

14th European Research Conference Helsingborg, 20th September 2019

VENUE: Helsingborg Campus of the University of Lund, Sweden
Bios and Abstracts

Seminar 14: Room C164 - Youth Homelessness

Chair: Nóra Teller, HU

Naomi Nichols, Jayne Malenfant, CA: A Social Research & Development Approach to Preventing Youth Homelessness and Fighting Intersecting Forms of Institutional Exclusion



Naomi Nichols is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. My research is about the policy and institutional contexts that shape the lives and development of youth, but particularly youth living in poverty and experiencing homelessness and other structural forms of marginalization.

Jayne Malenfant is from Kapuskasing, Ontario, Canada. She is a PhD Candidate at McGill University's Faculty of Education. Her research focuses on issues of institutional access for precariously housed and homeless youth, with a focus on schools, and draws on her own experiences of housing instability as a teen.



20% of Canada's homeless population is made up of young people between 13-24 years of age, with at least 35,000-40,000 youth experiencing homelessness in any given year. Historically Canadian governments and communities have responded to the problem of youth homelessness by providing temporary emergency services. Given that 75% of homeless youth experience multiple episodes of homelessness throughout their young lives, conventional crisis-driven interventions clearly are not working. The inability to effectively address youth homelessness represents Canada's most urgent youth equity issue. Research is unambiguous: homelessness rapidly deteriorates young people's health, and homeless youth experience strikingly higher mortality rates than housed youth. Using a range of participatory youth research strategies (including institutional history interviewing, contribution analysis and causal chain development), our research identifies key structural and systemic drivers of youth homelessness as a means of helping public systems make the shift from crisis response to homelessness prevention and housing stabilization for youth. To achieve this aim, the research challenges paradigmatic standards in evidence-based service delivery, governance and policy-making in Canada. Rather than offering tools that support or evaluate the existing approach, our project seeks to foster a flourishing social research and development (R&D) ecosystem that supports equitable approaches to homelessness prevention and housing stabilization. In this presentation, we will: 1) describe how we used a combination of institutional history interviewing (n=30 youth participants) and causal chain contribution analysis to identify specific municipal, provincial and federal inter-institutional and policy junctures – in education, child welfare, (mental) healthcare, housing and criminal-legal systems – that shape conditions of housing precarity for youth; and 2) articulate our emerging theories of prevention, through which we specify an array of structural and systemic factors, which undermine or enable housing stability for youth in the province of Quebec; and 3) describe our proposed efforts to use findings to design and user-test prevention-oriented intervention prototypes.

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Naomi Thulien, Stephen Hwang, and Andrea Wang, CA: Beyond a Home: Facilitating Socioeconomic Inclusion for Young People Transitioning Out of Homelessness



Dr. Stephen Hwang is a physician specializing in general internal medicine and the Director of the MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions at St. Michael's Hospital, which is dedicated to improving the health of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. His research focuses on interventions to end homelessness and to improve the health of people experiencing homelessness. Dr. Hwang is a Professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

Dr. Naomi Thulien is an Assistant Professor at the McMaster University School of Nursing in Hamilton, Canada. Naomi is a nurse practitioner and researcher committed to tackling the social structural inequities that cause and perpetuate youth homelessness. Her program of research focuses on testing interventions designed to improve social integration outcomes for young people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.



Andrea Wang earned an Honours Bachelor of Science degree from McGill University and recently completed a Master of Public Health at McMaster University. Her work currently focuses on assessing support programs for youth transitioning out of homelessness, which has been identified as a priority in homelessness research in Canada. In her community, she is involved in implementing a youth after-school education program and local housing policy analysis for an advocacy group.

Dominant societal discourse purports that the most significant way to improve the life trajectories of young people experiencing homelessness is to simply provide them with tangible supports like a home. However, the limited longitudinal research conducted in this area challenges this assumption, illustrating that formerly homeless young people continue to experience significant challenges – particularly when it comes to mainstream socioeconomic inclusion – even after they are “successfully” housed. Moreover, something that is rarely acknowledged is the fact that tangible supports can easily be taken away (e.g., change in government funding). In contrast, once acquired, intangible assets (e.g., self-efficacy and a sense of purpose) are inherently less dependent on external forces.

The goal of this Canadian pilot study was to assess whether and how an intervention focused on strengthening intangible, identity-based assets (e.g., sense of control and purpose, self-efficacy and self-esteem) impacted the socioeconomic inclusion of young people who had experienced homelessness. Over the course of six weeks, nineteen young people who had left homelessness within the past three years participated in weekly leadership and career development training sessions. The intervention was carried out by an organization not associated with the homelessness sector, meaning there was less stigma around accessing this program. Study participants were followed every three months for nine months post-intervention. Significant improvements were seen in markers of socioeconomic inclusion such as community integration and self-esteem, and these improvements were sustained over time. Qualitative findings included themes of reconstructing identity, regaining control, and reaffirming potential. In this presentation we discuss our study findings and put forward that the current approach of focusing predominantly on tangible supports like housing is simplistic and short-sighted given the complex nature of youth homelessness. We argue that ending and preventing youth homelessness demands attention to both tangible and intangible factors.



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