Can Housing First Work for Youth?

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❯ **Abstract_** *Housing First has emerged as an effective and humane approach to addressing homelessness. In spite of the strength of the evidence, questions remain regarding the applicability of Housing First to sub-populations, including youth. The proposed framework for Housing First for Youth outlined here is intended to provide a starting point for communities, policy-makers and practitioners interested in applying the model to adolescents and young adults, recognising that different national and local contexts present both unique challenges but also opportunities. Housing First does not promise or pretend to be the only approach to addressing youth homelessness. However, it can and should become an important intervention that supports, and in turn is supported by, other preventive and early intervention strategies, short term emergency supports, and so on.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Housing First, youth, key principles*

Introduction

Housing First has emerged as an effective and humane approach to addressing homelessness. Internationally, there has been debate over its potential for adaptation and application in different national contexts based on the recognition that social and housing policy varies widely between countries and on concerns about how the concept has been interpreted and implemented. The case for Housing First has been bolstered, however, by a large volume of research that attests to its efficacy, including the highly successful At Home/Chez Soi project from Canada. The breadth and rigour of this research makes Housing First one of the few homelessness interventions that can be truly deemed a 'best practice'.

In spite of the strength of the evidence, questions remain regarding the applicability of Housing First to sub-populations, including youth. In the application of Housing First in Canada and elsewhere, chronically homeless (and mostly adult) people with acute mental health and addictions issues are typically prioritised, and many if not most youth do not fit this criteria. As Housing First has become a priority for many funders across Canada, many are asking about its relevance for a youthful population for whom the causes and conditions of homelessness are unique from the adult population.

The question to be addressed in this paper is: can Housing First work for youth? It will be argued that Housing First can work for young people, but that the model must be adapted based upon our understanding of the developmental, social and legal needs of young persons.

What IS Housing First?

The increasing popularity of Housing First raises important questions about the exact meaning of the concept, as well as about how and in what ways it can be adapted. At its most basic, Housing First is considered to be:

> a recovery-oriented approach to homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions and then providing them with additional services and supports as needed. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed. This is as true for homeless people and those with mental health and addiction issues as it is for anyone. Housing is not contingent upon readiness, or on 'compliance' (for instance, sobriety). Rather, it is a rights-based intervention rooted in the philosophy that all people deserve housing and that adequate housing is a precondition for recovery (Gaetz, 2013, p.12).

The evidence for the effectiveness of Housing First with adult populations (and, in particular, chronically homeless people) is both extensive and compelling (Shern *et al.*, 1997; Tsemberis and Eisenberg, 2000; Culhane *et al.*, 2002; Metraux *et al.*, 2003; Rosenheck *et al.*, 2003; Tsemberis *et al.*, 2004; Pearson *et al.*, 2007; Falvo, 2009; 2010; Mares and Rosenheck, 2010; Tsemberis, 2010; Goering *et al.*, 2012; 2014; Waegemakers Schiff and Rook, 2012; Gaetz, 2013; Gaetz *et al.*, 2013). In fact, it is one of the few homelessness interventions that can truly be considered to be a 'best practice'. The At Home/Chez Soi project in Canada represents perhaps the most extensive examination of Housing First anywhere (Goering *et al.*, 2012; 2014).

This multi-side randomised controlled trial of Housing First as an intervention for homeless individuals with mental illness has provided the best and most compelling evidence to date for this intervention.[1]

Key findings from the *At Home/Chez Soi* study suggest that individuals who participate in Housing First, when compared to those who receive 'treatment as usual', are more likely, for instance, to obtain and maintain stable housing, experience a reduction in unnecessary emergency visits and hospitalisations, and have improved health and mental health outcomes.

In the wake of compelling evidence, the growing popularity of Housing First creates its own challenges as communities attempt to adapt the model. As Housing First has come to be taken up in contexts outside of the United States, the importance of taking into account cultural, policy and structural differences in social, health, welfare and housing supports has raised questions regarding the practicality or desirability of strict adherence to the Pathways model (Atherton and McNaughton Nichols, 2008; Johnsen and Texiera, 2010; Pleace, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2012; Pleace and Bretherton, 2012). Of course, it can also be argued that some of the controversy surrounding Housing First emanates from a profound misunderstanding of what the concept means, from the fact that it threatens established ways of doing things, and from poor and inappropriate applications of the intervention. In a review of Housing First practices in North America and Europe, Pleace and Bretherton argue that:

> As 'Housing First' has permeated the thinking of policymakers and service providers across the US and the wider world, the core ideas of (Pathways to Housing) have been simplified, diluted and in many instances, subjected to change. The (Pathways to Housing) paradigm often only has a partial relationship with the wide range of new and remodelled homelessness services that have been given the 'Housing First' label (Pleace and Bretherton, 2012, p.5).

In the end, in spite of controversy, the evidence base for Housing First suggests that not only is it an effective intervention with a strong evidence base (a best practice), but it is also likely more cost effective than 'treatment as usual' (Larimer, 2009; Gaetz and Scott, 2012; Goering *et al.*, 2012; 2014). Advocates of Housing First acknowledge that it is not the only possible response to homelessness, but it most certainly is a key one.

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[1]   An extensive list of research reports from the *At Home/Chez Soi* project can be found on the Mental Health Commission of Canada's website: http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/ English/issues/housing?routetoken=a0e29a03d828cfe8c99d30b93dae9fdc&terminitial=23

Can Housing First Work for Youth?

While the question 'Does Housing First work for adults?' has effectively been answered, whether and how it works for youth[2] still remains a valid question. Consultations with a range of Canadian service providers and young people who have experienced homelessness have revealed a number of questions and concerns relating to the age and maturity of young clients, the nature of youth appropriate supports and the length of time young people would have access to them, legal issues that may affect access to housing and benefits, and the challenges of trust-building necessary to support the model. Young people voiced concern about the potential isolation that might come from being put into the community in scattered site housing before they felt ready. Finally, concerns were expressed over the focus of rushing young people to independence and thereby undermining a broader goal of supporting a healthier transition to adulthood and wellbeing. These concerns do not suggest that Housing First cannot work for youth, but point to the need to better understand how to adapt the model for a more youthful population.

So what do we really know about how Housing First works for youth? While a small number of communities in Canada have implemented Housing First programmes for youth, few have been researched or rigorously evaluated. In spite of the wealth of research on the effectiveness of Housing First for adults, there is surprisingly little research evidence anywhere on the efficacy of the approach for young people.[3]

The best evidence we have to date in support of Housing First for youth comes from the *Infinity Project*, operated by the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary (Davies, 2013; Scott and Harrison, 2013). Serving young people 16-24 years of age, the goal of Infinity is to help youth become permanently housed and to increase and maintain self-sufficiency and a successful transition to adulthood. In addition to accessing housing (and obtaining rent supplements), young people are provided with a range of supports that facilitate reconnection with family and natural supports, accessing education and employment, life skills, etc. In terms of youth engagement, young people are supported in volunteering, exploring community resources and opportunities in their community, attending community events, identifying interests and

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2   Homeless youth are defined as persons "between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers and importantly, lack many of the social supports deemed necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood. In such circumstances, they do not have a stable or consistent residence or source of income, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to the support networks necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood" (Gaetz, 2014, p.13).

3   It should be noted that the *At Home/Chez Soi* project did include a number of participants between the ages of 18 and 25 and there is an intent to report research findings relating to Housing First with this sub-population. However, these findings had not been released at the time of writing.

exploring opportunities to become involved in programming. A central tenet of the Infinity Project is 'zero discharge into homelessness', meaning that if housing breaks down due to a crisis, behavioural challenges or other issues, young people will not find themselves on the streets, but rather, alternative accommodations will be secured. An evaluation of the project shows quite successful outcomes after the first year, including a housing retention rate of 95% and increases in income stability and access to services (Scott and Harrison, 2013).

Another perspective is provided by research on the *Youth Matters in London* (Ontario) project, which argues that while many young people thrive in a Housing First context, it does not seem to work for everyone. In some cases, those with mental health and addiction issues (or a combination of both) find that the choice and independence offered by the model were too much to handle and could be experienced as a 'set up for failure' (Forchuk *et al.*, 2013). That is, some young people felt that independent living was isolating and could become an enabling environment for drug use, and therefore would prefer to address other developmental/health issues prior to independent living. Forchuk and her team conclude that the 'one size fits all' approach proposed by some advocates is actually quite limiting and ignores the incredible variability in needs and circumstances of young people who are homeless.

> The social, cultural, financial and existential (i.e. the perceived meaning of one's existence and place in the world, as well as how this meaning may influence the decisions one makes) situations of the study's participants are very different (Forchuk *et al.*, 2013, p.113).

The research evidence on Housing First for youth suggests several outcomes. First, as it is currently constituted, Housing First is clearly a viable, effective and preferred option for some youth, but perhaps not all. Second, the two research perspectives are not contradictory and do not undermine the efficacy of Housing First for youth, when we remember that client choice is a key underlying principle of the approach. Finally, and following from this, young people may need a range of housing options within the Housing First umbrella that go beyond the scattered site, independent living model that is fundamental to many Housing First approaches. As part of a spectrum of options for accommodation and support, it is worth being reminded that 'Housing First' should also mean 'Preference First' (Forchuk, *et al.*, 2013).

What Might Housing First for Youth Look Like?

Those who work with young people who are homeless have been quick to stress that a Housing First approach for youth must not merely replicate an established approach that works for adults and simply create Housing First 'Junior' by changing the age mandate. If Housing First is to work for youth, it must be built upon our understanding of the developmental, social and legal needs of young persons.

This perspective is based on an understanding that because youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness both in terms of its causes and consequences, so must the remedies differ (Gaetz, 2014). Young people, depending on their age (and the needs of a 13 year old will most certainly be different from an 18 or 23 year old) may experience significant developmental changes (physical, cognitive, emotional and social) that impact on decision-making, social relationships, inclusion and opportunities (Christie and Viner, 2005; Steinberg, 2007). Some will have very little or no experience of living independently, dealing with landlords or managing a household budget. Becoming homeless may mean young people not only lose their families but other natural supports (friends, adults, extended family), and be forced to drop out of school. The youth population is also diverse, and some young people will be doubly or triply marginalised because of racism, sexism and/or homophobia (Abramovich, 2012; 2013; Springer *et al.*, 2013). Finally, youth may experience various forms of exclusion that mean they cannot easily access rental accommodation or a living wage (especially if they are early school leavers), both of which are necessary for independent living.

Many young people become homeless initially due to having experienced the trauma of physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999; Tyler *et al*., 2000; Thrane *et al.*, 2006; Tyler and Bersani, 2008). For these young people, leaving home may in some ways be experienced as 'freedom', but the longer a young person is absolutely homeless or comes to rely on emergency services, problems can mount, and the experience of trauma can be intensified (Karabanow, 2004). The greater their entrenchment in the street youth lifestyle, the more estranged young people may become from mainstream services; the worse their health (mental health and addictions) may become (Kidd, 2004; 2013; McKay and Aiello, 2013); and the greater likelihood there is of their experiencing crime and violence as well as sexual and economic exploitation (Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002). We also know that without adequate supports, many youth who are homeless today will become the chronically homeless adults of tomorrow (Baker Collins, 2013).

All of this suggests the need to provide young people at risk of, or who have experienced homelessness, with appropriate housing and supports as rapidly as possible. This is the case for adapting Housing First in a way that meets the needs of young people, and providing an alternative to entrenchment in emergency services and the street youth lifestyle.

The Core Principles of Housing First for Youth

The goal of articulating core principles is to establish a common set of ideas that should underlie any application of Housing First. While there is no 'one size fits all' approach to Housing First, the core principles articulated by Pathways to Housing (Tsemberis, 2010) and the At-Home/Chez Soi project (Goering *et al.*, 2014) become important in ensuring that programme adaptation demonstrates fidelity to the model – in particular the notion of consumer choice and self-determination – as well as immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness require-ments. Consistent with the perspective that interventions for youth should not merely replicate adult models but rather must appropriately meet the develop-mental needs and capacities of adolescents and young adults, the following are core principles that Housing First for youth should include:

1. **Immediate access to permanent housing with no preconditions**: Young people should be provided with rapid access to safe, secure and permanent housing that meets their needs as quickly as possible, without the condition that they are 'ready' for housing.

2. **Youth choice and self-determination:** Housing First is a rights-based, client-centred approach that emphasises client choice in terms of the kind of housing they need, and the extent and nature of supports and services they access. Housing First programmes should embrace a harm reduction philosophy, and there should be no requirement of sobriety or abstinence.

3. **Positive youth development orientation:** Accommodation and supports must first be designed and implemented in recognition of the developmental needs and challenges of youth, and second, foster and enable a transition to adulthood and wellness based on a positive strengths-based approach.

4. **Individualised and client-driven supports:** A client-driven approach recog-nises that all young people are unique individuals and so are their needs. Once housed, some people will need few, if any, supports, while other people will need supports for the rest of their lives.

5. **Social and community integration:** Helping people integrate into communities requires socially supportive engagement and the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities.

The Application of Housing First for Youth

It is important to distinguish Housing First as a philosophy from its application as a programme. As a *philosophy*, Housing First can be a guiding principle for an organisation or community that prioritises getting young people into housing with supports to follow. It is the belief that all young people deserve housing and that people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing. Housing First can be considered more specifically as a *programme* when it is operationalised as a service delivery model or set of activities provided by an agency or government body. It is important to note that there is no one single programme model for Housing First and that it can take many forms, but key essentials of any programme include access to housing and a range of youth appropriate supports.

A major consideration in the application of Housing First for youth is the kind of housing that is deemed appropriate. While in North America, Housing First programmes routinely emphasise private sector scattered-site housing (because this is, in fact, what most participants desire), one must consider a broader range of options for young people, as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Models of accommodation within a housing first framework for youth
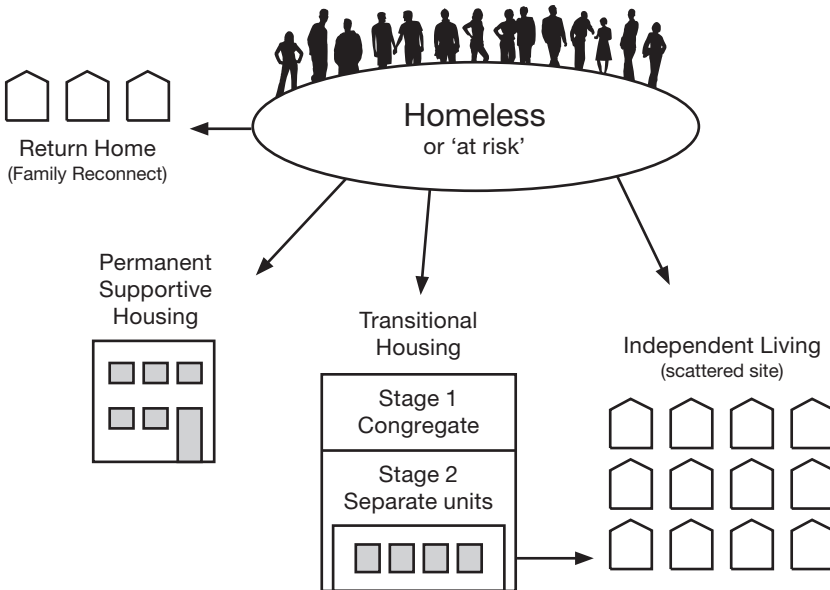
That many young people will, in fact, want access to their own (or shared) permanent housing in either the private market or the social housing sector must be acknowledged, and this has been demonstrated through the success of the Infinity Project. However, consistent with the key principle of 'Consumer Choice and Self-Determination', one must consider a broader range of housing options. For some, this means the opportunity to return to the home of their parents and/or to the home of another significant adult including relatives, godparents or family friends. Returning home is best supported through programmes and services that adopt a 'family reconnect' orientation, and may involve ongoing family counselling, mediation and support (Winland *et al.*, 2011; Winland, 2013). Other young people, particularly those with acute and chronic mental health and addictions issues, may require Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), involving a more integrated model of housing and clinical services.

A key innovation of Housing First for youth is the inclusion of transitional housing as an option, in spite of the fact that many proponents of Housing First see it as an outmoded approach. In fact, transitional housing in the form of more extensive supports and congregate living may not only be very appropriate for many youth but, again, consistent with the core principle of client choice, as it may be what many youth prefer and desire. There is research evidence that highlights the effectiveness of some transitional housing models for youth – in particular the Foyer (Quilgars *et al.*, 1995; 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2006; Gaetz and Scott, 2012). A case can be made that, particularly for younger teens, transitional housing may be ideal for those who have not have attained the necessary life skills, independence, confidence and maturity to maintain their own apartment. In our consultation with young people, some suggested that they preferred a more congregate environment as they learned independence, because moving into one's own place often means leaving their street friends behind along with the possibility of loneliness and isolation – a transition that can be difficult to navigate:

> I wasn't all about wanting to be independent so much…Like I've been very family deprived and that's why I loved Brennan [Transitional housing] so much… I was able to get that family and link up with friends. I always used to stay in then and never went out and partied. I was always there and it was enjoyable to come home and eat dinner with everybody and what not.

> (Alex, age 19, Hamilton, ON.)

A key caveat of incorporating transitional housing within a Housing First framework is that all young people who access such accommodation must eventually be supported to move into independent living (with supports).

Of course, Housing First is about much more than housing – it also necessarily means ensuring that young people are provided with appropriate supports to facilitate their transition to adulthood. Such supports are best delivered through an integrated 'system of care' approach, supported by client-centred case management, in order to organise and coordinate the delivery of services. A service integration model should ensure that the young person is able to access the range of supports they need to ensure housing stability and well-being.

Two key factors distinguish the kinds of support that young people need from those typically associated with Housing First for adults. First, the goal of case management and supports should not merely be to facilitate a successful transition to independent living, but rather to support a healthy transition to adulthood. Supports should be age-appropriate, designed to meet the needs of the developing adolescent and young adult, and emphasise 'positive youth development'. Second, in order to support the transition to adulthood, the supports should be provided as long as the young person needs them. Time limited supports (one or two years) are not practical, nor are they consistent with a broader understanding of the needs of young people, and they may in the long run undermine the ability of young people to reengage in education or maintain housing stability, for instance. The following are supports are considered necessary for the transition to adulthood:

1. **Housing Supports:** Given that many homeless youth will have little or no experience in finding and maintaining accommodation, housing supports are essential. Such supports include helping to search for and obtain safe, affordable and appropriate housing in the first place. It also means providing young people with the necessary life skills to enable them to maintain and keep their housing, and this includes learning to pay rent on time and learning how to develop good relations with landlords and neighbours, or deal with friends. In communities with a lack of affordable housing young people will likely require some form of rent supplement until their income is stable. Finally, young people will need supports when things go wrong, and a 'zero discharge into homelessness' philosophy should be adopted so that housing stability and crisis management become key.

2. **Supports for health and well-being:** A recovery-oriented approach to clinical supports that includes trauma-informed care should be implemented in order to enhance well-being, mitigate the effects of mental health and addiction challenges, improve quality of life and foster self-sufficiency. As part of a 'system of care', and because many homeless youth experience mental health challenges, young people should be supported in accessing assessments for mental health problems or learning disabilities, as well as in finding suitable interventions, if required. Some young people will need ongoing support to deal with addictions,

and harm reduction approaches should be emphasised. Finally, sexual health is a central feature of physical, emotional and social health and well-being, which influences individuals of all ages; as such, young people should be supported in the development of healthy sexuality.

3. **Supporting access to income and education:** Inadequate income and employment are well documented as causes of, and contributing factors to young people cycling in and out of homelessness. Supporting young people to earn an income is an important task of Housing First, and is key to addressing housing stability in the long term. Many young people who are homeless have dropped out of school at a young age. Given the centrality of education in our understanding of what helps young people to grow into healthy independent adults, and our understanding that many homeless youth have dropped out of school at an early age, support in (re)engagement with school should be a central feature of Housing First supports for youth.

4. **Complementary supports:** Life skills, access to adult support and mentoring, and family reconnection should be provided in order to facilitate housing stabilisation and help young people to improve their quality of life, integrate into the community and achieve self-sufficiency. Individual advocacy should be provided to support young people as they navigate their way through systems and get access to the services and supports that they need and are entitled to. All of this should be provided in an environment that emphasises anti-discrimination, for although homelessness is stigmatising for all young people who experience it, many are doubly and triply marginalised due to racism, sexism, transphobia and homophobia.

5. **Opportunities for meaningful engagement:** Key to any young person's transition to adulthood and well-being is the ability to nurture positive relationships with others, connect to communities and become involved in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling. Young people should be supported in developing positive relationships with peers, adults, employers and colleagues, landlords etc., as well as given opportunities to engage with communities of their choice – whether people and institutions in the local neighbourhood, or making cultural connections. Opportunities to participate in meaningful activities such as arts, sports or volunteering in order to learn skills, develop relationships and social skills should also be provided.

Conclusion

While there does not yet exist an extensive body of research on Housing First for youth, there is nevertheless reason to claim it can be an important response to youth homelessness, based on the belief that all people deserve housing and that young people who are homeless will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing. However, addressing youth homelessness through Housing First means adapting the model and incorporating what we know about developing adolescents and young adults – particularly those who have experienced trauma – into the programme model. This requires consideration of different models of accommodation, and an expansion of services and supports to assist young people to successfully transition to adulthood and wellness, and not merely to independence.

The proposed framework for Housing First for Youth outlined here is intended to provide a starting point for communities, policy-makers and practitioners interested in applying the model to adolescents and young adults, recognising that different national and local contexts present both unique challenges but also opportunities. Housing First does not promise or pretend to be the only approach to addressing youth homelessness. However, it can and should become an important intervention that supports, and in turn is supported by, other preventive and early intervention strategies, short term emergency supports, and so on. Under the broader umbrella of strategies to end youth homelessness, Housing First has an important place.

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