Transforming the Canadian Policy Agenda for School-Based Prevention of Youth Homelessness: Research as Activism

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ABSTRACT

Youth homelessness (YH) demands transformative changes in research, education, and public policy. Distinct from adult homelessness (AH), poorly addressed YH may lead to AH. Prevailing media narratives and policy communications perpetuate stigma and are unrepresentative of youth's lived experiences, hindering the educational sector's capacity to implement supportive measures in youth homelessness prevention. Schools are well poised to provide preventative and mitigative supports to address YH, yet the work intensification of educators has reached a point of fatigue, thus threatening support efficacy. We conceptualize research as activism and propose that policy can be engaged as a matter of social justice and a means to transform society via research and knowledge mobilization (KMb). Our Canadian environmental scan informs several studies in progress, which share goals to: prevent YH; reduce harms from intersectional issues to YH; and ameliorate conditions for resilience pertaining to youth in or at risk of homelessness. We call for a multi-pronged approach to engage stakeholders and the education sector in addressing this high-stakes issue disproportionately affecting underserved youth. Our findings chart the next steps of this research as activism cycle.

KEYWORDS

Research as activism; underserved youth; marginalization; stigma; youth homelessness prevention; policy transformation; school-based prevention; knowledge mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

Research as Activism (RaA) is a relatively new moniker yet to be defined or claimed by many researchers, despite evidence of what may constitute its practice having been around for decades in varying ways. The absence of an articulated definition invites those so compelled to offer insights about what RaA is and how it may be engaged. We respond to this special issue on the topic by reflecting upon what RaA means for us, and how our research involves relationships with academic work, public policy, and public advocacy, with focused attention on the prevention of youth homelessness.

Although we are not as yet settled on an absolute definition of what *Research as Activism* entails, our provisional understanding incorporates an appreciation for both the *rigor* of research—meaning we rely on empirically verifiable data that is based in reasoned inquiry rather than ideologically driven supposition—and the *justice-orientation* of activism—meaning we orient our work towards ameliorating injustices, particularly those wrought by powerful institutions such as the state and corporate capitalism. As such, RaA is an ontology rather than a methodology: we seek to make sense of the social world with the purpose of generating positive change, (e.g., change that results in greater democracy, more justice, and the expansion of equity). There are many ways to achieve such ends, but a few guiding principles are at the core of the work we do, and of what we think of as RaA. First, our academic pursuit of justice must be informed by the experiences of those who have been most harmed. In other words, we refuse academic research that claims to know without having spoken with or interacted with those who experience the injustice they are seeking to address. Secondly, and similarly to cognate approaches such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR), we value meaningful engagement with impacted communities and individuals as generating high quality and relevant research. Thirdly, we understand *objectivity* as pertaining to a rigorous approach to systematic data collection and analysis, *not* as a researcher position that involves maintaining some sort of calculated distance from the topic or individuals. Rather, we see the systematic and rigorous pursuit of knowledge as being *in service to* justice-informed ends, by providing the most reliable, robust, and accurate information that we can in order to advocate for the most just, democratic, and equitable changes.

In this article, we share how RaA can be engaged via multi-pronged institutional and policy engagement, including with political discourses, and via knowledge mobilization (KMb), all at the intersection of youth homelessness prevention.

Conceptual Framework: The Necessary Entanglement of Academics and Public Life

We note compelling reasons for our research to engage with political discourses and to face uncomfortable truths, ironies, tensions, and challenges. Said (1993b) deemed the role of academics to be necessarily entangled with public advocacy and called for engagement in political discourses to face uncomfortable truths. He argued that,

> There is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them, you've entered the public world. Nor is there only a public

intellectual, someone who exists just as a figurehead or spokesperson or symbol of a cause, movement, or position. There's always a personal inflection and a private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written. Least of all should an intellectual be there to make their audiences feel good. (Said, 1993b, opening address)

This statement provokes us in several ways. First, we recognize that academics are privileged. Our research questions, access to conversations with participants, the empirical evidence following these questions, and the statements that we make about these are enabled by powerful institutions and our words have influence beyond our acts of reporting what we learned from what we asked. We occupy institutional spaces that shape societal ontologies and epistemologies. Said's observations about academics in the public sphere highlight researcher privilege and a warning. Secondly, Said reminds us that academics live embodied lives, with personal inflections emerging overtly and covertly via publishing. This actuality calls researchers to engage in ongoing reflexivity, which he articulates in his treatise on culture and imperialism (Said, 1993a). Finally, we can expect this to take time and can be uncomfortable. Said compels us to venture into those spaces of discomfort, and to engage the public sphere through our researching capacities and words that we publish. We aim to advance political causes to reduce suffering, harm, and marginalizations. We propose that scholarship intersects with the public sphere in dynamic ways. While some scholars may aspire to neutrality, we embrace research as intended for impact and particular aims, namely for our work, social change for marginalized youth through policy transformation.

We approach conceptualizing RaA with a mix of curiosity for its potential for change, as well as trepidation for its inherent risks. Our inquiry of RaA interrogates tension-filled landscapes that include motivations drawing scholars to RaA to work for change, yet mired by complexities, including but not limited to: fortifying barriers one wishes to dismantle, and the risk of harming research participants. We offer institutional, policy, and political engagement as examples to unpack how RaA may be approached, noting that KMb is also a key component of RaA. Our environmental scan of school policies aims to shift the public policy landscape towards effectively addressing the problem of youth homelessness. Importantly, we foreground the vital role of the public education sector in prevention-focused solutions.

As a team of researchers with diverse educational backgrounds, our multi-phased, multi-study research agenda aims to support the policy and practice landscape shift that would see schools become more active participants in preventing youth homelessness. Data collection for our planned series of studies is in stages, with this environmental policy scan serving as a foundational contribution to this cluster of studies. Based on this initial work, we offer guidance for ways forward.

Framing Research as Activism (RaA)

Currently, little research engages the term research as activism (RaA). Harper and colleagues (2007) used this exact moniker, yet without defining it specifically. Reinertsen (2019, p. 260) combined teaching and researching as activism, offering an implied definition via actions and

outputs, noting events to provoke action that "press and force us to think otherwise, strange ontological hauntings". The topic, then, is charged with innuendo. Scholars interested in RaA may draw inspiration from those who have addressed power inequities and marginalizations that may be both systemic and individually experienced. For example, Battiste (2013) has helped educators to grapple with their practices while learning about Indigenous knowledge systems, offering clarity and direction to Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators alike to decolonize education. Ahmed (2007), Ladson-Billings (2014), and Love (2019) addressed systemic issues of racial oppression within school systems and have advanced anti-oppressive, culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching practices beyond their locales. Said situates our necessary relationship with the public sphere, while warning of new oppressions that can manifest in the interest of conquering old ones. He called upon intellectuals that choose to engage in specific social justice movements (in his example, challenging English colonial authority and power) to keep their "concerns [focused] with minority and 'suppressed' voices" but reminds us to practice "vigilance" and reflexivity (1993a, p. 54). While educators continue to learn about the effects of colonialism and racism and engage in shifting their practices to become more inclusive, school staff are generally not attuned to the issues, needs and effective responses to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness (e.g., Schwan et al., 2018).

Rationale for Youth Homelessness Prevention

Youth homelessness is a complex and persistent social issue that is generally misunderstood by the public. It is steeped in stigma and often overlooked as a policy priority, despite the magnitude of the problem. For example, it is estimated that annually, 3.5 million youth, ages 13-25 experience homelessness in the United States (Morton et al., 2017). In Canada, the estimated annual number is 25,000-45,000 youth, ages 13-24 (Gaetz et al., 2016). Youth experiences of homelessness are related to multi-level, intersectional issues at structural, systemic and individual-relational levels (Dej et al., 2020; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Nooe & Patterson, 2010).

The social and personal costs of youth homelessness are extraordinarily high. Violence, victimization and trauma associated with homelessness have cumulative impacts on individuals' health and social well-being (Baker-Collins et al.,2018; Barker et al., 2015; Paat et al., 2019). Youth in these circumstances are more vulnerable to social exclusion and socio-emotional issues, as well as the risk of entrenchment in a cycle of homelessness and poverty, attributable in large part to forced relocation between living situations that are unstable and often unsafe (Liljedahl, 2013; Watson, et al., 2016). Homeless youth suffer higher degrees of physical and mental health problems, are at higher risk of HIV infection, are more likely to be malnourished, encounter frequent and extreme forms of violence and victimization, are much more likely to be subject to criminalization, and have extremely high mortality rates (Antoniades & Tarasuk 1998; Baron 2003; Boivin et al., 2005; DeMatteo et al., 1999; Kennelly, 2015). More than half of Canadian homeless youth spend time in jail. Almost a decade ago, shelter costs for homeless youth in Canada were between CDN$30,000-$40,000/year; with the cost of penal detention

near CDN$100,000/year (Karabanow et al., 2016). Youth homelessness prevention can prevent events leading to homelessness from continuing to longer patterns of alienation, including adult homelessness and broad social stigma.

Preventing youth homelessness would allow Canada to better meet its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and the 2017 commitment announced by the Trudeau Liberals to uphold the human right to housing across the country. Youth in homelessness experience educational interruptions and lose important social networks such as connections with trusted teachers, school counsellors and coaches (Gaetz et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2023; Oppenheimer et al., 2016; Paat et al., 2019). A pan-Canadian study on 1,103 youth with lived experience of homelessness (Schwan et al., 2018) revealed that educational disengagement is a problem that is highly impacted by intersecting associative factors such as bullying (social stigma), learning disabilities, physical and mental health issues, childhood trauma, family dysfunction and low socio-economic status. Moreover, as youth from racialized/historically marginalized communities are significantly overrepresented in the homeless population (Evangelist & Shaefer, 2020; Morton, et al., 2017; Parrott et al., 2022; Schwan et al., 2018), it is an equity issue. Youth homelessness is therefore a multifaceted social problem that stems from societal failures to provide adequate support to young people and their families.

Although solutions to youth homelessness conventionally focus on emergency, crisis-management responses, the shift to prevention-based approaches has gained traction in recent years (e.g., Gaetz, 2020; Morton et al., 2020; Oudshoorn et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that to prevent homelessness, a multi-pronged effort is required that addresses issues at the individual, systemic and structural levels, including generational trauma, violence, family dysfunction, poverty and discrimination, and access to health and social services. Given the complex, intersectional nature of the issue, effective solutions require collaborative prevention efforts across sectors including education, health, social services, and housing. Schools are ideal loci for early intervention as the only public institution in Canada where the majority of young people are expected to regularly engage until the age of 16. Schwan and colleagues' (2018) study with 114 youth across 12 communities in Canada highlighted schools as one of the most effective places where young people can access supports to divert homelessness through early identification and connections to resources. Students experiencing homelessness perceive schools to play a critical role in providing them with safety, support, and guidance (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Ingram et al., 2017; Malenfant et al., 2018; Partridge & Kennelly, 2024). Ansloos and colleagues (2022) further argued that education is a promising area for upstream interventions toward Indigenous youth homelessness in Canada: with the right policies and tools, Indigenous ways of knowing and pedagogies may be prioritized to inform youth on how they can best serve themselves and their communities in ways that create sustainable change.

Conversely, numerous barriers and detrimental educational policies for youth experiencing risk of homelessness require addressing (Palmer et al., 2023). Examples include

punitive measures to address behavioural issues stemming from lack of supports, relationship breakdown, learning disabilities, and childhood trauma (Kearney et al., 2023; Malenfant et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in light of the research, schools have high potential as effective partners in prevention (e.g., Edwards, 2020; Le & Rew, 2023; Miller, 2015; Sohn & Gaetz, 2020; Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014). We also draw attention to scholarship in public policy (e.g., Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2006; Dej et al., 2020; Gaetz, 2020; Gaetz et al., 2016) that provide frameworks for policymaking (MacKenzie, 2018) and social innovation (Gaetz, 2020) in the context of how educational systems can be helpful actors in preventing youth homelessness.

Inviting educational institutions to engage with this work is an important piece of the homelessness prevention puzzle. Young people who have been interviewed for an earlier segment of this research project report that they would like to be able to remain in school; this finding is supported by a national Canadian survey of youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al, 2016; Partridge & Kennelly, 2024). School engagement therefore represents a highly pragmatic approach. On the other hand, we are aware of the work intensification that educators have faced in recent years and the mounting social care burdens they face. Rather than adding to their responsibilities, it is important to ensure educators are valued as collaborators and experts who can contribute to shared solutions without being required to take on ever-greater workloads.

Literature on Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) in the Context of Research as Activism

Addressing this multi-faceted issue beyond the conventional crisis-oriented response entails concerted efforts to draw on research-based evidence. We look to the field of KMb to understand how research can be utilized to advance prevention policies and collaborative initiatives, thus optimising institutional and policy engagement through advocacy. Concerns around the use and impact of research-based knowledge beyond scholarly pursuits have led to the evolving field of KMb. Our focus on KMb in the context of RaA is to expand engagement and increase the impact of the activism. Deriving from the field of knowledge translation, KMb focuses on dynamic processes through which scholarly research is disseminated and used for impact. The field has evolved considerably, from a focus on applied research based on hierarchies of evidence, to considering the complexities and nuances in evidence utilization for policy and practice (Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016; Rutter et al., 2017; Sohn, 2018).

Practicing meaningful and justice-oriented KMb can assume an expansive, transformative and purposive orientation. Drawing on critical theories of social change, emancipatory praxis and participatory action research, KMb reconceptualizes research as an instrument for amplifying voices of lived experience, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. This approach to KMb catalyzes grassroots movements for social change through community engagement and knowledge co-creation (e.g., Kelly et al., 2021; Turin et al., 2023; Wallerstein et al., 2020).

Critiques and challenges in this field centre on issues of access, including academic reward structures that value academic publications (Sá et al., 2011), power imbalances, and

ethical and institutional constraints (Cain et al., 2018; Fischman et al., 2018). Systemic barriers to access and inclusion pose significant challenges to meaningful engagement and collaboration (Kapczynski, 2007). These challenges underscore the need for change at the institutional, policy and systemic levels, to incentivize and facilitate community-engaged scholarship and KMb through an activism lens.

A notable inherent assumption by researchers is that with the availability, accessibility, and use of *high-quality* evidence, good policy decisions will ensue. However, the reality of policy development is characterized by complexity and non-linearity that is not adequately addressed in the literature (Cairney, 2019). Farfard (2012) argued that researcher and external stakeholder disappointments regarding policy decisions based on politics and ideology rather than on scientific knowledge reflect a lack of understanding of government decision-making and the role and nature of politics in policy development. Further, the quality of public policy decisions depends on factors outside of the context of the evidence itself, including the interest, skills and abilities of policymakers to interpret and apply evidence-based solutions to policy problems (Nutley, 2013; Powell et al., 2018). As Oliver (2006, p. 201) noted, "science can identify solutions to pressing public … problems, but only politics can turn most of these solutions into reality." Policymakers interpret evidence and implications pertaining to specific policy problems and decisions within their own contexts. They adjudicate the quality and credibility of evidence, based primarily on their professional norms and training, anecdotal evidence, opinions of their networks, prior knowledge, objectives and parameters for the evidence, as well as whether it is politically and economically conducive to their agendas (Sohn, 2018; Tseng, 2012). Consequently, to make a policy impact, activist-oriented researchers must move beyond the norms and expectations of scholarship and align to the processes through which policy is formulated. Cairney & Oliver (2020) suggested framing research-informed solutions to capture the attention of policymakers, shifting the dominant way of navigating emotional appeal, values, beliefs, and other heuristics related to decision-making in the presence of uncertainty. To move a policy agenda forward, broader contextual influencers should be addressed in research impact strategies, with attention to the fiscal climate, political timelines, global policy directions and public opinion.

A key area of KMb efficacy involves networks. Research-based persuasion is accomplished through coalitions that advocate from a common set of aims or beliefs, working through political tactics to appeal to the emotional and ideological biases of policy decision-makers (Cairney, 2016). Nutley and colleagues (2013, p. 24) proposed,

> Research data only really becomes information when they have the power to change views, and they only really become evidence when they attract advocates for the messages they contain. Thus, endorsements of data as 'evidence' reflect judgements that are socially and politically situated.

Given that policy decisions are influenced by political considerations, ideology, and a myriad of other factors beyond research-based knowledge alone, activism-oriented researchers must work within, against, and alongside these realities.

With these considerations in mind, our research ultimately aims to advance youth homelessness prevention through effective collaborations, framing and alignment of objectives across policy and practice. Given the aforementioned challenges around the education sector's involvement in youth homelessness prevention, these KMb strategies provide important insights and tools for our research to have the desired impact on the intended beneficiaries. As we grapple with RaA from our respective positions, we draw from these KMb insights toward policy and practice transformation as we chart the course of our research.

METHODS

The environmental policy scan is a flexible and valuable tool that can facilitate the mapping of policy (including educational legislation) landscapes across multiple jurisdictions, the provision of a preliminary assessment of programs and policies, and to inform decision-making in social, economic, technological, and political contexts (Graham et al., 2008; Wilburn et al., 2016). Environmental scans have played a significant role in informing the research agendas of public policy actors, leading to policy reforms (Jenkins et al., 2019), and driving programmatic changes in public education (Alexander & Choi, 2015).

Our environmental scan represents one step in a multi-phased cluster of research projects. We aim to shift the public policy landscape in Canada, so that youth homelessness prevention strategies can be formalized into policies and enacted via educational systems. Our objectives are threefold: First, our scan sets out to capture an exploratory pulse of the state of public policies addressing youth homelessness prevention in public education. Second, our scan seeks to help provide an evidence base from which to design other parts of our research projects. Finally, our scan provides direction for advocacy in areas of policy and practice that emerge from our findings.

The policy scan was initiated by a jurisdictional review of the Education Act of each Ministry of Education as well as one to two school board or district policies from each province and territory. Based on available information from government and school districts/boards' websites, we intentionally included both larger urban and smaller rural school boards and districts, and accounted for some operating within Indigenous territories and communities, which are in the purview of federal governance. In addition to policies, bills, and procedures, we also considered informal documents such as reports, plans, and guidelines to explore initiatives and practices beyond the jurisdictional sphere.

Given the limited policy sample from each province and territory, we purposefully reviewed topical policies and documents. Based on previous research highlighting the intersectional ways in which one's social background can impact experiences of homelessness while in school, we specifically searched for documents addressing homelessness, poverty,

equity, inclusion and diversity, as well as school admission and attendance (Ansloos et al., 2022; Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Gaetz et al., 2016; Ingram et al., 2017; Schwan et al., 2018). In some cases, documents were chosen for their distinctiveness (e.g., mention of homelessness), while in other cases, they exemplified common policy orientations (e.g., admission policies).

Data synthesis and document analysis proceeded with the creation of a descriptive table, which facilitated contextual interpretation across the selected policy documents. We characterized each document according to its type, jurisdictional level and focus, as well as specified school districts/boards' location and size. Policy sections and passages of texts showcasing potential barriers for homeless students were identified for further assessment.

Document analysis as a method asserts that texts such as a policy entail definitions, status, practices, rules and structures that actively shape the experiences of those within its purview. Policy is to be analyzed from how it is used, experienced and interpreted in a given social environment rather than as a fixed object (Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, the document analysis was supported by insights from prior research that highlight challenges experienced by homeless youth while in school. These studies have been iteratively compiled and consulted in a shared online library folder as part of our multi-phased project. This approach helped us develop a better awareness and critical understanding of the impact of existing policies and practices relating to school-based prevention of homelessness.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are based upon the scan of existing educational legislation and policy documents as well as scholarly publications on these topics and are organized into four categories that include: policies addressing homelessness and/or poverty; policies addressing school admissions and attendance; policies addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion; and misalignments between discourses, supports and the needs of homeless students.

Policies Addressing Homelessness and/or Poverty

Our environmental scan revealed that Canadian education policies rarely recognize or address youth homelessness. While we came across two provincial documents that exceptionally considered homelessness in the education system, one was a former policy while the other was a non-mandatory guideline, which made their impact limited and temporary[1] . Other education policies that addressed poverty did not provide long-term funding or programs. These policies largely focus on students' academic success rather than offering structural, financial or material supports[2]. These findings suggest there is limited recognition and understanding of the experiences and needs of students who are experiencing housing instability or homelessness. The absence of policies indicates that there is an urgent need to engage with institutional and

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[1] This online guideline from the Government of Alberta explicitly acknowledges youth homelessness and recommends measures for school personnel. The former general policy on grants and contributions from the Nunavut Department of Education once provided funds for initiatives that addressed homelessness.

[2] See this poverty policy example from the Centre de services scolaire de la Capitale in Quebec City.

policy education actors as well as non-state actors to introduce successful, evidence-based models that provide appropriate supports to youth without further burdening educators (for one such promising model, see Sohn & Gaetz, 2023).

Policies Addressing School Admissions and Attendance

The procedural formalities relating to admission, access and attendance may severely impact students' ability to stay and succeed in school when they are at risk or experiencing homelessness. Our policy scan revealed that admission and attendance policies/procedures do not take into consideration homelessness or housing insecurity as circumstances impacting students' capacity to enrol in and attend school.

Admissions policies require students to depend on legal guardians and proof of residency in a given school zone, which may abruptly change when their living situation becomes unstable and/or unsafe. The reviewed policies did not include measures such as enrollment exemption or adapted services (e.g., transportation) that would facilitate students' capacity to attend school. While admission protocols may be practical for school administrations, they fail to consider situations faced by housing-insecure or homeless students and assume they can rely on parents/guardians and have access stable housing and transport.

We found that attendance policies largely place the responsibility for attendance on students and parents/guardians. In turn, a school's responsibility is seemingly to investigate, report and punish a student who shows a pattern of chronic absenteeism. School boards/districts often employ attendance officers or counsellors to track students, intervene with parents/guardians and enforce attendance policies. Consequences for chronic absenteeism can go as far as fines, truancy charges and imprisonment.

A lack of access to basic resources and adequate support can intensify hardships in rural and isolated regions. Existing studies speak to the difficulty for youth living in rural areas to access culturally appropriate social supports, as well as services such as transportation, shelter, food and security (Ingram et al., 2017; The Yukon Child & Youth Advocate Office, 2021). Overall, our review of admission and attendance policies highlights how existing measures, acting as inflexible administrative and punitive protocols, fail to safeguard vulnerable youth and further marginalize them. Policies that address such hardships in supportive ways could serve a mechanism toward the prevention of youth homelessness.

Policies Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Multiple education policies and documents that we reviewed address discrimination, inclusion and diversity. They express a commitment to protect and respect all individuals' sociocultural diversity and include various intervention protocols in case of violence or discrimination. Although experiences of marginalization and discrimination have been recognized within education policies to a certain extent, poverty, housing instability, or homelessness are not identified as experiences necessitating direct intervention and tangible support. There is still a lack of sensitivity toward the struggles of racialized and marginalized youth living in poverty or experiencing homelessness. This is especially true for Indigenous students, who are

disproportionately represented amongst youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016; Kidd et al., 2019). A supportive and culturally inclusive school environment for Indigenous youth is critical to break cycles of chronic absenteeism, school dropouts, unemployment and poverty.

Finally, policy provisions regarding special needs/inclusive education are also prevalent across provinces and territories. They address various learning challenges and needs, with some definitions referring to *social* considerations. However, recognized exceptionalities largely refer to behavioural, physical, and cognitive challenges and impairments. Socio-economic conditions are not explicitly identified. Conversely, research has shown the multiple and intersecting ways in which youth with marginalized identities and/or special needs face additional barriers and risks when experiencing homelessness, and that youth with learning disabilities are over-represented among those experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016; Uppal, 2022).

Misalignments between Discourses, Supports and the Needs of Homeless Students

Our findings point to a lack of comprehensive policies and a mismatch between existing education approaches and the experiences of young people at risk of facing homelessness. A misalignment between policy considerations and school-based measures can result in youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness having different critical needs than expected or assumed by school personnel (Malenfant et al., 2020). For some young people, distress comes from experiencing an unstable housing situation or struggling to fulfill their basic needs. For others, unhealthy or unsafe relationships and lack of support/connection with family/relatives can have the greatest impact (Aviles de Bradley, 2011).

In another phase of our research, we interviewed young people who had experienced homelessness and asked them for their perspectives on how schools might have better supported them. As Partridge and Kennelly (2024) highlighted, students felt that schools could work towards destigmatizing the topic of homelessness through education, as well as helping students connect to relevant resources in the community. Accordingly, Ansloos and colleagues (2022) spoke with young Indigenous people who experienced homelessness in Canada and found that they experienced poor coordination between systems (welfare system, social services, medical providers and educational systems) where records are not easily/rapidly transferred, and communication is limited. The researchers gave the example of a young person who got out of homelessness with a new foster care placement but could no longer go to school for a while because the workers of the different systems could not organize transportation to their school (Ansloos et al., 2022, p. 1928). Examples such as these highlight the need to better inform, train and equip school personnel on how to intervene and support students who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In turn, these efforts must be coordinated across educative institutions and with other service providers.

Discussion, Implications and Next Steps

This scan revealed numerous policy gaps and blind spots, which we see as opportunities to introduce policies and practices that will better serve youth at risk or in homelessness. Through this environmental scan, we found that very few policy measures address youth homelessness,

and if they do so, it is indirectly. Research that centers on student experiences further unveils how some school policies and measures are designed to meet administrative requirements more than they can support and accommodate students who largely wish to but struggle to stay in school due to housing and life instability. These findings highlight the pressing need to improve collaboration and coordination between the network of support that homeless students may need. By highlighting the state of educational policies in Canada along with research evidence on how they concretely impact students, our research disrupts stigmatizing and inaccurate framings of youth homelessness both in public and policy discourses (Nelson et al., 2021). In keeping with our ontological approach to research as activism (RaA), we propose several next steps. Each of these is important yet some of these recommendations are specific to certain sectors and stakeholders. With orchestrated multi-sectoral collaboration, the following steps will serve to build positive, justice-oriented social change:

- Build a policy agenda strategy that focuses on developing policies deliberately and explicitly aimed at preventing and mitigating youth homelessness with support from the school system
- Take on active roles as partnership-makers (e.g., to further explore initiatives that address youth homelessness through school programs, learning from expert informants and practitioners).
- Partner with current service providers of programs addressing youth homelessness to leverage the dissemination of findings to policymakers and school districts.
- Provide program and policy evaluations to better understand how these are experienced by and impact youth with lived experience of homelessness Engage internationally and collaboratively in the field of youth homelessness prevention to contribute to collective knowledge and practices
- Consult with education, policy, and community stakeholders at the school district level to inform and articulate a policy agenda that is reflective of specific community needs and priorities
- Identify and create professional learning opportunities for pre-and in-service teachers to learn about the problem of youth homelessness and how it can be addressed in schools
- Integrate perspectives generated by young people with lived experiences of homelessness themselves throughout, whether that be through qualitative interviewing, research advisories, or as co-researchers.

We intend for this research to inform advocacy and a policy agenda that prioritizes supports for young people whose basic needs are not being met. The findings from this environmental scan can contribute to policy insights and awareness about this critical issue. We have identified policy gaps in Canadian education systems as an initial step, illustrating the *'what'* of the problem at the policy level. The next phase of our research will involve better understanding *how* the problem can be addressed, via exploration of effective educational

policies and initiatives for youth homelessness in other countries. Equipped with approaches to KMb in the context of RaA, we will navigate the policy arena with political acuity, working collaboratively towards social change for and with young people who have experienced homelessness.

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