Pathways to Homelessness Among Caribbean Youth Aged 15-25 in Toronto

By Joseph Springer, Terry Roswell & Janet Lum

Introduction

The primary goal of the research project was to ascertain patterns, trends, and pathways related to episodes of homelessness among Caribbean youth between the ages of 15 and 25 years old. It examined the literature on homelessness in Canada, generally, and youth homelessness specifically, to determine what could be learned about the ethno-racial dimensions of youth homelessness in Canada. The data component of the study used in-depth qualitative interviews with homeless Caribbean youth aged 15-25 to develop a greater understanding of the socio-demographic characteristics of ‘street-involved’ Caribbean youth, the ways in which they found themselves homeless, their support systems, interactions with police, vulnerabilities, and the impacts these have on their self image and sense of control over their lives.

Another projected outcome of this research was to build a broad-based, sustainable partnership structure with Caribbean youth communities and the agencies that provide services to them. Finally, we hoped that, given better information, relationships between ‘Black’ or Caribbean communities and many of the institutions in our society can be improved.

The schools and the police in particular have been defensive when criticized and resistant to significant change. Good research is a necessary, though not sufficient, element of the process of persuasion.

This research project was conducted in partnership with the School of Urban and Regional Planning and the Ryerson Caribbean Research Centre (RCRC).

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SUMMARY

The primary goal of the research project was to ascertain patterns, trends, and pathways related to episodes of homelessness among Caribbean youth. The data component of the study used in-depth qualitative interviews with homeless Caribbean youth aged 15-25 to develop a greater understanding of the socio-demographic characteristics of ‘street-involved’ Caribbean youth, the ways in which they found themselves homeless, their support systems, interactions with police, vulnerabilities, and the impacts these have on their self-image and sense of control over their lives.

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Background: Homelessness in Canada

In the past decade, Canadian researchers have extensively studied the issue of homelessness. Some experts have estimated there are anywhere between 130,000 and 260,000 homeless people in Canada (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 1998), including some 3,000 to 5,000 street youth in Toronto (Smart, Adlaf, Walsh, and Sdanowicz 1992). However, these figures may actually underestimate the real level of homelessness because they tend to exclude homeless people who do not use services (Dachner and Tarasuk 2002) or women in transition houses, women who are unsafe in their own homes, and/or abused women. (Du Mont, McGregor, Myhr, and Miller 2000)

Much of the literature on street populations has focused on young people under the age of 25 years old. Researchers have linked the phenomenon of street youth in developed countries to poverty; family violence; the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children; and the non-conformity and rebelliousness of youth themselves (Baron and Hartnagel 2002; Hagan and McCarthy 1997) and tend to be living in Toronto (Brannigan and Caputo 1993). While most of the attention has been placed on young people, recent attention has highlighted the plights of other groups as well, including women (Du Mont, McGregor, Myhr, and Miller 2000) and Aboriginals (Baron and Hartnagel 2002; Report of the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force 1999).

Besides identifying some of the complex background factors or pathways that lead some youth to episodes of homelessness (Gaetz and O’Grady 2002; Springer, Mars and Dennison 1998), studies also have focused on the experiences of homeless youth while living on the streets. These works have included examinations of their attempts to access community- and/or government-based resources (Morrell-Bellai, Goering and Boydell 2000); their modes of survival, including involvement in property crimes, panhandling and/or substance abuse (Basso, Graham, Pelech, DeYoung, and Cardey 2004; DeMatteo et al. 1999; Parnaby 2003); and/or their criminal victimization (Tanner and Wortley 2002).

Generally, most Canadian street youth have been found to be male (Kufeldt and Nimmo 1987; Hagan and McCarthy 1997) and tend to be living in Toronto (Brannigan and Caputo 1993). While most of the attention has been placed on young people, recent attention has highlighted the plights of other groups as well, including women (Du Mont, McGregor, Myhr, and Miller 2000) and Aboriginals (Baron and Hartnagel 2002; Report of the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force 1999).

One issue that has been noticeably absent from Canadian research in this area has been the analysis of racial differences in rates of homelessness. In fact, the ethnoracial compositions of some relatively large-scale quantitative Canadian studies are not even presented to readers or incorporated into most researchers’ analyses (Basso, Graham, Pelech, DeYoung, and Cardey 2004; Dachner and Tarasuk 2002).

Other projects have noted a significant representation of racialized groups in their sample but have failed to comment upon the different experiences of these same populations (DeMatteo et al 1999; Gaetz and O’Grady 2002; Tanner and Wortley 2002). Homelessness in Canada has been constructed in a way that negates the racial diversity that exists within this particular population. A few notable studies, however, have
commented on the different variables/pathways which pose a risk to visible minorities, including immigration, education, employment, housing, or the criminal justice system (Anisef and Bunch 1994; Anisef and Kilbride 2003; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Springer, Mars, and Dennison 1998).

For example, Anisef and Kilbride recognized that the needs of newcomer youth have not been adequately met, especially in relation to their experiences in the education system. They effectively identified some of the structural and ideological barriers with which these youth must contend in the Canadian education system.

More research on the experiences of racialized homeless populations would provide advocates and policy makers with information that should be better suited to deal with this social issue.

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The following are some of the main points outlined in their executive summary regarding the face of homelessness (Report of the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force 1998, iv): about 26,000 individuals used hostels in Toronto in 1996, and 5,300 children were homeless in that same year. Furthermore, a significant percentage of the homeless (about 30 to 35 per cent) suffered from mental illness, at least 47 per cent of hostel users came from outside of Toronto, poverty was getting worse, and the fastest-growing group among the homeless or those at risk of being homeless included youth and families.

The Toronto Report Card on Homelessness 2001, a more recent analysis of the homelessness situation in Toronto, provides more up-to-date information. According to this report, in 1999, two-parent families represented 9.6 per cent of shelter users, single parent families represented 7.3 per cent of shelter users, and couples comprised 1.8 per cent of shelter users – figures that have steadily increased since 1988. The number of individuals using the shelter system in 1999 was approximately 30,000 individuals.

Furthermore, youth comprise 23 per cent of shelter users as of September 2000, an increase from 1998 when the percentage was 20 per cent; and there has been an increase in the number of children using shelters from 2,700 in 1988 to 6,200 in 1999.

Of significance to this study, among families using emergency shelters, 24 per cent were refugee claimants and 9 per cent of families were newcomers to the City. In addition, single newcomers to the City accounted for 3 per cent of shelter users and single refugee claimants comprised 3 per cent of shelter users (City of Toronto 2001, 3-5).

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homelessness. The Mayor’s

One of the most prevalent reasons for hostel use was that many of the users were newly arrived to the City of Toronto: approximately 30.7 per cent of total hostel users stated this as their reason for using the service.
(Springer, Mars & Dennison 1998, 15)

Task Force on Homelessness which noted that, in 1997, 16 per cent of shelter users had arrived from other parts of Ontario, 17 per cent from other provinces, and 14 per cent from outside of Canada.

This illustrates that a significant number of emergency shelter users have been migrants from outside of Toronto, a finding also corroborated in Springer and Mars’s analysis of the characteristics of the homeless population in Toronto, in which they found that slightly under half of the hostel users studied had lived outside of the City of Toronto one year prior to their use of the hostel system.

It should be noted that the pattern of hostel use of those from abroad was different in that they tended to need only four days to two months to leave the hostel system; however, 6 per cent were found to have stayed in the system for a year or longer (Springer, Mars & Dennison 1998, 28).

**Affordable Housing**

It has been estimated that Ontario is short about 74,000 rental housing units, the majority of which are in the City of Toronto (Dunphy and Brennan 2001; Mahoney 2001). Reasons for this are attributable to the lack of incentives for the private sector to build rental-housing units. In the past, many had argued that developers did not invest in rental housing because of the government-regulated rent caps.

Under Premier Mike Harris, a new system was implemented in which landlords could raise the rents on a yearly basis to account for inflation and other rising costs. In 2001, the yearly allowed increase was 2.9 per cent, and in 2002 it was 3.9 per cent (Gillespie 2001). Even though this new system was to provide more of an incentive for the private sector to build rental housing, between 1996 and 2001, only 6,000 rental units were built in Ontario (Dunphy and Brennan 2001; Mahoney 2001).

Moreover, many landlords applied to the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal to increase rents beyond the allowed rate; many of these landlords were from Toronto (Gillespie 2001). Thus, the incentive of the possibility of on-going rental increases alone was not sufficient to induce the private sector to build rental-housing units. Furthermore, until the past year the vacancy rates for rental units remained at disturbingly low levels throughout Ontario, especially in Toronto where the vacancy rate in 2001 was 0.6 per cent (Dunphy and Brennan 2001; Mahoney 2001).

At present a healthy vacancy rate of approximately 5 per cent exists in Toronto. A low vacancy rate heightens competition among individuals for affordable rental units and, not surprisingly, migrants newly arrived to Toronto have had a difficult time competing with other Canadians, especially if they have had little income and few contacts.

In 2004, under Premier Dalton McGuinty’s new Liberal government, the “as-of-right” increase for rental charges was reduced to 1.5 per cent.

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**Immigrants and Poverty**

Kevin Lee’s analysis of urban poverty in Canada illustrated that recent immigrants are
having difficulties settling in Canada.

According to Lee’s analysis, 32.9 per cent of immigrants living in Toronto lived below the poverty line in 1995, compared to 21.5 per cent of Canadian-born residents (Lee 2000, 34). Lee found that over half (52.8 per cent) of recent immigrants - those who had arrived between 1991 and 1996 - were more likely to be poor, whereas those immigrants who had arrived prior to 1986 had a lower poverty rate (Lee 2000, 35, 32).

Furthermore, in Toronto, non-permanent residents (including foreign students, work-visa holders, and refugee claimants) had a poverty rate of 63 per cent (Lee 2000, 36). Lee stated that these data imply that recent immigrants were having a hard time obtaining a sufficient income (Lee 2000, 31).

As noted in Toronto’s Report Card on Homelessness 2001, a lack of, or an insufficient amount of, income creates poverty, and poverty is one of the primary factors determining homelessness.

Discrimination in the Rental-Housing Market

The Ontario Human Rights Code explicitly states that it is illegal to discriminate against an individual or refuse to rent to her/him based on the following: race/ethnicity, place of origin, creed, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status, disability, receipt of public assistance (Ryerson Student Group 2001, 2).

Many agencies, however, such as the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA), receive numerous complaints regarding discrimination in housing, especially the rental-housing market, based on race, ethnicity, and the like. CERA enlisted the help of Urban and Regional Planning Students at Ryerson University to conduct surveys across Toronto to assess the extent of discrimination in the rental housing market. The Ryerson Student Group (RSG) visited shelters in Toronto and administered surveys asking housing seekers what their experiences had been like in trying to obtain housing.

Overall, the RSG’s research found that discrimination in the rental housing market did occur despite the ostensible protections offered by the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Immigrants and refugees who live below the poverty line are, therefore, at risk of becoming homeless and, thus, in need of emergency shelter, as they attempt to bridge the gap to permanent, affordable housing. (Authors)

Research Methodology

The research employed a qualitative method to profile the characteristics of self-identified homeless youth of Caribbean descent, specifically targeting the 15 to 25 age group. The sample was opportunistic and was drawn from seven agencies serving homeless youth in Toronto.

We used a detailed questionnaire to assess the socio-demographic characteristics of Toronto’s homeless Caribbean youth. Included in the survey instrument were questions concerning the reasons for their homelessness and their previous episodes of homelessness; their family background; their hopes and aspirations; their perceptions of safety, racism, and discrimination; their sources of social and financial support; and the community resources accessed during their periods of homelessness.

Sixty interviews were attempted. This yielded 43
usable results (26 males and 17 females). Each participant was given an honorarium of thirty dollars. The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for storage and analysis.

Study Results: Demographics and Homelessness Histories

Age
Twenty-six of the 43 respondents (60.5 per cent) were between 21 and 25 years of age, 15 males and 11 females; 11 (25.6 per cent) were aged 17 to 20; and 6 (14.0 per cent) were between 14 and 16. In total there were 26 males (60.5 per cent) and 17 females (39.5 per cent) in the sample.

Immigration Status
Of the sample, 35 (81.4 per cent) had been born outside Canada, and 8 (18.6 per cent) had been born in Canada. Fifteen (34.9 per cent) were citizens, another 15 (34.9 per cent) were landed immigrants, 7 (16.3 per cent) were undocumented, and 5 (11.6 per cent) were refugee claimants. Eighteen of the 35 immigrant youth in the sample (51.4 per cent), had been in Canada for fewer than 5 years, with 8 (22.9 per cent) having been here for less than 2 years. Forty per cent of the sample thought of themselves as “Canadian.”

Ethnicity
The sample of homeless youth was overwhelmingly Black. Indeed, 33 of the 43 (76. per cent) identified themselves as Black, 7 (16.3 per cent) as mixed-race, 2 (4.7 per cent) as East Indian, and 1 (2.3 per cent) as Chinese.

Education
Eighteen (41.9 per cent) of the respondents were not in school at the time the survey was conducted. Of the others, 13 (30.2 per cent) had completed Grade 12 or less, although only two (4.7 per cent) reported having less than a Grade 10 education. Five (11.6 per cent) reported they had graduated high school, some in the Caribbean; 4 (9.3 per cent), all female, had had some college or university education. In all, 15 (34.9 per cent) had dropped out of school at some point.

The relationship of the youth respondents with the school system can be quite comfortably be described as strained; 18 of those in the sample (41.9 per cent) had been either suspended or expelled from school.

(Authors)

According to those in the sample, the primary cause of the suspension or expulsion was violence, which they related, in large measure, to a zero-tolerance policy with regard to fighting. Not surprisingly, this problem was more prevalent among the males in the sample.

Most of the youth who were surveyed suggested that schoolwork had not been a problem for them; 37 (86.0 per cent) reported receiving grades of “C” or better during their time in school. Education was highly valued by the youth in the sample. In fact, 34 (79.1 per cent) observed that they had plans to continue, or complete, their education.

Family Background
“Family” members had raised 40 of 43 (93.0 per cent) respondents. Ten (23.3 per cent) had been raised by both parents, 16 (37.2 per cent) by single mothers, 13 (30.2 per cent) by other family members, and 1 (2.3 per cent) by a single father. Twenty-six of those interviewed (60.5 per cent) had two or more siblings.

The employment status of the parents was remarkably stable. Generally, most of the parents were gainfully employed; 29 of the youth (67.4 per cent) had parents who worked full time, and just 7 (16.3 per cent) had those who worked part-time. Only 3 (7.0 per cent) had parents who were unemployed; none of the parents were on social assistance.

Income
Without question, this group of youth had experienced financial hardship. At the time of the survey, 37 of the 43 in our sample (86.0 per cent) were unemployed; 14 (32.6 per cent) were in receipt of either social

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assistance or a personal needs allowance (PNA), but 29 (67.4 per cent) did not receive such support. Twenty-six of the youth (60.5 per cent) claimed they got some help from family and/or friends. All reported having less money than their peers. To survive, some respondents suggested they depended on informal support from family and friends. Mothers were the main providers in 60 per cent of cases, fathers in 12 per cent.

Some women braided hair to earn extra money; 8 youth reported having sold drugs at least once. None reported panhandling or prostitution as sources of income, but 1 spoke of squeegee activity. (Authors)

Present Housing

This sample reflects a homeless, but not a street-based group. Twenty-eight of respondents (65.1 per cent) were living in a shelter or group home during the study period, 2 were in rooming houses, 5 (11.6 per cent) shared apartments with others, 8 (18.6 per cent) were unclear about their accommodation, and could best be classified as “couch surfing.” None were sleeping on the street at time of study.

For most, this was not their first episode of homelessness.

The homeless episodes for the members of the sample were of significant length. Almost 60 per cent had been homeless 9 weeks or more. The most frequent duration period cited by the respondents was 9 to 24 weeks. (Authors)

Twenty-five (58.1 per cent) had been homeless more than once, with 10 (23.3 per cent) homeless more than 3 times and 8 (18.6 per cent) more than 5 times.

Despite contact with family, the majority did not return home once they had left. In fact, 22 (51.1 per cent) claimed they had not returned home between episodes.

Reasons for Homelessness

For the participants in our survey, the most common pathway to homelessness was family breakdown. This was the reason given in almost 40 per cent of cases. This catchall response included problems with parents, partners, other family or guardians, and sometimes abuse. The next most reported reason was eviction related to inability to pay rent, which was cited 25 per cent of the time.

Personal Safety/Victimization

Respondents reported witnessing drug dealing; car theft; fights, both with and without weapons; threats with weapons; and sexual assault. In response, about 10 per cent carried knives for their own protection, and 25 per cent previously had been part of a gang that “looked out for each other.” (Only 2 told us they were still part of a gang).

Ten of the youth in the sample had faced threats of physical injury, including threats of being killed, more than once; half of the females had been attacked without a weapon; both males and females had faced sexual interference, and 5 females reported they had been abused. (Authors)

The geography of personal assault tended to differ significantly by gender. Women were most likely to be assaulted in the home. Indeed, 8 of 13 assaults at home were on women; 7 of the 8 assailants were males over 30; and in 5 of the 7 cases this adult was a family member. By contrast, 12 of 15 assaults on males took place outside the home; 2 or more other males carried out these assaults. Some assaults were based on race, others on sexual orientation. Non-physical assault included ethnic slurs, and almost 40 per cent of respondents reported experiences of this kind.
Discrimination and Racism

There was a very strong perception among respondents that racism and discrimination were pervasive. Ninety per cent of them articulated a belief that the police discriminated on the basis of race, and that some racial groups are treated worse than others.

Moreover, 75 per cent thought males were targets more often than females, and almost half believed racism had affected their grades in school. At the individual level, contact with police had been overwhelmingly negative. Without question, males bore the brunt of the negative contact with the police.

Over 50 per cent of those in our sample had been arrested at least once; 66 per cent had been stopped and questioned at least once; and 25 per cent had been searched more than 10 times. (Authors)

Self-Image/Self-Control

Despite their housing status, respondents generally had a positive image of themselves. Fully four-fifths of them considered themselves as capable as others, 75 per cent believed they were in control of their future, and half believed they had control over the bad things that happened to them.

This overall optimism was reflected in their identification of preferred jobs. Forty-five per cent chose the skilled trades or skilled professions as the form of employment they would achieve ultimately, while only about 12 per cent expected to be in the lower-paid service sectors. The youth in our sample did not see their existence as aimless. Indeed, 70 per cent disagreed with the statement that “they lived life day to day with little thought for the future.” Their responses, in the main, reflected a willingness to take responsibility for their circumstances and behaviours.

Nevertheless, 54 per cent described themselves as self-centred, acting without regard to the impact on others; 50 per cent admitted that they lost their tempers easily; and 44 per cent agreed that they often acted impulsively, without stopping to think. Of those in our sample, 70 per cent had tried marijuana; 25 per cent claimed to be weekly users and 10 per cent stated they were daily users. Most used public transit as the primary form of transportation, other than walking, and 50 per cent suggested they had used the TTC without paying.

Social Supports

According to the survey respondents, mothers were the primary source of support in 60 per cent of cases, other family in 25 per cent, and fathers in 12 per cent. Sixty-five per cent of the respondents claimed they received small amounts of help from friends. Sixty per cent stated they had 2 or more close friends. These tended to belong to the same race, sex, and social class, even if they lived in different parts of the city. Six participants reported they had no close friends.

Kozol has used the term ‘shelterization’ to refer to processes that make healthy people ill, normal people clinically depressed, and those who may be unwell already a great deal worse (Kozol 1998, 21). Thus, the longer-term costs of unstable housing and homelessness include loss of self-esteem, illness, violence, and extended unemployment.

Conclusions

The literature reviewed for this study suggested that common pathways to homelessness among youth include: 1) abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), 2) drug use, 3) mental health problems, 4) family breakdown, 5) poverty, 6) sexual identity/preference, and 7) various combinations of the above.

In addition, a number of researchers have suggested newcomer youth face adjustments to: 1) culture, 2) language, 3) the educational system, 4) blended families, 5) racism, 6) self-image in a new
societal context, and 7) feelings of isolation/exclusion.

A failure to adjust to any of these things may well increase the chances for homelessness.

The results of our pilot study strongly support the patterns described in the literature. Caribbean (Black) youth face all the challenges traditionally associated with youth homelessness.

In assessing the challenges that face newcomer youth, specifically, some disconcerting conclusions emerge:

• Race and Racism are critical in understanding the life terrain that Black youth must negotiate. Canadian-born Black youth face the same issues around institutional and individual racism as Caribbean- and African-born youth.

• The intersection of racism and education present a formidable structural barrier that Black males in particular, find difficult to circumvent.

• Youth arrive in Canada with a sense of optimism about their future and the possibilities of a new and better life. Unemployment, poverty, racism, and negative contact with the police systematically destroy this optimism.

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that migration per se is not a good indicator of homelessness among Caribbean youth. Rather as May (2000) has argued “a position of multiple structural disadvantage” is a more appropriate explanation.

Changes in social and income support, tenant protection legislation, and zero-tolerance policies seem to have combined with discrimination, racism, and economic restructuring to push immigrants, and immigrant youth in particular, closer to the margins of society.

One outcome of this marginal status is poverty and, far too often, homelessness.

Note:
A more detailed version of this research may be found in:

REFERENCES


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About Metropolis

Launched in 1996, the Metropolis Project aims to improve policies for managing migration and diversity by focusing scholarly attention on critical issues. It involves policymakers, researchers, and NGOs in all project initiatives.

Metropolis’ goals are to:

- Enhance academic research capacity;
- Focus academic research on critical policy issues and policy options;
- Develop ways to facilitate the use of research in decision-making.

Structured as a partnership, the project has both Canadian and international components. Metropolis encourages communication between interested stakeholders at the annual national and international conferences and at workshops, seminars, and roundtables organized by project members.

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