



Making the Shift: Roadmap for Youth Homelessness Data Infrastructure

2: Project Interviews



Policy Wise
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Canada



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University of
Lethbridge



Acknowledgments

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SHARING GUIDELINES

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Key Messages

This document shares learnings related to current Making the Shift projects that can inform our roadmap for data infrastructure to support the prevention of youth homelessness in Canada.

Data infrastructure refers to the collection and storage of information; people’s skills, mindsets, and capacity around data; the rules for who can access the information and in what ways; and how the information can be used. *Administrative data* is information collected by organizations for their operations. It can be linked to other information to help predict and prevent homelessness.

- 1. Data infrastructure can support youth homelessness prevention in various ways.** While data can help us understand pathways and trajectories of homelessness to determine what support programs would be useful to prevent homelessness, data can also be used in other ways. Examples are identifying homelessness risk in school, coordinating supports, and evaluating support programs. In the future, we should build various data sources needed for data-informed prevention efforts.
- 2. Data infrastructure requires underlying support infrastructure.** Identifying chances to prevent homelessness is only as useful as what can be done. It is necessary to first identify what aspects of programs and systems are modifiable, and then design the data systems that support decision-making in those areas. Identifying why a person needs help and not acting can be disempowering to those involved.
- 3. We can learn from different types of data.** While the project’s focus has been on administrative data capturing real-life service use, other data is vital. For example, qualitative data tells unique stories of homelessness trajectories, evaluations of interventions determine if programs work, and literature reviews can identify practices and policy to support prevention. Each serves useful functions as we seek a holistic understanding of how to prevent youth homelessness.
- 4. Consider race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and culture differences.** Data can be used to understand how youth with different backgrounds have unique, complex needs when experiencing homelessness. Data around these differences and intersectional analyses should be core to future work as it helps identify systemic barriers and address common and unique challenges for youth. Knowing these differences helps create relevant supports and make sure the supports are adequately funded.
- 5. Consent and privacy are critical.** Youth experiencing homelessness are a vulnerable population that should be protected in data activities. For example, we will need to maintain confidentiality, ensure de-identification of data, create good consent processes, and review ethics of data collection processes. Data infrastructure should not interfere with the provision of necessary services to youth in crisis. It should also protect youth through clear consent processes and strong privacy safeguards.
- 6. Include the youth voice.** Youth have distinct needs and perspectives that are often missed in policy and decision-making. Data infrastructure should include youth with lived experience’s voice so that their needs and experiences inform solutions for prevention.

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Introduction

This project is funded by Making the Shift: Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab. Making the Shift is co-led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. It is funded through the Networks of Centres of Excellence. Working in collaboration with researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and advocates, the Lab conducts, funds, and mobilizes cutting-edge research and prototypes promising program models in communities across Canada to prevent and end youth homelessness.

This project's goal is to create a roadmap for data infrastructure to support the prevention of youth homelessness in Canada. *Data infrastructure* refers to the collection and storage of information; people's skills, mindsets, and capacity around data; the rules for who can access the information and in what ways; and how the information can be used. Project activities include: 1) project steering, such as convening advisory team meetings to inform project actions, 2) learning that helps understand key related data infrastructure, promising practices and processes, other Making the Shift project learnings, youth with lived experience relevant practices, and Indigenous community relevant practices, 3) engagement with stakeholders to co-decide the best path for a roadmap, and 4) the co-creation of the roadmap with stakeholders.

As part of the data infrastructure learning aspect of this project, this document shares learnings related to current Making the Shift projects that can inform our roadmap.

Methods

We interviewed current Making the Shift project holders to inform our roadmap. As a principle, we focused on projects with administrative data infrastructure learnings and other projects that covered a range of methods that inform the prevention of youth homelessness.

Administrative data is information collected by organizations or government agencies through their operations. This data may be demographics, characteristics, and reported needs of those experiencing homelessness. Examples are intake data from youth homelessness front-line workers and/or other program data, such as education, health, and justice data. Different data sources can be linked together using identifiers (e.g., name and date of birth) to understand trajectories into homelessness and what factors may be addressed to prevent homelessness.

Step 1: Finding relevant Making the Shift projects.

Our team compiled a list of existing Making the Shift projects. We came to consensus on priority projects based on their potential relevance to the roadmap. As well, we asked the Making the Shift leads to send out a call to recruit Making the Shift project teams to discuss their work. A total of 10 projects accepted our invitation to participate in the interview (see Appendix A for the full list). Project topics covered youth homelessness administrative data, youth's lived experiences of homelessness (including Indigenous and Black youth), systematic reviews/jurisdictional comparisons, and interventions that prioritize youth homelessness prevention, such as school-based and youth Housing First.

Step 2: Interviews with Making the Shift project teams.

We conducted semi-structured interviews to learn from Making the Shift project teams and engage them as stakeholders in future data infrastructure (see Appendix A for the interview list). Interviews were conducted between February 2023 and March 2023. We discussed what teams had learned so far, how projects related to data infrastructure, their thoughts on administrative data, and other questions that addressed the uniqueness of each group (see Appendix B for detailed interview questions). Discussions were coded thematically with NVivo 12 (see Appendix C for full emerging themes). Themes were coded by one reviewer, revised by another, and consensus formed between the two reviewers.

Interviews targeted projects with multiple research methods. We briefly discuss how youth homelessness prevention is supported by each:

- **Administrative data.** This method helps understand how youth used services. Complex and linked administrative data can be used to identify factors associated with homelessness. Knowing these factors can help target services more effectively.
- **Qualitative:** This method provides deeper, more detailed descriptions of experiences. These can provide contextualized information on the lived experiences of youth that were homeless. As administrative data often lacks detail, qualitative data can supplement administrative data and set it in real-world experience.
- **Interventions:** This method can evaluate the effectiveness of strategies for reducing homelessness. Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) or other evaluations are often used to understand the effectiveness of interventions. Examples of homelessness interventions that are being evaluated are Housing First for youth, shelter diversions, and transition supports.
- **Literature reviews:** This method can help understand previous work and how it might inform service delivery. Examples are jurisdictional scans, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses.

Findings

We categorized interview learnings into prevention efforts, general learnings, and methods-specific learnings.

Homelessness Prevention Learnings

We discuss different categories of youth homelessness prevention mentioned in interviews. We list prevention efforts as they reflect approaches that would require different data infrastructure support. Supporting a range of data infrastructure has the potential to comprehensively inform prevention.

1. Identify unique pathways and trajectories

Project holders discussed that research should help understand pathways and trajectories leading to homelessness due to the unique and individual nature of homelessness' underlying causes. As one team mentioned *“people's journeys are quite different. I guess family, interpersonal issues, substance use,*

mental health of course. It's hard to say, I think one thing that I've learned about pathways is that every story is quite unique." Interviews with youth with lived experiences can identify risks for unique and shared trajectories that lead to homelessness. Administrative data can help understand common trajectories, often seen across populations, that lead to homelessness. They discussed that once pathways and trajectories are identified, it is essential to develop targeted strategies for prevention.

2. Create school-based programs

The Geelong Project in Australia (called Upstream in Canada) introduced school-based programs that identify youth at risk for homelessness, which then receive targeted resources and supports (MacKenzie, 2018). This project used a school-based survey to identify youth's risk for homelessness and introduced targeted supports. For example, school-based programs can provide youth with necessary skills and knowledge to become self-sufficient and independent, which then help prevent homelessness.

3. Coordinate the system

Interviewees discussed the need to use data to coordinate services to achieve a common goal. For example, they thought it was important to enable a better exchange of information between different systems, such as the child welfare, healthcare, and youth shelter system. This would help streamline service access and understand the immediate needs of youth. It can also help understand the issues surrounding youth in general and help strategically create policies and programs.

4. Develop support infrastructure

They discussed that even if risks were identified, often needed support programs were not available or accessible to address needs. For example, a youth may be required to consider very expensive housing options that are not within their budget for housing programs. A lack of needed supports can lead to long-term implications. As one person mentioned, *"When a person is staying in a shelter and there is not support services (like social workers or counselors), this can contribute to them becoming a long-term shelter user"*. If support infrastructure is in place, service providers can use data to prevent homelessness by using it to suggest supports. It is also important to create support infrastructure before collecting data on support needs as it can be disempowering to youth and staff when nothing is done.

5. Legislation can lead to prevention activities

They discussed that legislation could support the prevention of homelessness. For example, they discussed the Federal McKinney-Vento Act in the US, *"... (the) Education Ministry ensure(s) that each school in every (state) has a dedicated liaison to carefully track the housing state of its students, and then their minimum job is to make sure that young person can still come to school..."* Similar legislation in Canada could help prevent homelessness for youth here as it results in assistance and resources to those at risk. Data helps schools know about the state of their students to target supports.

General Learnings

We list major themes that often came up from Making the Shift project holders on general data work. These themes provide topics on the mind of Making the Shift teams as we create roadmap options.

1. The youth voice is critical

Many of the project holders discussed the need to include youth with lived experiences' voices in discussions around homelessness. Engaging youth allows them to share their experiences and perspectives on homelessness to keep interpretations of findings set in real-world experience. The involvement of young people can help decision makers understand the obstacles and challenges facing young people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and develop solutions tailored to their needs. As one team mentioned, *"Because oftentimes, in hearing their stories, you can hear their needs. And if there's anything that you could do about their needs, you want to be able to spend some time on that need."* Hearing the youth voice is also important as it can help reduce the impact of potential stigma on this vulnerable population.

2. Special considerations for race, ethnicity, gender, disability, & culture

They discussed that race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and culture must be considered to recognize the unique and complex needs of people experiencing homelessness. To reduce injustices faced by Indigenous, LGBTQ2S, newcomers and refugees, and Black and other racialized people, we must pay attention to the unique and common systemic barriers they face. These considerations start in inclusive data collection processes, which are currently often lacking.

3. Clear definitions around homelessness

They discussed the importance of a clear definition of youth homelessness. For instance, one team pointed out that homelessness exists on a spectrum – from couch surfers to those living rough or in shelters. However, without a clear and common definition of homelessness, certain individuals may be excluded from data infrastructure: *"When I'm asking a young person 'when did you become homeless for the first time?' They say that their experience is mostly couch surfing, they don't identify with that, and they may not be participating in research or being counted in services, because they're like, 'no, I am not homeless as I'm not in a shelter'."* Another interviewee highlighted the importance of a clear definition of "prevention", saying *"it's a question of 'what's being prevented?' Is it preventing, like a health crisis, getting to hospital, getting very unwell, suicide, overdose? Is it that prevention or if it's preventing homelessness, like worsening homelessness circumstances? Is it preventing from getting into emergency shelters or supportive housing, and independent housing as well?"* It is important to empower youth to define these terms for themselves, given that their experiences are unique, and their perspectives need to be respected.

4. Importance of collaboration

They discussed the importance of sharing, collaborating, and viewing the work being done by leaders and organizations to support change. Collaboration can provide a platform for collective problem solving

and create a stronger sense of community. In this regard, an interviewee referred to webinars and toolkits on the Homeless Hub as excellent examples of collaboration in action, *“when you speak with people in the field, they say a lot of change happens when you get leaders coming together, sharing, being able to see the work that’s happening beyond, webinars and toolkits and those sorts of things.”*

5. Ethical and Privacy considerations

Many teams mentioned different types of ethical and privacy considerations.

Clearly state the limitations of data. They discussed the need to clearly communicate the limitations of findings so readers can understand how to interpret them. Not knowing what data misses can lead to wrong conclusions when making decisions on programs and policies. As one team mentioned, *“All data is biased. And everything recorded in data is biased. An easy example is the papers that we wrote predicting chronic shelter use, I’m always very careful to say we’re predicting chronic shelter use, we’re not predicting chronic homelessness, because chronic homelessness can include rough sleeping, and we don’t have rough sleepers in our data, because by definition, they don’t come to shelter.”*

Discuss data use in consent processes. They also discussed the importance of telling participants and clients how their data will be used when they consent to data collection. This helps youth make informed decisions on what they disclose and preserves trust.

The advantages and disadvantages of university ethical process. An advantage discussed for university research is that it is subject to ethical standards that consider privacy issues. However, this is also a challenging requirement for dynamic research, as amendments to ethical protocols may be required on a weekly basis, delaying project timelines, deliverables, and resulting change.

Methods Specific Learnings

We list and discuss methods-specific learnings as each method is unique and can inform different aspects of data infrastructure.

1. Administrative Data Methods

Administrative data can be difficult to access and link. Many teams discussed that administrative systems often present significant challenges when it comes to data access and linkage. There are several factors contributing to this, including cost, time, and a lack of data agreements. For example, when different agencies need to share data, but no clear data sharing agreement exists, the process of data transfer can become difficult. Furthermore, they referred to some legal issues related to data transfer, which can further complicate matters.

Administrative data quality is not always ideal. Interviewees discussed that administrative data quality is often a concern. Concerns include missing information, invalid responses, and not being comparable because of inconsistent measures. In Canada, the political systems of the provinces and territories can complicate the issue of data quality. For example, different provinces and territories have different sets of laws and regulations, which leads to different data that is collected, shared, and stored. Issues with data quality can affect how data can be used and interpreted.

Consent and privacy are important. Project holders discussed how good consent processes and ethical reviews are important when conducting research with vulnerable study populations. As one team mentioned, *"Youth do not need (to) consent to access services. They don't have to share their data to go into all these different infrastructures to access services. When we ask workers if youth understand that they often say that they don't. You assume that they need to provide this data if they want to access the services. So that doesn't sound like consent to me."* Consideration of consent process and privacy safeguards for youth in crisis helps them receive necessary services, without compromising their rights. Anonymized administrative data may have different standards than interview and survey data.

Administrative data has great potential. Project holders discussed how administrative data holds immense potential to understand homelessness prevention. It can provide insights into patterns, demographics, and service utilization that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Context is important. Interviewees discussed that administrative data does not provide a complete representation of who vulnerable people are. To gain a more holistic understanding and effectively support youth, it is essential to understand the context surrounding youth, such as their goals and strengths. This knowledge can help tailor interventions and programs to better meet their needs, empowering youth to overcome challenges. They offered that free text fields provide staff members with additional insights and context. One group referred to anecdotal evidence suggesting that these comments fields often contain valuable information about goals and hopes. The detailed nature of this data makes it difficult to extract and process. Consequently, this data remains underutilized, limiting our ability to understand youth.

2. Qualitative Methods

Much context is needed to understand qualitative research findings. Project holders discussed that qualitative research findings are complex and nuanced. They emphasized that findings need to be presented in detailed context to be properly interpreted.

Consider the uniqueness of youth's lived experiences. Interviewees discussed the need to use qualitative data to understand the unique needs and experiences of young people and to provide tailored solutions.

Ensure privacy and consent for participants. Project holders highlighted how qualitative data can be sensitive, making it difficult to share without breaching participants' confidentiality. Sharing this data responsibly requires a plan that considers the sensitivity of the data, ethical considerations, and potential risks.

3. Intervention Methods

Ethical dilemmas in interventions. Interviewees discussed the ethical implications of having a control group, who do not receive an intervention that is being evaluated.

Privacy and consent are important. Interviewees discussed that researchers must handle participants' personal information with confidentiality. This includes protecting their identity and ensuring that any data collected during the study is de-identified.

Housing First programs learnings. Project holders discussed how long-term Housing First studies helped them delve into the various unique pathways that lead youth into and out of homelessness. By tracking youth over an extended period, they identified distinct patterns and trajectories that shaped youth's experiences of homelessness. Housing First has been adapted to meet the needs of youth.

4. Literature Review Methods

Findings have policy implications. Project holders discussed that literature reviews are an important tool to understand how others have been successful in preventing homelessness. They explained that by examining what others have done, we can learn from their experiences and apply similar strategies. Reviews can provide a comprehensive overview of the current evidence, allowing us to identify common themes and best practices in the prevention of homelessness. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned: *“a better understanding of what’s happening in the other countries can help us.”* Learnings from other countries are sometimes based in legislative differences that have policy implications.

Conclusion

This work identified that the prevention of youth homelessness can be supported through various strategies that are informed by different types of data. We identified five general learnings from the Making the Shift project holders that could inform data infrastructure. Of prime importance, the voices of young people are essential to grounding findings in the experience of and trajectories into homelessness. Furthermore, youth in crisis should be able to receive necessary services, while being protected by proper consent processes and privacy safeguards. Although administrative data presents challenges, Making the Shift project teams felt it has immense potential for improving Canada's understanding of how to prevent youth homelessness.

Appendices

Appendix A: Making the Shift projects List.

Project Name	Project description	Methods
1. Preventing Youth Homelessness: A Life Journey Approach using Linked Multi-sector Administrative Data and Community Engagement	This project uses existing surveys and administrative data from various sectors to examine risk and protective factors linked to youth homelessness in Manitoba.	Administrative data
2. Using Administrative Datasets to Understand and Identify Effective Responses to Youth Homelessness	A study examines youth shelter use and how it correlates with Housing First success. In addition, the project investigates how youth identities experience housing services. The project uses large longitudinal administrative datasets from homeless shelters in Calgary. Policy and practice recommendations will be provided for effective responses to youth homelessness.	Administrative data
3. Improving Frontend User Experiences by Mapping the Backend Architecture: A Cross-Sectoral Data and Infrastructure Audit	This project produces and mobilizes descriptive and analytical knowledge, to support the youth homelessness sector in developing cross-sectoral, rights-based data interventions and infrastructure that prioritizes youth homelessness prevention.	Administrative data
4. Youth Leaving Care – From State Care into Homelessness: Prevention and Early Intervention	This project uncovers pathways that lead Indigenous youth out of care and into states of homelessness. The researchers map Indigenous youths’ experiences of services to illuminate service gaps. The project reviews the roles of identity, Indigeneity and relationships in nurturing youth who are transitioning out of care systems.	Qualitative
5. Looking South (and Slightly North-East) for School-based Prevention Ideas: An International Comparative Policy and Practice Analysis	The project examines school-based prevention efforts in Australia, Wales, and the U.S. to provide insight and concrete strategies for integrating school-based prevention into Canadian educational policy. The project supports the	Interventions Literature reviews

in Canada, Australia, Wales, and the US.	Canadian response to meaningful prevention within existing institutions.	
6. Housing First for Youth Ottawa	This project uses a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCTs) design to test and evaluate the effectiveness of applying the Housing First for Youth approach to support young people experiencing homelessness without complex needs to exit homelessness and promote improved social and health outcomes.	Interventions
7. Using Health and Community Data to Prevent Youth Homelessness	This project uses a merged health and emergency shelter dataset for Calgary to develop data science tools to better support vulnerable youth that interact with these systems.	Administrative data
8. Understanding Black Youth's Experiences of Homelessness and the Role of Prevention	In addition to systemic racism, black youth face social and economic exclusion. Homelessness among Black youth is poorly documented, so we cannot effectively target preventive interventions or understand the causes and conditions of homelessness. In the context of systemic racism, Black youth's experiences of homelessness differ from non-racialized youths, and the approach to preventing their homelessness must reflect this.	Qualitative
9. A National Study of Tertiary Prevention Models for Youth Exiting Homelessness	This project uses a multiple case study design, systematic reviews, and a rigorous knowledge exchange strategy to articulate the service models of the most promising housing stabilization approaches and to build capacity in the sector.	Literature reviews
10. Ai'aoskiikowaata (Providing Guidance to Youth): Supporting Healthy Transitions from Government Care to Independent Living	Using two studies, this research examines youth transitioning out of government care in three southern Alberta locations. Using multi-media storytelling, a first study gathers young adults' first-hand experience of exiting care. The second survey examines the experiences and outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous young adults.	Qualitative

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The following semi-structured interview questions were tailored for each Making the Shift project that we interviewed. Questions were modified to speak to the strengths of each project.

General Questions

1. Please tell us about your Making the Shift project.
2. How does your project inform the prevention of youth homelessness?
3. What have you learned so far from your project?
 - Do you have any publications or early learnings that you could share with us for consideration in our roadmap?
 - Do you have any key research on youth homelessness prevention that would inform our roadmap? It does not need to be immediately from your project or from your research.
4. (Also customize and include 1-2 specific questions related to the literature we received)
5. Please describe which data you used in your MtS project.

If secondary use/administrative data projects

6. Please describe your experience accessing this data.
 - What approval was needed? How much did it cost? About how long does this take?
 - When accessing this data, was there anything it didn't include? What do you wish it had?
7. Can you comment on the quality of the data you use in your MtS project? What was done to prepare or improve the data?
8. What did you and your data sources do to maintain data privacy?
 - What could be done to make it more private and secure?
 - What are key ethical considerations in the data's use?
9. Please comment on the ease of using this data. What could be done to make it more accessible?
10. What other unique challenges does your data present? What do researchers need to consider working with this data?
11. How well does this data inform the prevention of homelessness?
 - Imagine you could change this data to better inform prevention. What would you do?
12. Thinking back to everything we discussed, is there anything else you feel is important to share? In particular, is there anything relevant that you missed that could inform data infrastructure to prevent youth homelessness?

If self collected data (e.g., interventions, survey, and/or qualitative data)

6. Please tell us more about your experience collecting youth homelessness data. What challenges did you face? What do researchers need to consider when doing this type of research?
7. Based on your experience working with this data, how do you see its place in data infrastructure for youth homelessness in Canada?
8. How could it be possible to include projects like yours in data infrastructure? (Based on type of project, sub-questions below)
 - a. How could interventions evaluation data be included?
 - b. How could survey/questionnaire results be included?
 - c. How could narratives and qualitative data be integrated with other findings?
9. To make your data more impactful, it might be shared with others. How would you feel about this? Why?
 - a. What could we do to make you feel comfortable sharing this data? How can we protect the privacy and rights of your participants?
10. We are considering using administrative data to inform the prevention of youth homelessness. This data could be intake data from youth homelessness front-line workers and/or other program data like education, health, and justice data, that is linked to the data. Where do you see its place in informing the prevention of youth homelessness?
 - a. Have you worked with administrative data in your project?
 - b. What concerns do you have about its use?
 - c. How could combining your data with administrative data improve evidence to support the prevention of youth homelessness?
11. Thinking back to everything we discussed, is there anything else you feel is important to share? In particular, is there anything relevant that you missed that could inform data infrastructure to prevent youth homelessness?

Appendix C Data Infrastructure Interview Learning Themes

Homelessness Prevention Learnings	<i>Identifying unique pathways and risk factors</i>	
	<i>Consider school-based programs</i>	
	<i>Create a coordinated system</i>	
	<i>Develop support infrastructure</i>	
	<i>Legislation can support prevention</i>	
General Learnings	<i>Special considerations for race, ethnicity, gender, & culture</i>	
	<i>Youth engagement is critical</i>	
	<i>Clear definition helps data collection and research</i>	
	<i>Importance of collaboration</i>	
	<i>Ethical and Privacy Concerns</i>	Clearly state the limitations of data
		Discuss data use in consent processes
		The advantages and disadvantages of university ethical process
Methods Specific Learnings	<i>Administrative Data</i>	Administrative systems struggle to effectively access and link data
		Administrative data quality can be low
		Consent and privacy are important, particularly for youth
		Administrative data is beneficial
		Context is important
	<i>Qualitative</i>	Provide context for qualitative research findings

		Consider the uniqueness of youth lived experiences, pathways, and solutions for homelessness
		Ensure the privacy and consent of their participants
	<i>Interventions</i>	Ethical dilemma of non-intervention
		Privacy and consent are important
		Housing First program learning
	<i>Systematic Reviews</i>	Can improve learning from other countries
		Findings have policy implications