



Rehousing Vancouver's Street-Involved Youth

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Abstract

Over the last decade in British Columbia, the incidence of homelessness has grown at an unprecedented rate. Since 2002, the homeless population counted in Metro Vancouver has more than doubled to a high of 2,660 in 2008. Governments have traditionally approached homelessness using a continuum of policy instruments ranging from emergency shelters and transitional housing to independent social housing and rental assistance. However, less research has been conducted to date on effective housing models for youth aged 16 to 24, who constitute between 10% and 20% of the homeless population. Studies suggest that the youth homeless population is extremely vulnerable, facing high levels of violence and sexual exploitation, as well as complex mental health and addictions issues. This research project examines the key barriers that street-involved youth face in exiting homelessness by answering the research question “Why do some street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 in Vancouver not become permanently housed?” Through a mixed method approach, namely, (1) a literature review of survey data of street-involved youth in the United States, Canada, and British Columbia, and (2) key informant interviews and focus groups with youth service providers, government managers, and private philanthropic funders, this study identifies and evaluates best practices for youth housing programs in Vancouver. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at permanently housing street-involved youth in Vancouver and British Columbia.

Executive Summary

Housing Canada's homeless population is one of the urgent challenges facing policy-makers today. Rising housing costs, low vacancy rates, lack of federal and provincial investment in new social housing, condominium conversions, and urban population growth have combined to create a severe lack of affordable housing in most urban areas in Canada, resulting in growing numbers of low-income Canadians forced into homelessness. Within this context, researchers have identified Aboriginal people, families, seniors, women, and people with mental illness and substance misuse issues as populations in need of specialized services to become stably housed.

This report identifies street-involved youth as another key population in need of targeted housing and support. Studies in the United States, Canada, and British Columbia have identified homeless youth as a substantial component of general homeless populations with unique needs. In particular, youth populations are highly marginalized, experience extreme states of vulnerability, and represent a considerable proportion of the overall homeless population.

This report contributes to the growing body of research on youth homelessness in Canada by addressing the research question "Why do some street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 in Vancouver not become permanently housed?" As such, the report presents a targeted study on the barriers facing street-involved youth to achieving permanent housing in Vancouver and recommends alternatives.

Drawing from a literature review and interview responses from key informants and focus groups, the study identifies eight key barriers facing youth in exiting the street environment in Vancouver: (1) affordability stress and low income, (2) landlord discrimination, (3) alienation and isolation, (4) lack of services for specific subpopulations, (5) lack of supports for 16- to 18-year-olds, (6) age of majority cut-off, (7) lack of system flow, and (8) lack of a provincial youth housing strategy.

Based on the research findings, the report presents two sets of policy recommendations designed to assist the provincial and municipal governments and the social service sector in rehousing street-involved youth. The first set of recommendations assesses the current mix of youth housing services in Vancouver and suggests several reforms in housing, services, and income supports:

- **Investment in youth housing:** increased investment in both scattered site and dedicated (congregate) supportive housing for youth. The study recommends ongoing evaluation in order to gather empirical evidence as to the successes and challenges of different supportive housing models as they pertain to youth. The report also recommends that the City of Vancouver and the Province engage in continued consultation with community members and youth service agencies to open a low-barrier emergency housing intervention for street-involved youth in Vancouver.
- **Flexible, relationship-based support services:** continued investment in outreach and supportive housing services specifically designed to meet the needs of youth subpopulations, with an emphasis on the services for Aboriginal youth; youth with mental illness and/or addictions; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth; and pregnant and parenting youth.

- **Income supports:** continuation of the Agreements for Young Adults Program, with revision of the eligibility requirements to allow increased access for all street-involved youth.

The second set of recommendations is designed to address some of the underlying policy barriers identified in the research. These recommendations identify opportunities for potential partnerships between the voluntary sector and the provincial government and highlight the need for new provincial strategies:

- **Development of a targeted provincial strategy designed to address the needs of street-involved youth between the ages of 16 and 18.** The strategy would include a review of the Youth Agreements Program to ensure consistent practice and implementation for all youth. The strategy could also include a range of alternative policy interventions, including dedicated supportive housing, a re-evaluation of the housing ministry's internal policy to discourage housing 16- to 18-year-olds in independent subsidized housing units, and a risk assessment regarding the feasibility of housing youth aged 16 to 24 in the same subsidized housing facilities and/or together in the private housing market.
- **Dialogue on outcomes-based measurement, evaluation, and research.** The report recommends that the provincial children's and housing ministries collaborate in partnership with service providers and community foundations to develop robust indicators for permanently housing street-involved youth that allow for improved system planning and case management.
- **Development and resourcing of a new provincial strategy to specifically address the housing needs of youth aged 16 to 24 that are leaving/have left care.** The report finds that effective transition planning between the children's, housing, and health ministries is crucial to effectively house Vancouver's street-involved youth population. Possible strategies could include implementation of specific legislation targeting 16- to 18-year-olds transitioning from care and legislation extending the age of majority to 21.

Rehousing Vancouver's Street-Involved Youth

1. Introduction

Despite the efforts of federal, provincial, and municipal governments across Canada, homelessness continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing policy-makers today. While traditional approaches to homelessness have tended to focus on the needs of single men, evidence suggests that Aboriginal people, families, seniors, women, and people with mental health and/or substance misuse issues are in need of specialized housing support and services (Frankish et al., 2005; SPARC BC et al., 2008; Condon and Newton, 2007). Within this context, street-involved youth are emerging as another key population in need of housing and support (Kelly and Caputo, 2007). This report examines the problem of youth homelessness in Canada with a particular focus on Vancouver's street-involved youth population aged 16 to 24. By examining the unique characteristics of homeless youth populations in Canada and the challenges youth face in becoming stably housed, this report contributes to the growing body of research providing evidence-based solutions to the problem of homelessness in Canada.

1.1 Growth of Homelessness in Canada

Over the last 10 years, homelessness and lack of affordable housing have emerged as urgent public policy problems facing Canadian governments. Rising housing costs, low vacancy rates, lack of federal and provincial investment in new social housing, condominium conversions, and urban population growth have combined to create a severe lack of affordable housing in most urban areas in Canada (Snow, 2008; Condon and Newton, 2007). According to the 2006 Census, nearly one in five Canadians spent over 30% of their gross income on housing, while the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) estimates that 13.6% of Canadians are in "core housing need" (Snow, 2008).¹

Affordability stress disproportionately impacts low-income Canadians and renters. As Snow notes, "in 2004, the lowest income quintile accounted for 81% of all urban households in core housing need ... affordable housing does not have a uniform effect – seniors, immigrants, and lone parents are most likely to suffer from housing affordability problems" (Snow, 2008: 10). British Columbians fare slightly worse than the national average with 223,700 households (15.8%) found to be in core housing need in 2001, composing 31.4% of all renters and 8.3% of all homeowners (CMHC, 2006). This lack of affordability intensifies in British Columbia's urban centres; according to the 2006 Census, 48.3% of renters in Victoria and Vancouver and 47.8% of renters in Kelowna were found to be spending more than 30% of their income on housing (Snow, 2008). A recent survey of privately owned and operated single room occupancy hotels, often the last resort for low-income residents in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, found 1,583 hotels renting rooms for over \$425, which is \$50 over the current BC Income Assistance shelter rate for a single adult (Swanson and Pederson, 2009).

¹ The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has developed the concept "core housing need" to measure affordability and other factors impacting Canadians' housing needs. Snow notes: "Core housing need measures three elements: affordability based on the 30% Shelter-to-Income-Ratio measure, suitability based on acceptable bedroom size and person-to-room ratio, and adequacy based on the need of major repair. If a household falls below any one of these standards and would have to spend 30% of its gross income to find alternative local housing, it is in core housing need" (Snow, 2008).

Combined with other social factors, such as the rise of low-waged work and the decentralization of the Canadian welfare state (Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002; Jenson, 2004), the lack of affordable housing has resulted in increasing numbers of low-income Canadians forced into a state of homelessness (Snow, 2008; SPARC BC et al., 2008). According to the Social Planning Council of British Columbia's (SPARC BC) 2008 point-in-time homeless count, 2,660 people were found to be homeless in the Metro Vancouver region, a 137% increase from 2002 (SPARC BC et al., 2008). Broader estimates designed to capture both absolute and relative homeless populations in British Columbia estimate that approximately 26,000 to 51,500 adults with severe addictions and/or mental illness are inadequately housed (Patterson et al., 2008).

From a public policy perspective, the growing homeless population increases demand on British Columbia's already overextended health care system. Canadian researchers have identified housing as a key social determinant of health, along with early childhood education, food security, education, and income (Bryant, 2003). As the cost of housing increases, individuals and households often have fewer resources to allocate to food, resulting in long-term chronic conditions such as malnutrition and/or obesity (Friendly, 2008). Homelessness itself has a direct negative impact on health, including increased mortality rates and a range of health conditions from tuberculosis to respiratory diseases, arthritis or rheumatism, high blood pressure, fungal infections, and/or infestations of scabies and lice due to crowded shelter conditions (Frankish et al., 2005). Research indicates that, in Metro Vancouver, the overall health of the homeless population is worsening over time: from 2005 to 2008, the number of homeless people in Metro Vancouver reporting more than one health condition jumped by 81% (SPARC BC et al., 2008).

Among the absolutely and chronically homeless population, researchers consistently find much higher rates of mental illness and substance use/abuse than in the general population (Frankish et al., 2005; Patterson et al. 2008). Sixty-one percent of the Metro Vancouver homeless population self-reported a health problem with addiction and 33% reported a mental illness (SPARC BC et al., 2008). Researchers note that the relationship between homelessness, substance use, and mental illness is not linear, with the street environment often exacerbating pre-existing mental health conditions (Frankish et al., 2005).

Reviews of cost-effectiveness studies of housing and support for people with mental illness and substance addictions in Canada, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom suggest that providing individuals with permanent housing and supports can significantly reduce the burden on public sector services, including hospitals, shelter services, and correctional facilities (Patterson et al. 2008; Culhane et al., 2002). A 2001 study conducted for the Government of British Columbia estimates that homeless people in British Columbia used 33% more public sector services than those who were adequately housed (Eberle et al., 2001). Thus, in addition to the compelling need for governments to address homelessness from a population health perspective, there are definitive economic benefits to permanently housing British Columbia's homeless population.

1.2 The Problem of Youth Homelessness

As the body of Canadian research on the scope and extent of homelessness deepens, researchers have examined the experiences and characteristics of homeless subpopulations with the aim of developing targeted policies that address individuals' and communities' particular needs. In addition to identifying Aboriginal people, women, and people experiencing addiction and/or mental health issues as requiring specific services (SPARC BC et al., 2008; Novac et al. 2002; Kraus et al., 2005; Patterson et al., 2008), researchers across Canada have identified the homeless youth population as a population with unique housing needs (Eberle et al., 2007; McLean, 2005; CMHC, 2001). Street-involved youth populations are often overrepresented with marginalized groups, including high proportions of Aboriginal youth (SPARC BC et al., 2008, Serge, 2006), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth (Smith et al., 2007; Raising the Roof, 2009; De Castell et al., 2002). Other vulnerable groups include youth with mental illness and substance misuse issues (Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Smith et al., 2007), homeless girls (Novac et al., 2002; Czapska et al., 2008), and pregnant and/or parenting youth (Eberle et al., 2007).

There is strong evidence that the youth homeless population in Canada is a highly vulnerable population, with youth experiencing extreme states of violence, instability, and sexual exploitation at higher rates than the general homeless population (CMHC, 2001; Raising the Roof, 2009; Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Serge, 2006). Common pathways into homelessness for youth include histories of family conflict and disruption; physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; engagement with child protection services; low educational attainment; and involvement with the criminal justice system (Raising the Roof, 2009; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Eberle et al., 2007).

There is a significant lack of rigorous national data identifying the extent of youth homelessness in Canada. Difficulties in adopting a universal definition of homelessness, defining a consistent age range for youth across provincial jurisdictions, and challenges in enumerating a population that is highly "hidden" have resulted in a lack of consistent estimates (Serge, 2006; Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Estimates range from 10,000 to 20,000 Canadian street-involved youth in 1993, to 50,000 in 1999, to 65,000 in 2009 (Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Raising the Roof, 2009). Calgary's recent point-in-time homeless count enumerated 355 homeless persons under 18 years old and 327 youth between the ages of 18 and 24, representing a 41% growth in the 18 to 24 youth population from 2006 to 2008 (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). In comparison, Metro Vancouver's most recent point-in-time homeless count found 270 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 to be homeless, representing 10% of the enumerated homeless population (SPARC BC et al., 2008), an estimate that is widely understood as an undercount.

Youth homelessness presents a particularly unique problem in that homeless youth are in a transitional stage from childhood to independence. Unlike adults, the majority of whom enter into homelessness from a state of independence, the majority of homeless youth enter into homelessness from living situations in which they were dependent upon either adults or the state to provide care and support (McLean, 2005; Raising the Roof, 2009). This transitional state carries with it a series of moral and legal obligations for government and communities to provide youth with effective supports that adequately assist youth to achieve independent and stable

housing (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). Without effective intervention, street-involved youth are likely to become more deeply entrenched in the street environment (Caputo et al., 1997; McLean, 2005), potentially leading to long-term, chronic homelessness. While there are very few longitudinal studies following cohorts of street-involved youth to confirm that street-involved youth are at higher risk for homelessness in later life, US studies have found that approximately one-fifth of homeless adults were first homeless as children and youth (Robertson and Toro, 1998), a finding that is supported by qualitative research in Canada (McLean, 2005; Raising the Roof, 2009; Karabanow, 2008; Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009n). These findings suggest that, for some individuals, without meaningful intervention, youth homelessness is not a transitional stage to independence but rather a path into more chronic experiences of absolute and relative homelessness.

1.3 Research Objectives

This report contributes to the growing body of research examining the specific needs of youth homeless populations in Canada by exploring the problem of youth homelessness in Vancouver, British Columbia. The goal of this study is to examine the scope of youth homelessness in Vancouver and to identify appropriate policy responses to permanently house Vancouver's street-involved youth population. While other studies have focused on youth's experiences in the street environment or their reasons for becoming homeless (Rachlis et al., 2009; Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Serge, 2006; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Caputo et al., 1997), less information is available on the individual and systemic barriers facing youth as they exit street life (Miller et al., 2004; Karabanow, 2008; Wingert et al., 2005). In particular, there is a significant research gap in understanding the factors contributing to stably or permanently housing youth (Eberle et al., 2007, SPARC BC, 2003; Raising the Roof, 2009). This study seeks to identify key barriers facing youth in obtaining stable housing in order to identify effective interventions to rehouse street-involved youth.

This research project addresses the research question “Why do some street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 in Vancouver not become permanently housed?”

In particular, this project focuses on the following questions:

1. What is the extent of youth homelessness in Vancouver? What are the common characteristics of street-involved youth populations? What are common pathways into homelessness for youth?
2. What are the key barriers for Vancouver's youth population to exiting homelessness and becoming permanently housed?
3. What are best practices in housing and support services in other jurisdictions? What are opportunities for partnerships between provincial, municipal governments, health authorities, and the not-for-profit sector to permanently house street-involved youth?
4. How can these policies be translated to the BC context to effectively house Vancouver's street-involved youth population?

1.4 Methodology

To address the research questions, this study uses two main research methods: (1) a literature review and (2) interviews and focus groups.

The literature review is drawn from survey data and qualitative research studies on youth homeless populations in Vancouver and British Columbia and is supplemented by research from other Canadian and US jurisdictions. The literature review focuses on four main themes: (1) defining the extent of youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver, (2) identifying common characteristics and vulnerabilities of youth populations in Canada and the United States, (3) reviewing identified pathways into homelessness, and (4) summarizing current policy initiatives.

The second method used by the study consisted of key informant interviews and focus groups to identify key barriers for youth in becoming permanently housed. Interviews were semi-structured and based on the research questions and were conducted as follows (for sample interview questions, see Appendix A):

- two interviews with expert researchers in the area of homelessness in British Columbia
- five interviews with representatives from the provincial government, health authorities, and non-profit funders
- two focus groups with representatives from Vancouver youth service providers
- five interviews with Vancouver youth service providers

Interviews were transcribed, reviewed, and thematically coded to identify key barriers facing youth in becoming permanently housed. The study also examines best practices of housing and support services for youth and successful partnerships in other jurisdictions based on Internet research and findings from stakeholder interviews to inform the policy recommendations.

The report presents a targeted study on the barriers facing street-involved youth to achieving permanent housing in Vancouver and recommends policy alternatives. By examining the key barriers facing street-involved youth as they exit the street, this study provides recommendations for policy direction and design, including the current mix of youth housing programs and services in Vancouver; partnerships between housing and service providers and government and non-governmental funders; and broader government policies impacting street-involved youth. As such, the study provides an important resource to the growing policy dialogue and debate regarding youth homelessness in Vancouver and presents youth funders – provincial, municipal, and non-profit – with recommendations as to viable, actionable program and partnership opportunities.

The study does not attempt to provide rigorous evidence as to the extent of the youth homeless population in Metro Vancouver. Studies suggest that due to the “hidden” quality of the youth homeless population, sound empirical enumeration is particularly difficult to obtain (Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; CMHC, 2001). This study depends upon a combination of point-in-time estimates conducted in the Metro Vancouver and British Columbian context over the last 10 years, census data on the estimated number of youth in core

housing need, and key informant interviews with researchers, public policy analysts, and service providers in the field. As a result, the empirical evidence is complicated, or contextualized, by the negotiation and debate within the policy network between government, youth service providers, and policy researchers as to the extent of the problem of youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver.

The study also lacks direct input from street-involved and previously street-involved youth themselves, both as to the scope of the problem and to the viability of proposed solutions. This lack of consultation is partly a function of limited project time, but is also due to the lack of adequate resources to develop an ethical participatory-research framework that uses a range of research methods to engage youth meaningfully in the research process. Without this framework, any research designed to reach street-involved youth is likely to be impacted by the very barriers it seeks to examine (De Castell et al., 2002; Rachlis et. al., 2009; McLean, 2005). The study attempts to address this weakness by drawing extensively on previous consultations and qualitative studies conducted with street-involved youth in British Columbia and Vancouver as well as conducting key informant interviews with youth service providers.

Finally, by narrowing the research question to the determinants of permanently housing street-involved youth, this study focuses on the more immediate needs of the current street-involved population as opposed to identifying more long-term factors determining individual youths' pathways to homelessness. Many researchers argue that targeted responses to chronic homelessness are only effective if policy is nested within an analysis of the larger connections between homelessness and affordable housing (Snow, 2008; Frankish et al., 2005; Hulchanski, 2002). Nevertheless, policy research that fails to focus deliberately on the current needs of the youth homeless population is less likely to point the way to effective solutions. This study attempts to navigate this dilemma both by including a literature review on the identified pathways into homelessness and by framing the research question in such a way that stable, permanent housing, and not simply zero street homelessness, is the desired policy end point for the street-involved youth population in Metro Vancouver.

1.5 Organization of the Report

The report is divided into six sections. Section 2 provides a background to the problem of youth homelessness in Canada, including a review of the methodological challenges inherent in estimating street-involved youth populations, a description of the common characteristics of street-involved youth populations, and a discussion of antecedent risk factors and pathways into homelessness.

Section 3 presents the research findings as to the key determinants preventing street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 from becoming stably housed in Vancouver. Section 4 reviews existing government initiatives addressing youth homelessness in Vancouver and examines the current service delivery model of housing, services, and income supports as it pertains to street-involved youth.

Section 5 draws upon the literature review and key informant interviews to propose two sets of recommendations. The first set builds upon the current service delivery model to propose reforms to housing, support services, and income supports. The second set of recommendations proposes broader system-wide changes, including partnerships between provincial government departments, health authorities and the social service sector as well as strategic policy changes aimed at rehousing street-involved youth.

2. The Context of Youth Homelessness in Canada

The following section provides an overview of the state of research on homeless youth in Canada, situated within trends among street-involved youth populations in the United States and the United Kingdom. The section draws from the literature to examine different methodological approaches used to measure youth homelessness, describe the common characteristics of street-involved youth populations, and identify vulnerabilities specific to youth populations. The section concludes with a discussion of key pathways into youth homelessness.

2.1 Defining Youth Homelessness

While media reports and public opinion tend to characterize people sleeping on the streets of urban centres as forming the majority of the Canadian homeless population, studies suggest that the problem of homelessness in Canada is more effectively understood as a continuum, ranging from “absolute homelessness” to “relative homelessness” (Condon and Newton, 2007). The United Nations uses these two terms to better define homeless populations (CMHC, 2001). Absolute homelessness refers to those people who do not have access to safe and affordable housing and may be living on the street or using temporary emergency shelters. Relative homelessness refers to those who live in unsafe, unsuitable, and unaffordable housing such as rooming houses, hotel rentals, or other accommodation where their housing tenure is insecure (Snow, 2008). Relatively homeless populations include people who are termed the “hidden” or “invisible” homeless: those who do not have access to their own housing but who temporarily stay with families or friends, often termed “couch surfing” (CHMC, 2001; SPARC BC, 2003; Auditor General, 2009).

In contrast to relative and absolute homelessness, permanent housing is a concept used by researchers to signify a state of tenured, stable housing (SPARC BC, 2003; Kraus et al., 2005). For the purpose of this study, permanent housing is defined as a state of housing in which the individual is not in core housing need and has been in a stable living situation for a year or more (Caputo et al., 1997).

In addition to these broad categories, a range of terms has been used by various researchers to capture the different characteristics of the youth homeless population, including “runaways, curbsiders, throwaways, missing children, street youth and youth at-risk” (Kelly and Caputo, 2007: 727). Just as there is a continuum of homelessness, researchers and practitioners note that there is also a range of youth involvement in the street lifestyle, leading some studies to broaden their focus to the street-involved youth population, which can include both absolutely homeless and relatively homeless youth (Smith et al., 2007; Rachlis et al., 2009; Czapska et al., 2008; Karabanow, 2008; Wingert et al., 2005; McLean, 2005; Miller et al., 2004; Robertson and Toro, 1998).

Moreover, some researchers define the age cohort of youth differently, depending on the focus of the research. Studies based on the more narrow legal definition of youth from ages 12 to 18 have examined the characteristics of the younger street-involved population, the majority of whom become street-involved between the ages of 13 and 14 (Smith et al., 2007; Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Wingert et al., 2005). Other studies have defined youth to include individuals up to the age of 25 in order to encompass the experiences of older youth, including those who have “aged out of care” (Caputo et al., 1997; CMHC, 2001; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009).

Following previous planning studies conducted in Vancouver, this study uses the term “street-involved youth” to refer to youth aged 16 to 24 who are either living on the street or significantly involved in street life and the street environment and do not have a permanent place to call home (SPARC BC, 2003; Eberle et al., 2007; Karabanow, 2008). The report uses the terms street-involved youth and youth homeless population to encompass the range of youth experiencing absolute and relative homelessness in Vancouver.

2.2 Estimating the Street-Involved Youth Population

One of the most consistent challenges facing researchers is determining the extent of youth homelessness in Canada. As with many marginalized populations, obtaining a comprehensive census of street-involved youth is extremely difficult, limiting most studies to small, non-random samples and so reducing the ability to generalize from results (CMHC, 2001; Raising the Roof, 2009; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Cross-study comparison is also difficult due to the lack of consistent definitions discussed above: the differing age of majority legislation across the country makes it difficult to compare cohorts, especially those drawn from more general studies that categorize youth as a subpopulation. As Novac et al. (2002) note in their national study of homeless girls, “most studies are descriptive and lack a theoretical framework; samples are generally small, non-representative, limited to a particular geographic area and frequently specific to one organization. The use of comparison or control groups is rare.”

While US researchers have developed large-scale national studies designed to determine an annual prevalence rate of youth homelessness (Robertson and Toro, 1998; Peters et al., 2009), Canadian researchers have tended toward using two main methods to determine the extent of youth homeless populations: point-in-time homeless counts and estimates based on the number of youth using shelters or youth services (Kelly and Caputo, 2007).² There are methodological difficulties with both approaches. Due to the focus on individuals who are either sleeping outside and/or sleeping in a shelter, transition house, or safe house within a particular period, (SPARC BC et al., 2008), point-in-time counts are widely understood as undercounts (SPARC BC et al., 2008; Condon and Newton, 2007; Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Frankish et al., 2005) that tend to oversample chronically and absolutely homeless individuals and severely undercount individuals who are at imminent risk of homelessness due to core housing need (Phelan and Link, 1999; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Kidd and Scrimenti, 2004; Shapcott, 2006). Some researchers suggest that, for every one visibly absolutely homeless individual, there are three to four people or households who are relatively homeless (Condon and Newton, 2007).

² A recent federal parliamentary brief notes that Statistics Canada has estimated that a comprehensive count of Canada’s homeless population would cost approximately \$10 million. Nevertheless, the authors note that other countries such as Australia and France have adapted the national census to enumerate residents experiencing absolute and relative homelessness (Echenberg and Jensen, 2008).

The challenges in enumerating homeless populations are compounded by the high proportion of street-involved youth who are “hidden” homeless – youth who are staying temporarily with friends or family but who do not have a regular address where they can live indefinitely – a population that is often deliberately excluded from point-in-time homeless counts (Eberle et al., 2007; Shapcott, 2006; SPARC BC et al., 2008). Many youth also fear apprehension by child welfare authorities or the police and so will often avoid accessing services designed for the adult homeless population and speaking with adult researchers (Eberle et al., 2007; Kelly and Caputo, 2007.) Nevertheless, the most recent 24-hour point-in-time homeless count conducted in Metro Vancouver enumerated 270 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 on March 11, 2008 (SPARC BC et al., 2008), representing 10% of the total enumerated population of 2,660. Similar point-in-time counts conducted in 2005 and 2002 found, respectively, 296 and 272 unaccompanied youth. In comparison, a recent point-in-time count conducted in Calgary enumerated 682 youth under the age of 24 on March 14, 2008, representing approximately one-fifth of the enumerated population (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009).

Some researchers argue that, despite their obvious limitations, point-in-time counts can be used to calculate annual prevalence rates (Robertson and Toro, 1998). US researchers with the Corporation for Supportive Housing have developed more comprehensive formulas to convert point-in-time counts to annual prevalence rates (Burt and Wilkins, 2005), including a formula which has been used by Vancouver-based researchers to calculate an annual prevalence of 328 youth currently in need of housing in the City of Vancouver (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009b).

An alternative method to point-in-time counts is to rely on shelter and youth service usage records (Kelly and Caputo, 2007). In their national environmental scan on youth homelessness, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) found that Montreal youth under the age of 18 constituted 4.6% of shelter users over a one-year reporting period (1996/97), a total of 380 youth. In comparison, the City of Toronto estimated that 6,000 youth aged 15 to 24 stayed in emergency shelters in 1999, Ottawa estimated 500 youth were served by shelters in 2000, and Edmonton estimated that 640 youth were served between 1999 and 2000 (CMHC, 2001). In Vancouver, consultations with youth service providers estimated that 1,600 street-involved youth were provided with housing and support services in 2005 (Eberle et al., 2007). As with homeless counts, service usage records fail to include “hidden” youth who are not “plugged into” the system; some providers estimate that there are up to two times more youth in need of service (Personal Interview, 2009h). Again, lack of consistency across providers in terms of usage records makes cross-jurisdictional comparisons difficult; for example, some agency housing wait-lists may be cumulative and may include “double-counting” of individuals due to the desire to protect youth’s privacy (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009b). In addition, while usage is an indication of need of service, it is not clear whether all of these youth require government-sponsored housing (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009d). Some researchers also stress the inherent moral hazard facing service providers in estimating youth populations when results are linked to policy formation and allocation of resources (Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Policy-makers in other jurisdictions have promoted the use of standardized Homeless Management Information Systems to standardize data collected by shelter and service providers (Begin et al., 1999; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009); however, this has yet to be implanted on a wide scale in British Columbia (Auditor General, 2009).

Faced with these methodological challenges, researchers have begun to explore other methods to estimate the prevalence of youth homelessness. An alternative measure is to estimate the youth population at economic risk of homelessness (Eberle et al., 2007; Condon and Newton, 2007). According to 2006 Census data, there were 6,595 youth-headed households in the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area paying 50% or more of their gross income for rent (Statistics Canada, 2006). Another approach is to work with provincial departments and health authorities to estimate the number of youth discharged from various services who are at risk of homelessness, including youth discharged from hospitals due to early psychosis treatment or pregnancy, youth aging out of foster care, and youth leaving correctional facilities (Personal Interview, 2009c). Other approaches include telephone surveys to determine whether members of the household are currently couch-surfing (Eberle et al., 2009; Phelan and Link, 1999); however, these methods require large-scale national samples in order to obtain statistically valid observations (Echenberg and Jensen, 2008; Personal Interview, 2009c).

The range of methodological challenges facing researchers has led some policy analysts to argue that the goal of determining a comprehensive census of the homeless population is “doomed to failure,” a proverbial search for an unachievable holy grail (Hulchanski, in Shapcott, 2006: 2). Similarly, in their preface to their study on street-involved youth in Calgary, the research team members argue as follows:

We will state at the outset that a definitive enumeration of homeless youth is impossible. The very nature of the issue and the contexts in which it occurs prohibit access to many of the young people affected. The greatest majority of homeless youth are hidden and many do not conform to strict mainstream definitions of homelessness, neither absolute, nor relative (McLean, 2005: 4).

Unlike disenfranchised adult homeless populations, some youth experiencing homelessness will not see themselves as such, despite their extreme vulnerability and need of support (Personal Interview, 2009f). Indeed, as several informants note, youth who have grown up in care and moved regularly from one housing situation to another or youth who experienced homelessness as children with their families are unlikely to have a lived experience of stable housing to compare with their current living situation, having grown up in an extreme state of “chronic” homelessness (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009c, 2009d, 2009h, 2009n; Eberle et al., 2007). The complex nature of estimating the extent of youth homelessness suggests that policy-makers need to consider other aspects of the social problem, namely the overrepresentation of marginalized groups among street-involved youth and the extreme vulnerability of the homeless youth populations in Canada and the United States.

2.3 Characteristics of the Street-Involved Youth Population

Canadian and US studies have found that homeless youth populations tend to be overrepresented by marginalized groups. In particular, Aboriginal; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth; young women and girls; and youth dealing with mental health and substance use issues (Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Serge, 2006; CMHC 2001; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Novac et al., 2002) consistently form high proportions of homeless youth populations.

CMHC's national environmental scan reports an overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth among street-involved youth populations in Vancouver, Edmonton, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Ottawa (CMHC, 2001: 1). In Metro Vancouver, 32% of the Vancouver homeless population enumerated in 2008 reported an Aboriginal identity, as opposed to 2% of the general population as reported in the 2006 Census (SPARC BC et al., 2008). For youth populations, the proportion of enumerated Aboriginal street-involved youth remains high: 41% of youth under the age of 25 self-identified as Aboriginal in the 2008 count (SPARC BC et al., 2008). The McCreary Centre Society's 2007 provincial survey of street-involved youth aged 12 to 18 found that 410 of the 762 youth surveyed (54%) self-identified as Aboriginal (Saewyc et al., 2008). In comparison, only 9.8% of school-aged youth in British Columbia identified themselves as Aboriginal (Saewyc et al., 2008). The McCreary study also documented a 21% increase in the proportion of youth reporting an Aboriginal identity when compared with an earlier study conducted in 2001. The authors propose several possible explanations for this increase: due to increased Aboriginal-specific housing services, more Aboriginal youth may be accessing services; more youth may be openly identifying as Aboriginal; more Aboriginal youth are being disproportionately impacted by the lack of affordable housing and cuts to housing and social programs; and there is an overall increase in the Aboriginal youth population, resulting in higher rates of street-involved youth (Saewyc et al., 2008). Aboriginal youth are likely to be disproportionately impacted by rural-urban transitions, as youth move off-reserve to urban environments to seek improved housing conditions and economic opportunities (Wingert et al., 2005; Czapska et al., 2008). Aboriginal youth are also more vulnerable to discrimination: 23% of Aboriginal street-involved youth report experiencing discrimination as a result of race (Smith et al., 2007).

US and Canadian researchers have consistently found lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth to be overrepresented among street-involved youth (Cochran et al., 2002; Robertson and Toro, 1998 CS/RESORS, 2001; Ray, 2006; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Kelly and Caputo, 2007, Wingert et al., 2005). The 2007 McCreary study found that one in five British Columbian street-involved youth self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in comparison with 3% of the general population of youth in school (Smith et al., 2007). Of concern is the higher rate of discrimination, violence, and abuse experienced by LGBTQ youth, both in their home life and in the street environment (Smith et al., 2007; CCHRC, 2002; De Castell et al., 2002; Eberle et al., 2007; SPARC BC, 2003).

Young women and girls also make up a significant proportion of the street-involved youth population in Vancouver. While adult homeless populations tend to be overrepresented by men – 75% of the adult homeless population in the recent Metro Vancouver homeless count were men – (SPARC, BC et al., 2008) the gender split in the street-involved youth population tends to be more equal. Girls and young women accounted for 48% of the unaccompanied youth population under age 25 during the 2008 homeless count (SPARC BC et al., 2008). Some evidence suggests that street-involved females are more likely to be located at the younger end of the age range (Caputo et al., 1997; Serge, 2006; Robertson and Toro, 1998, although this may be due to the tendency of older girls to become “hidden” homeless through their relationships with older men, often resulting in deeper entrenchment in sexually exploitive, precarious housing situations (Czapska et al., 2008; Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009g, 2009i).

Finally, as with the general homeless population, street-involved youth populations demonstrate disproportionately high rates of mental illness and developmental disabilities. In the United States, researchers have documented prevalence rates of serious disorders ranging from 19% to 50% (Robertson and Toro, 1998; Cauce et al., 2000). These findings are echoed in Canadian studies that find youth to be dealing with a broad range of mental health issues, including “depression, conduct disorders, trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and psychotic symptoms” (Kelly and Caputo, 2007: 732). The Calgary Youth, Health and Street Study (CYHSS), a survey of 355 street-involved youth under the age of 25, found that 43% of youth reported a childhood mental illness diagnosis, a rate that is 11% higher than the rate reported by chronic homeless adults (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). In British Columbia, the McCreary study asked youth if they had ever been diagnosed by a health professional to have mental health problems or cognitive disorders: one in five youth reported having been diagnosed with a learning disability, one in four reported having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD/ADD), and 13% of males and 32% of females reported suffering from depression (Smith et al., 2007). These findings are echoed in early results from a pilot psychiatry outreach project running in the City of Vancouver, which reports that 35% of males in the program live with psychotic illness and 31% of females suffer from a mood disorder (Mathias, 2009). Key informants also report a trend of developmental disabilities among youth (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e, 2009j, 2009m, 2009n).

Street-involved youth are three times more likely to attempt suicide than the population of youth in school (Smith et al., 2007). Novac et al. (2002) stress that young women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth are at much higher risk of attempted suicide. Youth’s depression and despair is often compounded by extreme isolation; in British Columbia, only 60% of female youth and less than half of male youth reported seeking help after their last suicide attempt (Smith et al., 2007).

Many youth also report concurrent addictions and substance misuse (Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Serge, 2006; Tarasuk et al., 2009). Raising the Roof’s recent national study, based on three research sites in Calgary, Toronto, and St. John’s, found 50% of youth to be dealing with addictions (Raising the Roof, 2009). As the authors note, “many youth self-medicate as a tool for survival in situations, where, for example, they might need to stay awake all night to avoid being exploited. Drugs and alcohol are often used as a substitute for expensive health medications” (Raising the Roof, 2009: 14). In British Columbia, the McCreary study found that 76% of street-involved youth report binge drinking, as compared with 26% of the youth population in school, and 77% of youth smoke both tobacco and marijuana. Unlike youth in school, street-involved youth also report high rates of other illegal drugs, with more than two in three such youth reporting use of some type of illegal drug yesterday, including cocaine, mushrooms, hallucinogens, crystal meth, ketamine, heroin, and other injection drugs (Smith et al., 2007). Similarly, the psychiatry outreach project finds that 77% of males and 69% of females referred to the program are actively misusing substances (Mathias, 2009). Of concern is the young age at which youth report starting to use drugs or alcohol: one-third of youth surveyed in the CYHSS reported starting prior to age 12, while 57% reported starting between the ages of 12 and 15 (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). Again, these findings are echoed in the British Columbian context, in which one in three youth have tried alcohol before the age of 11, rising to one in two before the age of 13 (Smith et al., 2007).

The high prevalence of mental illness, addictions, and developmental disabilities among the youth population, combined with the overrepresentation of marginalized and disenfranchised groups such as Aboriginal people, young women and girls, and LGBTQ youth, indicate the potential need for targeted services designed for a diverse youth homeless population. When considering the extreme vulnerability of the youth population, the need for specific policy interventions for street-involved youth becomes even more pronounced.

2.4 Vulnerability of the Street-Involved Youth Population

Several studies across Canada have stressed the difference in the homeless experience of street-involved youth in comparison with that of adults (Raising the Roof, 2009; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; McLean, 2005; Wingert et al., 2005). Youth populations report high levels of violence and sexual exploitation, a myriad of physical and sexual health problems, and high pregnancy rates (Smith et al., 2007; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Street-involved youth also report lower incomes than general homeless populations (SPARC BC et al., 2008) and involvement in illegal activities, including drug trade and theft (Tarasuk et al., 2009).

For many youth, violence is a perpetual condition of life on the street. Over one in two British Columbian youth report being threatened, 40% report being physically attacked or assaulted, and three of five report being in a physical fight in the last 12 months (Smith et al., 2007). In Vancouver, researchers and service providers have identified parts of Vancouver as being more dangerous for street-involved youth, particularly in the Downtown Eastside, where youth tend to be more isolated and less likely to live in “street families” or groups (Eberle et al., 2007, Personal Interview, 2009f, 2009l). In Calgary, 75% of youth surveyed in the CYHSS reported being a victim of violence on the street, a rate 6% higher than that reported by the adult homeless population (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). These findings are similar to the results of earlier studies: a 1992 study of street-involved youth in Ottawa found that 62% of youth had been beaten up or assaulted while on the street (Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Youth also report being physically abused by friends, romantic partners, police, foster parents, and other non-family acquaintances (Smith et al., 2007; Wingert et al., 2005).

Youth are also at high risk of sexual exploitation, defined as “the exchange of sexual activity for money, goods or resources such as shelter and food” (Smith et al., 2007: 40). In their 2003 study of 1,656 street-involved youth aged 15 to 24, the Public Health Agency of Canada found that 35% of youth had traded sex for money, cigarettes, drugs and/or alcohol, and shelter in the last three months. One in five females and 14% of males also reported having obligatory sex – defined as having sex after having received shelter, money, drugs/alcohol, etc. (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). These findings are supported by studies in British Columbia and Vancouver reporting that approximately one in three street-involved youth have been sexually exploited (Smith et al., 2007; Rachlis et al., 2009). Across the nine British Columbian communities surveyed by the McCreary Centre Society in 2007, the average age that youth reported being sexually exploited was 15. Significantly, the more precarious the housing situation, the more likely youth were to have been sexually exploited (Smith et al., 2007).

Importantly, different subpopulations have been found to be at higher risk of sexual exploitation, depending on their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and whether or not they experienced sexual and physical abuse while living at home (Czapska et al., 2008; Robertson and Toro, 1998). In their study of income generation activities among street-involved youth aged 25 and under in Toronto, Gaetz and O’Grady (2002) found that youth working in the sex trade were overrepresented by Aboriginal girls and bisexual youth. In British Columbia, non-status Aboriginal youth were more likely than status Aboriginal youth to be sexually exploited. Aboriginal youth who had experienced physical or sexual abuse were also found to be two times more likely to have been sexually exploited than their non-abused Aboriginal peers (Saewyc et al., 2008). Young women are also often drawn into sexually exploitive situations by older men who provide shelter and protection in exchange for sex (Czapska et al., 2008; Cauce et al., 2005; Personal Interview, 2009f).

Street-involved youth report a range of health conditions comparable to the general homeless population, from sleep deprivation, to poor nutrition, respiratory illness, lice, and skin problems (Kelly and Caputo, 2007). While homeless youth in general report fewer health conditions than their adult counterparts (SPARC BC et al., 2008), street-involved youth populations are at higher risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections than housed youth, resulting from “survival sex, multiple sexual partners, inconsistent use of condoms, and injection drug use” (Frankish et al., 2005; Rachlis et al., 2009; Cauce et al., 2005). As Kelly and Caputo (1997: 732) note, “many youth report that they either do not perceive the risk as high, are unable to control the risks because they need to engage in high-risk activities to survive, or do not care. Their attitudes speak to the despair, precariousness, and difficult situations in which they find themselves.” Unfortunately, even when youth do seek medical attention, many youth find themselves unable to access health and dental services due to lack of accurate identification (SPARC BC, 2003; Personal Interview, 2009i).

A significant percentage of street-involved youth are pregnant and/or parenting. In British Columbia, 32% of sexually active homeless youth report being pregnant or causing a pregnancy, in comparison with only 8% of sexually active youth in school (Smith et al., 2007). In the United States, 10% of homeless girls aged 14 to 17 are currently pregnant (Frankish et al., 2005), while 48% of Calgary youth report having been pregnant or causing a pregnancy (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). Thirteen percent of street-involved youth in British Columbia are parents, 38% of whom report that their children are living with them (Smith et al., 2007).

Research suggests that the youth population has fewer sources of income than the general population, and that street-involved youth are more likely to engage in illegal activities as a source of income than their housed counterparts (SPARC BC et al., 2008; Begin et al., 1999; Gaetz and O’Grady, 2002). A recent national study reports that 30% of youth experienced legal issues while on the street, including a variety of misdemeanours such as panhandling, loitering, and failing to pay transit fees (Raising the Roof, 2009). Importantly, researchers note that the increased criminalization of income generation activities commonly engaged in by street youth such as “squeegeeing” has served to further marginalize youth (Wingert et al., 2005). Studies have also found that the greater the degree of entrenchment in the street, the more likely youth are to engage in more severe illegal activities, including drug dealing, sexual exploitation, and theft (McLean, 2005). Informants in Vancouver note that, for many youth, illegal, “nefarious”

activities are a result of extremely low shelter income assistance rates and high housing costs, especially for youth aged 19 to 25 (Personal Interview 2009i). Despite these realities, many street-involved youth manage to find employment: the McCreary study found that one in three BC youth surveyed had a legal job (Smith et al., 2007).

2.5 Pathways into Homelessness

Canadian researchers have identified a number of antecedent factors linked to youth homelessness, including family violence and disruption, histories of physical and sexual abuse, family histories of poverty and/or homelessness, low educational attainment, involvement in the criminal justice system, and engagement with child welfare systems (Kelly and Caputo, 2007; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Raising the Roof, 2009; CMHC, 2001; Caputo et al., 1997; Kidd, 2003).

Evidence from Canada, the United States, Britain, and Europe overwhelmingly finds family violence and disruption as a key determinant of youth homelessness (Serge, 2006; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Kelly and Caputo, 2007; CMHC, 2001). Family histories include experiences of conflict; psychological, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; and neglect (Kidd, 2004; Caputo et al., 1997). Sixty-one percent of British Columbian street-involved youth report witnessing family abuse; one in four report physical abuse by their fathers; and one in five report physical abuse from their mothers (Smith et al., 2007). McLean (2005) notes that family conflict, abuse, and neglect act as “push factors,” which, combined with the “pull” factors of street culture, substance use, and relationships with other street-involved youth, lead children and youth to become homeless. Despite the consistently high rates of family conflict and abuse, researchers also emphasize that not all street-involved youth are disconnected from their families: nine of 10 British Columbian youth report feeling that their mothers care about them and over two-thirds feel that family members understand them (Smith et al., 2007).

Interestingly, survey data from the United States do not support the hypothesis that experience of family poverty is a direct causal factor in youth homelessness; however, findings suggest that family poverty may be related to more chronic or repeated homelessness among street-involved youth (Robertson and Toro, 1998). Certainly, experience of homelessness as a child is a more significant determinant: Raising the Roof’s national study finds that 63% of youth grew up with inconsistent housing and 50% report that their families had difficulty maintaining housing (Raising the Roof, 2009). Poignantly, youth who experienced homelessness as young children, or whose parents were also street-involved, often note that returning to a shelter can feel like “coming home” (Condon and Newton, 2007: 9; Personal Interview, 2009c).

Low educational attainment and conflict with teaching staff can act as another “push” factor to the street for youth (Kidd, 2004). Approximately 60% to 70% of street-involved youth across the country report having dropped out of school (Raising the Roof, 2009; Smith et al., 2007). While conflict within the educational system may act as a determinant of street involvement, it is important to note that this relationship is not necessarily linear, as evidence suggests that at least a third of youth experiencing precarious housing manage to attend school (Smith et al., 2007). The lack of high school certification often serves to compound the economic challenges facing youth, as many find themselves in low-waged, temporary working conditions, despite a commitment to working in a legal job (Smith et al., 2007; Gaetz and O’Grady, 2002).

Finally, one of the key causal pathways into homelessness is engagement in the child welfare/ protection system. The 2003 Public Health Agency of Canada survey found that 40% of street-involved youth across Canada had been in foster care. The overrepresentation of street-involved youth with a child welfare background has also been documented in numerous studies in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe (Serge, 2006; Robertson and Toro, 1998). Of particular concern are youth aged 19 to 24 who have “aged out of care” and youth discharged from hospitals and correctional facilities into tenuous or precarious housing (Eberle et al., 2007; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Auditor General, 2009; Echenberg and Jenson, 2009). Although there are no Canadian data on the rate at which youth leaving care become homeless (Eberle et al., 2007), US studies have found that 10% to 30% of former foster care youth experience at least one night of absolute homelessness (Rashid, 2004).

Yet while these factors provide important evidence for the design of measures to prevent pathways into homelessness, less is known about the pathways that street-involved youth take out of homelessness and into stable housing. Kelly and Caputo (2007: 727) note the following:

The attempt to develop categories of street youth reflects, in part, a belief that the reasons young people find themselves on the street is the basis for developing appropriate and effective responses. For youth themselves, this relationship is not quite so clear. Many street youth will argue that the street was the best option among the alternatives available to them regardless of the reasons they give for going to the street.

Faced with a lack of alternatives, street-involved youth are more likely to become quickly and deeply entrenched in a state of absolute or relative homelessness, running the risk of becoming chronically homeless (McLean, 2005; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). In order to develop evidenced-based policy alternatives, research is needed into the factors impacting the youth homeless population’s ability to attain permanent housing. The following section identifies eight barriers facing street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 in Vancouver in obtaining stable housing.

3. Barriers to Permanent Housing for Youth in Vancouver

Through interviews with youth service providers, researchers, policy-makers, and related literature, this study identifies eight determinants of becoming or not becoming permanently housed: (1) affordability stress and low income; (2) landlord discrimination; (3) alienation and isolation; (4) lack of services for specific subpopulations; (5) lack of supports for 16- to 18-year-olds; (6) age of majority cut-off; (7) lack of system flow; and (8) lack of a provincial youth housing strategy. By examining the aspects of these barriers, the study identifies key factors to inform policy intervention and design.

3.1 Affordability Stress and Low Income

Literature suggests that the most significant barrier facing the general homeless population in exiting homelessness is the lack of affordable housing stock. According to the CMHC’s most recent rental market survey, the vacancy rate for purpose-built apartment rental housing in the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) was 1.9%, reflecting a 1% increase in vacancies

over the previous year but still being below the provincial average of 2.3% (CMHC, 2009: 1). Nevertheless, the average apartment rental rates in the Vancouver CMA have continued to become more expensive over the last year, with the average rental rate of a bachelor apartment increasing to \$755 from \$735 in 2008 (CMHC, 2009: 6), a rate which is double the shelter allowance of \$375 for a single person on income assistance (Condon and Newton, 2007). Thus, while additional factors such as substance use and mental illness may compound an adult individual's inability to remain tenured in permanent housing, the primary determinant of homelessness for the adult population is the lack of access to appropriate housing options that can return them to a state of independence (McLean, 2005).

Key informants confirm that lack of income is a key barrier for youth in accessing permanent housing (Personal Interview, 2009b, 2009c, 2009f, 2009g). Street-involved youth in Metro Vancouver consistently report lower incomes than the adult homeless population (SPARC BC, 2003; SPARC BC et al., 2008). While one in three street-involved youth report engaging in legal, waged work (Smith et. al., 2007), low educational attainment, training wages, and lack of work experience result in lower wages, leaving youth unable to compete for private market housing (Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009f, 2009j, 2009k, 2009l; Eberle et al. 2007; SPARC BC, 2003). These individual barriers are compounded by low income assistance rates that do not meet average housing expenses in Vancouver, especially for youth aged 19 and over (Eberle et al. 2007; SPARC BC, 2003; CMHC, 2001; Condon and Newton, 2007).³

To access affordable accommodation, many youth are thus faced with either pursuing shared accommodation or renting single room occupancy units. For previously street-entrenched youth, both of these housing options are likely to be precarious. In its recent study of shared accommodation, the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia found that shared accommodation requires a fairly high developmental level of functioning to negotiate interpersonal conflict, a skill set which many street-entrenched youth may not have developed. The study authors note the following:

Shared accommodation provides the advantages of financial benefits, security, and companionship, but also the challenges of lack of privacy, sharing of finances especially in situations of poverty, and conflicts exacerbated by lack of interpersonal skills and dysfunctional lifestyle choices. The research found that housemate conflict was the major reason for seeking other accommodation. (Condon and Newton, 2007: 22).

This finding was confirmed by focus group participants who noted that, in their experience, roommate situations rarely result in stable tenancies for street-involved youth (Personal Interview, 2009h).

Alternatively, youth attain low-cost units in privately owned residential hotels, the majority of which are located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Primarily consisting of single room units, this stock tends to be in poor condition, with limited square footage, shared bathrooms, and nominal and often pest-ridden cooking facilities (Swanson and Pederson, 2009, Eberle et al., 2007).

³ Additional rental subsidies are available for youth under the age of 19 in care who are on a Youth Agreement or in a Supported Independent Living Program. See section 4.2.3 for more detail.

A recent hotel survey conducted in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside also found that the number of hotels renting above \$425 (\$50 above the adult income assistance rate) had increased by 44% (Swanson and Pederson, 2009), illustrating the extreme affordability stress caused by the lack of supply of even very low-income accommodation in Vancouver.

3.2 Landlord Discrimination

Youth service providers, researchers, and policy analysts identify landlord discrimination as one of the most significant barriers preventing youth from obtaining housing in the Vancouver private rental market. As a result of low vacancy rates, the private rental market in Vancouver is extremely competitive, leaving youth who are without credit histories, rental references, or saved rent deposits unable to compete with older applicants (Personal Interview, 2009b, 2009d, 2009g, 2009m). This lack of access is compounded by attitudes held by many private landlords that street-involved youth are a risky investment, assuming that young tenants will fail to pay rent, damage property, and leave without notice. Despite the fact that youth in care have additional supports, informants also report that landlords are often wary of youth with a history of involvement with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, due to the stigma that "bad kids go with the Ministry" (Personal Interview, 2009h, 2009m). These barriers are also compounded by other challenges facing youth such as developmental disabilities that limit their ability to complete rental applications, mental illness, substance misuse, and other health conditions impacting their ability to present as "mainstream" during the application process (Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009k, 2009m). These results confirm findings of previous studies conducted in Vancouver and other jurisdictions identifying landlord discrimination as a key barrier for youth in obtaining independent, permanent housing (Eberle et al., 2007; Czapska et al., 2008; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). Without targeted interventions providing additional supports to both youth and private landlords, street-involved youth are unlikely to successfully access permanent housing in the private rental market in Vancouver.

3.3 Alienation and Isolation

Informants also speak to the high degree of alienation and isolation among street-involved youth (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009h, 2009i). Youth with histories in the child welfare system are particularly likely to mistrust institutionalized supports, including adult health and housing providers (Eberle et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Czapska et al., 2008; Karabanow and Clement, 2004). As Jeff Karabanow notes in his exploration of the characteristics of youth service organizations, "Much of the literature regarding the child welfare system has shown its limitations in providing a safe and caring environment for street-entrenched youth ... A majority of institutionalized adolescents make the 'loop' within the system – from open to closed units; from foster care to group homes; thus leaving them angry, confused, frustrated and alone" (Karabanow, 2004: 49). Karabanow (2004) remarks that studies in the United States have reported that 70% of sheltered youth had child welfare experiences and that those youth had moved, on average, six times a year. Vancouver interviewees note that the experience of growing up in care is an example of "generationally chronic" homelessness, where youth, especially highly marginalized youth, are often "bounced" from one housing situation to another (Personal Interview, 2009a., 2009c, 2009d, 2009f). In terms of experiences on the street, alienation can lead to a distrust of adult housing services, resulting in a failure to access available

supports (Personal Interview, 2009f, 2009h). In their survey of street youth throughout British Columbia, Smith et al. (2007) found that 71% of BC street-involved youth aged 12 to 18 had never asked a housing worker for help. For Aboriginal youth, alienation is often compounded by the ongoing impacts of Canada's colonial history: in practice, many Aboriginal youth are alienated from non-Aboriginal, adult housing service providers (Saewyc et al., 2008; Personal Interview, 2009k, 2009l). Without an entry point to housing services and supports, many youth are unable to obtain permanent housing.

In the face of alienation and isolation, as well as management of ongoing health conditions, many street-involved youth form social networks, or "street families" (Kelly and Caputo, 2007) to help meet their emotional and basic needs.⁴ At the same time, youth report that street families can act as a "pull" factor to remain on or return to the street, resulting in deeper entrenchment in the street lifestyle (McLean, 2005; Karabanow, 2008; Karabanow and Clement, 2004; Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Researchers in other jurisdictions note that street families can become a barrier to permanent housing if service provision is conditional upon youth's repudiation of their street peer groups, documenting that some service providers require youth to leave programs due to a "lack of commitment." McLean (2005:20) argues that this "tough love" approach fails to acknowledge the lived reality of many street-involved youth:

Street culture requires members to develop behaviours that are often in opposition to mainstream norms and values. High levels of distrust, dishonesty, frequent moves, participation in illegal activities, threatening or intimidating manner, resistance to authority ... can all be seen to be adaptive behaviours in response to the context of street culture and survival in that realm. Honesty, trust, openness, generosity, cooperation, even morality, are all luxuries in the context of street life and do not enhance one's potential for survival. We need to place more emphasis on the resiliency and strengths that homeless youth possess regardless of where these strengths originated.

When housing support is predicated on mainstream behaviour and compliance rather than the condition of absolute or relative housing, then the more deeply youth are entrenched in the street environment and the less likely they are to access services, resulting in an ever deepening cycle of homelessness. More effective approaches recognize and build upon youth's strengths and assets (Personal Interview, 2009a). Interviewees noted that, surrounded with the appropriate supports, many street-involved youth who professed initial resistance to services have been able to successfully transition to independence (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009f, 2009h).

Although many street-involved youth display extreme ingenuity and resilience in meeting their basic needs while on the street (Wingert et al., 2005), key informants noted that the majority of street-involved youth lack experience in a range of mainstream life skills, including budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, and relationship skills, a finding that is confirmed in the literature (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009f, 2009h; Eberle et al., 2007; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Rashid, 2004). Lack of mainstream life skills often prevents youth from remaining tenured in an independent living situation, especially for younger youth aged 16 to 18, as the

⁴ Vancouver interviewees note that it is important to recognize that youth's street families can also include members of their biological family, especially for youth who have been apprehended into care (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009h).

pressures of managing an independent household for the first time without support can result in conflict with private landlords, leading youth to return to the more familiar street environment (Personal Interview, 2009f, 2009h, 2009n).

3.4 Lack of Services Tailored to Subpopulations

Previous planning studies conducted in Vancouver have stressed the diversity of Vancouver's youth population, noting that youth are a heterogeneous group requiring a variety of specialized services (SPARC BC, 2003; Eberle et al., 2007). One of the most pressing needs is for culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal youth, who are significantly overrepresented in the street-involved youth population (Saewyc et al., 2008, SPARC BC et al., 2008). The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development's 2009/10 to 2010/11 annual service plan notes that, while the total number of non-Aboriginal children in care dropped 22% from 2002 to 2008, the number of Aboriginal children in care rose by 12% in the same time period (MCFD, 2009). Given the high proportion of street-involved youth with histories in care, this trend suggests an increasing need for services that effectively outreach to Aboriginal youth. Researchers and Aboriginal community leaders in Vancouver stress that much of the current adult housing system remains rooted in a traditional, charity-based service provision model that does not take into account the traumatic legacy of colonization experienced by Aboriginal communities (Saewyc et al., 2008; Stewart, 2009). Community leaders emphasize the need for culturally appropriate services and alternatives to clinical models of support, rooted in a community development approach to service provision that provides educational and vocational supports (Saewyc et al., 2008; Raising the Roof, 2009; Personal Interview, 2009k, 2009l).

Survey data suggest that youth populations are also overrepresented by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth (Smith et al., 2007; Saewyc et al., 2008; De Castell et al., 2002; Robertson and Toro, 1998; Kelly and Caputo, 2007; SPARC BC, 2003; CMHC, 2001). Studies have consistently shown that LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for attempting suicide, indicating the urgent need for appropriate interventions for LGBTQ youth (CCHRC, 2002). The special needs of these youth can result in lack of access to adult housing services, especially shelters, where past family trauma may be compounded by homophobia present among clients and service providers (Eberle et al., 2007; Personal Interview, 2009e). Although several Vancouver interviewees noted that, in practice, many of the youth service organizations use an anti-oppression framework, modelling queer-positive behaviours (Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009e, 2009i), there are currently no LGBTQ-specific housing services available in Vancouver (Personal Interview, 2009e).

As with the adult homeless population, Vancouver's street-involved youth population is urgently in need of specific services for youth dealing with mental illness, developmental disabilities such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and substance misuse issues. Without appropriate housing supports, youth are unlikely to successfully navigate the private housing market, creating high demand for subsidized supportive housing programs for youth dealing with mental health and addictions issues (Personal Interview, 2009g). While there are a few supportive independent living programs for youth operating in Vancouver, youth programs have different eligibility criteria than programs for adults, resulting in a policy gap where case workers must advocate for youth on a case-by-case basis to move them into adult services after the age of 19 (Personal

Interview, 2009g, 2009h). In some cases, this policy gap forces practitioners to limit intake of younger youth dealing with traditional “youth” disorders, including ADHD and conduct disorders, because the youth will be ineligible for adult supportive housing programs later on (Personal Interview, 2009e, 2009g).

The high proportion of Vancouver’s street-involved youth population who are pregnant and/or parenting also indicates a need for specialized services for youth-headed families. SPARC BC’s recent study of family homelessness found that one-fifth of homeless families were headed by youth aged 16 to 25, a third of whom had a history in foster care (Condon and Newton, 2007). Informants also report that it can be difficult for couples to find subsidized housing together, resulting in family members living apart in order to obtain adequate housing (Personal Interview, 2009a). While pregnancy can act as a “critical incident” for some youth that propels them to seek out support to exit the street (Karabanow, 2008; Personal Interview, 2009i), for other youth, parenting can lead to forced transitions as they are required to leave their current community to seek out available supports. One focus group participant comments as follows:

I had a client who was in a foster home and really connected with a caregiver, but then she got pregnant and she had to be transitioned out, and that was really hard for her, because now she doesn’t have the support that she was really connected to, and now she has to go and meet new people and they have to know her story. I just think it would be nice that if [youth] find a place that they are comfortable in that they could remain there for however long (Personal Interview, 2009h).

The research findings from the study confirm that street-involved youth in Vancouver are a diverse group, many of whom experience barriers requiring specific types of support in order to sustain tenured housing. While some barriers are similar to those faced by the adult homeless population – for example, mental illness and/or addictions – the transitional and developmental needs of youth often require a particular youth-centred approach that can be lacking in adult housing services. The research findings suggest that, without specialized services, marginalized youth – especially youth who experience multiple barriers such as Aboriginal and LGBTQ youth – will remain “hidden” in precarious housing situations.

3.5 Lack of Supports for 16- to 18-Year-Olds

The study confirms the findings of earlier researchers who have noted a “virtual vacuum” in long-term housing options and services for youth aged 16 to 18 in the City of Vancouver (Eberle et al., 2007; Novac et al., 2002). While 16- to 18-year-olds fall within the jurisdiction of the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), in practice, due to internal pressures to funnel limited resources into early childhood protection, many adolescent street-involved youth find themselves with very little institutionalized support (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009d, 2009f, 2009h, 2009n). The MCFD’s Youth Agreements Program was specifically designed in order to meet the needs of youth aged 16 to 18 by providing additional rental supplements to youth who wish to live independently. However, informants report that the program is “inconsistent” and “barriered” (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009d, 2009f, 2009h). For example, youth report being denied youth agreements when living in shared accommodation, especially if living with older boyfriends and/or adult roommates (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009m; Czapska et al., 2008). While it is understandable that social workers would prefer not to

house youth with adults, the sheer lack of housing supply leaves youth without alternatives. If case workers deny youth rent supplements for fear of providing financial support to youth's adult roommates, youth remain dependent on the financial support of their street families, creating situations in which youth, especially young women, are increasingly dependent on street-involved adults (Czapska et al., 2008; Personal Interview, 2009f).

In addition, interviewees stress that all too often the Youth Agreements Program is used by the MCFD as a last resort to deal with youth who are resistant to returning to the foster care system and/or group homes (Personal Interview 2009d, 2009h). Thus, youth who are most in need of additional support services can find themselves in independent living situations far beyond their developmental needs and capabilities. For example, for young mothers, independent living is much less feasible than a supportive, semi-group living situation that develops their parenting skills and provides child support (Personal Interview, 2009h). Some interviewees express a sense that, due to limited Ministry resources, youth agreements are being used as an inadequate stop gap to relieve the Ministry of the responsibility of providing comprehensive services for older street-involved youth, many of whom are perceived to be "service-resistant" (Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009h, 2009n). As one focus group participant notes, "[the Youth Agreements Program] might be a good tool, but it's a good tool for a very narrow spectrum of people and it's tried to be used for everybody who's over 16" (Personal Interview, 2009h). Moreover, 16- to 18-year-olds are often limited to searching for housing within the private market, due to internal policies of provincial housing ministries that discourage placing youth under the age of 19 in subsidized housing (Personal Interview, 2009f, 2009g, 2009n; Czapska et al., 2008). This creates a "Catch 22" situation in which many youth are unable to gain entry into the private market without the financial help of older boyfriends/girlfriends or roommates, but who are unable to access the subsidized housing market because Ministry policy views housing youth with marginalized adults as inappropriate or high-risk.

The study confirms earlier findings that "youth aged 16-18, who are unable to stay at home but unwilling to go into care, present a serious challenge for the child protection system, as they have achieved a certain level of independence and require a different response" (Novac et al., 2002). Striking a healthy balance between an adolescent's need for independence and a factual assessment of his or her developmental abilities is challenging for all parenting adults, whether biological parents, foster parents, youth workers, and/or social workers. This balance is particularly challenging when considering the needs of older street-involved youth and requires an attentiveness and flexibility that is often absent from institutionalized care.

In particular, the findings from this study suggest that practitioners and analysts need to dig deeper to examine the policy gaps underpinning discussions of street-involved youth's "choice" to live in precarious housing situations. While many street-involved youth assert that the street was and is the best option for them in the face of their home life, this "choice" should not be interpreted by the state as justification for abdicating the government's legal and moral authority to provide housing for street-involved youth, especially for those under the age of majority. Researchers note that Canadian service providers have successfully faced similar challenges in developing appropriate and effective services for battered women, especially in responding to the challenge of women returning to abusive partners, a process that is echoed in a pattern of engagement/disengagement among street-involved youth (Czapska et al., 2008; McLean, 2005; Karabanow, 2008; Personal Interview, 2009h).

3.6 Age of Majority “Cut-Off” from Youth Services

Almost all housing and support services provided by the provincial government to youth in care end once youth have attained the legal age of majority, which is age 19 in British Columbia. However, the interviewees stress that, while turning 19 signifies becoming an adult in the eyes of the law, in practice age is a false indicator that often does not accurately reflect the actual developmental maturity of street-involved youth (Echenberg and Jenson, 2009; Eberle et al., 2007). Informants report that a high proportion of Vancouver’s street-involved youth population have experienced family trauma and abuse, which can be compounded by mental health issues, substance use, and other developmental disabilities. Together, these experiences serve to delay the developmental maturity of youth, so that a youth’s developmental capacity is often below that of a housed youth of the same age (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e, 2009g, 2009h). One interviewee notes the following:

Developmentally, youth are often at least a couple years behind. So if you have a youth that is 18, you often have a maturity level that is much earlier in age – 14, 15 years old – and that’s almost across the board, almost always with all of the youth, obviously because they’ve had a lack of caring adult relationships, and they’ve been traumatized. Surviving on the street doesn’t teach you how to become an adult, it teaches you how to survive (Personal Interview, 2009d).

The end of service can be particularly distressing for youth in care, who lose both services and financial support from the MCFD after turning 19. Interviewees note that the age of majority “cut-off” serves to further disenfranchise street-involved youth in the middle of their transition away from street life, resulting in a re-entrenchment in the street environment. Indeed, for many youth, 19 is the age at which youth are beginning to seriously consider transitioning away from the street environment (Personal Interview, 2009h, 2009i). Interviewees stress that the age of majority cut-off illustrates a disconnection between policy and practice: while practice-based evidence suggests that youth can more effectively transition to adulthood if supported to the age of 21 (Peters et al., 2009), government policy demands that support end at age 19. Some service providers likened the cut-off as a “door waiting to slam at age 19.” Unfortunately, the impending closure of a youth’s file often precipitates a crisis in their life as s/he anticipates being cut off from the support of a one-to-one worker or residential support (Personal Interview, 2009h, 2009i). On a practical level, the immediate drop in rental subsidy under a youth agreement to income assistance rates tends to result in loss of independent housing after youth turn 19 (Personal Interview, 2009h, 2009i). Interviewees note that the new Agreements with Young Adults Program has been designed to address some of these issues; however, several informants express concern that the program is under-resourced and remains inaccessible for the majority of youth due to restrictive education and/or rehabilitation requirements (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009b, 2009d, 2009f, 2009h).

3.7 Lack of System Flow

Literature suggests that lack of coordinated services and policy objectives can result in significant barriers to permanently housing street-involved youth (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009; Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Specifically, several informants speak to the lack of “flow” in the youth housing continuum (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009h, 2009k). While elements of a

comprehensive housing continuum for youth are in operation in Vancouver, including safe houses, transitional housing, supportive housing, and rental subsidies, it is very difficult for youth to transition through the continuum due to lack of supply. For example, several informants identify difficulties in transitioning individual youth from shelters to residential detoxification (detox) services to independent housing in the private market (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009f, 2009h, 2009k). In particular, service providers express frustration in their inability to place youth rapidly in transition housing or detox services, a failure that is compounded by the very small window of opportunity in which youth are willing and/or able to initiate exiting the street environment. One interviewee comments:

Often youth have so many other things happening to them with addictions or mental health, and so their perspectives are very skewed. Choice is a really hard thing to say to somebody who's in psychosis, who is not really understanding what reality is based in, or whose addiction is really running their life. So they don't feel that they have a choice, that this is what is driving them ... We should just be providing services and having services be consistent, and building that rapport, [so that] when that window comes up, and [youth] have a clarity in their mental health, or they've finally hit a wall in their addiction, the choice is actually available for them. I hit it all the time, where 'I want to go to detox' but it's three days later, or 'I want to get into a shelter,' but I can't find them a shelter because who's going to take them in because they've used in the last day (Personal Interview, 2009f).

Interviewees also express concern that the efficacy of highly intensive interventions – such as long-term, residential, rehabilitation services, for example – is considerably reduced when youth are returned to the same environment post-intervention (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009k). Moreover, services are sometimes tied to housing options, and so when youth “graduate” from service support, they are also required to move from their housing, resulting in the loss of community ties and broader community engagement (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009h; Eberle et al., 2007). Ultimately, lack of system flow prohibits youth and their case workers from engaging in long-term planning, a practice that inevitably prevents youth from becoming permanently housed. Notes one interviewee:

[We need] to have a continuum of options that would allow for planning. There's no real planning that goes on, it's all just 'what is the urgent case today?' and what can we do to get a roof over their heads. So if you could have [youth] in foster care, with a gradual move to independence, [that would be] great, but it's always crisis to crisis to crisis (Personal Interview, 2009h).

These findings suggest that, without clear systems and supports enabling social workers and transition teams to track youth as they move through the housing continuum, youth are likely to remain stuck charting a precarious course between couch surfing with friends, spending a night in a shelter, and living on the street without ever accessing more stable, permanent housing.

3.8 Lack of Coordinated Provincial Strategy

Unanimously, interviewees stress that the youth housing and support system fails to adequately plan for transitions out of care and/or over to adult support services such as subsidized housing and income assistance (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009b, 2009e, 2009f, 2009h, 2009i, 2009k, 2009m). In the absence of coordinated policy, successful navigation through the adult systems of housing and support depends upon the commitment of individual transition workers providing advocacy on a case-by-case basis, often beyond their specific job mandate. An interviewee comments:

What we're not seeing is a coordinated approach between departments on the provincial level. On the one hand, you have the Ministry of Children and Family Development, who run the foster care system and all the other elements of their Ministry, but from what I can see they don't manage an individual youth's movement through their system into independence as adult, which is where the Ministry of Housing and Social Development would come in" (Personal Interview, 2009d).

These findings echo the analysis of the Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia's 2009 audit report on homelessness, which identifies lack of comprehensive discharge planning for youth in care as a key weakness of the provincial system, along with discharge from hospitals and correctional facilities. The report emphasizes that managing the transition stages for homeless and at-risk populations is a crucial aspect of protecting the government's earlier investment, without which the cycle of homelessness is likely to be perpetuated. The report concludes by recommending "that government strengthen its approach to preventing homelessness by taking steps to ensure that people leaving health care services, child protection and correctional facilities are not homeless upon their release" (Auditor General, 2009: 36).

Part of the difficulty in coordinating comprehensive discharge planning for youth is the jurisdictional overlap between provincial ministries and mandates. Table 1 outlines seven different government agencies currently involved with homeless populations in British Columbia.

Table 1. Government Agencies in British Columbia Involved with Some Responsibility for the Homeless

Ministry or Agency	Responsibility
Ministry of Housing and Social Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income assistance • Employment assistance • Disability assistance • Tenant and landlord dispute resolution • Mental health and addiction service coordination • Community Living BC program
BC Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidized and supportive housing • Emergency shelter program • Partnership agreements with other levels of government, health authorities, and service providers • Homeless outreach
Ministry of Health Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and policy standards
Health authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical services delivery (primary care, mental health, and addiction) • Discharge planning • Support services (mental health or addictions counselling)
Ministry of Children and Family Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street youth • Youth safe housing and emergency shelters • Child and youth mental health services • Youth services • Foster care
Ministry of Attorney General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Court
Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offender rehabilitation • Discharge planning • Prolific Offender Management Project

Source: Auditor General, 2009: 22.

Key informants note that, without a decision-making table that brings these ministries together to focus on the needs of homeless youth, approaches are likely to be ad hoc, with greater degrees of coordination among practitioners but less strategic coordination on the decision-making level (Personal Interview, 2009i, 2009k, 2009n). On the local level in Vancouver, the Vancouver Youth Funders Committee brings together government managers from the provincial and municipal governments, researchers, and policy analysts to review practice and develop policy options. While the committee is well positioned to develop policy options, there is no clear reporting mechanism by which the committee can move positions onto governments' decision-making agenda. Informants also note that, due to lack of resources, both youth-serving organizations and the youth ministry are often absent from broader dialogues regarding the general homeless population, which serves to further obscure the needs of street-involved youth from public view (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009b, 2009n).

According to the Auditor General's report, lack of a cohesive strategy at the provincial level has resulted in ill-defined goals for reducing and preventing homelessness in British Columbia (Auditor General, 2009). Perhaps due to the lack of this cohesive strategy, there is considerable lack of consensus between youth service and housing providers and the different provincial ministries as to what outcomes indicate success. While BC Housing recently introduced a new measure designed to track the longer-term tenancy of individuals (MHSD, 2009), the Ministry of Children and Family Development does not include tenured housing as a measure of program success for youth in care. Informants report that success is often measured by organizational outputs (e.g. number of youth served for a number of hours) rather than long-term, community-based outcomes (e.g. number of youth stably housed for more than one year) (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009d, 2009h, 2009i).⁵

Ultimately, the lack of provincial coordination results in a patchwork response to the problem of youth homelessness in which specific interventions drive the policy agenda instead of policy shaping the chosen program intervention. As an interviewee argues, "the issue is often scaling-up. There are lots of one-offs [interventions] but the scaling-up often doesn't happen. That really only happens when there is a strategy in place that has some milestones and a driver that is going to keep pushing, even in the face of limited resources" (Personal Interview, 2009k). Indeed, the current scarcity of resources suggests an increased urgency for provincial coordination in order to stem the continued growth of youth homelessness throughout British Columbia.

Based on the literature review, key informant interviews, and focus groups, the study thus finds a range of determinants impacting the street-involved youth's ability to become permanently housed. While this report examines each determinant separately, it is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive and can serve to reinforce each other. Effective policy responses designed to stably house street-involved youth will thus take into account the specific impacts of these barriers through an integrated response. Section 4 reviews current policy initiatives designed to address youth homelessness in Vancouver.

⁵ One interviewee illustrates the limitations of measuring outputs as follows: "If you imagine yourself as parent, you would never after a year of working with your own child, say well I had 18 out-trips with my child!" (Personal Interview, 2009d).

4. Policy Responses to Youth Homelessness

Before examining potential policy changes to better address the barriers facing street-involved youth in obtaining permanent housing, it is necessary to review the current provincial, municipal, and not-for-profit policy initiatives under way in Vancouver and British Columbia that intersect with and impact the youth population. The following section summarizes current government initiatives and the current service provision model operating in Vancouver.

4.1. Current Policy Initiatives

4.1.1 Homelessness Partnering Strategy

The lack of federal investment in social housing since the early 1990s is well documented (Hulchanski, 2002; Condon and Newton, 2008). Nevertheless, as a result of pressure from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and other organizations, in 1999, the federal government introduced the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). Through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), the federal government allocated funding for emergency shelters and support services for homeless populations. Under the SCPI, approximately \$25 million annually was allocated to the Greater Vancouver Region from 2000 to 2007 (Condon and Newton, 2007). In 2007, again in response to public debate and dialogue, the federal government replaced the SCPI with the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), an initiative operating under a similar framework to the SCPI.⁶ Since 2007, approximately \$12 to \$15 million has been allocated annually under the HPS to Metro Vancouver.

4.1.2 Housing Matters

Released initially in 2006, *Housing Matters BC* comprises the current provincial strategic vision to provide safe, affordable housing to all British Columbians (MHSD, 2009). As such, the strategy informs the directions of the Ministry of Housing and Social Development and forms the basis of the Ministry's service plan (MHSD, 2009). *Housing Matters BC* outlines six key strategies designed to address issues of housing and homelessness, with four key strategies targeted particularly at reducing absolute and relative homelessness: "(1) The homeless have access to stable housing with integrated support services; (2) BC's most vulnerable citizens receive priority for assistance; (3) Aboriginal housing need is addressed; and (4) Low-income households have improved access to affordable rental housing;" (Government of British Columbia, 2006). Table 2 provides an overview of the programs and services arising from *Housing Matters BC*.

⁶ The Homelessness Partnering Strategy website summarizes the program goals as follows: "The HPS works to prevent and reduce homelessness across Canada through: investments in transitional and supportive housing through a housing-first approach; support to community-based efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness; partnerships between the federal government, provinces, and territories; and collaboration with other federal departments and agencies" (Government of Canada, 2009).

Table 2. Housing Matters BC: Strategies and Programs

Strategy	Programs
The homeless have access to stable housing with integrated support services.	Homeless Intervention Project Premier’s Task Force on Homelessness Emergency Shelters Homeless Outreach Teams Provincial Homelessness Initiative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitional and supportive housing development • Pre-development costs to encourage municipal development of supportive housing Supportive housing property tax relief
BC’s most vulnerable citizens receive priority for assistance.	Transition houses for women and children fleeing abuse Independent Living BC Seniors Supportive Housing Community Living BC Agreements with Young Adults Program
Aboriginal housing need is addressed.	Aboriginal Housing Initiative Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program First Nations Memorandum of Understanding
Low-income households have improved access to affordable rental housing.	Rental Assistance Program Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) Shelter Allowance Increase Family Self Sufficiency Program Housing Endowment Fund Local Government (Green Communities) Statutes Amendment Act

Source: Adapted from www.housingmattersbc.ca/index.html.

The original strategy explicitly defines the term “vulnerable citizens” to include individuals with low incomes needing support to live independently, “most often” including seniors, people with physical disabilities or mental illness, and those with drug and alcohol addictions, as well as women and children fleeing abuse. The strategy states that vulnerable citizens “may” include youth who face barriers in accessing private market housing (Government of British Columbia, 2006). The revised strategic document released in 2009 identifies the Agreements with Young Adults Program as a key intervention designed to meet the needs of youth aged 19 to 24 who have grown up in care (Government of British Columbia, 2009).

4.1.3 Strong, Safe and Supported

The provincial Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) released *Strong, Safe and Supported* in 2008, a provincial strategy developed primarily as a response to the recommendations of the *Hughes Review*, an independent review conducted in 2006 (MCFD, 2009). The strategy aims to “place a strong focus on early intervention and a needs based approach to supporting and protecting vulnerable children and youth.” The needs of street-involved youth aged 16 to 18 are mentioned under the third pillar: “Government will provide intervention services and support based on the assessment of individual needs.” The strategy highlights the Youth Agreements Program as a key alternative to bringing “high-risk” youth into care (MCFD, 2008). Key actions for the intervention pillar include improving case management systems and assessment models; providing improved support for caregivers; and improving supports to children formerly in care and youth in youth agreements transitioning to adulthood (MCFD, 2008). In particular, the Ministry identifies two main indicators of success: (1) “an increase in the number of children and youth in care or custody who have positive educational outcomes” and (2) “increase the number of children and youth in care or custody who have a secure, safe, lifelong, positive relationship with at least one caring adult” (MCFD, 2008). In MCFD’s 2009/10 to 2010/11 service plan, the Ministry explicitly identifies working with the Ministry of Housing and Social Development to improve developmental outcomes for youth with special needs transitioning to adulthood (MCFD, 2009) as a key strategy under the intervention goal. The MCFD also has a legislated mandate to provide transitional support services and agreements to youth under the *Child, Family, and Community Service Act* (1996), which outlines that directors may establish support services for youth, sign youth agreements with youth under 19 and sign an agreement with young adults for youth aged 19 to 24 who were in custody or care on their 19th birthday. Appendix B provides an excerpt of the Act.

4.1.4 Regional Homelessness Plan

Established in 2000, the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH) brings together 40 representatives of Metro Vancouver municipalities, service providers, community-based organizations, business, labour, and all levels of government to develop regional responses to homelessness and the lack of affordable housing in the region. In 2000, the RSCH released *3 Ways to Home*, a regional homelessness plan for Greater Vancouver. The plan outlines a continuum of housing support for addressing homelessness: housing, supports, and income. The plan includes a strong focus on prevention through housing and income as solutions to homelessness, while also recognizing the importance of supports in ensuring stable tenancies (SPARC BC, 2003). The revised plan, released in 2003, includes a specific section addressing the needs of street-involved youth. The plan highlights the need for services throughout the region and attention to specific subpopulation services for youth (SPARC BC, 2003).

The RSCH has also reviewed proposals and administered federal funding for homelessness in the region allocated through the federal Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) from 2000 to 2007 and, more recently, under the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) (Condon and Newton, 2007). In June 2009, the RSCH issued a call for proposals confirming that \$10 million of the funds allocated through the HPS would be directed to continuing service contracts. Five million dollars of the funds will be distributed to large and small capital projects

consistent with the plan's priorities of "supportive housing facilities, mental health and addiction facilities and emergency shelter facilities" (RSCH, 2009).

4.1.5 City of Vancouver Action Plan

In 2005, the City of Vancouver released its own Homelessness Action Plan, which uses the same framework as the regional plan (COV, 2005). The plan identifies 87 recommended actions to eliminate homelessness in 10 years, with three strategic priorities: reducing barriers to accessing welfare by the homeless and providing training and employment services, developing 3,200 units of supportive housing, and increasing addictions and mental health services. While the plan stresses that the underlying causes of homelessness fall within the jurisdiction of provincial and federal governments, the plan commits the City to continuing to provide sites for social housing, financial support through its community grants programs, and facilitation of federal, provincial, and local partnerships (COV, 2005). In 2007, the City of Vancouver and the provincial government signed a memorandum of understanding to develop 12⁷ City-owned sites for supportive housing, leading to the development of 1,200 units of social housing (COV, 2008). The City also coordinates the Vancouver Youth Funders Committee, which consists of senior managers with the federal, provincial, and city governments as well as major non-profit funders. In 2007, the committee commissioned a needs analysis for youth housing in the City of Vancouver (Eberle et al., 2007).

4.1.6 Community Foundations

In addition to the above-mentioned government initiatives, non-profit and private funders have also begun to address the problem of youth homelessness in Vancouver. Vancouver Foundation, the largest community foundation in Canada with an endowment of \$665 million, has identified housing as its most urgent priority. In 2008, the Foundation launched the Youth Homeless Initiative, committing \$750,000 over the next three years to funding initiatives addressing youth homelessness in Vancouver (Vancouver Foundation, 2009a). The Youth Housing Initiative includes support for ongoing, rigorous evaluation as a part of the funding framework; as a result, Vancouver Foundation anticipates developing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of different housing interventions over the next few years.

Vancouver Foundation has also supported the start-up of the Streethome Foundation in 2008, a new community-based foundation with the mandate of using a "housing first" approach to address the needs of Vancouver's homeless population. The provincial government and the City of Vancouver matched Vancouver Foundation's initial contribution of \$500,000, and Streethome has since raised \$750,000 in private donations toward supportive housing. Streethome is also in the process of developing a longer-term six-year strategy that includes a focus on prevention programs for youth, to be released at the end of 2009 (Streethome, 2009). The Streethome Board of Directors includes 25 community leaders from the public, private, and non-profit sectors in British Columbia, including representatives from BC Housing and the City of Vancouver.

⁷ The City has since slated two additional City-owned sites for development.

4.2 Current Service Provision Model

The current model for service provision addressing homelessness in Vancouver is a combination of housing, services, and income supports, as identified in the Regional Homelessness Plan. The following subsections provide a brief overview of the types of housing options and services available to street-involved youth in Vancouver.

4.2.1 Housing Continuum

Researchers, planners, and service providers consistently stress the need for a continuum of housing to address the barriers facing street-involved youth in exiting Vancouver's street environment (SPARC BC, 2003; Eberle et al., 2007; COV, 2005). Table 3 outlines four main elements of the housing continuum.

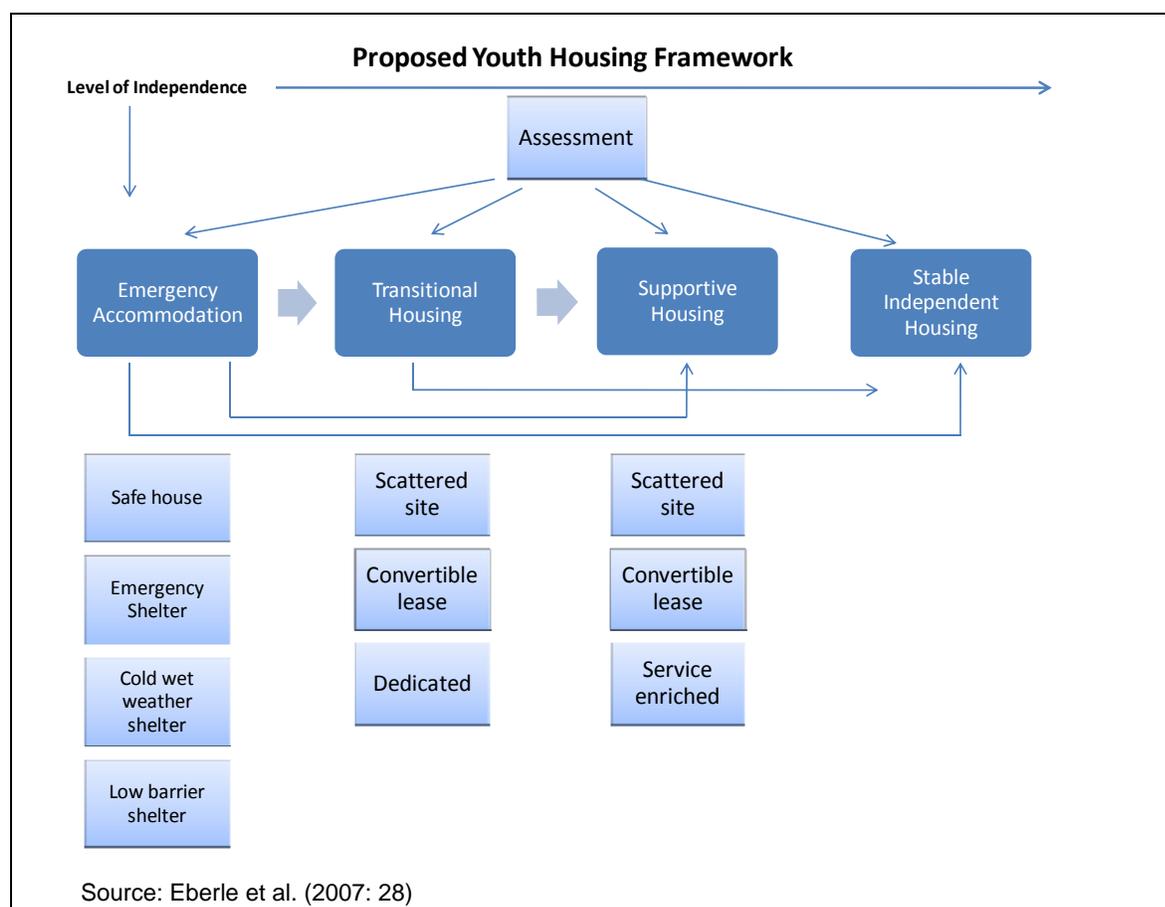
Table 3. Housing Continuum

Type of Housing	Description
Emergency Housing	Includes emergency shelters for youth aged 19-24, safe houses for youth under 19, and transition houses for women and children leaving abusive relationships.
Transitional Housing	Refers to time-limited housing, often from 30 days to 2-3 years that includes provincial on- or off-site services. Also sometimes termed second stage housing. Can be dedicated purpose-built housing or scattered site apartments.
Supportive Housing	Refers to housing with ongoing supports and services, with no limit on length of stay. Can include services to residents who cannot live independently (e.g. those with severe mental health and addictions issues). Can include dedicated purpose-built housing or in scattered site apartments or suites.
Independent Housing	Refers to permanent, affordable housing for individuals to live independently.

Source: Adapted from SPARC BC (2003: 15).

In their comprehensive review of youth housing options in the City of Vancouver, Eberle et al. recommend a similar housing framework for youth. The authors stress that youth “do not need to proceed through the continuum in a linear fashion i.e. from emergency to transitional to supportive to independent, but can access any type of housing, depending on their readiness as determined through an assessment” (Eberle et al., 2007: 27). Figure 1 depicts their proposed youth housing continuum.

Figure 1. Youth Housing Continuum



Based on an inventory of current housing capacity in the City of Vancouver, the report identifies three specific gaps in the continuum: lack of cold wet weather and low-barrier emergency beds, lack of scattered site transitional housing and housing with convertible leases, and lack of dedicated supportive housing units (Eberle et al. 2007). With regard to overall capacity, and assuming a range of 300 to 700 homeless youth in the City of Vancouver, the report points to a significant undersupply of housing in the range of 130 to 530 beds/units (Eberle et al., 2007: 53).⁸

Researchers in Vancouver and other jurisdictions have noted a gradual shift among policy-makers toward a “housing first” approach to policy and planning for adult populations, which aims to house individuals as quickly as possible in permanent housing while providing appropriate services (Eberle et al., 2007; Kraus et al., 2005; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009). Initially developed in New York City, housing first approaches have been found to be effective in addressing the needs of chronic homeless populations, including adults facing severe mental health and addictions issues (Culhane et al., 2002; Patterson et al., 2008). A crucial aspect of the housing first approach is that it is based in the principle of providing people with direct access to permanent housing, independent of services or requirements for treatment. The

⁸ Since 2007, 10 additional supportive housing units for pregnant and parenting youth living with addictions and/or mental illness and 19 scattered site units of supportive housing have been secured from the private rental market in Vancouver (Vancouver Foundation, 2009b).

housing first approach is client-directed, in that the client determines the range of supports s/he needs to remain stably housed, in contrast with housing programs that base tenure on compliance to a particular treatment or service (Kraus et al., 2005).

There is very little documented empirical evidence on the efficacy of housing first approaches with youth. As with the adult population, informants in Vancouver stress that effective housing options are rooted in client-centred service that focuses directly on the needs of the individual youth involved and creates meaningful opportunities for choice (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009c, 2009h, 2009i). At the same time, practitioners and researchers note that, unlike the adult population, the youth population is a population in transition from youth to adulthood, and as a result there is an expectation that, if provided with appropriate support, the majority of youth will be able to transition to independent living (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009f, 2009g, 2009i, 2009k). There seems to be general consensus among key informants that housing options that remain stable, while allowing for a reduction or change of services and supports, are preferable to time-limited programs in which both housing and supports are inextricably linked (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009c, 2009h).

4.2.2 Support Services

The 2003 Regional Homelessness Plan identifies six core categories of support services needed to complement the housing continuum in order to stably house youth. Table 4 provides a brief outline of the different types of services.

Table 4. Support Services

Type of Service	Description
Prevention	Includes rent banks, advocacy, landlord-tenant mediation, housing registries and family supports
Outreach Services	Outreach services designed to engage street-involved youth and help them to access housing and support services. Outreach services can also include housing workers who link youth to landlords in the private market
Drop-in Centres	Provide support for street-involved youth's basic needs, including laundry, washrooms and showers. Often also include employment assistance, outreach and housing workers, recreation opportunities and counselling services
Health Services	Includes drop-in clinics, emergency wards, street nurses, mobile clinics, dental care
Mental Health Services	Includes assessment, counselling, treatment, rehabilitation, referrals, crisis management and medication management
Substance Misuse Services	Includes detox facilities, sobering centres, residential treatment programs, supportive recovery homes, counselling, methadone treatment, needle exchanges

Source: Adapted from SPARC BC (2003: 177).

Youth services provided in the City of Vancouver funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Services have been consolidated into four youth hubs located within the city limits. In addition, there are two other youth service providers based in the City of Vancouver, one providing drop-in centres, short-term, and transitional residential housing in the Downtown core, and the other providing transitional and supportive housing in the Downtown Eastside. There is currently no designated youth hub in the Downtown Eastside.

Recent housing inventories suggest that there are elements of all six types of services available for youth in Vancouver; however, both the regional plan and the Youth Housing Options report note the lack of housing outreach workers and the lack of services for specific subpopulations of youth, including youth with mental illness and addictions, Aboriginal youth, pregnant and parenting youth, LGBTQ youth, and sexually exploited youth (SPARC BC, 2003; Eberle et al., 2007).

4.2.3 Income Supports

The third “way home” or pillar of the Regional Homelessness Plan is income supports. As with the adult homeless population, one of the primary barriers facing youth in accessing permanent independent housing is lack of income. For youth over the age of 19, the current income assistance rate is \$375 a month, well below the average rental rate for a one-bedroom, purpose-built apartment in Metro Vancouver. For youth under the age of 19 who have signed a youth agreement with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the average rental subsidy is higher, at \$650 a month, although informants noted that this amount is still below average housing costs in Vancouver (Personal Interview, 2009g, 2009g). Youth under the age of 19 living with mental health and/or addictions issues who have been accepted into Vancouver Coastal Health’s Supported Independent Living Programs are also provided with an additional subsidy of \$400 per month, to a total of \$775 per month. Finally, the new Agreements with Young Adults Program provides additional rental subsidies of \$600 per month for youth aged 19 to 25 who were in care or on a youth agreement on their 19th birthday and who are pursuing further education or entering a rehabilitation program. Informants expressed concern that the Agreements with Young Adults Program is currently under-resourced and reported that rental subsidies have already been cut from \$650 to \$600 after the first year of the program (Personal Interview, 2009f, 2009h).

Despite the service provision model outlined above, along with the current strategies in place in the provincial, regional, municipal, and non-profit spheres, this study finds that the needs of street-involved youth are not adequately addressed by the status quo. Within the current service provision model, there is a considerable lack of housing supply, specialized services are limited, and income supports are inadequate to stably house youth. Within the policy sphere, the housing needs of street-involved youth are mentioned only minimally, with rent subsidies promoted by both the children and housing ministries as the key policy intervention intended to house homeless youth. While rent subsidies are an important intervention for some individual youths, due to the multiple barriers discussed above, rent subsidies alone are unlikely to ameliorate the housing tenancies of the homeless youth population in Vancouver.

5. Policy Recommendations

This study proposes two sets of recommendations designed to address the identified barriers preventing youth from becoming stably housed in Vancouver. Building on the well-established planning model of the “three ways to home” developed in the Regional Homeless plan, the first set of recommendations suggests additional reforms in housing, support services, and income supports. The second set of recommendations concerns broader policy alternatives, including development of targeted provincial strategies and opportunities for partnerships between service providers, governments, and private funders. While each option is designed to address a key barrier, these options are not mutually exclusive and can be implemented in conjunction with each other.

5.1 Service Provision Recommendations

5.1.1 *Investment in Youth Housing*

The results of this study suggest that the street-involved youth population in Vancouver has intricate needs that are not met by the existing framework of youth housing options. Affordability stress and landlord discrimination intersect to prevent street-entrenched youth from accessing housing on the private market. Given the complexity of the youth population’s needs, the literature suggests that supportive housing remains the most effective intervention for stably housing youth, a finding that was confirmed through the key informant interviews and focus groups conducted during this study. As one informant stresses,

We need to develop dedicated supportive housing for this population recognizing the unique needs of this population between the ages of 16 and 24. There is plenty of evidence to show that if you can invest in housing and support services in that range, it will pay dividends later on (Personal Interview, 2009n).

The developmental and transitional needs of street-involved youth require a combined approach of housing and support that is most effectively delivered via supportive housing. As with the adult homeless population, there is limited empirical evidence in the literature determining the superiority of any particular model of supportive housing for youth, specifically with regard to congregate versus scattered site housing (Eberle et al., 2007). Findings from the research interviews were also inconclusive, with some informants promoting scattered site supportive housing in the private market (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009i, 2009k) and others preferring dedicated congregate housing, such as a youth floor on one of the 14 proposed supportive housing sites or a fully dedicated youth building (Personal Interview, 2009h, 2009n). Despite differences in proposed housing structures, informants asserted the need for flexible supports that can be adapted to the youths’ individual housing situations in order to keep youth tenured in a stable housing environment as long as possible. As with the broader housing continuum, **this study recommends a parallel investment in both supportive housing options, initiating with financial support for scattered site development in the interim while dedicated housing is in the construction stage.**

A majority of informants (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009f, 2009h, 2009k, 2009m, 2009n) pointed to the success of the Broadway Youth Resource Centre's (BYRC's) Housing Portfolio Development program as an example of a relatively low-cost policy option that secures supportive housing in the private market. Based on successful housing liaison programs in other jurisdictions, BYRC works in partnership with private landlords to rent units and in turn sublets the unit to a young person. As part of the scattered site model, support services are provided to assist youth to achieve and maintain independence (Vancouver Foundation, 2009). The advantage to this program approach is that it mitigates the impacts of landlord discrimination while also supporting individual youths' desire for independence. Given the current policy barriers against placing youth in general subsidized housing, this program also addresses the needs of 16- to 18-year-olds who are only able to access housing in the private market. However, at the same time, the dependence on the private housing market makes the program vulnerable to Vancouver's low vacancy rate. As with housing first approaches in Toronto, success of the program thus depends on the service organization's ability to provide supports but also to effectively motivate and engage the business community (Falvo, 2009). Nevertheless, despite Vancouver's low vacancy rate, in the first year of operations, BYRC was able to secure and maintain 19 rental units for vulnerable youth and over the next two years is working to secure and maintain a total of 70 rental units. Opportunities for expansion may also include partnerships with non-profit housing associations and co-operatives.

Another advantage of the scattered site model raised in both the literature and key informant interviews is the ability to remove supports once youth have transitioned to a more adult, independent stage (Eberle et al., 2007; Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009h). Often termed a "convertible lease," the concept is that, after transitioning to independence, the lease will transfer from the youth service provider directly to the youth, ensuring that youth are not required to leave their community unless they want to. Despite the success of convertible leases in other jurisdictions (Eberle et al., 2007), Vancouver service providers have yet to see many youth transitioning into a convertible lease, with most youth choosing to transition to independent housing in other neighbourhoods or municipalities rather than remaining housed in the supportive housing unit. Due to the relative newness of this approach in Vancouver, this study **recommends continued support for scattered site initiatives as well as ongoing evaluation in order to gather empirical evidence as to the successes and challenges of this particular approach.**

Alternatively, the findings of the study also stress the need for decision-makers to support the construction of dedicated subsidized housing sites for youth. BC Housing is currently working in partnership with a few youth service organizations to place youth in non-profit housing associations and government-owned single room occupancy units and has identified priority development of dedicated youth housing at two of the Vancouver youth hubs; however, given the current economic climate, the development of these properties is still several years away. In the absence of dedicated housing, **this report recommends that BC Housing pilot rentals to youth aged 16 to 18 in conjunction with supportive housing service providers such as the Broadway Youth Resource Centre.** While current policy deters housing managers from placing youth under 19 in subsidized housing, evidence from other jurisdictions suggests that youth can remain successfully tenured if provided with appropriate supports. If successful, the pilot project would provide BC Housing with empirical support to review the internal housing policy as it pertains to housing youth under 19.

Finally, this study confirms earlier research as to the need for low-barrier emergency housing options for youth dealing with addictions. As with the scattered site versus congregate housing options, there were some conflicting responses among interviewees as to the benefit of a low-barrier shelter, with the majority of interviewees firmly supporting the idea (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009c, 2009g, 2009i) and others suggesting that a system for rapidly housing youth in family or semi-supported settings would be more ideal (Personal Interview, 2009h). The recent community backlash against the opening of a low-barrier shelter based in Downtown Vancouver, which had a high proportion of youth clients, speaks to the importance of effective community consultation and engagement to avoid “not-in-my-backyard” resistance to service provision. Nevertheless, research from other jurisdictions stresses that youth agencies across Canada are incorporating a harm-reduction approach into their work to more effectively meet the needs of youth dealing with addictions, many of whom are also facing mental health problems (Raising the Roof, 2009). **This report recommends that the City of Vancouver and the Province engage in continued consultation with community members and youth service agencies to open a low-barrier emergency housing intervention for street-involved youth in Vancouver.**

5.1.2 Flexible, Relationship-Based Support Services

The results of key informant interviews confirm findings from the literature that street-involved youth experience high levels of alienation and isolation that limit the youth population’s ability to access adult housing services. Practiced-based research suggests that, as with adult “hard-to-house” populations, flexible, youth-centred approaches are likely to be the most effective in facilitating a permanent housing tenure (Kraus et al., 2005; Kidd, 2003; Karabanow, 2008; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow and Clement, 2004; Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Using a theory of change model, this approach is focused on providing a consistent adult relationship for youth that does not flag in the face of cycles of engagement and disengagement discussed above:

Homeless youth frequently engage with and leave programs multiple times before making significant progress in their transition away from street life. In the context of theory of change literature and models, repeated engagement and ‘relapse’ in the change process has been shown to increase chances of successful transition ... Repeated engagement should be regarded as a positive indicator (McLean, 2005: xv)

Repeated returns to the street are not necessarily an indication of program failure, but rather part of a long-term transition out of the street environment. Service providers interviewed for this study also stressed that, unlike adult outreach services, which tend to be based in a less interventionist approach in order to support individual adults’ choices, effective youth outreach services are very proactive, with workers often repeatedly engaging youth despite individual youths’ level of entrenchment in the street environment (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009f). Research findings from this study suggest that a modified housing first approach that places youth at the centre of the service provision model while also anticipating that the majority of youth will “move through the continuum” is most effective for this population (Personal Interview, 2009c, 2009f, 2009g, 2009i 2009k). Informants note that focused practice on connecting youth to the larger community is a crucial step in stably housing youth (Personal Interview, 2009h, 2009i). One interviewee explains it this way:

We think that your identity is not your circumstance, and that's an important piece. Being homeless doesn't mean you are 'homeless'... Especially for youth, that's so crucial, because they are actually in a developmental point in their life when they are building identity. So to build identity if you are in school and a really good basketball player is really different than if you are homeless and a really good drug dealer (Personal Interview, 2009i).

Effective practice works with youth to build on their strengths to develop new identities separate from their street-based identity to enable youth to transition to independence once they are developmentally ready. In his research on the exiting process of street-involved youth, Jeff Karabanow describes this process as follows: "Service providers play a significant role in supporting young people to regain or rebuild a sense of self. A majority of participants described diverse service provisions as 'surrogate families' and 'brokers' between street culture and mainstream living." (Karabanow, 2008: 780). Effective practice fosters connections between youth and the broader community, providing youth with a base of support beyond individual case workers.

Within this relationship-based context, specialized service interventions can meet the specific needs of youth subpopulations such as Aboriginal youth, youth with mental health and addictions, and LGBTQ youth. The Urban Native Youth Association, one of the four youth hubs in Vancouver, provides a range of culturally-specific Aboriginal youth outreach programs as well as emergency and transitional residential services; however, the residential program is currently limited to a capacity of 10 beds (five for young women, five for young men) (UNYA, 2009). Given the high proportion of street-involved youth reporting an Aboriginal identity, culturally specific support services for Aboriginal youth are a key lever in stemming the perpetuation of youth homelessness in Vancouver. Research finds that adult Aboriginal homeless populations are reluctant to enter into current housing facilities, especially those run by religious institutions due to residential school abuses (Stewart, 2009). Correspondingly, Aboriginal youth are likely to be similarly alienated from some youth programs with similar religious underpinnings and would benefit from expanded Aboriginal-centred programs.

Research informants identified the Inner City Mental Health Program as an example of a relationship-based outreach service that has been found to be very effective in meeting the needs of youth dealing with mental illness and/or addictions. In a partnership between St. Paul's Hospital, Covenant House Vancouver, Watari, and Vancouver Coastal Health, this program provides clinical psychiatric services to street-involved youth in two different shelter locations, a marked difference from traditional clinical practice requiring youth to attend regular appointments in hospital (Mathias, 2009). Although still in the first few years of operation, the program reports strong outcomes, with increased attendance at appointments and increased length of shelter stay past 21 days, an indicator that is correlated with long-term tenure (Mathias, 2009). This program also provides a proven example of effective interventions for youth dealing with severe mental health and addictions issues.

Finally, this study finds that the current service provision model in Vancouver is lacking in services for LGBTQ and pregnant and parenting youth. Earlier studies have identified both scattered site and dedicated safe houses as interventions that could be effective in housing

LGBTQ youth in the Vancouver context (Eberle et al., 2007; De Castell et al., 2002). Research from US jurisdictions has found scattered site housing combined with LGBTQ-specific services to be particularly effective in housing queer youth (Eberle et al., 2007). Similarly, pregnant and/or parenting youth, especially youth under the age of 18, are in need of prioritized housing that allows couples to be housed together. While subsidies in the private market may provide some relief for young families, findings of this study suggest that dedicated, subsidized, supportive housing would be a more effective intervention.

Based on barriers of alienation and isolation, as well as the needs of youth subpopulations, **this study recommends continued investment in outreach and supportive housing services specifically designed to meet the needs of youth subpopulations, with an emphasis on the services for Aboriginal youth; youth with mental health issues and/or addictions; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth; and pregnant and parenting youth.**

5.1.3 Income Supports

Findings from the research interviews and the literature consistently stress that low income remains one of the single most significant deterrents preventing youth from accessing permanent housing in Vancouver. In particular, the stakeholders interviewed expressed concern that the difference between income assistance for youth under 18 and youth aged 19 to 24 serves as an ongoing barrier for youth to maintain independent housing gained through earlier interventions such as supported independent living programs and/or housing portfolio development programs. While the recently introduced Agreements with Young Adults Program is designed to address this policy gap, the developmental maturity of many street-entrenched youth is likely to severely limit access to the program due to the educational requirements (Personal Interview, 2009d). Although the rehabilitation requirement provides a potential alternative for youth, this support is predicated upon acceptance into a rehabilitation program – again, while the residential detox facilities may be available, informants noted that youth are in greatest need of housing support post-intervention, and this may be when youth are most likely to need a rental subsidy (Personal Interview, 2009a, 2009k). Based on these findings, **this study recommends continued support of the Agreements with Young Adults Program, with revision of the eligibility requirements to allow increased access for all street-involved youth.**

5.2 System-Wide Recommendations

5.2.1 Targeted Strategy to House 16- to 18-Year-Old Youth

Another barrier identified in this study is the lack of housing options and supports available to street-involved youth aged 16 to 18. Without a targeted strategy in place to prioritize the needs of this subpopulation, youth find themselves increasingly marginalized, caught in a situation where they are perceived to have “outgrown” youth services while simultaneously being too young to access adult subsidized housing and income assistance. **This study recommends development of a targeted provincial strategy designed to address the housing and support needs of street-involved youth between the ages of 16 and 18.** The development of this strategy would include a review of the Youth Agreements Program to ensure consistent practice and implementation for all youth. The strategy would also include a range of alternative policy

interventions including dedicated supportive housing, a re-evaluation of the housing ministry's internal policy to discourage housing 16- to 18-year-olds in independent subsidized housing units as discussed above, and a risk assessment regarding the feasibility of housing youth aged 16 to 24 in the same subsidized housing facilities and/or together in the private housing market.

5.2.2 Dialogue on Outcomes-Based Evaluation and Research

Another significant barrier identified by this study is the absence of a system planning approach that tracks the movement of individual youths through the system of institutionalized support provided by the provincial children's and housing ministries. This report recommends that the provincial government facilitate a dialogue process between the children's, health, and housing ministries, the City of Vancouver, and the non-profit sector to develop ground-up outcomes-based measurements to evaluate the success of the system in housing street-involved youth. Findings from the literature suggest that shared outcome measurement systems can be an effective tool in facilitating inter-ministry coordination and integration. In its study of best practices for provision of youth services in British Columbia, the University of Victoria's Collaborative Community Health Research Centre argues that outcome-based measurement systems create benefits in three distinct ways: better accountability structures, more effective services, and increased freedom for communities to tailor service delivery to the specific needs of youth. The authors stress the following:

The province would have an accountability process for service delivery organizations that emphasized the most important product – better outcomes. Services for youth would be evaluated on the consumer and population outcomes leading to a singular and joint focus on them. Communities would have increased freedom and creative opportunities to manage their service delivery; overlap and duplication would be reduced, while more cooperation would be induced. Turf and mandate disagreements or boundaries would become less important in the cooperative effort to seek the common outcomes and rewards. Overall, the effect would be to liberate their creativity in options for action but to confine the focus of action on outcomes (CCHRC, 2002: 89).

Other jurisdictions have used the development of joint indicators as a key step in developing cross-government agreements and protocols between housing and children's welfare departments (Communities and Local Government, 2008). In contrast to the current system that uses age as the key indicator of independence, an outcomes-based measurement system is more likely to include additional indicators such as developmental maturity to more accurately track youths' individual readiness to successfully live independently.⁹ In addition, the development of shared indicators, or outcome measurements, could lead to the development of more robust and comprehensive evaluation systems, including a common model for enumerating street-involved youth (Raising the Roof, 2009). Currently in Vancouver, non-profit funders, such as the Vancouver Foundation, are the primary funder of empirical, evidence-based evaluation and research on current services provided to the street-involved youth population. **This report recommends that the provincial children's and housing ministries collaborate in partnership**

⁹ Some service providers in Vancouver already use alternative measures to evaluate youth, such as the Global Area Function Score, a psychiatric scale used to measure an individual's ability to function in society (Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009e; Mathias, 2009).

with service providers and community foundations to develop robust indicators for permanently housing street-involved youth that allow for improved system planning and case management.

5.2.3 Integrated Provincial Strategy

Ultimately, the research findings suggest that Vancouver's street-involved youth population is unlikely to become permanently housed without an integrated provincial strategy governing youth's transitions from care. While ad hoc and local coordination mechanisms serve to increase the effectiveness of service provision, including facilitating case management for individual youths (Personal Interview, 2009d, 2009f; Auditor General, 2009), on a more global scale, effective exit planning, or discharge planning, for youth in care is crucial to effectively housing the street-involved youth population in Vancouver. As noted above, there is some indication in both *Housing Matters* and *Strong, Safe and Supported* that the provincial government is aware of this gap; however, beyond the Youth Agreements and Agreements for Young Adults programs, it is unclear as to what resources are available to both the children's and housing ministries to assist youth in transitioning to independence. **This report recommends that the provincial government develop and resource a new provincial strategy to specifically address the housing needs of youth aged 16 to 24 who are leaving/have left care.** In developing a new strategy, this report recommends an analysis of governance models used in other jurisdictions that have effectively increased housing tenure for youth aged 16 to 24 leaving care. Specifically, recent research suggests that best practices from other jurisdictions include implementation of new legislation designed to provide specific supports for youth aged 16 to 17 transitioning from care (Communities and Local Government, 2008; Dixon et al., 2006) and legislation to extend the legal age majority to 21 (Peters et al., 2009).

The above recommendations form a multi-pronged approach designed to address the key barriers to permanently housing street-involved youth identified in the research findings. These recommendations confirm the findings of earlier studies identifying combined housing, service, and income supports as crucial interventions for effectively housing homeless populations. Moreover, this report suggests three broader policy changes to focus provincial interventions on the needs of street-involved youth: development of a targeted strategy to stably house 16- to 18-year-olds; facilitation of partnerships with the voluntary sector to develop shared indicators for successful youth housing and support services; and implementation of an integrated provincial strategy to guide youth's transitions to independence from care.

While these recommendations are intended to assist the provincial government in effectively housing the current street-involved youth population in Vancouver, it is important to recognize that any effective, long-term housing policy must address issues of prevention (Serge, 2006; Kelly and Caputo, 2007). Although outside of the scope of this report, some key informants spoke to the need to develop appropriate interventions for the very young street-involved youth population aged 10 to 16, specifically for sexually exploited youth (Personal Interview, 2009f, 2009k). Further research is needed to evaluate effective prevention strategies, such as school programs, family supports, and vocational training programs designed to reach youth prior to entrenchment in the street environment.

6. Conclusion

Policy-makers across Canada are confronted with the unprecedented growth of homelessness in their communities. In British Columbia, research finds that the homeless population is a heterogeneous group with a variety of different, and sometimes conflicting, needs. The provincial government has begun to take this diversity into account, developing priority services for adults with mental health and/or addictions issues, seniors, and women and children fleeing domestic violence (Government of British Columbia, 2006). Yet despite forming a considerable proportion of the absolute, hidden, and at-risk homeless populations in British Columbia, street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 are rarely prioritized as a population in need. This report draws on findings from the literature, key informant interviews, and focus groups to stress that, despite conventional perceptions of street-involved youth as irresponsible and undeserving of government support and service, the empirical reality is that street-involved youth form a highly marginalized, vulnerable population whom the provincial government has a legal and moral obligation to protect. While providing a supply of stable housing for the majority of British Columbia's population, due to low incomes and landlord discrimination, the private housing market fails to provide stable housing for street-involved youth, leaving youth dependent on either ad hoc social networks or government interventions to move them from "street to home." This report argues that a mix of dedicated scattered site and supportive housing; specialized, youth-centred services; and accessible income supports are needed to stably house street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 in Vancouver.

Perhaps most troubling is the research finding that current provincial policy actually serves to reinforce the ongoing marginalization of youth. Lack of prioritized service within the children's ministry and lack of integration between the provincial children's, housing, and health ministries prevent youth from accessing housing supports and services at crucial stages in their lives. Increased housing supports for 16- to 18-year-olds, supports tied to youth's developmental maturity instead of age, and integrated transition services are examples of policy changes that would serve to increase the youth population's housing tenure.

Housing street-involved youth is an intricate process, situated at the nexus of often conflicting political jurisdictions and mandates. Given the challenges of integration, lack of resources, and immediate needs of abused children and chronically homeless adults, it is not surprising that governments tend not to target youth as a core population in housing need. Yet the findings of this research stress that youth are not a "lost cause." Just as governments have begun to adapt services to provide effective housing supports to "hard-to-house" adult populations, so can services be adapted to successfully and stably house street-involved youth. Investment in housing street-involved youth may be a challenging investment, but it is a smart investment, without which we run the risk of standing by while today's homeless youth become tomorrow's homeless adults.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

(Read to interviewee at the beginning of interview)

- For purpose of our discussion today, research ethics require that I explain how information from this discussion may be used and then gain your consent to participate.
- My intent is to gather information from key members of the community involved in this policy area to develop options aimed at solving the policy problem of youth homelessness in Vancouver, with a focus on policies that permanently/stably house street-involved youth in Metro Vancouver.
- All the information gathered for this study will be strictly confidential. The audio record and/or notes will be assigned an ID# and stored using that ID# instead of by names. Your names will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study.
- You will receive a copy of the transcript of the discussion, which you may add to if you desire; however, you may not alter your remarks.
- Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.
- If you concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact Dr. Michael Buzzelli, Director of Housing, at michael.buzzelli@uwo.ca or 519-614-0315.
- Do you consent to participate in this discussion?

Expert Researcher Interviews

1. What are the common characteristics of the street-involved youth population in Metro Vancouver?
2. What is the extent of youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver?
3. What research methodology have you used to reach this estimate?
4. What are the key barriers facing Metro Vancouver's youth population to becoming permanently housed?
5. What types of policies (programs, services, partnerships, investments, legislative changes, and government agreements) have been effective in addressing the barriers youth face?
6. What are opportunities for partnerships between the provincial government, municipalities of Metro Vancouver, the health authorities, and the not-for-profit sector to permanently house street-involved youth?

Focus Group Questions

1. What are the key barriers facing Metro Vancouver's youth population to becoming permanently housed?
2. What types of policies (e.g. programs, services, partnerships, investments, legislative changes, and government agreements) have addressed these barriers effectively?
3. What types of policies could address these barriers?
4. What are opportunities for partnerships between the provincial government, municipalities of Metro Vancouver, the health authorities, and the not-for-profit sector to permanently house street-involved youth?

Service Provider Interviews

1. How many street-involved youth does your organization work with?
2. What are the common characteristics of the youth that you work with?
3. What are the key barriers facing youth in obtaining permanent, stable housing?
4. What kinds of housing and support services have you found to be effective in addressing these barriers?
5. What opportunities are there for partnerships between housing and service providers to address these barriers?
6. What opportunities are there for partnerships between the provincial government, municipalities of Metro Vancouver, the health authorities, and the not-for-profit sector to permanently house street-involved youth?

Policy-Maker Interviews

1. What is your understanding of the extent and scope of youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver?
2. What are the strategies or policy initiatives within your organization that address the needs of homeless youth in Metro Vancouver?
3. What are the key barriers facing youth in obtaining permanent, stable housing?
4. What policy initiatives or strategies have been successful in addressing youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver?

5. What are the key barriers facing policy-makers in addressing youth homelessness in Metro Vancouver?
6. What opportunities are there for partnerships between the provincial government, municipalities of Metro Vancouver, the health authorities, and the not-for-profit sector to permanently house street-involved youth?

Appendix B. *BC Child, Family, and Community Service Act*

Child, Family and Community Service Act [RSBC 1996] CHAPTER 46

Part 2.1 — Youth Transitional Support Services and Agreements

Support services for youth

12.1 A director may establish support services for youth, including but not limited to safe houses, outreach services and supported living arrangements.

Agreements with youth

12.2 (1) Subject to the regulations, a director may make a written agreement with a youth who needs assistance and who

- (a) cannot, in the director's opinion, be re-established in the youth's family, or
- (b) has no parent or other person willing or able to assist the youth.

(2) The agreement may provide for one or more of the following:

- (a) residential, educational or other support services;
- (b) financial assistance.

(3) The agreement must include a plan for independence that contains

- (a) a description of the support services or financial assistance, or both, that are to be provided by the director,
- (b) the goals to be met by the youth, and
- (c) any other contents specified by regulation.

(4) Before making the agreement, the director must

- (a) consider whether the agreement is in the youth's best interests, and
- (b) recommend that the youth seek advice from an independent third party.

(5) The initial term of the agreement must not exceed 3 months, but the agreement may be renewed for terms of up to 6 months each.

(6) No agreement under this section continues beyond the youth's 19th birthday.

(7) An agreement made by a director under this section with a youth is enforceable against the youth.

(8) An agreement made by a director under this section with a youth does not limit the court's power to hear an application and make an order about the youth.

(9) For the purpose of this section, "**youth**" includes a person who

- (a) is under 16 years of age, and
- (b) is married or is a parent or expectant parent.

Agreements with young adults

12.3 (1) Subject to the regulations, a director may make a written agreement with a person who, until the person's 19th birthday,

- (a) received support services or financial assistance, or both, under section 12.2,
- (b) was in the continuing custody of a director or the permanent custody of the Superintendent of Family and Child Service, or
- (c) was in the guardianship of a director of adoption or of a director under section 29 (3) of the *Family Relations Act*.

(2) The agreement may provide for support services or financial assistance, or both, to assist the person while

- (a) enrolled in an educational or vocational training program, or

- (b) taking part in a rehabilitative program.
- (3) The agreement may be renewed or, after an interval, another agreement under this section may be made, but, whether one or more agreements are made,
 - (a) the total of the terms of all agreements with all directors, and all renewals to all agreements, relating to the same person must not exceed 24 months, and
 - (b) no agreement may extend beyond the person's 24th birthday.



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