to fill an existing gap in the literature on this issue, as well as inform future research and action, including the expansion of pilot and evaluation initiatives to enhance service system capacities in other Canadian cities with significant newcomer populations.

1.3 Objectives

The key objectives of this study were to:

- 1) Explore the experiences of and pathways into homelessness among a sample of newcomer youth in Toronto
- 2) Identify service needs and investigate what newcomer youth believe to be critical components of interventions aimed at reducing and preventing homelessness
- 3) Assess current service system capacities for responding to homelessness among newcomer youth
- 4) Identify service gaps and possible promising practices among both traditional service agencies and ethno-cultural agencies that currently or could in future address those gaps

1.4 Defining homeless newcomer youth

Newcomer

For this study, the term ‘newcomer’ included youth who were born in a developing country within the Global South¹, and have immigrated to Canada. The duration of time in which newcomers have spent in Canada ranged from a few months to upwards of a decade. This broad definition of newcomer status was intended to capture the impact of access to services among youth who have recently arrived to Canada, as well as those who have been in Canada for a number of years. The broad definition of ‘newcomer’ in this study also allows for a comparison between groups that qualify for newcomer and settlement services versus those that no longer qualify, and how this may impact their housing security.

Youth

In this study, ‘youth’ were considered those between the ages of 16-24², a range based on definitions identified within the academic, grey, and government literature. This age cohort was also selected on the basis of highlighting individuals’ transition from the youth to adult service system.

Homelessness

‘Homelessness’ and ‘risk of homelessness’ is broadly defined in this study as having no permanent, safe, affordable, and adequate home. This may include staying outside, staying in a shelter or transitional housing, ‘couch-surfing’ or staying temporarily at a friend or family’s home, or accessing services for homeless youth. ‘Risk of homelessness’ also involves paying more than half of one’s gross income on rent.

1.5 Literature Review

A literature review of academic and grey literature was completed to identify best practices in reducing and preventing youth homelessness as well as benchmarks by which to measure promising practices in service provision for similar programs in Toronto. The review produced for this study is a scoping review of available literature to date. [Appendix A: Literature Review] The literature review highlights some of the following issues that affect newcomer youth including; the identification of common pathways into homelessness; variation in experiences of homelessness; and (dis)engagement with service systems. Due to the lack of literature on newcomer youth homelessness, particularly within an urban Canadian context, relevant sources for the literature review were identified through searches of the literature in service provision and access for youth, individuals who are experiencing homelessness, and newcomers.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a multi-method, qualitative and quantitative approach to data collection and analysis, including the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR), whereby newcomer youth with lived

¹ The term ‘Global South’ comprises both low and middle-income developing countries

² All interview and focus group participants met the age criteria for this study, although one of the Peer Researchers reported to be 25 years of age

experience of homelessness were recruited as Peer Researchers, functioning both as consultants as well as research team members on the project. Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods have been found to be promising in encouraging youth participation, defining appropriate research questions, creating appropriate data collection tools, and interpreting and applying research in ways that are relevant to youth (Soleimanpour et al., 2008).

2.1 Peer Researcher Team Composition

The inclusion criteria for participation as a Peer Researcher was that individuals be between the ages of 16-24, were born in a developing country, and that they possess some lived experience of being homeless or at-risk of homelessness in Canada. The final team of 9 Peer Researchers are a highly diverse group of youth based on age, gender, and languages spoken. The Peer Researcher team members have origins in countries such as; Ghana, Ethiopia, Somalia, El Salvador, Korea, and Sri Lanka. The Peer Researcher team is made up of 6 women and 3 men, and one team member openly identifies as being a member of the LGBTTIQ community.

Peer Researchers participated in 5 half-day training sessions in quantitative and qualitative research methods facilitated by Access Alliance Community Health Centre in Toronto, as well as a half-day training session on Knowledge Translation and Dissemination facilitated by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Peer Researchers were also provided support in completing the Government of Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 CORE) online tutorial. Peer Researchers receive honouraria for their participation at all meetings and research related activities, as well as public transit tokens to cover their travel cost. Three of the Peer Researchers are young mothers and they received on-site child-minding for their children during all training sessions, research meetings, and focus groups.

Peer Researchers' roles in the study included; facilitating the focus groups and interviews; contributing to research tool design; data analysis; attending project meetings; and co-presenting findings at conferences and meetings. One Peer Researcher was supported in applying for a Lived Experience Scholarship from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, and co-presented on the study at the 2013 National Conference to End Homelessness in Ottawa, Ontario [*Appendix I. Hidden in Our Midst NCEH 2013 Presentation*]. Two Peer Researchers co-presented findings and preliminary recommendations to Advisory Committee members and community agencies at a consultation meeting which took place in April 2014 [*Appendix J. Hidden in Our Midst Consultation Meeting Presentation, April 2014*].

2.2 Advisory Committee Composition

The project Advisory Committee involved participation from diverse organizations including; youth services; child and youth advocacy; refugee, newcomer and settlement services; youth shelters and homelessness services; child welfare; youth legal services; services to young parents; mental health services; and youth LGBTTIQ³ services. These organizations operate in Toronto, and at the provincial or federal levels of government. Advisory Committee members were invited to contribute to the study in a variety of ways, including; advising the investigators on planning issues; recruiting Peer Researchers and research participants; hosting focus groups; identifying other agencies that serve homeless newcomer youth; participating in meetings with the Research Team and Peer Researchers. Advisory Committee

³ LGBTTIQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer

members were also called upon to provide input on the development of data collection tools, as well as provide feedback on study findings and recommendations.

2.3 Development and Administration of Research Tools

This study was centred around the use of three research tools:

1. Youth demographic questionnaire
2. Focus group/interview guide
3. Service provider online survey

The demographic questionnaire [*Appendix D. Youth Demographic Questionnaire*] was informed by themes drawn from the literature review, as well as through input from research partners, Peer Researchers, and Advisory Committee members. The focus group guide [*Appendix E. Focus Group/Interview Guide*] was based around a semi-structured interview format to enable open-ended responses to some of the categories highlighted in the demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire was administered to individuals prior to their participation in a focus group or interview.

2.4 Youth Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview data collection took place during the months of June and July 2013. Nine focus groups were conducted in total at social service agencies and youth shelters across Metropolitan Toronto in Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough and downtown Toronto. Focus groups were held primarily at the agencies of the Advisory Committee members. Three focus groups were women-only, 1 focus group was men-only, 1 focus group was conducted Spanish, and 3 individual interviews were conducted⁴. This study was informed by guidelines set forth by Khanlou and Peter (2005) for ensuring that Youth Participatory Action Research projects conform to ethical standards, including confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, informed consent, and favourable risk-benefit ratio. Any individuals who did not feel comfortable participating in a focus group were invited to participate in an individual interview instead, facilitated by one of the Peer Researchers. Informed consent was obtained from each individual prior to their participation in a focus group or interview [*Appendix C. Consent Form for Youth Participants*]. Focus groups and interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in duration, and attended by 2-13 participants. Participants were compensated with honouraria as well as public transit tokens for their time. On-site counseling services, child-minding, language interpretation support, and access to a list of counseling, settlement, and housing resources were made available to participants [*Appendix F. Resource List for Youth Participants*].

2.5 Service Provider Survey

In January and February 2014, a survey was distributed online to two groups of agencies in the City of Toronto; a) those serving homeless youth, and b) those serving newcomer communities [*Appendix H.*

⁴ A LGBTTIQ-only focus group was originally scheduled, but cancelled due to a low response rate from potential participants. However, the LGBTTIQ voice was strongly represented during one particular focus group, as well as one individual interview.

Service Provider Survey]. The service provider survey was designed after the youth interviews and focus groups had taken place, to ensure that the survey would address agencies' capacity to provide those services that the youth believed to be most important in reducing and preventing homelessness. The surveys included both quantitative and qualitative measures, and was developed through input from Research Partners, Peer Researchers, and Advisory Committee members. The service provider survey was designed to collect data on two research objectives; 1) to identify and evaluate the extent to which the services currently delivered by agencies meet the needs identified by newcomer youth participants in this study and; 2) identify service gaps and promising practices among agencies that currently or could in future address those gaps. The survey was administered online using KeySurvey®; a secure, web-based surveying platform hosted on Canadian servers.

To be eligible to participate in the survey, respondents must have had experience working as a service provider in an agency that serves either homeless youth or newcomer communities. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to access survey respondents across the City of Toronto. Participants were recruited primarily through the professional networks of research partners and Advisory Committee members. Over 130 contacts were sent a recruitment email containing information on the project, as well as a link to view the consent form and survey [*Appendix G. Consent Form for Service Providers*]. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were given the option of completing the survey, but remaining anonymous. Participants did not receive compensation for completing the survey, but if they provided their name, they were entered into a draw to win a gift card. Participants were given 3 weeks to complete the survey and data collection took place between the months of January and February 2014.

2.6 Transcription and Analysis

All focus groups and interviews were conducted in-person and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy in relation to field notes taken during the focus groups and interviews by research team members. Analysis of the focus group and interview data was informed by classical content analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2004), where categorical themes were identified and organized according to the focus group questions. The qualitative analysis was also based in elements of grounded theory (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Saldana, 2013), whereby qualitative data was coded line-by-line to highlight key themes, barriers, and facilitators. One research team member was primarily responsible for coding the qualitative data, with code structures, summaries, and transcript excerpts reviewed by a second research team member. Code summaries were reviewed at different stages of the analysis by Research Team members and Peer Researchers, which allowed for a process of contextualization, refining of conceptual themes, member checking, and validation of the data. Data from the youth survey was entered into IBM SPSS 20.0 statistical analysis software, with descriptive frequencies generated.

3.0 RESULTS

Pathways into Homelessness among Newcomer Youth

3.1 Characteristics of the youth participants

Gender and Ethnicity

Seventy-four participants were recruited into the study, of which 45% were young women and 55% were young men. The percentage of women in this sample was slightly higher than numbers previously reported in the youth homelessness literature, where females have typically represented one-third of homeless youth (Gaetz et al., 2010). Zero participants in this study openly identified as being transsexual, transgender, or intersex.

Geographic Region of Origin

Nearly two-thirds of newcomer youth participants reported to have origins in Africa or the Caribbean

Geographic region	Share of participants (n=74)
Caribbean	(36%)
Africa	(27%)
Middle East	(10%)
South America	(9%)

Table 1. Top four geographic regions of origin reported by participants

The significant percentage of individuals with origins in Africa or the Caribbean aligns with existing studies on youth homelessness which has shown an overrepresentation of individuals from these groups (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

Sexual Orientation

Over one-third of newcomer youth participants identified as LGBTTIQ

When asked to list any and all sexual orientations they identify with, nearly 20% of participants identified as being gay or bisexual, with an additional 17% indicating that they were either questioning, not knowing, or preferring to not disclose their sexual orientation. Zero participants openly identified as being lesbian. The finding that over one-third of homeless newcomer youth identified as not being heterosexual, is higher than averages reported in the literature (Abramovich, 2012) as well as a recent study in Toronto which found that one-in-five homeless youth identify as LGBTTIQ (City of Toronto, 2013).

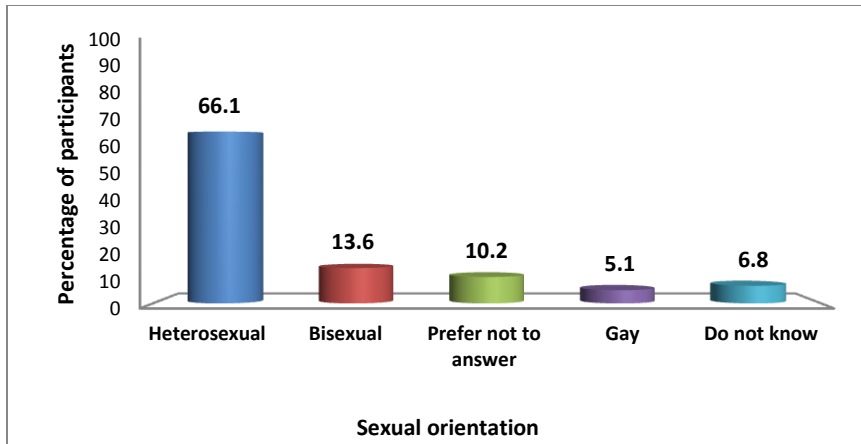


Figure 1. Sexual orientation of newcomer youth participants

Immigrating to Canada

Family reunification was the main reason for why newcomer youth participants came to Canada

When asked to specify their main purpose for coming to Canada, family reunification⁵ was the most commonly selected reason, reported by over one-fifth of participants. Other reasons specified by participants included; coming to Canada attend school, for better employment opportunities, fleeing their country of origin due to personal risk, through adoption, and parental relocation for work. Nearly 40% of participants arrived to Canada with their parents, while one-in-three participants arrived alone.

Status in Canada

Over one-quarter of participants have held Refugee Claimant status

Statutes Held in Canada	Share of participants (n=74)
Permanent Resident	52.1%
Canadian Citizen	36.6%
Refugee Claimant/ Government assisted refugee	26.8
Government Visa/Study Visa	7.0%

Table 2. Statutes held by newcomer youth participants⁶

Precarious immigration status negatively impacts the lives of newcomer youth as it affects access to services, education, jobs, and housing (Meagher et al., 2012; OCASI, 2012).

⁵ Family reunification often involves a process in which parents or caregivers immigrate initially and are later joined by their children months or years later. These children typically remain in their home country, but under the care of another relative or kin.

⁶ When asked to select “all that apply” from a list of options, these were the four statuses most commonly held by participants.

Age

The average age in which newcomer youth participants first experienced homelessness was at 17

All participants in this study were between the ages of 16 to 24. Nearly one-in-three participants arrived to Canada between the ages of 16 to 20, and the average age at which participants first experienced homelessness in Canada was at the age of 17. The average current age of participants was 21, and among those who indicated that they were still in a situation of unsafe housing, the average length of homelessness was 2.5 years.

History of physical and mental health

One-in-four newcomer youth participants reported to have experienced some form of trauma

When asked to select all that apply from a list of options related to their physical and mental health history, participants reported to have experienced the following:

History of physical and mental health	Share of participants (n=74)
Stress	57.4%
Addiction to cigarettes	48.6%
Anxiety	38.7%
Depression	32.3%
Attempted suicide	26.7%
Chronic health issue	24.2%
Mental health needs	22.0%
History of Abuse	
Physical abuse	45.0%
Sexual abuse	33.3%
Trauma	25.9%

Table 3. History of abuse, physical and mental health among newcomer youth participants

These numbers coincide with existing literature that has documented high incidences of physical and sexual abuse, and mental health and addictions needs among the overall homeless youth population in Canada (Raising the Roof, 2009). Over one-quarter of participants in this study reported that they have experienced some form of trauma, which for certain participants was linked to war and conflict in their home country.

Status as a young parent

One-in-four newcomer youth participants identified that they are a parent

In this study, just over a quarter of participants reported that to have given birth to or fathered a child, and among these young parents, 45% report to have either one or two children in their primary care. A recent Toronto based study found that immigrant and lone-mother-headed families are over-represented within poor housing and that immigrants who have had a longer settlement period are

much more likely than newcomers to live in poor housing conditions, and to be at risk of eviction (Paradis, Wilson, Logan, 2014).

Highest level of education achieved

Over fifty percent of homeless newcomer youth participants have completed grade 12 or some post-secondary education

During the focus groups and interviews, participants placed high value on pursuing post-secondary education in Canada, and 15.5% of participants specified that their main reason for coming to Canada was to pursue educational opportunities. Some of these youth already have identified some strong capacity in terms of their levels of academic achievement attained from their country of origin.

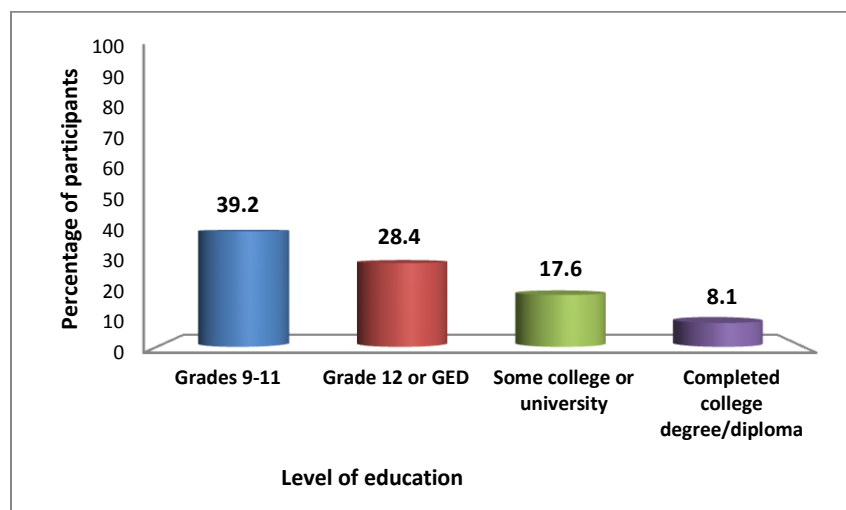


Figure 2. Highest level of education achieved

Over fifty percent of participants in this study reported to have completed grade 12 or some college or university education either in Canada or in their country of origin, a figure that is noticeably greater than the overall homeless youth population, of which only one-third report to have graduated from high school (Gaetz, 2013). Regarding their current education system status, four out of ten participants reported that they are not in school, one-in-three indicated that they are in secondary school, and nearly one-in-five are currently enrolled in some form of post-secondary education.

One theme that arose during the focus groups and interviews was participants' sense of "shattered expectations" in reconciling the positive perceptions they previously held of Canada as a place of opportunity and acceptance, with the challenges they have encountered in securing appropriate housing and employment. Some newcomer youth, especially those who have immigrated in their early to mid-twenties, may have attained a level of professional and education status, as well as high standard of living in their home country. For these youth, the comparison between their lifestyle back home and their current situation in Canada can contribute to feelings of disappointment during the settlement process.

When I was back home, I was having my own job, I was having my monthly payment, I was having my own car, home ... I was working, got good pay, and [now] I go down to high school...my experience, I'm starting from like zero...It's hard to be in a shelter, because, first of all, you're coming from a different country...you was living with your own family, you was living in your own bedroom, so when you come here and start living in the shelter, you're feeling like you're losing a lot, like your family being around you and stuff like that.

[Youth focus group participant]

Sources of income

Newcomer youth participants in this study reported accessing a number of formal and informal sources of income, and relied predominantly on their social or cultural community networks to access employment opportunities. When accessed to select all that apply from a list of formal sources of income accessed, the top five reported sources were:

Source of income	Share of participants
Ontario Works	46.9%
Income through paid employment	32.8%
Personal Needs Allowance	26.6%
Money from parents	20.3%
Student loans	10.9%

Table 4. Top five sources of income reported by newcomer youth participants

These findings align with data from recent studies including the 2013 City of Toronto Street Needs Assessment which found that the main source of income for those living in youth shelters was Ontario Works (45%) and through full or part-time employment (35%).

When accessed to select all that apply from a list of informal sources of income accessed, the top five reported sources were:

Informal source of income	Share of participants
Research and focus groups	22.7%
Selling drugs	16%
Bottle collecting	13%
Theft	12.8%
Selling stolen property	9.5%

Table 5. Top five sources of informal income reported by newcomer youth participants

Homeless newcomer youth often become involved in the informal economy due to lack of education and legal documentation (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow et al., 2010). Additional sources of income listed by participants included; asking friends for money, earning income through general labour, prostitution, and shelter allowances.

Reasons for having entered a situation of homelessness

Family conflict was cited by two-thirds of newcomer youth participants as the main reason for having entered a situation of homelessness

When asked to select all that apply from a list of options, the main reasons for why youth participants entered a situation of homelessness were:

Reason for entering homelessness	Share of participants
Conflict with family	(59%)
Low income	(38%)
Difficulty obtaining employment	(24%)
Abuse from family	(21%)

Table 6. Top four reasons for why newcomer youth participants entered homelessness

In this study, family conflict and income insecurity were the main factors for why newcomer youth first entered a situation of homelessness. Existing research has documented that physical, emotional and sexual abuse are common predictors of youth homelessness (Karabanow, 2008; Kelly & Caputo, 2007; Kulik et al., 2011; Moore, 2007; Raising the Roof, 2009; Springer, Roswell, & Lum, 2006; Youth Shelter Interagency Network, 2007). Family breakdown and instability such as separation, blended families, and changing cities are also significant contributors to youth homelessness (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011; Karabanow, 2008; Kidd, 2003; Springer et al., 2006). Some examples of family conflict mentioned by youth participants included; resistance to arranged marriage; challenges living with a host family in Canada; and family conflict stemming from differences in parent and child expectations regarding the practice of religious and cultural values in Canada. Participants also called attention the existence of diverse cultural perceptions and understandings of what constitutes as physical abuse or acceptable forms of child discipline.

Some participants expressed a reluctance to leave home in the first place or be seen accessing certain services in-person, because they were concerned about the idea of potentially “shaming” their parents, that leaving the home would be viewed as a public declaration that something is wrong within the family. This finding can be linked to existing research which has shown that newcomers tend to access informal networks before formal housing supports due to varying degrees of close community affiliation and shame at potentially “being a burden on the system” (Greenberg & Martinez-Reyes, 2010; Springer et al., 2006). Within the context of family conflict, low income and poverty among working newcomer families was also addressed as a pathway into homelessness.

3.2 Newcomer Youth Engaging with Service Systems: Identifying Needs and Service Gaps

Newcomer youth displayed a sophisticated level of resourcefulness in their ability to navigate multiple sources of information across agencies. Youth participants obtained information about services through many avenues including; cultural social networks, drop-in centres, phone lines, and through the internet. The anonymity provided by obtaining assistance over the phone or through the internet was viewed favourably by some participants. However, others noted that many newcomer youth do not have regular access to the internet, phone, or a mailing address, which underlines a need for services to

be offered at multiple agencies on a drop-in basis.

Participants expressed a strong desire to meet their personal, social, education, and career goals, as well as build the necessary skills to sustain independent living, housing, employment, a nutritious diet, and prevent recidivism within the justice system. Youth participants demonstrated high degrees of resilience and coping skills in overcoming past challenges, and articulated a striking sense of responsibility to improve their situation. Participants viewed access to information as a way for them to build the skills to support themselves, and to break out of a “cycle of dependency” that many existing structures work to perpetuate for youth service users.

Sources of Support Accessed

Over fifty percent of newcomer youth participants report some level of religious or faith identity

Using a five-point Likert scale where 1 represented “often” and 5 represented “not applicable”, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they relied on various sources of support when they are facing problems. When asked to select all that apply from a list of options, the following sources were the most frequently reported by participants:

Sources of support currently accessed	Share of participants who relied on this source <u>often</u>
Religion or God	44.9%
Friends	28.3%
Romantic partners	24.4%
Case worker/social worker/guidance counselor	22.0%
Parents	13.7%
Teachers	9.8%
Faith community	9.1%
Community organizations	7.7%

Table 7. Most often relied on sources of support among newcomer youth participants

Two-thirds of homeless newcomer youth participants indicated that they would feel most comfortable seeking support from their family doctors or walk-in clinic

When asked to specify among a list of options who they would feel comfortable going to if they needed help, participants selected the following:

Potential sources of support	Share of participants who said YES they would feel comfortable seeking help
Family doctor or walk-in clinic	66.1%
Youth agency	50.0%
Homelessness prevention agency	44.4%
Toronto police	37.0%
Mental health agency	33.3%
Newcomer or settlement agency	25.6%
Child protection services/Children’s Aid Society (CAS)	25.0%

Table 8. System services that newcomer youth participants would feel comfortable accessing⁷

Contact with the Justice System

Since arriving in Canada, participants reported that their main contact with the police was being asked for identification (38.6%), for loitering (36.8%), and having been arrested (28.6%). Under one-third of participants in this study reported that they have been arrested, which is less than the overall youth homeless population, of which more than half have been reported to have been in jail or a youth detention centre (PHAC, 2006).

Some youth participants described negative experiences of receiving unfair treatment or feeling racially profiled by members of the police, particularly young males of African or Caribbean descent. However, some participants also spoke to the potential value of the police working to build positive relationships with community leaders in the targeted neighbourhoods that they serve.

Contact with the Child Welfare System

One-in-four homeless newcomer youth participants have had contact with the child welfare system

Nearly one-quarter of participants expressed having some interaction with the Children’s Aid Society (CAS), with 9% having been in the direct care of CAS since arriving in Canada. This finding is significantly lower than other research, which has found that 43% of homeless youth reported prior involvement with Child Protection Services (Raising the Roof, 2009). For those participants who had previously been in the care of the CAS, one-fifth reported that they moved to the shelter once they transitioned out of the care system.

Systemic Discrimination in Services Accessed by Youth

A significant theme expressed by youth in this study was feeling stigmatized by service providers

Newcomer youth possess multiple identities, and these various identities embody what one Peer Researcher referred to as “interlocking sites of discrimination and oppression”. Youth participants spoke to perceived experiences of inequitable treatment within the service system based on characteristics

⁷ In the Demographic Questionnaire, ‘Family doctor or walk-in clinic’ was listed as one option. Because hospital emergency health services are frequently accessed by individuals who are homeless, a differentiation between ‘family doctor’, ‘walk-in clinic’, and ‘emergency department’ would be useful in future research on newcomer youth homelessness.

including but not limited to; age, gender, race, sexual orientation, mental health needs, status as a newcomer, status in Canada, and being a young parent. Newcomer youth describe experiencing perceived discriminatory treatment from four main pillars; 1) Housing (e.g. landlords); 2) Employment (e.g. potential and current employers); 3) Justice system (e.g. police); and 4) Service providers (e.g. front-line and case management staff).

A number of focus group participants also articulated a perception that a hierarchy currently exists within the service system, whereby “newer” newcomer youth who have recently arrived to Canada receive priority access in receiving services and housing, in comparison to other newcomer youth who may have been in Canada for a few years, but are not yet settled.

Contact with the Housing Support System

Sources of housing accessed

When asked to describe their first experience of unsafe or unstable housing, ‘the shelter’ was selected by nearly one-third of participants. ‘Staying in the shelter’ was also identified as the housing situation in which youth participants have spent the most amount of time (34.4%), followed by ‘living on the street’ (24.6%), and ‘staying temporarily with a friend, romantic partner, or relative’ (18%). Less than half of participants (45.7%) reported that they are currently in an unsafe or unstable housing situation. Most participants in this study were accessed through youth homeless shelters.

Barriers to Housing

Participants addressed a number of barriers that they have encountered in attempting to access housing since their arrival in Canada. The most frequently mentioned barrier was the experience of perceived unfair treatment from current and potential landlords, as well as housing service workers. Criteria noted by participants as barriers included; not having a previous rental history in Canada; not having a fixed address; disclosing the fact that they are currently living in a shelter; being unemployed; being an Ontario Works recipient; not having a stable source of income; and not possessing the English language capacity to adequately express their needs to landlords and service workers.

...if you can't speak English or you're just new to the country-it's a language barrier for you to get a place. You know, for people that can speak English better than others are more likely to get it because they can just talk to them you know...

[Youth focus group participant]

During multiple focus groups, the challenges faced specifically by young newcomer mothers in accessing both shelter accommodations and market rental housing was noted by participants. Participants also described feeling pressure from housing staff to transition out of the shelter, but not having yet secured a safe place to live or the skills to maintain independent living. Additional barriers noted by participants included not having sufficient funds to pay rent, cover the cost of public transit, and food.

Contact with the Education System

Barriers to education

Participants identified a number of education needs that have been noted in other studies including; challenges fulfilling school requirements when one is unstably housed; competing priorities of earning

income versus attending school (Kulik et al., 2011), and accommodations to attend service system appointments during regular school hours. Participants saw a particular need for schools and employment programs to provide accommodation to newcomer and refugee students for missed sessions due attending their immigration hearings.

Do not trust anybody, because even if ...they're [a] refugee or whatever, most of them are on the old system. So they have, leeway time. They have like two years of not even getting a hearing date. The new system, I swear to you - you apply, you get a hearing date automatically, 60 days. You have no time to waste...
[Youth focus group participant]

Other needs identified by participants included; supports to transfer academic credentials obtained from their country of origin; supports to obtain an Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate; and English as a Second Language (ESL) support services. Other studies have noted the impact of linguistic and cultural barriers, discrimination (OCASI, 2012), and lack of support from teachers and other educators (Khanlou, Shakya & Muntaner, 2009) as barriers to school success for newcomer youth.

Some participants expressed feeling that their English language skills were being unfairly perceived and assessed by their teachers as an indicator of limited learning capabilities, which has led to poor academic performance in the Canadian school system. Participants also pointed to a gap in social assistance, grants, scholarships, or bursaries available to homeless newcomer youth to pursue post-secondary education. While nearly one out of five participants reported being enrolled in post-secondary education, only 10% of these individuals were accessing some income from student loans.

Employment Access

Barriers to employment

For newcomer youth who may have arrived to Canada with a history of professional experience achieved in their home country, the inability to gain meaningful employment that value and builds upon their existing skill set presents a fundamental obstacle in their settlement process. The challenges described by newcomer youth participants in accessing employment include; limitations obtaining employment due to lack of education; difficulties securing as well as maintaining employment when one is unstably housed; lack of work-appropriate clothing; access to employment for those with mental health needs; the high cost of public transit to regularly attend one's place of employment; and not having a fixed address to provide on a resumé.

In addition to these barriers, many homeless newcomer youth are faced with the additional burden of being at risk of discriminatory treatment from potential and current employers based on their newcomer status, English language competency, lacking legal status in Canada, limited professional employment history in Canada, as well as unrecognized education or professional credentials achieved abroad.

4.0 Results

Agencies Serving Homeless Newcomer Youth

4.1 Characteristics of the sample

A total of thirty-nine individuals (n=39) filled out the online survey, representing a diverse cross-section of agencies including; newcomer settlement services; newcomer housing services; youth shelters; child welfare services; newcomer LGBTTIQ services; and mental health services among others. Homeless youth legal services, English as a Second Language (ESL) program delivery, services for young mothers, and multi-service agency were identified as additional primary sectors of service by one third of respondents.

Nearly all respondents (97%) indicated that their agency provides services to youth between the ages of 16-24, while over half of the respondents specified that children under 16 years of age comprise some portion of their agency's client base. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that a formalized protocol exists at their agency to connect youth to appropriate services elsewhere once they have "aged out" of their agency's catchment. Over fifty percent of respondents reported that there is a designated program or staff at their agency who are responsible for delivering front-line services to newcomer youth clients.

4.2 Summary of services provided

Programming for specific groups

The agencies surveyed reported to offer many of the supports geared towards reaching the most highly represented groups identified from the youth demographic questionnaire. Nearly two-thirds of the agencies surveyed deliver programs with a specific focus on the needs of African populations; 45% for Caribbean populations; 45% for Middle Eastern populations; and 42% for Latin American populations respectively.

Language access

When asked how their agency delivers services to clients who cannot communicate in English, the majority of respondents (84%) selected 'access to multilingual staff' as the principal method for engaging non-English speaking clients; followed by 'access to language interpreters' (70%); and 'availability of multilingual peer support' (46%). "Collaborate services with other partners" was listed as an additional method used. Fifty percent of respondents stated that French language services are currently available at their agency.

Housing services

Agencies report providing many of the housing services that focus group participants considered to be important in helping to reduce homelessness among newcomer youth. These services are outlined in the table below:

Housing service needs	Share of agencies that offer this service (n=39)
Assisting youth in locating housing	86%
Accompanying clients to attend housing appointments	69%
Providing resources to landlords regarding specific needs and considerations for newcomer youth tenants	34%
Following up with landlords regarding tenant applications submitted from newcomer youth	59%
Access to a database of available rent-geared-to-income housing	38%
Educating youth about their tenant rights	83%
Facilitating access to social assistance for housing or income for tenant insurance	66%

Table 9. Housing services offered by the agencies surveyed

Education services

Among the agencies surveyed, education supports appeared to be a priority area of service, with respondents reporting to address many of the education needs highlighted by youth participants. Sixty eight percent of agencies stated that they delivered services to support clients in obtaining an Ontario Secondary School Diploma; an Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate (57%); support in applying for college or university (75%); as well as English as a Second Language support (64%).

Additional education services mentioned by agencies included; resources on the right to education; legal services to assist non-status newcomer youth excluded from the education system; supports to complete study permit applications for refugee claimants/convention refugees; scholarship applications; section 23 education facilities for pre-natal and post-natal women; as well access to Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Programs.

Employment services

Regarding access to employment support, numerous agencies reported providing generic services on resumé writing (82%) and interview preparation (64%), yet gaps appeared to exist in gearing services more directly to newcomer youth. For instance, only 18% of respondents reported that their agency provides access to a database of employment opportunities for newcomers; a database of volunteer opportunities for newcomers (50%); and access to employment bridging or professional accreditation resources for newcomers (32%).

Many respondents however, expressed their agency's commitment to offering professional training resources for newcomer youth such as; employment mentoring and placement programs; access to internship opportunities; collaboration with employment programs to provide on-site outreach to youth clients; and apprenticeship fairs to inform agency staff of available resources for newcomer youth. The

provision of legal information on employment rights was also listed as an additional service currently offered by some agencies.

Health services

Specific health considerations for newcomers and refugees, such as lived experience of trauma, conflict, war, and post-traumatic stress disorder, were seen as requiring early intervention across community health centres and other health institutions to ensure that youth receive appropriate assessment and treatment upon arrival to Canada, and for psychiatric and medical documentation purposes related to immigration reporting. The establishment of partnerships with the Canadian Mental Health Association and ethno specific mental health agencies was also noted as a means of enabling the delivery of specialized training and resources for agency staff.

Health services identified by newcomer youth	Share of agencies that offer this service
Nutrition and healthy eating	65%
Mental health wellness	57%
Coping with stress and anxiety	78%
Coping with depression	65%
Physical abuse	57%
Sexual abuse	48%

Table 10. Health services offered by the agencies surveyed

Other service supports

Agencies reported providing services to obtain the various pieces of government issued documentation relevant to newcomer youth including; a Social Insurance Number; Work Permit; Study Permit; Birth Certificate; Health Card; Passport; Permanent Residence status; and Interim Federal Health (IFH) extension. Over three-quarters of agencies reported to provide one-on-one counseling; case coordination; availability of recreational programs; and free internet access. These services were also noted as being accessible on a drop-in basis. Other needs identified by youth, but offered to a lesser extent by the agencies surveyed were; access to social network building through faith based or cultural community groups (offered by 57% of agencies); language interpretation services (47%); and ‘host’ programs for newcomers (27%).

5.0 Promising Practices to Prevent and Reduce Homelessness among Newcomer Youth: Youth and Service Provider Perspectives

5.1 Preventing Newcomer Youth from Becoming Homeless in the First Place

Newcomer youth want an “insider’s perspective” on life in Canada

Youth participants expressed the significance of developing relationships with other young people

who share a similar cultural background or newcomer experience. Relationship building was viewed not only for the purpose of socializing, but also for gaining a greater understanding of system services in Canada. Participants placed high value on being able to connect with other newcomer youth who may be more settled in Canada, and to obtain information and hear stories on what “real-life” scenarios they can expect when immigrating. Specifically, participants wanted insight on Canadian social and cultural practices, as well as common challenges that newcomer youth encounter.

It's like being new at a job. You don't know anything. If that person doesn't train you, how are you going to carry out your job? So being new to Canada, if you don't have the proper resources, how are you going to find housing when you do get kicked out? It's like glitz and glamour that's portrayed, when they give you your refugee package... I think you have to go through a lot of bad before you can be like, "I made it, I am comfortable".

[Youth focus group participant]

Youth participants described a need for support in reviewing information received from Citizenship and Immigration Canada and other Government of Canada institutions, as well as guidance on how to navigate legal services upon their arrival, needs that have been noted in other studies on newcomer health access (Access Alliance, 2003). While youth participants spoke more broadly on the idea of accessing these services through their case managers and other front-line staff, this service gap also points to the role of mentorship, peer, and host programs in supporting newcomer youth settlement.

Wider availability of newcomer youth peer support networks

Service providers spoke strongly to the value of peer learning, and considered the education system as an ideal site for developing social networks and for introducing and promoting system services to newcomers. One service provider viewed the formation of peer-support groups as a way to “...meet and greet newcomer youth to their school and assist with orientation and settlement navigation... providing a built-in social network of encouraging them to stay in school”. Fostering mentorship opportunities between newcomer youth who are employed or on a successful educational track alongside more vulnerable youth was also held as a promising practice, particularly within shelter and transitional housing settings.

Newcomer youth see agency staff as an advocate for their housing needs

Newcomer youth participants viewed agency staff as a central resource in accessing appropriate housing, an ally in advocating for their needs, and as a liaison to facilitate communication with landlords. Youth participants expressed wanting to receive guided support in preparing tenant applications and attending housing appointments, information on how to avoid becoming evicted, and locating appropriate roommates. Youth participants repeatedly mentioned their preference for working alongside staff who have lived experience of being homeless or a newcomer to Canada, as well as workers with whom they share a similar cultural background.

Intensive case management and follow-up when youth first arrive to Canada

Service providers reiterated the view expressed by youth participants regarding the vital role played

by front-line staff as a newcomer youth's guide in securing appropriate housing. Regular case management check-ins, as well as financial and legal support upon arrival and during their first few years in Canada were considered crucial steps toward preventing homelessness, particularly among refugee youth. Service providers spoke to the need for newcomer youth, especially those who are in Canada by themselves, to have access to individualized guidance, support and mentorship, throughout their settlement process and for several years after their arrival.

Building the profile of homeless newcomer youth as a priority service population

Participants called for more targeted services and programs that are tailored for newcomer youth, as well as the availability of workers who specialize in serving newcomer youth.

I went to a center that doesn't deal with refugees and they helped me apply. That doesn't make sense to me...that's not their area, but they are helping me...all the centers...that's their area, they're too busy...staff is changing over, roles- a lot of people are coming...if I'm a newcomer and the place that's supporting newcomer has no room for me, where do I go? And then I get lost in the system, and then I go to my hearing and I have nothing to show...then like, I'm back home being abused again.

[Youth focus group participant]

Youth participants also underlined the value of agencies directly engaging employers and landlords, to provide information on unique considerations for newcomer youth tenants and employees, such as; accommodations for employment training, employment attendance flexibility, and supportive housing. Other activities undertaken by service providers in advocating for newcomer youth needs include involvement in committees and outreach to organizations such as; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Canada Border Services; Community Care Access Centres, Toronto District School Board, Toronto Public Health, and Children's Aid Society branches in the Greater Toronto Area.

Opportunities for "self-care"

In addition to dealing with the challenges of transitioning into adulthood, developing a sense of identity, and defining education and career goals, newcomer youth have the added pressures of adapting to a new country, climate, language, culture, value system, and institutionalized systems and structures. Participants in this study viewed the presence of meaningful relationships, friendships, and social networks as fundamental in dealing with these challenges, as well as to prevent feelings of isolation, particularly for those who may have arrived to Canada on their own.

Participants spoke positively of their experiences engaging with system services in Canada that encourage and foster opportunities for recreation such as; movie nights, beauty makeovers, music lessons, athletic activities, and other recreational day-programs that can be accessed on a drop-in basis. For those newcomer youth who have recently arrived to Canada and find themselves placed in a shelter setting, access to a 'welcome package' that would include cold-weather or winter clothing was also mentioned as a desirable service.

Targeted service areas

Education access facilitators

Youth participants described wanting to access education services that would support them on a tangible career path or assist them in developing practical employment skills. Some participants highlighted the value in increasing access to apprenticeship or trades programs for newcomer youth, especially among those who have mental health needs or a history of involvement with the justice system. Participants also highlighted the value of programs directed towards preventing and reducing school drop-out rates, particularly among newcomer youth at the intermediate or junior high school level.

Employment access facilitators

Obtaining identification such as a Social Insurance Number and Work Permit were noted as fundamental service needs for newcomer youth to support access to formal employment in Canada. Participants also called attention to a current service gap in accessing a database of employment or volunteer opportunities that newcomer youth would be eligible for without a Work Permit. Participants considered volunteering as a promising step towards gaining employment skills and work experience in Canada. Participants also saw the potential in agencies partnering directly with employers to recruit and train newcomer youth candidates. Overall, participants expressed a strong sentiment of wanting to support and sustain themselves through paid employment, and not having to rely on government assistance.

Intergenerational family services

Intergenerational family support was identified as a central intervention area by both youth participants and service providers, particularly in assisting reunification for families who may have been separated for long periods of time. Developing programs to reach both parents and children, especially those under the age of 18, was noted as a step towards addressing challenges related to settlement, acculturation stress, and generation gaps in adapting to a new culture and value system in Canada. Family counselling services for both parents and youth who have lived experience of trauma was identified as an early intervention strategy, to determine the level of support required in the home. Service providers also emphasized the necessity of generating additional income supports for young newcomer families, as well as increasing family-style or intergenerational transition housing, shelters, and affordable housing options.

Funding

Funding considerations identified by agency respondents included; expanding affordable housing options through permanent housing and rent subsidies for newcomers; basic needs allowances at shelters for youth who do not qualify for Ontario Works due to their lack of status in Canada; and eliminating or reducing fees related to Permanent Resident status applications. Funding areas identified by youth participants included; enabling access to the National Child Tax Benefit for newcomers; post-secondary scholarships for newcomer youth or homeless youth; and access to Ontario Works for youth under the age of 18.

5.2 Assisting Youth who are Currently Homeless on a Pathway to Stability

Expanding outreach efforts to connect with “hidden” homeless newcomer youth

Youth participants suggested that more programs and services be physically located in the neighbourhoods of communities that they are intended to serve, and to build connections and relationships with residents and community leaders. Youth participants spoke to the value of targeting resources to different cultures through various avenues outside of the traditional social service system, such as; faith groups; well-respected and influential cultural and religious community leaders, community centres; neighbourhood social activities; and cultural events.

Additionally, service providers called for more year-round, drop-in programs, anonymous telephone helplines, and multi-service, “one-stop shops”. Peer-led information sessions and workshops hosted at agencies across the city could be used to provide information on how to navigate housing, welfare, immigration, and legal systems, employment services, food banks, and other programs. The creation of a ‘newcomer youth homeless hub’ website or online network where youth can learn about available system services, as well as common experiences or challenges faced by other newcomer youth was also noted as an intervention strategy. Outreach staff were viewed as playing a crucial role in offering what one service provider referred to as the “storefront programs” that build direct ties with homeless youth.

Coordinating existing emergency services to better meet the needs of newcomer youth

Many service providers viewed the integration and expansion of emergency shelters with other supports as a vital response to reducing newcomer youth homelessness. Two Toronto-area agencies, Eva's Phoenix and Woodgreen were noted as successful models that have been able to link employment skills training within housing support services. Service providers also recommended that select shelters in the city should continue to build the cultural and linguistic capacity to specialize in hosting newcomer homeless youth. Service providers underlined the need for enabling greater access to Toronto Community Housing, co-operative housing, and housing subsidies for newcomer youth. At the same time, it was acknowledged that entry into the social housing system is often a very lengthy process, and that renting privately owned housing at fair market value is a viable option for securing housing faster for youth. However, for newcomers who are unemployed or possess no previous history of leasing or renting in Canada, obtaining private market housing is challenging in the absence of rent insurance or a guarantor.

A common theme expressed by service providers was the promotion of resource and information sharing between agencies, evaluation of existing programs and partnerships, and streamlining services across newcomer and youth serving agencies to more efficiently and effectively serve clients.

In our role as frontline staff, there may be times we are restricted in physically support[ing] these youth to venture out, (e.g attending external appointments with youth). The population we serve and community we work in is extremely ethno racially diverse with an incredibly significant amount of youth and families who are newcomers. Unfortunately, efforts have not been put in place to formally dedicate time to gather information and raise awareness as an agency about the needs of these youth. Workers within my organization are engaging in an extensive amount of

work with this population, unfortunately that is not being effectively captured or addressed in a formal way by the agency.

[Service provider respondent]

One-in -three respondents indicated that their agency provides services to assist external agencies and organizations in better understanding the needs of newcomer youth, through initiatives such as; consultation and research; partnering with agencies to develop grant proposals for new programs or services; increasing the number and quality of referrals between agencies; and delivering public education workshops. Engaging private, public, and community sector partners in creating an innovation lab to strengthen the provision of emergency and transition shelter and to generate community economic development opportunities for newcomer youth was noted as a promising strategy.

Newcomer Youth want:	BOTH Newcomer Youth & Service Providers want:	Service Providers want:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent, guided support to access services • Agencies advocating for their housing and employment needs • Cultural and religious leaders providing support to families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater outreach to youth at schools • More drop-ins & multi-service centres • Homeless newcomer youth online resource portal • Anonymous helplines • Family conflict resolution services • More service staff with lived experience of homelessness • Peer support networks • Refining services to meet individualized needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better coordinated services and resources for youth • Development of a city-wide, cross sectoral committee on newcomer youth homelessness

Figure 3. Summary of facilitators identified by youth participants and service providers

6.0 Discussion

Findings from this study suggest a mismatch between the needs of homeless newcomer youth and currently available services

Homeless newcomer youth are a diverse group that includes youth of different cultures, religions, ages, and personal histories. They comprise those who are recent newcomers, and those who have been

in Canada for a number of years, but are still at-risk of short and longer-term bouts of homelessness. Newcomer youth may have experienced hardships or challenges prior to or during their migration experience, including; moving to Canada to reunify with family after a long separation, fleeing abuse, and fleeing their home country due to civil strife. Significant percentages of youth in this study identified as LGBTQ, have ethnic origins in Africa or the Caribbean, and have given birth to or fathered a child. Taking into account the multitude of identities newcomer youth associate with, it is not surprising that many struggle with having to decide which of these identities takes precedence when they are attempting to seek help.

Newcomer youth participants demonstrated remarkable resilience in their migration and settlement experiences. They came to Canada with skills, strengths, and with dreams of a better future. However, in the absence of relevant, appropriate, and flexible supports that are able to address their individual needs at the right point in time, they are at-risk of homelessness, as well as poorer health and social outcomes. Findings from this study highlight a current mismatch between the services that agencies reported to offer, and the needs that youth identified as service gaps.

Homeless newcomer youth appear to be engaging with a social safety net that is made up of institutions that are either currently operating in siloes or functioning in ways that may even prevent them from a path towards a successful future. Systemic changes are needed both within and across the service system to develop holistic, coordinated, youth-centred services that respond to their unique strengths, needs, and goals, rather than having youth “fit” within existing programs.

Various sectors and groups in the community can play a vital role in moving towards providing a continuum of supports to these youth. Family doctors, faith leaders, culturally-specific services, child and family services, and community health centres were some of the key figures identified by youth and service providers in this study as promising avenues for addressing root pathways into homelessness among newcomer youth. Further collaboration between these sectors was noted as a step towards further resource and information sharing, as well as defining clear roles among all agencies involved, findings that has been echoed in recent literature regarding newcomer health (OCASI, 2014) and youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2014).

Homeless newcomer youth are a highly diverse group and face multi-layered challenges in accessing appropriate services

Newcomer youth are an underserved group and are extremely vulnerable to encountering discrimination and being at-risk of homelessness. There is a need to ensure that services do not further marginalize, discriminate, or create access barriers for these youth. Despite ongoing discourse and action on implementing effective anti-oppression and anti-racism (AOAR) service at front-line agencies, a major barrier identified by newcomer youth participants was the experience of perceived unfair treatment through their interactions with service system staff, landlords, and potential employers. The prevalence of systemic discrimination as experienced by newcomer youth, underscores a system disconnect of services that may be inaccessible, inequitable, or ineffective in meeting their needs.

The unique role of family in preventing homelessness among newcomer youth

Many mainstream homeless youth services operate on the assumption that young people need to be protected from their families, as opposed to the family being a resource that youth can draw upon (Gaetz, 2014). For many newcomer youth however, family can play a significant role in their settlement process, one that requires attentiveness and cultural sensitivity when identifying appropriate forms of intervention. Family conflict was identified by two-thirds of participants in this study as the main reason

for having entered homelessness. This finding highlights a unique opportunity for refining services geared towards families and youth who are dealing with reunification challenges, and to prevent youth from fleeing their homes or becoming homeless in the first place.

The significant percentage of LGBTTIQ newcomer youth in this study calls attention to an additional opportunity in working directly with families, ethno-cultural communities, settlement agencies, and faith groups to provide awareness on the risks faced by LGBTTIQ newcomer youth. Lack of parental and community acceptance, risk of suicide, and further victimization, are among some of the risks faced by LGBTTIQ newcomer youth. Collaboration between family and LGBTTIQ service agencies can provide a means of developing guidelines that work to support these youth.

Limitations of the study

Locating both Peer Researchers and youth participants who met the eligibility criteria for the study presented a major challenge, while also reaffirming the “hidden-ness” of the homeless newcomer youth population. Recruitment for the study was originally envisioned as an anonymous process by which individuals would indicate their interest to participate by responding to the recruitment flyer that was distributed among agencies serving homeless or newcomer youth [*Appendix I. Focus Group Recruitment Flyer*]. However, this process did not yield many responses, and ultimately, the majority of participants were recruited by front-line staff at the Advisory Committee member agencies as well as other agencies serving homeless or newcomer youth.

The barriers faced in recruiting both Peer Researchers and youth participants who met the eligibility criteria, calls attention to the need for further outreach in connecting with this hidden youth population, particularly those who lack status. The fact that most participants in this study held some form of status in Canada highlights that we may have met with youth that are perhaps “less hidden” among the homeless newcomer youth population. The health and social well-being of homeless newcomer youth who lack any status may be further compromised due to the possibility of them not accessing services at all in Canada.

The most well attended focus groups in study were hosted at homeless youth shelters or drop-in centres frequented by newcomer youth. A disadvantage of this recruitment method was that youth were more likely to have existing relationships with one another, which could potentially present challenges around ensuring anonymity among participants. The focus group format also made it difficult to provide one-on-one support in completing the demographic questionnaire or ensure that every participant’s voice was heard during the session. For future research with the homeless newcomer youth population, it is suggested that focus groups be limited to 3-6 participants per session or that researchers rely on the use of individual interviews as the principal method of data collection. The use of individual interviews or smaller focus groups would also facilitate the linking of demographic data to qualitative findings.

Key Findings from the Youth Data

1. *Nearly 2/3 of newcomer youth reported to have origins in Africa or the Caribbean*
2. *Over 1/3 newcomer youth identified as LGBTTIQ*
3. *Over 25% of newcomer youth identified as being a parent*
4. *Over 50% of newcomer youth report some level of religious or faith identity*
5. *Family conflict was cited by 2/3 of newcomer youth as the main reason for entering homelessness*
6. *Over 2/3 of newcomer youth indicated that they would feel most comfortable seeking help from their family doctor or walk-in clinic*

Figure 4. Key findings from the youth data

7.0 Recommendations

Findings from this study were consolidated to inform the following recommendations for policy and practice, as well as future research on reducing and preventing homelessness among newcomer youth. These recommendations were validated through member checks with the Peer Researchers, Advisory Committee members, as well as through community consultation with agencies that serve homeless newcomer youth.

1. Building on youth's strengths, resilience, and future opportunities

Homeless newcomer youth participants articulated many examples of their problem solving and coping skills to access resources and overcome adversity. They demonstrated a strong sense of purpose and responsibility to improve their situation and achieve their education and career goals, despite negative circumstances they may have encountered during their migration and settlement in Canada. In supporting homeless newcomer youth on a pathway to stability and success, front-line services should prioritize:

- Capitalizing on the skills that newcomer youth arrived to Canada with
- Developing individually-tailored strategies centred on employment, income security, maintaining finances, advancement of education, and housing

2. Expanding knowledge and developing best practices among formal and informal services for newcomer youth

Directly engaging the sectors and staff that homeless newcomer youth identified as sources of support, and increasing the number of advocates for youth within relevant agencies is needed to develop practices that better meet the needs of this population. Coordinated resource sharing and further collaboration among relevant system services is needed to build the profile of homeless newcomer youth as a priority service population. This can be achieved through:

- Increasing peer support at agencies
- Generating leadership and mentorship opportunities for homeless newcomer youth
- Building on existing resources among agencies that serve homeless newcomer youth
- Creating an online resource portal for homeless newcomer youth
- Wider availability of multi-service agencies & drop-ins
- Integrating legal, medical, social work and other services within multi-service agencies
- Wider availability of anonymous helplines
- City-wide committee & cross-sectoral networks that address newcomer youth homelessness

3. Coordinated housing and poverty reduction strategies that encompass the needs of homeless newcomer youth

- Strategies that are national, provincial, and municipal in scope
- Ensuring that strategies have measurable outcomes
- National Housing Strategy that also engages to meet local needs
- Specialized programs to address emerging needs (e.g LGBTTIQ youth shelters/transitional housing)
- Rent supplements or vouchers specifically for newcomer youth
- Rent-geared-to-income, subsidized, or co-op housing designated for newcomer youth

4. Improving equity and reducing stigma for newcomer youth service users

- Provision of anti-oppression and anti-racism (AOAR) training that focuses on social justice, diversity, and cultural competence
- Identifying AOAR promising practices and how they can be utilized and benefit agencies
- Audits or evaluation of services to ensure that services correspond to AOAR principles, are equitable, accessible, and accountable to newcomer youth
- Explicitly addressing racism and homophobia as major points for discrimination for homeless newcomer youth
- Hiring staff who are representative of Toronto's diversity
- Hiring of staff who are youth peers with lived experience of homelessness and/or being a newcomer to Canada
- Legal clinics providing additional support to tenants who face barriers to housing access

- Increasing availability of multi-lingual services or English language support at front-line agencies

5. Family-based intervention

- Identifying promising models of early intervention that involve family members
- Refining reunification supports to prevent family breakdown
- Agencies collaborating with religious and community leaders to develop culturally appropriate interventions
- Services specifically for newcomer youth who are young parents
- Prevention of child neglect
- Right to child support for homeless newcomer youth
- Services that promote family support of LGBTTIQ youth
- Supporting buy-in from parents for services and programs (e.g. diverse cultural understandings of what constitutes 'mental health')

5. Key Levels of Change & Action

- **Funded Agencies that Serve Homeless Newcomer Youth**
(e.g. Homeless youth services, youth settlement services)
- **Mainstream Social & Health Services**
(e.g. family doctors, social workers, community health centres)
- **Groups Outside of the Settlement and Homeless Sectors**
(e.g. LGBTTIQ youth services, religious groups)
- **Municipal Level**
(e.g. City of Toronto, Local Immigration Partnerships)
- **Provincial & Federal level**
(e.g. Government of Canada employment programs, Citizenship and Immigration Canada)

Funded Agencies Serving Homeless Newcomer Youth	Mainstream Social & Health Services	Groups Outside of the Settlement & Homeless Sectors	Municipal Level	Provincial & Federal Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Homeless youth services *Youth immigration & settlement services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Family doctors *Walk-in clinics *Community health centres *Hospitals *Mental health services *Primary care nurses *Social workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *LGBTTIQ youth services *African & Caribbean ethno-cultural agencies *Faith & religious groups *Spiritual centres *School guidance counselors *Police *Child welfare *Employment services *Apprenticeship & internship programs *Colleges & universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *City of Toronto *Local Immigration Partnerships *Toronto District School Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Citizenship and Immigration Canada *Provincial and federal employment programs *Ministry of Education *Ontario Human Rights Commission *Donors and funders of child, youth, & family services

Table 10. Key Levels of Change and Action

8.0 Conclusion

At present, there is insufficient knowledge regarding the diversity and magnitude of youth homelessness among immigrants and refugees in Canada’s urban centres. The profile of homeless newcomer youth in Canada has not yet been clearly defined, and uncovering this information is a vital step towards shaping relevant, equitable, and accessible policies and programs. This study aimed to provide a starting point for further research, evaluation, and piloting of services to yield an improved understanding of Toronto’s service sector capacity to address the unique needs of this population.

In this study, family conflict and challenges related to acculturation between parents and children were major elements in newcomer youth’s pathway into homelessness. Extended periods of separation present a substantial barrier to family reunification and youth settlement in Canada. On average, participants in this study reported to have first entered homelessness at the age of 17, suggesting that their pathway into homelessness may have started much earlier. This finding underlines a continued need for interventions that target youth between the ages of 12-15 or younger. Child and youth specific services and the child welfare system should seek to work with reunified adolescents and unaccompanied minors to prevent child abuse, and in some instances, seeking kinship options where possible if a youth is need of protection.

Additional areas for further investigation include; delineating gaps in service access for newcomer youth who have recently arrived, versus those who have been living in Canada for a number of years; identifying services that newcomer youth relied on prior to entering a situation of homelessness; and identifying service needs of homeless newcomer youth who lack status. Applying lessons learned from other sectors such as Aboriginal Legal Services can be used to identify models and best practices that can be applied to youth who do not have status in Canada. Cost-benefit analyses can also be used to project the potential economic savings and benefits in prevention and early intervention strategies, and reduced reliance on emergency health and shelter systems.

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Funded by

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada – Homelessness Partnering Secretariat

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Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth
Pathways to Education
Raising the Roof
Scarborough Housing Help Centre
Sherbourne Help Centre
Sojourn House
Supporting Our Youth
York University
YouthLink

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