

# Family largely ignored in Canada's response to youth homelessness

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The role of family in ending youth homelessness is largely ignored in Canada, according to a report released today by York University, though there is evidence that family reconnection works in Australia and the United Kingdom and in one exceptional program in Toronto.

Some 65,000 [young people](#) are homeless or at risk of homelessness across Canada. In Toronto, approximately 1,700 youth are on the streets on any given night, about half of them in emergency shelters.

"In Canada, we really need to radically reform our approach to youth homelessness," says Stephen Gaetz, associate dean of research in York's Faculty of Education and co-author of the Family Matters report. "We need to be much more strategic in how we address the problem, and this means placing a greater emphasis on prevention, family reconnection and rapid re-housing efforts. This not only improves lives, it's also more cost effective."

Prevention programs, including family mediation and support for the development of healthy family relations, are likely to produce longer-lasting results and a quicker exit from the streets, according to the report. Such interventions, which cost about \$7,000 a year per youth, make better financial sense than putting a young person in a shelter for a year at a cost of more than \$20,000. Unfortunately, such programming is rare in the sector, it says.

One exceptional initiative that the report says should be scaled up and

replicated is the Family Reconnect Program, run by Eva's Initiatives in Toronto. The Family Reconnect Program offers youth and their families free individual and family counseling to help them understand the nature of [family conflict](#) and resolve or better mitigate family problems. As a result, many youth decide to go back home, while others go into independent housing, supported by their community or family.

"The shelter system provides critical services, but it should never be the only option," says Rachel Gray, director of the National Initiatives Program at Eva's Initiatives. Between 2005 and 2010, the Family Reconnect program helped 376 clients: 62% of youth became more actively involved with family members; 14.5% reconciled with a family member after repairing a damaged relationship; and the housing situation improved for over 40% of participants.

The Family Matters report also details the success of national youth homelessness [prevention programs](#) overseas that could serve as models for Canada. In Australia, work is done with school and community-based services to engage young people and their families before youth become homeless. In the UK, family mediation programs help move young people out of the shelter system and back with their families or their community in a safe and planned way.

Part of the challenge in Canada is that emergency shelters are largely designed to provide young people with protection from abusive family situations. While this focus on protection is essential, given that 60-70% of homeless youth flee households where they experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse, the potential role of family or extended family members to help youth move on with their lives is largely ignored.

"For many young people who become homeless, family still matters," says report co-author Daphne Winland, a professor in the Department of

Anthropology at York. "Just because one comes from a household characterized by abuse, doesn't mean that there are no healthy or redeemable relations within the [family](#)."

Given the gaps in the current Canadian response to youth homelessness, Eva's Initiatives is launching an online toolkit that will give youth service providers across the country detailed information about how to incorporate prevention strategies into existing programs.

However, much more remains to be done if Canada is truly committed to ending youth homelessness, the report says. It calls for concrete measures and increased funding at the national, provincial and municipal levels to make prevention integral to Canada's response to youth homelessness.

Provided by New York University

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