YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

In an internationally renowned city such as Vancouver, it is unconscionable that youth are forced to live on the streets. Yet sadly, this is the unfortunate reality of many youth (Huang, 2019). The 2019 Homeless Count for Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, revealed that with a record number of 2,223 homeless people, the municipality had the highest per capita rate of homelessness in Canada (Clarkson, 2019). In 2016, 11.7% of the city's homeless population consisted of youth ages 5-19 (Huang, 2019). This proportion of youth homelessness continues to increase despite the strategies currently in place (Basi et al., 2012).

Using a systems thinking approach, our team identified three root causes of youth homelessness including structural factors, system factors, and individual/relational factors (Gaetz, 2013). These issues are further compounded by a lack of public understanding and empathy that affects the government and social strategies for helping youth experiencing homelessness in the community (Briggs, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020). Based on our research and the eleven interviews we conducted with community stakeholders, we conclude that in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver, the efforts of support services are broken up among many different organizations, and that a resulting lack of coordination contributes to the lack of program effectiveness. This situation is rooted in both the history of the DTES and in the current efforts to address the issue (Campbell et al., 2009; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Maté, 2018). This essay outlines a brief history of the deterioration of the DTES, an introduction to the causes of youth homelessness, a systems analysis of the current practices in place to address youth homelessness, and our conclusions as to where and how change might be possible in improving the lives of Vancouver's youth that are experiencing homelessness.

The DTES was once a key economic centre in Vancouver (Campbell et al., 2009). The closing of mental health institutions in the 1990's and the displacement of patients resulted in significant and quick increases in the homeless population (Campbell, 2009). In 1993, the social housing program that subsidized interest rates to low-income families, and provided them with grants was ended by the Federal Government as a cost-saving measure (Campbell et al., 2009; Mcafee, 2009). As the city became one of the most expensive cities in the world (now having the highest cost of living in Canada) the problems caused by the curtailing of social assistance became more and more pronounced (Shepert, 2019). Since 1988, house prices in Vancouver increased by 700%, in comparison to the second-most expensive city in Canada, Toronto, where prices increased by 343% (CMHC, 2018; Toronto Real Estate Trends, 2020; Vancouver Real Estate Trends, 2020). As Vancouver gained greater international status and development was spurred by foreign investment, the cost of living further increased (City of Vancouver, 2018). The city became widely known as a place with a diversity of cultures and features to appeal to all, from the mountains and coastal beaches, to the city skyscrapers and moderate weather (Telegraph Travel, 2017; Vancouver's Weather, 2020). This increase in prices left many local families in financial hardships (St. Denis, 2020). In turn, this paper identifies family conflict as one of the leading factors causing youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2013).

SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACH

By utilizing a system analysis approach, we were able to identify factors that contribute to the epidemic of youth homelessness experienced in Vancouver. Three methods were used to gain information and insight into the situation. The first was interviews with key stakeholders including workers at social agencies in the DTES, law enforcement, and social work and education students at the University of British Columbia. Next, academic research aided us in our analysis of the topic. Lastly, our own experiences volunteering in the DTES and interacting with residents there, contributed to the research we carried out. Through these lenses, we assembled a comprehensive view and understanding of the issues facing the DTES, the societal variables that serve as a backdrop, current approaches to youth homelessness, and finally the possible remedies that could be considered and implemented.

PROBLEM LANDSCAPE

Three key factors create the backdrop against which youth homelessness occurs; those being structural, system, and individual/relational (Gaetz, 2013). Structural factors include the core societal issues affecting individuals, be it poverty, the effects of colonization, discrimination, or the economics of a region (Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020). Systems issues relate to a society's human mechanisms and their failures, including the poor transition that exists for youth leaving government care, the difficulties youth face in accessing government and social services, or the failures of the education system to train teachers to identify and assist at-risk youth (Chu, 2020; Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020). Lastly, individual/relational factors speak to the specific issues that an individual might face, including violence, addiction, trauma, and especially important as this paper will show, family conflict (Gaetz, 2013; Givetash, 2017; Khong & Amaya, 2020).

A student in the faculty of social work at the University of British Columbia stated that the Canadian capitalist system reinforces a cycle of poverty (Khong & Amaya, 2020). Many who are born into poverty face certain obstacles, having to face class and socioeconomic segregation (Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020). The stress that poverty places on a family, be it food insecurity, poor educational outcomes, or a lack of housing, can lead to family conflict, which falls under the individual/relational category (Gaetz, 2013; Chu, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020). Struggling to meet one's basic needs, as well as the needs of their family can create immense stress (Hopper, 2020). Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid, the basic foundational needbase which consists of physiological needs such as air, water, food, shelter, sleep and clothing are the core of youth's well being (Hopper, 2020). When the base levels are not being met, it becomes challenging to fulfill those needs, therefore these financial stressors create an unhealthy living situation for the youth involved (Gaetz, 2013; Hopper, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020). Many youth on the streets of Vancouver left a home situation that is unstable or unsafe (Gaetz, 2013; Chu, 2020). When family trauma occurs and youth feel the need to leave their home, finding housing independently is difficult in such an unaffordable city (Shantz, 2020).

Family conflict occurs within the broader picture of the structural factor of unaffordability in Vancouver (CMHC, 2018; Gaetz, 2013; Sherpert, 2019; Toronto Real Estate Trends, 2020; Vancouver Real Estate Trends, 2020). Joe Roberts, who experienced homelessness as a youth, explains "I had early childhood trauma...and I had the early introduction to alcohol and drugs to deal with the emotional instability in my life. By the time I was 15, I had family conflict, which is the number one reason why kids end up homeless" (Givetash, 2017). This illustrates the complexity of family conflict and its relationship to youth homelessness. It is worth noting that failures of child protection, health and correctional services also contribute to the rise in the youth

homeless population, these falling under the systems factors previously mentioned (Gaetz, 2013). Poor assistance for youth transitioning out of government care creates young adults who age out of the system and directly into homelessness (Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020). In many cases that assistance is not only poor, but harmful, with between 40 to 50 percent of youth experiencing homelessness having gone through inadequate or abusive government care (Gaetz, 2013).

Once a youth is on the streets, rehabilitation is complicated (Parkinson, 2020). In an interview with Karen, a social worker based in the DTES, she explained how many of the youth that she works with become so accustomed to their living conditions on the street that they are not ready for Single Room Occupancy Accommodation (SRO) (Parkinson, 2020). They may also feel that the rules and regulations of SRO's will not work for them (Parkinson, 2020). Youth living on the street often succumb to addiction or mental illness, which is not properly addressed simply by receiving financial aid (Parkinson, 2020). Another factor in the system, as described by Jenny of Inner Hope Youth Ministries, is how a limited welfare allotment keeps youth in poverty (Shantz, 2020). Giving $375 to an individual in a city that requires $1000 to live is ineffective (Shantz, 2020, Epifano, 2020). It is unrealistic to expect a youth experiencing homelessness to improve their situation without a comprehensive support plan (Shantz, 2020).

SOLUTION LANDSCAPE

Current solutions such as food banks, emergency shelters and safe-injection sites, fail to encompass a whole-person rehabilitation approach for youth, a necessity when individuals are dealing with homelessness and additional trauma, addiction, and mental health issues (Gaetz, 2013; Maté, 2018; Athaide, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020). Unfortunately, these efforts only create short-term solutions that lack a youth-specific focus on the issue of homelessness, and therefore contributes to the lack of an effective resolution (Khong & Amaya, 2020). Without addressing the issues that a youth faces beyond their lack of a home, progress cannot be expected (Khong & Amaya, 2020). Moreover, current solutions fail to put together all the services that a youth experiencing homelessness requires. Organizations like Covenant House that work directly with youth experiencing homelessness are effective, but only come into play after several missed opportunities for early intervention, such as in schools (Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Higo, 2020), and merely mitigate the consequences suffered by someone who aged out of the foster care system (Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020). An organization like Covenant House is phenomenal at performing its specific task, but cannot end youth homelessness by itself (Briggs, 2020; Epifano, 2020). As well, a government funding structure with restrictive deadlines compromises the ability of organizations to provide adequate care and support or create innovative new programs (Khong & Amaya, 2020). This lack of coordination means that many youth fall through the cracks, whether through lack of accessibility or due to the numerous organizations in operation increasing the likelihood some things will be missed (Khong & Amaya, 2020).

Outside of Vancouver, there are solutions that dramatically improve homelessness situations (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). In Finland, they recognized that without housing, additional treatment for other issues had little value, and so, provided homes to those facing homelessness (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). Rehabilitation, detoxification, employment and other services are essential, but for them to succeed, permanent housing must be provided (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). This ensures that the homeless are not kicked out the next morning and they can plan their life ahead (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). Vancouver can adopt this principle to better address the youth homelessness crisis. Another effective solution already in place that could be expanded, is bc211, "a Vancouver-based non-profit organization that specializes in providing information and referral regarding community, government and social services in BC" (bc211, 2019). We see potential for any new solution to incorporate what bc211 is doing or use their service as part of a broader plan.

GAPS

In the current system, there are three elements that come to play - interest, eligibility, and opportunity (Kehler, 2020). There is uncertainty as to if youth are interested in accessing resources (Kehler, 2020). The eligibility of the youth going through a program could be changed after possible issues with staff (Kehler, 2020). As well, opportunities are hard to predict because there is no live system to notify the availability of resources (Kehler, 2020). John Kehler of Directions Youth Services shared that "...like a combination lock, you need all three in order for the door to open. Somebody may be interested, eligible, but if there's no opportunity, the door does not open. All three of these elements can change within a day and so much of it is out of our control" (Kehler, 2020).

It is important to identify four key components of the system that prevents youth homelessness from improving (Athaide, 2020; Batalden, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Kehler, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020). The first is a lack of understanding of youth homelessness (Athaide, 2020; Batalden, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Kehler, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020). As residents of the greater Vancouver area, although we grew up here, this project quickly taught us more than we ever knew. The population at large does not know what causes youth homelessness, thus is unlikely to pay much attention to the issue (Athaide, 2020; Batalden, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Kehler, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020). Secondly, without understanding, empathy is unlikely to grow (Khong & Amaya, 2020; Chu, 2020; Higo, 2020). Driving through the DTES, we see frightening individuals with scarred skin and ragged clothing. Yet under the grime are people, even children, who see terrible things happen everyday. Third, because there is a lack of empathy, there is a lack of support for improving the situation, especially when the general population does not know why the homeless are in those circumstances (Khong & Amaya, 2020; Chu, 2020; Higo, 2020). Lastly, the level of public support for the issue determines the government and social response (Khong & Amaya, 2020). Together, these four factors further contribute to youth homelessness (Athaide, 2020; Batalden, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Kehler, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020).

LEVERS OF CHANGE

Based on the interviews and research we conducted through our system analysis, we propose forming a centralized government coordination agency based on the provincial level that would create individualized plans for the specific needs of youth. This agency would coordinate all resources including; long term housing, counselling, rehabilitation programs, work opportunities, school information, food banks, in-site drug services and short-term shelters. It would also help to arrange life skills training and provide resources to prepare youth for adulthood. The goal is to organize all existing services so that they properly cover all areas of a person's rehabilitation. Only a coordinating agency operating at the provincial level would have the necessary authority to see the full scope of services available and how best to string them together. Computer logistical technology could reduce the staffing requirements. Also, the steady increase in the homeless population means that the government will take greater action and propose new initiatives, as the current ones do not suffice.

As many middle and upper class citizens are affected by this increase, they will in turn be more supportive of new government initiatives. Charities will also be encouraged to follow along if their donors support new measures. It is evident that combating youth homelessness needs a new plan of action. Youth experiencing homelessness need an environment where resources are easily accessible. Individualized focus would be required so that employees of such an agency could create a rehabilitation plan that is catered to that person. This plan would utilize some combination of the already existing charities and organizations to

provide a treatment plan. Since this organization would be aware of all existing services, they could also be responsible for educating the public with the goal of increasing empathy for youth experiencing homelessness.

KEY INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNED

Over the years, our group members have been active volunteers in the DTES. Contrary to what we believed, it was shocking to see that youth homelessness is such a significant issue in our community. As we began to critically examine the issue, we learnt that despite the best intentions and efforts of government and social agencies, the system in place is not effectively addressing the issue. Youth have specific needs that must be addressed for them to succeed. The DTES is fortunate that it has so many different agencies already doing good and important work. But as we outlined throughout this paper, coordination, organization, and youth-specific focus are required (Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020).

Our interviews showed us the importance of spreading awareness (Athaide, 2020; Batalden, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Kehler, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020). Covenant House's Allison Briggs explained that homelessness is "a real problem especially in Vancouver and homelessness could happen to anyone. Anyone could experience it. All it takes is a death in the family or losing a job...Just to reduce that stigma around homelessness...talking about it and saying why it is happening is so important" (Briggs, 2020).

This team recognizes that the solutions we put forward are not the only possible remedies to the youth homelessness crisis in Vancouver. Any solution would need to be organized in collaboration with key stakeholders and youth experiencing homelessness. The solution we recommend comes from our evaluation of the current system and what is missing, particularly the lack of coordination of this complex system. The lack of focus on youth homelessness as a distinct issue (Gaetz, 2013; Khong & Amaya, 2020) also suggests that more research could be done, which might identify more effective approaches to combating the issue. The key takeaway is that youth homelessness is indeed solvable.

CONCLUSION

Youth homelessness is a complex issue. As stated in this essay, structural, systems, and individual/relational factors create the backdrop against which youth homelessness occurs, and within those individual/relational factors, there is family conflict, a leading cause of youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2013). Together with a lack of understanding and empathy, and the resulting consequences, youth experiencing homelessness require a lot of help (Athaide, 2020; Batalden, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Chu, 2020; Kehler, 2020; Khong & Amaya, 2020; Higo, 2020). Yet in the DTES, the lack of progress is not due to a lack of services, but rather a lack of coordination between those services. When the provincial government and the agencies and services in the DTES work together, our community will begin the process of eradicating youth homelessness.

NEXT STEPS

The creation of a government coordination agency is an idea that warrants further research. In addition, whether or not this coordination role should be government run, or whether there should be a stronger leadership role by non-profits, is worth considering. More research on the topic of youth homelessness, and conversations with key stakeholders, are important next steps in determining the best course of action.