



Homelessness Data Snapshot: Youth homelessness in Canada

Youth Homelessness and Its Challenges for Those with Invisible Disorders

Overview

Youth homelessness remains a critical social issue across Canada. Many young people who experience homelessness have faced early life challenges, including *trauma*, *instability*, and *exposure to adverse conditions that undermine their ability to maintain safe and stable housing* later in life. Understanding the causes, patterns, and health implications of youth homelessness—particularly for those with invisible disorders—is essential for creating effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Scope and Limitations

The 2020–2022 Point-in-Time (PiT) Counts surveyed 87 communities, identifying that 12% of respondents experiencing homelessness were youth aged 13–24. However, limitations exist:

- Many communities only survey youth aged 16 and older, leaving younger homeless populations underrepresented.
- Youth often experience **hidden homelessness** (e.g., couch surfing, temporary stays with friends/family), making them harder to identify and support.

These factors contribute to a likely undercount of youth homelessness.

Key Findings

1. Early and Chronic Homelessness

- **44%** of respondents first experienced homelessness before age 25.

- The earlier homelessness begins, the greater the likelihood of chronic homelessness later in life.
- **58%** of youth respondents experienced chronic homelessness (6+ months in the past year), an increase from **53% in 2018**.

Youth who first experienced homelessness as children were **78%** more likely to be chronically homeless.

2. Causes of Housing Loss

- **51%** of youth reported **interpersonal conflict or abuse** (e.g., with parents or guardians) as the main cause of housing loss, compared to 31% among older groups.
- Other reasons included **financial issues** and **unsafe housing conditions**.

This highlights the need for family mediation, trauma-informed support, and youth-specific housing services.

3. Health and Invisible Disorders

For the first time, the PiT Counts gathered data on health challenges, including **learning or cognitive limitations, mental health issues, and substance use**.

Youth were more likely than older groups to report:

- **Learning or cognitive limitations**
- **Mental health challenges** (e.g., anxiety, depression, PTSD)
- **Substance use issues** (reported by **56%** of youth)

These invisible disorders often go undiagnosed or untreated, compounding barriers to stable housing and employment.

4. Youth in Care and Elevated Risks

Youth with experiences in the **child welfare system** were overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness, especially hidden homelessness (39%) and unsheltered living (38%).

Compared to their peers, youth formerly in care were:

- **61%** more likely to report learning or cognitive disabilities
- **29%** more likely to report substance use issues
- **25%** more likely to report mental health challenges

They also cited **substance use (21%)** more frequently as a cause of housing loss.

5. Demographic Insights

- Higher representation of **women and 2SLGBTQI+ youth** than in older homeless populations.
 - Indigenous youth and those with care experience were more likely to experience homelessness at an earlier age.
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Implications

Youth homelessness is deeply intertwined with **invisible disorders**, trauma histories, and systemic inequities. Early intervention, trauma-informed services, and inclusive supports tailored for youth with **mental health conditions, cognitive disabilities, or substance use issues** are crucial.

Hidden homelessness among youth—particularly those with invisible disorders—remains a significant challenge, requiring improved outreach, flexible service delivery, and cross-sector collaboration between housing, health, and child welfare systems.

Conclusion

Youth experiencing homelessness often navigate a complex intersection of interpersonal conflict, mental health challenges, cognitive impairments, and systemic barriers. In the absence of early, targeted, and empathetic intervention, these individuals face a heightened risk of chronic homelessness and prolonged instability. Addressing underlying and often invisible disorders is critical to disrupting this cycle and enabling access to safe, sustainable housing and long-term wellbeing.

The Change Coalition is committed to supporting individuals affected by invisible disorders. This summary has been prepared to provide a clear and informed perspective on the nuanced realities that must be considered in the implementation of the City of Ottawa's plan to end youth homelessness by 2030.