Making the Shift: Roadmap for Youth Homelessness Data Infrastructure

4: Community Service Provider Interviews

PolicyWise for Children & Families

Canada

MAKING THE SHIFT INC

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SHARING GUIDELINES

Key Messages

We interviewed community service providers to learn about their use of information to support youth that are or are at risk for homelessness/housing instability. These are the key messages we heard:

1. **Make information collection youth centred.** Information collection during the intake process can be distressing for youth. Create a safe space for youth to share their journeys, while recognizing that support and relationship building come first. When collecting information, consider how youth would like to be represented. Finally, consider how to represent youth beyond just numbers. Indigenous ways of knowing help create a holistic understanding of youth.

2. **Collect information ethically.** Informed consent is key to ethical information collection and sharing. Youth need to provide some information to access services but may feel pressured to provide more than they'd like. As well, youth may have varying capacity to provide consent. Consider consent on what type of information may be shared and to whom. Ethical information collection requires deep consideration of how information will be or could be used.

3. **Create a culture of effective information use**. Build a culture that values information to promote its effective and safe use. Streamline information collection to reduce burden on staff. Make sure staff know the value of what they collect and their role in the process.

4. **Build collaborative action.** Connect information systems between different funders, to reduce burden on staff and promote collaborative action. Build upon emerging initiatives aiming to break down silos among services providers through information sharing for better communication and collaboration.

5. **Community service providers envision a brighter future.** Despite existing challenges, community service providers are excited about the future. They see possibilities in the use of information for increased collaboration, system-level learning, and continual learning to better support youth.

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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 information; 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 to understand key related data infrastructure, promising practices and processes, other Making the Shift project learnings, community service provider related practices, 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.

This document shares learnings from interviews with community service providers who provide housing services, collecting and using information on youth that are or are at risk for experiencing homelessness/housing instability. The interviews aimed to understand 1) the reality community service providers face when collecting and using information, and 2) what they recommend for the roadmap.

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with community service providers who were involved in information collection and use around youth seeking housing supports. Ethics approval was provided by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board and the McGill University Institutional Review Board. Interviews were conducted between February and August 2023.

Step 1: Interview guide preparation

We created semi-structured interview guides to guide our conversations. Each guide was further tailored around the perspective of the type of organization and staff interviewed. Interviews focused on 1) current information collection and use, and 2) perspectives on information infrastructure for youth homelessness prevention for the roadmap (See Appendix 1 for interview questions).

Step 2: Participant recruitment

Interview participants were chosen based on previous partnerships, previous work in the project, and through convenience sampling. We reached out to 21 youth-supporting emergency shelter and housing providers in four provinces and eight organizations. Thirty-eight percent from three provinces accepted our call for interviews (see Appendix B for interviewee details). As part of the informed consent process, we explained the aim and the purpose of the interview, the eligibility criteria for interview participants (direct involvement in collecting information from youth accessing

the services and/or using the collected information), the duration of the interview, and compensation.

Step 3: Interviews

We shared interview questions with participants in advance of interviews to facilitate discussion. After receiving verbal consent from participants, we conducted 1-hour virtual interviews. Interviews were recorded with the consent of participants. We transcribed audio recordings and removed identifiable information.

Step 4: Data analysis

We coded transcripts using NVivo12 Plus. We created an initial code list based on the interview questions. We then deductively assigned transcribed data to pre-defined codes, while inductively creating and adding codes. We iteratively reviewed and organized codes across the data to identify common themes. As a final step, an independent reviewer with in-depth knowledge of the project examined the coding and theme list, and final themes were mutually agreed upon.

Findings

Participant and organization background

We interviewed 15 participants from eight organizations that spanned three provinces (British Colombia, Alberta, and Ontario). One organization supported Indigenous youth as a focus, while all welcomed Indigenous youth. Among the participants: eight were "service providers" who collect and/or use information to support youth when they access housing supports; four were "data managers" whose major roles included database management, data analysis, and evaluation to support organizational operations and services; and three were "leaders" who oversaw the implementation of the youth housing support programs and projects in their organizations. Interviewed organizations served a range of youth homelessness programs that support different age groups. For example, one organization had a youth emergency shelter for youth aged between 12 to 17 years old, while offering different programs for youth from 16 to 24 years old.

All eight organizations responded that they use a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) to report to funders. In addition, organizations often used additional (sometimes multiple) software programs and databases to manage collected information for monitoring, analysis, internal reporting, and visualization.

Key themes

1. Creating Safe, Holistic Views of Youth in Information Collection

CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Many interview participants stressed the importance of providing safety to youth. As one interviewee described, *"when you have a youth that comes to the shelter for an intake, you kind of handle them differently than an adult..."* They reported that **information collection during an intake**

process is simple: *"…sometimes that's something that youth don't want to do right off the hop."* The objective is to first meet immediate basic needs such as food, harm reduction, clothing, a place to have a shower, a safe place, or a chat on the phone with a probation officer. Once intake is complete, youth workers **wait for youth to feel comfortable enough to share their stories, while building relationships and learning** about their history of trauma, conflicts in the family, and mental health and substance history. As one interviewee mentioned, *"it takes a lot of time to build rapport with youth…before they want to sit down and do the paperwork…"* They also discuss skills and capacity of youth and goals for the future.

Safety also comes in allowing youth to **share what they want at the time they are ready**. Similarly, one organization described the importance of **consent to information sharing with whom they want in the case of an emergency**, *"they might consent that I can give my aunt my information. Or they might say, 'No, you can't talk to my mum.'"*

From the Indigenous perspective, it is important to **place priority on culturally safe approaches**, using an assessment tool that *"reflects the value system of Indigenous people" which "talks about the value of…trust, spirituality, humility, relationship".* The current system also does not appear to reflect the Indigenous value of reciprocity, giving back, as one Indigenous interviewee stated, *"HMIS currently has […] a dashboard, where I can actually go in and see what assessments are late, what's due, what is incomplete. So it doesn't give me a whole bunch of information. It gives the [Funder] their information they need, like number of years, number of referrals, whether they're transgender, because all our referrals are Indigenous. And so for us, I do not get excited because it doesn't give me anything."*

COLLECT INFORMATION HOW YOUTH WANT TO BE REPRESENTED

Another **important aspect of collecting information is to connect it to how youth would like to be represented**. For instance, they mentioned considerations around how to ask names (i.e., legal names as well as alias/preferred name) and self-identified gender. As one interviewee stated, *"we want to make sure that the way that we collect information is also resonating with our young people as saying 'yeah, this represents who I am.'"*

Discussing names, one interviewee stated, *"Having the name you go by is like the best most client-centered way because then if your colleague covers while you're on vacation, we're not dead naming or misgendering the young person with their legal name, but we also need their legal name because when it comes to dealing with the health system, the police, whatever, legal name is the name that they care about. And your chosen name can change. But we've also tried to shift away from language around chosen because it's not like you chose it, that it's just your name. That's what you go by. Whether that was the name given to you by your parents or not. That's like how you experience the world. So, I think there's tension between like, being client-centered and being, recognizing that a lot of the work we do really does involve conversations and involves using people's names".*

Addressing this point from the Indigenous perspective, one interviewee mentioned, *"we're going to be doing a circle trying to find out how to gather more information from youth that will be what the youth think we should be asking, and how the youth feel about who they are as individuals."*

INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING BUILD A HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF YOUTH

Much information is collected and reported to funders, such as the number of people accessing services, length of their stay, and their housing related outcomes. However, many interviewees stressed the importance of stories and qualitative information, saying *"Numbers aren't the whole story. This is like part of the story. It's like a big part of the story that our funders most [want to know], but it's not the whole story."* Furthermore, *"when youth are experiencing adverse [outcomes], it may look like they are failing, but it does not have any background on why they are failing- it is important to consider what's happening."*

An Indigenous interviewee explained, *"you hear the stories and passion and triumphs these young ones have through ceremonies where youth share stories as a form of truthing."* Other non-Indigenous interviewees saw the **value of holistic Indigenous frameworks that look at aspects of well-being of youth**. One non-Indigenous interviewee thought that Indigenous ways of knowing provide a different way of understanding where youth are from, saying *"when I think about how our commitment to reconciliation shows up in this work, and how we as researchers are part of like systemic oppression of like, numbering people, and like classifying people and just we have there's some real risks and pitfalls that we ought to be very, very careful of. Because I would say…., we are currently recreating the systems we say we're fighting against."*

2. Addressing Ethical Challenges to Information Collection

ADDRESS INFORMED CONSENT

One interviewee described that *"lots of our operations [supports that we offer] live and die based on a release of information"*. **Providing consent to information sharing is connected to the access of supports**, such as education, health, income support. One youth worker thought *"[youth] have been very systematically placed in where they are '[youth worker] just gave me the piece of paper, I just need to get this over with' by seeing some youth signing the consent form right away without reading through the consent form"*. Consent processes should *"balance rights and not re-traumatizing"* as youth may be **re-traumatized by telling their story over and over at each agency**.

On the other hand, a challenge in informed consent is that some **youth have limited capacity to consent due to their mental health state or disability**. For instance, one youth worker shared; *"our youth do have mental health, [such as] FASD can be, so trying to re explain, re-explain is really important every time. And even after, like any sentence like they'll say they understand, but you can kind of see that they're maybe not fully aware. So I do think that actually is a huge issue."* Another **tension is information collected from minors**. One interviewee stated, *"in the youth serving sector, there's actually a really interesting tension around like who…. Does your data (information) belong to your parent? Or does it belong to you?....it's really grey and hard to make client centered decisions because they're minors, right?"*

There are also **varying perceptions towards youth's view of information sharing**. While one youth worker stated, *"youth are not typically very concerned with technology and statistics and information sharing"*, others mentioned youth's concern about their information being shared. This perception also can depend on the type of sharing, *"I've just had conversations where they do feel*

very nervous about their information just being spread, without actually having any relationship or any connection to an agency or organization. Yes, I don't think they love their information being shared without their consent and or knowing who is at that specific [place]."

Recognizing that good rapport is needed for youth to share their information and understand how it might be used, several interviewees stressed the need for **clear communication with youth in terms of with whom and what type of information may be shared and giving options for consent for each**. One organization described the importance of getting consent for whom to share information with in an emergency, *"they might consent that I can give my aunt my information. Or they might say, 'No, you can't talk to my mum.' But in the event of something happens where you are in the hospital, or we have to call your next of kin, who we would we contact is very different."*

TRANSLATE INFORMATION TO ACTION

One interviewee shared their reflection that it is **important to consider the intention of collecting information**, asking what they measure and why they measure, and showing *their "responsibility to action findings"*. As they elaborated, *"it's really sobering and important, like reflective work for me to just ask those questions. What do we think we'll be able to do with this data (information)? How would we know we've succeeded if we did that? And what would change or be different? And how can we check like our own egos and our own biases about what information is worthy and valuable, and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, I just think sometimes when we're in head down project management mode, we lose that humility that's needed to deal with the data (information), like very vulnerable people and what they are owed by, by our work in our positions of privilege."* In advance of information collection, data analysis and knowledge mobilization plans can be used as tools to plan for impactful information.

3. Creating a Culture for Effective Information Use

STREAMLINE INFORMATION COLLECTION AND SHARING

Collected information is internally and externally used to serve different purposes. Interviewees mentioned that they may use different information management systems for internal sharing or external reporting. Since a range of programs are offered to youth within organizations, **centralizing and streamlining database systems for information collected to be accessible across programs and staff would help** so that youth *"don't necessarily need to repeat the same questions."* However, it is important to **consider where to limit access with consent processes and with whom**.

In addition, other efforts to streamline information collection work was discussed, such as **streamlining different intake processes to align information collected with the way that support is provided and creating processes that allow easy creation of reports**. As one interviewee mentioned, *"all we did was to put two forms in the same place. So it wasn't like, we… change(d) the work that they were doing. They were obviously doing the work. But we made it really, really, really easy for them to say yep, I've done a case plan. Just check this box, write some extra things in it's in exactly the same place that I do our regular notes. So those are, it's a different way of talking about*

challenges. But it's like, these are some of the solutions that we've come up with or the ways that we think about things to try to address some of the challenges."

One organization reported that their commitment to streamlining their processes to minimize the amount of information entered resulted in reducing staff workload and improved the quality of information. **Organizational culture that values information was reported as a facilitator to conversations around information collection practices and its use for decision making**.

MAKE INFORMATION MEANINGFUL

Organizations reported that information is used for the measurement of performance and evaluation of programs. A few interviewees mentioned a **perceived ambivalence of community service providers towards information**. One interviewee said, *"it's this weird dance of like, we're trying to be transparent. But it's also like deeply destabilizing for staff in some cases to see that data (information)"* as it can bring about fears around the loss of funding of programs.

Community service **providers play an important role in information collection**, *"the person collecting the data and their engagement in and investment in data quality, can be the way it lives or dies."* Community service providers are not always aware of their importance in information collection and how information is used. Interviewees discussed a **need for training on the importance of quality information collection, how to interpret information, and how to turn it into stories**. Interviewees also discussed the need to **support community service provider staff by being clear what information means**. One suggested practice was the **provision of infographics to help community service providers understand what the data yielded**. Infographics might include both positive comments from clients and pictures to make sense of collected information.

USE YOUTH-CENTERED INDICATORS

Information collection in organizations serves a critical purpose of reporting performance to funders. Information collected and reported may be things such as the number of youth accessing services, their length of their stay, and their housing related outcomes. Reporting can be burdensome particularly for small agencies. Interviewees described this as a *"juggle"* and *"sometimes… (the) information is too much"*. For instance, one organization reported having five different databases based on different funders. Several interviewees expressed their frustration in collecting so much information required by funders and spending a lot of time on data (information) entry, which could be better spent on the street for relational work. In this context, they described the challenges of navigating the system where different measures are required and **calling for more youth-centered measures**. As they stated, *"…measurement has been dictated by government, and by funders, not by experts. The experts are the youth and the youth workers"*.

4. Collaborating towards Change

BREAK DOWN SILOES

Interviewees reported using personal connections, regular meetings, and case conferences for external sharing around the collaborative support of youth. **Shared information systems that can be accessed by different agencies**, such as the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), **were considered as helpful** as the stored information gives background on youth as they enter different agencies. However, **challenges and disadvantages were pointed out**, such as a limited access to information on clients who are not under the same system, difficulty in tracking the history when a youth moves from one shelter to another, the nature of self-reported information, particularly when different information was used, and looking at information that was not updated.

As information systems are often attached to funders and each funder may use a different database, many organizations **shared frustration with disconnected systems, which become a burden** on community service providers who need to enter the same information in different databases. They discussed, *"I do want to acknowledge that we would then be reporting across three different channels of, and it's a lot of extra, like, when you're just adding the same information over three different data (information) collection systems, it starts to chew away at the time you should be on the street doing work."* The collected information is also siloed between different organizations and ministries. *"[The adult program information] and [child program information] both go to the province, but different ministries. And so they don't share information, which is a source of tension, because [the child program] technically funds 18 and under, right, and the [adult program] technically funds 18 and over. So in their minds, there's no overlap, whereas we know in practice that there's lots of 16 and 17 year olds who like, yeah, for who that's like not a helpful distinction."*

BUILD ON EMERGING COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES

The **importance of collaboration and communication across agencies** was mentioned by many interviewees. Some reported local initiatives to use shared information and measures. For instance, one group reported being part of a group of youth serving agencies coming together in the spirit of collaboration to improve continued work with youth. Their goal is to *"look at the wellbeing of youth and a holistic aspect of life skills and well-being and outcomes for that young person"* by *"shaping around what the youth are doing, and not necessarily what makes the agency look good."* Despite emerging promising initiatives, **challenges** described were: **a lack of accountability due to territoriality, difficulty in reaching consensus on what will be measured, and lack of common terminology**. **Benefits of collaboration** across agencies were identified as: a **better understanding of youth conditions and the prevention of re-traumatization through information collection by** *"not putting the burden on the youth to have to share the story"* again and again, **better service coordination by sharing resources, and influencing funders to change their outcome tracking and reporting requirements**. It is important to note that a **lack of organizational readiness can serve as a barrier to sharing**: *"People have expressed positive sentiment, but when it actually comes to sharing the information, then there's some differences in terms of what actually happens"*.

Visions for Future Data Infrastructure

Interviewees discussed the possibility of data infrastructure **to increase collaboration around the support of youth**. Several expected the benefits of: better service coordination through knowing available resources in different agencies, tailoring of services to identified needs, and reduction of paperwork from asking the same questions across agencies. This collaboration would be facilitated by algorithms and de-identifying methods to provide a safe sharing of information.

Interviewees stated the need for a systemic approach for youth homelessness prevention, considering failures of our systems that contribute to trauma cycles. **Data infrastructure is considered a facilitator of knowledge creation on system-level factors and youth trajectories that inform homelessness prevention strategies**. As one interviewee said, *"Certainly from a prevention perspective, I'm also always interested in system factors. So when we're talking about like, what like, things like for us a really, really simple one is things like oh, like, how does the average cost of rental relate to, like incomes that young people are accessing, and have the ability to access and things like that. So those system variables as well, seem incredibly important, though sometimes harder to quantify, in terms of this type of work."*

One interviewee envisioned a **continual learning cycle for programs and systems serving youth, which they called a *"Social learning system"*.** They hoped it could **scale up to provincial and/or federal levels to inform the prevention of youth homelessness across systems**. On the other hand, **some interviewees also mentioned concerns and potential challenges with data infrastructure**, such as complexities around consensus and agreement on the infrastructure, people's concern about security when linking information to other information, and limitations of self-reported information.

Some key factors offered for consideration for future **support of sharing through** data infrastructure were: **deciding an appropriate level of sharing, creating capacity to ensure sharing practices are done correctly, and considering organizational readiness of sharing**.

Conclusion

Interviews with community service providers provided on-the-ground experiences with collecting and using information from youth. While meeting youth's immediate needs is the primary goal of community service providers, the interviews highlighted that information collection needs to be youth-centered by collecting information in a way that aligns how youth want to be represented and comprehensively understands youth's conditions and strengths. For many community service providers, collecting information and entering them into different information systems for funders is burdensome. Fostering organizational culture that values the effective use of information and building on emerging initiatives of collaborations to share information across agencies can reduce this burden and support better service delivery at organizational and community levels.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview questions

The following semi-structured interview questions were tailored for each organization that we interviewed.

1. Tell us more about your role in your organization.

2. Please tell us a bit about the services you provide to support youth that are or are at risk for experiencing homelessness/housing instability.

3. When we say 'using data infrastructure to prevent youth homelessness', what comes to mind?

   - What excites you?

   - What has you concerned?

4. What information do you collect to support youth?

   - Would it be possible to get a list of the type of information you collect?

   - How complete and accurate is this information?

   - What are challenges in collecting complete information?

5. As we seek to inform the prevention of youth homelessness, identifying information such as Names, Date of Birth, and Healthcare numbers) could be used to link youth to other service use to inform prevention. This data would have strict processes to support privacy and anonymity.

   - How do you feel about this?

   - Do you collect these identifiers? Can you comment on the quality of what you collect?

   - What do you think your youth would feel about this? If we pushed for high quality identifiers, how might this affect your youth?

6. What do you use to collect your data (i.e., software)?

   - Do you use the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) or another Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS)? (If yes) Can you share any thoughts you have on this system?

7. What do you do to share information with others to support your youth?

   - How would you feel about a system that would increase this sharing?

8. More data and changes in data collection processes might support better evidence on how to prevent youth homelessness. How do you feel about changing your data collection for this purpose? Why?

9. Thinking back to everything we discussed, is there anything else you feel is relevant that you'd like to share?

Appendix B: Overview of the interviewed organizations

No	Province	Type of services they provide for youth	Type of interviewees
1	Alberta	Advocacy, research & development, systems planning, and funding	1 Data manager
2	Alberta	Temporary shelter, housing & outreach, support for education & employment, and settlement services	2 Data managers
3	Alberta	Temporary shelter, supportive housing, support for skills development, education & employment, and mental health	2 Leaders
4	Alberta	Housing support, Indigenous culture-based programs, employment support, crisis support, and peer connection	1 Leader 3 Service providers
5	Ontario	Temporary shelter* and counseling & harm reduction	2 Service providers
6	British Colombia	Housing support, education & career development, and mental health support	1 Service provider
7	British Colombia	Outreach, temporary shelter, housing support, education & employment support, and family relationship building support	2 Service providers
8	British Colombia	Drop-in, outreach, temporary shelter, housing support, and physical/mental/spiritual health	1 Data manager

*As services are not specifically targeted at youth, youth are generally referred to a youth shelter. However, youth receive available services when they are not transferred.