HOUSING SHOULD BE A HOME

PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH WHO USE(D) DRUGS ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS IN VANCOUVER

Community-Based Research Findings and Recommendations to Improve Youth-Focused Housing

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INTRODUCTION

Across North America, the number of people experiencing homelessness and unstable housing has been growing dramatically since the early 2000s. In Vancouver, which recorded a 32% increase in street-based homelessness between 2020 and 2023, eight percent of those identified in local homelessness counts were under 25 years old, and one third had a history of involvement in government care.[1] For each young person identified as experiencing homelessness, as many as three are not officially recorded because they experience "hidden homelessness"—couch surfing temporarily with friends, family members, or even strangers.[2]

Indigenous young people are overrepresented across all levels of the child welfare system, and in homeless counts in Vancouver and the rest of Canada, as a result of the historical and ongoing effects of settler colonialism.[3,4] Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer (2S/LGBTQ+) youth, especially those of colour and who grew up in poverty, are also grossly overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness in North America.[5,6] Young women and Two-Spirit, transgender, and non-binary youth—especially those who are Indigenous and racialized—face additional challenges, including higher rates of violence while homeless.[5-8]

When it comes to the harms associated with homelessness and unstable housing, young people who use drugs are disproportionately affected.[9] For the purposes of this report, we define young people as those between ages 13 and 29, encompassing distinct pediatric (ages 13 to 17) and young adult (ages 18 to 29) populations. This is the age range of the youth who participated in the studies and activities summarized below. Among young people who use drugs, substance use patterns are often powerfully shaped by the social, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual harms associated with seemingly "endless" cycles of street-based homelessness and unstable housing.[10] Research also shows that these harms can be compounded when cycles include time in institutions intended to help young people—such as foster care and group homes, correctional facilities, treatment and detox facilities, and hospitals.[10,11] While these settings can foster senses of possibility when programming and youth needs and desires are aligned, cycling between them can also increasingly limit young people's abilities to imagine futures outside of these places. As youth come and go from these settings (sometimes as a result of being "kicked out" or leaving abruptly), their lives can be destabilized in ways that exacerbate housing instability, mental health crises, and substance use. According to a 2023 provincial coroner's report, more than half of the 353 toxic drug-related deaths of young people under 29 years old occurred in housing environments—including places meant to address experiences of homelessness—or in public settings associated with unstable housing.[12,13]

As part of its comprehensive housing strategy, the City of Vancouver has outlined a "Housing Continuum" that extends from low-barrier shelters and transitional housing for people experiencing homelessness to affordable independent rental housing and homeownership.[14] There are a number of options available to young people who use drugs along this continuum—from temporary shelters to supportive housing and SROs (see next page).

In order to understand the impacts of homelessness policies on young people in settings like Vancouver, it is necessary to examine what stability and home mean to them as they navigate multiple living environments. This report provides recommendations to guide housing policy and programs for young people who use drugs 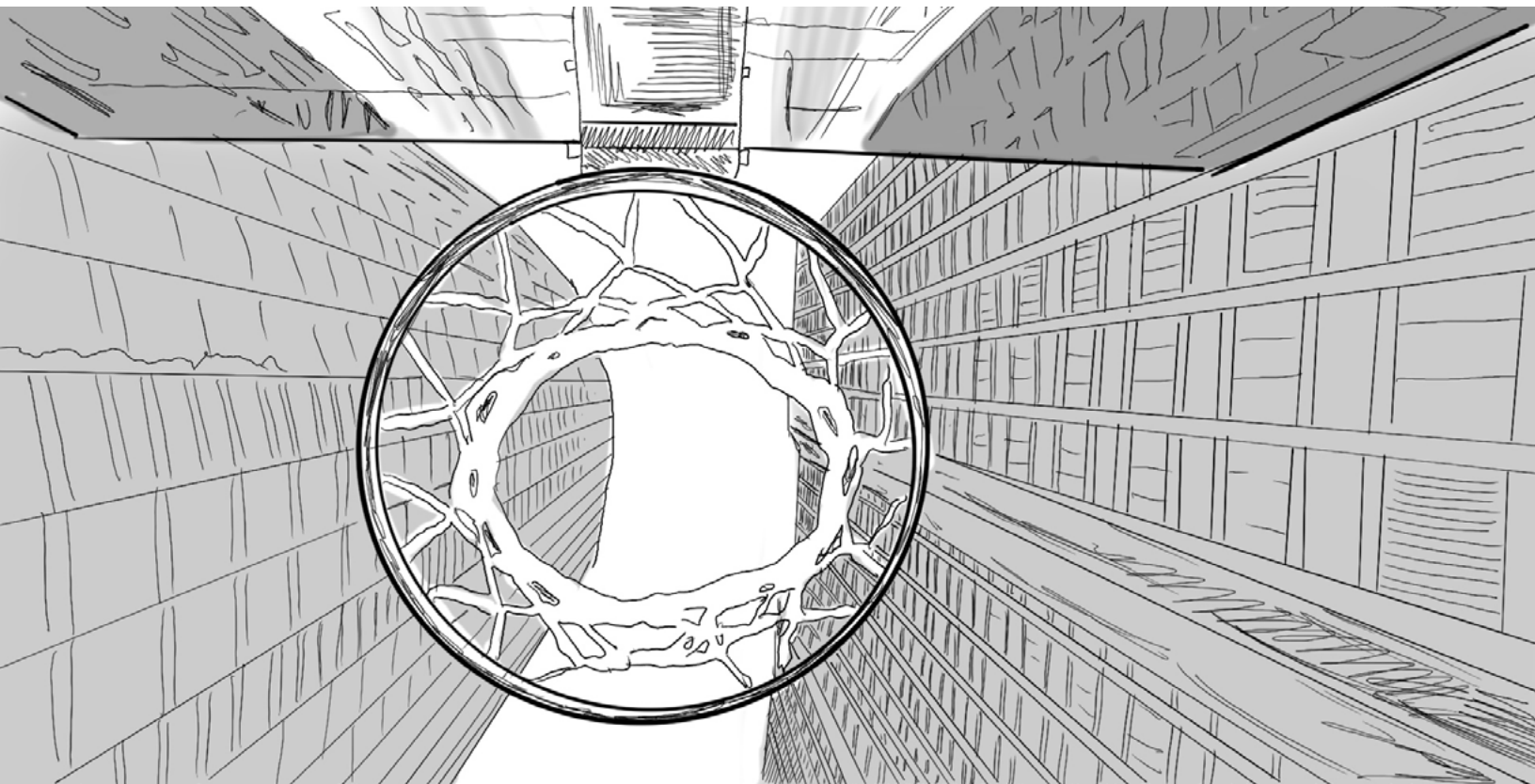and who experience homelessness and unstable housing. It draws on a series of ethnographic, qualitative, and community-based participatory research studies conducted with youth experiencing street involvement on the unceded, ancestral, and occupied territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil Waututh Peoples, also known as Vancouver.

Housing options for youth who use drugs in Vancouver

- **Youth homelessness shelters** provide temporary accommodation, typically in dormitory-style settings for people under the age of 25.

- **Safe houses for youth** offer emergency housing for individuals 16 to 18 years old exiting unsafe situations.

- **Transitional housing** refers to temporary, highly structured group living arrangements in apartments or detached market rental housing. It aims to assist young people transitioning out of government care, unstable housing, and substance use treatment and recovery programs.

- **Supportive housing facilities** are intended to offer long-term housing units with on-site services that include mental health and substance use treatment and life skills training.[15]

- **Modular housing** refers to rapidly deployable prefabricated housing units that typically offer similar services to supportive housing. Most of Vancouver's supportive and modular housing is not specifically designed for young people, but young people over the age of 18 may live in units in adult buildings.

- **Government and privately-owned SROs** are one of the few affordable housing options for young people who use drugs. Government-owned SROs are subsidized. Rent for privately-owned SROs regularly exceeds the shelter allowance from social assistance payments, and residents are frequently subject to eviction.[16,17]

WHO
WE ARE

We are a group of academic and community researchers and activists working in Vancouver, Canada. Many of us identify as youth with lived experience of mental health and substance use challenges in the context of homelessness and unstable housing, as Indigenous, and as 2S/LGBTQ+ people. In conducting this research and preparing this report, we recognize that certain groups of youth continue to be more vulnerable to harms associated with substance use and housing instability.

We know this is happening as a result of intersecting social, structural, institutional, and historical factors—including settler colonialism and the war on drugs—that operate along axes of racialization, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability. We acknowledge that the ongoing legacy of colonialism extends to health research, where Indigenous people and ways of knowing have been uncritically over-researched, exploited, and sometimes made invisible.

Our goal is to learn from our collective successes and failures, and begin to dismantle the inequities that are built into institutional responses to substance use and homelessness as well as research.

WHAT WE DID

This report emerged from a program of ethnographic, qualitative, and community-based participatory research focused on youth substance use, housing, and health. This means that we worked closely with youth across all phases of the research summarized below, from conceptualizing studies, to analyzing findings and developing themes, to sharing results, including the production of this report.

This report is primarily informed by two distinct research projects:

1. A community-based qualitative and ethnographic study conducted between 2022 and 2024, which engaged 73 youth between the ages of 19 and 29 and explored young people's experiences navigating homelessness, unstable housing, and "institutional circuits"[18] including shelters, government care homes, hospitals, juvenile and adult criminal justice facilities, and residential detox, treatment, and recovery sites.
2. A community-based photovoice study conducted between March and November 2023. This study involved interviews and a participatory photography activity with 32 2S/LGBTQ+ youth aged 17 to 29 to explore how trajectories of homelessness and substance use intersect.

All work was guided by the Youth Health Advisory Council (YHAC; 2018—present), an evolving group of eight to ten young people at any one time with lived experience of substance use, mental health challenges, and homelessness and unstable housing. Half of YHAC members have been involved with the group since its inception; the other half joined across time as others left the group. The YHAC includes a majority of Indigenous and 2S/LGBTQ+ youth. Since their first meeting in October of 2018, YHAC members have contributed to numerous research and knowledge mobilization activities, including planning and hosting a youth housing summit event in Vancouver in October of 2023, during which 35 young people aged 17 to 24 gathered to brainstorm youth-centered solutions to the city's housing crisis. This summit event produced the recommendations that conclude this report.

The study with 2S/LGBTQ+ youth was additionally guided by the Substance Use Beyond the Binary Youth Action Committee. This group is composed of nine transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming youth who use(d) drugs, many of whom also have lived experience of homelessness, unstable housing, and mental health challenges. The same group of youth has met monthly since 2022 and hosted a community photo exhibit with Vancouver's 2024 Queer Arts Festival. The drawings included in this report were created by artist and study coordinator Sophie McKenzie, inspired by some of these images created as part of the 2S/LGBTQ+ study. Other images were inspired by Danya Fast's book *The Best Place: Addiction, Intervention, and Living and Dying Young in Vancouver*.

In what follows, we present key findings from these studies and outline recommendations for housing programs and policies to better support young people. All names provided below are pseudonyms.
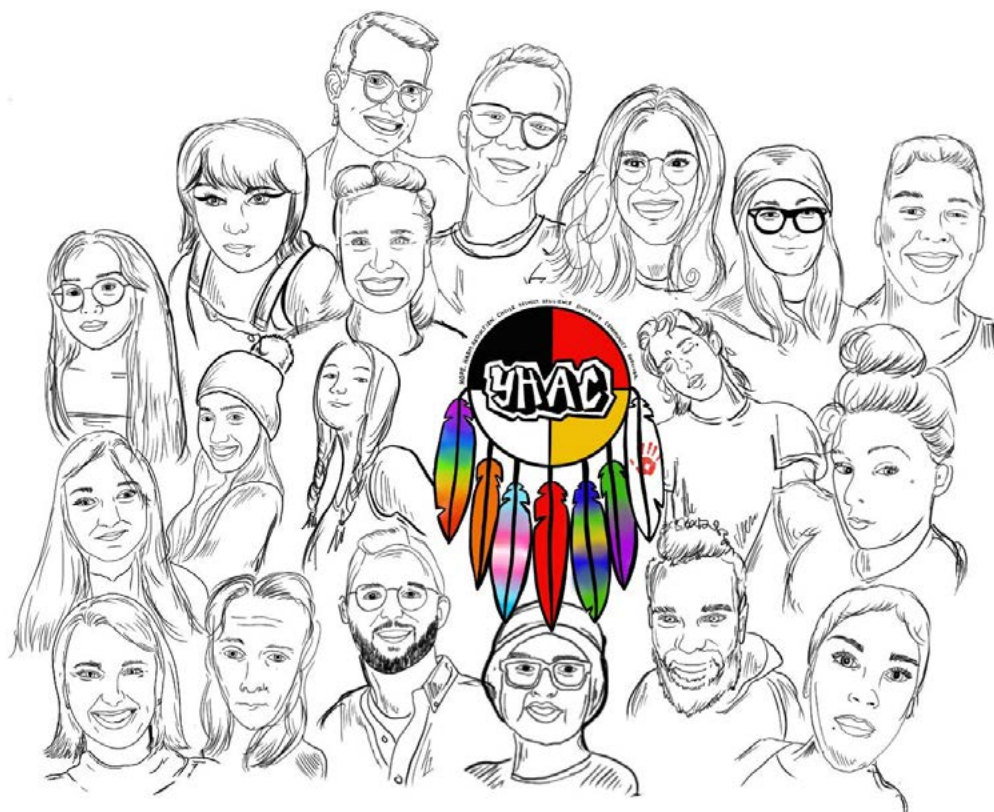
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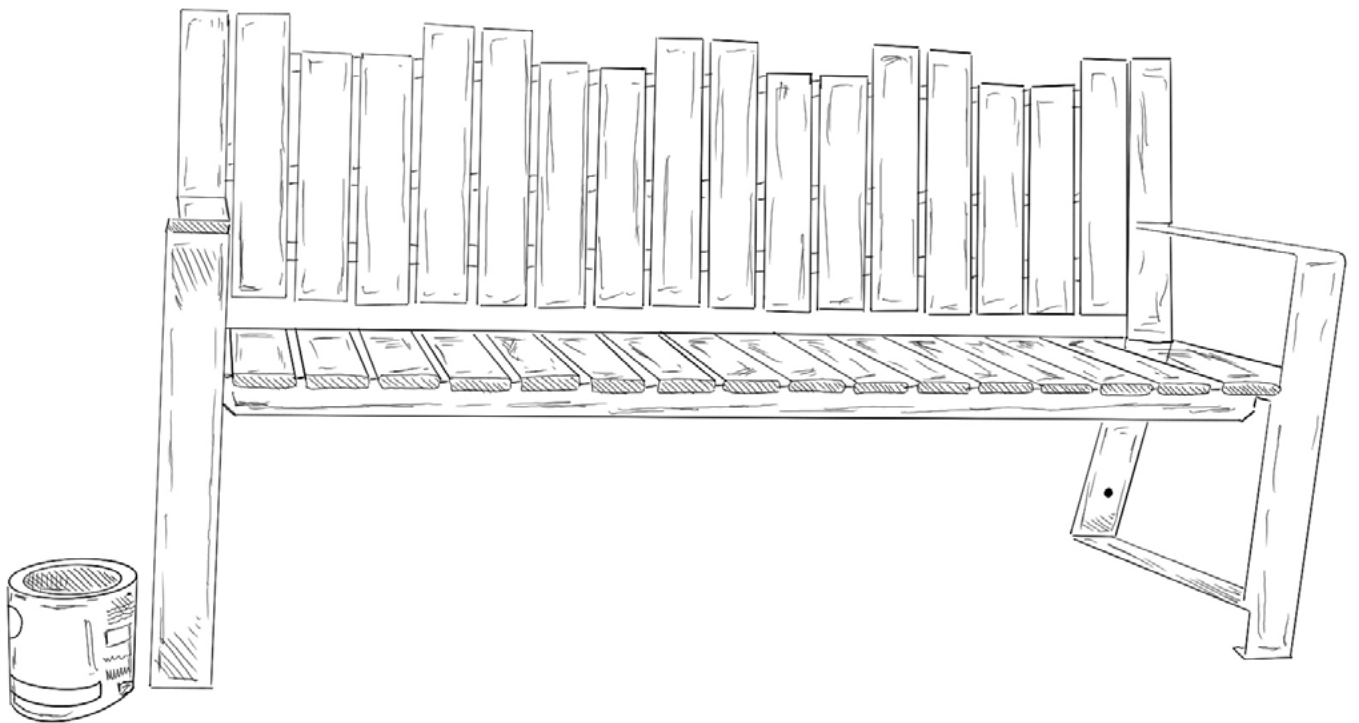
"Empty"
by Apollo

" **The fear of losing my housing has continued up until now. I still have a bag packed in my SRO just in case. I don't know if that, like, fear of being evicted or losing housing is ever actually going to go away."**

Laine, Black 28-year-old man

Over the last 15 years, Vancouver has attempted to address the lack of affordable housing by expanding access to temporary modular and supportive housing, including for young people who use drugs.[19]

These projects are guided by a Housing First philosophy that recognizes housing as a key social determinant of health, and a precondition for meaningfully engaging with health care and other forms of support. However, the growing number of young people experiencing unstable housing and homelessness in places like Vancouver highlights the inability of Housing First models to definitively reduce homelessness independently of other policy and programing shifts.

While Housing First interventions hold significant potential for reducing harms and improving outcomes, young people continue to experience uncertainty about where they will live and for how long.[20]

Waiting, isolation, and stagnation

❝ I'm staying in a care facility. It's a recovery/ mental health house. And I've been living there for the last almost 11 months. It's not stable. It's temporary housing, so it's not stable at all. And I've recently been given a move-out date. It's been a stressful time for me, because I need to find housing within less than two months."

Ramon, South Asian 23-year-old non-binary person

Many youth told us that uncertainty about their future housing situations makes it hard for them to commit to educational and professional programs, or to build deeply desired relationships with friends, romantic partners, and family (biological, adoptive, and chosen). We have observed that, as young people wait for their housing situations to change, they often experience a crushing sense of stagnation that can lead to intensified substance use and mental health crises.[10]

Detox, treatment and recovery facilities, shelters, and safe houses can provide a "pause" from the chaos associated with street-based

homelessness and substance use. Modular and supportive housing may further stabilize the lives of young people by providing them places in which they can establish daily rhythms and routines for significant periods of time—for two to five years, or longer. In practice, however, youth in these facilities often experience uncertainty about where they will go when their residencies end.[21]

Vancouver's notoriously lengthy waitlists for long-term social housing means that it might take five to ten years to move into more permanent subsidized housing. This period of waiting is characterized by subsistence on meager social assistance payments, dealing with the relentless, everyday emergencies of entrenched poverty and, oftentimes, substance use.[10,11] Many youth describe being perpetually stuck in "survival mode" marked by cycles of crisis, institutionalization, and returns to homelessness, rather than being in positions to begin envisioning and building meaningful futures.

Many 2S/LGBTQ+ youth described "hiding" and "playing down" their gender and sexuality in order to access housing services, and to avoid discrimination and violence when accessing them.[22] This was especially the case for Two-Spirit, transgender, and racialized youth, who face disproportionate threats of violence. Shuri, a 23-year-old Indigenous trans woman, shared:

" I'm scared half the time that if they find out I'm trans, [people will] try and hurt me. We have to be really careful. Really careful not to tell the wrong person, the wrong housing manager, the wrong counselor, doctor, whatever. They can all be unsafe. And can ruin our chances of having a home, having a life, having whatever. They could literally ruin our chance of being alive."

Modular and supportive housing

" This is the end of the line. They have support workers in the building, but what are they there for? Like, to make us clean our rooms and that's it. They give us [harm reduction] supplies. I still have a dealer in the building, and it's like the staff like it that way. It almost seems like they want us in our rooms, like, um, alone, using drugs? No one is pushing us to do anything different from that. From here on it's up to us to keep going somewhere."

Patty, Indigenous young woman, excerpted from *The Best Place: Addiction, Intervention, and Living and Dying Young in Vancouver*

For many young people, moving into modular and supportive housing is a time of significant optimism. They experience renewed desires for their immediate and future possibilities—expressing longings for what they often refer to as "normal" homes that will allow them to finally cook their own food, find stable employment, go back to school, and live with a romantic partner and pets.[10] Gaining stable housing is viewed as a critical first step toward these forms of normalcy.

However, although they are meant to provide safe and affordable residences for people who are struggling with mental health and substance use issues, many young people have remarked that their buildings are sites of intensive drug use and dealing that can "trigger" periods of drug use relapse, binging, mental health crises, and overdosing. This often leads young people back into detox, treatment, and recovery facilities. Unfortunately, the only move available to young people in terms of exiting these institutional circuits often becomes a return to street-based homelessness or couch surfing.[21,23, 24]

Rather than fostering a sense of independence, self-determination, and home, modular and supportive housing facilities often come to represent just one more site within the institutional circuits individuals might desperately want to exit. These circuits are often marked by experiences of violence and trauma, which were remarked on by women and Two-Spirit, transgender, and non-binary and racialized youth in particular.[22,25, 26]

Our ethnographic research spanning more than 15 years demonstrates that many young people eventually decide to disengage from all services and programs for periods of time. For these individuals, rather than endlessly cycling between institutions, there is often a preference to manage their shelter and substance use "on their own," often in an attempt to regain a sense of control over their lives and trajectories.[10]

TONI'S STORY, PART 1

Toni was 24 years old at the time of our first interview with her in 2023. She had recently secured housing in a privately owned SRO, after many years of street-based homelessness. Toni had been kicked out of her mother's home at the age of 16, when she moved in with her aunt (who was, at that time, living in a trailer). She was soon removed by child protective services and placed in government care, where she once again encountered significant instability and unsafety.

"I got forced out of my aunt's place and they stuck me in care, and then my first foster parent kicked me out because of addiction and my refusal to go to church," she told us. "I'm not religious. It was very like, 'You have to go to church every Sunday.' I'm Indigenous. You're going to force an Indigenous person to go to a Catholic church? So, she kicked me out. The second place [foster home] is where my addiction got really, really bad."

While in her second foster care home, Toni was hospitalized numerous times for mental health and substance use-related emergencies. On one occasion, she returned to her foster home after a week-long hospitalization, only to realize that the family had not noticed her absence. Soon afterwards, Toni left and began couch surfing with friends and sleeping on the streets for several months, until she finally secured a room in a privately owned SRO.

HOUSING AND CRISIS
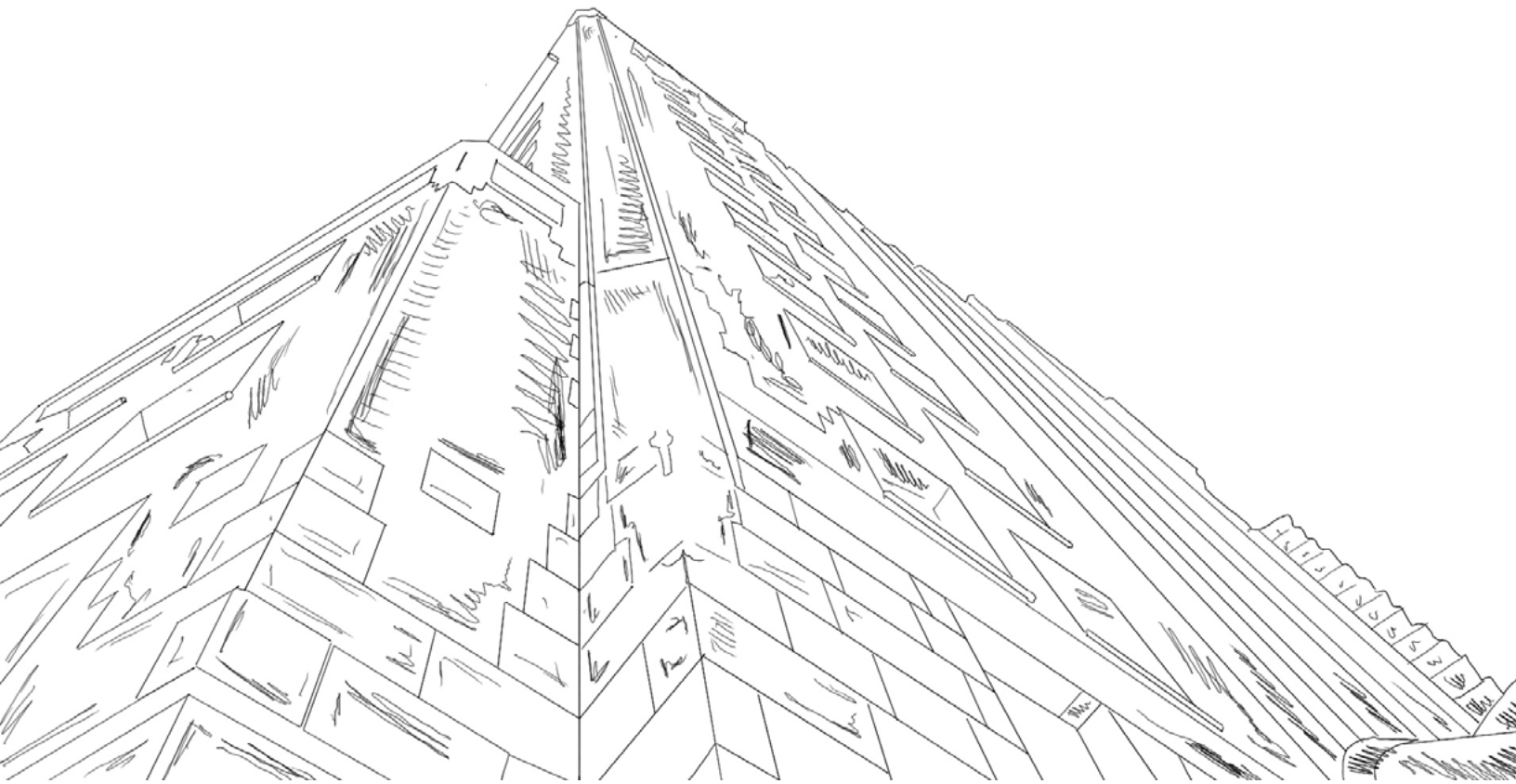
❝ I was suicidal—like, doctors at the hospital wouldn't listen to me. And if they don't diagnose you right, then you don't get into the right housing, and then boom, you aren't getting what you need and they don't see what is actually happening."

April, white 21-year-old non-binary person

The declaration of a mental health and addictions crisis in BC has led to an expansion of supportive housing that integrates mental health and substance use care. There is growing evidence that these models are effective at stabilizing people who are experiencing housing instability and concerns related to mental health and substance use.[27]

It is important to note, however, that supportive housing was created as a response to the crisis of homelessness—not as a permanent solution to the intersecting entrenched poverty, housing instability, intensive drug use, serious mental health challenges, and social exclusion affecting many of the youth who participated in our studies. We have observed that for these young people to achieve some stability through crisis-centered housing interventions, they must often maintain a delicate balance between being "too much" or "too little" in crisis.[28] This is deeply problematic. When "in enough crisis," young people may become visible to housing, mental health, and substance use related supports that may not otherwise be available to them. However, a prolonged or intense mental health crisis (i.e., "too much crisis") can lead to loss of housing and periods of involuntary institutionalization that may exacerbate harms. Moreover, youth experiencing acute psychiatric symptoms (e.g., psychosis) may not be eligible to enter particular substance use programs (e.g., live-in treatment), while youth with diagnosed substance use disorders may not be eligible for particular mental health interventions, such as early psychosis intervention programs.

Crisis as an everyday lived experience

❝ You can't get [sober] living next to your dealer. After moving into a modular [housing building], I relapsed hard."

Larissa, 24-year-old woman who did not disclose her race

Young people told us that the places where they were living – including modular and supportive housing buildings and SROs concentrated in Vancouver's Downtown South and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods – could be characterized by a perpetual state of crisis connected to the daily realities of entrenched poverty and persistent mental health issues, as well as the cyclical imperatives of intensive substance use and income generation. Youth described how this state of crisis extended into the other places that they found themselves living in for periods of time (e.g., shelters, hospitals, live-in treatment and recovery facilities), making recovery, healing, and desired forms of home and future-making feel impossible.

SHURI AND HARLEY'S STORY

In June 2022, we interviewed Shuri, a 23-year-old Indigenous trans woman, and her partner Harley, a 20-year-old Indigenous woman. At that time, they lived in a supportive housing building in the Downtown Eastside with their one-year-old child in a unit on a floor designated for people with children. Residents of the building have access to a range of services, including mental health and primary care, childcare, a parent resource centre, and various peer-led activities.

Moving into this family-friendly supportive housing building was a turning point for the couple, who had both experienced multiple foster care placements, homelessness, and time spent in live-in treatment and detox facilities and a transitional home. The pair met at the transitional home, staffed 24 hours a day with support workers. Harley, who at that time was on the cusp of aging out of government care, had been transferred to the transitional home directly from hospital, where she was being treated for alcohol poisoning. Before arriving at the transitional house, Shuri had stayed in a tent in an urban park, on a friend's couch, and eventually in a privately-owned SRO with a partner. When that relationship ultimately dissolved, Shuri found herself with nowhere to stay. During a brief stay at a local detox facility, a support worker helped her access a room in the transitional house where she met Harley.

Shuri was evicted from this transitional house following an altercation with another resident, and Harley was evicted a short time later for regularly breaking curfew. Over the next few months, the couple stayed on the streets, friends' couches, in shelters, and occasionally with Harley's relatives, before housing workers at a youth shelter helped them secure separate units on different floors of a supportive housing building in the Downtown South neighbourhood. There, they both described the presence of open drug use, dealing, and violence on their floors; intrusive staff; and a lack of privacy.

When Harley then became pregnant, the couple was told they would have to leave the supportive housing building in the Downtown South after the birth of their child. They were living in a building that could not support families; it wasn't safe. Harley feared a return to street-based homelessness would precipitate losing custody of their child. She frantically filled out applications for other supportive housing buildings, and received only one response. Harley moved into her new unit a month before the birth of their daughter.

Having a baby was, from the perspective of housing providers, a crisis that put Harley at risk of becoming homeless again due to difficulty securing alternative housing, but it ultimately helped her secure a unit on a family-only floor in a new supportive housing building in the Downtown Eastside.

Shuri's situation was much more precarious, as she was not named on the lease for the unit where Harley lived. She lost access to the unit in the previous Downtown South building she was staying in because she was now spending most of her nights with Harley and their daughter at their new supportive housing unit in the Downtown Eastside.

Shuri's status as a "permanent guest" gave her the appearance of being housed and "too little" in crisis to warrant further intervention by housing workers, managers, and programs targeting homelessness, even though she could become homeless in an instant.

Harley and Shuri eventually ended their relationship. Shuri spent a few nights in a shelter and began using drugs steadily again after almost two years in recovery. She eventually moved into a government-owned SRO in a rundown converted motel in East Vancouver, where children are not allowed. She did not see her daughter for several months until she began working with a case worker to find ways to see her child at offsite locations.

HOUSING AND HOMEMAKING

"Nostalgia Vibes"
by Billy

In 2019, the Government of Canada committed to a national prevention-oriented response to homelessness called *Reaching Home*.[29] Its key objectives include a 50-percent reduction in chronic homelessness by 2027, establishing targeted supports for Indigenous people, and developing coordinated provincial and municipal systems to connect people to local housing services.

Reaching Home is an important step toward creating a multifaceted prevention-oriented response to homelessness in Canada. Yet, important questions remain regarding what constitutes a "stable home," or even "home" more broadly, among young people who have experienced housing instability across their lives. Homelessness prevention policies have often too narrowly defined homelessness as roofless-ness, without considering how young people also experience it as a lack of stability—without predictable daily rhythms and senses of social connectedness and care.

In order to understand the impacts of prevention-oriented homelessness policies on young people in settings like Vancouver, we must understand what stability and home mean to them as they navigate multiple living environments.

TONI'S STORY, PART 2

Once Toni secured a room in a privately owned SRO, she continued to struggle to feel at home, until she finally gained the confidence to unpack. In 2023, she reflected:

"I've moved around so much in my lifetime that when I first moved into my place, I was living out of cardboard box. I refused to unpack, so I was like, I'm probably going to get evicted or like, something's going to happen. I'm going to have to move, right? And I finally got to a place [the SRO] where I was like, okay, I'm going to be here for a while. I can unpack. And I, like, set my stuff up. And I was like: home."

Creating a sense of home in un-homelike places

The young people we spoke with expressed a marked difference between being housed—in the sense of physically having a place to stay and sleep—and having a home.[26] They described home as the ability to establish day-to-day practices and routines such as cooking, cleaning and tidying, doing laundry, and socializing with friends, romantic partners, peers, and staff. These daily rhythms gave them a sense of stability, social connectedness, and care—even while in temporary housing, such as youth shelters, or in encampments. A number of youth described choosing to live in encampments rather than pursue placements in supportive and modular housing buildings and shelters. Encampments could be powerful sites of social connectedness and care in particular, where youth could live together with romantic partners and friends without surveillance and judgement.

Unpacking and displaying personal objects can be powerful homing strategies that create a sense of stability. Many young people had experienced losing their belongings while moving from place to place, and displaying personal objects in new housing or shelter placements could be a way of anchoring themselves in the present. Decorating and making spaces their own, and having access to amenities that facilitated daily rhythms and routines (e.g., kitchen facilities, communal recreation spaces), powerfully supported their homing strategies. For young people making homes in encampments, personal objects are also highly significant. The abrupt removal of these objects and tents, such as by bylaw officers, can have devastating and lasting impacts of young people's senses of physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

For many young people, "normal" domestic routines, even in temporary living situations, helped them to focus on how they wanted to live in a more general sense. Routines also helped them focus on creating deeply desired social connections and relationships.

Relationships and home

❝ We have the tent cities [encampments] because people feel safer in their community than they do behind four walls and a door. There's no use putting someone who's 22 years old who has [never lived on their own] in a place, whether it's supported or not, if they have no idea where to start [with making a home there]."

Arthur, Social Worker

Close relationships with friends and romantic partners who share similar lived experiences can create a sense of home, including in un-homelike places. This is especially the case for young people who lack supportive family relationships and have experienced broken connections with other young people in foster care and group home settings.

The success of housing programs often hinges on how successfully they can foster a sense of social connectedness among young people. However, some supportive housing buildings actually further isolate young people from each other—by prohibiting access to multiple floors and through strict guest and overnight visitor policies, for example.[10]

Young people frequently expressed that their relationships with staff in different housing environments played a significant role in their sense of home. They often remarked on the social connectedness they fostered with certain staff members—in particular, those who talked to them about their personal lives and future aspirations with genuine interest, in ways a family member or friend might. These relationships didn't only develop with integrated staff in supportive, modular, and transitional housing environments, but also in un-homelike settings, such as shelters and detox, treatment, and recovery facilities.[26]

Addressing anti-2S/LGBTQ+ and gender-based discrimination and violence must be embedded into youth homelessness prevention efforts and in the provision of services for youth experiencing homelessness. For many participants, stability, social connectedness, and care was fostered through integration into 2S/LGBTQ+ communities, and through access to identity-affirming services and programming. Connecting with 2S/LGBTQ+ communities, where diverse sexual and gender identities were accepted and celebrated, also supported participants in healing from some of the harm they faced.[30]

RECOMMENDATIONS

"A Bag"
by Edgar

The following recommendations emerged from the "Housing is a Home" summit event that we held in Vancouver in October of 2023, supported by the research summarized above. During this two-day summit, 35 young people aged 17 to 24 gathered to brainstorm youth-centered solutions to the city's housing crisis, together with housing rights activists and university researcher allies.

01.

Build capacity along the housing continuum, from low-barrier, harm reduction-oriented housing to abstinence-focused housing.

Housing placements should be inclusive of neighborhoods outside of downtown Vancouver to support young people who desire to exit locales that are a part of or adjacent to active drug scenes and better foster senses of safety, home, and possibility. Amidst this expansion, there is a need for dedicated housing navigation support to help young people identify, access, and sustain placements that align with their needs and desires. Young people should not be expected to complete lengthy and complicated paperwork and other bureaucratic requirements on their own, particularly as they simultaneously navigate the everyday emergencies of entrenched poverty and mental health and substance use challenges.

02.

Implement inclusion-focused housing and service policies that promote belonging and safety for all youth, with particular attention to the needs of groups experiencing oppression.

Anti-2S/LGBTQ+ and gender-based discrimination and violence, together with racism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression, are key drivers of homelessness for youth. In order to foster a sense of safety among diverse youth, shelters and other housing services must signal that their facilities are welcoming for all young people. Young people should not have to "pass" or "hide" in order to access or feel safe accessing housing services, and this isn't even possible for many folks. Organizations and staff should commit to and be trained in approaches to service delivery that are culturally safe, anti-racist, and 2S/LGBTQ+-affirming. Provisions that affirm the autonomy and belonging of young people with disabilities and who are neurodiverse should also be in place (e.g., wheelchair access). Strategic collaborations with community organizations, leaders, and youth-led initiatives that reflect critical engagement with exclusion, racism, and histories of colonial dispossession will often be beneficial.

Housing services for Indigenous young people must centre relationship building with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis staff members. staff members. Staff could include Elders, Peer Workers, and "cultural wellness mentors"—people who ensure that Indigenous young people have access to cultural knowledge and activities. Actively connecting young people with Indigenous-focused housing, work, and education and vocational programs is critical for this population.

03.

Provide secure storage for personal belongings and accommodations for companion animals.

Experiences of "losing everything" during moves lead some young people to avoid accessing shelters and housing in the future. Many young people rely on pets and service animals for physical, psychological, and emotional support as they navigate homelessness and unstable housing, yet many youth-focused shelters and other housing environments do not allow animals.

To prevent young people from disengaging with shelters and other housing services, these places should have secure access to storage facilities for personal belongings, including larger items such as bicycles, luggage, and carts. Spaces should allow companion animals or facilitate access to kennels or foster placements while young people access services.

Inspired by *The Best Place: Addiction, Intervention, and Living and Dying Young in Vancouver*

04.

Create a home-like environment whenever possible: offer options to personalize spaces and provide opportunities for social connectedness.

Young people navigating housing instability go to great lengths to create a sense of home by personalizing their spaces with meaningful objects, posters, and other decorations. Housing environments should encourage and provide funded opportunities for young people to decorate and, where possible, arrange furniture to their liking.

Shelters and housing services should include open spaces and flexible seating that invites lively social interactions. Have regular planned and funded group activities, such as preparing and eating food together, creating art and music, and playing sports and video games together. This must be balanced with ensuring individual privacy; provide individual bedrooms or curtains between sleeping spaces and bathrooms with lockable doors.

05.

Establish leadership structures to foster meaningful youth involvement in decision-making processes around housing design, policies, and program implementation.

Policies such as curfews, noise regulations, and limitations on guests can constrain young people's abilities to establish desired daily routines and rhythms and feel at home in their housing. Residents should be involved as much as possible in decision-making processes regarding policies and rules that operate in their housing, helping to find a balance between individual autonomy and the safety and comfort of all residents and staff. Staff training should center consideration of how consistency around mutually-agreed upon policies and rules is integral to creating an environment that feels "fair" and supportive.

In addition to influencing policy, design, and programming, youth housing advisory councils or similar youth leadership structures can also provide critical opportunities for peer support, networking, and friendships among young people with similar experiences, fostering desired routines, forms of sociality, and senses of social connectedness and care.

06.

Build rapport and trust: support and train staff to prioritize meaningful relationships and activities with youth in order to foster an environment of social connectedness.

Authentic relationships with trusted staff members can make young people feel at home and can even feel "lifesaving." High staff turnover in youth shelters and other housing environments have diminished potential opportunities to foster this kind of social connectedness in these spaces. Staff must be adequately compensated and supported with adequate time off and robust benefits.

Develop opportunities for more meaningful interactions between young people and staff to build relationships, rapport, and trust. These should include professional therapeutic interactions as well as more casual social encounters. Staff should actively participate in some shelter and housing-based recreation and leisure activities, while supporting youth to do the same in ways that are safe and feel good to them. Staff can play a key role in connecting young people to vocational, school, employment, and volunteer activities, working in active collaboration with youth's clinicians, workers, and other providers to provide support.

Staff should receive ongoing training and support in strengths-based service provision, trauma-informed care, and harm reduction approaches to mental health and substance use care. This training can prepare staff to better meet youth where they are at, and to work collaboratively to develop care plans that are responsive to evolving youth needs and desires.
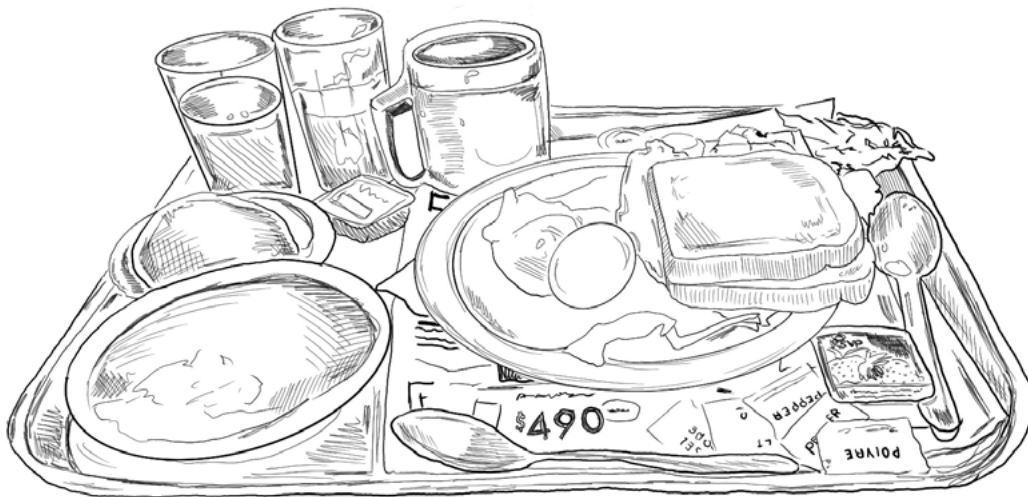
Inspired by *The Best Place: Addiction, Intervention, and Living and Dying Young in Vancouver*

07.

Center social connectedness in programming: support youth in (re)building and maintaining connections with family (biological, adoptive, and chosen), friends, and romantic partners.

Strict visitor regulations in many housing services may inadvertently undermine young people's ability to create a sense of home and could contribute to returns to street-based homelessness. Provide funded programming that supports young people with (re)building and maintaining connections with family, friends, and romantic partners who come to visit.

Youth housing environments should have established pathways for peer-to-peer connection and mentorship, such as through peer and youth-led programming. Creating opportunities for connection with trusted adults and allies is also imperative.

08.

Clearly define and uphold youth rights and protections within shelter and housing services to safeguard their well-being.

Many housing options available to young people are either not formally protected by British Columbia's Residential Tenancy Act (RTA), and residents' rights can be unclear or difficult to access. Young people should have housing rights that are clearly defined and independent of the type of housing that they live in. The provincial government should strengthen the RTA to provide clearer and enforceable protections for young people living in various housing situations. Young people's rights and responsibilities, as well as those of the landlord or housing provider, need to be clearly discussed and documented in easy-to-understand language at the outset.

Community spaces (e.g., community centers, drop-in centers) should provide education for young people on their housing rights and the range of social assistance programs available to them. This could involve partnering with community activist organizations (including housing advocacy groups) to provide workshops, seminars, and informational resources.

Across housing environments, there should be clear and consistently implemented policies around handling complaint processes and grievances. Youth must have meaningful recourse when they experience mistreatment, eviction threats, or conflicts with staff and peers.

09.

Adopt reasonably flexible age limits across all youth housing programs and bolster support once programs are over.

When youth are supported in building a sense of stability, social connectedness, and care–a sense of home–they often want to stay where they are, and may determine that it is a good time to work on mental health and substance use challenges. Adopting some flexibility around age limits in housing programs can give young people the extra time and support they need to develop the day-to-day routines and social connections to successfully navigate housing transitions and work on their challenges. When flexibility is no longer possible to ensure that spaces remain safe for younger adolescents, it is imperative that youth are not simply dropped from programming that was working for them and are instead carefully transitioned to a new housing setting.

Mental health and substance use programming embedded in shelters and modular and supportive housing initiatives should continue even after young people's tenancies have ended. Transitions between programs should be carefully supported and not result in disruptions to housing or care. To foster meaningful pathways to desired homes and futures, rental subsidies and housing placements must encompass neighbourhoods and housing beyond downtown Vancouver. These supports should be complemented by ongoing support with accessing education, employment, recreation, and leisure opportunities.

Inspired by *The Best Place: Addiction, Intervention, and Living and Dying Young in Vancouver*

Welcome to the Hunger Dome

What do you wanna know?
This is where you go without a home, hungry and alone
The street is colder than stone, but not as cold as those building SROs
Eroding your rights down to the bone, the government's funding it bro
Because they know poor people with no rights are easy to control
Why does it take years to approve permanent housing in Vancouver?
Because if they do, then their rich investor buddies would be screwed
That's why the mayor is such a scrooge, it's his bottom dollar on the line
He's got a lot to lose! I'm just a dude with eyes to see and ears to hear
What I see is what I feared, it's crystal clear, we need to nip this in the rear
Or permanent housing is never coming here

Written by Shane Douglas

DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to all the young people who have lost their lives to overdose in British Columbia. We remember you, and we miss you deeply. We also want to extend our heartfelt thanks to all the youth, caregivers, and service providers who generously participated in this project.

LEARN MORE AT:
YOUTH-OVERDOSE-PREVENTION.UBC.CA/
KNOWLEDGE-TRANSLATION-AND-EXCHANGE/YOUTH-VOICES-REPORTS

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HOUSING SHOULD BE A HOME

PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH WHO USE(D) DRUGS ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS IN VANCOUVER