

# The TYC report on **youth homelessness**



# Introduction

Words are powerful. But sometimes, numbers are necessary to illustrate the importance of a community and the issues they face. Consider these:

- There are approximately 308,400 youth aged 15 to 24 living in Toronto.
- They comprise 12.4% of the city's population.
- Yet, in one of the richest cities in the world, 20,000 young people used Toronto emergency shelters at least once in 2003. In that same year, 27% of all shelter users were young people (Toronto Youth Profile 2003, City of Toronto, 2003).

These numbers speak to the stories of young people who live on Toronto streets and the many others who “couch surf” between friends and acquaintances, often seeking refuge from family abuse, neglect and economic instability. Many are perhaps only a step or two away from moving onto the streets.

Our political culture and policy-making process often leaves little to no room for young people to bring their concerns and ideas to the discussions where laws and programs are made and resources allocated. Youth marginalized by homelessness are even further isolated from policy processes. Committed to bringing youth ideas and perspectives to City Hall, the Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC) was created in 1998 to change this dynamic of inequality and exclusion.

*Catch us before we fall* is the result of TYC's commitment to engaging street-involved youth in their own advocacy. Beginning in May 2004 with a two-part forum on shelter and housing issues, TYC set a precedent for inclusive decision-making that stresses the importance of gathering input from under-represented youth communities. Young people are committed, energetic and capable of creating long-term effective solutions to address the multiple issues of homelessness and at-risk youth.

Divided into two parts, this TYC Report on Youth Homelessness is a collection of ideas about how to build on homeless and at-risk young people's capacity to be more independent and motivated in their lives. Part I contains the TYC's Priority Recommendations for Toronto City Council to consider in their 2004 – 2005 policy and budget debates around housing and homelessness. Part II reflects the various ideas of at-risk and street-involved youth with experience using Toronto's shelters and street-level programs and services. Young people focused their ideas on strategies to help youth transition off the streets, gain access to safe and affordable housing, obtain a living wage, and benefit from a range of effective supports to meet the mental health and addiction needs.

As the political landscape on the issue of homelessness shifts, we hope that *Catch us before we fall* is recognized as an effective youth contribution to the political dialogue on housing, shelter and supports. The recommendations contained in this report are concrete and viable avenues for Council to continue to invest in Toronto's young people.



Hassan Jama  
Street-level Services Advocate



Jennifer Dalton  
Co-Chair, Street-level Services Team

# Part I: Priority recommendations for Toronto City Council

“Politicians don’t really have any clue of the real state of youth homelessness in Toronto.”

– Sabri

## Setting TYC priorities

The TYC Report on Youth Homelessness is a living document. In writing this report, the Toronto Youth Cabinet used its ideas and recommendations to try and influence the many policy change dialogues happening at City Hall. In particular, TYC recognized that allocating money to City programs and services had become an important way to set policy in the City of Toronto. Consequently, the Cabinet sought opportunities to depute to the City’s Budget Committees as part of a strategy to realize several key recommendations.

On January 19, 2005, the staff report, “From the Street into Homes: A Strategy to Assist Homeless Persons Find Permanent Housing,” was presented to the City’s Policy and Finance Committee. This document both reflects the recent policy debates, and aims to shape future policy debates on how to effectively address homelessness in Toronto. TYC focused our attention on this opportunity.

Many of our recommendations are reflected to some extent in the staff report, and certainly its spirit is inclusive, respectful and outreach-oriented. However, “From the Street into Homes” falls short in one fundamental way: it is almost completely silent on young people who find themselves living on the streets, in shelters or transitional housing. There is little acknowledgement that young people require targeted and unique services to successfully move forward.

The Toronto Youth Cabinet proposes five key recommendations that — beginning now and continuing in future years — will allow the City of Toronto to build towards a holistic method of helping young Torontonians transition off the streets into more stable circumstances.



Homeless or street-involved youth are defined as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 who are permanently, occasionally, temporarily or at risk of being without shelter.

## The TYC recommends that:

1. A youth-focused sub-committee on homelessness be established as part of the Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons that currently advises the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services and the Community Services Committee. Encompassing current and former street-involved youth, as well as homeless youth advocates, the youth-focused sub-committee would ensure that the real needs of street-youth are voiced and met.
2. Housing be built now, with at least 10% of affordable and subsidized housing designated for youth. Furthermore, 10% of rent supplements should also be designated for youth.
3. An eviction prevention program be introduced in the city to ensure that once young people are housed, they can remain housed. It may include landlord/tenant dialogue workshops and life-skills training, including budgeting and housekeeping skills to build the capacity of street-involved youth to successfully live independently.
4. The number and supports for peer mentoring programs across the city aimed at street-involved youth be increased. Formerly street-involved youth would make presentations to homeless youth to inform them of their rights and the options available to them. Several youth-friendly toolkits containing documents on rights and responsibilities, available services and contact information already exist so the emphasis is to increasing their availability.
5. More Parks and Recreation programs be made accessible to street-involved youth eliminating registration fees. Access to quality recreation activities throughout the year for homeless youth would contribute to their stability and provide capacity-building opportunities.



*The TYC Report on Youth Homelessness is a call to decision-makers to continue to take leadership and exercise the political will needed to create real and relevant changes in the lives of at-risk and street-involved youth. TYC offers these recommendations as concrete and viable avenues for City Council to continue to invest in Toronto youth.*

### **The five most pressing issues facing street-involved youth in the City of Toronto are:**

1. A lack of access to affordable housing in safe communities, close to services and support systems.
2. Police harassment while living on the street.
3. A lack of programs, services and supports that help young people learn necessary life-skills for healthy, independent living.
4. High poverty rates, low minimum wage, lack of available jobs and social assistance rates that fail to accommodate the cost of living.
5. Substance use as a dependency and as a means of survival.

# Part II: Voices of street-involved and at-risk youth

## Background

In fulfilling our civic youth engagement mandate, the Toronto Youth Cabinet is committed to an anti-oppression framework — actively working to acknowledge and shift power and privilege towards inclusivity, accessibility and social justice. On this basis, the Cabinet created two homeless youth forums in May 2004 to ensure that young people who had experienced homelessness could bring their voices to City Hall.

The first two forums launched TYC's intense investment in engaging at-risk and street-involved youth in education and advocacy. In early summer 2004, the Toronto Youth Cabinet created a coffee-house session combining entertainment with conversation to educate young people about youth homelessness in the city. In August 2004, TYC collaborated with community partners to select street-level services as one of our three priority issue areas for the work year.

With the creation of a new position on the TYC Executive — the Street-level Services Advocate — and a new Street-level Services Team, structural capacity was created within the Cabinet to continue to build on the first homeless forum on May 17, 2004 and the second eight days later. By November 2004, the Street-level Services Team, including the Advocate, former street-involved youth and other interested TYC members, had organized two large forums entitled “No Fixed Address,” to educate 1,000 Toronto-area high school students about the multiple layers of youth homelessness.

## The participants

Each TYC consultation opportunity in May 2004 engaged approximately 50 youth who call the streets, shelter system or transitional housing “home.” This represented the first stage of generating the *Catch us before we fall* report.

## Moving the forum recommendations forward

### Stage one

Street-involved youth from the first homeless forum produced over 50 concrete recommendations for improving housing and shelter services in the City of Toronto. This preliminary report was brought forward to the second forum on May 25, 2004 and presented to participating youth, City Councillors, community workers and advocates. All opinions, ideas and solutions that were expressed were recorded and catalogued into a second draft report that synthesized the findings of both forums.

### Stage two

The Toronto Youth Cabinet's Street-level Services Team formed a Youth Advisory Committee of formerly street-involved young people, to ensure the recommendations that moved forward in this report reflected the most pressing issues facing street-involved youth and offered solutions that would actually meet their needs.

Recognizing the resilience of youth, the Youth Advisory Committee struggled with an important question: How can adult decision-makers (e.g., governments, civil servants, service providers, school boards and the police services) help build the capacity of homeless and at-risk young people to be more independent in their lives? Having lived on the streets themselves and all successfully transitioned to more stable circumstances, many now delivering street-level services or working in advocacy, the Advisory Committee developed a vision where street-involved youth can:

- transition off the streets
- gain access to affordable, stable housing
- receive a living wage
- become safe from harm.

From these discussions, three effective sections emerged to categorize young people's issues and concerns about their life experiences on the street and using street-level services, and to capture their recommendations for improvement:

1. Shelter and housing
2. Education, job training and skills support
3. Mental health.

## 1. Shelter and housing

### Youth voiced concerns about...

#### Affordable housing:

- There is a lack of affordable housing, services and support systems in the City of Toronto.
- Continued increases in the cost of rent make it increasingly less affordable for homeless youth to gain access to adequate housing.
- Social housing waiting lists are far too long, and homeless youth have trouble gaining access to the proper bureaucratic agencies that deal with affordable housing waiting lists.
- Rent supplements help homeless youth tremendously and are effective in maintaining housing, but there seems to be insufficient youth access to rent supplements.
- Affordable housing, in many cases, is not located in safe neighborhoods among mixed-income housing.
- Homeless youth on social assistance are not eligible for the rent bank.

#### Shelters and hostels:

- Inconsistency exists in the application of rules and regulations from one shelter/hostel facility to another.

#### Communication/public awareness:

- Homeless youth are discriminated against by landlords because of their age, combined with their experience on the street and/or in the shelter system.



"I'd like to see more peer programs added. I'd like to see more money spent on subsidized and affordable housing and transitional housing units. [There shouldn't] be a focus on long-term involvement in the system. The quicker someone can get off the streets, the less likely they are to return to the cycle."

– Leia

## Youth recommend that...

### Affordable housing:

- The “Housing First” policy approved by Toronto City Council should be honoured and implemented.
- More mixed-housing neighbourhoods be established to ensure equal access to varying services and opportunities.
- New transitional housing developments should focus on eradicating homelessness in outlying areas of the City of Toronto.
- Transitional and subsidized housing where youth can use these programs in and out of the downtown area be increased.
- An adequate percentage of the City-administrated rent supplements be designated for homeless youth.
- City-owned land be used to develop more affordable housing units to meet the shortages.
- A price floor on rents or a rent freeze be introduced.
- Accessibility to the rent bank for street-involved youth who are unable to claim social assistance be increased.

### Shelter and hostels:

- A city-wide quality standard be developed for youth hostels.

### Support services:

- New transitional housing units be closely linked with services used by homeless youth and support staff.

- Funding be allocated to create long-term case management programs in the shelter system to get more youth into stable and permanent housing.
- Community organizations be made more accessible to street-involved youth and youth at risk of homelessness.
- Active outreach is made since these efforts are crucial for initial contact with youth who feel marginalized by their communities.
- The Community Start-Up Benefit for youth on social assistance be increased to ensure that youth are adequately able to move or set up new housing.

### Communication/public awareness:

- A public awareness campaign about youth homelessness be launched in schools, youth hostels and community centres to help counter some of the stigmatization and misinformation.
- Eviction prevention programs designed for homeless youth be made available, including landlord/tenant dialogue workshops and life-skills training, to help increase the housing retention rate for youth who formerly lived on Toronto streets.

### Youth involvement in policy-making:

- A Youth Homelessness Steering Committee be created to develop strategies to reduce and prevent homelessness among youth.



**Catch us before we fall** – TYC Report on Youth Homelessness

## 2. Education, job training, and skills support

“The problem is that all these services don’t help you maintain long-term employment. They seem to be geared more for short relief on employment services.”

– Ozz

### Youth voiced concerns about...

#### Support services:

- There is a shortage of programs, services and life-skills support programs for homeless youth.
- Language barriers exist between newcomer youth and the staff of street-level services and supports.
- Under some circumstances, homeless youth must wait three months after losing employment before getting the basic needs portion of social assistance.

#### Education and training:

- Homeless youth face numerous barriers of entry while enrolling in schools or other formal educational institutions, including internships and apprenticeships, further depriving them of their right to education.
- Homeless youth also face barriers of entry to employment enrichment programs.
- Homeless youth with mental illness and/or substance use issues lack adequately-focused support systems like harm reduction programs.
- Zero-tolerance in Safe Schools policies and legislation place at-risk youth in increasingly harmful situations, through suspensions and expulsions without productive activity and supports during these times.

#### Employment:

- Homeless youth surviving on social assistance have trouble finding jobs that pay a living wage. Whether they work or only receive social assistance, they currently receive virtually the same amount of money.
- Regular youth employment centres do not help youth with substance abuse issues.



- Complex barriers exist which prevent homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues from obtaining employment.

### Youth recommend that...

#### Support services:

- Programs and services that provide life-skills training and capacity-building for street-involved youth be made more readily available, to enable youth to more effectively transition off the streets into more stable circumstances.
- Dialogue between service providers be facilitated, to improve program efficiency and provide a holistic, continuous plan of support for street-involved youth.
- More housing services and medical clinics be created in drop-in centers and youth hostels for greater accessibility by homeless youth.
- A diversion program for street-involved youth charged with/convicted of minor offences be implemented and monitored.
- Social assistance be maintained at a level to provide an incentive for youth to find employment, and collect and save their significant incomes for the purpose of education, housing, and other such necessities.
- The basic needs portion of social assistance be made available for homeless youth earlier than the current three-month timeframe.

- Municipally-owned and operated drop-in programs be opened during evenings and weekends for greater accessibility by homeless youth.
- Within the current programming offered by Parks and Recreation, additional subsidized recreational opportunities be created for street-involved youth, to ensure their access to safe, productive activities and capacity-building opportunities.



#### Employment:

- Subsidized and paid employment opportunities be provided for homeless youth to ensure their access to a living wage. This is a critical measure to prevent first-time and recurring incidence of youth homelessness.
- Paid peer mentorships/internships be created to connect formerly street-involved youth who demonstrate a desire to become role models with their peers currently living on the street. The emphasis of these mentorships is to have youth with lived experiences of homelessness provide useful, youth-friendly information, in the form of a municipally-funded tool-kit, to current street-involved youth to help them transition off the streets and/or from shelters.

#### Education and training:

- Educators, service providers, recreation outreach workers and youth employment counsellors be encouraged to develop a holistic prevention strategy to meet the needs of youth at risk of becoming homeless. A strategy could include more effective communication by agencies about the range of facilities, services and programs youth have access to, as well as the creation of varied, fun and effective programs and facilities placed where youth naturally congregate.
- The number of student spaces for homeless youth in alternative schools be increased to give youth a flexible schedule that permits them to obtain day-time employment.
- The number of student spaces for homeless youth in cooperative education and apprenticeship programs be increased to allow youth to develop skills in the trades.
- Summer school and night school courses be made available for homeless youth to improve their marks or take new credits for additional education or employment opportunities.
- Support programs for suspended/expelled homeless youth be established to prevent their further marginalization on the street.
- A partnership between youth hostels and school boards be facilitated to address the barriers homeless youth face in enrolling and succeeding in school.
- Schools be funded to act as community hubs that provide classes as well as recreational activities outside the traditional Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. schedule.

#### Affordable housing:

- Adequate aftercare supports that ensure stable and appropriate housing be made available to youth who transition from youth hostels or shelters. These would include ongoing care and support from housing and support workers, particularly mental health and addictions counsellors.

### 3. Mental health

#### Youth voiced concerns about...

##### Multiple barriers:

- Drugs and alcohol use form a substance dependency for many street-involved youth.
- Mental health concerns and/or substance dependency can prevent youth from carrying out essential aspects of daily life, further diminishing their capacity to overcome the multiple barriers of homelessness.
- Youth with mental health and/or substance use concerns are at a higher risk of becoming homeless, and remain homeless for longer periods of time.
- Homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues suffer more physical health concerns.
- Homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues are more often in trouble with the law than homeless youth who have better mental health.

##### Support services:

- Many homeless youth have mental health concerns that go undiagnosed and untreated.
- Homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues would be able to live in the community if proper support systems were provided.
- Homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use have less contact with the support network of family and friends.
- There is a strong demand for improvement in the quality of programs so that service providers can support the rehabilitation of young people who are addicted to substances.

---

“Truthfully, I’d say I’ve never met a street-involved youth who doesn’t have an addiction of some sort. So I think that the basis of a lot of street life is addiction. You’ve got to come clean with your addictions or you’ll never get off the streets.”

– James

---



Catch us before we fall – TYC Report on Youth Homelessness

## Youth recommend that...

### Staff training and capacity building:

- Police and service providers receive additional skills training, so they can develop a greater level of understanding to effectively help homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues.

### Support services:

- Access for homeless youth to harm reduction shelter services be increased.
- The appropriate City bodies support additional new and innovative approaches that help youth with mental health and substance use concerns obtain and retain stable housing. This should act as a measure to prevent homelessness.
- Additional programs be created to assist youth with mental health and/or substance use issues to obtain treatment and services like health care, harm reduction treatment, legal assistance and other supports.
- Policies and programs be established to identify homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use concerns who are charged/convicted of minor offences, and to divert these youth from the court and incarceration systems to proper alternative measures.

### Affordable housing:

- Policies and practices that prevent homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use concerns from access to stable housing be eliminated.
- Housing with support programs and supportive staff that interact with youth on an individual basis be made more readily available to youth with mental health and/or substance use concerns.



# Thanks to our team of partners, supports and sources!

On behalf of the Toronto Youth Cabinet, the Street-level Services Team would like to thank everyone who provided ideas, recommendations, energy and support to make this report happen. To the street-involved youth who began this process with their attendance at the homeless forums in May 2004, and all who have followed after, thank you for sharing your stories and your solutions.

## **Toronto Youth Cabinet Street-level Services Committee:**

Jennifer Dalton

Anna Haas

Hassan Jama

Aaron McKinnon

## **Toronto Youth Cabinet Editorial Team:**

Shaun Alphonso

Lisa Anthony

Adam Chaleff-Freudenthaler

Ryan Hayes

Paul Lewkowicz

Shilipi Saraf

Zoë Williams

Denise Andrea Campbell, TYC Coordinator

## **Youth Advisory Committee:**

Ankita Arora, Toronto Youth Cabinet

Martin Brazzier

Kolin Davidson, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

Andrew Frazier, Project Not-so-Much

Sabri Essa, Project Not-so-Much

Jamie Gharzouzi

James Gowin

Hamzat

Megan Lee Licznar, YouthLink Innercity

Ozz

Courtney Powell, Project Not-so-Much

Leia Saunders

Many thanks to the community partners, shelters, City staff and Councillors who have actively supported the Toronto Youth Cabinet at every stage of this extensive project. We appreciate the ongoing support for the Cabinet's work from Councillor Olivia Chow, Ward 20 Trinity-Spadina, and her team.

## **DESIGN AND EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE:**

Community Outreach Support Unit

Social Development and Administration

©2005 Toronto Youth Cabinet

Printed in Toronto, Canada March 2005