Constrained Choice: Housing for Youth who are Homeless in Edmonton

by

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Abstract

The National Housing Strategy Act, passed by the Canadian government in 2019 to address homelessness, enshrines housing as a fundamental right. Despite these efforts, many individuals still lack access to adequate housing. Canada witnesses an annual occurrence of homelessness for youth ranging from 35,000 to 40,000 (S. B. Collins & Schormans, 2023; Nichols et al., 2023). In Edmonton, Alberta, the site for this study, Homeward Trust reported a homelessness count of approximately 2,800 individuals, with 25% being youth under 18 years old (Fortner, 2022). This data represents a significant increase from pre-pandemic levels in 2018 when the homeless population numbered just under 2,000 individuals (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), n.d.).

High homeless rates among youth are troublesome because youth who do not obtain housing early in the homeless journey are more likely to become adults who are chronically homeless. Further, youth participants have fewer problems than adults in adjusting to housing. Therefore, work is needed to decrease the number of youths who are homeless; being housed leads to better outcomes for youth and aids in reducing homeless rates overall.

Many researchers have looked at the experiences of people who are homeless, including youth. However, there is little research on how housing choice is constrained for youth who are homeless, and how those constraints are structurally produced. This study seeks to fill this gap. My study aims to comprehensively examine the challenges faced by youth who are homeless in accessing suitable housing and to identify their specific needs and requirements in this regard. This study answers the following research questions: (1) How is choice constrained for youth in obtaining housing? and (2) What do youth need to be able to obtain housing? Results are based on thirteen semi-structured interviews with youth who are homeless and four with professionals

engaged in youth Housing First initiatives. Drawing on the concept of cumulative disadvantage, my analysis highlights the shared need among youth for a safe and secure home. Unfortunately, many youths who are homeless encounter significant challenges when attempting to secure appropriate housing due to systemic factors.

Additionally, the shared need for a safe and secure home is experienced by all youth. All youth participants had specific needs that needed to be met to move past homelessness. Some of these needs are similar across many participants, and others only by a few. My study shows that social challenges and experiences of discrimination contribute to perpetuating homelessness. Structural and institutional factors pose significant barriers for youth who are homeless in their pursuit of housing.

Moreover, youth must navigate "Catch-22" scenarios, such as the requirement to prove government income support to obtain housing, while funding is contingent on having a place to live. Finally, all youth have requirements that need to be met for a house to be a home (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2004). Meeting their needs necessitates comprehensive wrap-around support services, including survival assistance, support for economic and social participation, and dedicated housing support. Only by providing holistic support can youth overcome the multifaceted challenges of homelessness and secure a stable and dignified home—a place they can proudly call their own.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Laura Ann Quinlan. The research project received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: “Personal Choice: Housing for Homeless Youth in Edmonton,” No. Pro00100975, March 26, 2021. A one-year renewal was granted on March 14, 2022.

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List of Abbreviations

AISH	Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
ARC	Armoury Resource Centre
CMHC	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
CERA	Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation
HF	Housing First
HF4Y	Housing First for Youth
HTE	Homeward Trust Edmonton
ID	Identification
MBM	Market Basket Measure
NRHN	The National Right to Housing Network
PP	Professional Participant
Secretariat	Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research
SIN	Social Insurance Number
TF	Treatment First
YEEP	Youth Education and Employment Program
YESS	Youth Empowerment and Support Services
YP	Youth Participant

Chapter One: Introduction

Imagine it is forty below. You do not know where you will sleep and have no idea when and what you will eat. Zac[1], a youth participant (YP, Age 18), discusses the extreme circumstances that can occur when homeless in the freezing cold and the shelters are full. Youth who are homeless with nowhere to go are in dire situations and can get frostbite and hyperthermia in winter. Zac discusses how death is possible in their homeless reality. Six people who were homeless died from the cold in Edmonton between October 12, 2022, and November 30, 2022 (CTV News Edmonton, 2022). Six people is too many. Homelessness is usually beyond the control of the people who experience it. Many people continue to view homelessness as an individual problem or a moral failure rather than a structural issue (Dolson, 2015; Gaetz, 2020; Gonyea & Melekis, 2017; Holmes & Burgess, 2021; Roffee & Waling, 2017; Sussman et al., 2020; Zufferey, 2017).

Canada is working to resolve this structural problem and has declared housing a fundamental human right (Houle, 2022; Human Rights Council, 2020). In 2019, the National Housing Strategy Act legally enshrined this fundamental right (Puddu, 2020; Schwan et al., 2020). However, in reality, not everybody has housing. People living on low income struggle to pay their rent, and some need to use food banks to meet the rent (Nasser, 2022; Suttor, 2016). Often housing obtained is of poor quality and located in areas people would rather not reside (Suttor, 2016). Individual youth have varying desires for accommodations; therefore, no single solution would work for all youth.

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

Many researchers have examined the lives of youth who are homeless. Areas of study include childhood trauma (Oransky et al., 2013; Vitopoulos et al., 2017), resilience (Cleverley & Kidd, 2011; Cronley & Evans, 2017), foster care involvement (Rome & Raskin, 2019; Shaikh & Rawal, 2019), LGBTQ2S+ status (Abramovich & Kimura, 2019; Walls et al., 2007), parental and youth substance use (Hansen, 2018; Kirst et al., 2011; Paradise & Cauce, 2002), family conflict (Paradise & Cauce, 2002), and poverty (Shaikh & Rawal, 2019). Very little literature specifically addresses youth housing preferences or focuses on constraints on their housing choices. Most of the literature on housing choice focuses on adults (Forchuk, 2018; McParland et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2003). The choice of accommodation for youth is essential for investment and working on other issues including, trauma[2], mental health, and addictions (De Jong, 2019).

In this project, I draw on youth voices to show the experiences and effects of constraints on their housing options. I address the following questions: (1) How is choice constrained for youth in obtaining housing? and (2) What do youth need to be able to obtain housing? I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 youths aged 16 to 24 in Edmonton, Alberta, who were looking for housing and with four professionals involved in Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). By highlighting youth voices, I demonstrate the big picture of the homeless experience through the lens of cumulative disadvantage to show how complex it is to exit homelessness successfully. Cumulative disadvantage involves disadvantages accumulating over the life course (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Dannefer, 2003; Lippert & Lee, 2015). Systemic structural factors create disadvantages for people living on society's margins, contributing to high homeless rates.

[2] According to experts, "trauma is not an event itself, but rather a response to a stressful experience in which a person's ability to cope is dramatically undermined" (de Thierry 2016, as cited in Ayre et al., 2020, p. 57). Trauma is the cumulative effects of abuse over time (Ayre et al., 2020).

I approached this project with the idea that housing is a right, not a privilege, and I was initially interested in the housing preferences of youth experiencing homelessness. However, the project quickly morphed into a focus on the constraints around housing choices, as housing preferences were not a critical concern for the youth interviewees. In addition, although the recruitment criteria were for participants who identified as having a mental illness, participants had a more expansive interpretation of this concept than I had planned. Therefore, interviewees touched on mental health, but this thesis does not focus on this aspect of participants' experiences.

Literature Review

Canada witnesses an annual youth homelessness rate of 35,000 to 40,000 (S. B. Collins & Schormans, 2023; Nichols et al., 2023). Zooming in on Edmonton, according to Homeward Trust Edmonton (HTE), in 2022, about 2,800 people were homeless in Edmonton, and 25% of them were youth under 18 (Fortner, 2022). This number has substantially increased from pre-pandemic times in 2018, when just shy of 2,000 people were homeless (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), n.d.). On the by-name list in May 2023, just over 3,000 people were homeless (HTE, n.d.-d). The COVID pandemic led to increased homelessness rates, which have yet to return to pre-COVID levels (Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC), n.d.).

Youth are defined here as people between 13 and 24, and homelessness refers to living rough on the streets, in shelters or places not intended for permanent habitation (HTE, n.d.-a). Youths couch-surfing or provisionally accommodated are homeless (HTE, n.d.-a). Youth who are homeless constantly struggle to meet their basic needs.

A Brief History of Housing Policy

Various strategies have been used historically in Canada to provide housing. I will now provide a summary of housing policy history in Canada. Very little research on housing existed before the 1930s (Epp, 2010). The first housing legislature in 1935, the Dominion Housing Act, had the intention of helping unemployment and allowing people of lower income to own homes (Epp, 2010). Ironically, this program subsidized housing for higher-income Canadians (Epp, 2010).

Various governments promised housing, including low-income housing, after World War II. In the era following World War II, heavily subsidized social housing[3] started to be built that was affordable for people with low incomes (Suttor, 2016). For example, the government of Prime Minister Mackenzie King promised 750,000 homes in the next decade (Brushett, 2007). "To fulfill this promise, King's government enacted a new National Housing Strategy Act (NHA) in 1944 and established the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) to administer the program a year later" (Brushett, 2007, p. 379). The housing did not materialize. Subsidized units built during the 1950s were just over 7,000 (Brushett, 2007). Social housing was less than one percent of housing built during this period (Brushett, 2007). Then in 1964, there was "a large welfare expansion" (Suttor, 2016, p. 10). Housing built increased "ten-fold," and this continued for two decades (Suttor, 2016, p. 10).

In Canada, funding for affordable housing has decreased since the 1960s (Mahaffy, 2003). Policy changes in the 1970s resulted in building mixed-income housing rather than only

[3] In Canada, there is a distinction between public and social housing. Public housing is only provided to people in need. Whereas "social housing (non-profit and co-operative) . . . is occupied by households with a greater diversity of socio-economic status" (Abramsson & Borgegård, 1998, p. 154). In Canada, most public housing was developed between 1950 and 1970 and most social housing since the mid-1970s (Abramsson & Borgegård, 1998).

low income dwellings (Suttor, 2016). Other policy changes led to major cutbacks in the mid-1980s (Suttor, 2016). This funding reduction over three decades was a neoliberal gamble that the private sector would supply affordable housing (Gaetz, 2020). Economic changes and funding cuts to social programs and welfare rates resulted in large-scale homelessness in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016). During the 1980s and 1990s, governments continued cutting welfare rates and affordable housing (MacLeod et al., 2016). At the same time, the deinstitutionalization[4] of psychiatric patients also occurred, resulting in a perfect storm (MacLeod et al., 2016). Supply decreased, and the need increased.

Since then, cuts have continued. In 1993, the federal government ended funding for new affordable housing projects altogether (Mahaffy, 2003; Shapcott, 2004). The government deprioritized housing and expected the private sector to provide housing (Gaetz, 2020). Provincial and territorial governments also decreased funding (Mahaffy, 2003). In total, cuts to subsidized housing were $480 million over seven years (Mahaffy, 2003). It was the early 2000s before new affordable housing was built (Suttor, 2016). The current affordable housing development is much lower than in the 1970s when social housing was in its prime (Suttor, 2016). Gentrification[5] occurred, which made the Canadian housing situation worse.

The gentrification of neighbourhoods eliminated many affordable private units (Schwan et al., 2022; Suttor, 2016; Zhu et al., 2021). “[B]etween 2011-2016, for every new affordable unit created, 15 existing affordable units (under $750/month) were lost” (Schwan et al., 2022, p. 44). At the same time, between 2002 and 2013, a third of the units were built compared to the

[4] Deinstitutionalization is the closing of mental health facilities with the plan of care in the community. Unfortunately, community programs are underfunded and inadequate for people with severe mental illness (Noble et al., 2022).

[5] Gentrification involves redeveloping or renovating to increase the property’s value (Kennedy et al., 2017).

period between 1965 and 1995 (Zhu et al., 2021). The 2017 federal budget for affordable housing provided less than 20% of what the federal government spent in 1976 (Zhu et al., 2021). Due to decreased available units and increased need, wait lists for subsidized units have increased alarmingly. The situation is being made worse by increasing funding cuts.

Cuts to affordable housing have continued. The Government of Alberta recently announced a plan to sell or transfer most current social housing units over the next ten years to alternative affordable housing providers, including non-profits and sell some on the open market (Bellefontaine, 2022). This plan is partially due to the high costs of maintaining existing housing and being unable to meet maintenance needs (Bellefontaine, 2022). This plan and the current inflation will likely create a perfect storm of lower availability of affordable units and greater demand. Lack of affordable housing and inadequate funding, whether from welfare or employment, makes it difficult to obtain housing resulting in increases in homelessness and making support services essential to people who are homeless (Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019). Due to limited housing available, youth who are homeless need assistance to find housing. Providing support to obtain housing is key to resolving homelessness for youth.

Housing and Homelessness

Providing services and supports beyond basic emergency services is essential to help youth exit homelessness before becoming entrenched and adapted to life on the streets (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013). Housing early in the homeless journey can reduce chronic homelessness rates (Gaetz, 2020; HTE, n.d.-a). The longer someone is homeless, the harder it is to exit homelessness (Moradian, 2019). It is best to provide housing so youth spend less than one year on the streets to avoid entrenchment (Charles et al., 2020; Holland, 2018). Rapid housing aids in preventing homelessness from becoming the usual way of

life and makes exiting homelessness easier (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; Karabanow, 2008; Kidd et al., 2013; Magwood et al., 2019; Slesnick et al., 2017). Further, youth are at greater risk of experiencing violence and victimization due to their developmental stage; therefore, housing youth as quickly as possible will result in the experience of less violence and victimization (Miller et al., 2004).

Not only does housing lower victimization rates, but it also reduces overall costs since people who are unhoused access significantly more services than people with housing (Gaetz, Scott, et al., 2013). On the extreme end of service use, a person who was homeless in Edmonton required police attention 76 times in 19 months, was seen 115 times in the emergency room, and spent 72 nights in the hospital in one year (Gordon, 2012). An estimation of this individual's service cost is greater than $200,000 per year (Gordon, 2012). Studies have shown that newly housed people dramatically decreased service access within one year (Adair et al., 2017). Reductions occurred in the use of ambulance services, emergency rooms, and hospital admissions of respectively 38%, 40% and 25% (Trainor et al., n.d.). Arguably these decreases in service use are not only cost savings but also indicate a better quality of life (Dodd et al., 2018). The estimated cost savings by providing housing with support services is between $1,300 and $24,000 annually (Trainor et al., n.d.). In other words, it is less costly to provide permanent housing than homeless shelters (C. C. Collins et al., 2019).

To fully realize these cost savings, it is necessary to meet youths' needs and desires. Accommodating needs and desires is essential to realize cost savings. Housing success should be evaluated not only by obtaining and maintaining housing but by other quality-of-life indicators (Gaetz et al., 2019). However, sometimes systems fail youth.

Youth homelessness is often the result of other systems failing to provide adequate plans for housing when discharging from care (S. B. Collins et al., 2018; Quirouette et al., 2016; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). The best practice for youth leaving foster care, corrections or mental health care would always be to arrange a place that is not a homeless shelter before discharge (S. B. Collins et al., 2018; Dej, 2020; Gaetz, 2014a; Nichols & Doberstein, 2016; Puligandla et al., n.d.; Quirouette et al., 2016; Zerger et al., 2008). Foster care involvement is linked to higher rates of homelessness which arguably could be minimized with better discharge planning (Alberton et al., 2020). Without planning, vulnerable youth become homeless without support (Piat et al., 2015). People in positions of power, such as social workers, program staff and teachers, need to work alongside marginalized youth by providing resources required to navigate these structural issues and work to prevent marginalized youth from becoming homeless (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Housing Choices for People who are Homeless: Housing First and Treatment First

Several approaches have been commonly used in Canada to house homeless individuals. I briefly cover literature surrounding the two primary approaches to managing homelessness—Treatment First (TF) and Housing First (HF). With a TF approach, people must ascend a metaphorical staircase to obtain permanent housing (Henwood et al., 2015; MacLeod et al., 2016). People who are homeless must prove they are capable and deserve a home (Dodd et al., 2018; Henwood et al., 2015). Getting permanent housing requires progressing through several different phases. TF homeless programs tend to be zero-tolerance, requiring total abstinence from substance use and adherence to other program requirements. If a housed individual makes one mistake, they are expelled from the program (Hansen, 2018).

In contrast to TF, I refer to HF as an elevator approach. Obtaining housing requires meeting fewer preconditions, and programs focus on harm reduction instead of abstinence (Anderson-Baron & Collins, 2019; C. C. Collins et al., 2019; Guevara et al., 2019; McParland et al., 2019). HF housing is a right, not something to earn (Bergman et al., 2019). The goal is to house people quickly (Gaetz, 2014a; Zufferey, 2017). Once housing is secured, treatment is not required to keep housing but is encouraged to deal with issues such as mental health or addictions (Anderson-Baron & Collins, 2019). Securing housing and services will likely improve youths' quality of life (Dodd et al., 2018). Originally HF was experimental.

HF began in a New York City experiment in 1992 meant for adults who were chronically homeless and had mental health and addiction issues and high service needs (D. Collins & Stout, 2021; McParland et al., 2019; Pathways Housing First Institute, n.d.). In Canada, Calgary, Alberta, became the first city to adopt HF in 2007, and in 2008 Alberta announced a "10-year plan to end homelessness using Housing First" (Anderson-Baron & Collins, 2019, p. 1287). In HF, the foundation is that it is easier for people to succeed once housed (Gaetz, 2014a; Holtschneider, 2016). With HF, the goal is to minimize "blind spots" when working to provide services to people who are homeless (Hansen, 2018). Clients are offered needed services (Guevara et al., 2019; Hansen, 2018). These services can range from help with finances to aid in accessing needed services and anything else a client needs for housing success (Hansen, 2018). Most HF programs require participants to have an in-home visit once a week (Hansen, 2018).

Several requirements must be met for a program to be considered HF (Guevara et al., 2019). Housing must be "immediate and unconditional" (Guevara et al., 2019, p. 73), and participants cannot need to prove "housing readiness" (McParland et al., 2019, pp. 52-53). People do not have as many preconditions to get or maintain housing compared to TF.

Participants do not need to be in remission, actively working or in school, substance-free or taking their medications (Guevara et al., 2019). HF participants can choose their dwelling, the neighbourhood and if they live with a roommate (Guevara et al., 2019; Holtschneider, 2016). Housing also must not be in an institution such as a hospital or jail (Guevara et al., 2019).

HF has a history of use with adults who are homeless but was not initially designed for youth (McParland et al., 2019). HF4Y requires modification from adult HF (Gaetz, 2014a). Due to various youth developmental stages, a "one size fits all" approach is inappropriate (Bergman et al., 2019; C. C. Collins et al., 2019; Gaetz, 2014a; Zerger et al., 2008; Zufferey, 2017). Some youth may not feel ready to live independently and prefer housing of a transitional nature (Kidd et al., 2013). Housing choices should include all possible types of accommodation (McParland et al., 2019). In HF4Y, the goal needs to be housing youth in a dwelling they prefer, even if it is not an independent long-term home, but the desirable end goal should be permanent housing when the youth are ready.

TF and HF have various advantages and disadvantages. A TF approach emphasizes change on the part of the client. The main advantage of a TF approach revolves around control. TF requires treatment adherence and zero-tolerance of drug and alcohol use, which limits problems from treatment non-adherence and substance use. By contrast, an HF approach provides housing with fewer conditions and allows for greater independence (Forchuk et al., 2013). HF offers more choices for the person housed (Trainor et al., n.d.). It is easier to get kicked out of a TF program because they have zero tolerance, while HF programs have as few conditions as possible (Bergman et al., 2019; Dodd et al., 2018; Forchuk et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2014a; Mayock & Parker, 2020; Nichols & Doberstein, 2016; Zufferey, 2017). People who are housed with HF have greater success in remaining housed.

HF is effective and has a solid research base (Holtschneider, 2016). A multisite quantitative Canadian study titled At Home/*Chez Soi* studied Canadian homelessness and provided data on the success of HF for people with mental illness (Kozloff et al., 2016; McParland et al., 2019). HF effectively increases housing stability, making HF participants more likely to stay housed. For some participants, HF provides more independence than they are ready for and may not be a success (Gaetz, 2014a; McParland et al., 2019). Therefore, in HF4Y, different types of accommodation need to be available.

Cumulative Disadvantage, Poverty, and Discrimination

In keeping with the HF model, I take a structural approach to analyzing the systemic inequalities surrounding homelessness that accumulate in people's lives. In many ways, barriers encountered by people living homeless are cumulative and compound over time.

Due to the reality of homelessness, participants in my study encounter many forms of marginalization and discrimination. Homelessness is often related to poverty and insufficient money to meet basic needs. Different socioeconomic and other characteristics marginalize many youths, create discrimination and many identity characteristics work together to develop cumulative disadvantages. At the same time, participants experience marginalization by the intersection of different characteristics, such as being young, homeless, or Indigenous. Poverty, discrimination, and cumulative disadvantage are embedded in a structural approach and foreground systemic inequalities.

Homelessness is often caused and exacerbated by numerous "social and structural barriers" that must be navigated to prevent homelessness or leave homelessness behind (Krüsi et al., 2010, pp. 283-284). Research shows that belonging to multiple outgroups increases adversity, discrimination and homelessness (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016; Rosenfield, 2012;

Seng et al., 2012). Structural factors that make homelessness more likely also "include broader sociopolitical factors" (Piat et al., 2015, p. 2369). A structural approach considers these factors together, which is needed because it is difficult to determine what precipitates homelessness and its result (Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019; Rosenfield, 2012). Homelessness for youth is often related to poverty, discrimination, and high housing costs (Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019). Structural factors can trap marginalized youth in housing that is in poor condition, neighbourhoods with high rates of drug use and housing that is unaffordable (Piat et al., 2015).

Housing affordability is a structural problem made worse by increasing rents and a lack of wage growth (Falvo, 2020; Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019; Stadler, 2020). Families spending an unaffordable amount on rent are less likely to have funds to cover any unexpected expense (Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019). Additionally, families living on low income often cannot house their children, and older youth must leave their familial home even when this is undesired by the youth or parent (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004). The causes of the splitting up of low-income families are diverse. They can range from family dysfunction surrounding abuse in the home or other barriers (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004) and accessing affordable housing is difficult.

Affordable housing is based on need, and access is difficult. Youths must rank the highest on a needs-based point system to obtain subsidized housing. The points system decides who gets an available home (Civida, 2020). Applicants receive points for having a dependant, high rent-to-income ratio, lack of accessibility for a disability, overcrowding, living in accommodations with health and safety issues, living in shared accommodations, paying utilities, HF graduates, and other special circumstances (Civida, 2020). When a unit becomes

available, the person with the most points gets the housing—even if they have been waiting a short time.

Being evicted is a structural factor that increases points and the need for affordable housing; therefore, being evicted can be the only pathway to access affordable housing (Templeton & Durksen, 2014). The need for eviction is problematic because it affects credit scores and landlord references (Sandy, 2014). These structural factors result in greater separation from the wider community, increased adversity and risk of homelessness (Piat et al., 2015). Lack of money is often a key barrier to exiting homelessness.

The main barriers to leaving homelessness are often financial—low-cost housing is unavailable, access is difficult, or income is too low (Sandy, 2014). Other interrelated issues include a lack of access to social connections to obtain housing or employment (Sandy, 2014). Ironically experiencing homelessness makes a return to homelessness more likely.

The structural factors I discussed above work together to create cumulative disadvantage. Systemic factors accumulate over the life course, leading to greater disadvantages (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Dannefer, 2003; Lippert & Lee, 2015). Disadvantaging circumstances can compound each other, and these circumstances do not happen randomly (Seabrook & Avison, 2012). In many ways, these are path-dependent and influenced by social policy that has changed over time (Deeming, 2013; Inglot, 2016).

Cumulative disadvantage makes obtaining a stable job difficult (Foster & Hagan, 2007). The more disadvantages a person experiences in their life course, the more problematic it is because the accumulation of disadvantages makes a successful exit from homelessness more difficult (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002). It is easier to remain homeless than to leave it behind. These disadvantages can compound each other, and the intersections of these various

marginalizing factors lead to unique discrimination and disadvantage. A youth of low-socio-economic status may also suffer abuse and have other issues that compound together. The different disadvantages work together to create greater adversity. Disadvantages experienced compound over time, and the compounding adversity makes homelessness more likely and difficult to leave behind (Bayón, 2017; Foster & Hagan, 2007). Barriers experienced are complex.

Systemic barriers related to homelessness are numerous and include poverty and discrimination. People in poverty lack the funds to obtain the necessities for a good life (Sarlo, 2020). Poverty can result in activities such as survival sex[6] or drug dealing (Berkum & Oudshoom, 2015; Ting & Showden, 2019). Poverty is a complex problem in Canadian society.

Poverty is recognized as a fundamental social problem and drives homelessness (Schwan, French, et al., 2018). Before 2018 Canada did not have an official poverty line. In 2018 the federal Liberal government adopted the Market Basket Measure (MBM) as Canada's official poverty line (Sarlo, 2020). The MBM has evolved based on what 70% of households in Canada have (Sarlo, 2020). This measure defines poverty as being unable to have an adequate standard of living to participate in society (Sarlo, 2020). According to the MBM, a family of four must make at least $60,000 to be above the poverty line (Sarlo, 2020).

The poverty line is much higher than what government assistance or minimum wage employment provides, and due to limited income, many individuals with low income are in

[6] Survival sex is "trading sex to meet one's survival needs" and is often "a non-cash exchange" and is in response to poverty (Fraser et al., 2019, pp. 6-7).

either core[7] or deep core[8] housing need (DiBellonia & Kapoor, 2023; Kolkman, 2020). In Edmonton, the average rent in 2022 for a one-bedroom apartment was $1,066 (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), n.d., Housing section). The average apartment is unaffordable for many Edmontonians. An Alberta Supports[9] recipient who is not expected to work spends 116% of their money on rent (Alberta Works, 2023). A person receiving Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)[10] would pay 60% on rent (Government of Alberta, 2023). A minimum wage earner[11] would spend 47% on rent (Spring, n.d.). These figures reveal how dire the experience is for people living on low income. The Alberta Supports recipient needs to spend more on rent than they receive. AISH recipients are in deep core housing need, and minimum wage earners are in core housing need.

Government support used to be more generous, but in the 1990s, substantial changes were made to social assistance in many provinces in Canada, including Alberta (Dolson, 2015; Michalski, 2003). Before this, welfare programs were based mainly on entitlements and were changed to become a moral project and, in many ways, based on punishment and control (Dolson, 2015). Rates decreased, and welfare became workfare (Chouinard, 2006; Dolson, 2015). This change occurred as a cost-cutting mission and neoliberal government policies. These

[7] People living in core housing need are spending greater than 30% of their gross income on rent or live in "housing in need of major repairs" or "unsuitable housing," including inadequate "rooms based on the family's size and composition" and no suitable housing is available in the community (NRHN, 2022, What are the National Occupancy Standards section).

[8] People who pay more than 50% of their gross income for rent and no suitable housing is available in the local community are in deep core housing need (Kolkman, 2020).

[9] Alberta Supports pays $919 monthly to people classified as unable to work (Alberta Works, 2023). More or less funding is available on Alberta Supports and AISH, depending on a recipient's circumstances (Government of Alberta, 2022). The name Alberta Supports has changed from Alberta Works.

[10] AISH pays $1787 (Government of Alberta, 2023, Living Allowance section). AISH is challenging to access, and the application is extremely detailed and confusing. Processing times for AISH can be lengthy.

[11] My assumption in this calculation is that the minimum wage earner works 37.5 hours a week at $15 per hour (Spring, n.d.). Gross income is $2,250. If a youth works less than 28 hours per week, they make $13 per hour (Spring, n.d.).

cuts increased homelessness rates (Haldenby et al., 2007). Not only does poverty affect homelessness, but it also affects food security.

Poverty often means an inadequate diet and the inability to afford basic necessities (Budescu et al., 2019; C. C. Collins et al., 2019; Holmes & Burgess, 2021; Levesque & Abdel-Baki, 2020; Trainor et al., n.d.). There are also health-related costs to poverty. People of lower socio-economic status experience illness and disability at higher rates than wealthier individuals. The lowest quintile in Canada experiences an alarming increased rate of disability of 358% in comparison to the highest quintile (Trainor et al., n.d.). Further, the lowest Canadian quintile experiences a 60% higher rate of having at least two medical conditions (Trainor et al., n.d.). Poverty is linked to higher rates of numerous medical conditions. Poverty is interrelated with discrimination.

Discrimination includes treating people differently based on racism, sexism, ableism etc. (Budescu et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2018; Sisselman-Borgia et al., 2018). Multiple memberships to discriminated groups can create even greater discrimination (Sisselman-Borgia et al., 2018). Discrimination is systemic throughout society; since the 1970s, sociology literature has used the terms “institutional,” “structural,” and “systemic” to designate “practices that contribute to the systemic disadvantage of certain groups” (Ringelheim, 2022, p. 2). Social division is systemic in Canada.

In Canadian society, social divisions exist and are experienced subjectively (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Discrimination is problematic and outlawed in Canada against many groups (Potvin, 2005; Ringelheim, 2022). Discrimination can be covert or overt (McCullough et al., 2023). For example, overt discrimination involves refusing a prospective tenant because of their race. On the other hand, covert discrimination is hidden, and quantification of it is difficult

(McCullough et al., 2023). It is impossible to define discrimination fully because behaviours surrounding discrimination are diverse (Novac et al., 2002). People who discriminate can have diverse reasons for their behaviour (Novac et al., 2002).

Discrimination also occurs in housing, including in the rental market (McCullough et al., 2023). While in the application process, a prospective tenant can be steered to units or buildings that are less desirable or experience rejections based on discrimination (CMHC, 2023). Once a tenancy ends, discrimination can continue. A landlord may refuse to return former tenants' damage deposits, refuse to provide references or add them to "do not rent" lists (CMHC, 2023). The experience of rental discrimination results in difficulty in finding suitable housing, and prospective tenants will often have to acquire housing of lower quality (McCullough et al., 2023).

Having a way to study rental discrimination is needed because it is a systemic factor in the housing market. In housing research, audit testing[12] is used to determine if discrimination occurs in the rental market and has been done numerous times (Asplund et al., 2020; Gaddis, 2019; Gaddis & Ghoshal, 2020; McCullough et al., 2023). Audit testing involves having two confederates[13] who, for example, are White and Black, and they approach landlords about renting advertised dwellings. Discrimination occurs if the White confederate has more success in the housing market. Audit testing traditionally involved in-person rental experience but has since been expanded to include online contact (Gaddis & Ghoshal, 2020). Audit testing is helpful because it contextualizes housing discrimination and the homeless experience. How youth experience homelessness depends on the context.

[12] In audit testing, racialization is the most commonly studied (McCullough et al., 2023).

[13] Confederates are part of the research team and play a role in the study (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Alberta Context

This research took place in Edmonton, Alberta, and this discussion will focus on the Alberta context. The discussion will be by no means exhaustive. Housing in Alberta is a fundamental human right (Holtschneider, 2016; Watson & Cuervo, 2017; Zufferey, 2017). Everyone should have access to a home, which is not the case for youth who are homeless. Jazmin, a professional participant (PP) in my study, pointed out that there is no minimum age at which a youth can independently sign a lease agreement in Alberta. Jazmin's statement was confirmed by Lecic and Zuker (2019); in Alberta, there is no minimum age to enter into an agreement for necessities of life. Many property management companies will not rent to tenants under the age of 18, and this creates a significant barrier for younger youth. Discrimination is a problem; insufficient money and lack of awareness of what is available provide additional barriers.

Income is needed to obtain housing. In Canada, navigating a maze is necessary to access government income assistance (Lightman et al., 2003; Pasma & Regehr, 2019). Being unaware of the available financial resources creates additional barriers to securing funding (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Youths must complete the correct application with the information necessary to get funding (Zivanovic et al., 2016). These application forms are confusing; if filled out incorrectly, there is a delay or denial of funding (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). No central location is easily accessible to learn about all the different subsidies for people living below the poverty line. Government funding provides some services, and businesses or charitable organizations offer others. I concentrate on services available in Alberta, Edmonton, and Youth Empowerment and Support Services (YESS), as this is where this study is situated.

Provincial Support

Many of the youth interviewed were unaware that government assistance is available. Accessing government funding is difficult even when you know what is available (Zivanovic et al., 2016). For unemployed youth, Alberta Supports require qualifications that many youths who are homeless cannot meet. Payments are inadequate to cover basic living expenses, if obtained at all. Youths under 18 must meet additional criteria—such as being in school or working—to access these supports. Lack of government support or adequate employment makes exiting homelessness difficult, if not impossible.[14] Even when obtained, government funding is inadequate for basic needs.

I should preface that various income assistance programs are designed to provide enough money to survive but not prosper (Templeton & Durksen, 2014; Thulien et al., 2018). The goal is to have people transition to employment (Templeton & Durksen, 2014). The above factors make it challenging to obtain funding because the preconditions for government assistance require a significant commitment from youth who are homeless. Even for youth over 18, some requirements are difficult for those living in the precarity of homelessness.

Intertwined with issues when living homeless is that Alberta and Edmonton have higher housing costs than reasonable to pay at minimum wage or on provincial financial assistance. Units with more affordable rent tend to be in undesirable areas or of substandard quality (Piat et al., 2015; Templeton & Durksen, 2014). Youth who are homeless are left to obtain housing on the open market.

[14] Alberta Supports will not provide funding to someone who is unhoused. It is possible to receive a full AISH check while homeless, but the approval process is lengthy for AISH (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

Youths who are homeless have difficulty paying for a phone. Telus (n.d.) offers programs that provide a free refurbished cell phone, a free cell phone plan and low-cost internet for youth aging out of care. Unfortunately, replacement is not free if this phone is lost or stolen. Youth without access to personal devices must rely on the phone or computers at YESS or other agencies when applying for income support, housing, or employment. Call-backs from social workers take up to 48 hours; therefore, lack of continuous access to a phone can result in youth missing important calls about income support or other services. The closure of in-person services makes Alberta Supports even more inaccessible. Additional support services are available through non-profit organizations.

General Resources in the City of Edmonton

Edmonton is home to many social service organizations that assist people who have low incomes or are homeless. These include places that offer meals, food hampers, clothing closets, and other items. Several different shelters are available in Edmonton. The YESS Nexus overnight shelter is the only option for 15-year-old youth. For youth 16 and older, several shelter options and organizations offer longer-term and permanent housing. Edmonton has a history of HF programs. The first Edmonton HF program opened on April 1, 2009 (HTE, n.d.-c). HF works with youth and adults to aid in obtaining permanent housing (Adair et al., 2017; C. C. Collins et al., 2019; Gilmer, 2016; Wang et al., 2019).

Some form of Identification (ID) is required to apply for housing, jobs, and income support. The theft of wallets, backpacks, and cell phones makes it difficult for youth who are homeless to maintain access to ID (Merdsoy et al., 2020; Poremski et al., 2014). Alberta Health Services (n.d.) offers assistance in obtaining and storing ID. This assistance is critical for the

exit of homelessness because, without proper documentation, it is difficult to find housing or employment (Gordon, 2012).

Even with ID, people who are homeless have difficulty obtaining employment; therefore, various agencies in Edmonton provide aid in securing employment. Several programs in Edmonton offer temporary or permanent work, and several programs are specifically for youth. Available programs include the Verto Project through YOUCAN (n.d.), and YESS offers Youth Education and Employment Program (YEEP). Both programs are similar, and youth receive minimum wage while in the program. As this study involved YESS participants, I will explain YEEP in an upcoming section.

Programs Offered by YESS

My study involved participants who also accessed YESS programming. YESS offers several facilities in Edmonton to provide services for youth who are homeless (YESS, n.d.-b). All YESS facilities operate with harm reduction for substance use. Harm reduction means youth under the influence of drugs or alcohol can stay at the facilities provided they can follow the rules; however, consumption or possession of drugs or alcohol is prohibited within the facilities (Bergman et al., 2019; Gaetz, 2014a; Zufferey, 2017). YESS services are also LGBTQ2S+ friendly. Youths 15 to 21 can access Nexus and supportive housing (YESS, n.d.-b). Youths 15 to 24 can access services at the Armoury Resource Centre (ARC) (YESS, n.d.-b).

The Nexus Shelter is open 24/7, with 16 beds for youth aged 15 to 21 (YESS, n.d.-b)**.** This facility provides basic needs services, including meals, a donation room, showers and laundry facilities—shelter staff work to connect the youth to other supports (YESS, n.d.-b).

YESS also offers temporary supportive housing for youth 15 to 21 and provides a temporary cohort living program within Edmonton for youth (YESS, n.d.-b). These transitional

housing facilities provide youth with a safe living space while working toward other goals. The cohort living program was a one-year pilot initiated during the COVID pandemic and allowed youth to function more normally (Admin, 2021a). Cohorts could unmask when interacting with youth in their cohort, which allowed for more normal interactions with peers.

YESS also operates ARC,[15] which is open from 10 AM to 4 PM Monday to Friday and provides wrap-around support for youth aged 15 to 24 (YESS, n.d.-b). YESS offers a wide range of services designed to meet all the needs of youth who are homeless and move them into housing. The ARC is also home to YEEP, an employment program for youth.

YEEP aids youths aged 15 to 24 to obtain employment (Admin, 2021b). The program pays participants minimum wage during the program. The program's first three weeks involve in-class training in identifying employment goals, work readiness skills and tickets specific to work youth desire (HTE, n.d.-a; Loosemore et al., 2021; Phillip Muñoz et al., 2005). After three weeks of classroom training, there is a 12-week employment/practicum (Admin, 2021b). After successful completion, a transition worker works to plan the next steps (Admin, 2021b).

YESS also participates in the Coordinated Youth Response that began as a response to the COVID pandemic (HTE, n.d.-b). Coordinated Youth Response means that youth will not need to share their story with every agency they access. Instead, agencies that aid youth share information if the youth consent. This system also includes conference calls with other service organizations, so youth do not need to travel to different locations to reduce the spread of COVID (HTE, n.d.-b).

[15] In the Summer of 2023 YESS began offering Resources and Programs formerly offered at ARC at the same location as the NEXUS shelter.

Methods and Methodology

I interviewed 13 youths (see Table 1 and Table 2 for youth demographics) and four professionals (see Table 3 for professional demographics) involved in youth housing. I interviewed youth participants because their first-hand understanding of hopes and needs for housing, and of the challenges in obtaining housing, is vital. Professional interviews provided context to the youth interviews and insights into services and systems. I gained access to youth participants by volunteering weekly for YESS from July 2018 to March 2020. I leveraged my experience and the relationships built to complete this project—information from volunteering informed interview questions and the conceptual underpinning of this study.

Table 1

Youth Demographics

Name	Pronouns	Age	Sexual Identity	Race	Foster Care
Chase	Him	19	Male	Metis	Unknown
Dean	He/Him	21	Male	Metis	Unknown
Eric	Me	20	Male	Black	Unknown
Hannah	She/Her	22	Bisexual	White	Yes
Jade	All	17	Male	White	Unknown
Jessica	She/Her	19	Female	White	Yes
Logan	He/Him	22	Male	White	Unknown
Mike	He/Him	20	Male	White	Unknown
Molly	She/Her	18	Female	Aboriginal	Unknown
Nathan	He/Him	24	Male	White	Unknown
Ryan	Any	24	Male	Aboriginal	Yes
Tom	He/Him	16	Male	White	Unknown
Zac	Male	18	Male	White	Unknown

Both focus groups and individual interviews have different strengths and weaknesses (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Individual interviews provide privacy when discussing issues of personal nature, and I thought youth would not talk freely in a group setting (Rapley, 2004).

This study involved questions about stigmatizing experiences. Previous research has shown that participants interviewed about sensitive topics were more comfortable in individual interviews (Guest et al., 2017). I also believed that focus groups would only produce "surface information" (Powell & Single, 1996). Getting enough participants to hold a focus group was difficult, particularly during the COVID pandemic. For the reasons above, I made the methodological decision to use individual interviews.

Table 2

Youth Demographics Continued

Name	Substance Use	Gangs	Duration	Episodic or Extended	Mental Health
Chase	Yes	No	Entire Life	Episodic	Asperger's /Cocaine
Dean	Unknown	No	9 months	Extended	N/A
Eric	Unknown	No	4 years	Episodic	Depression
Hannah	Yes	Unknown	Starting at 14	Extended	Depression /ADHD/ Anxiety
Jade	Unknown	Unknown	2 Years	Extended	Depression /Anxiety
Jessica	Yes	Yes	First Homeless at Age 11	Extended	Depression /Anxiety
Logan	Unknown	No	1 year Steady/Briefly 1 month later	Both	ADHD
Mike	Yes	No	2 days	Episodic	Yes, Unknown Type
Molly	Yes	No	3 years	Both	FASD
Nathan	Yes	No	3 years	Extended	Meth
Ryan	Yes	Yes	11 years	Episodic	N/A
Tom	Yes	No	2 years	Episodic	Anger Issues
Zac	Yes	No	6 years	Unknown	Anger Issues

Table 3

Professional Demographics

Name	Pronouns	Position
Edward	He/him	Aboriginal Elder
Jazmin	She/her	Property Manager
Leslie	They/them	HF Placement Worker
Sofia	She/her	HF Placement Worker

Recruitment

I recruited 13 youths aged 16 to 24 who self-identified as having a mental illness and were looking for housing. All youth recruitment occurred at YESS. I chose YESS as my recruitment site because I volunteered at the YESS Nexus shelter for a year and a half before the COVID pandemic, and I had a commitment to the agency and the people they served. YESS serves clients aged 15 to 24. The agency policy is that 16 or older youth do not need parental consent to stay at the Nexus shelter or to use ARC services. I obtained ethics approval to interview 16 to 24-year-old youth based on agency policy and obtained consent from these youths (see Appendix A for consent form) (Cleverley & Kidd, 2011). Fifteen-year-old youth were excluded from this study because parental consent is required to use YESS services.

I used convenience sampling to recruit participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). Convenience sampling was appropriate for this study because a central list of all youth who are homeless does not exist. Therefore, random sampling is impossible because there is no usable sampling frame. Posters were displayed at the Nexus shelter and ARC to facilitate recruitment. A staff member or I approached potential participants and told them briefly about the study, and interviews occurred at that time if the youth was interested.

The Interviews

Interviews ascertained the housing wishes and needs of youth and the services they need to exit homelessness (see Appendix B for the youth interview guide). Questions explored the homeless experience, housing preferences and barriers encountered when working on getting housing. All youth interviews occurred in person at ARC. A YESS staff member was present for most interviews (see Appendix C for the confidentiality agreement). All in-person youth interviews conformed with the COVID restrictions. Due to the ongoing restrictions, the interviewer and participant wore masks during the interviews. Unfortunately, masks hide facial expressions that would provide context to what interviewees say. Also, when participants spoke quietly, the mask muffled their voices. I also used an arts-based approach.

During interviews, I asked youth participants to represent their ideal homes in a drawing and obtained descriptions where possible. This arts-based method is appropriate, especially given the marginalizations experienced by youth who are homeless (Gonick et al., 2021). I designed this exercise to learn how youth who are homeless viewed housing and provide an alternate way to express complicated ideas (Dorow & Dogu, 2011; Guillemin & Drew, 2010; van Ommen & Painter, 2005). I adapted this method from sketch maps (Dorow & Dogu, 2011; van Ommen & Painter, 2005).

After completing youth interviews, I interviewed four professionals who work with HF4Y. Two interviews were with HF4Y placement workers (see Appendix D for the interview guide, one with a property manager (see Appendix E for the interview guide), and one with an Indigenous elder. Professional interviews explored reasons behind youth experiencing homelessness, how HF4Y works in Edmonton, and how much choice youth have. These

interviews provided context to what the youth participants described. Three professional interviews occurred via Zoom; the final interview was in-person at a local restaurant.

Data Analysis

To aid data analysis, I transcribed all interviews myself, and participants had the opportunity to review transcripts. Data was analyzed using grounded theory principles and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2001). Grounded theory is useful when data has rich descriptions. Grounded theory allows for a flexible inductive approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2001). I found ideas, categories, and themes in the interview transcripts (Abramovich, 2017; Kelle, 2019). The final data analysis used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Initial coding occurred via pen and paper, and final coding used NVivo software. I analyzed youth and professional interviews with the same coding scheme, and youth sketches were coded holistically and analyzed. These analysis methods allowed for a rich exploration of information. This iterative approach to data analysis was appropriate to obtain great depth in understanding. I found emergent themes by moving back and forth between analysis and data collection. Interviews evolved based on what I discovered (Jett, 2017).

Participants provided numerous interrelated themes. Homelessness for youth is complex and has no one solution because youth have varying needs and desires. The support youth require must be delivered with wrap-around support services that meet all of the youth's individual needs. All youth desire a safe and secure home, which are in many ways two sides of a coin. Youth also desire personal freedom and to live with or near the people that matter, whether family or friends. Youth who are homeless encounter various social struggles and discrimination in their daily lives. Youth who are homeless encounter Catch-22 scenarios when

working to get a job, get a place, and get financial support, which also intertwines with the social struggles and discrimination they experience in daily life. Youth need to have all of their needs met to surmount homelessness and succeed in housing.

Reflexive Positioning of Research

Personal experience affects research, and there are advantages and disadvantages to having similar experiences with the people you are studying (Archer, 2007). I share some of the experiences of the youth. Sometimes, personal experience can be a blinder in looking at collected data (Chaney, 2019). Alternatively, personal experience can aid in asking the right questions (Saukko, 2003). I needed to consider how personal experiences with mental illness and housing issues influenced my research and be mindful of the influence of personal opinions (Chaney, 2019). My personal experience helped inform the perspective from which I entered the research setting (Yakushko et al., 2011). I had to watch for "blind spots" created by personal experience (Finlay, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 2019). For example, one blind spot is my poor opinion of group homes due to personal experience. My research is "a self-reflexive encounter" that my experiences influence (Pini, 2004; Saukko, 2003). I analyzed my experiences with a critical look at how my experiences affected what I discovered and what influence I had on the results I obtained (Gray, 2008).

I shared the experience with participants of having a mental illness and the stigma I experienced because of it. I have experienced marginalization and exclusion. I would have been homeless if I had not had family support. The hospital's discharge plan was that I would go to the Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre (WEAC) in Edmonton. Instead, I went to my parents' home. I have the experience of living in accommodations that I did not wish to live in. When I attempted to find affordable accommodations outside my group home, I was lied to and

told nothing was available. Eventually, I found an affordable apartment, but my parents had to co-sign my lease. Because of these experiences, I know how easy it is to become homeless and how people without support have difficulty obtaining housing.

Ethics

This research project received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: "Personal Choice: Housing for Homeless Youth in Edmonton," No. Pro00100975, March 26, 2021. A one-year renewal was granted on March 14, 2022.

Consent

I volunteered for YESS for a year and a half, which abruptly ended due to the start of the COVID pandemic. The majority of my volunteering was at the Nexus overnight shelter. Some of my participants had accessed the Nexus shelter while I was volunteering. Previous involvement as a volunteer with potential participants could influence their willingness to participate (Ceatha, 2017; Humphrey, 2007; Jett, 2017; Pini, 2004; Thompson et al., 2006). When volunteering, I had a key to use during my shift and could be present in the staff office during client intake interviews. I was not directly involved in decisions surrounding things such as restrictions placed on youth. I was able to open lockers for youth and get needed items from the donation room. I do not believe that the youth saw my volunteerism as situating me in a position of authority, and I believe it did not influence consent.

All participants provided consent (see Appendix A and Appendix F for consent forms). Youth participants occupy multiple marginalized positions. It is essential to inquire into their opinions because researchers often avoid them. After all, obtaining consent can be logistically challenging. I ensured voluntary consent and that participants understood the consent they

provided. I emphasized that the interview was voluntary. Participants were offered 14 days after transcript return to withdraw their data without repercussions. I have taken care in the data I am reporting to keep the information anonymous. For in-person interviews, I provided a written consent form; for virtual interviews, consent was received via email. Understanding is crucial to consent.

At the beginning of each youth interview, I confirmed consent orally. I reviewed consent orally with youth due to uncertain reading ability levels (Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research (Secretariat), 2018; Washington, 2010). I confirmed understanding through an oral comprehension check in youth interviews (see Appendix G for comprehension check). I ensured youth were aware that their participation and responses would not affect their status with YESS services, including obtaining or maintaining housing (Secretariat, 2018). Youth participants received a $25 gift card to thank them for participating.

Confidentiality

Individual interview details that could identify individual participants are not shared. I used pseudonyms, and I, the principal investigator, am the only one who knows the identity attached to the alias. I changed any identifiable information to ensure confidentiality. No information in the report allows for individual participant ID.

Sensitivity of Topic Area

Topic areas may be sensitive for some participants, including experiences with homelessness and mental health. The discussion involved participants' present circumstances, and participants were willing to share experiences.

Risks and Benefits

Participants did not directly benefit from this study, but the information generated may indirectly aid youth themselves or others in similar circumstances. Interview questions focused on perceptions, housing wishes and needs, and no participants were distressed during the interviews. Interviews occurred in public spaces or remotely; the study was a minimal risk for the researcher (Secretariat, 2018).

Data Security

Except for one interview, interviews were audio recorded. Written notes and hard copies of data are stored in a locked filing cabinet, and electronic data is stored on my laptop, which is password protected and encrypted.

Arc of Thesis

Chapter Two discusses youth participants' wishes and dreams regarding housing. It discusses the needs of individual youth and introduces them as individuals with varying needs and desires before discussing their needs and the barriers experienced by being homeless in later chapters. I give light to the preferences of individual youths. All youth have requirements they consider necessary in a home, and I discuss the importance of a safe, secure, and affordable home. Youth also value accessibility of social support and basic services and having family or family-like connections in their lives. The chapter concludes with a discussion of dream homes, where I asked the youth to dream big about what they would consider an ideal home. Some youth discussed what is feasible in their eyes in their present circumstances, while others express what they consider their ideal housing.

Chapter Three discusses pathways into homelessness. This chapter discusses how the longer someone is homeless, the more difficult it becomes to leave it behind. I discuss the

diverse reasons people become homeless and many beyond their control. Homelessness is often the result of discharge from foster care, mental health services or corrections without housing arrangements. It is difficult to exit homelessness once someone becomes homeless. Limiting the length of a homeless experience is best because outcomes worsen the longer someone is homeless. I discuss the social struggles and experiences with discrimination by people who are homeless. In many ways, these experiences involve cumulative disadvantage. Structural factors such as cumulative disadvantage, poverty, and discrimination cause and perpetuate homelessness.

Chapter Four discusses structural and institutional factors that create homelessness and create difficulty in leaving it behind. I discuss three general categories: getting a job, getting a place, and getting support. These work together to create "Catch-22" scenarios, such as needing to prove government income support to obtain housing. But the government will not supply funding until you have a place. Satisfying the interlocking conditions is difficult or impossible, particularly when living homeless.

Chapter Five goes on to discuss the various support needs of youth who are homeless. These needs are diverse, and youth have many different needs. For youth to exit homelessness successfully, meeting these diverse needs is essential. Services to support youth include survival support, support for economic and social participation and support needed to obtain housing. It is vital to meet all the needs of youth with wrap-around support services.

Significant research exists about youth who are homeless, but little literature examines how choice is constrained as youth enter, experience and work to exit homelessness. Homelessness is a complex issue with no single solution; therefore, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Youth who are homeless require social support services to be able to leave

homelessness behind. Root causes of homelessness must be addressed, such as cumulative disadvantage, poverty, discrimination, unemployment and mental health issues. Comprehensive services are required to meet all of the needs of youth who are homeless. Youth who are homeless must navigate Catch-22 scenarios to obtain a stable home. It is necessary to navigate getting a job, a place and navigating government bureaucracy. Navigating can be difficult because a landlord can refuse to fill out government paperwork needed to obtain funding to pay the rent, and the government will not provide funding until receiving the paperwork from the landlord. Youth who are homeless need support to survive, participate in society, and obtain housing to surmount homelessness. Only when all of a youth's needs are addressed is a sustained homeless exit possible. Youth who are homeless desire a house they are proud to call home.

Chapter Two: Housing Wishes and Dreams

I present youth participants' various needs and desires in this first findings chapter. I show how some youth have similar needs, and some are unique to a few. Youths need agency in their quest for housing. I demonstrate that even when living in the precarity of homelessness, many youths have specific things they require to consider housing a home. Specific requirements for many youths are pretty basic. Some specific requirements include being in a location youth feels safe and secure. Youths are aided to move past homelessness by meeting their needs and desires. This chapter draws on interview data, participant sketches and descriptions of their ideal homes.

Due to youths' different desires, no universal housing exists for all youth who are homeless (Forchuk et al., 2006; Gaetz, 2013). Structural and situational challenges constrain housing choice (Sample & Ferguson, 2019). Poverty, discrimination and cumulative disadvantage are a large part of these processes. These barriers significantly impact a youth's ability to obtain housing that meets their preferences or, for that matter, any housing (Sample & Ferguson, 2019).

Literature Review

When youth have their housing preference met, they experience higher levels of "housing satisfaction, residential stability, and psychological well-being" (Nelson et al., 2003, p. 118)—youth who were formerly homeless and who are satisfied with their housing move forward and develop a life beyond homelessness. Living in a home that meets youths' desires is needed because it "reflects their needs and identity," allows for the exercise of personal choice and creates "a place of privacy and security" (Bate, 2021, p. 378). An Edmonton study of housing of choice for youth who were homeless showed that 52% preferred to live alone, and

20% desired Supported Independent Living (Crerar, 2006). These statistics indicate that youth place a high priority on independence, and they prefer to live in a setting in which they have control. Very little literature on housing preferences for youth who are homeless is available, and most available literature generally is about adults who are homeless. This chapter aims to fill this gap.

Housing preferences often stem from early life experiences, and the meaning of home differs for different people (Blaauboer, 2011; Darrah & DeLuca, 2014; Gorman-Murray, 2015; Opit et al., 2020). Many people desire to live in similar neighbourhoods to where they grew up. However, housing choice is constrained by availability (Opit et al., 2020). In this section, I discuss literature surrounding several general topical areas that youth indicated in their interviews and drawings as necessary or desirable: safety and security, affordability, social support and basic needs and family and interpersonal connections. Lastly, I discuss the literature surrounding ideal or dream homes. With this background, the next section presents my participants' drawings and narratives around these issues.

Safety and Security

Housing available and affordable for youth is often "substandard and undesirable" due to systemic issues of discrimination and poverty (Piat et al., 2015, p. 2376). When arranging to house, it is necessary to ensure that the dwelling provides "physical and emotional safety" (Karpathakis, 2021, pp. 61-62). In an American study, Casas et al. (2016) found that youth consider social housing unsafe, and obtaining housing outside these buildings is desirable. Everyone should have a place in an area they consider safe and in good repair (Nelson et al., 2003). At the same time, safe housing needs to be affordable. Meeting safety, security and affordability at the same time is challenging but is necessary for youth success.

Housing at an Affordable Price

One of the structural causes of homelessness is the unaffordability of housing (Evans, 2012; Walters et al., 2021), and access to affordable housing is vital to ending homelessness for youth (Mayock & Parker, 2020). People with low incomes can only rent properties at the low end of the market (Cooper, 2004; Suttor, 2016). This housing is often affordable due to habitability or neighbourhood problems (Cooper, 2004; Suttor, 2016). Many youths say poverty keeps them from obtaining housing (Sample & Ferguson, 2019). Private rentals are often unaffordable and, therefore, inaccessible for youth working to exit homelessness (Mayock & Parker, 2020). Available units have rents that greatly exceed 30% of the income of most youths who are homeless.

In Canada, a "30% rule" is often used as a benchmark for affordable housing. People paying more than 30% of their gross income for housing are cost burdened and may have difficulty paying for other essentials (CMHC, 2018; DiBellonia & Kapoor, 2023). This rule is common in many countries to determine if housing is affordable (CMHC, 2018). High rents mean accessing housing is difficult and make rent supplements essential.

Subsidized housing is challenging to access in Edmonton; wait lists are long and are not direct waiting lists. Obtaining housing is based on a points system, as discussed in Chapter One; the person with the most points gets the home. Civida[16] averages 300 applications monthly in Edmonton and has a waitlist of over 6,000 (Kolkman, 2020). Further, "[t]he 2016 federal census found that 49,215 households (or 14.2%) are in core housing need in the city of Edmonton. 22,350 Edmonton households were in deep core housing need" (Kolkman, 2020, p. 10). These

[16] The name changed from Capital Region Housing Corporation.

statistics are problematic because other needs are unmet when rent is more than what is affordable. Most available housing is unaffordable for youth who are homeless. (Kennedy et al., 2017). High rent is problematic because it is unaffordable on Alberta Supports, AISH or minimum wage. Poverty makes support services essential.

Social Support and Basic Needs

Due to the realities of living in poverty, youth who are homeless need support services (Puligandla et al., n.d.). Provision of needed services is required, and they vary for different youth. Supports needed include financial support like transportation and assistance to obtain other supports. Nelson et al. (2003), in a study from southwestern Ontario, found that 83% of youth needed transportation to be available, 82% needed help to get phone service, 78% needed an apartment damage deposit, 74% required aid to get financial and social benefits, 70% wanted support workers to be available 24/7. Most of these needs surround poverty, and financial support, which shows that poverty is a primary barrier for youth working to exit homelessness. Through building trust by providing tangible economic support, it becomes possible to provide other services. Choice and control is needed by youth.

By allowing for choice and control of the environment, people who were formally homeless experience satisfaction with their accommodations and have increased stability in housing (Roy et al., 2013; Srebnik et al., 1995). Living in poverty is complex, and managing a fixed income is not easy and sometimes impossible; therefore, youth may also need help with financial planning (Hansen, 2018). Due to the youth's limited funds, it is essential to aid money

management[17] (Holmes & Burgess, 2021). Meeting both choice and affordability is needed simultaneously. Besides choice and affordability, youth also value interpersonal connections.

Family and Interpersonal Connections

Youths value their relationships with others (Holtschneider, 2016). Developing genuine connections with youth is crucial and allows for independence, and studies have shown that youth prefer having support staff only be available when needed (Krieg, 2001); providing only the services required aids youth in becoming increasingly independent (S. B. Collins, 2013; Gurdak et al., 2022; Vitopoulos et al., 2017). A one size fits all approach to services will be ineffective for youths because of their different experiences and desires. Meaningful connections to others are critical.

Youths need to have family or family-like connections in their lives (Bowlby, 2011; Parker & Mayock, 2019). Disruption of these connections affects youth who are homeless, and it is essential to provide youth who are out of contact with biological family members aid in obtaining their "chosen family"[18] (Casas et al., 2016; Holtschneider, 2016; Parker & Mayock, 2019). Connections help build well-being and resilience and influence rates of homelessness (Cronley & Evans, 2017; Harvey et al., 2012; Priya, 2019; Somefun et al., 2023). It is essential to house youth in an affordable, safe home that meets support needs and allows for interpersonal connections. To the extent possible, the needs and desires of youth should be met.

Ideal or Dream Homes

Almost everyone has an idea of the type of accommodation they prefer (Finley, 2000). A home must provide at minimum privacy and safety (Bate, 2021). When asked about their

[17] Budgeting to stretch available funds can be impossible when there is not enough money to meet basic needs. No matter how youths budget their money, they will still be unable to meet basic needs.

[18] The chosen family provides social support similar to a family.

preferences, youth in one study often described it as “lavish, large and comfortable” compared to present circumstances (Bate, 2021, p. 385). For those with positive childhood experiences living situations reflecting childhood circumstances are desirable (Fast, 2017). A home, at minimum, must provide meaning and stability (Bate, 2021). For a home to be an ideal home, preferences must be met.

Housing providers and workers must strive to allow youth to live in the type of dwelling or neighbourhood they prefer (Karpathakis, 2021). It can be challenging to meet the housing preference of youth who are homeless because many youths have limited personal connections and face stereotypes of living in poverty and the resulting discrimination (Brushett, 2007; Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017). Furthermore, many youths lack a landlord’s reference or credit to obtain a home independently, restricting choice (Novac et al., 2002). If the desired accommodation is unavailable, youths must choose from what is available to first-time renters. Accommodation in the housing of choice should occur as much as possible and is affordable based on local conditions (Gaetz, 2014a; Gaetz, Scott, et al., 2013; McParland et al., 2019; Stadler, 2020). Housing also must be as rapid as possible.

Aid to find housing as rapidly as possible is essential to limit entrenchment in homelessness (Gaetz, 2014a). HF provides a framework for providing housing and support. It provides youth with all the support they need, which aids in housing retention (Forchuk et al., 2006). Youth have diverse individual needs; therefore, for long-term success, they all need to be met (Nichols & Braimoh, 2018). It is challenging to remain housed when youth have unmet needs and desires (Bergman et al., 2019), which makes working to meet youth’s preferences key. Next, I will use participant voices to discuss how housing is vital for youth and youths’ preferences and needs.

Voices of Participants

In this section, I draw on both participant interviews and sketches they were invited to draw during the interviews. Sketches (see Figures 1 to 9 below) are from a prompt: "Could you draw me a sketch of your ideal home? You can use pictures, symbols, and text." All youths have specific things that they desire in a home. Many participants had similar desires, while some were rarer or individual. I discuss these wishes thematically across participants. Participants provide rich information about their diverse needs. As echoed in the literature review above, I discuss safety and security, affordability, accessibility of social supports, and the basics such as food, family, and interpersonal connections. Youth need very basic things in a home. Safety needs are unmet while homeless and comprise many youths' needs. Lack of safety while homeless means allowing youth to have a secure home is essential.

Safety and Security

Many youths value safety and security. Five participants directly address this theme. In an unrecorded interview, Jade (YP, Age 17) mentions that they need safety and thought affordable housing options are unsafe. They are moving into Clay,[19] which they call the ideal program when interviewed. Jade also mentions that they would like to live in an area with less gang activity, which they link to being more upscale and safe. They value a place that would be safe for them and their friends. Jade also indicates their need for freedom. One interpretation can be they could come and go as they please without restrictions. For freedom to exist, people must feel safe to come and go as they please. Living in an unsafe neighbourhood limits freedom.

[19] Clay was a one-year pilot project funded due to COVID, providing transitional housing for up to one year. It was a cohort living program.

When obtaining housing, safety is crucial for Logan (YP, Age 22). Like Jade, Logan values safety and security, which they link to an area being "niceish":

> That it's in a like [a] niceish neighbourhood, it doesn't have to be crazy nice as long as it's secure inside the home like no one can just break in and walk in. Or, like you wouldn't be worried about people just walking in.

Logan states that for a home to be safe, it needs to be in a safe neighbourhood. The community does not have to be extremely expensive, just in a location where they feel safe and do not have to worry about an unwelcome visitor walking in. Having a secure place is vital to keep out unwanted visitors. Safety involves not just the area but the dwelling itself. For a dwelling to be safe, it must have a good lock capable of keeping unwanted visitors out.

Hannah (YP, Age 22) repeats that safety is a critical concern. Hannah desires any housing except downtown, where she feels unsafe. Feeling unsafe could be partially due to the larger number of clients and the concentration of services (HTE, 2023a). Furthermore, Hannah also directly states that the Hope Mission[20] is unsafe: "They basically allow people to get sexually assaulted in their doors." Hannah believes downtown services are unsafe.

Tom (YP, Age 16) also expresses that safety is essential, and they prefer to live in a "not too like dangerous area." Ryan (YP, Age 24) desires a roommate and a "gentle neighbourhood" without "too much umm drama." Ryan desires to live in a neighbourhood with less social disorder where they feel safe. The areas that youths often prefer tend to be more expensive. All of the participants quoted above-viewed safety as an essential concern. For most of these participants, more affluent areas are often considered safer. Low-income communities tend to be viewed as unsafe and, as Ryan puts it, have too much drama. Affordability is also vital.

[20] Hope Mission is a charity with a facility in downtown Edmonton. They offer wraparound support services for homeless individuals who are 16+ (Hope Mission, n.d.).

Housing at an Affordable Price

In many ways, affordability and safety are two sides to a coin. They intersect each other, and both need to be satisfied. Finding a place that is both affordable and safe is difficult. However, suppose a youth obtains unsustainable housing due to insufficient income. In that case, it will only be a matter of time before they cannot pay the rent and utilities, resulting in eviction.

Logan also indicates "that affordability" is a crucial concern when obtaining housing. Obtaining housing that exceeds what youth can afford leads to instability, and an unexpected expense or loss of work hours can result in a return to homelessness. It is best to find housing that is no more than 30% of their income because it leads to more long-term stability. If rent is beyond this threshold, it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to have an emergency fund. Due to high costs, roommates are often needed.

Many participants indicate that they are looking for housing with a roommate. For some participants, living in shared accommodation is not their preference but is necessary due to the high costs and poverty (Hughes, 2003). Roommates are a practical goal to be able to obtain housing. Dean (YP, Age 21) expresses the need for roommates related to high housing costs and says, "Maybe shared accommodations would be good." Tom also considers a roommate necessary: "I think I could be good with an even apartment. [One-bedroom or shared] apartment would be perfect to just start me off." A place of their own would be ideal, but they prioritize any housing. They are willing to live in shared accommodation. Even if shared, a place to live is essential for many youths.

Mike (YP, Age 20) echoes other participants and indicates that their "low-income housing" need and affordability are key concerns. "So, like it could be one room with one

bathroom" or a shared house, what matters is a home. Mike is cognisant of the limited budget available for housing. They recognize at this point that they are priced out of regular housing and, therefore, will need a subsidy or roommate to obtain a home. Their preference is for a place of their own.

Affordability is not the only priority for participants. Affordability and the home being safe and secure are delicate balancing acts. Youths must meet the rent, but they also need to feel safe in the home. One youth, Nathan (YP, Age 24), did not consider affordability their crucial concern. Instead, rent must be at least a certain amount because housing is unsafe or undesirable below that amount. Nathan states the price point they require to obtain pest-free housing:

> Anything lower than [$]600 or [$]600 and lower, don't go for it. I can guarantee that. It's a ghetto. Anything from 800 bucks is fine. Because I have friends who live in like $700 building. But the place is. This building has cockroaches. I'm like, you know I pay [$]825. My place has no bugs in it. I would rather pay the hundred dollars to feel safe.

Nathan believes paying at least a certain amount is needed to find a pest-free apartment, and pest-free housing is more important than housing affordability. The pest-free apartment could also be a safety need. Unfortunately, places at the bottom of the rent spectrum also tend to have this and other habitability issues. For example, Civida has issues with tenants waiting too long for essential repairs, including remediation for black mold (Szulc, 2022). Youths need to weigh their desire to obtain housing against waiting for a place they can afford to become available or move into shared accommodations, which are, in many cases, more affordable but have unique drawbacks. Youths also need to weigh the importance of affordability, safety and a pest-free home. Unfortunately, satisfying all three simultaneously is difficult. No matter the location housed, youth need access to support services due to poverty.

Social Support and Basic Needs

Finding safe areas that simultaneously have the accessibility of services is difficult. Some neighbourhoods, particularly when socio-economically disadvantaged, may lack essential services, such as accessibility of grocery stores and other necessary amenities. But social support agencies tend to be in socio-economically deprived areas. Having access to both mainstream and social support agencies is essential for youths. Some affordable places are in food deserts,[21] making obtaining food difficult (Gopika et al., 2022). Logan desires essential services near their home. Accessibility of services is a key concern for them:

> Umm, like access to like so like food. So, like decently distanced from the grocery store or like walking distance or bus distance. Umm, and then access to, like, general social programs if I need those, [and] I think those are important.

Amenities such as regular bus service and access to stores that carry basic everyday supplies are essential. Molly (YP, Age 18) identifies support needs; they desire an independent place with food included and volunteers to provide support services. Freedom for them is essential, but they also wish to have support in this specific area of life. Other youths have needs related to social support. Mike discusses requiring a mental health support worker and the help of a co-signer:

> I would love a mental health worker, so I could talk to them about all the shit that's happened. Umm. Then I would need like a co-signer. That's a big problem, and maybe some staff to help with stuff or I don't know. . . [It] would because you be able to call or text or call the hospital [to] get mental health treatment. Or you can have an actual therapist.

Support is critical. Jessica (YP, Age 19) echoes the need for mental health support: "Ah. Damn, I honestly don't know how I handle it. . . a couple [of] times. . . [I attempted] suicide. . . [it is a

[21] A food desert is an area with unaffordable food, and fresh produce is difficult to access (Gopika et al., 2022). These communities tend to be lower income and often have none or limited grocery stores.

year] since my suicide attempt." Ryan also indicates the need for support. Help is needed in day-to-day life so they stay on track to be able to find and keep housing:

> Support workers and stuff . . . just to keep me on track . . . Yeah, like if I'm like. Even if I got off track, I would like for a support worker too. To umm to like give me a little push just to. To get myself back on it.

Logan, Mike, Molly, Jessica and Ryan indicate they need various social support services. Having the support services available that individual youth need is critical for youths to exit homelessness. Many of these themes are related to the location where youth are housed. They intertwine with each other, and the separation of these ideas in my discussion is artificial in many ways. Providing the physical safety, affordable housing, and formal support services youth need is essential. Interpersonal connections are also key.

Family and Interpersonal Connections

Family and interpersonal connections matter; connections to family and friends supply comfort, familiarity and informal support. Areas of housing preference often involve family, and some youth prefer to be near their family or other supports. For example, Dean has an idea of where in Edmonton they would desire to live: "Maybe [the] east side of the city . . . because that's where I grew up. That's where my grandparents live. Where my parents [are, and], I like grew up [there]. That's where my childhood would be." Where youth grew up dramatically influences the type and location of accommodation they desire. Tom's location preference is in the Mill Woods area "Cuz I lived there for a lot of my life." Dean and Tom prefer living near their family. Both prefer to live near where they lived as a child and where their family lives.

Family is often a key source of support for youth who are homeless or housed. If youth who are homeless are in active contact with family, it is essential to house them in a location accessible to family members. The location matters. For Jessica, location matters; they desire

housing outside the city. Living on a farm or acreage for Jessica is ideal. A farm or acreage similar to childhood reflects their location preferences: “Horses, cattle, and animals, [and] it helped me with my mental illness.” Jessica, a young parent, also desires to obtain housing and live with their young child:

> I want to be able to have me my daughter and a house. I want to be able to have, you know, [to] go back to work, and my daughter go[es] back to school and everything and still have a place to call home where there is not people coming in and out and not worrying about if you’re going to get a bed or not.

Their desire for accommodations that allows them to live with their child is another family-driven need. This wish is unique in interviews; however, this is the only interview with a youth engaged in parenting. Jessica also indicates they desire a home rather than a shelter, where getting a bed some nights is problematic.

Sometimes to exit homelessness, avoiding certain friends is vital. Friends can be the provider of drugs that they may be actively avoiding. Nathan views the area housed as essential to avoid falling back into using drugs. Housing must be away from Whyte Avenue:

> Area, because for me, that was my thing. Cuz after I wanted to get housing, I needed to make sure I was off Whyte Ave here. Because I’m such a huge drug addict wise, and my friends, because they love me, I can get [drugs] for free. Hey, so I make sure that I stay off Whyte Ave . . . as long as I’m away from, like, the area where I could get free drugs at. Fine. Because I don’t look for it. Because I don’t go out of my way. [Drugs] just show up. So, as long as I’m away from it, you know.

For Nathan to move into a place on Whyte Avenue is setting them up for failure because friends will supply the drugs they actively avoid. Being away from Whyte Avenue is a safety need.

Because of their social support, living with or near family and friends is vital for many youths. Living or having contact with family or chosen family is essential. Unfortunately, some youths like Nathan need to avoid friends to meet the goal of staying off drugs. Although many participants are probably silent on this issue, if abuse by the family is a contributing factor to

becoming homeless, some youth may desire to avoid contact with family (Abbott & Blake, 1988; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Paradise & Cauce, 2002; Shaikh & Rawal, 2019). To meet the many needs identified by youth, fulfilling housing wishes and dreams is vital.

Ideal or Dream Homes

Many people think that people who are homeless should take the housing they can get because homelessness is a personal failure (Holmes & Burgess, 2021). They should not have any preferences in where they live. This section of this thesis allows youth to express their dreams for the perfect home. It provides youth agency to express what they desire. Unfortunately, present circumstances surrounding housing do not often allow for the expression of these wishes, let alone having them met. The white picket fence ideal or American Dream[22] often plays a role in conceptualizing an ideal home. A typical description of an ideal home is a bungalow, a yard and single-family occupancy. (Mallett, 2004; Temmers Boggenpoel, 2019; Wright, 1991). What is an ideal home is socially constructed and influenced by experience (Chapman et al., 2002). An ideal home differs for different people, and life experiences influence the individual ideal. When describing their ideal home, some participants went beyond the physical and indicated relational factors as important to them (Mallett, 2004). I used a drawing activity to gather information on ideal homes.

Toward the end of the youth interviews, I asked the youths if they could draw me a sketch of their ideal home. I told participants they could use pictures, symbols, and text. I asked participants to dream big and draw or write what they consider their ideal home. I asked this question to have youth think beyond their present circumstances. This section builds on

[22] I refer to "the classical American Dream notion of having a single-family house" (Lucio et al., 2016, p. 371). Generally, people living in the white picket fence home are middle class (Stevenson, 2002; Temmers Boggenpoel, 2019).

interview conversations and provides an alternative means for youth to express their desires. This exercise aimed for youth to express their opinion on housing. Identifying housing wishes is needed to meet them. This section also demonstrates the cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination youth experience.

Six youths provided a quick sketch, three answered by writing down their description, and three preferred to respond verbally. First, I present this rich information of youth who describe the physical aspects of their ideal home, followed by youth who emphasize a home's affective or emotional component. Lastly, I will discuss youth who combine physical and affective aspects of home. I present this rich information within these sections and order the images according to something relatively minimalist to dream accommodations.

For an accommodation to be minimalist, it needs to meet basic needs, and the dwelling must be clean and safe, basically a safe place to sleep and eat (Kidd & Evans, 2011). All youth interviewees indicate they desire a safe home, and many youths who dream big include relational aspects in their ideal home. As discussed above, the data expresses the desire for safety and living with people who matter. Many youths who describe a minimalist home describe what they think is achievable in their present circumstances.

I will now discuss participant sketches that emphasize a home's physical characteristics. Ryan[23] left their drawing with the ARC staff for me to collect before I left. They provide a sketch of a normative home, providing a vague idea of a house as a stand-alone dwelling (see Figure 1). Their drawing is of a minimalist home that meets the white picket fence ideal.

[23] Oral recorded consent was obtained for the use of images.

Figure 1

Ryan's Sketch of Home

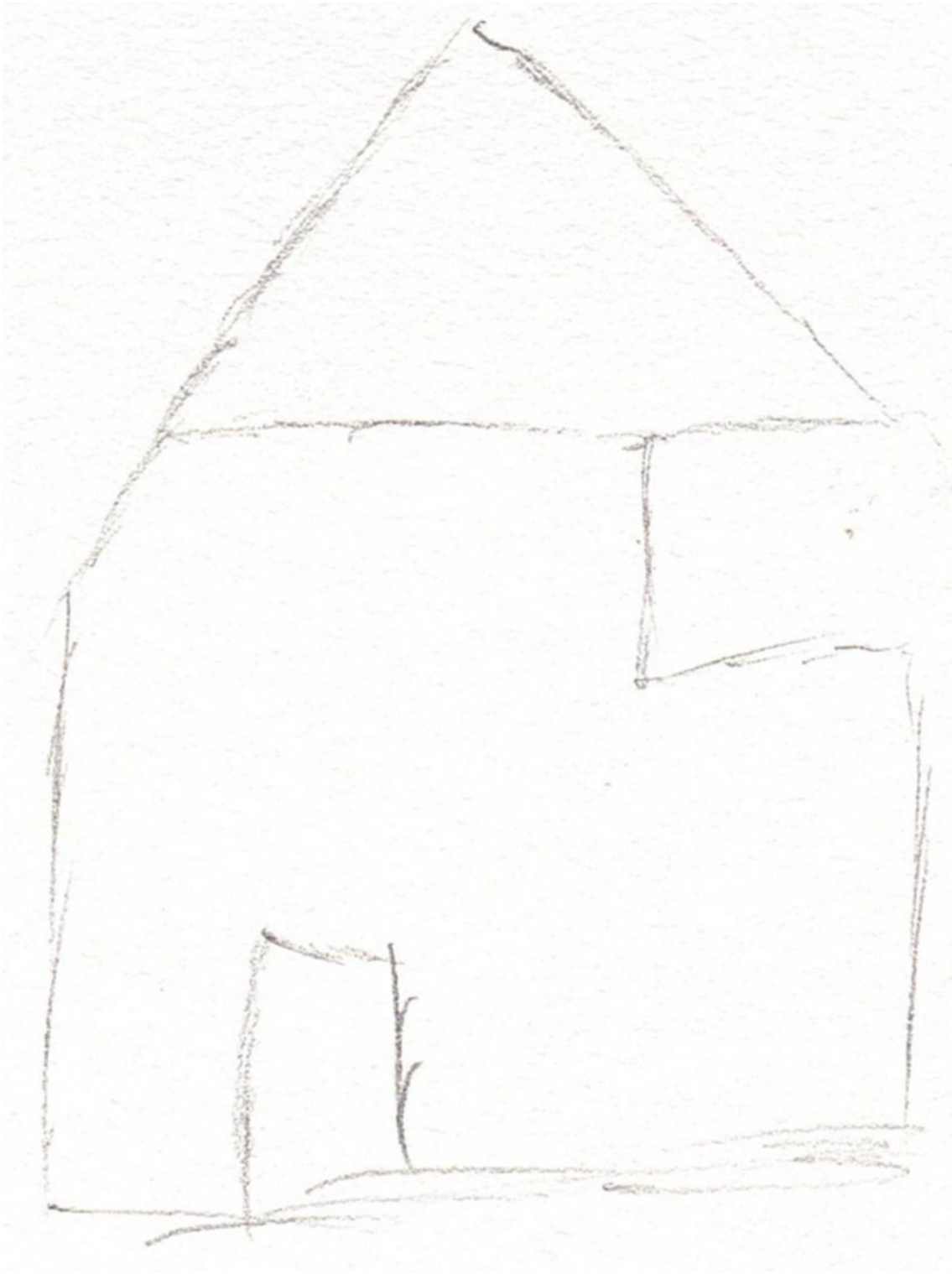
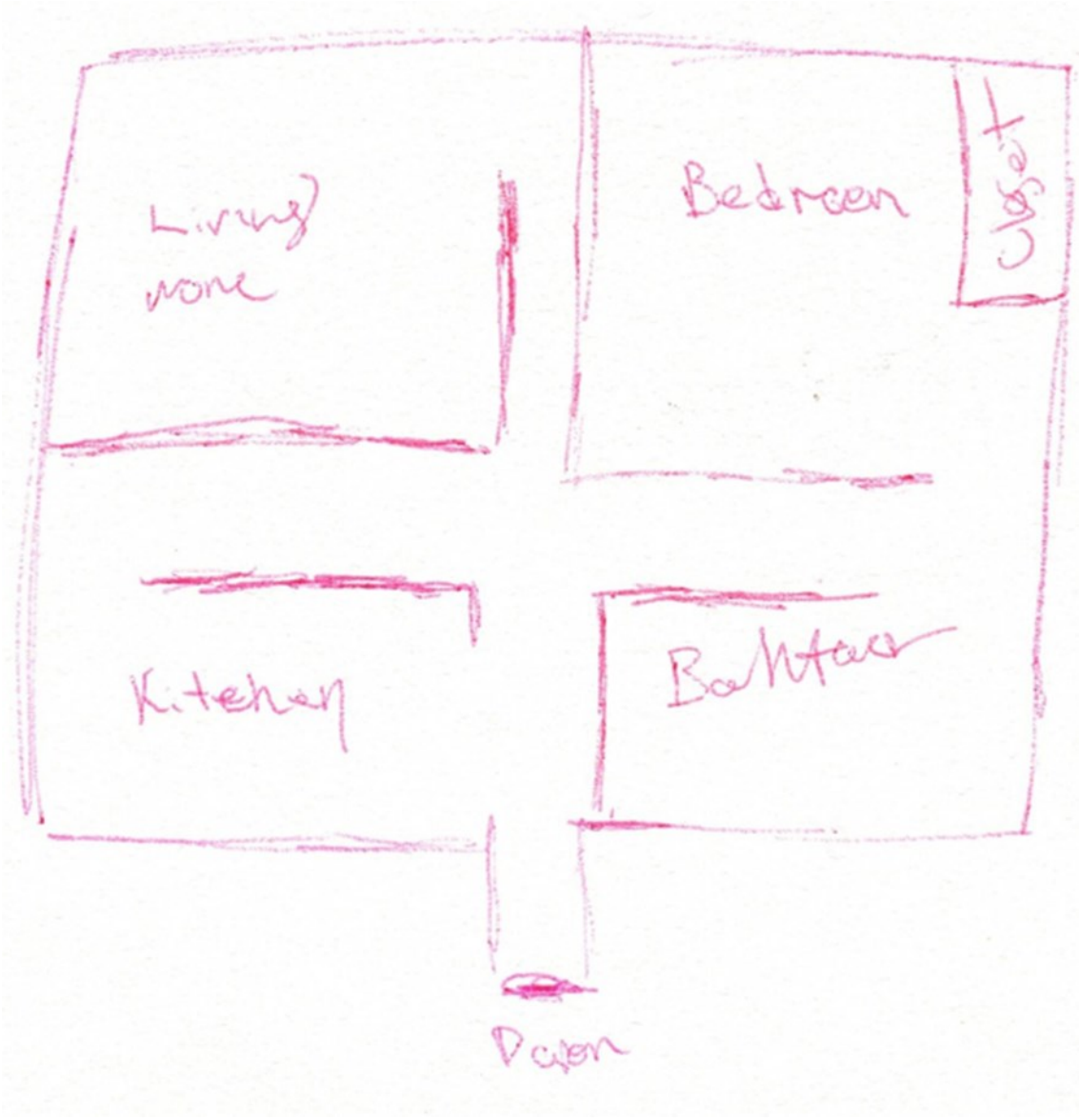


Figure 2

Dean's Floorplan of Ideal Home



Dean also supplies a sketch. It is an unexplained sketch of a small one-bedroom apartment. This type of dwelling is minimalist; it is a sketch of the typical floor plan (see Figure 2). It shows that it is essential for Dean to have a home. They are willing to live in small accommodations. Zac also provides a sketch (see Figure 3). After they finished their sketch, I asked if they could explain their drawing. Zac replies:

> I drew an apartment. Well, not a big apartment, but you've got the main floor, and you got [the] second floor; there is supposed to be stairs. And then you've got [the] third floor. You got the attic. I would like to live in a nice apartment. Well, not a really nice, nice apartment but an apartment that actually says hey, I live here. You know.

Zac dreams of a modest home and somewhere they can be proud to say, "I live here." It does not need to be large but must be nice, which in many ways is similar to Logan's niceish apartment. For a house to be home, Zac needs to be in a place where they feel safe. It can be modest as long as they feel safe and secure.

Molly provides a written answer: "A very modern apartment [with] one room, one bath, laundry, living room, kitchen, and a big balcony with a view" (see Figure 4). In many ways, this apartment is a dream for Molly because this type of dwelling they describe is, in many ways, a dream accommodation. This description is a normative setting of a comfortable one-bedroom apartment.

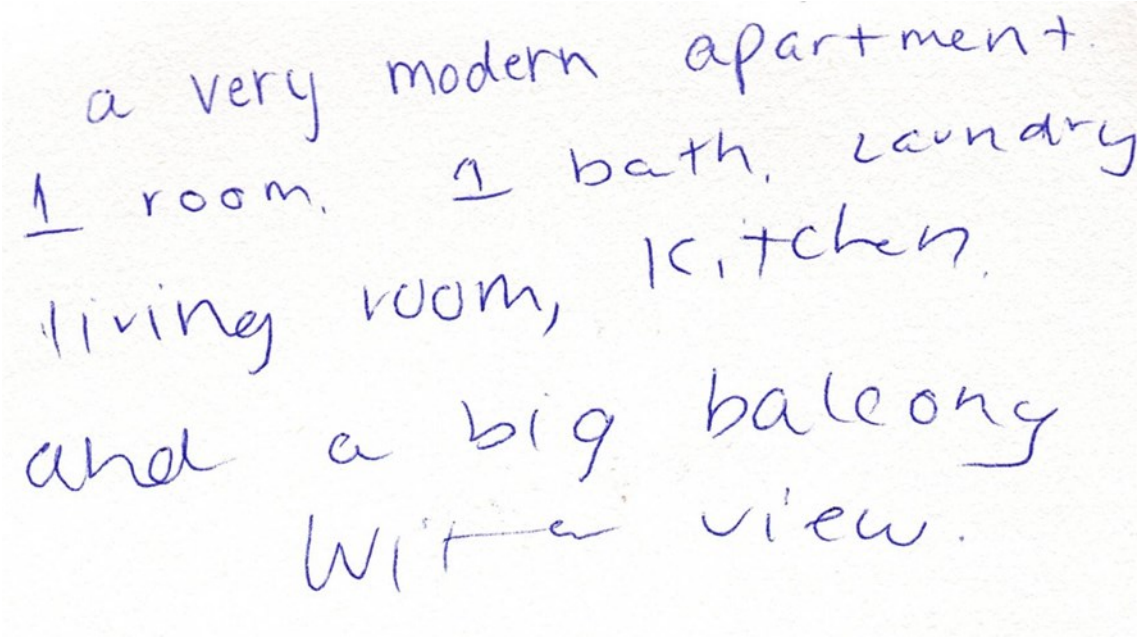
When first asked about their dream home Mike describes it orally as "A very, very expensive house" they then wrote the rest of their answer on paper (see Figure 5): "A home with a two-car garage and a pool." This description describes a white picket fence dream home that; hopefully, they can achieve. Mike also describes their ideal accommodation if they could choose. Tom decides to answer verbally and also desires a home similar to their childhood:

Figure 3

Zac's Sketch of Home

Figure 4

Molly's Description of Ideal Home

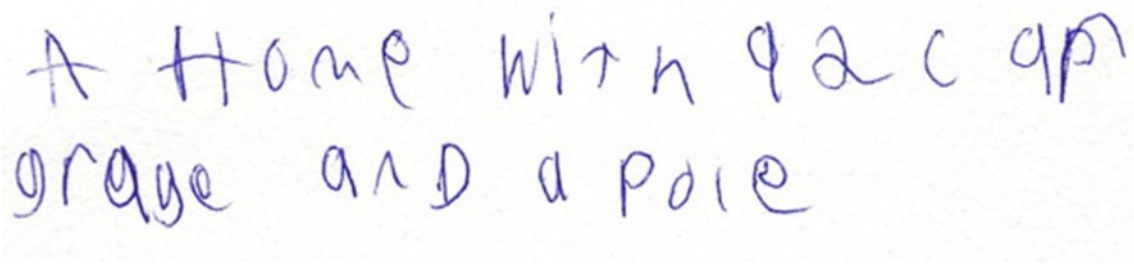


> Oh, like my dream house. Umm. I'd say like a four-bedroom house or something. Two floors. And a garage, you know, a nice backyard, and a deck, definitely. A back deck. And a bar downstairs. That's carried in my family. My grand family. They all have a bar in their basement.

This large house is an idealized dream home. They desire a home similar to their parents or relatives.

Figure 5

Mike's Description of Ideal Home



I will now discuss the image where a youth discusses an ideal home's affective and emotional aspects. Jessica wrote their answer on paper (see Figure 6): "A Home is Where I See the People I love. Smile an[d] laugh; well, every room fills with joy. Live Love Laugh." This description moves home from a dwelling to a place shared with the people you love and moves to it being a home. Live, Love, Laugh is a unique description that does not specify the home's monetary value. For Jessica, sharing with friends and family is critical.

Participant sketches also combine affective and physical characteristics. Chase (YP, Age 19) replies verbally with a "Backyard. Fucking a spot to have a BBQ. Comfortable stuff. . . I prefer a house that I can call my own, and I know [it] is safe." "Probably sharing it with my street homeless. Maybe a couple of them." Chase does not care if they live in a specific part of the city as long as it is safe. Safety is vital for Chase and living with their chosen family. Chase also describes housing that I would view as a white picket fence ideal of a home. Chase desires to share their life with those who matter. Eric (YP, Age 20) provides a sketch and a description (see Figure 7):

> I'm going to sketch a house . . . I'm going [to] draw a mini house. You know, with a puppy in it . . . And the side of the house. And then I draw tree shrubs and stuff like that. And then a heart. I don't really [laughter] know.

This sketch with the small house and a puppy, in many ways, meets the white picket fence romantic ideal (Lucio et al., 2016). Eric also indicates that their location preference would be in a quiet rural area:

> So, I don't be bothered. I [have] wanted it since I was a kid [and] just never change. And I won't. I always wanted a house. When I was a kid, I'd say I wanted to have logs. Little log cabin with the logs. The log cabin. Yeah.

Figure 6

Jessica's Description of Ideal Home

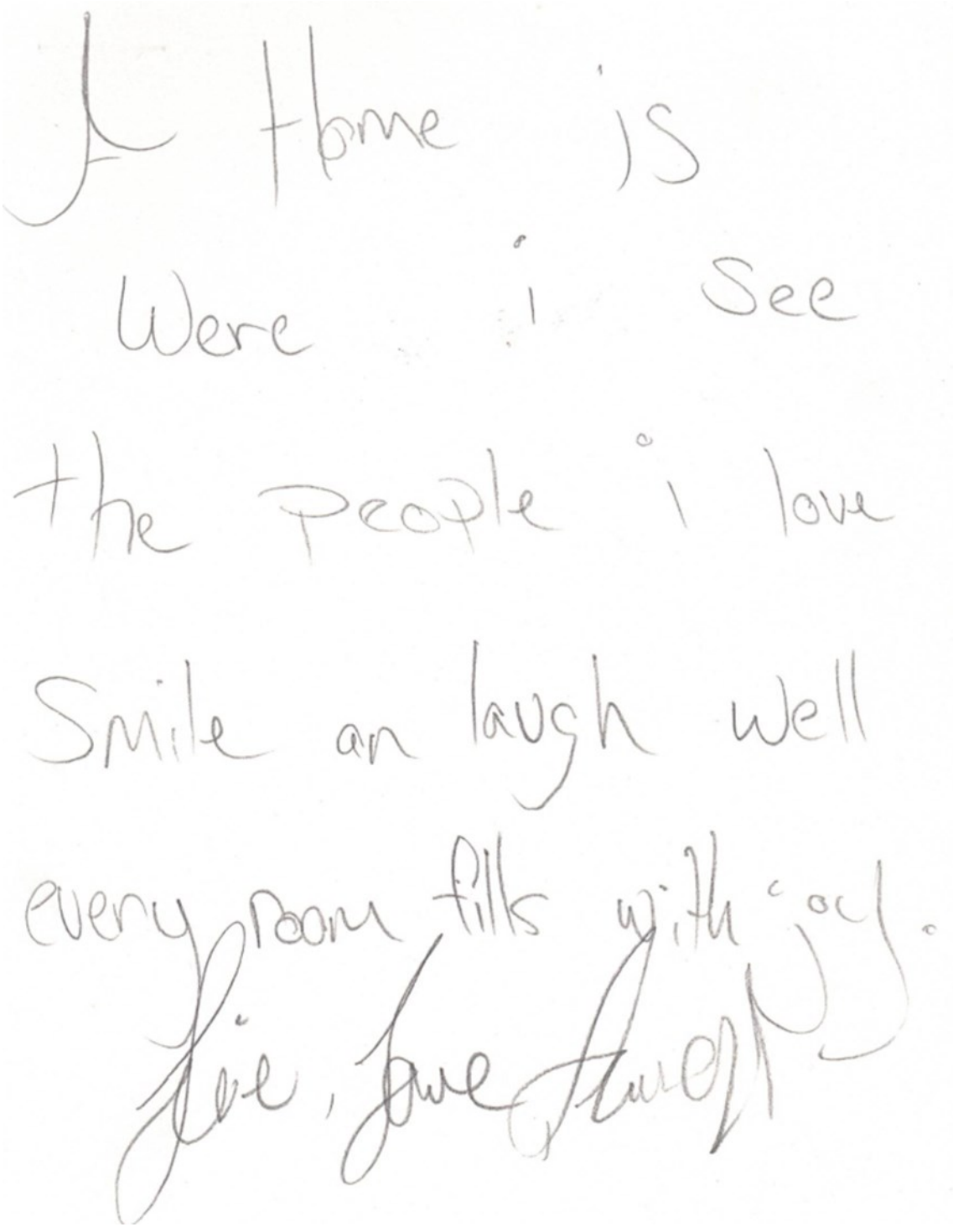


Figure 7

Eric's Sketch of Home

Eric is describing their childhood dream home that, in many ways, probably reflects where they lived before experiencing homelessness. They describe the log cabin as a dream of where they prefer to live. Eric indicates their ideal circumstances include having a place where pets are allowed. Nathan provides less detail than others, answers verbally, and provides a sketch: "Cuz I want a house and that. I want at least not for like three bedrooms and a yard so I can have a dog" (see Figure 8). Nathan desires a spacious dwelling and a pet. Their desire for a home that is beyond their present circumstances and being able to have a pet is essential to them. They also desire a single-family dwelling, not an apartment. Hannah also replies orally:

> So, [my] dream house is a nice two-split, a nice two-story house. That's what I grew up in, in Manitoba. [small town name redacted] not okay. However, two rooms at the bottom, and then the kitchen—big nice kitchen with a nice big island for you to cook on. Pool in the backyard cuz pool and a hot tub because hot tubs [are nice in the] winter. And upstairs there's four bedrooms upstairs, and I imagine. Like all my kids except for the adopted one,[24] just playing in the house. Play[ing] in the pool, jumping on the trampoline, being married to some human. Human thing and have a big family together.

Hannah discusses how their desired home is similar to their childhood; arguably, Hannah's description is a white picket fence ideal. They explain what they consider ideal accommodation, reflecting on their childhood experiences and discussing the relational aspects they desire in a home. Hannah needs to share with the people who matter. Logan explains their drawing (see Figure 9):

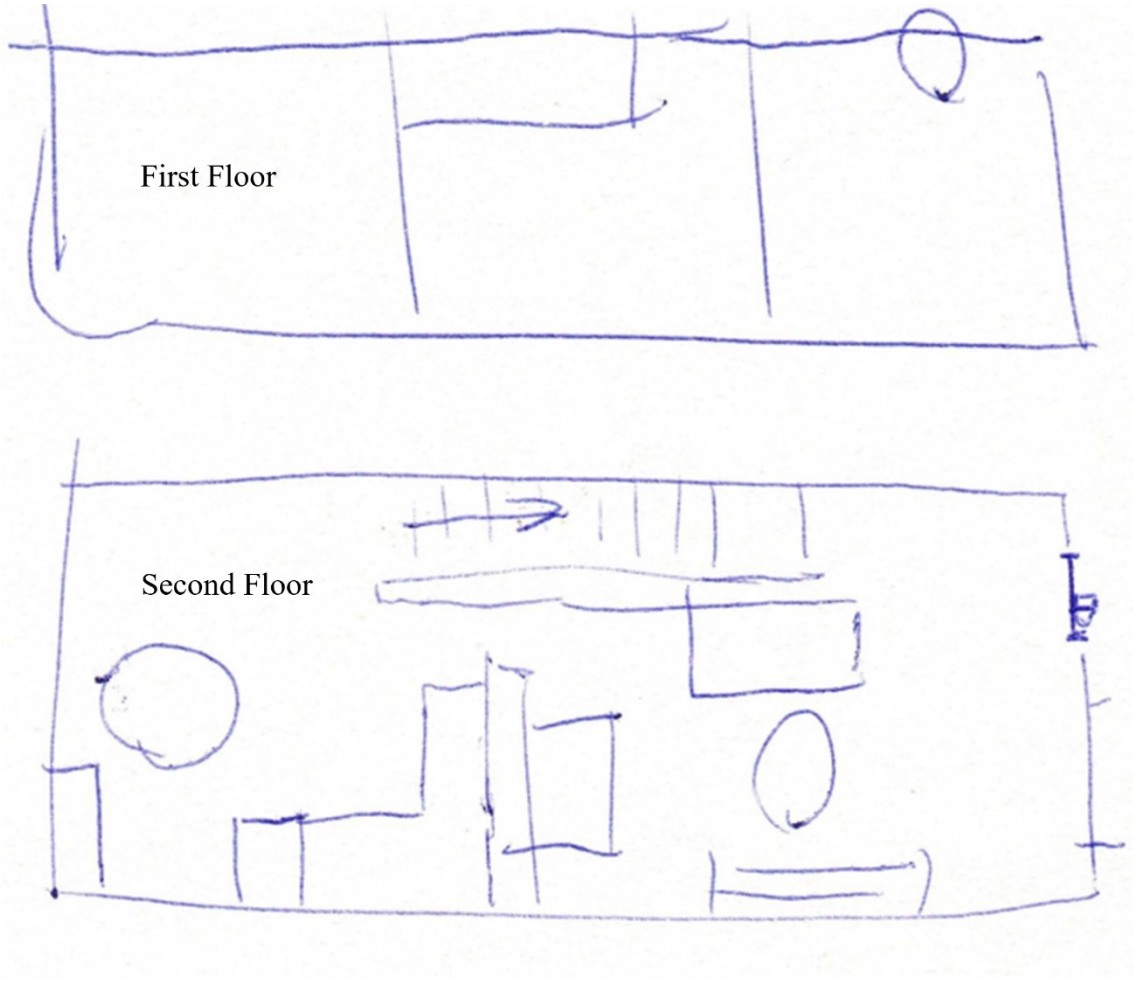
[24] While Hannah was homeless, they became pregnant and decided to give their child up for adoption because they did not want to raise a child while homeless.

Figure 8

Nathan's Sketch of Home

Figure 9

Logan's Floorplan of Ideal Home



> So, I'm going to so that it's locked. Showing it's secure. I think that's important. You don't want people walking into your house and stealing your stuff. I am literally going to make it a row house because I think that's affordable. This is actually like the same floor plan that place I moved into . . . because I learned how to be an adult there, I think so. I think that it was pretty good. So, this is the first floor, and the second floor is going to just be like a bathroom and the bedroom. Let's just say that's what that is.

Logan repeats a central theme in the narratives for many youths, combining that a home needs to be secure and affordable in their sketch and oral explanation. Finding security and affordability in the same place is difficult because many affordable places are in poor repair or unsafe neighbourhoods (National Housing Council, 2022). Their description and sketch provide rich

information about their personal housing preferences. Logan also includes where he became an adult in his ideal home description. They prefer to have a place that meets their needs that, as they are quoted earlier as saying, is niceish, a place that is both safe and affordable. Affordability is essential, but a home must meet what Logan considers niceish standards. Their description goes beyond the white picket fence ideal and describes how they view the home. Sharing with the people that matter is essential for youth.

Youth often desire to live with the people who are important to them. Many youths desire what is similar to their childhood; these idealistic dreams reflect their preference. Their daily life does not live up to these hoped-for ideals. I asked participants to provide me with information about what they consider ideal. Some participants expressed dreams for a life well beyond what they currently live, and other participants indicated what they thought they could achieve given their present circumstances.

Conclusion

Youth who are homeless have many diverse needs and desires that need accommodation for stable housing to be achievable. These needs vary between youths, and some are individual. Therefore, no one common type of dwelling would meet the needs of all youth. All youths need to have a secure and safe place to live. The dwelling also, ideally, should be located near family and friends. Many of these needs compound each other through the cumulative effect of the multiple disadvantages youth who are homeless experience.

Due to poverty, affordability is a concern for most youth who are homeless. Housing cannot be a long-term home if it does not have long-term affordability based on a youth's income. In many ways, long-term affordability is a big problem for youth who are homeless. The rent subsidies provided under HF4Y are short-term subsidies, and planning needs to occur

for how youth can meet rent for their home once exhausted. It is a delicate balancing act to aid youth in obtaining housing in an HF4Y framework because HF4Y foregrounds personal choices. Still, at the same time, this needs to be balanced with assisting youth to have access to the income to maintain their housing after their HF4Y rent supplement ends.

My key takeaway is that housing preferences reflect childhood experiences, and everyone who answers desires to live in a home in an area where they feel safe. All participants desire a place to call home. Participants who dream big express a common theme of having their essential people in their imaginary homes. Many home descriptions describe a home that fits the stereotypical American dream (Hughes, 2003). Some participants have fun dreaming bigger and expressing their ideal world preferences. Others stuck more to what was feasible due to their current circumstances. Youth who are homeless desire more than any place; they want a place to call home.

This chapter focused on youths' desires and needs in the quest for housing and introduces the participants as individuals. Against the backdrop provided by this chapter, upcoming chapters focus on the circumstances that make realizing these desires and needs difficult. I will start with the factors that lead to homelessness in the first place.

Chapter Three: Pathways to Homelessness

In this chapter, I illustrate the precarious lives of many youths who are homeless and the cumulative effects that youth experience due to various marginalizing factors and discrimination. I discuss factors that contribute to becoming homeless in the first place and the factors that contribute to remaining homeless. Economic and social realities mean that people often enter homelessness through no fault of their own.

The reasons for entry into homelessness are diverse and are often beyond personal control. For instance, often, youth are discharged from foster care, mental health services, and corrections without housing in place (Crawford et al., 2015; Falvo, 2022; Gypen et al., 2017; McGee et al., 2017; Winland, 2013; Zerger et al., 2008). Exiting homelessness is difficult once someone becomes homeless. People who fall into homelessness are trapped and have difficulty escaping, and the longer someone is homeless, the more difficult it is to exit homelessness (De Jong, 2019; Dej, 2020). Some youth who are homeless with great childhood adversity may view the streets as a "safe haven" (Karabanow, 2004). These adverse childhood events can include a history of "family dysfunction and/or breakdown; problematic child welfare experiences; physical/sexual/emotional abuse; and severe poverty" (Karabanow, 2004, p. 6). These factors often lead to street involvement and instability, making homelessness more likely. Early exits from homelessness are crucial to success in leaving homelessness permanently.

Aiding youth to exit homelessness is needed because youth who are homeless do not have the extensive homeless experience of adults who have been chronically homeless for years (Meschede, 2011). Kidd et al. (2013) found that the longer someone is homeless, the greater the difficulty of belonging to a non-street life. Therefore, the longer youth stay within the shelter system or live roughly on the street, the more likely they will become entrenched in

homelessness (Gaetz, 2014a). Although entrenchment makes living on the street possible, it also makes exiting homelessness more difficult (Thompson et al., 2006). It is best, in general, to minimize how long someone is homeless because outcomes worsen for people who are homeless long-term (Begun et al., 2018; Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; Cleverley & Kidd, 2011). Further, no two people have identical reasons for homelessness and can encounter multiple barriers.

Literature Review

The reasons for entering homelessness and why people get trapped are connected. The more barriers a youth has, the harder it is to keep and obtain housing. Multiple barriers make it harder to exit homelessness, increase discrimination, and make finding and maintaining housing difficult. These barriers work together to create cumulative disadvantages. Structural barriers that lead to and entrench homelessness are multiple and can accumulate over time (Budescu et al., 2019). Multiple identity categories lead to more obstacles and discrimination that can be challenging to negotiate.

The youth interviews provide general themes that fall into two broad categories: social struggles and discrimination (Sample & Ferguson, 2019; Shaikh & Rawal, 2019). Social struggles include trauma, domestic violence, abuse and violence, addictions, mental health and poverty. These social struggles are often tied within the systemic structural context. Social struggles lead to discrimination. These issues, in many cases, overlap each other and create cumulative disadvantages. Social struggles are shaped by social circumstances of inequality (Gehlert & Mozersky, 2018; Seng et al., 2012). Factors contributing to discrimination include agism, racism, and sexism. Gender and sexual identity also play a role, and being perceived as homeless, gang-involved, or mentally ill (C. C. Collins et al., 2019; Frederick et al., 2011;

Karabanow, 2008; Quirouette et al., 2016; Sample & Ferguson, 2019). These social categories often co-exist (Scott, 2014). These factors contribute to youth having difficulty exiting homelessness and lead to housing precarity for youth who are formerly homeless. Surmounting social struggles is vital to exiting homelessness.

Social Struggles

The youth I interviewed encountered many social struggles, including trauma, domestic violence, abuse and violence, addictions, mental health issues, and poverty. Homelessness is associated with high levels of trauma, both as a cause and a result of homelessness (Evans, 2012). Although incidence rates vary depending on the source, trauma affects many youths who are homeless (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Martijn and Sharpe (2006) found the experience of trauma among youth who are homeless is "virtually universal" (p. 2). Trauma occurs while homeless and can also be a driving factor of entry into homelessness. YESS (n.d.-a) states on their website that all youth served have experienced trauma. Trauma experienced during childhood causes youth who are homeless to be more likely to experience victimization while homeless (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Youth who are homeless have high rates of abuse and neglect. A Canadian study of youth who are homeless found that 24% have experienced abuse, and 42% had a chaotic childhood home (Rattelade et al., 2014). Often this abuse involves issues with parents and family. Due to the prevalence of trauma among participants, it is an important consideration. Understanding the role of trauma in homelessness allows service providers to offer trauma-informed care (Ayre et al., 2020).

Witnessing domestic violence is traumatic and involves abuse within a household between two cohabitating partners and exceeds unpaid rent as a cause of women entering homelessness and drives homelessness for youth (Mostowska & Debska, 2020). Domestic

violence can involve various forms of abuse, including psychological, physical and sexual abuse. Witnessing domestic violence during youth is linked to increased child abuse and homelessness (Cole, 2019; S. B. Collins, 2013). The linkage is often called "the intergenerational transmission of violence" (Petering, 2016, p. 70). At least 80% of youth experiencing homelessness have witnessed domestic violence in childhood (S. Yang, 2011). Youth who are homeless may leave the familial home voluntarily, or parents may ask them to leave. In some cases, leaving home can be to escape the abuse they are witnessing; generally, experiencing abuse or neglect as a child affects youth's mental health, leading to cumulative disadvantages in other areas of life (Seabrook & Avison, 2012).

Many youths who are Indigenous encounter trauma in many aspects of their lives. The trauma includes the intergenerational effects of residential schools[25] and the sixties scoop[26] (Alberton et al., 2020; Bombay et al., 2020; Shaikh & Rawal, 2019). Trauma affecting youth today is related to residential school abuse (Baskin, 2013). Many residential school survivors lack parenting skills to raise children due to the normalization of systemic abuse (Shaikh & Rawal, 2019; Sinclair & Grekul, 2012; Thistle, 2017). Youth and children who are Indigenous comprise 8% of the general Canadian population but alarmingly were 52% of youth in foster care (Alberton et al., 2020). The trauma of residential schools and the sixties scoop continues to affect youth who are Indigenous and is linked to overrepresentation in the foster care system today and systemic racism toward people who are Indigenous (Alberton et al., 2020; Baskin,

[25] Residential schools were designed to assimilate Indigenous peoples and eliminate Indigenous cultures (McKinney, 2022). Christian churches ran these schools, and abuse was rampant (McKinney, 2022). The goal was "to kill the Indian in the child" (Zawadzka, 2015, p. 4).

[26] The sixties scoop was "the large-scale removal of Indigenous children from their families between the 1950s and 1990s" (Bombay et al., 2020, p. 63). The removed children were "placed with non-Indigenous families across Canada, the US, and abroad" (Bombay et al., 2020, p. 65). It resulted from the residential school system (Bombay et al., 2020).

2013; Bombay et al., 2020; Molgat, 2018; Thistle, 2017). Due to discrimination, people who are Indigenous have high rates of homelessness.

Canada-wide, people who are Indigenous are overrepresented in homeless numbers (McGee et al., 2017). The 2016 Canadian Census found that youth who were Indigenous in large Canadian cities such as Ottawa and Vancouver comprised 20% to 30% of youth who were homeless (Ansloos et al., 2021). Zooming in on Edmonton, five percent of Edmonton's population identifies as Indigenous (McGee et al., 2017). HTE (2023b) data from July 2023 indicates that 57% of Edmonton's homeless are Indigenous. Due to the prevalence of out-of-home care for youth who are Indigenous, it is essential to consider how the intergenerational trauma people who are Indigenous experience leads to the over-representation of Indigenous youth among youth who are homeless. This discrimination increases the difficulty of finding housing. Indigenous youth who are homeless need to be "twice as good" compared to other applicants (Belanger et al., 2019, p. 12). Youth who are homeless often experience systemic racism and related discrimination and trauma (Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018).

Trauma can occur in the family of origin, resulting in foster care involvement or homelessness (Evans, 2012; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018; Winland et al., 2011; Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2020; Zerger et al., 2008). Many youths' trauma experiences began before foster care involvement, and it can continue while in foster care, and it disrupts family support that aids in avoiding homelessness as an adult (Crawford et al., 2015; Rome & Raskin, 2019; Trejos-Castillo et al., 2015). Many youths exiting foster care do not have someone to co-sign a lease or provide a stable home base (Rome & Raskin, 2019; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018; Zerger et al., 2008; Zufferey, 2017). Youth leaving foster care often lack secure attachment to caregivers that aid in preventing homelessness (Bassuk et al., 1997; Piat et al., 2015). Foster care

is unstable, and when youth exit care, they often lack independent living skills (Axe et al., 2020; Gaetz, 2013; Gypen et al., 2017; Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019; Shaikh & Rawal, 2019). Youth are often homeless when leaving foster care due to a lack of discharge planning (Basi et al., 2012; Evans, 2012; Falvo, 2022; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Substance use is often related to trauma and foster care involvement.

Over 50% of youth who are homeless have substance use problems (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Even if youths are not addicted when they become homeless, the realities of homelessness often increase substance use (Evans, 2012). Youth who are homeless consume drugs at many times the rate of youth who are housed; they are four times as likely to use heroin, five times more likely to use hallucinogens, seven times as likely to use crack and cocaine, and three times more likely to use marijuana (Evans, 2012). These high rates of drug use lead to a greater risk of overdose and youth engaging in high-risk activities. People with addictions sometimes deal drugs, engage in prostitution, or steal to feed their addiction(s) (Forchuk et al., 2013; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013; Slesnick et al., 2018). These behaviours lead to greater precarity once housed and create difficulty in obtaining housing (Basi et al., 2012; Slesnick et al., 2018). Mental health issues often are intertwined with substance use.

Youth who are homeless compared to youth who are housed have higher rates of mental health issues (O'Reilly et al., 2009). Estimates of rates of depression are significantly greater for youth who are homeless than the general youth population. In the general youth population, depression rates are between 2% and 8%, and in youth who are homeless, depression rates are between 15% and 50% (Evans, 2012). Suicide rates for youth who are homeless are higher than for youth who are housed (Frederick et al., 2012). Poverty is related to substance use and mental health issues in many ways.

Poverty, in many ways, drives homelessness and poverty in families. Poverty is often intergenerational (Aubry et al., 2021; Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Evans, 2012; Fraser et al., 2019; Ngo et al., 2017; B. A. Robinson, 2020; Schwan, French, et al., 2018; Woods, 2018). Poverty beginning during childhood, can negatively affect child development and has no simple solution (B. A. Robinson, 2020; Schwan, French, et al., 2018).

Poverty intersects with many other obstacles and is also an outcome of obstacles encountered (Rome & Raskin, 2019). Almost a third of youth who are homeless considered insufficient money the main issue when working to exit homelessness (Sample & Ferguson, 2019). This lack of sufficient funds is a systemic issue worsened by the lack of affordable housing and, in many ways, is outside of personal control and can be linked to childhood experiences (Shaikh & Rawal, 2019).

Due to circumstances beyond a child's or youth's control, a family may have difficulty having enough money to pay for the basics needed for survival (Trainor et al., n.d.). Not paying rent will often result in eviction, and the family will lose their home. Just over 40% of youth who are homeless have experienced eviction at least once (Turner, n.d.). Eviction causes families to move, sometimes multiple times, resulting in many changes in schools and communities, making it difficult to make and keep friends and be comfortable with teachers and counsellors at schools (Berg & Brännström, 2018). Once evicted, it becomes challenging to find affordable mainstream housing.

Poverty and housing unaffordability are the root causes of homelessness for many people (Evans, 2012). The unaffordability of housing is related to high utility costs, high market rents and inadequate income (Shaikh & Rawal, 2019). Market housing is unaffordable to many youths who are homeless, and the waitlists for subsidized housing are long (Kolkman, 2020; Shaikh &

Rawal, 2019). Waitlists are growing faster than people are housed (Kolkman, 2020; Wyton, 2020). As mentioned earlier, in Edmonton, wait lists exceed 6,000 households (Kolkman, 2020), and it is not a direct wait list (Civida, 2020).

Edmonton's Affordable Housing Strategy aimed to build 2,500 new units, but only 776 were built (Kolkman, 2020). Exacerbating the situation when the need is growing, Premier Kenney's government cut funding for rental assistance by 24% in the October 2019 provincial budget (Kolkman, 2020). Subsidy cutbacks and the growing wait lists make affording housing difficult. These social struggles and poverty intertwine with discrimination.

Experiences with Discrimination

Discrimination makes accessing and maintaining housing difficult and makes it easier to enter homelessness than exit (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Slesnick et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2006). Struggles with discrimination in homeless individuals' daily lives include ageism, racism, and sexism. Gender and sexual identity also play a role, and being perceived as homeless, gang-involved or mentally ill (Budescu et al., 2019; Gaetz et al., 2022; Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Sample & Ferguson, 2019; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). It is impossible to separate someone into component parts; therefore, simultaneous consideration of multiple identity categories is necessary.

The reasons for homelessness that youths encounter often intersect, and they can accumulate over time. Cumulative disadvantage looks at inequalities compounded throughout life (Seabrook & Avison, 2012). Narrowing discrimination to a specific characteristic is difficult, if not impossible (Budescu et al., 2019). In many ways, discrimination and poverty intertwine. Age-based discrimination is a problem for youth who are homeless.

Youth who are homeless often encounter age-based discrimination when seeking housing (Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA) et al., 2021). Age-based discrimination is the norm for youth rather than an exception (CERA et al., 2021; Mayock & Parker, 2023). This discrimination is problematic because youth is not a legally protected class (CERA et al., 2021). Without formal legal protections, youth who are homeless are more likely to suffer the consequences of this discrimination (CERA et al., 2021; Mayock & Parker, 2023). Youth experiencing homelessness often lack "personal safety nets," especially if they were involved with foster care (Mayock & Parker, 2023, p. 171). Youths also often have insufficient income to show they can afford the rent or lack rental and credit history, which makes renting to youth a business risk for a landlord (CERA et al., 2021). Racialized individuals experience increased discrimination (Abramovich & Kimura, 2019; Fraser et al., 2019; Gaetz, O'Grady, et al., 2013; McCullough et al., 2023; Sample & Ferguson, 2019; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). Discrimination is a systemic structural issue faced by all people who are racialized, including people who are Indigenous.

People who are Indigenous encounter stereotyping that makes them more likely to experience homelessness due to stereotypes such as "lazy Indian" or "drunken homeless Native," creating difficulties in finding housing and employment (Thistle, 2017, p. 26). The statistics surrounding homeless rates for youth who are Indigenous are alarming. "[O]ne in fifteen urban Indigenous people were homeless, compared to one out of 128 non-Indigenous Canadians" (Belanger et al., 2019, p. 9). This pronounced difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous homelessness is staggering. It shows the depth of discrimination and the structural inequalities of violence and trauma that people who are Indigenous encounter daily. Gender is also a factor intertwined with racialization and Indigeneity.

Gender must be considered simultaneously with other characteristics (Mena et al., 2019). A Vancouver study of youth living on the street estimated that between one-third and one-half were girls (Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015). Being homeless as a youth who is female leads to high rates of sexual assault and harassment (Lenon, 2000; Saddichha et al., 2014). Due to safety concerns, women avoid homeless services as much as possible, preferring to remain hidden and less visible and take on domestic roles or engage in survival sex to avoid absolute homelessness (Klodawsky, 2006; Schwan et al., 2020). There is also an issue of inadequate resources to meet the needs of women and girls. There is a lack of gender-specific support (Schwan et al., 2020). The lack of services includes underfunding women-specific services, including services for the victims of domestic violence (Schwan et al., 2020). Gender minority youth also encounter significant discrimination while homeless.

Youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+ often experience homelessness due to family rejection of their identity (Abramovich, 2017; Abramovich & Kimura, 2019; Shelton & Abramovich, 2019). Many homeless shelters assume a gender binary in service provision, making it difficult for youth who are LGBTQ2S+ to access much-needed services (Abramovich & Kimura, 2019; Chapple, 2020; B. A. Robinson, 2020). Youth who are transgender have safety concerns accessing services due to gender-neutral facilities not being commonplace. Gender identity is often not accounted for in many services, which leaves the youth with the option of either hiding the fact that they are gender diverse or being unable to access services that are not gender sensitive (Abramovich, 2016, 2017; Abramovich & Kimura, 2019; Chapple, 2020; B. A. Robinson, 2020). Due to poverty and lack of support systems, youth who are homeless are often recruited to join gangs.

Marginalized youth are more likely to be gang-involved (J. Yang et al., 2021). Some youth become involved in gangs to receive support, and a sense of belonging that is not available from their families (Evans, 2012). Gangs often recruit homeless and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth (Ngo et al., 2017; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018; Sinclair & Grekul, 2012). Youth who are homeless who were in the foster care system are at higher risk for gang involvement due to a lack of support (J. Yang et al., 2021). These factors create a disconnect between youth and mainstream society (Gaetz, O'Grady, et al., 2013; HTE, n.d.-a; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). Due to the criminality of gangs, this association can lead to criminal and other antisocial behaviour (Quirouette et al., 2016). The factors discussed above intertwine; stereotypes play an enormous role in the discrimination for youth who are homeless.

Lastly, youth who are homeless also face barriers such as being "read as" homeless, gang-involved, or mentally unstable. For example, in a New York City study, Budescu et al. (2019) found that 81% of homeless individuals experienced discrimination for being homeless at least once. This discrimination often is based on appearance. Stereotypically homelessness is associated with being dirty, gang-involved and mentally ill, and landlords or employers are unwilling to rent to or employ people who fit these stereotypes (Budescu et al., 2019; Gnawa, 2016). These stereotypes make exiting homelessness extremely difficult and compound the longer a person is homeless.

Voices of Participants

Due to how these issues intersect for many youths who are homeless, the issues discussed above do not neatly separate into categories. The discussion below highlights these areas, and my discussion artificially detaches some areas of youth's experiences to aid understanding.

Social Struggles

The youth I interview encounter many social struggles: trauma, domestic violence, abuse and violence, addictions, mental health issues and poverty. Hannah experiences several intersecting marginalizations that led to their homeless experience. They experience domestic violence and LGBTQ2S+ discrimination by their family. Domestic violence for Hannah and their parents not accepting they are LGBTQ2S+ intersect. Abuse and foster care involvement resulted in their homelessness. These challenges accumulate over Hannah's lifetime resulting in cumulative disadvantage. Hannah discusses their experience with the trauma from domestic violence fuelled by alcohol use and how it both contributes to their homelessness and also resulted in homelessness due to reacting to the violence by assaulting their step-parent:

> It's not cuz of my mom that I don't want to go back, and it's because of my stepfather that I don't want to go back there because he is a heavy, heavy, heavy, heavy, heavy alcoholic. And he made it made me, my brother and my twin unsafe, and he was actually the reason why we got kicked out because I called him a dumb cunt. Because he was drunk and he was beating on my mother, so I decided to beat on him. And that went to that end. Yeah.

Several participants were kicked out or experienced abuse or rejection in the home, resulting in homelessness or child welfare involvement. Hannah further discusses how their parents indicated that they are no longer allowed at their parent's home:

> Well, I first started with group homes cuz young age and defiance against my mother was a lot. So, I went to a group homes and then back home. Defy her, group home, back home, defied her and she finally had enough of our shit [and] kicked both me and my brother out for being bisexual and being transgender. The day we came out, we were at school, and by the time we got home, the bags were packed at the door saying. Hey, please leave. You're no longer welcome in this house.

These stories from Hannah demonstrate how easy it is to get kicked out of one's home and into the child welfare system. Abuse or eviction can be related to a lack of support for a youth's identity or conflict in a household resulting in expulsion for youth who experience structural

vulnerability and discrimination. Youth who are LGBTQ2S+ will often end up in foster care or homeless. Many participants left their familial home or foster care at a young age. Like Hannah, several participants describe their childhood home(s) as violent and abusive. Jade called their parental home a "toxic environment." They will not voluntarily return home. Jessica dealt with abuse and homelessness at a young age:

> I've had it pretty rough. I was homeless at a very young age. At the age of 11, on and off. Between [foster] homes, being on the street. It's not, it's not not what you expected it to be, and it's definitely not what it seems to be for sure. It, it takes a toll, a lot of abuse.

Later in our interview, Jessica discusses being kicked out by their parents because of complex family dynamics surrounding horrific sexual violence: "My mom's ex-boyfriend raped me, and that's why they kicked me out because she didn't believe me." Jessica is at the intersection of domestic violence, sexual abuse and homelessness at a young age. Substance use and misuse are also widespread among youth who are homeless.

Seven youth participants identify drug and alcohol abuse as reasons for youth becoming homeless. Drug abuse and partying can lead to youth losing their residence and family support (Gaetz, 2014a). Drug and alcohol use by parents or other family members can also cause loss of a place and family support. Tom summarizes this point: "I got kicked out of my dad's house . . . because he didn't like that I smoked weed." Family, roommates and landlords often think drug and alcohol use and abuse are inappropriate and will sometimes kick youth out for engaging in this behaviour, making them homeless again. In the Vancouver Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, substance users experienced increased evictions (Kennedy et al., 2017). Substance abuse is linked in many ways to mental illness.

Mental health is also an issue contributing to homelessness for some participants. Logan indicates this is a "tough challenge" due to the isolation and service disruption of the COVID

pandemic. Due to the lack of structure and the precarity of homelessness, it is difficult to deal with mental health issues. These situational factors complicate coping with a mental illness, resulting in difficulties in exiting homelessness and making it easier to become homeless (Kidd, 2013). Mental illness is not a significant concern for participants when the immediate crisis is shelter and food (O'Reilly et al., 2009). Logan states: "I feel like [homelessness is] more of an issue than mental health . . . . cuz you can't get mentally okay until you are stable." Dean thought shelters are "full of chaos . . . with youth having triggers of their own." Nathan expresses a similar idea:

> You're not really focusing about your health problems . . . when you're homeless. Me, it was focusing on what you're doing today, where you're going to eat. Where you're going to stay? As a matter of fact, I didn't care about anything else about my mental [health] issues. It was more just, you know—basic, basic your basic needs of survival that's what [is important].

Homelessness is a precarious position lacking stability (Dolson, 2015; Fraser et al., 2019). Jessica discusses drug addiction and how drug use is often a way to escape for youth who are street-involved. Due to high rates of mental health issues and suicide, mental health services should be treated as a basic need. Living on the streets is not easy due to physical conditions and discrimination, so often, drug use makes the situation more liveable:

> So, when I first became homeless, I got addicted to drugs. I did everything and anything I could. But I would never sell myself. I got into drinking and almost got killed a couple of times. I've been shot and stabbed. I've been drugged. I've been [drugged] especially being homeless. I've OD'd almost six times as well, as, on top of that, my depression got really bad from it. And then, just being homeless, a lot of people don't realize. Like you know where you know like you have bushes and a lot of things happen in the bushes. I've been. I was raped three times in six years [and] assaulted four times.

This drug use is, in many ways, problematic because of the problems surrounding it. Physical or sexual assault is common for youth while homeless, and if anything, substance use increases violent experiences (McGee et al., 2017; Paradise & Cauce, 2002; Rattelade et al., 2014; Walsh

& Donaldson, 2010). Due to it being illegal to use most substances, the use of substances increases violent experiences. Using drugs and assaulting someone can lead to time in jail which compounds other issues and makes homelessness more likely. Substance use and gang involvement intertwine.

The majority of youth participants spoke about avoiding gangs and gang-ridden areas. In Edmonton, youth indicated neighbourhoods having high gang activity, including Whyte Avenue, Coliseum area, and downtown. Several youths spoke about wanting to live in a safe, gang-free area. Jessica had gang involvement with the "Crazy Indians" and "Red Alert." Their gang involvement led to physical and drug abuse; Jessica was in jail "with charges up the ass." Ryan mentions that they "used to till I moved here to Edmonton, and that's when like I can't do this anymore. So, then I just pulled myself up." Therefore, living away from these problem areas can be important for youth, particularly those with previous gang or drug involvement.

All of these social struggles intertwine with poverty. Poverty is alluded to in many interviews but not always directly addressed. Poverty is often a primary driver of homelessness and can be intergenerational. Poverty within the childhood home and in a family can contribute to homelessness. A family may be unable to provide housing to youth with nowhere to go due to space constraints or landlord regulations.

The rent would increase for families in subsidized housing (Civida, n.d.-b). Further, for example, (Civida, n.d.-a) also restricts occupancy to specific types of family members. An additional occupant may exceed national occupancy standards[27] for the number of bedrooms the

[27] Many social housing providers began using national occupancy standards in the 1990s to decide the number of bedrooms a household needs (NRHN, 2022). In these guidelines, no more than two people can share a bedroom, a married or common-law couple can share a bedroom, single parents need their own bedroom, members over 18 and not living in a relationship need their own bedroom, children and youth under 18 can share a bedroom but only children under five can share a bedroom with a sibling of opposite sex (NRHN, 2022).

household requires (The National Right to Housing Network (NRHN), 2022). If the change in occupancy is unreported to the housing provider, it may result in eviction and mean a family cannot house a youth.

Dean discusses how their grandparents could not aid them by preventing homelessness. "My grandparents couldn't take me in cuz they have a small house. So, I had to refer to [the] homeless shelter for the time being." Dean experiences homelessness due to their family having too small of a residence to accommodate them. Of course, the space constraint can also be an excuse if they are unwilling to upend their lifestyle, resulting in their grandchild being homeless. Poverty is a crucial issue intertwined with homelessness.

Familial socioeconomic status also affects the likelihood of someone becoming homeless. Leslie (PP) discusses how youth from families of higher socio-economic status are at lower risk of becoming homeless because they receive more financial support from their families:

> So, umm, children who are raised in poverty umm aren't often given the same opportunity umm as children [who] were raised in riches. Umm. To get their first apartment, to have that, umm, support to pay for school. To pay for, you know, whatever, and so umm, we see a lot of that. Umm . . . really frustrating and disheartening umm. But also, we see a lot of umm. Like I've seen a lot.

Youth who do not have access to these kinds of financial resources are unable to escape the poverty cycle, leaving the subsequent generation vulnerable, as Leslie explains:

> A lack of parental support, umm or family of origin support in general. As well as umm systemic barriers that youth face umm when growing up in poverty. Umm. We have a lot of clients that we housed umm, and then their children come back in the program, and so, I was actually talking to someone recently about that umm, and she just like noticing like different last name and decided to take a deeper dive umm and she said that we do sometimes have that where we'll house an adult, and then they'll have children with them, and then their children will come back in the program at a later time umm, and so yeah it's a combination of systemic and family origin umm barriers.

Leslie further highlights the disparity between educational opportunities for youths of higher and lower socio-economic status by relaying their personal experience:

> Yup, umm, so as I was saying, if a family is or is raising children in poverty, umm, generally, the children aren't given the same opportunity. The same umm experience umm as other youth might be. Umm. Actually, speaking from like personal experience, I grew up in low-income housing in [Maritime province redacted], umm and just like. The opportunity for like my parents to pay for college or to encourage college or to pursue that. I mean, my dad had a grade eight education, and my mom had a grade eleven education. So, there wasn't a whole ton they could contribute to my future. Umm, and so, yeah, I see that a lot with my clients as well.

Leslie describes how poverty means youth from low-income families start at a disadvantage that compounds during their life course. Leslie emphasizes that parents' level of education plays a vital role in determining whether or not the child completes secondary or tertiary education. Their story suggests that youth from families with lower educational attainment may not have the opportunity to achieve higher education, thus limiting their options for employment.

Poverty sometimes means relying on government financial assistance. Youth under 18 are very restricted from accessing financial aid (Government of Alberta, 2020). Youth under 18 are eligible for funding as full-time learners but must be pregnant, a single parent or in a cohobating relationship (Government of Alberta, 2020). For youth who do not meet one of these three criteria, approval is the exception rather than the rule. Approval requires a letter from the youth and a professional explaining their circumstances (Government of Alberta, 2020). The COVID pandemic also made it more challenging to obtain Alberta Supports because government offices were closed; phone or the internet was the only way to access income support. Even when received, government financial assistance is inadequate to meet basic needs. Intertwined with social struggles and poverty, youth who are homeless experience discrimination.

Experiences with Discrimination

Many youths experience issues with discrimination. Discrimination adds to the daily barriers that youth experience, making it harder to find a way out of homelessness. Jessica, as a White female, experiences discrimination:

> It's been detrimental. Honestly, I've had a couple [of] times where I used to get hit all the time for. I used to get all my shit taxed,[28] like taken from me just because just because I was White. Or just cuz I had blond hair and I was a little bit younger.

Jessica experiences discrimination for being White, female, and younger. It is often thought that being White is always advantageous, but for Jessica, the interaction of being a youth, being female, and White creates disadvantages. On the other hand, Logan is at a relative advantage regarding discrimination. Logan, a White male youth, equates their experiences to winning the lottery due to being a White male and does not think either ethnicity or gender marginalizes them. They did not feel they experience discrimination based on those two intersecting statuses. Logan states that their ethnicity "Had a positive impact because I don't look like someone who is homeless." Logan is not visibly homeless.

In an unrecorded interview, Jade also discusses how younger youth are more vulnerable to manipulation, making efforts at housing younger youth quickly essential to help prevent this manipulation (Haldenby et al., 2007). Being more susceptible to manipulation is due to the developmental stage of the youth (Bergman et al., 2019; McParland et al., 2019). Youth, particularly younger youth, are easily manipulated and must be housed quickly. A further factor is that younger HF participants have greater success in housing than older participants meaning

[28] Taxed is the term Jessica uses to describe being robbed.

that housing youth who are homeless quickly can reduce rates of chronic homelessness for adults. Jazmin states this idea eloquently:

> I'm not even sure if it's that they appreciate it more or just due to their age. They haven't had that instability of someone who's coming in with Housing First in maybe their 30s or 40s. Coming in as Housing First when you're 15 [or] 16, you haven't had that same [experience]. In and out. In and out.

Jazmin's observation of how younger youth do better and are more stable when housed means it is crucial to house youth as early as possible in their homeless journey.

Logan also spoke to the challenge of being stereotypically homeless and its intersection with age "Because some private landlords will just say no because you look scraggly or young." Mike also discusses how landlords discriminate against people who are homeless, "Like ah some landlords will look into if you are on the street for or whatever. Some landlords will think if you're on the streets, you don't have any money." Hannah also discusses a similar sentiment:

> Always. Like. You get frowned upon as soon as you exit the shelter in Edmonton. As soon as they see you and where you're from, you get frowned upon. And they're like, oh, you're homeless. Well, we don't trust you with a job. We don't trust you with money. We don't trust you with this. And it's like, why not? You haven't even give[n] me a shot.

Logan, Mike, and Hannah discuss how homelessness makes landlords discriminate against you. If you fit the homeless stereotype or are seen leaving a homeless resource, landlords will be less likely to rent to you. The existence of this homeless stereotype points to the importance of showers, laundry and clothing donations to make finding employment or accommodation possible.

A YP indicates that the availability of gender-neutral bathroom and shower facilities at YESS is very positive for transgender or gender non-binary youth. Significantly, all of the washrooms at the Nexus shelter were being renovated and turned into gender-neutral facilities in March 2020 when I last volunteered. The bathrooms at ARC are all gender. This change is

positive for transgender and nonbinary youth. Pathways into homelessness for youth are diverse, and I will now discuss two youths' pathways to homelessness.

Youths' Journeys into Homelessness

This section about homeless journeys for youth highlights the social struggles and discrimination that youth who are homeless experience in their lives and illustrates how they compound over time, creating cumulative disadvantages. No two youths have identical pathways to becoming homeless and working to obtain housing. I will now discuss Logan and Hannah's pathways leading to homelessness. I chose to use these stories as exemplars because Logan and Hannah provided in-depth information about their experiences and illustrated the diverse pathways to homelessness for youth.

Logan left their childhood home voluntarily and obtained work in construction. Logan lost their construction employment and, as such, could not meet their rent. They then couch-surfed for six months until they exhausted the support of their friends. When unable to couch surf, they came to the Nexus overnight shelter. It was a year before Logan obtained housing through HF4Y. HF4Y assisted with their rent for about six months and supplied start-up supplies, including food and furniture (Find, n.d.).[29] Logan then became briefly homeless for one month and was rehoused by HF4Y. In many ways, Logan's pathway to homelessness revolved around financial issues. Their story indicates that housing support is vital, and sometimes re-housing is necessary. For many youths, a first response like Logan's is to couch surf when they become homeless. Couch surfing increases the vulnerability that youth who are homeless experience because they do not have tenant rights and couch surfing delays homeless

[29] Find (n.d.) works with social agencies housing HF clients and provides free used furnishing for their new homes.

service access, increasing time spent homeless. Logan would have had difficulty obtaining housing independently due to the precarity of homeless living. Logan's journey demonstrates the importance of HF4Y programs for youth who are homeless.

Hannah first experienced homelessness at age 14. Due to their young age and conflict with their parents, they moved numerous times. Hannah described their experience: "It was jumping from shelter to shelter; house to house; group home [to] group home; and mental hospitals to find a nice bed to sleep." The episodic movement from home to other housing settings became permanent when their twin came out as transgender, and they came out as bisexual at school. Their bags were packed when they returned home from school. They were no longer welcome at their home. Compared to Logan's, Hannah's homeless pathway revolved around family conflict due to defying their parent and LGBTQ2S+ identity. They had the disadvantage of multiple moves in childhood. They returned home multiple times only to leave again. These multiple moves, whether from foster care placements or others, create instability and precarity for youth. The multiple moves often mean that they lack the support that youth obtain from family and other people they are close to.

These two examples demonstrate that homelessness is often beyond a youth's control and that family conflict and loss of employment are frequent causes for youth to enter or re-enter homelessness. For Logan, homelessness was caused by economic circumstances due to job loss and the inability to pay rent. For Hannah, homelessness was an issue of family conflict and LGBTQ2S+ identity. The pathways to homelessness and the work to exit differ depending on the youths' circumstances and the cumulative disadvantages they experience.

Conclusion

Housing youth permanently and early in the homeless journey in housing that meets their desires and needs is essential because it prevents entrenchment in homelessness. The longer someone remains homeless, the harder it is to leave it behind because, in many ways, a homelessness exit requires adaptation (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; HTE, n.d.-a; Kuskoff & Mallett, 2016). Upon exit, adaptation is also needed (Magwood et al., 2019).

Youths become and remain homeless for many interrelated reasons. Many of these reasons result from different social struggles intersecting with each other. In some cases, disadvantaging circumstances compound and create discrimination. The discussion above artificially separates many of the stories of youth participants for ease of description. These factors are not separate in the real world and need simultaneous, holistic consideration.

Individual youth have different "hardships and stressful life events" that lead to homelessness in the first place and also act as barriers to obtaining housing (Peressini, 2007, p. 112). Support services must consider personal obstacles and work to overcome them (Peressini, 2007). HF4Y is an appropriate response to youth homelessness because it considers the complexities of lived histories and understands the ongoing barriers experienced.

The next chapter will discuss the structural and institutional barriers that must be navigated to leave homelessness behind. I will discuss three general themes: getting a job, getting a place, and navigating government support. These work together to create Catch-22 scenarios, such as needing an address to apply for work and needing work to secure housing and satisfying the interlocking conditions while homeless is difficult or impossible.

Chapter Four: Structural and Institutional Barriers that Create Homelessness and Make Exit Difficult

People who are homeless encounter multiple structural and institutional disadvantages that compound over time, making homelessness challenging to exit (Frederick et al., 2012; Peressini, 2007; Robards et al., 2019; Seabrook & Avison, 2012; Uggen & Wakefield, 2007). The structural factors at play lead to cumulative disadvantages related to poverty and discrimination, making assistance in finding housing essential to surmount the numerous barriers youth who are homeless face (B. A. Robinson, 2020).

Barriers exist for all youth to obtain housing, especially for youth who do not have family support. Youth involved in the child welfare system have less support and lack skills and connections that aid in the transition to adulthood (Axe et al., 2020). Youth exiting foster care experience cumulative disadvantage and have significantly lower high school graduation rates making it more difficult to obtain employment (Evans, 2012; Gypen et al., 2017; Harkness, 2013). High school graduation is essential for employment (Gaetz, 2013; Gehlert & Mozersky, 2018). and increasingly, entry-level positions require postsecondary education (Gaetz, 2013; J. L. Robinson & Baron, 2007). Lack of necessary credentials makes moving forward in life difficult.

I discuss three general categories of barriers to obtaining housing: getting a job, getting a place, and getting support. At the end of this chapter, I will also discuss how the COVID pandemic increased barriers for youth working to exit homelessness. These factors accumulate over the life course and interrelate, creating Catch-22 scenarios that lead to and keep youth homeless, alongside abuse, discrimination, and intergenerational poverty. This context makes it more difficult for youth to navigate the constraints faced when seeking to exit homelessness:

needing work and income to access housing, necessitating housing to get stable work, and requiring help to understand and access government support. Youth need previous access to other things to get needed services, making it challenging to simultaneously satisfy the conditions various support systems require. These Catch-22s maintain homelessness, making it challenging to arrange an exit from homelessness. Rather than different systems working seamlessly to aid youth in obtaining housing, they work to create difficulty in accessing needed services. They can contribute to further cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination.

One of the critical difficulties in accessing needed services is that the landlord and government both require you to obtain the other first (Stadler, 2020; Zivanovic et al., 2016). Landlords often require proof of income before filling out government paperwork (Stadler, 2020). The Alberta government requires this paperwork before providing proof of income (Stadler, 2020). These requirements make obtaining housing and getting income at the same time challenging. These exclusionary tactics block exit from homelessness by making it difficult to obtain housing and successfully navigate the government support system to leave homelessness. By analyzing interview data with youth who are homeless and supplementing by interviews with professionals who work with HF4Y, I explore how landlord and government regulations make a successful exit from homelessness difficult for youth. Youth who are homeless experience marginalization linked to different but interrelated factors that accumulate over time. No two youths who are homeless have identical barriers.

Literature Review

I review the literature surrounding barriers to exiting homelessness and discuss literature surrounding three general areas: getting a job, getting a place, and getting support. These issues are treated separately in this discussion but overlap and compound each other in the real world.

Getting a Job: Employment Barriers

Many barriers exist when finding employment because it is a luxury to maintain personal hygiene and have a safe place to sleep while homeless (Huffman et al., 2021; McGee et al., 2017; Thulien et al., 2019). Youth who are homeless often have poor social connections and lack the formal credentials many employers require (J. L. Robinson & Baron, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). An additional barrier is youth who are homeless lack a permanent address for applying for work (McGee et al., 2017; J. L. Robinson & Baron, 2007). Some youths are uncomfortable supplying shelter addresses (Novac et al., 2002; B. A. Robinson, 2020). For youth who are homeless who do secure employment, it is often precarious, in the service sector, pays minimum wage and is temporary—the low-pay youth secure at work creates a barrier to leaving homelessness and increases poverty (J. L. Robinson & Baron, 2007).

The lack of mainstream employment and high clawback rates[30] of social assistance programs lead youth to rely on the informal economy (Axe et al., 2020). When youth who are homeless work under the table[31] or in illegal positions, their income does not affect social assistance payments (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004). This lack of clawback by government assistance makes these positions attractive to many youths who are homeless. Under-the-table work is often underpaid and lacks legal protection for the youth. Obtaining stable employment is often needed to be able to obtain housing.

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[30] For single individuals receiving Alberta Supports, "[t]h first $230 [of employment earnings] is exempt, plus 25% of any amount over $230" (Government of Alberta, 2021, Employment Income Exemptions section). For single individuals receiving AISH, "[t]he first $1,072 of net employment income is fully exempt. Any amount between $1,072 and $2,009 is 50% exempt" (*AISH Employment Income Exemption Calculation Example*, n.d., p. 1). Any earnings greater than $2,010 is fully clawed back (*AISH Employment Income Exemption Calculation Example*, n.d., p. 1).

[31] Under the table and illegal positions are work that is not reported as income; therefore, this income does not affect taxes and needs-based financial assistance programs. These positions are often underpaid for the type of work (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004).

Getting a Place: Landlord and Rental Issues

Youth who are homeless often fall through the cracks in the bureaucratic system because they lack connections that make finding housing easier (Barker, 2012; Bassani, 2009; Raffo & Reeves, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Thulien et al., 2019). These cracks are interrelated with poverty and include insufficient funds to pay a damage deposit and rent (Miller et al., 2004). These financial and poverty issues present key barriers for youth exiting homelessness or staying housed. Alberta Supports is difficult for youth to access and inadequate to be able to pay market rent. Therefore, employment is essential for many youths to exit homelessness. Finding employment and housing as rapidly as possible is critical to leaving homelessness behind.

Because youth have a shorter homeless experience, they find it easier to adapt to housing (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2013; Slesnick et al., 2017). HF4Y participants have fewer struggles than adult HF participants. Further, experience as a youth affects future adult functioning (Sinclair & Grekul, 2012). Chronic homelessness increases the difficulty of homeless exit (Charles et al., 2020; McGee et al., 2017). Providing youth housing prevents youth from experiencing chronic homelessness over their life course and avoids entrenchment (French et al., 2021; Gaetz, 2020; Meschede, 2011; Sample & Ferguson, 2019; Slesnick et al., 2018). Landlords are key gatekeepers to housing.

Getting a place to live is dictated by the influential role that landlords have as gatekeepers. Many landlords will not rent to someone who does not have good credit and references or refuse to rent to people who are homeless or on government assistance (Holmes & Burgess, 2021; Krüsi et al., 2010; Novac et al., 2002). Many youths lack the references and credit landlords require (MacDonald, 2013). Youth often experience discrimination in the quest for housing.

In addition to dealing with landlord gatekeeping, once housed, it is not easy to keep it. Unstable income and low government assistance can lead to falling behind on rent, triggering a return to homelessness (Holmes & Burgess, 2021). Once a history of eviction appears on a background check, finding a landlord willing to take the risk becomes challenging, resulting in greater cumulative disadvantage (Holmes & Burgess, 2021). Numerous barriers affect the ability of youths who are homeless to obtain housing and remain housed. Reasons for eviction can be varied and create further disadvantages. All the reasons people are evicted, including reasons for losing government assistance, need to be addressed when considering housing for youth who are homeless. Housing for youth who are dealing with homelessness is extremely precarious.

Precarious housing is a common experience for youth, with 25% of youth living in precarious housing in the past year; precarious housing includes things like abandoned buildings, rough on the street, in hotels, tents, foster care, homeless shelters and couch surfing (Saewyc et al., 2013). Couch surfing is staying with others without paying rent and is extremely precarious because the youth who are homeless do not have tenant rights (VanMeeter, 2023). Youth are more likely to couch surf when homeless using informal peer networks to avoid authorities (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016; Perez & Romo, 2011). Service avoidance is partly due to fear of authorities due to familial obligations and child welfare being responsible for meeting the basic needs of youth under 18 (Turner, n.d.). This fear increases the likelihood that youth under 18 will prefer to stay hidden from homeless services (Turner, n.d.). Due to low employment income and high rent, youth often need government assistance in the quest for housing. However, several decades ago, governments cut funding to social welfare programs.

Getting Assistance: Navigating Government Bureaucracy

The federal government cut housing funding, and the Alberta government cut income support funding in the 1980s (MacLeod et al., 2016). These cuts have led to extremely long waits for subsidized housing and make subsidized housing inaccessible when needing housing in a crisis (Aubry et al., 2021). Unaffordable housing is often the cause of homelessness (Aubry et al., 2021)—lack of government funding is interrelated with homelessness. Substantial commitment is needed to obtain housing and government assistance if required.

Government regulations require substantial efforts to address homelessness before funding is accessible (Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). These regulations are problematic for youth who are homeless, and cutting welfare rates and removing people from welfare exacerbates poverty. It is more difficult to receive financial assistance if a youth is employable. If employable, proof of work search is required regularly. Being employable also means youth receive less money from Alberta Supports than unemployable youth (Alberta Works, 2023). Participants discuss these interrelated structural factors that result in increased cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination.

Voices of Participants

Participants demonstrate the reality of the experience of the homeless economic and social situation. They encounter multiple structural barriers in their search for housing. These barriers make exiting homelessness difficult, and they also contribute to homelessness. These structural barriers are systemic. The barriers interact, creating Catch-22 scenarios that are difficult to navigate. To successfully exit homelessness, a youth must address or resolve these barriers. Youths must obtain work or government assistance to pay rent and find a home. These

barriers must be surmounted simultaneously for youth to exit homelessness; however, working while homeless is difficult, but employment is the first step to housing for many youths.

Getting a Job: Employment Barriers

Youths who are homeless have great difficulty obtaining employment. Many youths who are homeless have poor social connections, and some are not in contact with family. Due to the precarity of homelessness, many youths do not have access to a personal phone and documentation such as their Social Insurance Number (SIN). It is impossible to apply for housing, jobs and income support without documentation. Youth who are homeless must obtain IDs as quickly as possible. Tom discusses the importance of having ID: “Well, me getting me, you know, all my IDs that I couldn’t get before. Get me a job. Potential. Potentially get me back into school. You know, get me settled.” Tom discusses the importance of ID to exit homelessness. Tom indicates that employment and ID are a necessary first step to obtaining housing: “Definitely a job; umm, I need my bank account, which I’m getting right quickly. I need my IDs and SIN number.” Later in our interview, Tom states, “Well, you need. You need a job, obviously. You need money, you know.” Tom also discusses that finding a place is useless without employment because, without money, they will not be able to pay the rent. Tom goes on to state that getting a job in the legitimate economy is impossible without an ID. Lack of ID creates barriers to accessing many support services, including employment, housing, and government financial assistance. Obtaining ID is a necessary first step to address other issues. Without ID, homeless exit is challenging, if not impossible.

Finding employment is essential for most youths to find housing after obtaining an ID. Without employment, housing is impossible, in the view of many youths. Stable employment and stable housing are needed to exit homelessness. Ryan also identifies that employment needs

to come before housing: “Well, lately, I haven’t really been looking into housing. I [have] just been trying to [get] some employment first. So, then the number [one thing is to] be able to have the money.” Zac also intertwines work and housing.

Finding employment for youth who are homeless is difficult due to non-existent or short work histories. Employment programs that include wages, life skills, and employment-related training help address this barrier. Sofia (PP) discusses how employment programs can be of benefit:

> Like if when you’re coming into the [Housing First] program, you have to have some sort of income. And then, if you don’t have income, we will help you get connected to income. If you’re going to go to school, we’ll try to get you connected to the learner’s benefit. Also, there is like employment programs that pay.

Youth also talk about the importance of work programs. Even when employed, it can be necessary to access government financial assistance. Getting accommodations or government assistance is complex due to the conditions for getting government assistance and low assistance rates.

Getting a Place: Landlord and Rental Issues

Many youths experiencing homelessness will have either eviction(s) in their rental history or bad or no credit, making it difficult to obtain accommodation independently. Support from HF4Y is vital to many youths to secure housing. Logan discusses their journey to obtain housing through the use of support services:

> I came here, and [it] probably took me about six months to get housed again. However, that’s generally a little longer for people. Umm, I think that it requires a lot of like a lot of the services here. Getting like the umm what’s it called the referrals to those programs. [It] is really important, so this program is a good step in a sense. Because we have people that reach out to the youth and stuff, and that really helped me because the youth Housing First used to be in here, so it was really close and everything. So really, that’s kind of what helped me. It was kind of just getting the referrals and getting proper

> resources. I feel there are a lot of resources out there. It's just hard to know where they are and what they are.

Logan explains the need for support services to obtain housing. And how it is not, for many youths, a short journey from homeless to housed. Logan also demonstrates that homelessness exit can be complex and challenging. Many youths require ongoing support to exit homelessness successfully.

It is challenging to obtain housing when on government assistance (Novac et al., 2002). Many landlords will not rent to people who are on government assistance (Dyck et al., 2022; Hulchanski, 2006; Hulchanski & Shapcott, 2004; Novac et al., 2004; Schwartz et al., 2014; The Homeless Hub, n.d.). Hannah discusses landlord requirements: "They want a specific amount. You have to be on [a] fixed income, or you have to be working. And a lot of places don't accept people on government assistance. Although it is a fixed income." Landlords' choices are a significant problem for people attempting to exit homelessness with the help of Alberta Supports. Encountering discrimination in the quest for housing is common.

Youth who are homeless face many barriers, from discrimination to obtaining housing, including lack of landlord references, short or non-existent work histories, low-income, lack of savings to pay the damage deposit and looking homeless. Logan discusses the obstacles they would have had to face if they did not have the HF4Y program:

> I didn't have much challenges because like I had so much help from youth Housing First. So, I think [Housing First] kind of got rid of the challenges . . . like, you know, prove to a landlord that you are a good person [and a good tenant] . . . Because some private landlords will just say no because you look like you are aberrant or being all scraggly or young like that. Umm. Stuff like that. [pause] The other challenges were probably just like [a] down payment usually is a challenge.

Later in our interview, Logan discusses the barrier of having a short work history. They also discuss how important employment is to maintain a place to live: "Like access to like

employment or access to it being able to get to work and to get a job and keep the job." As Logan discusses, employment for many youths is critical to maintaining or obtaining housing. In many ways, homelessness only compounds issues that all youth face when working to secure employment. Youth who are housed also lack work experience but tend to have more interpersonal connections making surmounting this issue easier. It is more difficult for youth who are homeless to obtain employment due to often lacking connections to others who can help in getting work or getting a place. These barriers affect all people who are homeless, but youth who are homeless also face additional obstacles related to agism.

Being young in and of itself is a barrier to housing. Many landlords are unwilling to rent to young tenants because they believe younger tenants will likely have issues paying the rent or misbehave (Novac et al., 2002). Professional participants identify problems that youth encounter when trying to obtain housing. Jazmin says:

> Generally, from what I've seen it's, they have no landlord reference. They have a limited income and generally . . . If they are under 18, there is a lot of misconception that they can't enter into a rental agreement.

Even though no official age limit exists for signing a rental agreement, many landlords are unwilling to rent to youth under 18 (Lecic & Zuker, 2019). Landlords can be reluctant to rent to youth under 18 due to misconceptions about the quality of minor tenants (Novac et al., 2002). Jazmin explains that few landlords will rent to youth under 18: "[It] even took a lot of education within our practices. Umm. [It] meant educating members of our office that housing is a human right. We can't discriminate based on age. Within that right [to housing]." Education of landlords is vital to combating this rental discrimination experience of many youths in the fight to obtain housing.

In opposition to the stereotype of minor tenants being a greater risk, Jazmin refers to a conversation with a couple of on-site managers of their buildings:

> [Managers] comment[ed] that oddly often enough youth have less problems, less struggles, less difficulties adjusting to the new accommodations than any of the adults that we've ever assisted. . . They haven't had that instability of someone who's coming in with Housing First in maybe their 30s or 40s. Coming in as Housing First when you're 15-16, you haven't had that same [experience].

When youth are homeless, they exhaust their social circle and couch surf before going to a homeless shelter or homeless services. Youth who are couch-surfing are considered homeless within the official definition. However, many people do not consider this homelessness. This lack of awareness that couch surfing is within the realm of homelessness means that youth are experiencing homelessness for longer periods than necessary. They are not identified as homeless until they use a drop-in centre or shelter, as exemplified by Logan's experience:

> I lost my employment, so I became homeless, and then I spent about six months couch surfing—just a kind of hanging out at friends' houses until they eventually kicked me out. And then I came [to Nexus], and [it] probably took me about six months to get housed again.

After running out of friends to double up, Logan contacts the homeless service sector. Permanent housing is unlikely without homeless services, particularly if previously evicted. Mike also discusses their couch-surfing reality. They state this idea directly: "I haven't technically been homeless. But I'm currently like couch surfing or whatever." They do not consider themselves homeless. Tom also discusses couch surfing in our interview: "Before, I was just staying at friends' houses couch surfing and then one night I had to stay here [at Nexus]." Logan and Tom identified that they couch-surfed for as long as possible, and only once their personal resources were exhausted did they turn to homeless services—many youths to afford housing need government assistance.

It is not easy navigating getting a job, getting a place and getting support. Youths will experience rejection by potential employers, landlords, and social workers while on the path to obtaining housing. In many ways, this rejection is related to poverty and discrimination. HF4Y helps surmount housing challenges. Logan also points out that looking scraggly can cause a landlord to decline to rent a home. Landlord discrimination points to the need for showers and appropriate clothing to support obtaining housing and employment. The practice is discriminatory, but it is possible to mitigate this issue by being aware of it. Poverty is often interrelated with being able to pay a damage deposit and furnish a home. HF4Y assists with the damage deposit, rent, and start-up supplies, which are vital to youth (Miller et al., 2004). In doing so, HF4Y eliminates barriers when obtaining and establishing housing as a home. Understanding local context is critical to navigating from homeless to housed.

Getting Assistance: Navigating Government Bureaucracy

Both employment and government bureaucracy are challenging to navigate. Youth can fall through the cracks in the system, and social workers' attitudes towards youth enquiring about assistance can create further barriers for youth (Hansen, 2018). Zac discusses their situation and being turned down for assistance in their small community:

> It's been like when I turned 16; I try to get my own housing. Couldn't do it because I wasn't 18. So, I can[not], like, sign it. I tried to go through social services. They didn't want to help me. They just told me to get out of their office [and] never come back.

This type of treatment prevents the youth from trusting and accessing needed social services. Zac will be extremely reluctant to attempt to get help from the government bureaucracy. Even when access is negotiated, Alberta Supports rates are inadequate for necessary expenses.

Even when a youth gets income support, basic needs are unmet. Nathan exemplifies the government's inadequate support: "I get 30 bucks for food a month." With that little money,

after paying rent and other mandatory expenses, $30 is not enough to buy food. This experience is consistent with Thulien et al.'s (2019) Toronto, Ontario study; after paying rent and a bus pass, most participants have $36 left to pay other necessary expenses. Lack of funds means youth with housing still need to access homeless services, making it more challenging to move past homelessness (Kidd et al., 2016). Many people are unaware of what assistance is available.

Another interrelated issue is that most of the youth I interviewed are unaware that government assistance is available and, therefore, will never receive it. When I asked Sofia about government funding for youth under 18, they replied in a contradictory manner to youth participants:

> So, most of the youth who are seeing come through our program. Most of them are connected to like children's services . . . Getting a landlord to rent to you [when under 18] is very hard. But we do have; I don't know if you know [property management company name redacted] . . . . is like the only landlord that will rent to like underage people. So, that becomes a challenge. . . If they are going to school . . . they can get learner's benefits. Some get student funding if they are going to school.

Youth under 18 have more conditions than adults to obtain government funding. To receive assistance, they need to work or be in school. The homeless reality makes consistent attendance at work or school difficult, if not impossible. COVID has made homelessness more challenging to navigate.

COVID

The ongoing COVID pandemic results in new and increasing barriers that youth who are homeless face in the quest to get a job, a place, and assistance. COVID creates new obstacles for youth exiting homelessness, increasing poverty and discrimination and creating greater disadvantages. Zac mentions that COVID adds barriers to searching for employment: "I can't really get housing without a job. I'm trying to get a job first, but since COVID's affecting that

part." COVID suspended many entry-level positions due to the closure of most in-person services (Mahboubi & Higazy, 2022). Youth are overrepresented in these industries, making finding employment difficult, especially when homeless and the restrictions due to COVID (Mahboubi & Higazy, 2022).

The isolation and other restrictions due to COVID also exacerbate the homeless situation (Abramovich et al., 2021). Many people are less comfortable having a friend couch surf, and some homeless services reduced or altered their available services. Physical distancing makes it even more difficult than pre-COVID to navigate the path from homeless to housed, and COVID also makes it more difficult to see places to live. COVID health regulations required masks and physical distancing for in-person interactions, making apartment viewings more difficult during project interviews. Hannah describes:

> Oh, it made it a whole lot worse cuz [of] everyone. Oh, no. You have to wear a mask when you come in. Have to wear a mask while talking to me. You have to do this. You have to do that. You have to stay six feet apart. I'm like, how the fuck am I supposed to stay six feet apart away from you when we're in a two-foot fucking apartment building?

COVID restrictions resulted in closures and changes in many social interactions, making finding housing more difficult (Abramovich et al., 2021). For example, in April 2021, Mike states that some housing programs require COVID tests to obtain housing. COVID can also lead to revocation of housing. Jessica discusses how they lost a housing placement due to symptoms of COVID: "I was supposed to get my housing before Christmas, but because I had swollen tonsils and they thought I had COVID." Jessica is greatly affected by health regulations. Jessica lost her housing due to an illness thought to be COVID. COVID has led to many policy changes. The changes in policies include difficulty in being able to view apartments. Jazmin discusses how COVID changes apartment viewings:

> We shut down our viewings when things escalated because, of course, persons coming in there [are] unknown; it's very hard to do an accurate contact tracing. We eliminated our entry to occupied suites to emergencies only to reduce [the] risk to staff and our tenants. Outside of that, not much really changed. We relied heavily on our online force.

The property management firm made changes to minimize COVID exposure risk for managers, tenants, and prospective tenants. Changes also occurred within the HF4Y program. Leslie also discusses how apartment viewing practices have changed with COVID and the reduction of client choice. During the early part of the COVID pandemic, apartment viewings were impossible, and driving clients was not allowed. There also was a decrease in the number of places youth view: "I try to take them on like three to six viewings. Umm. With COVID, it's been more like two to four viewings. Umm, before they make like a full decision." This reduction in viewings means that youth must decide after seeing fewer potential homes lessening their available choices.

COVID resulted in the closure of many services for in-person assistance compounding cumulative disadvantages. Lack of in-person services is particularly a problem for people who are homeless. Before COVID, a youth could go to the social service office and wait to talk to a financial assistance worker to obtain assistance or book an appointment. Youth who are homeless must access services remotely. Hannah discusses how COVID makes it harder to receive government assistance:

> During COVID getting first on income support or getting income is just hard. Cuz with COVID, the government buildings aren't open. So, you can't go apply in person. You have to apply over the phone, and then they have to call you back.

Youths experience more difficulty accessing support than before COVID due to the closure of in-person services. With in-person services closed, getting income support for youth who are homeless is even more difficult. This difficulty exacerbates the barriers youth who are homeless

face adding another layer to the discrimination and hardships faced. All these barriers result in no-win situations (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). These Catch-22 scenarios create great difficulty in a homeless exit.

Catch-22 Scenarios

Catch-22 scenarios are situations where two or more competing demands or challenges create no-win dilemmas (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is difficult or impossible to satisfy all of the demands simultaneously. Catch-22 scenarios are experienced by participants in my study. For example, it is difficult to obtain housing when relying on government support. As Leslie explains, for an individual to receive funding from Alberta Supports, they must provide proof of rent and address. Most landlords require potential renters to pay a damage deposit before filling out this government paperwork. This system punishes individuals without access to either money or housing, making both finding housing and then having the funds to pay for the housing extremely difficult. Hannah briefly discusses a Catch-22 scenario in our interview: "I need a place, but I need income to get a place." Leslie elaborates on this point:

> I mean, I understand with income that, like income support, doesn't want to support both the living homelessness but at the same time, before I can get them in front of a landlord to say, hey, this person needs housing. I have to have an income source to show a landlord. And so, one of the biggest barriers I am facing right now actually is the fact that Alberta Works will not support someone to live in homelessness. So, they won't give income to someone who doesn't have a lease. And they can't get a lease because they don't have income.

These issues lead to increased exclusion for people who are homeless and make it extremely difficult to find a home when relying on government assistance. All participants cited above exemplify the difficulties youth who are homeless face and the Catch-22 scenarios created by the intersections. Catch-22 scenarios compound over the life course creating cumulative disadvantage.

Conclusion

Many of the barriers I discuss result from compounding factors that lead to exclusion and cumulative disadvantage. Issues surrounding getting a job, getting a place and getting support combine to create difficulty for youth to avoid homelessness and to be able to exit homelessness. One of the Catch-22s for youth who are homeless is that they need employment to get housing, but they need housing to get work. The problem is you need the other in advance to get what you need, which is, for obvious reasons, problematic.

The next chapter discusses in detail the support services many youths need to be able to exit homelessness. Support service needs, in many ways, involve structural factors, including cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination. However, different youths have different needs, many related to poverty. Generally, youth who are homeless need support for survival: food, shelter and mental health resources. After meeting their survival needs, youth need assistance for social and economic participation. The required support includes aid in obtaining ID and connecting to employment programs to obtain employment or connections to government income support. Youth also require support to obtain housing. These supports need to be provided with wrap-around support services because if one area is unmet, it is difficult to succeed in others. The interactions between these needs intersect and compound each other, increasing exclusion.

Chapter Five: Experiences of Youth with Support Services: Needs, Strengths, and Gaps

This chapter builds on the previous chapters by discussing the support services youth who are homeless need to move past homelessness. It expands on the information in the last chapter discussing specific supports youth need to get a job, get a place and access government support. After this description, I discuss more general needed supports surrounding survival supports, supports required for economic and social participation, and the supports needed to obtain housing. Youth services need to be easily accessible due to the cumulative disadvantage, poverty, and discrimination faced by youth who are homeless.

Many frontline services are low-barrier, with few preconditions to access (Pedersen et al., 2016). To be eligible to access a youth shelter, a youth only needs to need a place to spend the night, meet the age criteria, and not be restricted[32] (S. B. Collins et al., 2018). The youth left behind by other systems often end up in shelters even though specialized services could better meet their needs (S. B. Collins et al., 2018). The youths and professionals I interviewed in this study identify many things youth require to exit homelessness. Many youths identify vital needs that are almost universal. Youths need aid to obtain the ID necessary to access other services and assistance applying for employment, housing or income support. HF4Y provides a framework for support services.

HF4Y is appropriate because it meets youth where they are at. It is a low-barrier approach to providing housing that works to minimize the disadvantages youth who are homeless experience. The idea is that housing is necessary to succeed in other areas (Gaetz,

[32] Restricted is the term used at YESS for when a youth is excluded from their program due to inappropriate behaviour(s), including fighting or drug use on the property.

Scott, et al., 2013). HF4Y uses a harm reduction approach. Many youths who are homeless use alcohol or other substances, so harm reduction is appropriate and is one of the critical parts of the HF4Y framework (Anderson-Baron & Collins, 2019; C. C. Collins et al., 2019). The goal with HF4Y is to house as quickly as possible and then work on other issues if the youth is willing (Hansen, 2018). Services are not forced on the youth, and youth only receive needed services (Guevara et al., 2019; Hansen, 2018). Being homeless is precarious and means dealing with inescapable structural factors, including cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination. Violence and exploitation are rampant for youth who are homeless.

Literature Review

Homelessness for youth means living in fear of rampant violence and exploitation (Abbott & Blake, 1988; The Toronto Centre of Excellence on Youth Homelessness Prevention et al., n.d.). Life is a daily search for basic needs (Abbott & Blake, 1988; Abramovich et al., 2021; Levesque & Abdel-Baki, 2020). Youth experiencing homelessness need survival support, a safe place to sleep, food and access to mental health support (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; C. C. Collins et al., 2019). After meeting these survival needs, youth need assistance obtaining social and economic participation and support to obtain stable housing. Survival support is necessary first.

Survival Supports: The Basics of Shelter, Food and Mental Health

Survival needs must be met first. By meeting survival needs, staff gain trust that will aid in providing other needed services (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Budescu et al., 2019; C. C. Collins et al., 2019; Hansen, 2018; Morisseau-Guillot et al., 2020; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). Satisfying survival needs fits within an HF4Y framework, provided the goal is to house

permanently as quickly as possible. Access to shelter is the most crucial need in Edmonton, especially during extreme weather conditions.

Having shelter is a priority because of Canadian winters, and youths need a safe place to sleep (Nichols & Braimoh, 2018). Emergency shelters must be available when a youth experiences a crisis and needs to have as few restrictions as possible. Emergency shelter is necessary for youth leaving foster care, hospitals or corrections without housing arranged (S. B. Collins et al., 2018).

Once youth have shelter, they need sufficient food (Kidd, 2013). Youth who are homeless often experience food insecurity, which is being unable to obtain or consume enough food in large enough quantities and being unable to get food in acceptable ways (Hattangadi et al., 2019). Food insecurity is a problem for people living on a low-income or people who are homeless (Hattangadi et al., 2019). Poorer physical and mental health outcomes result from food insecurity (Hickey et al., 2019). Food security is particularly challenging for people who are homeless due to having nowhere to store and cook food; therefore, youth who are homeless depend on obtaining food from social service agencies. Even youth who are housed can be food insecure or live in a food desert.

Food deserts are where nutritious and healthy food is either unavailable or expensive and is problematic (Gopika et al., 2022; Loopstra, 2018). Food deserts occur frequently in poorer neighbourhoods and have long-term health effects (Gopika et al., 2022). When living in a food desert, often the only accessible places to purchase food are convenience stores. Convenience stores are more expensive, lack food variety, have limited fresh produce and meat, and do not sell in bulk (Gopika et al., 2022). Limited funds and shopping at convenience stores decrease the quality and amount of food purchased. Poverty is linked to food insecurity and is highly

prevalent among people receiving income support in Canada (Entz et al., 2017; Olauson et al., 2018). Food security is essential when addressing homelessness due to the associated poverty. After food security is addressed, youth often need mental health support.

Youth who are homeless have higher rates of mental illness and addictions than those who are housed (Kirst & Erickson, 2013). High rates of trauma, including sexual exploitation, are experienced by youth who are homeless (Saewyc et al., 2013). Many youths who are homeless avoid mental health and addiction services to avoid being viewed as "crazy" (Budescu et al., 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2009). Therefore, to increase service use, it is necessary to gain the trust of youth and build relationships, or youth will avoid support (Kominkiewicz & Kominkiewicz, 2019). After meeting food security and shelter, mental health services must be available. I consider this to be a survival need. Youth also greatly value independence, even when they experience mental health issues.

Most people with mental health issues prefer to live independently, and support staff be available if needed but only when needed (Forchuk et al., 2006; Krieg, 2001). A participant in Forchuk et al.'s (2006) study states: "We want people to come, but we want them to leave," which nicely summarizes this idea (p. 46). Forchuk et al.'s (2006) participant indicates that privacy and independence are vital. Molly discusses a similar sentiment: they desire support to be volunteers, not paid staff. Once youth have their survival needs met, aiding in participation in society is vital.

Supports for Social and Economic Participation

After survival needs, providing support for social and economic participation is needed. As previously discussed, lacking ID can lead to issues accessing needed support (HTE, n.d.-a). ID is required to obtain employment or housing (Boyett et al., 2021; Denny et al., 2011). The

lack of these essential documents makes it difficult to move past homelessness and become housed; therefore, support to obtain ID is a critical component in ending homelessness and allowing access to other services.

Another interrelated barrier is having possessions stolen, including ID, while homeless. Therefore, places are available to store ID while someone is homeless (Alberta Health Services, n.d.). Safe storage is necessary because finding housing or accessing other essential services is difficult or impossible without ID. Assisting with obtaining ID and secure storage is critical for the exit of homelessness because, without proper documentation, it is impossible to find housing, employment, or receive government assistance. Youths identify a lack of ID and employment as barriers to obtaining housing.

For many youths, obtaining employment is a crucial way to exit homelessness. Securing employment is difficult for many youths who are homeless due to a lack of social connections (Gaetz, 2018; Karabanow, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In other words, their social networks lack people who can help them obtain employment (Barker, 2012; Perez & Romo, 2011). Therefore, as previously discussed, employment programs are vital in securing employment. After survival needs and societal participation, youth need assistance to obtain safe, affordable housing.

Supports in Obtaining Housing

Unsafe housing is a dwelling, not a home. According to HF, “every person has the right to a safe, secure home” (McGee et al., 2017, p. 12). High housing cost is a difficult barrier interrelated with poverty and discrimination. Without support, many youths who are street-involved can only afford single-occupancy hotels (Krüsi et al., 2010). These accommodations are problematic due to poor living conditions, and many youths characterize these types of

accommodations as being unsafe (Krüsi et al., 2010). Therefore, it would be best to avoid single-occupancy hotels as housing for youth who are homeless and provide accommodations that youth view as safe. Meeting all housing needs and wishes aids in housing success and should be provided by wrap-around support services.

Wrap-Around Support Services

Homelessness is not the result of one single cause and is related to cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination. The services that individual youth require will not be identical. HF4Y is an excellent strategy for housing youth who are homeless because it provides immediate access to long-term housing and views housing as a right for everyone (Bergman et al., 2019; Houle, 2022; Human Rights Council, 2020). More than one issue generally creates homelessness and is intertwined with discrimination and poverty (Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018). Youths will have different support needs, and providing all the services youth require is essential. It is best to use multiple services to meet their needs (Miller et al., 2004). Study participants describe their support needs eloquently.

Voices of Participants

I will now present information obtained through participant interviews that provide rich context surrounding the support needs of various participants. Homelessness is complex and results in youth having many barriers to finding housing and the support they need. My research shows that all youth who are homeless have unmet needs and that meeting these needs is vital. Transitioning from homeless to housed involves a complex interplay of the various structural barriers youth experience from cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination. It is necessary to meet survival needs before it is possible to support economic participation or aid youth in obtaining housing. Survival needs must come first.

Survival Supports: The Basics of Shelter, Food and Mental Health

Meeting survival needs, need to come first, and then support in other areas can be provided. Nathan discusses the Nexus shelter and the essential support Nexus provides. Nathan mentions:

> It got me somewhere to go. Oh, honestly, [we] have food and everything because without this place. Yeah, they may not have got me a home and stuff. But yeah, at least they gave me food and bus fare.

Many participants tell me the food at YESS facilities is excellent, and the staff is friendly and generous. Staff work with the youth to aid in accessing services from YESS and other appropriate services. Having a bed, food and being given bus fare is vital for youth. Furthermore, approachable, caring staff is essential. Dean discusses this idea:

> All the staff here are generous; they like to put the youth first and [then] themselves, but [in] some situations like. The staff are generous, the staff are kind, and the staff are like welcoming. That was the kind of welcome[ing] atmosphere I got when I first arrived here.

Staff must provide a welcoming atmosphere for youth because accessing services for youth who are homeless, especially for the first time, can be difficult due to the stigmatization and discrimination surrounding homelessness. It is necessary to address mental health, food, and shelter as survival needs.

Youth participants identify a need for mental health support, and I argue that it is a survival need, although the sector does not always treat it that way. Housing will aid in mental health management, and support services are needed and are not readily available throughout the homeless-serving sector. I ask: “Does homelessness make dealing with mental health more difficult?” Hannah replies: “Oh, fuck, yah. It does.” Hannah identifies housing as vital. Mental health issues interrelate with trauma.

Youth who are homeless also experience trauma. Youths need mental health support while homeless, and support needs to continue once housed. Since youth who are homeless or newly housed tend to have low incomes having free services to aid youth is essential. Some homeless services, however, do not provide mental health support. Hannah identifies a problem of some services not having trained staff available:

> Because in certain places, they don't have the resources for you to get counselling. Some resources don't even provide counselling, and some resources [say] just suck it the fuck up. Go for a walk.

Hannah explains further that many services need well-trained providers: "Yah. Like there needs to be free counsellors that actually know what the fuck they're actually doing." Training is essential, and staff without the knowledge to help youth with mental health issues can do nothing or harm a youth due to a lack of understanding of what the youth needs. After addressing basic needs providing support to participate in the broader society is vital. ID is essential to participate in society.

Supports for Social and Economic Participation

Losing their ID or having it stolen is a significant barrier for youth who are homeless. Lack of ID is often a substantial barrier to accessing services, making it difficult to exit homelessness. ID is required to apply for benefits, work or housing. Leslie sums up this issue:

> A lot of youth come with a bunch of barriers. Umm. Some youth don't have ID[s]. Some youth don't have income. Some youth don't have even access to a family member to get information for an ID before we can get income before we can stand in front of landlords and view apartments.

ID is needed to apply for employment, housing or government support. Youths require income to obtain housing either from employment or government assistance. For many youths, the goal is to obtain employment. Youth who are homeless do not have the social connections that aid in

finding work, making employment programs essential. Tom discusses that they would be starting YEEP, run by YESS, which provides aid in obtaining employment: “My job, this job opportunity thing. I’m getting into this employment program.” In another interview, Tom elaborates on this idea: “I’m in this employment program, you know I’m working to get[ting] up to get a job, get on my feet. Find a place you know.” Programs such as YEEP are of great benefit to youth who are homeless. Professional participants also address the importance of employment programs.

Jazmin touches on the usefulness and importance of employment programs. Youths need some form of income to participate in HF4Y. Jazmin touches on this issue but does not discuss employment programs specifically. Youths also require consistent support.

Having access to someone consistent is essential for many participants. Caseworkers provide much-needed support for youth who are homeless, which is vital because many youths who are homeless do not have adequate support. Jessica describes how they found their long-term worker to be helpful:

> Definitely, with Housing First, they give you a contact. And also give like a you get kind of like a case worker. Social worker. She’s more like a counsellor type. They’re really nice [to] talk to, especially with, like, some social workers for me. I’ve had mine for the longest time. They gave. Like you’ll have their phone numbers. Basically, especially with like housing, Housing First they will. They’ll actually, once you get your place, they have kind of like a social worker, kind of like a counsellor comes in and checks in at you. Try to see how the place looks and how you are doing physically [and] mentally.

For youths lacking family support, support workers are essential. Support is needed for youth to move from homeless to housed. In addition, to survival support and help getting ID and employment, many youths who are homeless require support to obtain housing.

Supports in Obtaining Housing

Many youths experiencing homelessness will have either eviction(s) in their rental history or bad or no credit, making it difficult to obtain accommodation independently. Support from HF4Y is vital to many youths to secure housing. Logan discusses their journey to obtain housing through the use of support services:

> I came here, and [it] probably took me about six months to get housed again. However, that's generally a little longer for people. Umm, I think that it requires a lot of like a lot of the services here. Getting like the umm what's it called the referrals to those programs. [It] is really important, so this program is a good step in a sense. Because we have people that reach out to the youth and stuff, and that really helped me because the youth Housing First used to be in here, so it was really close and everything. So really, that's kind of what helped me. It was kind of just getting the referrals and getting proper resources. I feel there are a lot of resources out there. It's just hard to know where they are and what they are.

Logan explains the need for support services to obtain housing. And how it is not, for many youths, a short journey from homeless to housed. Logan also demonstrates that homelessness exit can be complex and challenging. Many youths require ongoing support to exit homelessness successfully.

Many participants identified a need to have support in staying on track and to aid in doing what they need to do to obtain housing. Ryan mentions this idea: "Yeah, like if I'm like. Even if I got off track, I would like for a support worker to. To umm to like give me a little push just to. To get myself back on it." Ryan refers to accomplishing what is needed to leave homelessness. It is not easy navigating getting a job, getting a place and getting support. Youths will experience rejection by potential employers, landlords, and social workers while on the path to obtaining housing.

In many ways, this rejection is related to poverty and discrimination. In chapter four, Logan discusses how HF4Y helps surmount housing challenges. Logan also points out that

looking scraggly can cause a landlord to decline to rent a home. Landlord discrimination points to the need for showers and appropriate clothing to support obtaining housing and employment. The practice is discriminatory, but it is possible to mitigate this issue by being aware of it.

Poverty is often interrelated with being able to pay a damage deposit and furnish a home. HF4Y assists with the damage deposit, rent, and start-up supplies, which are vital to youth (Miller et al., 2004). In doing so, HF4Y eliminates barriers when obtaining and establishing housing as a home. Understanding local context is critical to navigating from homeless to housed.

How Housing First Operates in Edmonton

In Alberta, housing programs centre on HF (Anderson-Baron & Collins, 2019). Based on interview data from two HF4Y placement workers, I will explain how HF4Y works in Edmonton. Placement workers understand the issues that make obtaining a permanent home while living homeless difficult. They interact with youth working to obtain a home and then transfer them to longer-term case workers who support them while housed. Leslie views the HF4Y program as essential in Edmonton. “I think that the Housing First program is the bread and butter of Edmonton . . . . It’s very client-centred.”[33] Leslie goes on to inform me that HF4Y is “Like walking alongside step by step by step, umm, in a way that I’ve never worked before. Umm, it’s just incredible.” HF4Y placement workers work with the youth to obtain housing—they work with the youth for as long as it takes to secure a home. However, HF4Y does have requirements to gain access to housing.

[33] The client-centred approach ensures that services are tailored to each client’s needs and preferences, empowering them to participate in decision-making actively. Clients have the right to decline services, except for the program’s mandatory requirement of regular meetings with a designated worker in the HF4Y program. HF4Y workers strive to support and guide youth, working alongside them to provide the necessary services that align with their goals and aspirations.

HF4Y has policies and procedures for youth to access housing. Sofia directly addresses this intake process. Youth "have to go through an intake process and . . . follow [the] rules." Leslie provides further information about the HF4Y intake process. To access housing, first, youth need "an intake for coordinated access . . . And then they are put on the by-name list." To stay on the list," they must keep their file current. Housing access representatives will contact youth on the by-name list "Every three months to ensure up-to-date information is on file." The HF4Y teams choose names off the by-name list; the youth are given a housing placement worker who works to obtain housing.

Although HF4Y is a helpful program, it does have requirements to obtain housing. Sofia indicates that youth are selected off the by-the-name list based on need. HF4Y does not have a direct waiting list. Once selected from the by-the-name list, youth must commit to obtaining housing. With the design of HF4Y, securing housing is impossible without a commitment to attend appointments and view apartments. Sofia discusses the issue of needing to be committed to securing housing: "They got to commit to the program. So, they have to be able to, umm, make their appointments" and be committed to getting housing. "Right, like they can't cancel their meeting, and they keep not showing up. And then they expect to still be in the program." Later in the interview, Sofia discusses how commitment is needed on the part of HF4Y participants to obtain housing:

> So, that is like the housing [incomprehensible] in the process, but that's why they have to be committed. So, making appointments. Like to view places. So, they do come around to the apartment viewings. Umm. They do get to make a choice of where they [are] living. They're asked at intake about what kind of housing they are looking for. So that includes the location. Umm. What kind of like amenities [do] they want to have?

Finding housing requires making appointments and viewing potential homes. Obtaining housing is not easy when living in the precarity of homelessness. Commitment to finding housing is a requirement to have access to services to aid in the quest for a home.

Along with the requirements of HF4Y, youth experience constrained choices if they are hunting for their first apartment. Therefore, youth need to choose from apartments available for first-time renters. Sofia discusses how housing choice is constrained based on youth not having previous independent rental experience: "Youth they do have a choice in most of the things but some of [the] things you have to guide them through. Just because they don't have the time renting experience." This constrained choice is a problem for all youth but is greater for youth who are homeless due to a lack of family support.

Once youth obtain a home, setting them up with everything needed is necessary. Leslie shares that youth receive: "Everything that you should need [for] your first apartment." Youth are provided everything from kitchenware to appliances to groceries. They receive all these items for free, including furniture from Find (n.d.). Leslie takes into account what youth say they will use. Leslie works to personalize these start-up supplies because: "It shows that I care." Without these items, many youths would have four walls and nothing else. Furnishings and supplies aid in making an apartment into a home youth are proud of and allow the youth to move past homelessness.

HF4Y works to allow youth to move past homelessness and be housed as much as possible in the type of dwelling preferred and in an area the youth view as safe. HF4Y sets youth up for success. Leslie sums up this idea:

> [It] is setting youth up for success in a way that other youth programs aren't. . . We address their homelessness first, and then they okay; what are you passionate about? What [are] you interested in? What barriers do you face that we can assist you to

> overcoming and umm, so youth have a hard time sometimes coming up with goals and things like that.

HF4Y considers other areas of importance to their clients. They work to provide the connections needed for youth to meet other goals besides housing. Youth must meet with an HF4Y worker for nine months after obtaining housing (Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2004; Hansen, 2018). However, sometimes housing may not be successful. Sofia informs me: "Housing First is not a one-shot deal. If youth are evicted, they will be rehoused" (Gaetz, 2014a). Rehousing youth who are evicted is essential because anyone can make a mistake and have trouble with housing resulting in eviction. Being rehoused will give a youth a second chance to have a home they are proud of. Logan discusses being housed and then rehoused by HF4Y:

> Yah, so I lost my employment. So, I became ah homeless. And then I spent about six months couch surfing. . . And then I came [to YESS], and [it] probably took me about six months to get housed again . . . . What helped me? It was kind of just getting the referrals and getting proper resources. I feel there are a lot of resources out there. It's just hard to know where they are and what they are. . . I was fully like homeless for a good year steady. Until I managed to get housing . . . . I had [a] quick stint afterwards. About 18 months afterwards, I was homeless just briefly, probably a month—the same thing. I just kind of came here [to] youth services and then got housed again really fast.

Logan discusses their path between being homeless and housed. Logan's path demonstrates how the loss of employment is a common trigger for homelessness, and it is easy to lose a home without a steady income to pay your rent. Logan also discusses how youth often first turn to couch surfing when homeless and only come to homeless services when friends are exhausted.

Conclusion

YESS provides the basic services that youth require when experiencing homelessness. They offer low-barrier services that meet the survival needs of youth. Low-barrier facilities have limited rules surrounding things like medication adherence and drug use. Further, services are available without referrals (Michalak & Zappelli, 2022). In the context of YESS services, youth

can be under the influence of substances while on site but cannot possess or use substances at the facilities. YESS immediately provides survival support, shelter, food and mental health support that youth require when they become homeless. YESS also provides services that go beyond essential survival support. Staff at YESS work to connect youth to the various supports they need for economic and social participation. Connections are made to services to obtain ID required for other services, including housing and employment. Many youths who are homeless lack the relationships necessary to obtain employment. YESS provides YEEP, a paid employment program that aims to connect youth to long-term work. Through an HF4Y framework, YESS will connect youth to housing opportunities through their services and others in the broader Edmonton community. Youth need to be provided with all services they need and are willing to accept. Provision of all of the services a youth needs and accepts is required. Wrap-around supports are vital to moving past homelessness.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Significant research is available about youth who are homeless, but little literature examines how choice is constrained as youth enter, experience, and work on exiting homelessness. This project used youth voices to show the sources and effects of these constraints. I provide a view of the larger picture from youth narratives as they navigate the experience of homelessness, entering and exiting. I examine homelessness through a structural approach and the lens of cumulative disadvantage, poverty and discrimination, which helps to demonstrate how complex it is to exit homelessness.

Most youth homelessness research only includes youth 18 or older. The exclusion of youth under 18 from most studies of youth who are homeless is problematic because youth who become homeless at a young age face unique circumstances compared to older youth. Essential data about youth experiences is limited or unavailable by excluding younger youth. Given that younger youth face increased barriers while homeless and in obtaining housing, it is vital to gather information about their experiences.

The youth in this study have preferences for where and in what kind of context they would like to live. These preferences are commonly related to having the people important to them in their lives. If they have family they are in contact with, they will often prefer to live in areas accessible to their family's homes. Many participants also desire to live and spend time with their friends. Some youth did not express strong preferences for any particular location. Still, all youth interviewed desire to live in a safe area, and housing affordability is a concern. All youths desire independence. Many youths prefer their own place, but some are open to sharing, mainly due to high housing costs. Several youths prefer a roommate(s), and all want a place they are proud to call home and move beyond the marginalization of homelessness.

Youths who are homeless experience various marginalizations. Often, homelessness is not the fault of the person who is homeless but is due to economic and social realities. Cumulative disadvantages are caused by many structural barriers (Gonyea & Melekis, 2017). Pathways to homelessness are diverse but generally include the intersection of two types of barriers: social struggles and experiences with discrimination.

Social struggles are shaped by social circumstances of inequality (Gehlert & Mozersky, 2018; Seng et al., 2012). Social struggles and experiences include trauma, domestic violence, violence and abuse, addictions, mental health issues, and poverty. Experiences with discrimination for youth who are homeless include sexism, ageism, racism and being read as homeless, Indigenous, or having an identity on the LGBTQ2S+ spectrum (Budescu et al., 2019; Gaetz et al., 2022; Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Sample & Ferguson, 2019; Schwan, Gaetz, et al., 2018).

Social struggles and discrimination, in many cases, co-exist, requiring a lens of cumulative disadvantage. Addressing these interrelated reasons is essential to aid youth working to move from homeless to housed. HF4Y is appropriate because it moves youth into stable housing with fewer conditions (McParland et al., 2019). Then if youth are willing, they are provided with services suited to their needs. In HF4Y, youth need to consent to the services they are receiving, and the HF4Y housing must be unconditional except for meeting with a worker regularly.

People who are homeless encounter multiple disadvantages that are structural and institutional and compound each other (Frederick et al., 2012; Peressini, 2007; Robards et al., 2019; Seabrook & Avison, 2012; Uggen & Wakefield, 2007). To be able to leave homelessness behind, youth who are homeless need to get a job, get a place, and navigate government

assistance. Youth who are homeless need to surmount Catch-22 scenarios to leave homelessness behind. For example, to obtain support from Alberta Supports, youth need proof of their place. Many landlords will not fill out this paperwork until they see proof of income. Therefore, simultaneously satisfying both Alberta Supports and the landlord is impossible. The Catch-22 scenario markedly constrains available housing.

Youths often have no landlord reference or lack a significant work history required by landlords (Novac et al., 2002). Youth living homeless also often do not have a cosigner which is sometimes a requirement. Youth who are homeless often have a previous eviction, and when this appears on a background check, many landlords are unwilling to take a risk (Holmes & Burgess, 2021). All of these factors compound to lead to increased exclusion. It is also challenging to navigate government bureaucracy because social assistance in Canada is a maze (Lightman et al., 2003; Pasma & Regehr, 2019). Filling out the correct form with the right information is needed for assistance, and directories are difficult to navigate and incomplete (Herd & Moynihan, 2018).

Due to the multiple barriers youth experience, most youths who are homeless need support services to overcome homelessness. Many youths who are homeless lack the ID necessary to apply for work, housing or income support; therefore, Edmonton has services to support obtaining this needed documentation (Alberta Health Services, n.d.). Youth need survival support, a safe place to sleep, food and mental health support (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; C. C. Collins et al., 2019). After meeting their survival needs, youth need assistance to obtain social and economic support and support in the quest for a stable home. Support provision for youth needs to be through wrap-around support services. Services need to be individualized

because no two youth experience identical barriers. HF4Y participants only receive services they are willing to accept, and youth can refuse services.

To conclude, it is essential to note that homelessness is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach. In addition to affordable housing and improved access to social support services, addressing the root causes of homelessness, such as cumulative disadvantage, poverty, discrimination, unemployment, and mental health issues, is critical. A comprehensive approach that combines housing support, social support, and targeted interventions to address the underlying causes of homelessness is necessary to create lasting solutions.

Therefore, there is no one solution, but it is essential to meet the housing needs and wishes of youth experiencing homelessness. Ending the homeless cycle in youth is more effective because youth do better when housed than older HF participants. HF4Y is an excellent model to use when housing youth who are homeless. Some youth may be uncomfortable with independent living due to their developmental stage. With HF4Y, youth need their housing preferences met even if the housing is transitional (Gaetz, 2014a). In HF4Y, it is necessary to accommodate youths' transitional stage to provide the assistance they need in the homeless-to-housed journey.

Youth, or for that matter anyone experiencing homelessness, need to navigate Catch-22 scenarios to be able to obtain housing. It is necessary to navigate getting a job, a place and navigating government bureaucracy. Navigating is difficult because a job requires an address, and proof of employment is often needed to obtain a place to live. To successfully navigate this system, youth need support to survive, participate in society, and obtain housing. Only by addressing all of these interrelated issues is it possible for youth to successfully exit from homelessness.

Limitations and Recommendations

The results of my study lead to recommendations while also coming with some limitations. I strongly recommend changing federal and provincial policies surrounding subsidized housing and income assistance. Income assistance needs to be made easier for youth under 18 to access. Currently, youth under 18 are very limited in accessing income assistance and need to meet additional requirements that adults seeking aid do not need to meet (Gaetz, 2014b). More generally, to aid both youth and adults who are homeless, more social housing units need to be built that allows people with limited incomes to pay 30% of their income for rent (CMHC, 2018). To achieve this, federal and provincial policies surrounding subsidized housing must be reformed to provide enough income to afford housing and meet needs beyond survival. Significant investment is required, but it is necessary to prevent entry into homelessness and to make an exit from homelessness easier. Providing youth who are homeless with housing and income support will reduce youth entrance into long-term chronic homelessness.

Alberta Supports, AISH, or minimum wage does not supply enough money to pay rent and other essentials in Alberta (Alberta Works, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2023). Provincial assistance and minimum wage must increase to provide enough funds to afford available housing. To my knowledge, no adequate market housing is available at affordable prices.

There is not one easy solution to the problem of insufficient funding because it is substantial and often used as a political strategy around election times. For example, while campaigning for the 2019 Alberta provincial election, Kenney said they would make no changes to AISH (CBC News Edmonton, 2019). When elected, Kenney cancelled the indexing of Alberta Supports, seniors and AISH benefits and discussed reducing or modifying eligibility

requirements for AISH. Had the proposed changes occurred, they would have made a challenging and time-consuming program even more inaccessible (CBC News Edmonton, 2019; Hudes, 2020). Change is also needed on the federal level.

On the federal level, for people with disabilities who are 18 to 64, there is hope with the passage of the *Canada Disability Benefit Act* (2023), which received royal assent on June 22, 2023. However, funding levels, application forms and eligibility have not been decided (Clapp, 2023). Although this funding is targeted at adults aged 18 to 64 with disabilities, it is of relevance to many of the youth in my study because most participants had disabilities and participants had an average age of 20. If funding works as planned, it will not be clawed back by existing support programs (Disability Without Poverty, 2023; Zimonjic, 2022).

A second recommendation is based on personal experience of the difficulties of navigating the social support maze (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Lightman et al., 2003; Pasma & Regehr, 2019). I have heard of support programs through word of mouth or found them randomly online. There needs to be a more comprehensive directory of all services available. Online sources can be valuable in finding social support resources, but navigating these sites can be difficult and time-consuming. The search function often returns too many results, making it hard to find what you need. In addition, some resources may not be listed or are challenging to find.

To address these issues, the design of online directories of social support services needs to keep user experience in mind. The search function should be easy to use, and more user-friendly filter options to help narrow down results. The directory should also be regularly updated to list all relevant resources. The current search functions provide many irrelevant results that are often inaccessible because of location. Searching by postal code or

neighbourhood would be beneficial. This directory needs to be widely available in print and online. Providing information about available services would allow these programs to be accessed. A directory will not solve all issues related to homelessness and poverty, but it would allow access to services, if needed, that are currently available. Without knowing a service exists, access is impossible.

A third recommendation is to provide increased training to homeless-facing services staff on supporting youth with mental health and addiction issues (HTE, n.d.-a; Trainor et al., n.d.). Knowledge would aid youth because it would mean that support staff could assist them no matter what service organization they access (Abdel-Baki et al., 2019). Increasing training would prevent youth from being turned away when needing mental health services and support.

A fourth recommendation is the education of landlords and property management companies that youth under 18 can sign a lease (Lecic & Zuker, 2019). Alberta has no minimum age to sign an agreement for basic necessities (Lecic & Zuker, 2019). Knowledge would help youth under 18 have more options when looking for a home. Education is essential because many landlords believe youth under 18 cannot sign a lease agreement. Additionally, it may be helpful to suggest outreach efforts to educate landlords and property management companies, such as partnering with local associations or organizations that work with landlords or property management companies to disseminate this information. Outreach to property management companies and landlords needs to occur to make these gatekeepers aware that youth under 18 can sign a rental agreement. According to Leslie, Home Ed, Civida, and the Canadian Mental Health Association will rent to youth under 18 in the Edmonton area. Further, HF4Y participants have more success maintaining housing and encounter fewer issues than older participants.

Providing housing to youth can help to prevent youth who are homeless from remaining homeless and becoming adults who are chronically homeless.

This study had limitations. First, data collection occurred during the ongoing COVID pandemic. In the historical moment of COVID, everyday activities are not available. It is a strange time and circumstance that is not normal and has and continues to cause changes or make many daily activities unavailable. Facilities that would have, in normal circumstances, been accessible have been unavailable on and off since March 2020. These facilities include coffee shops, libraries, malls, and social service organizations. Many of these facilities were closed or had limited occupancy, making access to these facilities difficult, if not impossible. These closures changed the experience of youth who are homeless because the facilities they would typically access were unavailable. The closures decreased the availability of inside spaces needed for protection from the extremes of Edmonton weather. COVID disrupted the daily routines of youth and thus shaped the data I collected. My results could have differed, particularly if data collection occurred before the COVID pandemic.

A second limitation is that I did not include youth in the hidden homeless[34] population (Mayock & Parker, 2020). Youth disconnected from homeless services likely have different housing wishes and needs. Youth experiencing hidden homelessness can be detached from support services. Because I did not interview youth in the hidden homeless population, any reasons I would give would be speculative.

[34] Hidden homeless people live in precarious situations, including couch surfing (Abramovich, 2016). The hidden homeless lack tenant rights (Agans et al., 2014).

A third limitation is that a larger sample could have included youth experiencing different intersecting social locations. If I had interviewed more participants, I would have better understood more intersecting marginalizations, such as mental illness, sexuality, and Indigeneity, which would have broadened the scope of this study. Further, having more participants that shared the same intersecting marginalizing factors would have allowed for a richer analysis; therefore, results are not generalizable to all youth who are homeless.

Directions for Further Research

In a Canadian study, Gaetz et al. (2018b) found that of youth currently experiencing homelessness, over 40% had their first experience of homelessness before age 16. Low-barrier shelters are unavailable in Edmonton until a youth is 15 (Gaetz et al., 2018a). YESS offers shelter services to youth aged 15 to 21. YESS Nexus shelter is the only facility that provides low-barrier shelter to 15-year-old youth in Edmonton, Alberta. However, 15-year-old youth need parental consent to stay at Nexus. Independent Nexus access is unavailable until age 16. Some youth in this study were homeless at a very young age (as young as 11). Studying the experiences of people who experienced homelessness at young ages is vital because it is a critical understudied area. Therefore, it is crucial to interview adults retrospectively who were first homeless at age 15 or younger about how they survived before they could access homeless services and how this experience with early homelessness has affected their life course.

A second research direction may involve using my study methodology to examine the experiences of youth accessing other shelters in Edmonton or rough sleepers. Youths using other services or sleeping rough in Edmonton could have a different experience than the youth in this study. Choice constraints at another shelter in Edmonton could be different than YESS. The choice constraints could be due to a larger client base and interagency differences. Rough

sleepers are also often less connected to homeless services and likely would have different needs and desires concerning obtaining housing. Services available vary in different contexts. Using my methodology to study youth experiencing homelessness in other provinces or territories in Canada or internationally would be valuable. It would be beneficial to see how different services aid youth and provide suggestions on how these comparisons can improve services in the local context and beyond.

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Appendix A: Youth Consent Form

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Personal Choice: Housing for Homeless Youth in Edmonton

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Background

- I am looking to talk to youth aged 16 to 24 who personally identify as having a mental illness and actively seeking housing.
- Youth homelessness is a complex issue of great importance, and given that large numbers of youth affected, I think it is very important.
- I am interested in discovering the type of housing homeless youth prefer and what homeless youth think is necessary to be able to transition out of homelessness. Questions will be asked surrounding housing preference and support service needs.
- This research will be used to support a Sociology Master's thesis.

Purpose

- I am conducting this study because I am interested in discovering what housing youth prefer and what they think is necessary to find and maintain housing.

Study Procedures

- I will be interviewing homeless youth about housing preferences and support service needs.
- Interviews will take place in person or virtually (by video or phone).
- For remote interviews the main points of the consent form will be reviewed orally.
- If current COVID-19 restrictions of YESS, Alberta Health Services, and the University of Alberta allow for in-person interviews will occur at one of the YESS facilities (Armoury Resource Centre or the Nexus overnight shelter).
- The interview will take approximately an hour.
- I will record and transcribe the interview if you consent. If you do not wish to be recorded, I will take written notes.
- I would appreciate your feedback on the transcript of your interview. I can send the transcript via google drive or arrange to meet up for you to review it. You will have two weeks from receiving to review and return the transcript.
- If you wish, I can send you the final report or meet up to give it to you.
- A YESS staff member will observe the interview and only participate if a risk to self or others is identified. The staff member will not discuss the content of the discussion or who attended.
- Information that will not identify individual participants may be shared with YESS.

- I will be asking for a visual representation of your ideal home using pictures, symbols, and text.
- Before we begin, I will need to ask a couple of questions to make sure you understood this form. I will explain anything that you did not understand in more detail. I will be obtaining consent verbally.

Benefits
- You will not directly benefit from being in this study.
- Results may indicate the housing preferences of homeless youth and services they think they need to succeed in the transition out of homelessness.
- As a thank you for participating, you will receive a $25 Tim Hortons Gift Card.

Risk
- Due to COVID-19, there is a risk of exposure to the virus. Steps will be taken to minimize this risk.
- COVID-19 regulations of YESS, Alberta Health Services and the University of Alberta will be followed. Physical distancing will be maintained during interviews, and masks will be provided. Sterilized writing instruments will be available to sign consent forms and participation in a sketching activity.
- The risk of contacting COVID-19 is the same as meeting with someone else.
- If I test positive for COVID-19 within two weeks of our interview, I will let you know and request you do the same if you test positive. You can notify me via phone, text or email.
- There are no other physical risks in participating in this study.
- However, emotional discomfort may be experienced. If you are uncomfortable with a question, let me know. If you experience emotional discomfort because of the research, you can ask a YESS staff member for a referral to the YESS trauma team. Options outside of YESS include calling 211 or 780-660-8640 to reach the Mental Health Support Worker at the Bissell Centre.
- Interviews will be about personal views around housing wishes and needs, and some questions may be difficult to answer.

Voluntary Participation
- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you decide to withdraw within two weeks of the transcript's return, I will delete the interview from the database, and you can keep the gift card. To withdraw your data, please contact Laura either by phone, text, or email.
- Your participation is voluntary.
- Feel free not to answer any question you do not want to answer and if you wish can withdraw at any point in the interview.
- If you withdraw from the interview or withdraw your data the gift card is yours to keep.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
- This research will be used for the completion of a Master's thesis. I may publish papers using data from this project in journal articles or conference presentations.
- Names will not be associated with the information reported.
- Only Laura Quinlan and Dr. Sara Dorow (supervisor) will have access to the data.

- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, and printed documents will be kept in a locked cabinet.
- If you wish, I can provide a copy of my research findings via email.
- If an interview is conducted remotely via video conferencing software the video portion will not be recorded.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Laura Quinlan.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent Statement

The research study has been explained to me. I have been allowed to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I was told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I verbally consent.

May I audio record our interview?

_____
Email address

_____ _____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

Appendix B: Youth Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I am interested in learning about your opinions of dealing with homelessness, your views on the type of housing you prefer, and what you think you will need to exit homelessness successfully.

Pre-questions (conversational)

So, I refer to you with the correct pronouns, what do you prefer? Him, her, them, something else.

I think age will be important. How old are you?

1) Can you tell me about your experience with homelessness?
    a. Maybe start by telling me how long you have been homeless?
    b. Have you experienced homelessness on and off, or pretty steadily?
    c. Have you had any positive experiences while homeless?
    d. What about negative experiences?
2) Prior to being homeless, where were you living?
    a. What was it like there?
    b. Would you go back to living there?
        i. Why?
3) What have been your experiences staying at shelters?
    a. How has it been beneficial or important to you?
    b. What challenges or difficulties has it posed?
    c. Have you encountered personally difficult issues, like violence or theft?
4) In your experience, what are the different reasons that youth become homeless? What do you think are the main reasons?

a. Do you mind telling me what led to you specifically becoming homeless?

5) What specific aspects of your identity or background do you think have shaped your experience with homelessness? (for example, age, gender, race, or ethnicity).
    a. How has your age shaped your experience with homelessness?
    b. How has race or ethnicity affected your experience with homelessness?
    c. How has gender identity shaped your experience with homelessness?

As you know, I am interested in youth experiences of dealing with a mental illness while homeless. So, I want to ask you a bit about that.

6) How do you deal with both at once: homelessness and mental health?
    a. Does homelessness make dealing with mental illness more difficult?
        i. How so?
    b. How has COVID impacted experiences with mental illness and homelessness?

Thanks for the background. It's really helpful. Since this project is about housing preferences, I want to switch to talking about that.

7) What is important to you in finding housing?
8) [in-person interviews only] Would you be able to take a moment to draw what your ideal home is. You can use pictures, symbols, and text.
9) If you could choose what type of place to live, what would you choose? Examples include independently in an apartment, in an apartment with support workers; in a home living with other youth with your own room that either has staff or not; in a larger communal setting where you either had your home room or shared a room with another youth with communal areas and meals provided; or anything else that comes to mind.

a. What type of dwelling would you prefer, for example, on your own in an apartment or a shared space?

b. If you could choose what neighbourhood, or kind of neighbourhood, would you live in?

    i. Why?

10) What have your experiences been looking for housing?

a. What challenges are there in getting housing?

    i. Is cost a barrier?

    ii. What about the lack of landlord references?

    iii. Lack of a co-signer?

b. What barriers have you encountered in trying to get housing?

    i. Gang involvement

    ii. Being homeless

    iii. Gender

    iv. Race

    v. Are there any other things that created barriers to housing?

c. How does mental illness affect being able to find housing?

d. What impact has COVID had on finding a place to live?

11) What do you feel is necessary to find and keep housing?

12) Do you think obtaining housing will aid in managing your mental health?

a. Do you think obtaining housing will aid in accessing mental health treatment?

13) Just one more question. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences with homelessness or mental illness?

Appendix C: Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality Agreement

Study Title: Personal Choice: Housing for Homeless Youth in Edmonton

Research Investigator
Laura Quinlan, BA
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I, _____, the Youth Empowerment and Support Services (YESS) staff member who will be observing interviews as part of the above study, agree to keep the information shared in the interviews by the youth confidential except in the case where there is an immediate risk of imminent harm to self or others.

_____ _____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

Appendix D:

Professional Interview Guide for Housing First Placement Workers

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I am interested in learning about your work with Housing First for youth.

1. In your experience what are the main reasons youth become homeless?
2. In general, how does Housing First work in Edmonton?
    a. What are the steps involved in the process of Housing First for youth?
3. In noticed online that with COVID there has been a move to a Coordinated Youth Response. How has this changed housing for homeless youth?
4. At what point and how much choice do youth have with where they are housed?
    a. Location
    b. Housing type
5. Just one more question. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your role with Housing First?

Appendix E: Professional Interview Guide for Property Manager

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I am interested in learning about your work with Housing First for youth.

1. In your experience why do homeless youth have difficulty obtaining housing?
    a. What about remaining housed?
2. In an interview with a Housing First staff member it was mentioned that Home Ed is the only landlord in Edmonton who will house youth under 18.
    a. In my understanding minor youth cannot sign a lease. How do you work around this issue?
3. In your experience what are the main reasons youth become homeless?
4. In general, how does Housing First work in Edmonton?
    a. What are the steps involved in the process of Housing First for youth?
5. In noticed online that with COVID there has been a move to a Coordinated Youth Response. How has this changed housing for homeless youth?
6. At what point and how much choice do youth have with where they are housed?
    a. Location?
    b. Housing type?
7. In my interviews with youth, it has been mentioned that there is no government funding available prior to age 18. Is there any funding that you are aware of?
8. Just one more question. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your role with Housing First?

Appendix F: Professional Consent Form

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Personal Choice: Housing for Homeless Youth in Edmonton

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Background

- Youth homelessness is a complex issue of great importance, and given that large numbers of youth affected, I think it is very important.
- I am interested in your experiences working with Housing First for youth and how Edmonton's Housing First program operates.
- I will also be interviewing youth with mental illness who are looking for housing.
- I am interested in discovering the type of housing homeless youth prefer and what homeless youth think is necessary to be able to transition out of homelessness. Questions will be asked surrounding housing preference and support service needs.
- This research will be used to support a Sociology Master's thesis.

Purpose

- I am conducting this study because I am interested in discovering what housing youth prefer and what they think is necessary to find and maintain housing.
- I am conducting interviews with Housing First staff to discover how the Housing First program currently operates in Edmonton.

Study Procedures

- I will also be interviewing homeless youth about housing preferences and support service needs.
- I will be interviewing Housing First staff about the Edmonton youth Housing First program.
- We can talk at a quiet location convenient for you or via the phone, Zoom, or Google Hangouts.
- For remote interviews the main points of the consent form will be reviewed orally.
- Interviews will only occur in person if current COVID-19 restrictions of YESS, Alberta Health Services, and the University allow for them.
- The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.
- I will record and transcribe the interview if you consent. If you do not wish to be recorded, I will take written notes.

- I would appreciate your feedback on the transcript of your interview. I can send the transcript via google drive or arrange to meet up for you to review it. You will have two weeks from receiving to review and return the transcript.
- Information that will not identify individual participants may be shared with YESS.
- If you wish, I can send a copy of the final report or meet up to give it to you.

Benefits
- You will not directly benefit from being in this study.
- Results may indicate the housing preferences of homeless youth and services they think they need to succeed in the transition out of homelessness.
- Housing First staff members will not receive the Tim Hortons Gift Card.

Risk
- Due to COVID-19, there is a risk of exposure to the virus. Steps will be taken to minimize this risk.
- COVID-19 regulations of YESS, Alberta Health Services and the University of Alberta will be followed. Physical distancing will be maintained during interviews, and masks will be provided. Sterilized writing instruments will be available to sign consent forms.
- The risk of contacting COVID-19 is the same as meeting with someone else.
- If I test positive for COVID-19 within two weeks of our interview, I will let you know and request you do the same if you test positive. You can notify me via phone, text, or email.
- There are no other physical risks in participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation
- You are under no obligation to participate in this study and can withdraw without penalty. If you decide to withdraw within two weeks of the transcript's return, I will delete the interview from the database. To withdraw your data, please contact Laura either by phone, text, or email.
- Your participation is voluntary.
- Feel free not to answer any question you do not want to answer.
- You can withdraw from the interview without penalty.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
- This research will be used for the completion of a Master's thesis. I may publish papers using data from this project in journal articles or conference presentations.
- Names will not be associated with the information reported.
- Only Laura Quinlan and Dr. Sara Dorow (supervisor) will have access to the data.
- Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, and printed documents will be kept in a locked cabinet.
- If you wish, I can provide a copy of my research findings via email.
- If an interview is conducted remotely via video conferencing software the video portion will not be recorded.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Laura Quinlan.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent Statement

The research study has been explained to me. I have been allowed to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I was told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I consent.

May I audio record our interview?

_____
Email address

_____ _____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

Appendix G: Comprehension Check

Prior to starting the interview, I am just wanting to double check your understanding.

What is this study about?

Can you tell me what voluntary means?

What does confidential mean?

What does consent mean?

What are the risks or benefits of participation?