Youth homelessness has possibly been one of the most underestimated and overlooked social issues within contemporary Canadian society. Young people represent one of the fastest growing sub-populations among the Nation’s homeless population (Rachlis, et al. 2009). In 2014, between 35,000 and 40,000 young Canadians experienced homelessness (Gaetz et al. 2016). In Canada’s capital city, 844 youth (aged 24 and under) occupied a shelter bed for at least one night during 2016 (Bulthuis, 2017). Homelessness renders youth vulnerable to hardship including various forms of exploitation, criminalization, complex trauma and premature death (Gaetz et al. 2016), highlighting an urgent social need to develop successful strategies to combat this issue.

This study: This research is informed by a social justice framework which promotes the need to conceptualize homelessness as a lack of fundamental and intersecting non-material needs and conditions rather than simply a lack of housing (Watson & Cuervo, 2017). Within this framework schools can be conceptualized as a viable site for prevention, alleviation and resolution of youth homelessness. This study presents some of the ways that schools currently respond to at-risk and homeless youth. In-person oral interviews (30-45 mins) were conducted with 13 formerly and currently homeless youth (aged 16 to 23) to critically examine their school-based experiences with a central focus on:
1. Which school-based experiences alleviated or exasperated experiences of homelessness?
2. In what ways can schools help to prevent and intervene in youth homelessness?

The researcher accessed these youth through social media and several youth-serving agencies in Ottawa. The interviews were transcribed and dominant themes within the school-based experiences of youth identified.

The findings: Corroborating the conclusion of Sauvé et al. (2018), that school(s) represented a point of failure for homeless youth, participants in this study stated that these institutions could have helped them but failed to appropriately respond to their circumstances. Schools often knew that students were experiencing complex personal issues, if not specifically risk of homelessness, however, most responses were not adequate to prevent or resolve instances of homelessness. One-size-fits-all guidance was the most commonly reported school response, characterised by generic advice that generally failed to address the constellation of complex issues faced by these youth. The most common response that actually helped to alleviate youths’ homelessness was that of individual charity whereby school personnel provided various types of assistance—emotional support, financial help etc.—to youth without the support of their institution. In many cases, school responses were not only inadequate but actually harmful, exasperating youths’ experience of homelessness. School personnel often misinterpreted the actions and behaviours of homeless youth—e.g. sleeping in class, avoidance, tardiness etc.—and responded with punitive measures. A lack of trust between youth and school personnel—sometimes the result of youth being abused by other adults such as parents, or as a result of personnel not having time to develop relationships with students etc.—created barriers that deterred youth seeking help for their homelessness from the school which they attended prior to or during their homelessness. Leave-your-homelessness-at-the-door classrooms were frequently reported by youth, characterised as a refusal of the school to respond to youths’ needs by placing the onus on the at-risk or homeless student to obscure their circumstances during school hours.

The future: The data collected during this study will contribute to the development of youth-informed recommendations for schools as well as the generation of Professional Development workshops on youth homelessness for school personnel.
Abstract: Evaluating the Implicit Successes and Failures of Schools in the Presence of Youth Homelessness

References:


By Charlotte. E. Smith, 2018. For the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Carleton University.