BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

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BC HOUSING
RESEARCH CENTRE

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Methodology

The researchers used a multi-method research approach, including a literature review, a jurisdictional scan, and qualitative interviews.

The jurisdictional scan and literature review were used to identify housing models and best practices. Qualitative interviews were used to gather expert and stakeholder opinions on the suitability of the housing options to respond to the specific needs of the subpopulations of homeless youth.

[1] This report was written by students in the Masters of Public Policy program at Simon Fraser University, in partnership with BC Housing.

[2] These categories of homeless youth identified are not mutually exclusive.

Student Research Series

Housing Options for Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults in B.C.

Introduction

This report examines housing options for six subpopulations of youth (aged 18-24) who are overrepresented and underserved in the youth homelessness population in British Columbia. These subpopulations are:[2]

> LGBTQ2S+ Youth

> Indigenous Youth

> Youth Aging out of Care

> Youth with High Acuity Mental Health Challenges

> Youth in Active Substance Use

> Youth in Recovery from Substance Use

Five housing models are considered as promising options for these youth subpopulations. They include:

> Foyer Housing

> Host Home and Supportive Roommate

> Convertible Leases

> Low Barrier Scattered-Site Housing

> Low Barrier Congregate-Site Housing

This report analyzes essential design and program characteristics of each housing model against two sets of key considerations: suitability for the needs of subpopulations of youth, and factors to consider for implementation including costs, stakeholder acceptance, and the extent to which the options are applicable in urban or rural communities across B.C.

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Congregate-Site and Scattered-Site Housing

In this report, congregate-site housing refers to a single building with several rooms or units and common areas, or clustered units in a single building in which a certain percentage of units are set aside for youth and young adults. This form of housing generally includes on-site recreational and vocational opportunities and a supportive peer environment.

Scattered-site housing refers to housing dispersed throughout a community. Units are typically rented from private landlords but may also be rented from non-profit housing providers. This approach supports youth to transition from homelessness in a way that reduces stigma and offers more opportunities to integrate into the community compared to congregate-site housing. On the other hand, scattered-site housing has also been associated with experiences of loneliness and isolation.

Subpopulation Considerations

The report discusses each subpopulation and their housing needs as well as factors for successful housing.

LGBTQ2S+ Youth

Homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and associated discrimination continue to profoundly impact LGBTQ2S+ youth. They may find shelters to be unsafe spaces, leading some to prefer sleeping outside. LGBTQ2S+ youth may also have greater difficulties accessing housing when compared to their peers. Factors for successful housing include: supporting youth choice, affirming their identities, and protecting youth from discrimination.

Indigenous Youth

Indigenous youth are overrepresented among the youth homeless population. The dynamics of a discriminatory system of institutional care, combined with a legacy of homelessness puts Indigenous youth at significantly higher risk of experiencing homelessness. Indigenous youth may encounter barriers with housing services including: stigmatization, conflicting mainstream and Indigenous approaches to health and healing, concurrent disorders, and a need for harm reduction services. Factors for successful housing include: incorporating a holistic

framework, focusing on healing through a trauma-informed lens, offering culturally relevant services and opportunities for cultural reconnection, and training staff in cultural safety.

Youth Aging out of Care

Studies indicate that most youth leaving the child welfare system do not have the experience needed for independent living. To prevent transitions into homelessness, it is critical to ensure continuity of care for youth leaving the child welfare system at the age of 19. Factors for successful housing include: supporting youth choice, facilitating connection to community, and supporting youth in building life skills as well as education and employment in their transition to independence.

Youth with High Acuity Mental Health

Depending on their diagnosis, youth with mental health challenges do well in housing with evidence-based wrap-around clinical mental health supports, with either in-house clinical staff or through collaboration with a professional mental health team. Factors for successful housing include: housing models that minimize the risk of eviction and offering mental health supports and appropriate levels of support and safety planning.

Youth in Active Substance Use

Youth who actively use substances require housing with a minimal risk of eviction. Youth experiencing homelessness often have concurrent disorders and coordination between mental health and addiction services is a best practice. Factors for successful housing include: minimizing the risk of eviction, providing opportunities to connect youth to appropriate treatment services, promoting safety when using substances, and implementing a harm reduction philosophy.

Youth in Recovery from Substance Use

Youth in recovery from substance dependence benefit from housing programs that minimize their exposure to substance use (the "contagion effect") and minimize the risk of eviction. Factors for successful housing include: minimizing exposure to substance use, integrating addiction treatment supports, and allowing for safety and flexibility in the event of a relapse.

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Considerations for Housing Model Implementation

Model	Description	Housing Implementation Considerations
Foyer Housing	Foyer Housing is a congregate-site, transitional, high barrier model with supports focused on life skills development. Foyer Housing often requires enrollment in school, a vocational training program, or employment. Youth generally pay a program fee of 30 percent of their income, which may be returned upon graduation.	**Stakeholder Acceptance:** › High barrier nature of the program helps mitigate negative public response **Cost Considerations:** › Requires initial capital investment to create the Foyers and high ongoing program costs **Location:** › Benefits from proximity to youth-specific education and employment agencies in urban areas › Requires a critical mass of youth in the program and may not be suitable for small communities
Host Home / Supportive Roomate	Host Home options are a scattered-site, high barrier model in family-like settings with an option to remain in the program until age 25. They include a youth-driven matching process to find hosts who have a shared identity. The housing agency pays a rent supplement to the host family and provides case management and support. For Supportive Roommate options, youth live with a roommate in a shared flat and the housing agency holds the lease with the landlord.	**Stakeholder Acceptance:** › Host Homes – no need for landlord engagement and host families manage neighbour relationships › Supportive Roommate – high landlord acceptability because housing agency holds the lease **Cost Considerations:** › Low capital costs since not developing new housing **Location:** › Identified as particularly effective in suburban and rural areas
Convertible Leases	Convertible lease options are a scattered-site, transitional model, medium-to-high barrier, with supports focused on life skills development, and the opportunity for long-term housing. Youth are involved in securing a private rental unit. The housing agency holds the lease, provides a rent subsidy and case management. Upon graduation, youth have the option to convert the lease into their own name so they can maintain their housing.	**Stakeholder Acceptance:** › Risk of public opposition is relatively low › Landlords have security because the housing agency holds the lease and provides support **Cost Considerations:** › Low capital costs since not developing new housing › Operating costs will depend on market rents in the community **Location:** › Requires communities where affordable rental units are available › Perhaps best suited to small cities

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Model	Description	Housing Implementation Considerations
Low Barrier Scattered-Site Housing	Low Barrier Scattered-site Housing is a long term, low barrier model with supports focused on the Housing First for Youth philosophy. There are no preconditions for housing, and there is a zero discharge to homelessness policy, and a harm reduction approach. The housing agency helps secure the unit and provides intensive case management as well as 24-hour access to on-call support staff for youth and landlords.	**Stakeholder Acceptance:** › Landlord acceptance may be high due to guaranteed rent payments and relationship with the housing agency › Risk of public opposition is relatively low **Cost Considerations:** › Ongoing costs may be greater than congregate-site housing due to intensive case management, outreach, rent subsidies, insurance and damage deposits › Low capital costs since not developing new housing **Location:** › Requires communities where affordable rental units are available › Most effective where there is an adequate supply of resources and support networks, which may be lacking in rural areas
Low Barrier Congregate-Site Housing	Low Barrier Congregate-Site Housing is a transitional, low barrier model with supports focused on the Housing First for Youth philosophy. There are no preconditions for housing and it includes harm-reduction, targeted support services and 24-hour support staff on-site. Timeframes for staying in this kind of housing program are generally flexible based on youth needs, but the average is 1-3 years. The housing provider covers all program costs through funding from partner organizations.	**Stakeholder Acceptance:** › Requires initial capital investment and ongoing operating and support costs **Cost Considerations:** › May be low due to a Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) reaction in local neighbourhood **Location:** › The applicability of the model to rural areas is largely dependent on the demand that exists in that area for this type of housing › Could be effective in a small city setting where there is sufficient demand but also an affordable housing market for youth to transition after exiting the program › To date, most of this housing is in urban areas where youth can access more resources compared to rural areas

Suitability of Housing Models for Youth Subpopulations

Model	LGBTQ2S+ Youth	Indigenous Youth	Youth Aging out of Care	Youth with High Acuity Mental Health	Youth in Active Substance Use	Youth in Recovery from Substance Use
Foyer Housing	› Opportunities for peer support and mentoring on-site › Staff training and programming can create an environment that celebrates the identity of LGBTQ2S+ youth	› May not be designed to include culturally relevant programming › May not incorporate policies that reflect a broader understanding of what homelessness means for Indigenous youth	› Would support youth in developing life skills through education and employment › Opportunities for peer support and mentoring on-site	› Program expectations may be a barrier for some youth	› Program expectations may be a barrier for some youth › Housing would be at risk if youth use substances on-site	› Can be successful if youth are provided with enough support › In the event of a relapse, youth may lose their housing
Host Home and Supportive Roommate	› Can connect youth with people who celebrate their gender identity, and who identify as LGBTQ2S+ › Can provide youth with community support and peer networks	› Youth can be matched with families or roommates with a shared identity › Housing agency can connect youth with community activities, peer networks, and cultural support	› Can support youth in transitioning to adulthood and self-sustainability › The principle of choice respects independent decision-making › Supportive roommate option may be preferred by older youth seeking more independence	› Host families/ supportive roommates typically lack capacity or expertise to meet the needs of youth with high acuity mental health concerns	› Cannot provide sufficient level of support or safety for youth who actively use substances	› Shields youth from living in environments that expose them to substance use pressures › Hosts/roommates must have experience with youth substance dependence to be able to provide adequate support › No immediate eviction risk due to relapse
Convertible Leases	› Lack of on-site or built-in peer and community support › Support staff who identify as LGBTQ2S+ and/or have relevant training may serve in a mentorship role › Relevant programs and access to peer networks may be offered through support services › Scattered-site units reduce stigma and offer opportunities to integrate into the community	› Can incorporate culturally relevant programming, supports, and emphasis on healing and employ Indigenous workers › Youth would need to possess community connections independent of the housing program	› Can provide guidance and support to help youth transition effectively to adulthood › Support services can emphasize employment, education, and life skills › While the model offers opportunities to integrate into the community, moving into independent living can be isolating	› Cannot provide the specialized clinical supports needed to address severe mental health concerns › Risk of eviction may be too high to make this a suitable option	› A lack of on-site support reduces the opportunity for harm-reduction practices › Risk of eviction may be too high to make this a suitable option	› Can work well for youth who have recently come from treatment and have low support needs › Youth may be less likely to be exposed to substance use › Relapse is not automatic grounds for discharge

Suitability of Housing Models

More likely to be suitable　　　Less likely to be suitable

Model	LGBTQ2S+ Youth	Indigenous Youth	Youth Aging out of Care	Youth with High Acuity Mental Health	Youth in Active Substance Use	Youth in Recovery from Substance Use
Low Barrier Scattered-Site Housing	› Suitable when implemented with culturally/identity-relevant programming, staff who identify as LGBTQ2S+, and peer support networks › Choice and self-determination can be effective for LGBTQ2S+ youth in their personal development › Scattered-site units reduce stigma and offer opportunities to integrate into the community	› Suitable when implemented with culturally relevant programming, supports, and Indigenous front-line staff › Would need to focus on healing intergenerational trauma › Has potential for creating a safe space free of racial discrimination › May pose a risk of isolation and lack of connection to community and elders	› Suitable for youth who would find congregate housing to resemble institutionalized care › Built-in supports can help youth develop life skills and prepare for independence › Effective for youth who wish to choose their location of residence › 'Zero discharge to homelessness policy', can provide stability and a safety net for youth › Independence offered through this model may be too abrupt for some youth	› Success would depend on the severity and complexity of mental health concerns › Potential benefits could include integrated mental health support services and access to councilors, minimal risk of eviction, a client-centered approach, goal setting, and life skills support › Concern about lack of support in case of an emergency › For youth with severe mental health challenges, eviction risks may be higher	› Benefits youth who may not be willing to live with rules imposed by traditional housing programs › Higher eviction risks than a congregate-site model › A harm-reduction approach provides support services and treatment when desired › Youth would not be evicted for using substances on site › Youth who live alone could be at risk of overdose	› Depends on the youth's desire for independence, commitment to treatment plans, and receptivity to mentorship and guidance › Supports and resources provide opportunities for personal development, education, life planning, and financial support › Absence of the "contagion effect" or exposure to substance use that may be present in communal or congregate-site housing › Housing not at risk in case of relapse if a 'zero discharge to homelessness' policy is in place
Low Barrier Congregate-Site Housing	› 24/7 staffing can provide a safe place for LGBTQ2S+ youth › Staff training and programming can create an environment that celebrates the identity of LGBTQ2S+ youth › Can offer a beneficial peer support network, particularly if the housing is targeted to LGBTQ2S+ youth	› Combines low barrier housing with access to services in the community › Potential to create a sense of community and belonging › Employing Indigenous staff members and offering culturally relevant services and programming would be essential › Limits youth choice in the location of housing › Could result in discrimination if not targeted to Indigenous youth	› Significant level of supports may facilitate transition from the child welfare system to independent living › Younger youth, especially those who have recently left care may prefer living with others › Supports can be extended to support youth directly after leaving care and guide their transition to independence › Low barrier aspect may expose youth to substance use	› Suitable for youth with mild to moderate mental health issues › Youth can access mental health services in a space where they feel at home › Youth with mental health challenges may be vulnerable to peer influences and therefore the "contagion effect" for using substances	› A harm-reduction approach would help protect youth from eviction, provided they do not disturb other residents › Youth can be connected to services that support safe substance use and services to address addictions › 24/7 staffing ensures that youth are always surrounded by staff who are trained to respond in case of an overdose	› Congregate and low barrier nature of this model could create exposure to substance use › Youth may have access to services to support their recovery but continued exposure to substance use may leave them at a higher risk of relapse

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Discussion

No single model can meet the diverse needs of all youth who experience homelessness. Given the diversity of needs among the youth subpopulations included in this study, this report highlights approaches which may be most promising for each of the subpopulations.

This report recognizes that the subpopulations of homeless youth identified in this study are not mutually exclusive and there is considerable overlap. In addition, needs and risks that have been identified for a subpopulation may not apply to each individual within the subpopulation. The report cautions against prescribing any housing model for a particular group and recommends an individualized approach to housing youth that promotes youth choice in housing and service participation.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study is that youth were not included in the interview process. Survey information and interviews from frontline workers were included, however, this is not a substitute for hearing directly from youth. In addition, the timeframe and resources available for this study limited the number of people who could be interviewed.

More Information:

Visit BC Housing's Research Centre at www.bchousing.org to find the latest workshops, research and publications on the key challenges and successes in building and operating affordable, sustainable housing. Please contact BC Housing's Research Centre by email to request the full report: Housing Options for Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults in B.C.