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Homelessness and young people's mental health

Evidence summary



Knowledge Institute
on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions



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At a glance

- The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted services for young people experiencing homelessness, making it important to understand the impact on their mental health.
- 75% of young people experiencing homelessness in Canada report high psychological distress.
- Women who are homeless, as well as Indigenous, 2SLGBTQI+ and racialized young people are at increased risk for mental health and substance use problems.
- In addition to differences in mental health outcomes between young people who are homeless and those who are stably housed, there are differences between young people who couch surf and young people who sleep rough.
- The rates of mental health issues among young people who are homeless are comparable to the high rates of mental health issues seen in the adult homeless population.
- COVID-19 has resulted in an increased demand for mental health services among young people experiencing homelessness. Recommendations to meet mental health needs include increased outreach, a blended model of virtual and in-person services and collaboration with other organizations.
- Promising Canadian interventions include the Housing Outreach Program Collaborative (HOP-C) in Toronto and Thunder Bay as well as Réseau d'intervention de proximité auprès des jeunes (RIPAJ) in Montreal.
- While COVID-19 has increased the risk of mental health problems among young people, researchers and direct service providers continue to adapt services and develop promising interventions to help young people meet their mental health needs.

Background

We wanted to understand the mental health issues faced by young people experiencing homelessness. We also wanted to understand which young people are at greater risk of mental health problems, the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and substance use and the types of interventions that can help. This is a pressing concern, as the COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted services for young people experiencing homelessness which could have a negative, ongoing impact on their mental health.

Methods

We conducted a rapid, non-systematic scan of peer-reviewed literature using a five-year time frame to capture the most recent literature. The findings reflect information available from 2016 to 2021.

Data were collected from two databases: PsycINFO and Medline.

The following search terms were used in a non-systematic manner:

- homeless
- young people, youth, adolescent
- mental health

We included research:

- pertaining to young people experiencing homelessness
- published between 2016 and 2021
- available in English or French
- published through pre-publication services, online or in print by peer-reviewed journals
- available in full-text format

Findings

Prevalence of mental health concerns

National Canadian Homeless Youth Survey

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has conducted two national surveys studying homelessness in young people (Kidd et al., 2017, 2021). More than 1,000 young people completed surveys in 2015 and 2019. At both time points:

- one third of respondents reported at least one suicide attempt.
- one third of respondents reported at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization.
- three quarters of respondents reported high psychological distress (a level of distress similar to adolescents from the general population who are receiving outpatient or inpatient psychiatric care).

Reported mental health and substance use outcomes varied across populations of young people. In general, young women, Indigenous young people and young people who identify as 2SLGBTQI+ are at increased risk.

- Those who experienced homelessness at a younger age were more likely to report a suicide attempt and substance use.
- Females reported greater distress, lower resilience and an increased likelihood of attempting suicide compared to males.
- 2SLGBTQI+ young people reported poorer mental health, higher rates of substance abuse and a significantly higher rate of suicide attempts compared to cisgendered young people (70% versus 39%).
- Indigenous young people reported poorer mental health, a higher rate of suicide attempts and greater substance use than non-Indigenous young people.
- Findings for racialized young people were mixed; respondents reported poorer mental health but lower rates of suicide attempts.

It is also notable that 25% of young people experiencing homelessness identified as Indigenous. Kidd and colleagues (2017) note that Indigenous young people are overrepresented among the homeless population – 15 times greater than what would be expected in the general population.

Social determinants of health

Research from other countries supports some of the findings from Canada's national surveys (Gultekin et al., 2020; Prock & Kennedy, 2020). For example, young women experiencing homelessness are at greater risk for symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. They are also more likely to experience sexual abuse and victimization (Gultekin et al., 2020).

2SLGBTQI+ young people are at greater risk of ongoing homelessness or unstable housing (Gultekin et al., 2020). They report greater mental health needs and are also more likely to experience sexual abuse and victimization (Prock & Kennedy, 2020).

Comparing mental health outcomes

Comparing young people who are homeless and housed

Young people experiencing homelessness have worse mental health outcomes than housed young people. For instance, they present more frequently to emergency departments and to outpatient and inpatient mental health services (Russell et al., 2021). As well, these young people are 11 times more likely to be readmitted to an inpatient mental health ward than housed young people (Russell et al., 2021).

Young people experiencing homelessness are also significantly more likely to have attempted suicide. Only 2% of housed young people reported a suicide attempt in the previous year. However, a suicide attempt was reported by 11% of those experiencing homelessness, 20% of young people who had run away and 33% who had experienced both (Gewirtz O'Brien et al., 2020). Young people who have run away or experienced homelessness also reported higher rates of suicidal ideation, self-injury and depressed mood compared to housed young people (Gewirtz O'Brien et al., 2020).

Comparing young people who couch surf and sleep rough

Differences in mental health outcomes are also found when comparing young people who couch surf to young people who sleep rough. Couch surfing involves intermittent moves and a lack of stability. Put simply, young people who couch surf have a roof but not a home. Sleeping rough

refers to sleeping outdoors, including in vehicles and makeshift shelters (Hail-Jares et al., 2021). While couch surfing is often considered to be a lower risk than sleeping rough, research suggests that young people who couch surf may be more likely to experience repeat episodes of homelessness (Hail-Jares et al., 2021).

Young people who sleep rough were more likely to report legal issues and recent drug use (Hail-Jares et al., 2021). Young people who couch surf were more likely to:

- identify as female
- identify as 2SLGBTQI+
- have limited community support
- report poor mental health
- indicate more serious histories of self-harm or suicide attempts (Hail-Jares et al., 2021)

Researchers note that females who couch surf might be engaging in survival sex – trading sex in exchange for shelter – to avoid rough sleeping (Moore, 2017). Young women who couch surf often report a loss of agency, abuse, feelings of shame or stigma, and anxiety about pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Moore, 2017).

Comparing young people and adults who are homeless

Young people and adults experiencing homelessness both report high levels of mental health issues (Saddichha et al., 2014). However, young people were more likely to be female, identify as Indigenous, and report substance abuse of alcohol, amphetamines and cannabis. Misuse of alcohol and cannabis were particularly common in young people – more than 70% met criteria for problematic substance use.

Clinical interviews showed that young people are as likely as adults to be diagnosed with depressive disorder (39% of young people), bipolar disorder (20%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (23%). Adults are significantly more likely to experience psychotic disorders, with 30% of adults meeting criteria compared to 13% of young people.

Additionally, young people reported similar levels of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Half of young people reported sexual abuse, and more than two-thirds reported emotional and physical abuse.

COVID-19

Impact of COVID-19

Few studies have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on young people experiencing homelessness. Young adults participating in a U.S. study reported it was harder during the pandemic to meet one or more of their basic needs (Tucker et al., 2020). For instance:

- 54% reported it was harder to get enough food to eat.
- 44% reported it was harder to access mental health services.
- 32% reported it was harder to access substance use services.

In Canada, direct service providers reported that the demand for mental health services has increased during the pandemic. Young people experiencing homelessness are struggling more with mental health and substance use issues than they were prior to the pandemic (Thulien et al., 2020). Despite the increased demand for services, many young people face barriers to accessing phone or virtual care.

Service adaptations during COVID-19

Innovative adaptations to services have been implemented to address the mental health needs of young people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Some examples include:

- socially distanced counselling (walking therapy and drop-in counselling at outdoor tents)
- social events to facilitate connections (outdoor drag shows and weekly community meals)
- enhanced street outreach (system navigation assistance and printed information regarding service closures)
- advocating for novel uses of donor funding (to supply young people with free tablets for accessing virtual services)
- increased effort to connect young people with natural supports and divert them from shelters (Thulien et al., 2020)

Practice recommendations during COVID-19

After conducting focus groups with direct service providers and young people with lived experience, researchers noted several practice recommendations to better address the needs of young people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic (Thulien et al., 2020).

For instance:

- Increase outreach and be proactive about addressing their needs.
- Consider a blended model of virtual support, in-person visits and outreach to improve equity.
- Proactively collaborate with other organizations to decrease the burden of system navigation on young people.

Effective or promising interventions

Housing Outreach Program Collaborative

The Housing Outreach Program Collaborative (HOP-C) is a tertiary prevention program that provides housing, case management, peer supports and mental health supports for young people in Toronto (Kidd et al., 2019). Self-report measures and triangulated ratings by case managers, mental health providers and peers were used to assess the effectiveness of the program. After the six-month program, 75% of participants showed improvement. Reported program outcomes include:

- improvements in self-reported mental health.
- increased engagement in mental health services.
- increased educational and employment engagement.
- improvements in perceived housing stability.

HOP-C has been successfully adapted for use with Indigenous young people in northwestern Ontario (Toombs et al., 2021). The adapted program includes individual and group counselling services, peer mentorship, case management and cultural mentorship. Reported program outcomes include:

- reduced hospitalizations (for both mental health and non-mental health reasons).
- increased engagement in mental health services.
- increased educational enrollment.

Réseau d'intervention de proximité auprès des jeunes

The Réseau d'intervention de proximité auprès des jeunes (RIPAJ) is a Montreal network of community organizations offering a wide range of services for young people experiencing homelessness (Abdel-Baki et al., 2019). This network was created to improve access to mental health services so that there is no “wrong door” or “wrong timing” for young people. Network organizations include those offering medical, psychological, psychiatric, education, employment, legal, housing and financial services.

Key features of RIPAJ include:

- early identification of young people who are experiencing homelessness
- engaging youth and family in service planning
- eliminating traditional age-based transitions or accompanying young people as they connect to adult services

Young people requiring access to care are identified through outreach activities and on-site clinicians who can immediately engage with the young person. Youth-friendly activities, including yoga, art sessions, films and outdoor activities are offered to increase mental health literacy and promote help-seeking behaviour among young people.

Last word

Young people experiencing homelessness frequently face mental health and substance use problems. COVID-19 has increased their risk of mental health problems due to service cancellations. Researchers and direct service providers continue to adapt services and develop promising interventions to help young people meet their mental health needs.

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