

# **A Call to End Youth Homelessness in Toronto:**

*The 2025 Youth Homelessness  
Summit Summary Report*

# Acknowledgements

The Youth Homelessness Summit was supported by organizations dedicated to advancing prevention and solutions for youth homelessness through the youth homelessness sector table, including:

- The Toronto Youth Cabinet
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- Sojourn House
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- The Centre for Refugee Children
- The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness

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We also recognize the many community partners, service providers, policymakers, and funders who contributed their expertise, time, and energy to this event. The strength of this Summit came from the diversity of voices — frontline practitioners, youth advocates, researchers, government staff, and cross-sector leaders, who came together with a shared commitment to preventing and ultimately ending youth homelessness in Toronto.

The land on which we gathered for the Summit, also known as Tkaronto, is the Traditional Territory of many Indigenous Nations, including the Ojibway, the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. This land is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

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# Executive Summary

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*“To move out of a situation you’re stuck in, you have to have money, you have to have a job. That was my biggest reason I couldn’t move out.”* – Youth Participant

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On August 25, 2025, more than 120 participants that included over 90 young people with lived and living experience of homelessness, along with 40 youth service providers, policymakers, and community leaders, gathered at Toronto City Hall for the first-ever Toronto Youth Homelessness Summit. The summit was convened to address the urgent need for a coordinated, youth-specific strategy to respond to, prevent, and ultimately end youth homelessness in Toronto. Youth voices were at the centre of this conversation along with a shared call among youth homelessness service providers for systemic change.

The summit created a platform for youth to identify barriers, propose solutions, and shape recommendations directly alongside decision-makers. It aimed to amplify youth leadership, strengthen cross-sector alignment, and build momentum toward a citywide strategy to prevent and ultimately end youth homelessness in Toronto.

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## Key Insights

Youth and stakeholders consistently underscored the following:

- **Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness** and requires tailored supports across housing, mental health, education, and employment.
- **Equity considerations.** Indigenous, Black, newcomer, refugee and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are disproportionately affected, highlighting the need for culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and identity-affirming supports.
- **Disconnection is the core issue.** From family, community, and services, making connection-based interventions (family supports, peer mentorship, trusted staff relationships) essential.
- **System gaps perpetuate homelessness**, especially discharges from child welfare and justice systems into housing instability, age-based service cut-offs, and inaccessible shelter environments.
- **The cost of inaction is unsustainable.** Youth homelessness perpetuates trauma, worsens health, overwhelms shelters, and drives up public costs. Prevention and stability through proven approaches such as shelter diversion, Family and Natural Supports, and school-based prevention programs like Reconnect are more effective and cost-efficient than emergency responses.

## Recommendations

The summit produced a set of short and longer-term actions informed by youth with lived experience, the most current evidence, and stakeholder consensus:

- 1. City of Toronto** – Establish a Youth-Specific Strategy to Respond to, Prevent, and End Youth Homelessness in Toronto, guided by the establishment of a Lived Experience Advisory Committee to inform its design and implementation.
- 2. Province of Ontario** – Reform age-based eligibility cut-offs to extend supports beyond age 24 and strengthen child welfare transition programs (e.g., Ready, Set, Go).
- 3. All Levels of Government** – Expand youth housing solutions, including dedicating 10% of new affordable housing to youth-focused units with federal/provincial funding.
- 4. City of Toronto** – Scale up shelter diversion and Family/Natural Supports so they are available at every youth shelter and access point.
- 5. All Levels of Government** – Build cross-sector partnerships to link youth housing stability with meaningful and gainful employment, education, and mental health supports.

These recommendations include immediate actions such as scaling up shelter diversion and creating a youth advisory committee, and longer-term system changes including reforming eligibility cut-offs and embedding youth housing in all new affordable builds in Toronto.

## Conclusion

The summit underscored the urgency and opportunity before us: without immediate action, today's youth experiencing homelessness risk becoming tomorrow's chronically homeless adults. By embedding youth leadership, investing in prevention, and aligning systems across all levels of government, Toronto can take the bold steps necessary to ensure every young person has the housing, supports, and opportunities they deserve to thrive.

The message from youth and stakeholders was clear: Toronto cannot wait. With bold leadership and cross-government commitment, we can end youth homelessness in our city.

**Toronto Needs a Youth-Specific Strategy to Respond to, Prevent, and End Youth Homelessness.**

# Background

Youth homelessness is a growing crisis in Toronto. The most recent data from the City of Toronto's Street Needs Assessment suggests that more than 1,500 young people aged 16–24 experience homelessness on any given night in the city (City of Toronto, 2025). The true number is likely much higher due to "hidden homelessness," where youth stay in temporary or unsafe spaces rather than shelters. This is significant because the youth shelter system only has up to 740 shelter beds currently available (City of Toronto, 2025), often forcing young people into dangerous alternatives: sleeping outdoors in extreme weather, risking violence, or entering the adult shelter system — which is not designed to meet their unique developmental needs.

Earlier this year, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario released another concerning report on homelessness that found that more than 80,000 Ontarians were known to be homeless in 2024. The report also indicated that this number could triple within a decade if an economic downturn occurs and additional billions are not invested in resources and supports (AMO, 2025). Particularly troubling is the growth of chronic homelessness — defined as experiencing homelessness for six months or longer within a year. Nearly a decade ago, this group represented just over 20% of the homeless population; today, it exceeds 50% (AMO, 2025).

As difficult as these numbers are, it's perhaps even more concerning to learn that nearly 25% of these Ontarians experiencing chronic homelessness are under 24 (AMO, 2025). That's one in four people experiencing chronic homelessness as a child, a teenager, or a very young adult. Research also shows that people who first experience homelessness as children are significantly more likely to experience chronic homelessness later in life.

In fact, 78% of those who become homeless as children were chronically homeless during the most recent federal count (AMO, 2025). This emphasizes the opportunity to prevent chronic homelessness by providing critical support to youth at the beginning of these experiences. This will prevent today's youth from becoming tomorrow's chronically homeless adults.

Shelters continue to operate at full capacity, as demand for beds far outpaces supply. In the most recent Street Needs Assessment, 57% of youth reported being unable to access a shelter bed when they tried in the past year (City of Toronto, 2025). Indigenous, Black, newcomer, refugee and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth remain overrepresented in this data.

Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness in both causes and consequences. Yet, too often, our systems and services respond to youth as if their needs were the same as adults — even though youth consistently tell us this is not working. Family conflict and breakdown are among the most common reasons youth lose housing (Infrastructure Canada, 2023), with many related to (either causing or resulting in) child welfare involvement. Youth also face barriers related to limited education, work experience, and life skills — challenges tied to their age and circumstances, not individual failings. Without youth-specific, tailored resources and wraparound supports such as health care, counselling, education, employment opportunities, and life skills development, it is extremely difficult for young people to exit homelessness successfully.

**1,500 young people are experiencing homelessness on any given night in Toronto.**

Source: City of Toronto, *Street Needs Assessment*

These struggles are intensified by broader economic pressures, including post-pandemic inflation and skyrocketing rents (CMHC, 2024). Without quick and effective interventions, young people experiencing homelessness for the first time are at heightened risk of violence, trauma, mental health decline, and chronic homelessness into adulthood. This reality underscores the urgent need to prioritize homelessness prevention, with a particular focus on supporting at-risk youth before their circumstances escalate into long-term instability.

While Toronto has a range of services and policies to support people experiencing homelessness, there is currently no coordinated youth-specific homelessness strategy. Existing initiatives include **shelter diversion**, which, when appropriate, helps young people find safe alternatives to entering the shelter system; **Family and Natural Supports programs**, which work to repair or strengthen relationships with family members or other trusted adults, improving outcomes related to housing stability, well-being, and long-term success; and **cross-sector initiatives**, where schools, child welfare, housing, health, and justice partners work together to better meet young people's needs. These efforts show promise, but without an overarching plan that ties them together, they remain fragmented. A coordinated youth strategy would allow us to prevent the cycle of homelessness from taking hold and ensure young people receive the right help at the right time.

Evidence from Canada and internationally shows that when youth receive the right supports at the right time, outcomes improve significantly (Gaetz et al., 2018). Other cities across North America — including as New York City, Calgary, Washington, D.C., and Kelowna — have developed dedicated youth homelessness strategies. While these approaches vary, the ones that have proven most successful share common features: they emphasize prevention through family mediation, school-based supports, and housing stabilization; they prioritize youth voice; they strengthen cross-system collaboration; and they commit to clear, measurable outcomes. Locally, the Mayor of Ottawa recently pledged to end youth homelessness by 2030, demonstrating municipal leadership and political will to act on this issue with many of these solutions in mind (CBC News, 2025).

Toronto now has the opportunity to build on this foundation of knowledge—drawing from recent homelessness data in the Street Needs Assessment and the insights of key stakeholders and youth with lived experience who know our systems best—to create a comprehensive, coordinated youth homelessness strategy.

Such a strategy would:

- Focus on prevention, early intervention, and systemic change.
- Address root causes while expanding housing and employment pathways.
- Strengthen cross-sector partnerships across child welfare, education, justice, health, and housing.
- Embed youth leadership in design, decision-making, and evaluation.

While these solutions come with a cost, the cost of inaction is much greater. Homelessness places a heavy burden not only on young people themselves, but also on taxpayers and society. Emergency shelters, hospital stays, policing, and lost productivity all carry significant costs that far exceed those of proactive housing and support programs (Latimer, Rabouin, & Cao, 2019).

This call comes at a pivotal moment. By working together — governments at all levels, service providers, and communities — Toronto can reduce reliance on costly emergency responses, strengthen stability and well-being for young people, and prevent today's youth experiencing homelessness from becoming tomorrow's chronically homeless adults. Investing in a youth-specific strategy is both the fiscally responsible and the socially just path forward, helping us build a healthier city where everyone belongs.

# Purpose

On August 25, 2025 a Youth Homelessness Summit was convened at Toronto City Hall to respond to an urgent and persistent challenge: the critical need for a dedicated, youth-specific strategy to respond to, prevent, and ultimately end youth homelessness in Toronto. While the City has invested in important homelessness policies and responses, the unique needs and challenges of young people are often overlooked and require tailored approaches. Despite the tremendous work of organizations responding to youth homelessness under extremely difficult conditions, the crisis continues to escalate. As the first gathering of its kind and scale in Toronto\*— bringing together young people, youth sector service providers, policymakers, and government representatives — the summit created a vital opportunity to hear directly from youth and begin shifting policymaking toward upstream, coordinated solutions rooted in prevention and systems change.

## **A Youth-Led, Advocacy-Driven Initiative**

From the outset, the summit was designed to be youth-led and advocacy-driven. Pre-summit focus groups were held with youth who have lived and living experience of homelessness, ensuring that their voices grounded the discussions and shaped the recommendations. These sessions directly informed the event agenda, identified priority issues, and highlighted the policy changes and program improvements youth themselves saw as most urgent. Importantly, youth were compensated for their time and expertise, underscoring that their participation was valued and essential. This approach went beyond consultation — it was about shifting power and positioning youth as central architects of the conversation rather than passive participants.

## **Building Momentum for Change**

The summit aimed to build momentum for systemic change by building on a foundation of sustained advocacy and consistent youth and sector input acknowledging that while meaningful progress has been made in research, programs, and prevention models, there is a clear opportunity to achieve greater impact through deeper collaboration to amplify solutions, share goals, and align processes. Youth homelessness cannot be effectively addressed within current systems designed primarily for adults. Although some services have adapted where possible, what is urgently needed is a unified, comprehensive, citywide youth-specific strategy to strengthen both immediate responses and long-term prevention.

## **Multi-Stakeholder Engagement**

To lay the foundation for collaborative action toward a youth-focused prevention strategy, the summit brought together a wide range of stakeholders: youth with lived and living experience of homelessness and those at risk; frontline service

providers working daily with young people; community organizations with expertise in housing, mental health, safety, employment, and education; and policymakers with the authority to translate insights into structural change. This diversity of participation reflected both the complexity of youth homelessness and the shared commitment across sectors to advancing coordinated, youth-centered solutions.

## Objectives and Intended Outcomes

The summit's objectives were to:

- **Amplify youth voices** as essential to shaping solutions.
- **Strengthen cross-sector collaboration** and alignment.
- **Generate actionable recommendations** across policy, program, and partnership levels.
- **Build momentum** toward a comprehensive, youth-specific homelessness strategy in Toronto.

The intended outcomes extend well beyond the day itself. The summit aimed to inform the development of policy and program responses, sustain advocacy for youth-specific approaches, and ensure youth leadership remains at the center of future actions. By grounding recommendations in both lived experience and cross-sector perspectives, the summit laid a strong foundation for meaningful change.

**10% of those known to be experiencing homelessness in Toronto on a given night are youth between the ages of 16 to 24.**

Source: City of Toronto, *Street Needs Assessment*

# Participation Snapshot

## Youth: Pre-Summit Focus Groups

In the weeks leading up to the Youth Homelessness Summit, three focus groups were held with young people who have lived and living experience of homelessness. These sessions were hosted in partnership with Covenant House Toronto, Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth, and Friends of Ruby, and included a total of 30 youth. The focus groups provided a safe, facilitated space for participants to share their insights and experiences, identify systemic barriers, and propose solutions.

Youth highlighted a range of challenges in securing stable housing, including unaffordable rents, long waitlists for transitional and supportive housing, and barriers related to lack of credit history and employment precarity. Many spoke about experiencing discrimination, including racism, homophobia, and transphobia, as well as the social exclusion faced by asylum seekers and youth “aging out” of the child welfare system. These experiences mirror those of refugee youth, who often face similar barriers to housing, education, and belonging. The focus groups also revealed barriers to accessing existing services, such as restrictive eligibility criteria, limited hours, and inaccessible or unsafe spaces.

Despite these challenges, youth also identified programs and people who had made a meaningful difference: case managers who took time to listen, supportive shelter staff, access to employment and training programs, and culturally relevant community supports. These examples underscored the importance of trauma-informed care and the value of trusted relationships in helping young people stabilize their lives.

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## Youth: Summit Breakout Session

More than 90 youth attended the summit, including many who had participated in the pre-summit focus groups. In breakout discussions, youth built on earlier conversations by naming causes of homelessness, such as family breakdown, “aging out” of care, and cultural conflict within households. They emphasized that shelters and housing programs are often not designed for young people, leaving them subject to punitive rules, surveillance, and environments that do not account for differences in ability.

Several youth raised the urgent need for greater accessibility within the shelter system, noting that staff should be trained to better understand diverse types of disability and that facilities themselves—bathrooms, showers, bedrooms, and common spaces—must be physically accessible. Without these changes, youth with mobility or other disabilities are left to navigate unsafe and exclusionary environments on their own.

Youth also identified what would make services safer and more supportive: stronger personal connections with staff, flexibility in rules, and opportunities for youth to help shape shelter policies through councils and advisory groups. They called for increased funding for frontline workers, more mental health and substance use supports, and better pathways to education and meaningful employment.

By combining the pre-summit focus groups with the summit breakout sessions, youth participation extended beyond sharing stories. It shaped recommendations and built momentum for a youth-specific strategy to respond to, prevent, and end youth homelessness in Toronto. The issues raised in these discussions are explored in detail in the section on Key Youth Insights and Themes on page 12.

## Stakeholders: Summit Breakout Session

In addition to youth with lived and living experience of homelessness, the summit brought together more than 40 sector partners, service providers, and policymakers.

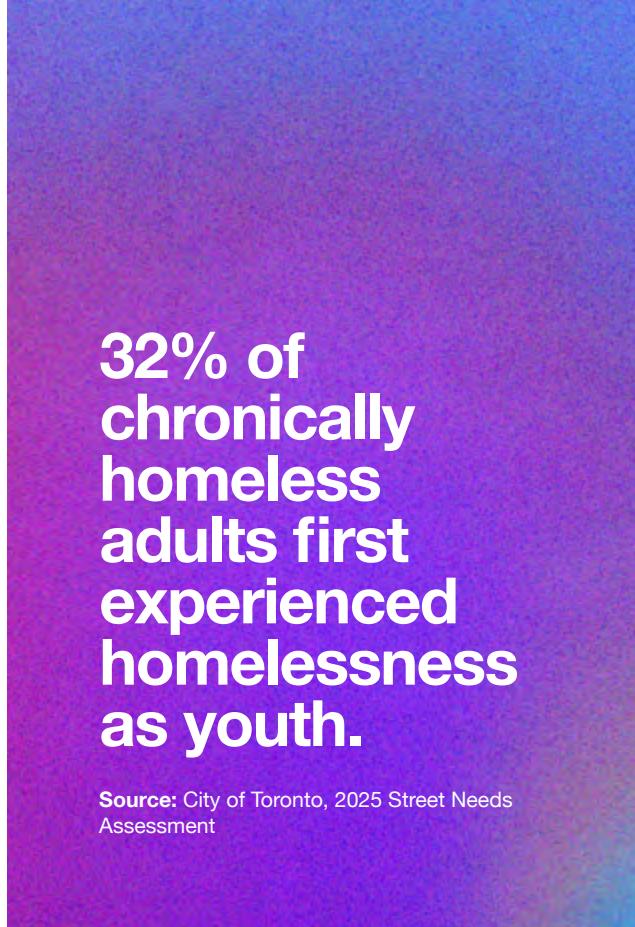
Representation included members of the Toronto Youth Homelessness Sector Table — a coalition of service providers, researchers, and sector leaders advancing youth homelessness prevention in Toronto. Chaired by Covenant House Toronto CEO Mark Aston, the group includes leaders and senior staff from Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth, Youth Without Shelter, YMCA GTA, Sojourn House, Friends of Ruby, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, CAMH, the Centre for Refugee Children, and A Way Home Canada.

Community organizations and nonprofits also participated in stakeholder discussions, including WoodGreen Community Services, ENAGB Indigenous Youth Agency, The Neighbourhood Group Community Services, The Helix Foundation for Children & Youth, BGC East Scarborough, YouthLink, and Jack.org, along with funders such as the Toronto Foundation and the Home Depot Canada Foundation, and advocacy groups such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

Given the event's focus on policy change, government voices were also represented. Attendees included representatives from the City of Toronto Shelter & Support Services division and SafeTO, as well as Councillor Chris Moise (Ward 13, Chair of the Board of Health) and Councillor Frances Nunziata (Ward 5).

The diversity of voices at the table provided a wide range of perspectives. Many participants spoke from their own lived experience that guides their work or reflected what they hear from youth in their organizations. Others contributed insights from navigating government systems, addressing funding challenges, and managing administrative and reporting requirements.

What became clear throughout the day was that cross-sector conversations are essential to advancing shared goals. For example, during discussions about the need for a youth strategy, service providers pointed to how youth “aging out” of care often fall through the cracks of both the child welfare and housing systems. Policymakers in the room acknowledged the gaps and emphasized the importance of better coordination across these systems. By bringing these perspectives together in one space, the summit highlighted not only the scale of the issue, but also how collective action can drive solutions that no single system could achieve alone.



**32% of chronically homeless adults first experienced homelessness as youth.**

**Source:** City of Toronto, 2025 Street Needs Assessment

# Key Youth Insights & Themes

Youth participation in the focus groups and summit breakout sessions revealed consistent themes across housing, mental health, safety, education, employment, and system navigation. Their insights were grounded in lived experience and underscored the urgent need for a youth-specific homelessness strategy in Toronto.



## Housing & Shelter

Youth identified the lack of affordable, youth-specific housing as their most pressing concern. Long waitlists, landlord discrimination, and inaccessible shelter environments create constant instability. Youth stressed that existing adult-focused systems do not meet their needs and often exacerbate their vulnerability.

- *“It’s a long waiting time, for some it’s a year or two just to get on the list. It’s kinda wild.”*
- *“Government talks about new housing, but it’s never focused on youth.”*
- *“Affordable housing exists outside the city, but jobs are limited there.”*
- *“Shelters and transitional housing need to be more accessible... bathrooms, showers, bedrooms – so a youth with mobility needs can actually navigate their living space.”*

Youth called for transitional and supportive housing models that balance independence with wraparound supports, and for stronger tenant protections to guard against exploitation.



## Mental Health

Youth consistently raised mental health as a barrier to stability. They described long waitlists, a lack of trauma-informed staff, and limited supports for youth with complex mental health needs. Participants emphasized that housing stability cannot be achieved without adequate mental health services.

- *“More mental health resources are needed for young people with personality disorders. It’s already so rare to get help.”*
- *“Hire more staff trained in mental health support, with respect and compassion.”*
- *“Staff helping youth achieve personal goals and providing ongoing support makes all the difference.”*



Youth also pointed to the importance of counsellors, case managers, and community workers who build trust and maintain consistent relationships. These personal connections were seen as critical in navigating crises and planning for stability.

## Safety & Belonging

Experiences of discrimination and exclusion were pervasive. Youth described facing racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and punitive shelter rules that undermined their sense of safety. They emphasized the need for shelters and programs to operate with dignity, respect, and flexibility.

- *“As an asylum seeker, I’ve been told I’m taking up services meant for Canadians.”*
- *“Depending on how you present yourself, you face discrimination if you don’t identify with your gender at birth.”*
- *“Shelter staff yelled at me the first time I tried to open the wrong door, the way you talk to youth matters.”*
- *“We need staff to treat us with respect. Flexibility goes a long way.”*

Youth also raised concerns about excessive surveillance in shelters and the lack of anonymous feedback mechanisms. They stressed that belonging is fostered through supportive staff, peer connections, and spaces designed to be inclusive and accessible.



## Employment & Education

Youth drew a clear line between employment, income, and long-term housing stability. They described difficulty finding stable, meaningful jobs due to lack of experience, employer discrimination, and limited student supports. Many also flagged the financial barriers to pursuing post-secondary education.

- *“To move out of a situation you’re stuck in, you have to have money, you have to have a job. That was my biggest reason I couldn’t move out.”*
- *“Employment opportunities and affordable housing, those are our top priorities.”*

Youth called for more transitional employment programs, better-paying student jobs, and educational supports that do not exclude those without family or financial backing.



## System Navigation

Finally, youth highlighted the difficulty of navigating a fragmented system. Many did not learn about services until after they became homeless, while others faced confusing eligibility requirements and inconsistent information. Schools were identified as key spaces for prevention and early intervention.

- *“I didn’t even know Covenant House existed. If I had known earlier, things would have been so much easier.”*
- *“People should be made aware of these things before they enter a precarious situation.”*
- *“Schools should put up posters and flyers so people know what resources exist.”*

Youth emphasized the need for stronger outreach, better communication, and systems that treat couch-surfing and precarious housing as legitimate forms of homelessness.

Across every theme, young people expressed urgency, frustration, and determination. Their voices underscored that housing solutions must be youth-specific, rooted in equity, and paired with supports in mental health, employment, and education. Above all, they called for respect, dignity, and meaningful opportunities to shape the policies that affect their lives.

**Youth homelessness  
is different –  
our responses must  
be too.**

# Key Stakeholder Insights & Themes

This session brought together a diverse mix of stakeholders — including sector partners, service providers, funders, policymakers, and other key players — to reflect on what is and is not working in Toronto's youth homelessness prevention efforts. The breadth of representation created space for a holistic conversation where participants shared insights from frontline experience, organizational challenges, and policy-level perspectives. These discussions underscored the value of diverse voices in tackling a complex, cross-sector issue.

Guided by key questions, stakeholders considered which strategies are most effective in preventing youth homelessness; how schools, child welfare agencies, community organizations, and decision makers can collaborate more effectively to identify risk and provide timely support; where the biggest prevention gaps lie; and what policy or funding changes would most improve their ability to support young people.

While many of the themes reinforced existing sector priorities, participants also offered practical insights into where collective efforts should focus.

## **Shelter Diversion**

**Shelter diversion**, when implemented appropriately and with the right supports, was widely recognized as an effective intervention. In simple terms, shelter diversion helps young people identify safe, stable alternatives to staying in a shelter. This might mean reconnecting with a relative, securing a short-term rental, or accessing mediation that helps resolve family conflict. By doing so, diversion ensures that youth who have a more stable or safe option do not need to enter the shelter system, which frees up beds for those with no alternatives. This approach can also reduce the risks youth face in shelters, such as exposure to trauma or violence, while keeping them connected to family, school, and community supports.

Many participants pointed to successful examples, such as the Diversion Program at Covenant House Toronto. This program works by having trained staff meet with youth at the “front door” of the shelter system, problem-solve immediate housing crises, strengthen ties between youth and important adults in their life, and provide follow-up supports to ensure stability. Stakeholders strongly supported scaling up such programs citywide as a key prevention tool.

## **Strengthening Connections**

The strongest and most consistent message from the session was that youth homelessness is, at its core, an issue of disconnection. Prevention and response efforts must focus on fostering meaningful connections — not only to services, education, employment opportunities, mental health supports, and housing, but most importantly to caring people in a young person's life. This includes family, chosen family, cultural community members, and other trusted adults.

Participants stressed that youth cannot and should not be expected to rely solely on professional supports for the rest of their lives. Building networks of natural supports is both more realistic and more sustainable.

Stakeholders highlighted models that demonstrate the effectiveness of connection-based approaches:

- **Family and Natural Supports (FNS):** A program — delivered independently and as a key component of the following two models — that works to repair or strengthen relationships with family members or other trusted adults, improving outcomes related to housing stability, well-being, and long-term success.
- **Reconnect:** A school-based early intervention that identifies at-risk youth and connects them with supports before homelessness occurs.
- **Housing First for Youth (HF4Y):** A program that provides housing as a right, combined with comprehensive wraparound supports tailored to youth needs.

## Cross-systems Collaboration

Participants stressed the urgent need for stronger collaboration across education, justice, child welfare, and housing systems. Without coordinated action, young people fall through the cracks as they transition between systems, and critical opportunities for prevention are missed. Stakeholders emphasized that accountability rests with the Province of Ontario — particularly within education, child welfare, health and justice — to ensure these systems no longer operate in silos. By increasing touchpoints, strengthening communication, and adopting more effective data-sharing practices, stakeholders argued that young people could receive consistent, connected support across sectors.

## Emergency Financial Supports

Stakeholders expressed strong interest in expanding access to emergency financial supports that provide young people with flexible funds to meet immediate needs. Unlike many government benefits, these supports do not dictate how the money must be spent, allowing youth to cover essentials such as food, rent, utilities, phone bills, or transportation. This approach affirms young people's ability to make decisions about their own lives, fosters trust, and helps reduce reliance on crisis services.

These supports can also be paired with complementary programs such as shelter diversion, eviction prevention, or Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) — a rights-based program that provides young people with housing alongside wraparound supports in health, education, employment, and well-being. When combined, these approaches can promote housing stability and long-term success (Gaetz, 2014).

## Life Skills Supports

Another recurring theme was the importance of strengthening life skills supports, which help young people live independently and stably in the community. Many youth lack opportunities to develop practical skills such as financial literacy, cooking, or navigating government systems. Expanding these supports through

schools or youth-serving agencies can help youth build confidence, greater self-sufficiency, and a foundation for long-term stability. Targeted initiatives tailored to specific populations have shown particular success — for example, Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth runs a financial literacy program specifically for Black youth that was highlighted as a promising model.

## **Education Supports**

Participants consistently underscored the importance of education as a pathway to stability. Whether finishing high school or pursuing post-secondary studies, education was described as key to preventing homelessness and breaking cycles of poverty. Too often, youth feel pressured to leave school early and enter the workforce, sacrificing the long-term opportunities that come with completing their education or training.

Stakeholders emphasized that supports must not only help youth stay in school but also create pathways to meaningful work and careers. Programs such as those led by Pathways to Education, which supports youth through high school completion, and initiatives that provide sustained assistance through post-secondary studies, were cited as critical examples of how to keep youth engaged and set up for future success.

## **Sustained Funding & Long-Term Commitments**

Stakeholders raised concerns about the instability of funding for critical programs and services that help break the cycle of youth homelessness. Too often, promising one-year pilot projects are launched and then discontinued, only for similar initiatives to be restarted later. This cycle disrupts continuity for youth, undermines trust, and wastes valuable resources.

At the same time, participants recognized the fiscal pressures governments face. They suggested that sustained commitments could be achieved by gradually redirecting a portion of existing crisis-response spending toward prevention, incorporating proven pilot projects into stable base budgets, and modestly increasing funding within targeted program streams where there is strong evidence of impact. Stakeholders emphasized that long-term investment is both more cost-effective and more likely to deliver lasting outcomes for youth and communities.

These models demonstrate that when relationships and supports are strengthened, youth are more likely to achieve housing stability, well-being, and long-term success. Stakeholders strongly called for greater investment in connection-based programs and urged the broader sector to embrace this shift in philosophy and practice.

# Recommendations

The Youth Homelessness Summit generated a set of recommendations rooted in youth voices and informed by evidence, promising practices, and input from service providers and sector partners. These recommendations build on insights from previous consultations and reflect proposals shared in a policy briefing note during the event. They encompass policy reform, program innovation, and cross-sector partnerships, outlining both immediate actions that can be implemented quickly (“quick wins”) and long-term commitments required to respond to, prevent, and ultimately end youth homelessness in Toronto.

## Policy Recommendations

### Short-Term Actions

- **City of Toronto** – Establish a Youth-Specific Strategy to respond to, prevent, and end youth homelessness in Toronto.
- **City of Toronto** – Create a Youth Lived Experience Advisory Committee to guide city policies, programs, and funding decisions.
- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing) / City of Toronto** – Build on existing efforts to strengthen tenant protections and expand rent control, with a focus on at-risk youth renters. This includes developing a plan to establish clear accountabilities and advance provincial reforms to the Residential Tenancies Act and eviction processes, alongside local tenant protection programs and supports delivered at the City level. These efforts should align with existing eviction prevention and tenant support initiatives, ensuring youth-specific needs are embedded within broader housing stability measures.

### Long-Term Actions

- **City of Toronto** – Dedicate a fixed percentage (e.g., 10%) of all new affordable housing developments to youth-focused housing units. This builds on existing set-aside practices used in Inclusionary Zoning and Transit-Oriented Communities, aligns with provincial and federal housing commitments, and provides a clear, scalable benchmark, with higher-level funding support needed to ensure sustainability.
- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services)** – Reform age-based eligibility cut-offs so youth do not lose access to key supports at age 24. This includes extending access to housing programs, mental health services, and employment supports. For young people leaving child welfare, strengthen and expand programs like Ready, Set, Go to ensure smoother transitions into adult systems and prevent service gaps.
- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security)** – Introduce tuition relief or fee waivers for homeless and at-risk youth at post-secondary institutions.

## Program Recommendations

### Short-Term Actions

- **City of Toronto** – Fund and expand shelter diversion programs and Family/Natural Supports so they are available in every youth shelter and access point, ensuring young people can be stabilized and remain connected to family, community, or other safe housing whenever possible. Programs should also ensure accessibility for refugee and newcomer youth, who may lack traditional family networks or face unique legal and settlement challenges.
- **City of Toronto** – Improve accessibility in shelters and transitional housing, ensuring bathrooms, showers, and common areas meet current provincial accessibility standards.
- **City of Toronto** – Develop a centralized, youth-friendly resource (available both online and in print) to make navigating supports easier. Distribute it widely through trusted touchpoints that at-risk youth already engage with, such as school guidance counsellors and coaches, Youth Wellness Hub staff, health professionals, and community or faith-based organizations.

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### Benefits of a Youth-Specific Strategy to Respond to, Prevent, and End Youth Homelessness



### Long-Term Actions

- **City of Toronto** – Expand youth-focused housing solutions including supportive housing, transitional homes, and rent supplements with provincial/federal funding support.
- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development and Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security / City of**

**Toronto)** – Develop meaningful supported education, employment and training programs linked to long-term career pathways and financial literacy.

- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Health and Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services)** – Scale up mental health and substance use supports, with specific services for youth with complex needs.
  - **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Education)** – Strengthen school-based prevention programs, such as Reconnect, and improve the capacity of teachers and counsellors to identify and support at-risk youth early.
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## Partnership Recommendations

### Short-Term Actions

- **City of Toronto** – Partner with shelters and youth-serving agencies to ensure youth experiencing homelessness can access affordable or free transit.
- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and Ministry of Education) / City of Toronto** – Foster collaboration to improve early identification of at-risk youth by establishing regular forums to share trends and best practices, and by strengthening referral pathways between schools and youth-serving agencies.
- **Province of Ontario (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services)** – Strengthen collaboration to prevent discharges from care or custody into homelessness. This should include joint case planning, clear discharge protocols, and data-sharing agreements to ensure no young person exits these systems into housing instability.

### Long-Term Actions

- **All Levels of Government** – Build a formal partnership to resource and sustain a Youth-Specific Homelessness Strategy. This should include dedicated municipal, provincial, and federal funding, City leadership in implementation, and strong collaboration with frontline and lived-experience partners.
- **Province of Ontario** – Establish a formal cross-ministerial framework that brings together child welfare, youth justice, housing, health, and education systems to coordinate prevention efforts and align accountability. This would ensure housing stability is embedded as a core outcome across all youth-serving systems.
- **All Levels of Government** – Create public-private partnerships to expand youth employment opportunities linked to housing stability. These should include provincial incentives for employers, City-led convening and direct funding to ensure local partnerships are resourced, and federal investments through workforce development and youth employment funds to sustain and scale initiatives. Employers and philanthropic partners should also be engaged to co-invest, ensuring that all sectors contribute to long-term sustainability.

# Conclusion

Youth homelessness in Toronto is not inevitable — it is the result of system gaps, inequities, and underinvestment. The Youth Homelessness Summit brought together diverse voices to confront this urgent reality and underscored a hard truth: the cost of inaction is staggering.

Research shows that in the event of an economic downturn, the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness will rise exponentially (Association of Municipalities of Ontario, 2025). Already, people experiencing homelessness face significantly higher rates of illness, mental health challenges, and premature death, with one-year healthcare expenditures averaging \$12,209 per person, nearly seven times higher than for housed individuals (Richard et al., 2024). In Toronto, this translates into an estimated \$69.8–\$99.7 million annually in additional healthcare costs. Toronto Public Health's tracking of deaths among people experiencing homelessness adds another devastating reminder of the human toll (City of Toronto, 2025).

For youth, these consequences are even more acute. Inaction inflicts unnecessary trauma, severs connections to education and employment, and entrenches cycles of instability. It also overwhelms shelter systems and leaves frontline services operating in permanent crisis mode.

Yet the Summit also showed that solutions exist. Proven prevention models like Family and Natural Supports, Reconnect, and shelter diversion demonstrate what works. Embedding youth-specific housing, mental health, and employment pathways can create the stability young people deserve to thrive. What is missing is not evidence, but coordinated commitment and sustained investment.

This Summit must be a turning point. Toronto cannot afford to continue with fragmented responses or short-term fixes. What is at stake is the health, safety, and wellbeing of thousands of young people across the city. Every sector and level of government has a role to play, but the City of Toronto must lead by committing to a dedicated youth homelessness strategy and implementing the recommendations in this report. The cost of inaction is too great, and the responsibility to act is one we can no longer defer.

The path forward is clear. Toronto has the service expertise, community partnerships, and policy momentum to change course. What remains is the collective will to act, to match evidence with investment, and urgency with implementation. Toronto cannot wait, the time to act is now.

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