A Roadmap for Youth Homelessness Prevention Data Infrastructure

PolicyWise for Children & Families

Canada

MAKING THE SHIFT INC.

University of Lethbridge

i. Acknowledgments

PRIMARY CONTRIBUTORS

Russell, M., Yamaguchi, S., Zarezadeh-Kheibari, S., Mustafa, F., Nichols, N., Victor, J., Urichuk, L., & Belanger, Y.

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SHARING GUIDELINES

It is the hope of all those who contributed to this project that these findings are shared and used to benefit others and inform policy and practice to improve child, family, and community well-being. PolicyWise asks the intent and quality of the work is retained; therefore, PolicyWise for Children & Families must be acknowledged in the following ways:

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ii. Brief Summary

We co-created a roadmap for information to support the prevention of youth homelessness in Canada. Our project supports 'making the shift' from focusing on crisis-based youth homelessness supports towards an approach that works to prevent homelessness. We engaged with youth with lived experience of homelessness, Indigenous peoples, community service providers, researchers, funders, and government workers.

Key principles that emerged from this work were to be: community-centred, collaborative, supportive, inclusive, ethical, feasible, and sustainable.

The roadmap includes four recommendations:

1. **Build quality community engagement.** Engagement makes prevention data meaningful by connecting it with the realities of interest holders.
2. **Support better data collection and use**. Building more reliable data enhances prevention efforts, and sharing findings boosts impact.
3. **Support collaboration around prevention.** Collaboration serves the holistic needs of youth to enhance prevention efforts.
4. **Build up data for youth homelessness prevention.** Various data can be improved to better inform prevention. Data can:
    a. provide learning on youth homelessness prevention strategies;
    b. detect youth homelessness risk to inform early prevention;
    c. provide counts of homelessness to understand if efforts are working;
    d. inform later shelter and housing prevention efforts, and;
    e. inform systems change around prevention.

Some immediate steps we recommend are:

- **Beginning with ongoing data-related initiatives.**
    1. Share findings from Making the Shift and other projects about effective youth homelessness prevention.
    2. Share what is learned on how to collect data to inform prevention.
    3. Nurture relationships for prevention. For example, build prevention community connection tables, where communities come together to work on prevention.
- **Next, building new information.** Start on a smaller scale and build up to:
    1. Fund and support community-based research and evaluation on prevention.
    2. Build better data about homelessness prevention, such as data that supports: early prevention before it happens, collaborative efforts with organizations for prevention, later prevention in youth shelters, and systems change around prevention.
    3. Create standards for data collection and use around data used for prevention.

Moving forward, a cooperative, cross-sectoral, and cross-interest-holder governance team is needed. This team should have representation across interest holders. As efforts progress, further interest holder engagement is necessary to move forward.

iii. Executive Summary

The issue

Currently, youth homelessness services are mainly focused on crisis-based supports to help those experiencing homelessness. Our project focuses on developing Canadian information that helps prevent youth homelessness. There are many ongoing promising efforts to improve data about homelessness. However, many gaps need to be filled to better inform youth homelessness prevention.

Roadmap introduction

The roadmap seeks to explore effective prevention strategies through research and evaluation. It informs different types of prevention and addresses critical gaps in youth homelessness prevention data.

The roadmap presents interest holders' ideas for improving this data, provides examples from across Canada and the world, and offers a path forward. The roadmap is not intended to be rigid. As we journey forward in this complex and evolving landscape, more engagement is needed.

We learned from literature, drew insights from current data, and engaged with interest holders in youth homelessness to co-create the roadmap. Our processes drew on the experience of various interest holders in the youth homelessness sector, such as: youth with lived experience of homelessness, Indigenous peoples, community service providers, researchers, funders, and government workers.

The roadmap has multiple parts, each housed on its [website](#):

1. *the final report*, which is the roadmap in detail (i.e., this document);
2. *the summary report*, which introduces the roadmap in a more accessible way;
3. *interest holder briefs*, which discuss some more immediate things that can be done by interest holder groups to move forward on data infrastructure;
4. *supplementary reports*, which discuss findings in-depth from the main learning phases;
5. *academic publications*, that supplement findings; and
6. *interviews and webinars,* introducing the roadmap and its findings.

Roadmap principles

We offer seven principles that represent how interest holders want to work to be done.

1. **Community-centred.** Considering the views and needs of those involved.

2. **Collaborative.** Working together to address the complex and multi-system nature of youth homelessness prevention.

3. **Supported**. Increasing funding and support structures needed to improve data.

4. **Inclusive.** Addressing the diverse needs of youth in data.

5. **Ethical.** Prioritizing ethical data collection, focusing on putting youth needs first and preventing harm.

6. **Feasible**. Beginning with simple, impactful changes. These changes need to work within the capacity of interest holders and build on existing policies and initiatives.

7. **Sustainable.** Building long-term efforts that strengthen data for preventing youth homelessness.

Recommendations

The first three recommendations support how the work is done, as valuable information is built on strong practices, relationships, and connections. The final recommendation addresses the data needed.

1. Build quality community engagement

Community engagement helps make data meaningful by connecting how it is collected, used, and interpreted with the realities of communities.

To build quality community engagement, we need to:

- Provide training on quality community engagement
- Facilitate and motivate community engagement around data

2. Support better data collection and use

Reliable data enhances prevention efforts, and sharing findings better boosts their impact.

- Provide training on youth data collection and use
- Improve data collection by ethically collecting data from youth and making it more human-centred
- Increase the use of findings from data

3. Support collaboration around prevention

Serving the holistic needs of youth requires collaboration.

- Facilitate collaboration around youth homelessness prevention
- Use data to support collaboration

4. Build up data for youth homelessness prevention

Data is an essential tool that can inform the prevention of youth homelessness.

Support learning on youth homelessness prevention

We need to learn more about what works to prevent youth homelessness.

- Build on insights from existing projects from Making the Shift and ongoing research and evaluation
- Learn how to do better prevention research and evaluation from ongoing work
- Future work can progress on a smaller scale but benefits from larger funding

Detect youth homelessness risk early and use it for prevention

Early risk detection can improve the chances of preventing homelessness before youth are stuck in the homelessness system.

- Build data around known transition points, such as youth moving from child welfare supports to the street, to inform efforts to reduce transitions into homelessness
- Build more earlier risk data, such as data from the child welfare system, K-12 education, and mental health supports, to address youth homelessness early
- Support prevention with policies and programs aimed at identified youth

Improve homelessness and housing-related data

Homelessness and housing-related data can help count homelessness to understand how efforts are working and inform later prevention strategies.

- Strengthen homelessness shelter and housing data
- Strengthen homelessness counts, especially around youth
- Develop other housing-related data

Use administrative data to inform homelessness prevention

As a priority topic for this project, added consideration was given to *administrative data*, which is collected by organizations for their operations and reporting.

1. Building up administrative data

Building up administrative data at the organization level and across organizations helps immediate efforts and readies the data for other use cases.

- Improve organization-level administrative data
- Improve administrative data across organizations in a sector supporting youth

2. Using linked administrative data

Administrative data linked across sectors helps look at youth service-use patterns that predict homelessness. This can be used to inform systems-level solutions to prevention.

- *Support the use of existing linked administrative data*
- *Increase linked administrative data across Canada*

3. Linking organization data to administrative data

Organizational data can be linked to relevant administrative data to show how prevention services impact individuals. This helps demonstrate services and support continued learning to improve services.

The way forward

- Because the work to support the prevention of youth homelessness in Canada is complex, it needs robust and coordinated planning and oversight. Dedicated staff can benefit these efforts
- It requires a cooperative, cross-sectoral, and cross-interest-holder governance team
- As efforts progress, further interest holder engagement is necessary to align efforts with communities

More immediate steps are:

1. **Begin with ongoing data-related initiatives.**
   - Share the insights from Making the Shift and other projects about youth homelessness prevention
   - Train on effective prevention data use
   - Facilitate relationships. For example, prevention community connection tables can be formed to connect communities around prevention
2. **Next, build new information.**
   - *Start on a smaller scale and build up, starting with a single community or province*
   - Fund and support community-based research and evaluation
   - Build better prevention data, such as data that supports: early prevention before it happens, collaboration across organizations for prevention, later prevention in youth shelters, and systems change around prevention
   - Create data collection and use standards for prevention data

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1. Project introduction

This project's goal is to co-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 is used.

Project activities included:

> 1) project steering, such as convening advisory team meetings to inform project actions and monthly investigator meetings;

> 2) gathering and analyzing information about existing infrastructure, promising practices, interest holder perspectives, Indigenous communities' practices, and policy;

> 3) engagement with interest holders to co-design the best path for a roadmap; and

> 4) the co-creation of the roadmap based on interest holder input.

This 'final report' shares the full roadmap findings in detailed form. This document provides details on the recommendations that have surfaced from the work, their rationale, and examples of how they could look like in practice. This report is meant to serve as a foundation to implementing roadmap work. It is paired with a shorter, summary roadmap, as well as briefs targeting immediate steps for interest holders. The work described in this document is large in scope and cannot be advanced all at once. The roadmap is considered a 'living document' that will need updates as culture and policy changes over time, with input from interest holders. *The roadmap is about people and those involved need to have a substantial role in decisions made about them.*

This project was completed as a partnership between PolicyWise for Children & Families and researchers from the University of Lethbridge.

Funder and timeline: This project took place from June 2021 to December 2024 and was funded by Making the Shift: Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab (Making the Shift). 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, Making the Shift conducts, funds, and mobilizes cutting-edge research and prototypes in communities across Canada to prevent and end youth homelessness.

2. Introducing the issue

Forty percent of Canadian youth that are homeless had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 16 (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). Despite youths' great resilience and ability to adapt, they face a harsh reality as their life journey takes them into homelessness. Often youth are involved in multiple systems of support (for example, income support, child welfare, justice, health, education) due to trajectories involving poverty, conflicts in the home, criminal-legal system involvement, and/or educational

difficulties (Gaetz et al., 2018). Some estimates put the risk of homelessness for youth in the child welfare system at 193 times higher than for other youth (Gaetz et al., 2016). If a youth does end up homeless, they may accumulate additional risks over time, often further seating them in a trajectory of chronic, long-term homelessness. Homelessness is expensive in Canada, costing an average estimated $54,000 per year for homelessness by paying emergency, psychiatric, and justice/corrections services that perpetuate homelessness (Latimer et al., 2017). While the current system does not strive to keep youth homeless, it is limited in its focus on crisis-based supports, such as temporary emergency shelters, to serve those who are already homeless (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). This approach can miss chances earlier in children's and youths' lives to intervene and stop the cycle of homelessness before youth become entrenched in this cycle, such as in housing solutions and preventative supports for youth.

Our project is part of a movement to make a shift from crisis-based responses to responses that focus on the prevention of homelessness. This work focuses on youth because they are often a point of entry in homelessness and preventing homelessness serves to improve their lifelong well-being, while saving significant societal costs over their lives.

2.1 Our definition of youth

For this report, we discuss **youth as those 13-24 years old,** following the Canadian definition of youth homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). While the age of 'youth' differs by analyses, jurisdictions, and organizations, this age range aims to address: 1) a start in childhood supports (under 16, under 18, under 19, depending on the jurisdiction and service type), which we call ***child-youth***; and 2) a transition to adult systems and supports in early adulthood, which we call ***adult-youth***. Considering both child- and adult-youth is critical as data infrastructure and supports differ greatly between the two. For example, we found that child- and adult-youth homelessness data were reported to separate government ministries that did not necessarily share data or collaborate well (M. Russell et al., 2023). We also acknowledge that youth we engaged with did not necessarily agree with this age range, discussing that it can functionally differ for many reasons.

2.2 Types of youth homelessness

As we discuss homelessness, it is important to discuss the various types of youth homelessness. For example, *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* states (Gaetz et al., 2018):

"For youth, homelessness not only includes sleeping rough or in emergency shelters, but a range of precarious housing and shelter circumstances. The different degrees of homelessness and housing insecurity that young people may face are laid out in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness and include:

> *1) **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;*

*2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence;*

*3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure; and finally,*

*4) **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.*

*An important aspect of youth homelessness is that young people have a greater likelihood of being part of the '**hidden homeless**' population (see Provisionally Accommodated). That is, they may couchsurf, staying temporarily with friends or relatives because they cannot go home, and may not seek out services designed to support people who are homeless. Some youth may technically be housed (e.g., living with caregivers) but lack a meaningful sense of home because their living situation is abusive, unsafe, unsupportive, and/or inherently precarious. These young people would be considered 'at risk' of homelessness."* In regard to this last situation, we note that some youth we engaged with discussed that they considered this last situation as a kind of homelessness. Using data to prevent youth homelessness is challenging due to difficulties in identifying hidden homelessness and risks for homelessness.

2.3 What is youth homelessness prevention?

We use an expanded version of the youth homelessness prevention definition that has been developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, based on the public health model of prevention (Gaetz et al., 2023). This definition requires that prevention efforts have a direct connection to housing/homelessness. It does not include general service and interventions that help all youth. We used the most updated version of this model at the time of this report, which may differ from previous and future versions.

However, as early prevention is a priority topic of this work, we allowed discussions around data that identified the risk for homelessness that might not always appear directly connected to housing/ homelessness. For example, some Making the Shift projects supported school-based interventions focused on graduation, which is connected indirectly to homelessness. *This decision is supported by youth that we engaged with, discussing the need to be more inclusive of their situations to remove barriers to their support. First and foremost, the roadmap is about supporting youth.*

The definition offers (Gaetz et al., 2023): *"Homelessness prevention refers to policies, practices and interventions that provide supports designed to achieve the following:*

1. ***Primary Prevention***: *Reduces inflows into youth homelessness by taking proactive steps to stop youth from becoming homeless in the first place.*
2. ***Secondary Prevention***: *Intervenes early to reduce the risk that youth who experience homelessness for the first time will transition to long term or chronic homelessness.*

3. ***Tertiary Prevention***: *Provides appropriate supports to reduce the likelihood that chronically homeless youth who exit homelessness will return to it."*

While all levels of prevention are necessary, the most impactful form is primary prevention, as it happens before youth become homeless and are exposed to various negative trajectories that build and sustain lifelong impacts.

In addition, it is important to note various types of homelessness prevention targeted by Making the Shift. Making the Shift is currently funding learning on these various prevention pathways.

*"**Homelessness Prevention Typology** (Gaetz et al., 2018):*

1. ***Structural Prevention***: *legislation, policy, and investment to address risks of homelessness and increase social equality. Examples include: legislating housing as a human right, adhering to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, poverty reduction strategies, and income supports.*
2. ***Systems Prevention***: *breaking barriers and enhancing access to services and supports. This includes transition supports for those leaving public institutions, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, and child protection systems.*
3. ***Early Intervention***: *strategies designed to act early and address the risk of homelessness, as well as provide crisis intervention to those who have recently experienced homelessness. Examples include: effective outreach, coordinated intake and assessment, client-centered case management, and shelter diversion.*
4. ***Eviction Prevention***: *a type of early intervention, programs designed to keep people stably housed and help them avoid eviction. Examples include: landlord/tenant mediation, rental assistance, emergency financial assistance, and legal advice and representation.*
5. ***Housing Stabilization***: *supporting people who have experienced homelessness to find and maintain housing. This includes Housing First and supports to enhance health and well-being, education and employment, and social inclusion.*
6. ***Duty to assist***: *a statutory responsibility to help youth at risk with an obligation to ensure that adults in the lives of young people are able to provide supports to help youth avoid homelessness, or direct them to services and supports that can do so."*

This project seeks to support a wide range of prevention efforts through data infrastructure development in Canada. Prevention efforts are the real goal of our roadmap, using data as a tool to inform these efforts. There is a strong support for preventing youth homelessness in Canada across policies and interest holders (Gaetz, S, 2023).

2.4 What is youth homelessness prevention data infrastructure?

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 is used. When we discuss data infrastructure, we refer to a wide range of different types of data that can be used to inform youth homelessness prevention. This data crosses the different types of youth homelessness prevention, such as: 1) *primary prevention data* from schools to inform programs

that support youth well-being and prevent homelessness; 2) *secondary prevention data* from shelters that identifies risk for chronic youth homelessness and helps direct early supports to prevent this, and 3) *tertiary prevention data* from shelters that directs supports that prevent continued chronic homelessness for youth. It also involves data to understand the extent of youth homelessness (e.g., such as youth shelter counts or Point-in-Time counts) to understand how well ongoing efforts are working. As a more feasible primary source of data to pursue, *research and evaluation data* informs the design of programs and policies to prevent homelessness, while keeping data collection to a more reasonable extent. One example of this is from the research funded by Making the Shift to strategically inform prevention. Finally, *administrative data analysis* of linked cross-system data (e.g., data that cross education, child-welfare, and emergency shelter programs) can inform system-level solutions to prevent youth homelessness.

2.5 Some promising data infrastructure in Canada for prevention

Our goal is to build a better use of data infrastructure to help break the cycle of youth homelessness and prevent it before it occurs. We found many aligned recent developments in Canadian data infrastructure, with much that can still be done to move towards stronger data infrastructure that effectively informs youth homelessness prevention. We start with infrastructure that shows promise in preventing youth homelessness. This list is not exhaustive of all promising efforts.

2.5.1 An increase in youth homelessness prevention data

First and foremost, we identified the Making the Shift initiative as an important development in youth homelessness prevention efforts that has generated research and evaluation data that can inform change. It funded 39 projects that span methods and prevention typologies to inform future efforts around youth homelessness prevention (Making the Shift, 2025). The Making the Shift initiative contributes strong early steps towards the creation of data infrastructure to support youth homelessness prevention. It also contributed to data infrastructure development by providing training on how to do youth homelessness prevention research, building necessary connections for the work, and building capacity for the next generation of researchers to engage in this research and evaluation.

2.5.2 Many strong collaborations

We heard of many collaborations across organizations and sectors that can support youth homelessness prevention efforts, with some beginning to seek and use data to support these efforts. For example, the [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#) built a model to coordinate services to serve youth well-being and prevent youth homelessness). Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario uses standardized questionnaires to support services; designed a collaborative data system to coordinate across sites; and created a shared research lab. Their data sharing is youth-centred, being based on youth input. Collaborative youth hubs also exist in other provinces/territories under various names (Foundry, 2025; *Integrated Youth Services*, 2025). On the community level, the [Youth Agency Collaboration (YAC)](#) is working to coordinate across services to better serve homeless youth in Edmonton. They coordinated service delivery during the pandemic using data; created youth centred indicators; and are working to create a shared data space. As a non-youth specific example of collaboration, the Community Information Exchange (CIE) model is spreading across

Canada to support *closed-loop referrals*, where service providers know if referrals were followed through, in efforts to coordinate on service provision in a community (Community Connection, 2025). These are just a few promising initiatives that represent a priority seen across Canada to increase collaboration via data sharing and/or integration, which can better serve the holistic needs of youth and facilitate prevention.

2.5.3 Improving homelessness data

Other promising data infrastructure developments centre around data systems that can inform homelessness services directly and systems-level decisions around homelessness prevention. Related to the former, the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) has been developed to support the provision of homelessness services across Canada. Most provinces and territories are using it or a similar system due to federal and provincial mandates. In a new development, the supporter of HIFIS, Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, is working to improve the quality of this data and move towards the ability to report monthly on shelter use in Reaching Home funded communities. These communities are also mandated to use their data and By-Name-Lists to support *coordinated access* of housing supports, increasing collaboration around housing support access. However, interest holders discussed that further development is needed to realize to potential of these data management systems, especially around informing prevention. Many communities mentioned they are still learning how to effectively do coordinated access, with more advanced communities sometimes expressing positive results (CAEH, 2021, 2025; Nichols & Martin, 2024). While most communities do not share HIFIS and coordinated access data across their province/territory, Saskatoon has done this across the province (Homelessness Information Partnership Saskatchewan, 2025), with others interested in building such sharing to coordinate across shelters.

Using Homelessness Information Management System data (e.g., HIFIS), some groups and data centres have explored linking homeless shelter usage data on the provincial level to other provincial data. For example, the BC Data Innovation Program linked data provided by HIFIS systems to various other sectors' data (e.g., corrections, education, income supports, child welfare); anonymized the data; and supports its use for research on how to support individuals in BC. This data is being used to inform systems' level discussion on the provision of homelessness and housing services (Government of British Columbia, 2024), including on youth homelessness prevention (Government of British Columbia, 2025). A similar effort is being explored in Manitoba and may become possible in other provinces in the future. As another example of linkage, Statistics Canada linked Alberta homelessness data to tax file data as a demonstration project (Dionne et al., 2023). This data is linkable to other national data housed in Statistics Canada that can inform systems level prevention and has potential to fill capacity gaps for provinces without data centres. Nationally, data centre efforts are being supported through leading efforts from Health Research Data Network (HRDN) to increase health-related research across Canada, including increasing data linkage. On a smaller scale, examples exist of community shelter data being linked to other housing and sector data, to show the effect of programs and inform if they fulfill their mandate to prevent homelessness (Kneebone et al., 2023).

2.6 Gaps in data for youth homelessness prevention

2.6.1 A need to further improve homelessness data

Despite many promising developments, we also identified many areas where data infrastructure could be improved to better inform prevention. As one area for improvement, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada released a report in 2022 discussing limitations with current national homelessness data (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022). The report discussed goals set by the federal government to greatly reduce homelessness and implement *coordinated access* with data, coordinating across communities to connect individuals to housing. They discussed that data was not available to track accountability for this goal in a timely way, which was further impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also discussed that goals for coordinated access were unlikely to happen in time for the targeted dates. While the Government of Canada responded well to the audit and is attempting to correct identified issues, the issues do point to limitations with the current system. In particular, the timelines for reporting to track progress are still behind other jurisdictions. For example, [Australia has very high-quality monthly data](#) from reporting from all homelessness service providers across the country, as compared to Canada which is just now moving towards the ability for monthly reporting in Reaching Home funded communities, but not other homelessness services and shelters. As another example, the United States has yearly Point-in-Time counts to track homelessness over time, compared to Canada's biannual counts. These faster timelines and more frequent counts make it easier to dynamically track the effect of policy decisions and pivot as needed. Finally, while coordinated access is a step forward, it is still in development and currently does not intend to include coordination across communities or with other services outside of the homelessness system.

2.6.2 Gaps in youth data

Critically, we found substantial gaps in *youth* homelessness data. First, we found that shelter data from child-youth (i.e., under 18) were often not included within shelter usage counts. Part of this seems to stem from the source of funding and policies for younger youth, which are provided by youth systems such as the child welfare system (M. Russell et al., 2023). Second, Point-in-Time counts miss inclusion of most younger youth homelessness, as youth are more likely to be hidden homelessness. Guides on youth homelessness counts have been developed, but do not expect to truly count youth homelessness (Government of British Columbia, 2024). As a complimentary method, the [Canadian Housing Survey](#) exists to estimate hidden homelessness but lacks sufficient data on youth and across provinces to be useful to understand youth homelessness. This issue is exacerbated due to the difficulty of reaching youth in surveys and the inability of surveys to adequately reach hard to reach populations, such as individuals that are currently homeless. Supplementing these limitations, surveys have been created to understand youth being supported across larger areas around their experiences with homelessness, although they acknowledge they cannot cover all youth (Smith et al., 2023).

Another critical gap identified was in data related to *early* youth homelessness prevention, especially on risks for homelessness earlier in youths' trajectories. Further data is needed on risks for homelessness from youth specific sectors, such as K-12 education, child welfare, and youth corrections, including on

critical transition points between systems serving youth. This gap requires a massive undertaking to address. Furthermore, supports are largely missing to address identified prevention needs.

2.6.3 Gaps in data collection processes

Data infrastructure gaps were identified in this project around the ethical use of and community engagement around data. Both were discussed as priorities from project interest holders, matching recent developments in research and government policy. First, interest holders, including youth, discussed that current consent processes around data and its use often did not meet standards for informed consent. For example, youth indicated they did not know how data would be used, that the language used in consent was too difficult to understand, and consent was sometimes not really a choice, in that youth felt they needed to provide it to get services. Second, while many communities discussed the importance of community engagement in research and data infrastructure, especially around lived experience, community engagement was discussed as currently not being done enough and requiring more support to be conducted well. Finally, a big gap was identified around Indigenous data. While many discussed the importance of putting governance and ownership of Indigenous data in their hands (e.g., OCAP), and many organizations discussed starting to build strategies around how to engage Indigenous populations, these processes were still in early development. We expect that Indigenous data strategies will continue to develop in the upcoming years.

Further gaps, opportunities, and examples of data infrastructure are highlighted in the recommendations section below.

3. Making use of the roadmap

3.1 What is the roadmap?

The roadmap is a *tool* to support upcoming development of data infrastructure for youth homelessness prevention in Canada. This roadmap represents three years (ending in late 2024) of community engagement and learning around data infrastructure that informs youth homelessness prevention, as well as further strategic thinking around the feasibility of steps forward. It provides many interest holder-led thoughts and ideas for how to move forward towards better data infrastructure. It discusses various examples across Canada and the world of strong data infrastructure to consider, and provides options, knowing that not everything can be changed at once. To help decide next steps, it highlights feasible and important steps to do. In the larger picture, it provides thoughts on how the work might be governed and funded, knowing that governance will develop over time and is dependent on what is being done.

The roadmap has multiple parts, each housed on its website (https://policywise.com/a-data-roadmap-for-preventing-youth-homelessness/): 1) the final report, which is the roadmap in detail (i.e., this document); 2) a summary report, which introduces the roadmap in a more accessible way; 3) supplementary reports, which discuss findings from the main learning phases of the project in depth; 4) interest holder briefs, which discuss some more immediate things that can be done to move forward on

data infrastructure; 5) academic publications, that supplement findings; and 6) interviews and webinars introducing the roadmap, with the final roadmap webinar to be shared in March 2025.

3.2 What the roadmap is not

The roadmap is not intended to prescribe a fixed or definitive sequence of steps forward to create strong youth homelessness prevention data infrastructure. While our scan of the current state of data infrastructure was extensive, it will have missed some initiatives as it was not meant to be exhaustive. Similarly, while our interest holder engagement was wide, it was not possible to represent the broad diversity of experiences and knowledge among the many intersecting interest holders impacted by homelessness. A wide range of thoughts were offered in our engagement and are a basis of the roadmap recommendations, but opinions differed among engaged interest holders and further divergence is expected among those not engaged. Additional engagement and ongoing monitoring of the landscape is needed as data infrastructure advances to inform the evolution of this roadmap so that it adapts to interest holder needs and priorities, as well as changing culture and technological advancements.

3.3 How to use the roadmap?

We support a wide range of use cases through our roadmap deliverables. Some of these intended use cases are described below.

For those looking to understand the roadmap learnings on a high level to see if they are interested in specific aspects, we recommend referring to the summary roadmap and its related webinar, that explains the roadmap briefly. The roadmap presentation in the Making the Shift conference (i.e., the Prevention of Youth Homelessness International Conference in 2025) contains similar content to the webinar. Based on your review of these, you can direct yourself to the roadmap final report or interest holder briefs to learn more about details and your place in them.

For those looking to understand the roadmap learnings in-depth and their rationale, we recommend the roadmap final report (this document). It can be read in various ways, such as

1) reading the full report to understand all details and their context;
2) focusing on recommendations most to your interest, although we recommend reading the context sections 1-3 first; and
3) focusing on immediate steps in sections 5-7, including how work should be done stylistically or governed. Note that reviewing the context sections 1-3 and the interest holder briefs will provide more information that may relate to your perspectives.

For those looking to focus on their perspective on how to move forward, we recommend starting with the interest holder briefs most related to your perspectives. If you need more detail on what actions that you can take, you can refer to the relevant sections in the roadmap final report.

For those looking to understand specific learnings more in-depth, we recommend the supplementary reports, the "Designing Data Infrastructure to Prevent Youth Homelessness in Canada" webinar from November 2023, and the academic publications. As a reference, 1) the supplementary reports detail all learning activities before the design sessions; 2) the webinar describes main project learnings before the updated Canada policy scan and the design sessions; and 3) the academic publications, currently in review and revisions (as of February 2025), which consider the intersection between the perspectives of community service providers and youth, and detail how the roadmap was designed and the reasoning for this process.

3.3.1 The roadmap as a living document

We note that the roadmap work is meant to serve as a starting point for 'living documents' on how to move forward on youth homelessness prevention data infrastructure development. As data infrastructure is developed and governance formed, it is important to regularly check in with interest holders to develop up-to-date plans. We expect that the roadmap would need to evolve over time to remain relevant to changing culture and priorities.

4. Methods

The roadmap is based on interest holder engagement with over 130 individuals through various learning activities in the project. It also integrates substantial comments and perspectives from outside formal learning activities, engaging with those seeking to support homeless individuals and improve youth outcomes. Our activities drew on the experience from various interest holders in the youth homelessness sector (i.e., youth with lived experience of homelessness, Indigenous communities, community service providers, researchers, and government workers). We also engaged with youth with lived experienced of homelessness with varied backgrounds, such as Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, immigrant, and black youth. Extra consideration was given to *administrative data* as a priority topic identified by Making the Shift leadership. Policy Wise has 15+ years organizational experience working with administrative data that we draw upon as we discuss its opportunities and drawbacks.

> *Administrative data* is collected by organizations for their operations and reporting. This data may be demographics, characteristics, and other information. Youth homelessness community service providers and other sectors, such as education, mental health, and justice, collect administrative data regularly. Data across sectors and organizations can be linked together using identifiers (e.g., names and dates of birth) to understand trajectories into homelessness and what factors may be addressed to prevent homelessness. Identifying information is typically removed from linked data to protect individuals during analysis.

4.1 An overview of project activities and their goals

Our activities and methods were supported by input from a cross-Canada, cross-interest holder advisory team. We met four times to discuss project decisions. We discussed: 1) the project design and how to be

strategic on meeting interest holder needs; 2) engagement plans with interest holders; 3) how to make the roadmap useful to interest holders and increase its impact; and 4) how to share the roadmap effectively and set things in motion after the project ends. We also met with Making the Shift leadership and an arm-length liaison to connect the work to the Making the Shift vision and streamline future action.

To create a foundation for our recommendations, we advanced various learning activities on: 1) key existing administrative data infrastructure in Canada, which revealed existing options to be prioritized; 2) promising practices and processes around administrative data infrastructure, which provided leading practices for data; 3) Making the Shift projects, where project holders shared their experiences with data from ongoing prevention research; 4) community service provider experiences, which told us the reality and needs of the people in the frontline; 5) youth with lived experiences, which told us the reality and needs of youth; and 6) current Canada policies, which revealed connections between current policy priorities and emerging priorities for the roadmap. In addition, our team regularly sought opportunities to understand ongoing trends and opinions among interest holders in the homelessness sector and youth supports, through webinars and meetings. We synthesized learnings and held sessions with interest holder groups to expand on learnings and further develop specific solutions. We also engaged with Indigenous people and organizations as part of learning activities and design sessions. Finally, we synthesized all project findings to create the principles and recommendations introduced in this report. Please see Appendix A for more description of project activities and the supplementary materials on th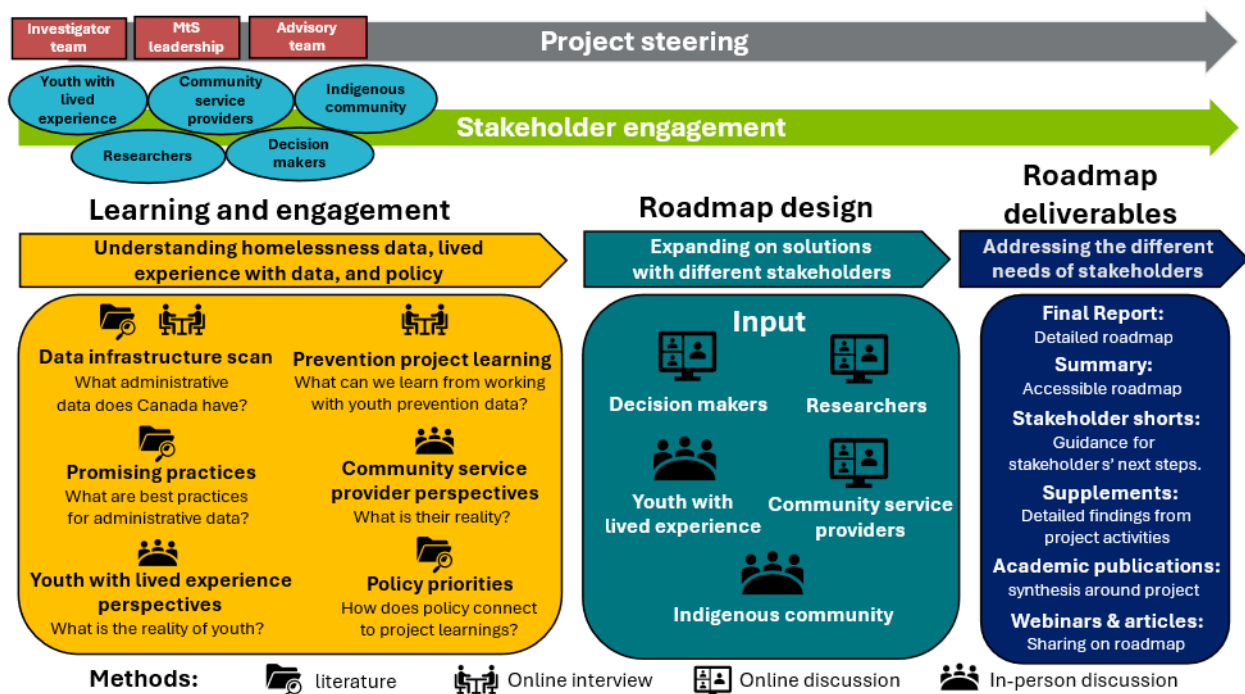e website for more details on the main learning activities (https://policywise.com/a-data-roadmap-for-preventing-youth-homelessness/).

Figure 1. *Project activities and deliverables.*

5. Roadmap principles

We offer seven principles that characterize the desired future state of data infrastructure in the youth homelessness ecosystem: community-centred, collaborative, supported, inclusive, ethical, feasible, and sustainable. The principles emerged from input from interest holders about how future work should be done, current Canadian data culture, and promising data practices. In the recommendations below, principles that are particularly relevant are highlighted. Some are priorities in Canada that are still progressing, such that we expect them to develop further in the future.

5.1 Community-centred

We need to address the perspectives and needs of the different people and organizations involved in data infrastructure, such as youth with lived experience, Indigenous communities, community service providers, researchers, and decisionmakers. We should seek human-centred solutions that match real-world experiences and needs of people involved in data collection and use. This perspective was voiced across interest holder types.

Researcher: "And so given… the real importance of frontline workers, I mean, it's our responsibility as data people to support those frontline workers as much as possible."

Community service provider: "We want to make sure that the way that we collect information is also resonating with our young people."

Researcher: "Even a few years ago, I think most data centers that housed multiple data sources are looking at ways to ensure that there is engagement and interpretation support provided by community members…"

Indigenous community service provider: "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."

Youth: "It's important to actually have those voices present who are affected, directly affected, but also to well beyond and to go the, to physically go to the spaces where it is needed. And not look at it as just like I said, like it's still a statistics is a statistic. But also at the same time, like I said from earlier in the conversation, to honor those stories as stories, and not as like, just like numbers. But bringing that, and bringing those voices to these conversations with these people who make these changes."

5.2 Collaborative

Collaboration is necessary to address the complex and multi-system nature of youth homelessness. Collaboration was discussed in many ways, such as: collaborating across community service providers; collaborating across systems to address youth needs; and collaborating across interest holders, including building tables to connect researchers to community service providers. Strong relationships form the backbone of collaboration. These relationships may be between organizations; between governments and their ministries; and with youth, who need to be able to trust those serving them and be supported in times of need. Data sharing was discussed as a way to support collaboration.

Community service provider: *"I really truly believe that there needs to be more collaboration and more sharing. "*

Indigenous community member: *"I think personal information being shared between organizations is okay as long as it's okay with the person who gave the information in the first place. But it also helps with knowing the situation for the person in question and helps not repeating your story, I think, not having to repeat the whole thing at another organization."*

5.3 Supported

We regularly heard about a lack of sufficient funding and support structures for strong data collection in current data infrastructure to develop them to their potential. Support was discussed in multiple ways. For example, providing sufficient training for staff on data collection; training and funding for quality research; funding to engage in proper engagement with communities and youth; funding to allow robust homelessness counts across Canada; and funding to build enough housing to house people in need. This contrasts with other countries that excelled in the development and implementation of data infrastructure, where well-funded support was discussed as a key enabler. Support is particularly important with rising costs and struggles with staff turnover (PolicyWise for Children & Families, 2025).

Community service provider: *"We are a 24-hour operation, we've got rotating staff, so even just bring out staff together alone, right? We're paying hourly staff. So just funding and also connecting with the government, finding space to even have training for staff."*

Community service provider: *"I think we're dealing with a lot of youth that are struggling with undiagnosed and diagnosed mental health. And in order to get an understanding of how to collect accurate and appropriate data, the first trainings we need to assist with staff. I'm not sure if anyone's seen Mental Health First Aid training lately, but it's literally videos from the 80s."*

Researcher: *"I wish that there was more emphasis specifically with early academics and people doing graduate study work of more work and more clear training and expectations on how to do [community engagement]. "*

5.4 Inclusive

Many interest holders discussed addressing the diverse needs of youth in data infrastructure solutions. The experience of youth can differ greatly by their backgrounds. Interest holders discussed varied experiences and needs among different subgroups of youth, such as Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, immigrant, and black youth. Youth of differing backgrounds reported experiencing data collection differently. For example, Indigenous youth described that data collection is currently very Western. They hoped for a more culturally appropriate, narrative approach.

Indigenous community member: *"When it comes to stories and information from young people, it's always important to remember that us as Indigenous people are. It's our birthright to honor our stories, to honour our creation stories, to honor our ways of knowing, so all of us as indigenous people are natural born storytellers. It's our way of life. It's where we get our knowledge, our teachings, our ceremonies, everything has a story. Everything has a spirit. And I think that a big part of understanding*

that is that the youth, like us as a youth, are not only future leaders, but we're the present leaders too. And it's the voices of the youth and their stories that really carries a huge spirit."

Youth: *"So you know we have our preferred name and preferred pronoun. So a lot of people, when we tell them, It's my preferred name, they just take it very, like very easy. So we feel very disrespected. They said no, no, but it's the name on your ID, I will call you with that. Because you know, that's the name we'll be taking forward."*

Youth also discussed a need for inclusivity in definitions of youth homelessness. The current Canadian definition of youth homelessness "refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016)." Youth discussed that the definition leaves out their first homelessness situation, excluding situations that could have led to an earlier intervention. Inclusion of different situations helps build connections between systems and sectors serving youth needs.

Youth: *"By that definition, I wouldn't have been homeless when I first came to this program…. Yes, I had been living with my dad at the time because I had no other alternative. I didn't have any permanent residency so I couldn't even have a chance of getting a job or anything like that."*

Youth: *"I definitely think that safety and like a feeling of safety, either physically or emotionally should be added to that definition. And I also feel like independent living from parent should be completely removed. Because while yes, that is what's typically thought of as homelessness, like, doesn't have a house to stay in... You can still be living with, like somebody that it's just like, hard to escape from, like, their domestic situations and stuff like that, where that definition would no longer apply to them."*

5.5 Ethical

Interest holders often discussed putting priority on ethical data infrastructure. It should place youth needs first and actively work to prevent harm. For example, interest holders discussed youth stigma experienced from current data collection processes or exclusion of youth from services based on replies. Ethics also plays a factor in data collection, as youth need to trust data collectors to feel comfortable offering replies to some questions, that may direct what services can be offered.

Informed consent is the standard for youth and adult homelessness data collection in Canada. Data infrastructure should value the rights of youth and place them as decisionmakers on how data will be used to support them. The reality is that current processes often do not represent real informed consent in that both youth and service providers see data collection as not really a choice, but necessary to get services. Truly informed consent should detail how data will be used in accessible language and remove barriers to saying no.

Youth: *"Because you need a shelter, right, you're desperate to get a shelter. So, if you need the service, you can't say no".*

Youth: *"I don't even think the most relevant thing is what the questions are, but who is getting the answers... That way, you can be confident if you're telling someone you trust, and you're telling someone you don't trust."*

Youth: *"For example, if I'm homeless I don't necessarily want that information to be kept long term. If I don't know, say you're being interviewed for a job and they look up your name and somehow they find like a government kind of thing and they're like, oh this person's been homeless before, like I feel like that would."*

Community service provider: *"I feel like we're always trying to improve the way we collect data without us winding up asking a youth multiple questions that are the same by multiple staff, and then they wind up being re-traumatized by having to tell their story over and over and over again. So I think that given, trying to be really conscious of trauma informed teamwork practices..."*

5.6 Feasible

The roadmap prioritizes starting with simple, impactful changes to Canada's current data infrastructure and promising next steps, while keeping in mind larger possibilities. We heard that youth, community service providers, and Indigenous communities were often past capacity. We introduce solutions first that work within the capacity of interest holders or remove burden, rather than adding responsibilities. We highlight ongoing policies and initiatives that serve as a more feasible starting point.

Community service provider: *"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."*

Community service provider: *"...to recognize, like, you know, there is certainly a burden on a community agency, to interacting with university researchers, you know. There's letters of support, you know, which can be done relatively quickly. But, you know, for all the work that I do, it's not just ethics, like the ... requires like a legal data sharing agreement to be in place between the university and the agency, you know, that talks about how we're going to access their secondary data and keep it secure and stuff like that."*

5.7 Sustainable

Many of the recommendations in the roadmap require sustained efforts to move towards the goal to build strong data to prevent youth homelessness. Unfortunately, current funding often suffers from a focus on innovative pilot projects. We identify projects with existing, sustained funding to build off. We also discuss interest holders' thoughts on more sustainable approaches to fund and govern the work. Many interest holders mentioned the need to build off Making the Shift work and sustain the connections it built.

Researcher: *"...like now you're tied to government funding cycles, elections, having to wait to secure funding and, like for community members that we've worked with that have to then wait, we don't know if like, it's January, we don't know if in March, you're going to have money to continue your program."*

Researcher: *"How do we bring a collective voice to the ways that government funds community programs more broadly, and our tendency to chronically pilot things and never actually sustain them when they're working?"*

Researcher: *"Let's drop the pilots, not everything needs to be innovative. Not everything needs to be, there's things that work, let's figure out how to invest in things that aren't necessarily sparkly and shiny and new and innovative. And like, let's just focus on what we know is working and how to pull that data in a reliable way that will give us like longitudinal information to inform really good decision making."*

6. Support Framework

We held discussion with interest holders on their view of how this work should be governed. While a comprehensive governance framework will need to be developed in collaboration with interest holders, we share foundational considerations here to serve as a starting point. The governance model should evolve over time as data infrastructure matures.

6.1 Governing this work

Making the Shift should be considered as a starting point for the roadmap journey, although it is nearing completion. It has built many critical interest holder relationships that are the basis for the success of the next steps in the roadmap and its learnings are a foundation that need to be further built upon for the next steps. Making the Shift is currently in the process of transition planning and there is a clear opportunity to connect it to the roadmap—as the two are perhaps most clearly aligned in goals based on all groups discussed by interest holders.

To govern this work, a cooperative, cross-sectoral, and cross-interest holder governance team is needed. This team may be most successful as a continuation of Making the Shift or a new group setup for the specific purpose of coordinating and sustaining data infrastructure to inform youth homelessness prevention. Various organizations have aligned goals, but their work differs too much from that of what is proposed for this work. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada are perhaps most aligned as a starting point for this work, due to their connections to youth homelessness prevention and with Making the Shift. Building a new organization benefits by being able to set its strategic direction and purposefully align fundraising to roadmap goals. Dedicated, full-time staff would be best as work progresses, although the work may need to start first as an initiative supported by various interest holders and champions with other roles. Various interest holders need to be engaged and sit on committees but would struggle to support the extent of this work as a "side of desk job." The main governing body should: play a role in setting the tone of the work; ensure it follows roadmap principles; build capacity for interest holders; and fund various aligned activities and research.

Governance will require different subcommittees/groups to support each recommendation, as they involve different interest holders and scopes of work, which may evolve as recommendations advance. Natural leaders of different areas of the work can be informed by the interest holders supporting each recommendation and further modified based on the scope of work. Garnering buy-in for comprehensive governance can start with early projects with limited governance that are expanded by showing benefits of the work and building a case to scale up. Following a community engaged approach, interest holders in each recommendation should lead and provide input, making decisions on activities to advance them.

Terms of reference and set lengths of service help non-full time committee members know their responsibilities.

While connections across the levels of government are critical to the success of implementing the roadmap, the project should be led from outside the government to protect its intention to be community-focused and ensure it reflects community needs. The governance should connect leaders of related work in Canada, such as the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, the Ministry of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and Health Research Data Network (HRDN). Governance needs representation from equity-focused partners, youth, elders, and organizations. The work itself should connect across systems to reduce duplication of efforts. One group identified as having a role in supporting this work is Statistics Canada due to their aligned mandate. Of importance, while a complexity of required governance is essential to the success of this work, it is also a risk as it can delay processes as interest holders possess differing goals. This is why it is suggested that each target improvement has its own governance that includes interest holders immediately impacted by the steps and activities required to achieve it.

6.2 Funding this work

Sustainable funding is critical to the success of this work. Current work suffers from what was called 'pilot-itus', where funding systems regularly fund work and research that demonstrates novel solutions but does not offer a way to continue work after it completes. Various types of funding were identified, such as academic funding streams, community foundations, different levels of government, and philanthropic funding, all with their own strengths and weaknesses. Strong funding that is sustainable requires dedicated staff to apply for it and support progression. One discussed limitation of current data infrastructure was a lack of sufficient funding to truly implement data collection change. Expanding funding increases success, but options for taking next steps with limited resources are also provided.

One funding model that that fits the goal of sustainability is diverse funding across different types of funding sources, pooled to address applicable project recommendations. Funding will need to differ among recommendations and steps proposed. This increases relevance to funders, with each step forward having different timelines and requirements. Sustainable revenue may need to be incremental, building off successes as the roadmap implementation develops. Matched funding across levels of governments was achieved in some jurisdictions implementing successful large-scale data infrastructure change. One efficient way to fund this work is to collaborate with existing data infrastructure to expand, pooling the dollars available for each solution. For example, there is an opportunity to work with already funded and established data centres across the provinces and territories to to target multisystem issues like youth homelessness. This approach is more cost efficient than building systems anew and keeps current important established relationships to governments providing the data, which facilitates connections with data providers and program directors that provide necessary context on what the data means and support policy development.

Funders also help data infrastructure develop by requiring and supporting changes in reporting as part of funding responsibilities. However, it is important for funders to engage with the community to make sure that reporting is useful to the community, is less burdensome, aligns across funders, and is properly supported.

7. Discussing next steps for data infrastructure

Before detailing recommendations, we offer suggested next steps based on the recommendations. We discuss: 1) what can be done now to use data infrastructure to support prevention; and 2) what should be considered in the near future to work towards impactful data infrastructure to support youth homelessness prevention. This section synthesises recommendations, prioritizing actionable steps and those with more potential to support youth homelessness prevention. More in depth discussion of recommendations is in the following section "8. Recommendations – In detail".

7.1 Realizing ongoing data efforts

7.1.1 Share widely on current approaches to prevent youth homelessness

The end of the Making the Shift initiative marks an important opportunity to learn from the completion of a wide range of youth homelessness prevention efforts to realize their potential. Thus, first we should maximize the sharing of learnings from Making the Shift projects and other ongoing efforts for youth homelessness prevention. Linked to the roadmap, we recommend sharing widely on learnings from: 1) different types of prevention and how data can effectively support them; 2) how to collaborate around youth homelessness prevention and how data supports this; 3) how to use emergency shelter and housing data for prevention; and 4) how administrative data can inform prevention efforts.

7.1.2 Share on how to use data to inform youth homelessness prevention

Second, we recommend sharing learnings from Making the Shift projects and other ongoing efforts on how to collect data effectively to inform youth homelessness prevention. Linked to Making the Shift development, training is needed on how to: 1) do community engagement with interest holders, such as with youth with lived experience, communities, and Indigenous communities, to seek relevant prevention solutions and data; 2) use data to support collaboration, including thoughts on ethical sharing, governance, and what is allowed for sharing; 3) ethically collect data from youth, especially around informed consent, preventing harm, and removing barriers to service access regardless of consent; and 4) collect data in a way that makes youth comfortable (e.g., training on sensitive data collection, such as on gender and ethnicity, or during times of trauma). Training is also needed on how to do research and evaluation with youth and how to impactfully use the resulting data for change. The commonality of the first two steps is their focus on learning from recent and ongoing efforts around data and prevention.

7.1.3 Facilitate relationships for youth homelessness prevention

Third, interest holders discussed the need to facilitate relationships for prevention efforts. These relationships support future research and community engagement. This involves supporting ongoing relationships, building new relationships, and connecting teams to create efforts around youth homelessness prevention. One idea popular with interest holders was facilitating community connection tables around youth homelessness prevention, where communities gathered to collaborate on prevention and were supported by researchers. These efforts are supported by data that helps direct collaboration efforts.

7.2 Impactful next steps for data infrastructure

As next steps, we focus on more impactful ways to build data infrastructure to support youth homelessness prevention. The efforts cannot be done all at once and may benefit from starting on a smaller scale (e.g., starting with a single community or province).

7.2.1 Expand prevention research

First, we recommend continuing strong future development of youth homelessness prevention through research and evaluation after Making the Shift ends. Part of this might entail pursuing small funding opportunities to support limited research. However, this would ideally entail the creation of a long-term or permanent centre of youth homelessness prevention research. This would fund and share on promising prevention efforts. It would support strong community engagement and community-based research to keep research and evaluation aligned with community needs. It would also support connections and relationship building as a basis of collaborative prevention efforts. Increased collaboration to serve youth was a priority area discussed across all types of interest holders in this project. As well, Indigenous-led solutions to prevention were often discussed as a priority.

7.2.2 Build better prevention data

Second, various types of priority data were discussed in this project. Unfortunately, all are quite difficult to do on a national scale and may benefit from smaller, community or provincial/territorial development first. As each are developed, leaders in these efforts could share learnings that would support future efforts. As well, considerations are needed around how to make each culturally appropriate to Indigenous peoples and communities.

The biggest priority is to develop stronger early prevention data (i.e., primary prevention and prevention earlier in youths' lives) and use it to actively prevent youth homelessness before it happens. This relates to the further development of homelessness risk data from K-12 education, child welfare, and mental health supports, and using it to direct prevention efforts. For example, Upstream Canada is using risk data in some cities to direct supports to prevent homelessness in schools. Some challenges that need to be navigated with this data are that it is often not being fully utilized, the data is from systems that do not directly work to address homelessness (e.g., education systems are focused on learning), and the data has many barriers to navigate that make it hard to collect. Despite these limitations, the potential

of this data makes it a priority with some solutions being developed by Making the Shift projects, such as Upstream Canada.

The next priority is on supporting collaborative solutions to prevent youth homelessness. This involves supporting strong relationships that are the basis of collaborative solutions and developing ways to use data collaboratively to support these efforts.

One data source that can be developed to inform solutions to prevent ongoing youth homelessness is younger youth (under 16, 18, or 19 years old, depending on the jurisdiction) shelter and housing data. This would include using youth shelter data in a youth-centred way to inform efforts to end homelessness early and working towards collecting child-youth shelter data to include within community, provincial, and federal reporting to understand the extent of younger youth homelessness, to better track how well youth homelessness efforts are working. Ongoing efforts from the Government of Canada to improve homeless shelter data and move towards monthly reporting is one potential connection for this data improvement, although similar models for child-youth shelters would need to be established.

A final priority we suggest is to further use existing cross-sectoral linked administrative data to understand youth systems use that predicts homelessness. This informs systems planning around prevention. As the data is currently quite limited, doing analyses is strategic as it helps build interest in further use of this data.
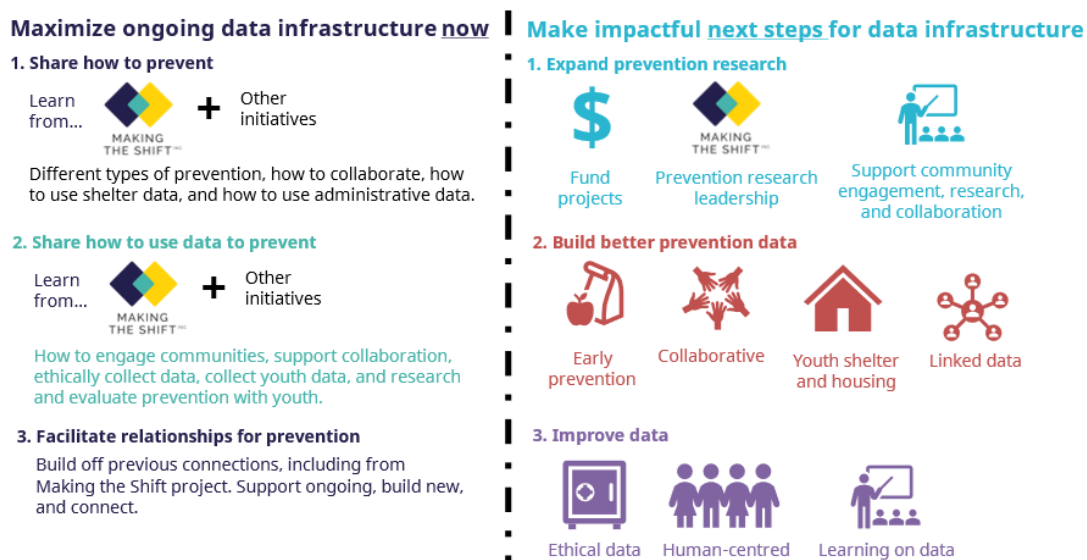
Figure 2. *Visual of recommended immediate and next steps.*

7.2.3 Improve data

The last area of work recommends sharing information on improving standards for youth data collection and use. Priority areas of work are: 1) actively supporting development around ethical youth data collection, including consent processes, preventing harm, and ensuring communities (e.g., groups the data is focused on) have a say in their data; 2) creating human-centred data that is centred around those

involved in the data and its collection, such as using youth indicators, making data collection minimal, building trust through data collection, and collecting impactful common data across organizations to inform change; and 3) supporting other learning on best practices for data infrastructure as youth homelessness prevention data is further developed.

8. Recommendations – In detail

The following recommendations detail major areas of work we learned of throughout our project. Recommendations and steps often relate to discussion from interest holders in this learning. In general, we order recommendations based on what needs to be done first and what is most feasible. While we ordered steps, not everything is linear or needs to be linear for progression. We suggest engaging with the community often as efforts progress, prioritizing what to do next and how it should be done. General guidance on what might be prioritized in terms of impact and feasibility is described in the previous section "7. Discussing next steps for data infrastructure."

As points of interest, we start with recommendations that support how the work is done: 1) being community engaged, 2) working to improve data, and 3) building up collaboration. This is due to comments across interest holders that the 'how' of data infrastructure is often more important than the data itself, as successful data infrastructure is built on relationships and community connections. In the last recommendation section, we discuss specific areas around data improvement. Recommendations are generally more feasible on a smaller scale first (e.g., community based or provincial) but can also benefit from guidance and support from larger scale insights (e.g., national or provincial governments). By setting standards and supporting them, funders can support greater change.

Recommendation 1 (R1): Build quality community engagement

Where are we at? Canada is moving towards more community engagement in research, but many roadmap interest holders could benefit from help with community engagement. The reality is that for many, community engagement is difficult to do well, underbudgeted, and can be burdensome with current capacity.

What are we aiming for? High quality community engagement to align youth homelessness prevention data changes, analyses, and research/evaluation with community realities.

Why is this necessary? Community engagement helps make data meaningful. Data infrastructure should reflect the needs and realities of involved interest holders to move forward successfully. Community engagement can inform data infrastructure in many domains, such as improving how data is collected, how it is used, and how it is interpreted. In addition, standards around engagement with each type of community can serve to build trust and increase the impact of resulting prevention efforts. For example, standards need to be further developed and shared around engagement with Indigenous communities.

R1, Step 1: Provide training on quality community engagement

The first step centres around actively providing training and support to increase quality community engagement around youth homelessness prevention data with different types of interest holders. It is based on the feedback from many interest holders on the necessity of, but difficulties faced with, doing community engagement. While many interest holders are doing great community engagement, the current reality is that many want to do it, but wish they had more guidance.

Activity explanation: As community engagement methods for youth research develop, there is a chance to pool learnings to increase the quality of community engagement moving forward. Learnings may come from various sources, such as Making the Shift research, other youth homelessness research, or literature on community engagement. Community engagement training should address youth prevention work, such as how to engage schools and school boards in data informed interventions (e.g., the Upstream Canada project). Many would benefit from learning how to engage Indigenous communities meaningfully. Resources will differ from general community engagement training as it should focus on supporting issues faced by the youth sector. Training is necessary around how to engage the community in decisions around data collection, while supporting their needs.

Multiple methods of training and support are necessary for greater impact. Recordings of webinars can increase the sharing of training materials, while providing opportunities to learn under time constraints faced by many. Training needs to be offered over time to remain relevant and connect with more people. Junior trainees are a priority as they have more potential to use community engagement over time. Mentorship models can facilitate deeper learning. When capacity is lacking, connections may be facilitated with high quality researchers and organizations that can do community engagement.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Build training materials on community engagement (easy).** Create materials to train for quality community engagement around youth prevention data and research/evaluation. Making the Shift projects and other youth homelessness research learnings on community engaged approaches can inform these materials. Create multiple modes of training materials.
2. **Train on community engagement (easy).** Share training across groups that could benefit from training on community engagement. Offer recorded webinars on different types of community engagement. Update trainings and offer them over time to connect with more interest holders and share community engagement methods as they improve. One example of Indigenous community engagement that facilitates data collection is OCAP training.
3. **Facilitate connections to community engagement experts (moderate).** Facilitate mentorship opportunities for researchers to actively work with experts to develop their community engagement abilities. When capacity to do engagement within an organization cannot be developed, facilitate connections to experts in community engagement to fill the gap.

Who is involved: Leaders in community engagement (building materials, providing training, mentoring, and helping do community engagement), researchers (being trained), and community organizations (being trained).

What is an example of this? One example of community engagement training is the [Family Engagement in Research (FER)](#) course. This course connects researchers with people with lived experience, while teaching how to do meaningful research in partnership with persons with lived experience.

Opportunities: The Making the Shift work involved training and sharing on community engagement methods, including on how to engage with youth with lived experience. Continuing this training based on Making the Shift project learnings can carry forward the legacy of the initiative.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Current data standards and policies value community engagement and lived experience.
- Community engagement methods are continuing to develop, and more people are becoming experienced in them and learning innovative methods.
- Community engagement can improve the relevance of data and research/evaluation.
- Training is relatively simple to do and can have a great impact if done well.
- Engaging communities can make data more relevant, while increasing buy-in on changes.
- There is much youth community engagement experience to build off.

What are some weaknesses?

- Many interest holders are overburdened and have limited time for training.
- Trainings need to vary widely to be relevant to the different types of community engagement needed for the roadmap work.
- Trainings may not be able to address the specific needs of different communities well.

R1, Step 2: Facilitate and motivate community engagement around data

This step builds off community engagement training, working to increase the amount of quality community engagement around data and research/evaluation. As engagement is relational, it is facilitated by connections. It also benefits from more calls for engagement and a removal of barriers.

Activity explanation: As part of Making the Shift and other existing youth homelessness work, many active partnerships with the community have been built for community engagement around data and research/evaluation. These relationships take much time to build and are a starting point for future work. For others beginning this work, connections can help them begin to engage communities. Community service providers can facilitate connections to youth with lived experience. Some relationships can be more difficult to pass on, such as Indigenous community connections that need to be established over time while honouring reciprocity.

Strong interest was expressed in building prevention community tables, where communities meet to discuss prevention, also connecting researchers with communities in need of research and evaluation. Many existing examples were mentioned to build on, with interest from researchers to support and facilitate tables. The strength of tables is that they naturally facilitate connections and teach researchers community needs, to increase the relevance of their work. However, tables require guidance and

training on how to collaborate with each other well. For example, researchers often have different goals and timelines from community organizations, that can affect collaborations.

Policies and culture have shifted towards more support for community engagement, with some funders asking for community engagement. Interest holders discussed that unfortunately, guidance on how to do this was minimal, and suffers from a lack of funding to do it well. Interest holders also discussed various barriers to community engagement. For example, limitations often exist in terms of who can be paid when being engaged. For example, Making the Shift was bound by Tri-council rules, that limited payment of underpaid postdoctoral fellows and graduate students with lived experience of homelessness for their time. As another example of a disincentive to engagement, academic researchers are often not given much merit for their community engagement in their promotion and evaluation process.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Facilitate relationships for community engagement (easy to moderate).** Facilitate connections to established relationships with community interest holders willing to be engaged (e.g., youth with lived experience, different types of community service providers, and Indigenous communities). Build youth homelessness prevention community tables, where communities gather to discuss prevention, while connecting researchers to the communities.
2. **Call for community engagement (moderate to hard).** Work with funders to put in calls for community engagement in funding around research and data. Provide clear guidance on how engagement should be done within calls. Provide more funding for engagement.
3. **Remove barriers to community engagement (moderate to hard).** Work to remove barriers on how funding can be used to pay community members being engaged. Work with universities to change how academics are evaluated on community engagement.

Who is involved: Funders (asking for engagement and funding it), groups with community connections (supporting connections), researchers (doing more community engaged research and connecting with tables), and universities (changing how academics are evaluated on engagement).

What are some examples of this? [Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research (SPOR)](link) facilitates connections with persons with lived experience for research on health topics. SPOR Networks support community engagement around various research topics, including related child and youth topics. These groups can be a place of learning about youth community engagement.

Making the Shift expanded community-based research in youth homelessness prevention. It promoted more community engagement through its funding calls and provided guidance on how it should look.

Opportunities: Making the Shift and its partnering groups, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Away Home Canada, have established many connections that can facilitate future community engagement.

Other opportunities:

- Community engagement is a rising a standard in Canada, now discussed in various funding opportunities.

- Some funding exists around community engaged research.
- Community tables exist, although few were discussed around youth homelessness prevention.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Many researchers want to involve community more to increase the impact of their work.
- It increases the impact of funding asks that discuss community engagement.
- Guidance on community engagement in funding calls can remove ambiguity on expectations.
- Increasing community engagement increases the relevance of work and allows the development of more ethical, community driven solutions.
- Making engagement part of academic evaluation removes barriers to research for academics working with the community.

What are some weaknesses?

- Risks to relationships exist if they are handed off without thought and things don't go well.
- Interest holders may be overwhelmed by too much community engagement.
- Community engagement can be time consuming and expensive.
- Capacity to do community engagement is limited for many.
- Changing academic culture will be difficult.

Recommendation 2 (R2): Support better data collection and use

Where are we at? Various data is collected across Canada that could be useful for homelessness prevention ([see Sections 2.5 and 2.6 on state of Canadian data](#)). However, the consistency and quality of this data varies greatly and could be improved. As a barrier, there is frequent staff turnover in some sectors supporting youth, making it difficult to maintain high standards for data collection. Researchers and community organizations are interested in youth homelessness prevention but would benefit from more support in its data collection and use.

What are we aiming for? Improved data collection and use to inform youth homelessness prevention. Growth may progress differently among the types of data and sectors involved. Proposed changes support the data discussed across the data areas in [Recommendation 4](#).

Why is this necessary? Having strong, reliable data can improve its ability to inform prevention. Systematic problems or omissions with data can mislead and reinforce issues faced by stigmatized populations. High quality data collection and better knowledge use can reduce burden on interest holders by decreasing the need to repeat studies, although replication of findings is not necessarily a bad thing. More effective sharing of findings can increase its impact.

R2, Aspect 1: Provide training on data collection and use

This aspect discusses various types of training that can improve the impact of youth homelessness data. One activity that supports strong data infrastructure is training on data collection, research, and use. Simply put, data is more impactful when it is collected and used to its potential. Training will differ

depending on the type of data collected. This does not mean that data collectors and consumers aren't doing their best with what they have or that current data is not useful, but that additional support would help further realize the potential of data. Training is needed over time as community staff and methods change. Leading data infrastructure groups across the world with high quality data mentioned that most of their ongoing resources were used to offer training and support to those collecting data. Training is also beneficial on research/evaluation methods and how to share findings.

Activity explanation: Strong data collection is supported by well trained staff and researchers. Interest holders, including youth, discussed the need for better training on trauma-informed approaches to data collection and around sensitive topics for youth. As they discussed, many of the current training videos are very old and do not represent modern culture or needs. Training around data collection would benefit from more funding and cannot be one-off due to culture change and turnover of staff.

In addition, training for researchers is needed to build capacity to effectively use resulting data. Researchers can benefit from similar training to that for community staff on sensitivities of youth during data collection. Earlier career researchers/staff have more potential years to advance this work.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Train on data collection (easy to moderate).** Train on how to collect data, which will differ by the type of data. Various trainings were discussed by interest holders related to data collection, on: youth in general; youth with mental health needs; youth with trauma; and youth with different backgrounds, such as by gender identity and mental health status. Training should make the value of data collection clear.
2. **Train on research and evaluation (easy to moderate)**. Train community service providers and academic researchers on youth prevention research and evaluation. Provide best practices on how researchers should work with youth and communities. Train on how to share findings for impact, such as faster sharing when working with community service providers.
3. **Provide sufficient funding to support ongoing training (moderate to hard).** Due to limited schedules and high staff turnover, funding is needed to provide regular training over time. While general training is useful, specific training is also needed for individuals and organizations.

Who is involved: Funders (funding and supporting training), leaders in data collection (supporting training), community organizations (providing training and being trained), and researchers (providing training and being trained).

What are some examples of this? The Australian Government collects data monthly from 1,700+ homeless serving agencies in Australia in their [Specialist Homelessness Services Collection](#). They provide training to organizations to support high quality data. They work with agencies to show the value of the data.

One community service provider discussed the current difficulty in keeping staff up to date with training. To address this issue, they created a learning management system to support staff training on data collection during the time staff have available, which can be quite different based on their shift.

Some opportunities:

- Making the Shift has provided the chance for researchers to develop skills in youth prevention research, which can inform future data collection and research.
- There are many ongoing initiatives around supporting diversity in Canada.
- There is an ongoing initiative in the Government of Canada to improve data collection and move towards monthly reporting across Reaching Home communities.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Youth feel more comfortable when staff ask questions more appropriately.
- Training can help staff and researchers be more engaged in data collection. Knowing the use and value of data increases the chances of strong data collection.
- Teaching how to do prevention research can improve its quality in the future.

What are some weaknesses?

- Strong data collection can be expensive to support over time, especially due to turnover.
- Organizations and researchers may have different needs for training.
- The primary job of staff is to support clients, which can compete with data collection.

R2, Aspect 2: Activities to improve data collection

This set of activities discusses priority issues around improving data collection introduced by interest holders, and the solutions they proposed. They discussed pressing ethics issues, such as improving informed consent and protecting youth in data sharing; and the need to match interest holders' realities through more human centred data collection. Each of these are also connected to aspects of *Recommendation 4*.

R2, ASPECT 2, PART 1: ETHICALLY COLLECT DATA FROM YOUTH

Activity explanation: One issue often highlighted was around ethical issues on how data is collected from youth. Youth discussed that consent processes were sometimes not accessible due to the state they were in when they accessed services (e.g., by losing one's housing as a result of a relationship breakdown). Youth discussed the need to simplify what was discussed at first, with gradual revisits to consent over time. They also discussed consideration around simplifying the language used in consent forms. As a balance, informed consent should be clear on youth rights, risks, and how data will be used. As another concern, both youth and service providers discussed that service access is often tied to consent for data use. True consent would be separated from service access, doing everything possible for youth regardless of if data is provided. Youth should be able to change consent decisions later.

The need for nuanced consent was highlighted around sharing information by youth, letting youth decide what is shared, with whom, and for what purposes. This is particularly important to youth when sharing information which may lead to harm for them (e.g., youth discussed becoming ineligible for services by sharing information). It is very important to protect youth in the process. Successful large-

scale data sharing initiatives discussed significant considerations around preventing harm from sharing, such as not allowing sharing with those that could cause harm due to contrasting goals.

Different types of consent for data collection might be considered depending on the situation. For example, opt-in consent, where youth need to agree to share data was discussed in more vulnerable situations. On the other hand, opt-out consent, where all youth are included but have a choice to drop out, was discussed when data crosses all youth, such as school-based screening for supports. Discussion on how to design informed consent processes needs youth input and is needed before data is collected.

Activities (difficulty):

Ethics processes need to be tailored to each situation. As processes develop, learnings should be shared to help move things forward. As well, guidance and requirements from funding organizations can motivate change.

1. **Improve informed consent (easy).** Make the language and length of consent processes accessible to youth in a vulnerable state. Shorter and simpler is often better. Consent can be revisited after youth receive needed supports or services. Make rights, risks, and data use clear. Allow nuanced consent on data sharing, letting youth decide what is shared and with whom when possible.
2. **Protect youth from harm (moderate).** Work to ensure that data collection processes protect youth from potential harm. Split consent for data collection from service delivery**.** If a youth doesn't consent, processes should be created to still serve the youth. To simplify what is being consented to, consider splitting research data from data that directs services. Nuanced consent, asking about who can access data and when, can prevent harm from data sharing.
3. **Consider different types of consent (moderate).** Consider different types of consent depending on the situation. Interest holders, including youth, should be engaged in how consent processes are designed. For example, the choice to provide data (opt-in consent) was discussed for youth in vulnerable situations. Opt-out consent was discussed for school-based interventions, where population screening can better detect at-risk youth.

Who is involved: Funders and universities (requiring improved consent and ethics), community organizations (improving ethical processes), and researchers (improving ethical processes).

What are some examples of this? Multiple organizations discussed designing shorter data collection and consent processes for the first use of services and revisiting it over time when youth come back. Some discussed doing everything they could to support youth regardless of consent for data use.

Upstream Canada uses a school-based intervention for homelessness prevention, focusing on opt-out consent to detect risk across school populations. It can be hard to negotiate opt-out consent in Canadian schools, but it was done in these pilots.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Ethical data collection and use processes and clear guidelines around informed consent processes are widely supported across interest holders.

- Most youth mentioned they would agree to provide data if asked but want to be better informed on its use and asked for consent.
- Providing choice empowers youth.
- Protecting youth increases their trust in supports.
- Knowing a person did not consent and therefore not collecting data is better for research than collecting data based on answers that are not truthful because they were forced.

What are some weaknesses?

- Some data will be lost from stronger consent process. Youth may not want to share certain useful information.
- Consent forms that are accessible to youth do not always align with university ethics standards.
- Some youths don't want to be asked about consent more than once.
- Consent was discussed as a potential barrier to service access in the current system.

R2, ASPECT 2, PART 2: MAKE DATA MORE HUMAN-CENTRED

Activity explanation: A human-centred approach, where the people involved in data collection and use are the focus, can yield data that better matches their reality. This can reduce burden in data collection and make data more useful. Regular engagement is needed with interest holders for this approach. For example, more engagement is necessary with Indigenous communities to collect data to address their needs and perspectives. To improve data collection, community service providers and youth wanted to streamline data collection to focus on the most relevant and useful data, collecting data minimally early on while building trust and progressing to more questions on later visits. Interest holders suggested separating questions that direct services from those for research needs to shorten data collection. In addition, youth discussed using data across their journeys, reducing repeated questioning. Shortened data collection can prevent trauma resurfacing from questioning. As part of the streamlining process, consideration is needed around which questions need to be collected across organizations to collaborate on prevention and see impact.

Current data also often does not reflect youths' realities. Effort should be made to move data collection to a more youth-centred view. Youth can be engaged to co-create better youth-centred data to inform prevention. For example, youth discussed creating more holistic views of themselves. Youth also wanted to move from current deficit-based approaches to more strengths-based views. Indigenous youth did not feel that data represented their cultural worldviews.

Activities (difficulty):

Human-centred processes need to be tailored to each situation and organization. However, as processes are developed, learnings need to be shared on what worked to help other organizations move forward.

1. **Co-create youth data that informs prevention (moderate to hard).** Engage with youth to collect data how youth want to be represented. Collect data that sees youth more holistically, such as through qualitative data. Take a strengths-based approach. Work with funders to gain support in these indicators. Support culturally relevant approaches, especially for Indigenous youth.

2. **Shorten data collection (moderate to hard).** Limit questions to those directed at services or required for reporting. Work with funders to reduce redundancy in questions. Use data to support youth across their journeys. Engage with involved interest holders about data needs and how data is collected.

    a. **Use progressive questions**. Collect minimal questions on intake, building to more as youth stabilize and trust is built. Use data to facilitate trust and relationships.

    b. **Separate service data from research data.** Rather than collecting everything when youth use services, consider focusing on the most relevant data for reporting, service provision, and prevention. Collect separate, less frequent research data collection to inform future prevention efforts among youth that consent to participating.

2. **Improve data collection across organizations (moderate to hard).** Collect some data across organizations to support collaboration and sector-wide analyses. Work together to determine the most impactful common questions to inform prevention. Plan how to use common questions in collaboration.

Who is involved: Funders (supporting data changes and engaging communities), community organizations (collecting data and streamlining data collection), researchers (considering interest holder perspectives and collecting research data), and youth (providing input on data).

What are some examples of this? Community service providers discussed working to streamline their data collection process. They discussed that streamlining their processes reduced burden, while keeping impactful data.

Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario engaged with youth on their new data system design to address youth needs.

The Youth Agency Collaboration (YAC) engaged with youth to develop more youth-centred, holistic indicators. Other organizations reported similar engagement.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Human-centred designs can make data collection smoother and increase the relevance of data.
- Collecting less data can reduce burden. Youth trauma can be lessoned by having to share less.
- When communities work together on common questions, they support collaborative practices.
- Consent is stronger if service relevant questions are separated from research.
- Youth centered data can be more relevant to their experience. Some indicators have been developed across Canada. The complexity of youth needs is better captured by holistic data.
- Youth may be more comfortable in using services and sharing data if questions match their experience.

What are some weaknesses?

- Large scale changes in data collection can be difficult to navigate as organizations are often funded by various groups. The best question for one organization may differ from another, making it difficult to select common questions.
- Not all questions can be negotiated with funders.

- It can be difficult to determine essential questions. Staff may be overburdened, making it difficult to optimize data collection.
- Relevant youth centred indicators may not exist and take time to develop.

R2, Aspect 3: Increase use of learnings from data

Activity explanation: Various data and research can inform prevention ([see Recommendation #4](#)). We can expand its impact by improving how well it is used. To increase the impact of findings, they can be shared wider, earlier, and with involved communities. Training is needed on how to share findings to inform change. When sharing involves different interest holders, findings may need to be shared differently. For example, findings may need to be shared earlier and in more accessible language to be engaging for community service providers, compared to academic audiences.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Train on the effective sharing of findings (easy to moderate).** Train researchers, community service providers, and policymakers how to use findings for change. Provide leading examples of how the timely sharing of findings led to change, such as through dashboards. Build guidance on sharing in community partnerships. Sharing may need to be earlier to support service delivery, well before lengthy academic publication processes.
2. **Work to increase the impact of findings (easy to moderate).** Facilitate wider sharing of findings from prevention efforts, such as from the Making the Shift projects. Highlight connections to how findings inform policy. Share back findings to the communities and youth they relate to. Consider how to share findings sooner, such as through dashboards. Fund efforts to share.

Who is involved: Funders (supporting sharing and funding it), communities (improving sharing and asking for it in partnerships), and researchers (sharing better).

Examples and opportunities: Making the Shift has resulted in many findings that could be shared further to inform youth homelessness prevention. Learnings on how to share findings can be documented and benefit others.

Various communities discussed using dashboards to show outcomes of their efforts to support decision making.

Other opportunities:

- Much literature exists in relation to knowledge mobilization. Some models aim for faster sharing and change.
- A Way Home Canada and Canadian Observatory on Homelessness are a potential place for future sharing.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Sharing on findings is a good way for funders to highlight the work they are funding.
- Knowledge sharing is an affordable way to get more impact from current work.
- Many prevention findings exist that could be shared more.

- Sharing with communities can increase their willingness to engage with future research.

What are some weaknesses?

- Impactful knowledge sharing can be difficult to do.
- Often project budgets do not have much for sharing after a project ends.
- Knowledge mobilization is historically slow in terms of its impact on policy and change.
- Academics sometimes hesitate to share findings early.
- Academics are not rewarded as much for sharing of findings with communities.

Recommendation 3 (R3): Support collaboration around prevention

Where are we at? Currently many organizations serving youth collaborate with other organizations to coordinate to some degree. This connection between organizations helps direct services. Some stronger partnerships to collaborate and collaboration tables exist around prevention. For example, integrated youth hubs have been created in many provinces as places to coordinate around the needs of youth, including mental health and homelessness. In addition, homeless shelters have been mandated to coordinate access around housing supports in communities that are funded by the federal government, although this access is not as clear for younger youth.

Despite these many examples of efforts for collaboration, most interest holders expressed the need to further develop collaboration for prevention, crossing organizations and sectors to better serve youths' holistic needs.

What are we aiming for? Increased collaborative service delivery to serve youth homelessness prevention across Canada.

Why is this necessary? Collaboration is needed for youth homelessness prevention due to the complex needs of youth. Collaboration can serve youth better in various domains, such as reducing the trauma of retelling stories and connecting youth with the right supports, before they become homeless.

R3, Step 1: Facilitate collaboration for youth homelessness prevention

Collaboration is critical for youth that become homeless due to their complex service needs that they may experience in their journeys. Collaboration is often sought in the youth homelessness sector but could be further developed around prevention. Collaboration is less common with other sectors where prevention needs to be informed but the sector's primary purpose is not homelessness support (e.g., health, corrections, and K-12 education). Collaboration can be difficult as it requires strong relationships.

Activity explanation: Many collaborations exist across organizations serving youth. Unfortunately, fewer collaborations exist around youth specific prevention efforts. The Making the Shift initiative has many projects that focused on different ways to collaborate to serve youth homelessness prevention. We can learn from these efforts and share on how to collaborate. Connections to established relationships can support future prevention efforts, but further relationship building across sectors is needed to support future collaboration efforts for prevention. As a natural way to increase collaboration, interest holders

discussed using collaboration tables in the community, where communities get together to plan. Unfortunately, few exist around prevention. Funding calls can benefit from asks for collaboration, supported by sufficient funding. While this step does not discuss data directly, collaboration efforts often lead to the informal sharing of data to coordinate efforts.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Train on how to collaborate for youth homelessness prevention (easy)**. Use learnings from collaboration projects for youth homelessness prevention to develop training. Train on privacy rules for collaboration, as it is a common perceived barrier. Train on how information can be shared for collaboration while protecting youth.

2. **Facilitate relationships between organizations and cross-sector (easy to moderate).** Actively facilitate connections between organizations to build collaborations and reduce time building relationships. Start with groups actively seeking collaboration and work to connect those interested in starting to collaborate.

3. **Facilitate collaboration tables around prevention (easy to moderate).** Tables exist serving homelessness crises, but more youth homelessness prevention tables are needed. Researchers can support tables; however, they need to be careful that community needs are prioritized.

4. **Incentivize collaboration (moderate hard).** Funders should call for more collaboration to prevent youth homelessness and provide guidance for how it should happen. Funding is needed specifically for collaboration around youth homelessness prevention.

Who is involved: Funders (funding and guiding collaboration), leaders in collaboration (sharing learnings on collaboration and facilitating relationships), communities (seeking collaboration), and researchers (supporting research and evaluation in collaborations).

Examples and Opportunities: The Youth Agency Collaboration (YAC) built a youth collaborative of over 20 youth service agencies that work together to serve the holistic needs of youth. It used data to collaborate supports during the COVID-19 pandemic and is seeking to further these efforts.

Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC; formerly Infrastructure Canada) is actively promoting collaboration through coordinated access requirements and requirements to collaborate in recent funding calls.

Youth Wellness Hubs and Integrative Youth Hubs across Canada are collaborating to serve youth needs, including well-being and homelessness, coordinating across various local partners. These efforts are currently being expanded.

The Quebec Homelessness Prevention Collaborative is an initiative to foster collaboration community organizations, youth with lived experience, and academics.

Other opportunities

- Making the Shift supported collaborative relationships that are already built and could be learned from.
- Governments are looking for more collaboration in programs they fund.
- Many examples of good collaborations to serve youth have been established in Canada.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Collaboration is a recognized need by communities and funders.
- Training on collaboration is not high cost and has much potential return on investment.
- Connecting youth to other services can address their needs.
- Governments are seeking more efficient systems and working together has potential to reduce redundancy and save costs.

What are some weaknesses?

- Designing effective collaboration can be difficult for overburdened service providers.
- It can be a large change to move to prevention-focused from crisis-focused collaboration.
- Some agencies worry about losing resources by collaborating.
- Organizations need trust for collaboration, and this comes at different speeds.
- Youth come in for support in difficult times and trust must be navigated across collaboration.

R3, Step 2: Use data to support collaboration

Data sharing for collaboration is based on strong relationships between organizations and with youth. A critical foundation for successful sharing is ethical processes that empower youth with the ownership of their data and choice on how it is used. Shared data comes in various forms, some more complex than others.

R3, STEP 2, PART 1: BUILD PROCESSES FOR ETHICAL DATA SHARING

Activity explanation: While data sharing has great potential to serve youth around prevention, it suffers from apprehension among youth that needs to be addressed ethically. These activities discuss the creation of standards for ethical data sharing of youth data. Data sharing should provide clear benefits to youth, while preventing harm. Youth discussed that they worry about various things when sharing information, such as data being used against them, data remaining after they no longer need services, and data being shared with those it was not intended to be shared with. That said, youth were often supportive of data sharing if they were informed of its use and allowed true consent. The informed consent process needs to be further developed. As well, ethical data sharing processes should be developed with the input of youth as there is a disconnect between intentions and what youth perceive. In the case that youth do not want to share data, alternate processes should be developed to serve youth if they want services.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Co-create strong informed consent processes on data sharing (easy to moderate).** Inform youth on how data will be used in sharing and provide them with a choice on how they share. Consent needs to be nuanced, providing choice on what is shared, who can access it, and when it would be shared. Consent forms need to be accessible for youth, even when they are in tough

times. Consent processes can be shared among organizations, but caution is needed on how they are applied to different contexts. Youth should provide input on the process.

2. **Create processes to protect youth from harm in data sharing (easy to moderate).** Create processes to maximize benefits to youth, while preventing harm. As youth are on a journey, data needs to be treated as dynamic (i.e., be cautious how one-time problematic behaviour is documented and shared as it can lead to discrimination). Consideration should be given to when data should be deleted after it is not serving youth. Alternatives to data sharing are needed when youth want services, but don't want to share.

Who is involved: Funders (requiring improved consent and ethical processes), youth (providing input and making consent choices), and organizations and researchers (developing more ethical processes).

Examples and opportunities: Some Making the Shift projects involved using data to coordinate services around prevention. These projects often involved youth engagement in their design.

Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario codeveloped processes around data sharing with youth.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Consent for data sharing is the standard in Canada.
- Ethical data sharing can prevent unintentional harm.
- Youth trust of data collection processes can prevent disengagement from services.
- Strong consent processes empower youth on their journeys.

What are some weaknesses?

- Some organizations do not have the capacity to co-develop consent processes.
- Sometimes youth feel pressure to consent, especially when services need sharing for access.
- Data sharing is dependent on strong relationships with youth. Asking for consent up front can lead to the early denial of services, when they do not trust enough to share.
- Legal systems do not always support younger youth consent issues.

R3, STEP 2, PART 2: SHARE DATA TO SUPPORT COLLABORATION

Activity explanation: Data sharing is a tool that can increase collaboration and is built on strong relationships and governance. Various types of data sharing facilitate collaboration and service access for youth homelessness prevention. Some examples of collaborative data sharing introduced in our engagement were: 1) sharing simple data to facilitate referrals and make connections smoother; 2) sharing service availability data, to inform youth where to go for their needs; and 3) sharing data between organizations, to simplify service navigation and reduce repetition for youth. As examples of data sharing to support prevention efforts are developed, they should be shared to support development in other organizations.

Activities (difficulty):

Activities 2 to 4 may need to progress one collaboration at a time.

1. **Support learning about data sharing (easy).** As successful examples of data sharing to support youth homelessness prevention are identified, share learnings from these initiatives. International examples can be useful, but Canadian examples may have more immediate impact as they were designed for the Canadian context. Learning on successful governance for data sharing is important to support future work.

2. **Share simple data to support referral (easy to moderate).** Create and share processes for organizations to share simple data for warm handoffs and referrals for youth. Ask what information youth are comfortable with sharing to support the handoff. Youth described sharing packets of information that support their connection to the new agency. Organizations should consider handoff processes around homelessness prevention.

3. **Share service availability data (moderate).** Create maps of service availability for youth to address their needs. Location is important as services that are far away are less accessible. Service availability data should be up-to-date and specific enough to help youth needs. Youth discussed wanting to know what service is best for their specific needs, based on evidence.

4. **Share youth data to coordinate services (hard).** Sharing collaborative youth data can simplify connections between agencies. This may involve data systems where certain information is shared between organizations, such as data fields to coordinate or shared case notes. Consent is needed before sharing. More sharing around youth homelessness prevention is needed (e.g., in schools or child welfare programs). Consider common assessments to direct clients to the right services. This kind of data sharing requires strong governance that can take time to build.

Who is involved: Funders (funding and supporting data sharing), community organizations (working to share data), and data leaders (creating service availability maps and supporting data sharing).

Examples and opportunities: Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario has codeveloped a system to share data between hubs. It has also developed a data sharing platform to support more sharing of youth research. Youth want this hub to use findings to identify the right service for their needs.

Upstream Canada has worked with schools to identify youth at risk for homelessness and use this to direct services. This model is promising in its use of data collected in schools to direct outside services.

The Youth Agency Collaboration (YAC) in Edmonton used data to collaborate to support homeless youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Community Information Exchange (CIE) model was created in San Deigo to support data sharing in a community, to direct various types of services to those in need and close the loop in referrals. The model is directed by a coordinating group, such as 2-1-1, to connect individuals to services. This model is being adapted in a few places in Canada, such as Edmonton, Alberta, Calgary, Alberta, and Collingwood, Ontario. The Collingwood model is now supporting some shared health care data and case coordination.

Many services related to youth have databases that can be used to coordinate services. For example, Reaching Home emergency shelters have access to HIFIS and are currently mandated to provide coordinated access to housing supports.

What are some strengths of this step?

- Many groups are trying to collaborate more.
- Service access mapping is a relatively simple tool.
- Data sharing can cut down on the need for youth to repeat traumatic stories.
- Examples exist of using differing databases together, connected with a common system that helps the data work together, such as in the CIE model.

What are some weaknesses?

- Data sharing systems can be expensive and take a lot of time to setup.
- Sharing between systems can be difficult to navigate due to differing privacy rules, often taking many years to setup. Data sharing governance is difficult to navigate.
- Some organizations are not in a place to share, including technologically- or trust-wise.
- Youth data can change frequently, making some shared data less meaningful.

Recommendation 4 (R4): Build up data for youth homelessness prevention

Where are we at? Much promising data are available in Canada ([see more on the state of Canadian data in sections 2.5 and 2.6](#)). The quality of the data is not always perfect, but much can be used in its near or current form to inform prevention. There are also many major gaps in data that are critical to informing strong prevention efforts, especially around younger youth.

What are we aiming for? To increase quality data that can inform youth homelessness prevention, especially in the earlier years. To have data that better helps understand how well efforts to decrease youth homelessness are working.

Why is this necessary? Data is an important tool that can inform the prevention of youth homelessness. By strategically improving data and collecting new data, we can better target prevention efforts aimed at youth and understand how well they are working.

Discussing the format of the data areas.

This series of recommendations focuses on data highlighted in our learnings that can inform the prevention of youth homelessness. It is not exhaustive. The following possibilities have widely varying difficulties and differ greatly in how they inform prevention.

Recommendations are ordered starting with more feasible/impactful data areas and parts of each area. Impact relates to the ability of the data to inform youth homelessness prevention, with preference placed on prevention efforts earlier in youths' lives. Smaller scale changes (e.g., one organization or a community) are generally more feasible than larger scale changes (e.g., provincially/territorially or across Canada), although governments and funders have an important place in supporting larger scale changes. Building higher quality data increases the ability of each data area to inform prevention, but this is more difficult to support on a large scale.

Various suggestions around how data is used and collected are discussed in previous recommendations. *While each data area was developed substantially in this project, all data areas need further input from involved interest holders as we progress towards improved data infrastructure.*

Introducing the data areas:

The four data areas are 1) supporting learning on youth homelessness prevention, 2) detecting early youth homelessness risk to inform prevention, 3) improving homelessness and housing-related data, and 4) using administrative data to inform homelessness prevention.

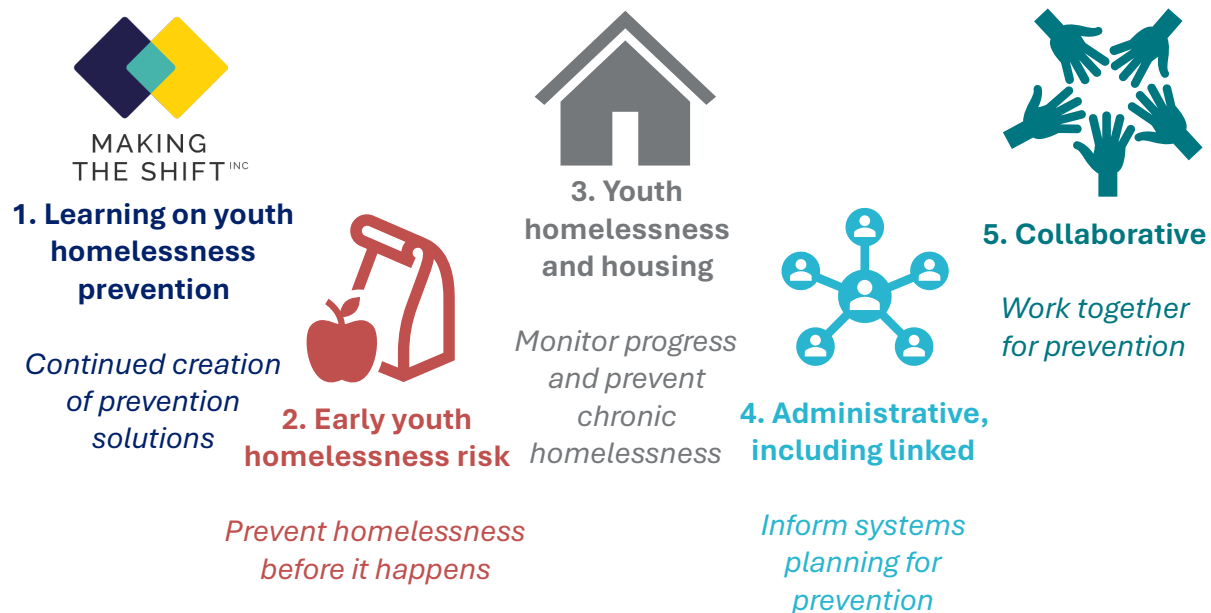# Building data to prevent youth homelessness

Figure 3. Visual of data areas that inform youth homelessness prevention and their use.

The first actively supports learning on youth homelessness prevention, by researching and evaluating approaches to prevention. This data area is easier to support than others as it can progress on a smaller scale and is currently happening through Making the Shift. We consider it an 'encompassing data area' in that it involves all types of data discussed in the roadmap and informs their design.

The second discusses data that supports action through the early detection of youth homelessness risk, supporting efforts to prevent youth homelessness before it happens. Needs in this data area are informed by solid research on youth homelessness prevention. Some of the data identified to facilitate prevention efforts may not fit current Canadian definitions of homelessness prevention but could help identify very early precursors and risks for homelessness. For example, risks identified in the K-12 education system could inform interventions to improve youth well-being and prevent trajectories into homelessness. This area is very difficult to do and in its early stages, but very impactful as it can prevent youth ever facing homelessness.

The third area relates to improving homelessness and housing-related data. This data informs later prevention efforts and provides data tracking on the levels of homelessness that exist. A limitation of this data is that it is more feasible for youth in their later years (18+ years old). This means that youth experiencing homelessness may not show up in this data until many years later, limiting its use in understanding the impact of youth homeless prevention efforts.

The last area seeks to use large scale administrative data, collected to support operations, to inform system-level efforts to prevent homelessness. This can involve using administrative data linked between sectors to understand trajectories into homelessness. It can also involve linking community data to other sectors' data to see if programs help reduce later negative outcomes.

While not contained in this recommendation section, collaborative data supplements other data areas and is discussed in Recommendation 3, supporting collaborations across sectors that help prevent youth homelessness.

R4, Data area 1: Support learning on youth homelessness prevention

More learning is needed about what works to prevent youth homelessness. We can learn from existing projects and need to continue to learn, both through research and evaluation. The methods for learning should vary widely and be based on the target research and evaluation questions. In addition, interest holders discussed a need to move from current 'pilot-itus', where projects are regularly funded for short-timelines, limiting the development of existing strategies and the funding of strong strategies over time.

What are some examples of methods we can learn from?

- **Evaluation of prevention efforts:** We should evaluate the effectiveness of strategies for reducing and preventing homelessness. For example, Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and a range of other evaluation types may be 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.

- **Systems-level administrative data analysis.** We can use linked administrative data to understand how youth used various support sectors. Administrative data is linked across sectors to identify systems-level factors associated with homelessness. Knowing these factors can help target services more effectively and to the scale of the problem. Administrative data can also be linked between program and intervention data to other sector data to evaluate how programs affect later theorized systems outcomes (Kneebone et al., 2023; M. J. Russell et al., 2021).

- **Qualitative research**: We need deeper, richer descriptions of lived experiences. These experiences can provide contextualized views of the lived experiences of youth that are/were homeless, helping set prevention solutions in their realities. As administrative data often lacks detail, qualitative data supplements administrative data and seats it in real-world experience.

- **Literature reviews:** Literature helps understand previous work and how it might inform service delivery. Examples are jurisdictional scans, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. For example,

a review on policies in other countries can inform youth homelessness prevention policies in Canada.

Activity explanation: Many youth-specific prevention studies were funded by Making the Shift, with other ongoing projects outside of Making the Shift. There is much we can learn from these projects to increase youth homelessness prevention activities across Canada by sharing findings. However, there is also much left to learn on youth homelessness prevention. We need to seek pathways to support the continued development of prevention efforts through funding additional research and evaluation moving forward. Training around research and evaluation serves to further increase quality research and evaluation around prevention.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? This area of work informs the prioritization of future youth homelessness prevention efforts. By iteratively investigating prevention approaches, we improve effective prevention strategies. More and better-quality research and evaluation serves to improve prevention strategies.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Learn from recent and ongoing youth homelessness research and evaluation (easy)**. As Making the Shift projects finish up, their results can inform an immediate shift to youth homelessness prevention. Other learning exists from projects outside Making the Shift as well. Sharing needs to be designed to reach different interest holders to reach its true potential. Learning communities can be used to continue to share findings and support prevention efforts. For example, the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness may be an avenue for this sharing.
2. **Train researchers on youth homelessness prevention research and evaluation (easy).** Learn from ongoing projects and research methods to inform the next generation of researchers and evaluators. Share how to do impactful youth homelessness prevention research and evaluation. Teach about critical points around this work, such as working with youth navigating trauma and learning from youth lived experience.
3. **Fund future research and evaluation on youth homelessness prevention (moderate to hard)**. Continue to support efforts to fund youth homelessness prevention research and evaluation. Part of this is creating connections when funding calls develop that can support research and evaluation on prevention. Smaller funding calls can be a starting point, but a larger funding group like Making the Shift has more potential impact. Continue to prioritize sharing of findings from new research and evaluation.

Who is involved: Funders (funding and supporting sharing of learnings), youth homelessness leaders (seeking promising work and sharing it), and researchers and community organizations (researching, evaluating, sharing findings, and teaching how to do prevention research).

Examples and opportunities: Making the Shift projects are a starting point to share new learnings on prevention. Making the Shift supported training around aspects of youth homelessness research and evaluation, such as on how to engage with youth with lived experience. The path after Making the Shift is currently in discussion.

Health Research Data Network (HRDN) Canada has various training series on methods for using administrative data in health research contexts.

Other opportunities:

- Researchers and policymakers showed much interest in continuing to seek solutions to prevent youth homelessness.
- Making the Shift project holders are a starting point for future research and evaluation as they have experience in youth homelessness prevention research methods.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- This builds on current Making the Shift work.
- We can continue to improve prevention efforts through research and evaluation.
- A research or evaluation project is limited in scope and easier to fund than other data areas.
- Training and sharing are relatively less expensive than funding research itself.
- Training can increase youth homelessness research by building capacity to do it.

What are some weaknesses?

- Research and evaluation funding may take time to build up. Making the Shift was a large undertaking, taking many years to setup and move forward.
- Research and evaluation are based on the capacity to do it, which may lead to certain groups doing more and being overburdened. Community organizations sometimes have less capacity to research and evaluate, benefitting from support from researchers.
- Research and evaluation don't necessarily lead to large scale changes without sharing of findings or funding to do successful approaches to prevention.

R4, Data area 2: Detect youth homelessness risk early and use it for prevention

Youth homelessness, especially in the earlier years (child-youth, under 18), is different from adult homelessness. Youth have different entry points that may involve family trajectories and are less likely to engage in shelter systems. They are also more likely to become hidden homeless, living with others and engaging in couch surfing. This leads to the dilemma that youth homelessness is harder to detect and support before youth become entrenched in the homelessness system. This data area centres around rethinking how we detect youth homelessness risk *early* for prevention (i.e., before youth ever become homeless) and use known patterns to direct prevention efforts. The underlying ethical issue regardless is having a plan in place first to support youth at risk for homelessness, such that this area also involves a commitment to support action to prevent youth homelessness. This data area is informed by research and evaluation (i.e., see Data area 1) that reveals entry points into homelessness and strategies to serve youth.

The scope of this category is wider than other data areas and many efforts are in their early stages, such that our engagement and learning activities do not adequately cover details for the work. That said, this

is a priority area as it directly relates to a major goal of Making the Shift, early prevention, serving the ultimate goal of being able to prevent youth homelessness before it ever happens.

Activity explanation: Many points exist when youth exit systems or transition between child-to-adult systems into homelessness. For example, youth may transition from child welfare supports or from corrections involvement to the street. Data around known transition points can coordinate efforts to reduce transitions into homelessness. This supports prevention less early than other data discussed next but may still prevent youth from becoming homeless. The benefit of this data is that it is easier to collect than other early prevention data, as it exists around a transition. It is important to continue to collect research and evaluation data on transitions to identify where support is needed (Data area 1).

To support early prevention efforts, data from various systems is needed that identifies risks for youth becoming homeless. Unfortunately, little data currently exists that can inform early prevention efforts. Some places that can detect early risks are: the child welfare system, K-12 education, mental health services, and integrated youth services. For example, Upstream Canada uses school-based screening to identify youth that may benefit from supports. One barrier to increasing early prevention data is concerns around privacy for child-youth and their families. Another is that the involved systems may not see preventing homelessness as part of their responsibilities. To address this issue, it is important to make clear connections to system goals, such as addressing youth homelessness efforts in schools as removing barriers to learning and graduation. Efforts may be more successful on a smaller scale in this data area, such as one community's school district. Large-scale change, even in a single system like education across a province, may have many significant barriers due to it crossing school boards.

Critical change is also needed around accountability when homelessness risk is detected, creating supporting policies and programs connected to collected data. While supporting youth may be an up front cost, preventing homelessness early is cost effective as it means less years of supporting youth as traumas accumulate and entrench them into more negative trajectories. One discussed change is policy around a 'Duty-to-Assist' for youth, which provides legislation to require cross-system efforts to prevent homelessness. The Duty-to-Assist has improved homelessness outcomes by requiring supports in other jurisdictions when risk for homelessness was identified. A youth version of this policy would synergize with efforts to better detect youth homelessness risk across systems, creating responsibility to serve identified youth. Sufficient funding is needed to support an effective Youth Duty-to-Assist.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Better early detection of risk for homelessness can improve chances to prevent homelessness before youth are entrenched in the homelessness system. Transition data can be simpler and serve many at risk youth, while earlier risk data can help address youth homelessness before a crisis period. Policy and programs aimed at supporting identified youth are necessary.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Improve data around transitions points into homelessness (easy to hard).** Collect better data around known transition points into homelessness, such as transitions from child-welfare, corrections, or from child-to-adult supports. Continue to research topics that identify risky transitions. Pair data with policy and program changes that support prevention. Some policies

can operate with minimal data (e.g., providing automatic income supports for housing to children aging out the child-welfare system to prevent housing crises).

2. **Build data to detect youth homelessness risk early (hard to very hard).** Build up data in various sectors on risk for youth homelessness to inform early prevention (e.g., primary prevention before youth become homeless). Some systems are: K-12 education, child-welfare, or child mental health supports (including integrated youth hubs). To increase success, frame data collection around serving the needs of the system. Efforts may need to start at a smaller scale (e.g., an individual school or school district) and may be much more difficult on a larger scale (e.g., across schools in province). Pair data with policy and programs that support prevention. Efforts may need to cross systems and supports.

3. **Support efforts around a 'Youth Duty-to-Assist' to enhance accountability (very hard).** To enhance efforts, a potential game changer is a Youth Duty-to-Assist policy, requiring assistance for identified youth. Sufficient funding is needed for assisting identified youth for this to be effective.

Who is involved: Governments (building and supporting a Youth Duty-to-Assist and various prevention efforts), funders (funding data collection and prevention), systems leaders (supporting data, creating policies and programs), and communities (collecting prevention data and offering supports), and organizations (offering supports).

Examples and opportunities: An example of transition work is British Columbia's provision of youth housing income supports, when youth are identified as aging out of child welfare programs. This helps prevent a loss of housing as youth age to adult systems, sometimes leading to homelessness.

Upstream Canada and Reconnect are working with some schools in Canada to detect homelessness and its risks early, offering supports to youth identified as being at risk.

Other opportunities:

- Existing research and evaluation inform prevention strategies. Making the Shift has resulted in many findings that can inform planning for early prevention data and efforts.
- Other examples exist of early youth homelessness prevention efforts that benefit from data in Canada, such as Youth Wellness Hubs (sometimes called the integrated youth hubs).
- Support for prevention has increased in Canada. Prevention is now mentioned or inferred to in various homelessness policy strategies.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- Transition data can be relatively simple, making it less costly to implement.
- It is easier to justify data around limited youth at known transition points than for all youth.
- Early prevention data has potential for greater, life-long impacts for youth.
- Early prevention can decrease costs on the system more, compared to later prevention.
- Data collection based in action builds trust in data and makes it easier to collect.

What are some weaknesses?

- Youth may not engage with supports during transitions.

- There is a lot of growth needed in early prevention data. The scale of change needed is massive and would take a lot of buy-in and funding to do well across even one system.
- Many privacy concerns must be addressed around youth homelessness prevention data.
- The efforts needed to ensure that identified youth are fully supported are difficult. Supporting an identified youth can be hard as they and their families need to consent for help. Widespread changes lead to upfront costs, although we know they can save costs in the long term.
- Data collection for many early prevention efforts is strongest as population-based, screening all youth. This makes it harder to collect data due to hesitancy to ask questions to all.

R4, Data area 3: Improve homelessness and housing-related data

One tool to inform youth homelessness prevention is better homelessness and housing-related data. Improving this data serves two major goals: 1) informing an understanding of homelessness trends to understand the effect of prevention efforts and 2) directing later prevention efforts once youth are already homeless. The first type of data is homelessness shelter and housing data. It allows longitudinal analyses to better understand chronic homelessness. This data also serves to support administrative data analyses that inform homelessness systems-level planning. As a limitation, child-youth shelter use data (under 18) is often not being reported. This can limit learning on earlier youth homelessness. Next, Point-in-Time counts are a tool to monitor goals to reduce homelessness, as they further enumerate homelessness by including rough sleeping. . Last, other housing and homelessness related data exist but are lacking, such as evictions and healthcare data. Improving this data can support prevention efforts.

R4, AREA 3, PART 1: STRENGTHEN HOMELESSNESS SHELTER AND HOUSING DATA

Activity explanation: Strong emergency shelter and housing data can provide timely knowledge of the use of homelessness services by youth. One benefit of shelter data is that is that it allows longitudinal analyses on youths' use of services, although this is difficult to track across child-youth to adult-youth shelters. This data has many uses, such as for prevention efforts, ongoing tracking of shelter use, and administrative data analyses (discussed in Data area 4). Emergency shelter numbers are also used in Point-in-Time counts, although child-youth shelter use is less enumerated.

Improvements to this data connect to many points discussed in [Recommendation 2](). First, informed consent processes need to be improved ([see Recommendation #2-1]()), informing on the use of data and providing choice without losing access to service access. Second, current first service access processes are often long and need to be shortened to remove burden. Common questions are often needed across organizations to inform collaboration and systems learning but should be kept to a minimum. Interest holders expressed concerns of the applicability of the current main tool used across Canada, the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT). Currently there also seems to be no clear pathway to the co-development of common questions. To improve data collection for youth, interest holders discussed using progressive questioning, starting with minimal questions on initial visits and building up as youth come back and develop trust with service providers. Third, shelter providers discussed that due to a high turnover of staff, data often lacked consistency. This benefits from regular training, which requires

adequate funding. Fourth, further consideration is needed on how shelter and housing data can be used to support youth prevention efforts, such as identifying youth early in homelessness trajectories or those entrenched in chronic homelessness, to target supports. Finally, more regular reporting on emergency shelter and housing use is needed to inform systems planning. This aligns with current initiatives from the Government of Canada, currently targeting monthly reporting in Reaching Home communities.

One major limitation of current shelter and housing data is that it misses some types of shelters, with an important gap in child-youth shelters (under 18 years old). We learned of many cases where child-youth data was not being shared back in counts, as their funders differed from those funding adult homelessness services (M. Russell et al., 2023). Child-youth shelter data is needed to better inform youth homelessness prevention efforts.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Better homelessness shelter and housing data can improve counts of youth using these services and inform prevention strategies. This data can also be used for system-wide analyses, such as administrative data analyses.

Activities (difficulty):

These efforts are easier on the single organization or community level, and increasingly difficult to do well as their scope increases to provincial and national data.

1. **Co-develop common questions (moderate to hard).** Engage with shelters and researchers to develop impactful common questions to collect across organizations, including evidence-based questions that inform prevention efforts. Create clear pathways for engagement around these questions that can improve the questions and how they are asked. Relevant common questions can support collaboration in a community.
2. **Improve emergency shelter and housing data collection (moderate to hard).** Improve consent processes around shelter and housing data, to ensure service provision if not consenting to data use. Fund and support regular training for staff to improve the quality and consistency of critical information collected. Train staff on how to collect data in inclusive ways. Support reductions in the number of questions asked to reduce burden on staff and youth.
3. **Use this data to support later prevention efforts (hard).** Identify youth new to homelessness and those chronically homeless, to direct prevention supports. Perform analyses to understand youth at risk for chronic homelessness. This may direct future data collection and supports.
4. **Gather and report emergency shelter and housing data more regularly (moderate to very hard).** Expanding on the current initiative from the Government of Canada, move towards monthly national reporting of high-quality data from all emergency shelters and housing programs. Expand this beyond Reaching Home communities, including youth shelters and family violence shelters. Include reports on common questions and share findings as soon as possible. Use this data to inform systems planning decisions around youth homelessness prevention.
5. **Collect data from child-youth (e.g., under 18) shelters (hard to very hard).** Increase reporting of child-youth shelters data. Youth-focused privacy measures may be necessary to make interest holders comfortable sharing and working with this data.

Who is involved: Community entities, provincial governments (often crossing ministries), and federal governments (requiring data for reporting and supporting training); other funders of services (requiring data for reporting); and community service providers (collecting data and streamlining data collection).

Examples and opportunities: An example of high-quality and comprehensive homeless services data across a country is the Special Homelessness Services data in Australia. The Australian Government supports the monthly data collection from over 1,700 specialist homelessness service agencies across Australia. The data quality is discussed as on the level of healthcare system data, which is the gold standard for data.

Currently the Government of Canada is working towards monthly reporting of Reaching Home data and improving data quality. This effort is voluntary and involves over 50% of the communities. Reaching Home asks for common questions across the country in emergency shelters receiving their funding.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- Ethical data collection protects youth and helps them feel comfortable engaging in supports.
- Training improves the quality of data. Training on how to ask sensitive questions motivates youth to answer questions.
- Better quality shelter data, that needs less processing, can improve the lag in homeless counts.
- Improved shelter and housing data can inform supports for homeless individuals, including around later prevention.
- Streamlined data collection can reduce burden on data collectors and youth, while focusing on more impactful questions.
- Child-youth data is needed to understand earlier trajectory homelessness.

What are some weaknesses?

- Current data is sometimes inaccurate, incomplete, or unusable to those that can direct prevention efforts. Changing these limitations can be difficult.
- Supporting improvement across shelters can be expensive.
- It would be hard to get all shelters and housing providers to agree on common questions, especially as they may have greatly differing populations they support.
- Adult shelter and housing data is later in homelessness trajectories and less connected to early prevention efforts.
- This data does not represent all type of homelessness and misses the many youths that are experiencing hidden homelessness.

R4, AREA 3, PART 2: STRENGTHEN HOMELESSNESS COUNTS

Activity explanation: While not a perfect measure of homelessness, Point-in-Time counts are an important tool to understand the extent of homelessness and how it changes over time. The strength of Point-in-Time counts is that they measure homelessness beyond emergency shelter use, including rough sleeping and sometimes other systems in Canada (e.g., healthcare and corrections). Point-in-Time counts can help understand the type of individuals facing homelessness, through various questions they

ask. That said, Point-in-Time counts are not perfect, suffering from various issues such as the overrepresentation of chronic homelessness, which appears larger on a single day count as most individuals only become homeless briefly across the year.

Expanding on current biannual Point-in-Time counts in Canada, various improvements can increase their potential impact. First, as one improvement discussed by the Auditor General of Canada, it is important to provide results faster to connect them to how well ongoing efforts to reduce homelessness are working (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022). Second, a more complete count of homeless individuals is needed to truly understand if homelessness is reduced. This means funding enough staff to count most individuals that are homelessness on the count night and across communities. As is, counts often depend heavily on volunteers. Some communities reported having too few volunteers to perform counts, with funding necessary to bridge the gap. This is a fundamental problem as not having enough people to count can underreport the number of homeless individuals, making it difficult to understand if efforts are working. Third, special efforts are needed around counting child-youth (under 18), although Point-in-Time counts cannot be expected to reach these youth well due to the hidden nature of their homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2017). Aiming efforts at youth can better understand their current needs and inform supports. Fourth, more frequent counts than the current biannual count (e.g., such as yearly counts in the US) can help us better understand if immediate efforts are reducing homelessness.

In terms of how Point-in-Time counts can be used to enumerate youth homelessness, the reality is that changes in homeless youth from prevention efforts may only be seen in the much longer term due to its bias towards adult data. Shifts may only be seen as fewer adult individuals report they were homeless as a youth, which is many years after early prevention efforts. This limits the use of this data for timely evaluation of child-youth homelessness prevention efforts and makes it more useful to understand adult-youth prevention.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? By enumerating homelessness, we better understand how well we are reducing homelessness. It may take more time to see shifts in Point-in-Time counts as younger youth data will be more incomplete, meaning that we need to rely on adult homelessness patterns to see change.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Decrease the time to report Point-in-Time counts (easy to moderate).** Decrease the time it takes to publish Point-in-Time counts. Earlier counts based on communities and provinces that report first should be provided as early as possible. Use counts to inform policies and programs. Sharing Point-in-Time data for research can increase its impact.
2. **Co-design count questions to inform change (moderate to hard).** Actively use Point-in-Time questions to inform policy and programs. Engage with communities and researchers to design questions, providing clear pathways for engagement.
3. **Improve the coverage of counts (hard).** Count as many homeless individuals as possible in Point-in-Time counts to enumerate homelessness more accurately. Provide sufficient funding to do this well, as undercounts do not have much meaning. Make efforts to survey child-youth in Point-in-Time counts to understand trends.

4. **Increase frequency of counts (hard to very hard).** Use more frequent Point-in-Time counts to inform policy. A yearly Point-in-Time count is used in other jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions report on easier to access homelessness service use data more frequently to inform policy.

Who is involved: Municipal, provincial, and federal governments (supporting counts); communities (doing counts); and researchers (supporting analyses).

What are some examples of this? The United States of America does yearly Point-in-Time counts. Using this more frequent data, they had evidence that policy changes around US supports for veterans decreased homelessness.

The United Kingdom does yearly rough sleeping counts. As a special case, London uses the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) to counts all individuals reached by street outreach as part of provided services. The group supporting this effort noted that homeless individuals appeared to increase as efforts to address homelessness were better funded. The reason behind this is having more outreach workers increased detection of rough sleeping, as outreach activities reached more individuals.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- Stronger, more timely counts increase accountability on public actions around homelessness.
- Counts are not frequent, such that asking questions here can be less burdensome for individuals that are homelessness than multiple times during program access.
- Questions asked in counts can be anonymous, which can feel less risky to individuals to answer.
- Counts that offer a gift in return provide benefits to individuals that are homeless.

What are some weaknesses?

- Supporting homelessness counts well is more costly. Getting more frequent Point-in-Time counts, that are more complete, requires funding.
- Point-in-Time counts only show the extent of visible homelessness on a single day.
- Not all homeless youth can be identified in counts. It can take a lot of time to see efforts to prevent child-youth homelessness to show up in counts, which better count adults.
- Individuals do not always answer count questions.

R4, AREA 3, PART 3: DEVELOP OTHER HOUSING-RELATED DATA

Activity explanation: Interest holders discussed data gaps in other housing-related situations that could support youth homelessness prevention. Two asks were for better evictions data and identification of homelessness in the healthcare system. These data sources may miss other needed housing data.

Better eviction data was discussed as being important to inform crisis responses to prevent homelessness for adult-youth. For younger youth, this data might relate to the family being on the cusp of eviction, which some youth said was their entry point into the homelessness system. The call for eviction data was also around having better research data to inform efforts to create eviction programs.

For healthcare data, individuals sometimes share information in their emergency room or hospital visits on a lack of housing, which may be prompted by the service provider in certain situations like frostbite.

A recent change requires this is recorded in healthcare data across Canada (CIHI, 2022, 2023), which helps increase documented homelessness in healthcare data. However, questions and inquiries around housing status are not asked enough to systematically identify homelessness. The leader in this change discusses that Canadian hospitals should consider formal procedures to ensure that health care providers ask about and document housing status, which will be required by 2024 in the US (CIHI, 2022). Increasing this data marks an opportunity to better detect homelessness due to the health effects of being homeless. It is also a chance to connect identified individuals to supports.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Better eviction and healthcare data can help direct prevention supports. This data can supplement Point-in-Time counts. As better data is collected, it can also be used for various analyses to inform systems change.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Improve evictions data (moderate to hard).** Improve evictions data and use it for research to support future program and policy design. Connect supports to data around individuals facing evictions.
2. **Improve healthcare homelessness data (moderate to hard).** Make standards for how to ask about housing in healthcare visits. Youth might benefit from variants on questions around hidden homelessness. Connect youth to supports, making concerted efforts to not release them homeless. Use healthcare data on homelessness for analyses, which will be more informative as it becomes a standard question.
3. **Improve other housing-related data (unknown)** that that can inform homelessness prevention.

Who is involved: Evictions systems (sharing and improving data); healthcare systems (setting standards on questions and enforcing them); healthcare staff (asking questions and referring to supports); community organizations (supporting those identified); and researchers (using data for research).

What are some examples of this? Evictions data is being used in Wales to support local authority providers as they work to support legislation around the [Duty-to-Assist](), which requires reasonable efforts to assist those at risk for homelessness.

PolicyWise used the healthcare code for homelessness to investigate youth identified as homeless, using a multi-system linked data (PolicyWise for Children & Families, 2019). This analysis suggested that identification was limited to more stereotypical homelessness. ICES staff performed analysis with the homelessness healthcare code in Ontario (Richard et al., 2024).

What are some strengths of this data area?

- Better evictions data can inform prevention efforts.
- Progress has been already made in Canada by asking to report answers around housing in healthcare visits in healthcare codes, which helps future efforts in this domain.
- A single question on housing in healthcare visits is minimal in terms of how much it requires from staff and can lead to much greater detection of homelessness.
- Asking about housing in healthcare visits it is a way to direct supports.

What are some weaknesses?

- Asking all hospitals to do ask a housing question would require much change management.
- People may not declare their homelessness in healthcare visits due to stigma.
- Healthcare data focuses on individuals with healthcare needs and misses many.
- Using healthcare data for analysis is difficult.
- Child-youth homelessness may be more difficult to identify in evictions and healthcare data.

R4, Data area 4: Use administrative data to inform homelessness prevention

As a primary target of this project, we investigated the use of administrative data. The initial investigation was on how we could use data collated by provincial governments and linked across sectors to inform population-based research to inform systems change around the prevention of youth homelessness, but this investigation was expanded to other use cases.

What does administrative data look like? Administrative data takes on various forms. In its simplest form, administrative data is information collected by organizations for their operations. This may be questions asked around identifying youth and directing programs. For example, organizations collect names and dates of birth. Some parts of administrative data are required for sharing with funders as part of reporting requirements. For example, answers to common questions are reported by emergency shelters funded by Reaching Home. Administrative data has the potential to be linked to other sector data to show how service use is connected for youth across systems, using identifiers such as names and date of birth. Analyses are performed on this linked data after it is de-identified, removing identifying information. Provincial cross-sectoral linked administrative data can inform population-based strategies for systems-level change to support the prevention of youth homelessness. In addition, organization data can be linked to related sector data to show how the organization's programs affect outcomes in that sector, such as decreasing emergency room visits. This may come in the form of an evaluation.

Cautions around administrative data: Administrative data can lead to confusing results due to its lack of detail. For example, when considering youth that are supported by crisis systems or programs, you may find that youth being supported by a program appear to do worse. This may not mean the program is not working, but often youth being served by interventions have complex needs and are being served for these needs, which may take time to resolve. Finer level data is needed to address this limitation but is often not available or possible in large-scale administrative data. Administrative data is also often ambiguous by itself, requiring much supporting context on what was happening in the jurisdiction or programs; investigation on how the data was collected over time; and engagement with interest holders to interpret what it really is showing.

R4, AREA 4, PART 1: BUILD UP ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Part 1 involves the immediate use of administrative data within an organization or sector. We describe this step first as this use is easier to support early and quality administrative data forms the foundation of linked administrative data analyses. This does not mean that we can't proceed directly to linked

administrative data analyses, but rather that over time analyses can become stronger as the underlying administrative data is improved. Unfortunately, improvements in youth data take many years to accumulate before they can be seen and used in linked administrative data analyses.

Activity explanation, Step 1: Improve organization-level administrative data:

This activity seeks to improve administrative data and its use in individual youth serving organizations. Building up administrative data is easier within one organization, compared to across a whole sector. Administrative data is useful in the homelessness and housing sectors, and in other sectors supporting youth (e.g., K-12 education, child welfare, and mental health). Organization-level administrative data can be used to understand general patterns across youth that they support. Dashboards, reports, and research are all ways to inform program decisions within organizations. For example, dashboards can be developed using organization data to show how well programs are doing in moving towards goals that support prevention. Training on how to use this administrative data can increase its use. Furthermore, funders support the use of data within organizations through the funding they provide and questions they require for reporting, which should also support organization needs. Various relevant data improvements are described in Recommendation #2.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Administrative data on patterns within youth-serving organizations can inform their programs and supports aimed at the prevention of youth homelessness.

Step 1 activities: Improve organization-level administrative data (difficulty):

1. **Train organizations to use their administrative data (easy).** Provide training on how to use organization data to inform programs, such as through dashboards or reports. Provide examples of when organization-level administrative data was useful for prevention. Training is necessary across different sectors that support youth (e.g., education, child welfare, and homeless shelters).
2. **Design reporting questions to be useful to organizations (moderate to hard).** Organizations should work together with funders to make reporting questions that also support organization needs. Common questions might be sought by funders across a sector to support systems learning. If reporting software is common across organizations (e.g., HIFIS), standard reports and dashboards can be created to support across funded organizations. Data quality measures and supports that improve organization-level data can increase the usefulness of this data.

Activity explanation, Step 2: Improve administrative data across organizations in a sector:

Administrative data that crosses organizations can provide a larger picture of patterns and trends to target to support systems change around prevention. This data is particularly meaningful on the scale of decisionmakers/funders (e.g., community entities knowing patterns within their community to decide on funding needs and decisions, the provincial government, and the federal government). However, the reality is that each organization has different goals and collects different data to address their needs. This means that beyond mandated data for reporting, much data is still needed for each organization. As such, required reporting may result in burdensome and data collection not relevant to organizations. Working with organizations can limit this issue. Data collection differences were commonly reported around mandated common data and may lead to differences in its meaning. Common questions and

processes across organizations can make data more impactful. However, *input is required* by communities to make sure that data and processes address needs and do not lead to undesired issues with clients. If questions do not agree with those collecting data or answering questions, they may skip questions or lie, leading to systematic issues in the interpretability of findings. The natural progression of high-quality data is organization to community to provincial to national, as each level represents more interest holders to represent and more data quality issues to address. However, higher level funders are also critical as they can have wider spread impact based on what they require and support.

As with organizational data, dashboards and reports can help bring timely data to inform decision making. As the scope of the data gets bigger (e.g., community to provincial to federal), more caution needs to be placed on the interpretation of findings and consideration placed of differences between jurisdictions. For example, provinces will have differences in how provinces' address homelessness, which will affect interpretation of differences in findings between them. Various relevant data improvements are described in Recommendation #2.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Cross-organization data can inform larger systems change by showing areas where change can generally be supported/funded to prevent youth homelessness. The level of the data (from community to provincial to federal) corresponds to the level of systems change the data informs best, as well as how specific solutions can be. Smaller equates to more specific, more relevant solutions. Improving cross-organization data is fundamental to analyses linking it with other sector data to inform cross-sectoral systems change.

Step 2 activities: Improve administrative data across organizations in a sector (difficulty):

Cross-organization data in a sector is increasingly complex moving from community to provincial to national data. Each requires more support and engagement, as more organizations are involved. Improvements in relevant youth data across sectors better informs youth homelessness prevention.

1. **Use cross-organization data to inform change (easy to moderate).** Report back on cross-organization findings in a timely, meaningful way. Create dashboards to provide an early tool to look at patterns. Some patterns may require more time to process and require a written report with sufficient context to interpret. Use established software (e.g., HIFIS) to speed up this work. Work to contextualize data, in terms of how it is affected by combining across organizations. Having the right questions and quality data is fundamental to how useful this data is. Share leading use cases to support improvements in other jurisdictions.
2. **Select relevant and impactful common questions (moderate).** Co-develop common questions that inform youth homelessness prevention across organizations in a sector. Work with organizations to make sure common questions are relevant and impactful. Be cautious not to over ask common questions, as it adds burden. Avoid questions that may be interesting but have no clear use.
2. **Actively support improvements in data collection (hard to very hard).** Provide standards and training for data collection that serves to improve data quality across organizations. Develop standards that meet organizations' realities by actively engaging with them on standards. Use dashboards, data quality checks, and communities of practice to support improvements to data. Improving data on a larger scale is increasingly difficult and harder to support well.

Who is involved: Community, provincial/territorial, and federal funders (funding and adjusting reporting; using data to inform systems change); leading organizations (training on how to collect and use data); and organizations (reporting and using data for program improvements).

Examples and opportunities: On the community level, public dashboards in Toronto are used in the shelter systems to understand system use and the types of clients served. Many Canada homelessness service providers also discussed creating dashboards to show the types of clients served.

To improve community level data, one community entity discussed using dashboards to show managers and organizations what needed to be improved. This facilitated follow-up conversations. They also provided back findings early to make data more useful, to motivate staff to collect better data.

On the national level, shelter data across the provinces is used to understand inflows into homeless and various client characteristics. Currently the Government of Canada is building towards monthly reporting of data across Reaching Home funded emergency shelters and improvements in data quality.

As a national example, the Government of Australia discussed that required government approved software comes with set reports that can be pulled any time by service providers to support decisions. These reports can be customized around organizational needs. In addition, reports are created and returned to homelessness service providers regularly to support decision making.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- Organizational data is smaller scale and more actionable. Organizational data can better address their needs. Dashboards can be centred around organizational goals.
- Cross-organization data can help understand bigger trends among the system and connect these patterns to policy and funding decisions.
- Emergency shelters often have a common funder federally in Reaching Home, which can support national change in its data.

What are some weaknesses?

- Many organizations lack capacity to use administrative data fully. It takes effort and capacity to build dashboards and data around meaningful use cases.
- Data can look very different across the type of organization (e.g., an adult emergency shelter is different than youth homelessness shelter). It can be difficult to scale up changes across organizations due to differences between them.
- Requiring the same data at a larger scale can reduce relevance.
- Good data across organizations requires support to do well. Supporting data was mentioned as being intensive and expensive in jurisdictions collecting high quality data.

R4, AREA 4, PART 2: USE LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Part 2 uses linked administrative data to inform system-level change around the prevention of youth homelessness. This approach looks at youth service use patterns that predict homelessness. We discuss how to support use of existing data, followed by how to improve this data for systems-level analyses.

Activity explanation, Step 1: Support use of existing linked administrative data

Some provinces have begun to link data across sectors. Data is linked, then provided to researchers to perform analyses on how individuals using one system were involved in other systems. This data can tell a rough story on the trajectories of service use of youth facing homelessness to help create systems solutions for prevention. Currently, many data centres in Canada link provincial cross-sectoral data, with Statistics Canada involved in one project linking provincial data to other sector data.

This step facilitates the use of existing linked administrative data. As cross-system administrative data analysis is difficult to use, part of this is supporting data access and training on how to use the data. Training is also needed around community engagement approaches and context building methods that help bridge the limitations of administrative data around its lack of detail. Sharing on metadata, data quality, and scripts supports use of the data. As all analyses are dependent on data quality, previous recommendations around improving administrative data quality can improve the usefulness of the data. To facilitate data use, it is important that concerns on data quality are shared back to data custodians to support troubleshooting on how data are being used and inform future data quality improvements.

One reality of administrative data is that it will never be perfect, and it often misses certain populations. Thus, a critical step to using linked administrative data is understanding data quality and who is included in the data and who is not, to make sure the interpretation of the data does not reinforce current systematic exclusions of groups. Understanding who is in the data is facilitated by linkage to a population-database, the gold standard being health care registrations in a province/territory due to Canada's universal health care system. This is paired with strong demographic data which allows validation on who is included. It is important to acknowledge critical gaps in coverage of the data in analyses, especially gaps that limit the scope of strategies informed from linked administrative data. Project relevant gaps we are aware of from our work with Canadian administrative data are that it often excludes: Indigenous peoples (including those on reserves), populations that choose not to declare their demographic background, youth under 18 in shelters, youth that are couch surfing, and individuals that are rough sleeping.

Engagement with target communities in analyses is critical. Related to this, strong principles around use of Indigenous peoples' data that puts decisions on in their hands are needed, often discussed under [OCAP (ownership, control, access, and possession)](#) for First Nation's data.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Linked administrative data can inform systems-level solutions to prevent youth homelessness. However, administrative data often is not fine grained and does not inform exact solutions, which requires further community engagement and research.

Step 1 activities: Use existing linked administrative data to inform youth homelessness prevention (difficulty):

1. **Support the use of existing linked administrative data to inform prevention (easy).** Share information on available data that can inform prevention and on how to access it. Provide training around its use, such as on how to build context around data with relevant communities. As projects advance, share metadata, data quality, derived data, and scripts to facilitate future use of data.

2. **Document who is in administrative data (easy to moderate).** Use metadata and perform analyses to understand who is covered and who is excluded by your data. Make sure that interpretations and resulting policy and program designs do not exclude those who are not covered by data. Acknowledge data gaps in analyses to ensure they do not reinforce systematic exclusions of populations. Work to improve demographic data that supports this process.

3. **Support engagement with relevant communities to interpret data (moderate).** Work with data custodians to make sure analyses match program design and data collection processes. Build up engagement processes for working with relevant communities around interpreting the linked data. Build up processes around data use from Indigenous communities, referring to established principles such as OCAP. Support connections with these communities in the province/territory where linked data was collected. As part of relationships with data custodians, provide feedback on data quality and potential future indicators from your engagement that might inform program and policy design.

Activity explanation, Step 2: Increase linked administrative data across Canada

Data centres vary in what kind of data is linked, with many gaps in important youth homelessness prevention data across Canada. To increase the functionality of linked data, more linkage is needed of adult emergency shelter data and early youth cross-systems use data. This step involves finding available data and working with established data centres to link data. Some data is not even being collected or reported and might require lengthy efforts to acquire the data. One big gap in emergency shelter data is shelter use data for youth under 18. When new data is added, researchers can benefit from dedicated support to use it.

Another big step is to increase the number of data centres across Canada using cross-sector linked data, especially linking homeless shelter and housing data, and use this data to perform analyses to inform larger change. As many data centres are established and support data linkage, their learnings on how to establish legislation, governance, and data access can inform progress in other jurisdictions. Currently the most advanced data centre in Canada around the roadmap's goals is the Data Innovation Program in British Columbia due to its allowance of out-of-province remote access and linkage to homelessness shelter data. Health Research Data Network (HRDN) Canada is a potential ally for this work as they support health data access across the provinces and territories. Currently their focus is on health care system data, but they are supporting many data centres with health-related cross-sector linked data. Linkage is possible through Statistics Canada for provinces/territories lacking capacity or wanting other federal data linked, but various issues exist around using data this way across jurisdictions.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Connecting to more sectors informs a more complete view on how youth homelessness needs can be supported to inform prevention. Multiple jurisdiction analysis provides comparative and larger-scale population-based evidence on how to engage in systems change.

Step 2 activities: Increase linked administrative data across Canada (difficulty):

1. **Support the use of new data (easy).** Advertise new data as it is linked to increase its use. Provide metadata support and training on how to use it. Provide training on cross-jurisdictional data analysis, such as federated data analysis. Share scripts to support future use of new data.

2. **Support linkage of more youth prevention relevant data (moderate to hard).** Work with data centres that can link cross-sector data to identify existing government program data that informs youth homelessness prevention. Work to link this data. Youth shelter and early youth system data are priorities. When data is not available, identify gaps and advocate for the data. New data collection is difficult and takes many years to accumulate to be useful.

3. **Increase data centres with relevant linked data across Canada (hard).** Work to increase relevant cross-sector linkage data centres across Canada with homelessness and housing data. Support their development through learnings from other leading centres across Canada. Partner with HRDN Canada in these efforts, messaging around the importance of using linked social data to inform health outcomes. Work with Statistics Canada to increase linkage when capacity is lacking in a jurisdiction or when needing to link to federal data sources.

Who is involved: Funders (supporting data use and data centre development), data centres (linking data and supporting use), administrative data experts (training on use), researchers (using data), government workers (providing input on data and how to use it), community members (providing input on data use and interpretation), and HRDN (training administrative data research and increasing data access).

Examples and opportunities: British Columbia is a current leader with homeless shelter data linked to multiple systems (e.g., schools, justice, child welfare, social supports, etc.). The Government of British Columbia is seeking to link more systems data.

Manitoba (Manitoba Population Research Data Repository) is a long-established leader with multiple social systems linked to health data (which can detect some homelessness). They may link to shelter data in the future. Other data centres close in this kind of work are New Brunswick (NB-IRDT) with cross-system linked data, ICES in Ontario which just changed legislation that might allow this work soon, and Prince Edward Island (Secure Island Data Repository), which has begun health data linkage. Statistics Canada has started some linkage of provincial emergency shelter data to other systems data (e.g., to tax data).

Health Research Data Network Canada is a group working to support cross-jurisdictional data access for health data. They offer trainings and support access to health and linked administrative data. For example, HRDN hosted a webinar series on various aspects of how to use administrative data, including on federated data analysis to support cross-jurisdictional analysis.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- Many homeless shelters collecting adult-youth (18 years old and later) homelessness data have reported mostly complete data, suggesting it has potential to be linkable.
- This data can inform multi-system strategies to support the prevention of youth homelessness. It helps understand the extent of systems issues.
- Building up cross-sector data in Canada benefits other systems, as it can be used beyond homelessness.
- Cross-jurisdictional analysis creates unique possibilities to learn from other jurisdictions as data collected in each province differs.

What are some weaknesses?

- Administrative data is hard to use.
- Administrative data often has limitations. Data quality is dependent on organizations and sectors. Differences in data collection exist and can lead to inaccurate conclusions, especially if not accounted for.
- Administrative data lacks the specificity needed for real world solutions by itself.
- Child-youth (under 18 years old) homelessness data is limited.
- Due to different legislative histories and developments across Canada, many jurisdictions are farther behind in linked administrative data. Getting provinces up to speed may not be feasible.

R4, AREA 4, PART 3: LINK ORGANIZATION DATA TO ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Activity explanation: Often organizations aim to improve outcomes that are seen in other sectors. Linkage of organizational data to relevant administrative data from those sectors can be used to provide evidence that services provide this impact. This type of linkage has become more common but is still rare as the process is time consuming and requires much research capacity. Part of this work is providing connections to known linkage pathways. It is also about building capacity to do strong analyses with this data. As one pathway to increase this work, many provincial data centres and government organizations are established and have capacity to do linkage. This recommendation is about building up the ability to do this work, while the work itself may be done in Data area 1.

How can it prevent youth homelessness? Linkage of organizational data to relevant administrative data can provide evidence of how prevention services impact clients. This helps demonstrate services and supports continued learning to improve services.

Activities (difficulty):

1. **Train organizations on administrative data linkage process (easy to moderate).** Train on and support doing this work. Training is needed on how to create data sharing agreements, access data, link data, and do analyses. Share on examples of successful efforts and how they were possible.
2. **Support connections to increase this work (easy to moderate).** As successful linkage develops, share connections to linkage opportunities. If organizations do not have capacity, support connections with researchers to do this work.
3. **Increase capacity to link community data with other sectors' data (moderate to hard).** Work with data centres and government organizations to increase opportunities to link their administrative data to organizational data to evaluate programs. Build up the ability of data centres and organizations already doing this work to expand the number of projects doing this. Many universities and data centres in Canada have secure environments that could be used for this purpose. Dedicated funding can increase organizations doing this work.

Who is involved: Experts in linked administrative data (training and sharing about available datasets); researchers (performing analyses); community organizations (supporting work and doing it); and data centres and governments (linking data and supporting increased use).

Examples and opportunities? Statistics Canada can link individuals' data to other systems data.

Provincial health care systems sometimes link health data to other data. For example, PolicyWise linked a community service provider's data to healthcare use data to show how the program related to healthcare use outcomes (M. J. Russell et al., 2021). Similarly, PolicyWise linked three organizations' program data to government data to show how their training programs related to later employment outcomes (M. Russell et al., 2020).

Many Making the Shift and other projects have linked community data to other data to show outcomes of programs.

What are some strengths of this data area?

- It is easier to see systems' change on the scale of a single organization, as community data is more specific to programs.
- It is easier to modify data collection at the scale of an organization (vs. on a larger scale) to evaluate outcomes for that program.
- The scale of the work is smaller and often project-based, so it can be less expensive than other population-based administrative data linkage approaches.

What are some weaknesses?

- The data might be identifiable without privacy considerations (e.g., service providers may know who a data point represents).
- Not all linkage is possible or feasible.
- If data collection and linkage is not well-thought out, it can lead to conclusions that a program does not work, when in fact it does. For example, linking a program's data to an unrelated sector may result in saying an unrelated outcome was not achieved. Similarly, linking to an outcome too early that takes many years to form may result in saying the outcome was not achieved, whereas shorter term outcomes may be seen with other measures.

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Appendices

Appendix: Methods in-depth

First, we performed an administrative data infrastructure scan to inform our roadmap. We focused on Canadian data infrastructure that in its existing or near state could be used for large-scale investigations into youth homelessness. We focused on 25 organizations with data infrastructure in Canada. We extracted key information from websites describing the data infrastructure. We then identified 11 promising Canadian groups and held interviews to better understand their data infrastructure. We also held two interviews with leading international groups working with homelessness data, with other leading groups contacted about the possibility of an interview. We coded the interviews thematically. In addition, we performed a scan of funding sources of community homelessness service providers across Canada. We searched for examples of homelessness provider funding in each province and territory. Our goal was to understand who homelessness providers report to.

Second, we interviewed current Making the Shift project holders to understand their experience working with data to inform youth homelessness prevention. As part of this engagement, we sought to build relationships with their teams to support future project activities. Our team invited priority projects and reached out to other projects interested in sharing. Interviews covered a wide range of methods related to the prevention of youth homelessness, including administrative data, qualitative data, and interventions. We conducted 10 interviews, tailoring questions to each group's work. Discussions were coded thematically.

Third, we conducted a narrative literature review to identify promising practices for administrative data infrastructure for homeless populations. We reviewed academic and grey literature for promising practices for data infrastructure that uses homelessness-related health and/or social data. Our focus was on Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. We developed a search strategy with the assistance of a research librarian at McGill University. We found 1,004 unique academic publications and 34 non-academic publications (e.g., organization reports, blogs). We screened to 39 publications and coded them thematically.

Fourth, we held interviews with housing/homelessness community service providers on their experience with information collection and use around youth seeking homelessness and housing supports. We created interview guides to guide our conversations and tailored them to each organization. We interviewed 15 participants from eight organizations that spanned three provinces (British Colombia, Alberta, and Ontario), including one Indigenous-focused organization. We shared interview questions with participants in advance to help them prepare for discussions. We coded transcripts thematically.

Fifth, we held focus groups with youth with lived experience of homelessness on their experience during information collection and use when accessing supports. Methods were co-designed in partnership with an engagement facilitator with lived experience of youth homelessness. We created discussion guides to

facilitate conversations. We conducted three in-person focus groups with 21 youth with lived/living experience in two provinces (Alberta and Ontario), including youth from an Indigenous-focused organization. At each session, one youth support worker was present to provide support to youth participants if necessary, supporting trauma informed care. We coded transcripts thematically.

Sixth, we scanned Canadian national, provincial, and community governments and organizations' homelessness/housing support policies. We searched for policy documents related to homelessness strategies online from three relevant federal government departments, all provincial and territorial governments, and 18 municipal/community organizations and coalitions, crossing provinces and territories. We retained 55 documents. We extracted information corresponding to previous project learnings. We coded this information thematically.

In addition to formalized learning processes, our team regularly sought opportunities to understand ongoing trends and opinions among interest holders in the homelessness sector in Canada. For example, we learned about ongoing efforts and developments from Making the Shift leadership; held meetings with teams responsible for leading work; reflected on our long experience as an organization leading population-based administrative data analysis in partnership with the government; and regularly attended webinars on various related topics (e.g., homelessness conference presentations, youth homelessness prevention, changes in housing policy). We considered both learning content and the reactions/questions from people involved. For example, we watched presentations from the 2024 Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conference to update our knowledge on recent initiatives.

As a final step, we held focus groups where we expanded on and learned specific solutions to various key topics that crossed project findings. We created discussion guides to facilitate conversations, tailored to each type of interest holder. We conducted two in-person focus groups with nine youth with lived/living experience from two provinces (Ontario and Quebec). We held an in-person Indigenous circle session where we split 15 youth, four elders, and six community service providers between four circles (Alberta). We held eight online focus groups that consisted fully of one type of interest holder: researchers (two sessions with nine individuals), decisionmakers (government representations/funders; three sessions with nine individuals), and community service providers (three sessions with eight individuals). We also prompted for responses via an online survey for individuals than could not attend sessions. When possible, discussion from previous focus group sessions was fed into subsequent sessions to further develop ideas. We coded discussion thematically, synthesizing findings between interest holders and combining with the previous six learning activities to develop recommendations.