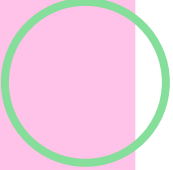


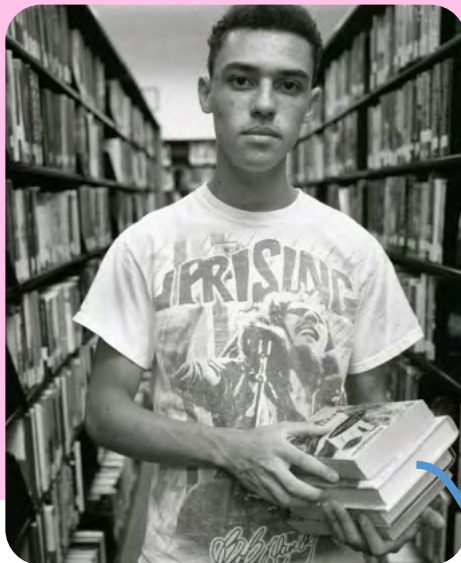
POST-SECONDARY STUDENT HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

Informing Prevention Through
Qualitative Analysis





"Don't wait until the end of the day to figure out where you're sleeping that night. It makes it far more stressful. Try to focus on class the best you can and know that if you stick with it, it will pass. Reach out and let people know the situation that you're in, even if you're embarrassed about it, because it may not even be your fault. Make sure you're fed and just keep your head up."



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Widespread Problem

Basic needs precarity—including housing precarity and even homelessness—among post-secondary students is often talked about as inevitable, as just a normal part of the student experience. However, students who do find themselves homeless experience a whole range of negative effects, ranging from shame and discrimination to domestic

Up to 1 in 4
students experience
homelessness ↘



violence and worsened health, in addition to poor academic outcomes. Consequences like these should not be considered normal or inevitable.

One study on the prevalence of homelessness among post-secondary students in Canada found that nearly 6% of students experienced homelessness (Utile, 2022),

although this might be significantly undercounted as other studies have reached figures as high as 28% (Danis & Herlick, 2022). This makes clear that a significant proportion of post-secondary students are finding themselves in dire housing need and are dealing with the consequences of that, often with little support.

“The issue of post-secondary student homelessness in Canada remains extremely understudied”

Despite this, the issue of post-secondary student homelessness in Canada remains extremely understudied, which leads to a corresponding lack of attention and support. Our study, the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Project, is a contribution to filling that gap.



Introduction to the Research Project

i

This project grew out of a smaller, unfunded study at Red Deer Polytechnic that started in 2017 and the work of the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Network. This data enabled us to receive three years of funding from Making the Shift to expand to additional sites and deepen our work.



1

First, we conducted a scoping literature review to summarize existing academic literature on post-secondary student homelessness.

2

We followed this up with a global resource scan to identify resources, services, and programs available to post-secondary students experiencing homelessness and housing precarity.

3

This laid the groundwork for us to conduct interviews with students from five institutions (Nova Scotia Community College, Lakehead University, Red Deer Polytechnic, the University of New Brunswick, and the University of Alberta) who identified as having experienced homelessness during the course of their studies.

4

We interviewed a total of 65 students and 54 staff and performed a qualitative analysis of their transcripts to obtain a nuanced portrait of student homelessness.

5

These data were complemented by round table discussions at each institution involving key interest holders, such as university administrators, faculty, government officials, and community partners in addition to students.

6

Based on our findings, we then prepared a toolkit of suggested actions for post-secondary institutions to contribute to solving this pressing issue.

Factors Associated With Student Homelessness

Consistent with Smith and Knechtel's 2019 findings, we found that post-secondary students who are members of marginalized groups are at a higher risk of housing precarity. Women were overrepresented in our data set (71%), the majority of participants were racialized (54%), and 24% identified as LGBTQ2+. The majority of students who experience homelessness receive little support from their families, reporting only occasional or rare contact, and 18% described having little to no support of any kind. This kind of isolation has been correlated with lower academic success (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Stadtfeld et al., 2019) and so compounds the challenges students experiencing housing precarity face.

Higher risk of housing precarity for members of marginalized groups

71% Women

54% Racialized

24% LGBTQ2+



More than half of student participants were employed, and studies show that working while studying is associated with lower rates of program completion (Hovdhaugen, 2013). In our study, about 17% of students had previously attended post-secondary school but had to stop due to housing and financial precarity. Over 31% of participants relied on student loans, although many identified these loans as insufficient, pushing them to incur other debts and to sacrifice necessities like stable housing. Student debt is associated with worse mental health (Tran et al., 2018), which can also be seen among students in our study.

"over 31% of participants relied on student loans, although many identified these loans as insufficient, pushing them to incur other debts and to sacrifice necessities like stable housing"

Impact on academic performance

44% of respondents described their grades as low

63% of respondents had missed school due to homelessness

55% mentioned that housing was a barrier to academic achievement

As we have seen, all of these factors affect academic performance, with 44% of respondents describing their grades as low. As well, 39% of students were not aware of any support services at their institution, something that has been associated with lower grades among students experiencing housing instability (Kornblug, 2024). About 63% of participants had missed school due to homelessness, and 55% mentioned that housing instability was a barrier to academic success.

Post-secondary students experiencing homelessness commonly feel shame about their situation (77%), and many felt they needed to hide their living situation from others (71%). Students described the stigma associated with the word “homeless”; this led many students to not identify as homeless until having the definition read to them. This shows that destigmatizing homelessness may be a precondition for providing support to those experiencing it.

"Destigmatizing homelessness may be a precondition for providing support to those experiencing it"

More than 3 out of 4 students experiencing homelessness felt shame about their situation



Causes of Student Homelessness

Although financial precarity was the main cause of student homelessness in our study, domestic conflict or violence was in second place. This is in line with research that shows that one in five young people experiencing homelessness also experienced intimate partner violence (Baker et al., 2010; Petering et al., 2014), and this number is higher for racialized young adults (Evangelist & Shaefer, 2019). International students in particular are at increased risk of sexual violence compared to domestic students (UQAM, 2023).

Almost 20% of student respondents in our study reported staying in unsafe conditions just to keep a roof over their heads, and unsafe accommodations were the cause of about 15% of instances of student homelessness. About 17% reported a need to escape their previous country, about 7% became homeless due to a loss of accommodation (for example, through an eviction or breakup), and 5% described poor mental health as the primary cause.

"Almost 20% of student respondents in our study reported staying in unsafe conditions just to keep a roof over their heads"



Service Use Among Students Experiencing Homelessness

As we saw above, although many students had no knowledge of support services on campus, many students did make use of services during their period of homelessness. Campus food banks were the most used service by respondents (28%), while less than 20% accessed emergency housing or funding. Many students were afraid of being rejected by support services (38%), which reduced the likelihood that they would seek help. Racialized students in particular have been found to be less likely to seek support, likely due to the increased social stigma they face (Ting & Hwang, 2014).

81%

of students said that increased awareness of services was the most important thing institutions could do to support students experiencing homelessness

As for off-campus services, awareness was even lower: only 1.5% of respondents knew of three or more off-campus services. Many students felt the institution should be responsible for providing services and so did not look elsewhere. In our interviews, 81% of students said that increased awareness of services was the most important thing institutions could do to support students experiencing homelessness.

From our scan of available services, it is clear that basic needs insecurity has become a focus for post-secondary institutions in Canada and the United States. The resources offered focus heavily on food, but there is also an emphasis on service navigation and awareness, like in California, where all public colleges and universities must have an easily accessible webpage with information about services to help students meet their basic needs.



In terms of food insecurity, we identified four main categories of services: campus food banks, community gardens, meal plan donations programs, and emergency grocery funds. Services of each type are present on campuses across Canada, but these supports are still limited, and students must frequently make use of food banks in the community.



Supports around housing insecurity are much less present, with the support available through institutions mostly being short-term emergency housing. These are focused on allowing students to leave violent situations by making beds available in campus residences or through partnerships with local landlords or hotels. Many post-secondary institutions refer students in need to emergency shelters in the community.



As we have seen, housing insecurity among students is most often **caused by financial insecurity**, and post-secondary students do have access to a range of financial supports. These include emergency, needs-based bursaries offering small amounts of money for basic needs and long-term financial aid that may be offered by governments or by institutions. However, often these financial supports have complex applications, are delayed, and force the student to accrue an immense amount of debt prior to graduation.

It is worth noting that information about these programs was not always easy to find, even when we were actively looking. As well, many of these resources are heavily used, which makes them difficult to access due to capacity limits. Although there is an increasing focus on housing support for students, the rate at which these services are increasing may not match the increase in need.

Institutional Toolkit

Every experience of post-secondary student homelessness is unique; solutions must, therefore, be adaptable to each student's needs. Rather than propose a list of recommendations, we instead offer institutions a set of tools they can implement at their campuses, ideally with the participation of students with lived experience and community partners. The toolkit is divided into four dimensions, each of which addresses a systemic factor that perpetuates student homelessness. We summarize the dimensions below; please see Section 9.1 for the full toolkit.

Dimension 1

In Dimension 1, we call on post-secondary institutions to collect data on the prevalence of student homelessness and its impact on student retention while also better promoting available resources, improving resource navigation, and developing a communications strategy to reduce stigma.

Dimension 2

In Dimension 2, post-secondary institutions can help students dealing with financial precarity by simplifying applications for bursaries and loans, expanding campus food programs, and making it easier for students to donate to services for other students.

Dimension 3

In Dimension 3, we urge post-secondary institutions to improve students' access to mental health and social supports by increasing awareness of existing on-campus resources and educating staff about these issues.

Dimension 4

Dimension 4 deals with housing insecurity. Institutions can create a centralized database of housing and other related resources, develop emergency housing programs for students, and explore options for subsidized student housing.

By acting across these four dimensions, institutions can tangibly support students experiencing homelessness, often without taking on substantial new costs. This toolkit also favours an adaptive service landscape in which students have options about what services to access to meet their unique needs.



Reflections on the Research Project

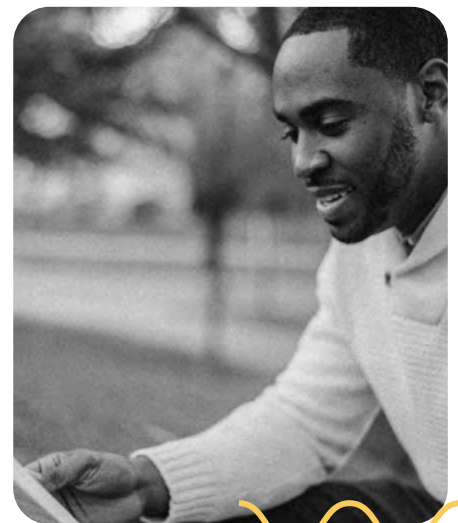
After the completion of the study, Lisa Mader, one of the co-investigators on this project, was curious to know what the research assistants (RAs) on this project had gained by working on it and what had challenged them. To this end, she developed nine questions, and seven of the nine research assistants responded.

Although the RAs came into the project prepared to hear difficult stories, the student participants' experiences of homelessness were still often surprising. One RA described not expecting to feel so emotionally exhausted, and another was surprised by the number of barriers students encountered when seeking help. The RAs had no idea so many students were struggling, but this had a silver lining: while many of the participants had previously left school due to financial and housing precarity, they were now back in school. One RA described being impressed by their resiliency.

The RAs were also surprised to hear of so many students in need being ignored by government and student services—there seemed to be a disconnect between students' needs and the resources on offer. They were also struck by how close homelessness can be to our daily lives and by the intersection of homelessness and various forms of oppression.

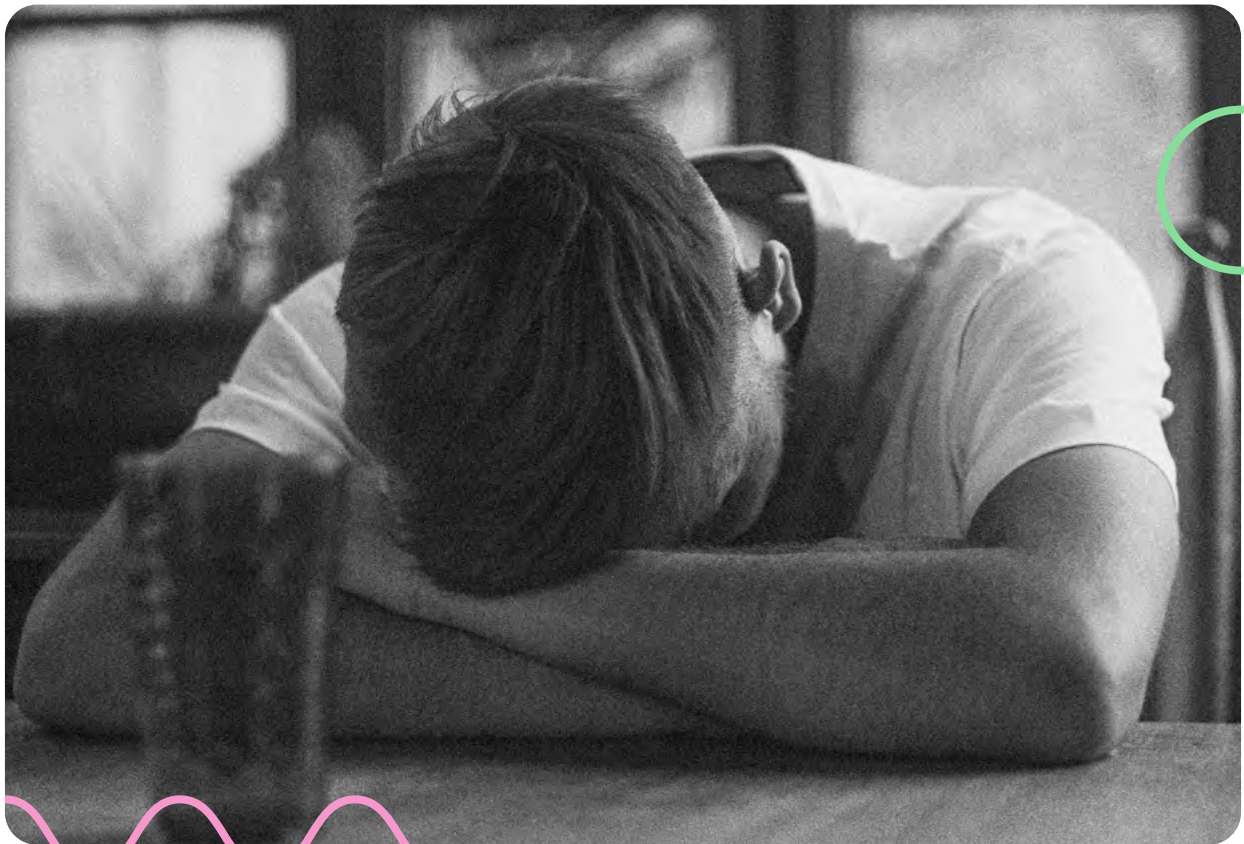
"Some RAs found it hard to hear about traumatic experiences while being unable to offer any practical support"

In terms of challenges, some of these were common to any qualitative study, like working with raw transcripts and keeping interviews on track. However, some RAs also found that sharing their own lived experience at the beginning of the interview encouraged participants to be more forthcoming. This was not without its difficulties, though, as even with access to support, some RAs found it hard to hear about traumatic experiences while being unable to offer any practical support. Any positive outcomes from this study are years in the future, and so the participants will most likely not be around to benefit from them personally. Still, the RAs felt they were able to offer participants validation and a listening ear, making them feel less alone with their struggles.



Concluding Remarks

One effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to expose a much larger number of Canadians to housing precarity, pushing the issue into prominence nationally and provincially. The post-secondary sector is no exception to this, as housing is a fundamental need for the students, and students are the lifeblood of these institutions. Students had been presenting at their institutions showing the consequences of housing precarity and homelessness, like academic problems and financial stress, and it has taken a shift in perspective to see the underlying issues. The Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Project grew from a long-term commitment to preventing and ending post-secondary student homelessness, and we see this as a moment when systemic change is possible.



BACKGROUND

1. Introduction to the Study on Student Homelessness

In 2016, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conference was held in London, Ontario. Dr. Weissman was presenting research on housing unit takeovers that he led with a psychiatric/consumer survivor advocacy group called the Dream Team. At the conference, he talked with Melanie Redman of Away Home Canada, and she suggested that, as an educator travelling from school to school, he should investigate how homelessness is affecting youth students. That was the simple informal conversation that led to the completely unfunded research undertaken by Dr. Weissman and Dr. Robson in 2017, while both were at Red Deer College (now known as Red Deer Polytechnic). Starting with truly exploratory surveys, they began work that led to the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Network, a committed network of students, faculty, staff, and administrators from several Canadian post-secondary institutions that receives support from global associates, such as School House Connection in the USA. Only one prior Canadian study by a research team out of the University of Alberta had addressed homelessness at the post-secondary level (Kovacs Burns et al., 2016). Many of the observations in that work were reflected in the anecdotes, survey results, and discussions collected over the next seven years of investigating post-secondary student homelessness in Canada. Our process has been transparent, openly shared and discussed with various audiences.

The goal has always been to establish a wide network of students across different sites to understand the prevalence and costs of post-secondary student homelessness, to build housing and supports from a student perspective, and to create a student-driven working group to maintain the legacy of this work. While several of our goals have been impacted by COVID-19, student burnout, the economy, and the rapid decline in housing affordability, the overarching vision of the project adapted and changed to generate some valuable impacts. For our part, we have completed a very thorough range of interviews across several sites, scanned literature, research and global programming, and built a website with resources available for use. Our main objective was to advocate for housing supports for students, to see them built, and to reach the ears of federal decision-makers directly. We achieved the last goal this year, having been asked to offer expert testimony to the

Parliamentary Committee on Post-Secondary Research Funding, where we stressed the need to provide housing supports for all students, graduates, and near-term apprentices.

This project grew from one site to over 11 after receiving funding from Making the Shift, especially during COVID-19, and this has some value for understanding what we found and for others engaged in similar multi-site work. We are very pleased to present this final report of the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Network. To begin then, what were the origins of the project?

2. Changing the Narrative

"A few days ago, one of my students came up to me—this is after I had submitted all the final grades for her class. I told her that if she had showed up more, been more on top of her work, well then, maybe then I could have reconsidered her failing grade. Then she, well, she kind of broke my heart and made me angry at the same time. She said, 'Well, you wouldn't feel that way if you knew I have been homeless this whole term.' And she walked away. I literally didn't know what to say or do. You tell me; what do we do?"
(Instructor at Red Deer College, 2017)



This statement underscores the difficulty we face as educators and researchers when thinking about student homelessness in Canada. On the one hand, we have seen its hallmarks and symptoms for decades: students who are exhausted, stressed, starving, distracted, truant, lacking confidence, ill-equipped, poorly resourced, and suffering from a digital divide who misunderstand unstable housing as somehow normal. We who work in higher education and with youths and young adults have been working on vulnerability from many angles: poverty, health disparities, criminalization, abuse, economic displacement, and high anxiety (Fang et al., 2021; Knifton & Inglis, 2020; Murali & Oyeboode, 2004). Education and poverty scholarship has long addressed the deleterious impact of poverty and housing instability on education from kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Connell, 1994; Farkas, 2017). However, very little had been written prior to 2015 on post-secondary student homelessness in Canada, perhaps because of

the way post-secondary narratives of inevitability have been constructed over time. The stories we tell about social experiences are shaped by the values and suppositions we learn about the world around us (Castoriadis, 1986). In the West for most of the 20th century, such narratives of inevitability involved a belief in meritocracy, equity, and just desserts. They also maintained the empirically untrue assumptions that a person's attributes (e.g., wealth, age, gender, race) were more compelling than the socially powerful structures and institutions that hem in the agency of all actors. Another untrue assumption is that these attributes and how they intersect within societal structures are experienced the same way by everyone.

Many people have wrongly assumed that, if one comes from poverty or from certain racialized groups, homelessness or even criminality is inevitable. Some have argued that poor mental health and addictions are still the primary causes of literal and other forms of homelessness. Some thinkers (Wagner, 1995; Weissman, 2012; Wright, 1999) have debunked as shills those who assign importance to the supposed characterological defects of people who do not measure up to mainstream expectations, as this deflects attention from things like poor housing supply, inflation, domestic abuse, and economic inequality. Narratives of inevitable failure have been used for decades by powerful groups, usually economic elites or entrenched sites of institutional power, such as universities, to hold certain groups down, deflect responsibility away from systemic failure, and blame people who are not succeeding as neoliberal citizens (Wright, 2005). Nikolas Rose (1999) adapts a Foucauldian model to show that freedom and power are not universal, transcendental values we can apply to any situation, since their meaning is formulated and fed to us by more powerful groups with an interest in normalizing certain problematic human conditions, such as failure and poverty. Under neoliberalism, a certain degree of struggle, then, comes to be naturally associated with the choices adult citizens make. If a post-secondary student struggles in school, then they must not be doing it right or maybe a post-secondary education is not for them. After all, being subject to housing precarity for just four years is not bad, because it has been considered normal for so many other students who went before; overcoming the hardship has become almost a key step in the rite of passage. Alongside this, there is the assumption and falsehood that if you can afford to attend post-secondary school, you should have the funds to cover housing and related expenses. This falsehood ignores the rising costs of education and the resulting reduction in available funds for basic living needs.

Assumptions are culturally shaped such that, here in Canada, when we began our work in 2017, most of us (teachers, administrations, students) thought wrongly that unstable and unsafe housing was part of the normal post-secondary experience. It could not be a major problem, because the post-secondary sector was growing, producing graduates, and we believed the state and institutions had only limited responsibility to address the individual needs of adult students living in precarity. From a moral and political perspective, this was not the case for K-12 students. The responsibility of the welfare state for minors and disadvantaged youths has been more clearly researched and addressed than post-secondary student homelessness in both the US and Canada. This is in part due to the strong interventionist traditions that emerged in the 1960s in the US with the Moynihan Report (1965) and to increasing global scholarship on the role of the state under late capitalism in caring for the disadvantaged (see the work of Gøsta Esping-Andersen). Institutional supports for children in poverty, especially around nutrition and education, have been a political and research agenda item, then, since the mid 1960s. We have maintained that this moral imperative to lift children out of despair is, although laudable, perhaps why little attention had been paid to the experience of post-secondary students in homelessness. It had been hard to think of anyone choosing to go to college and putting up with housing hardship as stuck in the entropy of poverty or that actors beyond the student might have some responsibility to provide for those needs. Housing and homelessness have steadily increased globally, especially in Canada, and notably among students. Post-secondary student homelessness was due to be discussed. And it is not that K-12 and the post-secondary system are not connected. There is considerable literature on the direct relationship between preceding experiences of intergenerational or childhood poverty and antecedent adult occurrences (Duncan & Le Menestrel, 2019; Hedefalk et al., 2023). As educators, we have heard these oral histories, and we know them to be true. As a result, we also maintained early on, based on our collective experience as students and then as faculty and administrators, that there were many overlaps between K-12 and post-secondary experiences; that most post-secondary students are adults does not mean that they should be cut off from supportive critical research.

The other important piece of this narrative of inevitability is that most people share an image of homelessness restricted to people sleeping outside on park benches or under bridges (known as “*sleeping rough*”). To some degree, the word “*homelessness*” is still conflated with being literally unsheltered. This is a mistake. For the most part, post-secondary student experiences are not commonly defined by literal homelessness. We have been guided by the importance of distinguishing structural homelessness from the loss of one’s spiritual

place and sense of home. In the context of structural homelessness, having a home is about safety, protection, a place to live, and an address (Fox, 2016; Weissman, 2017). Homelessness in that dimension is understood through a lack of housing spaces, and that is a growing and valid concern in Canada. In terms of the loss of one's spiritual place, home is a place of memories, ancestral connection, personal space, privacy, intimacy, and refuge (Williams & Stuart, 1998; Woodhall-Melnick & Weissman, 2019).

To clarify to ourselves and the research community, we embraced work done by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) (Gaetz et al., 2012). According to the COH's Canadian Definition of Homelessness, homelessness refers to a range of housing and shelter circumstances that has being without any shelter at one end and being insecurely housed at the other. Homelessness encompasses a range of physical living situations which the COH organizes in a typology that includes:

1. **Unsheltered or absolute homelessness**, living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation.
2. **Emergency shelter**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence.
3. **Provisional accommodation**, referring to accommodation that is temporary or that lacks security of tenure.
4. **Risk of homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless but whose current economic or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

It should be noted that, for many people, homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency.

The COH definition is very good at helping us understand how a wider range of sheltering and housing situations can be understood as forms of homelessness. These situations share several things in common, but for our work, it is the lack of safety and stability and the constant physical and mental health toll of living with housing anxiety that is of greatest concern. We learned early on from anecdotal evidence that many students stay in abusive and violent households or engage in highly criminalized and dangerous activities to stay housed. As a result of this awareness, we were not willing to focus only on those literally unsheltered.

Furthermore, many of our early discussions and research in other areas (Dunn, 1975; Thistle, 2017; Weissman, 2012, 2014, 2017) showed that home is about a wider range of connections between a person and the world around them. Conventional views on housing and home are not only western and colonial in their focus on the primacy of housing, they miss the mark altogether about the most human aspect of home: the myriad connections to kin, ancestors, community, the Earth, and importantly, the self. Thistle's (2017) Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada applies to all persons who are disconnected from land, ancestors, time, and meaningful social connections. Indigenous homelessness is a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals, families, and communities who lack stable, permanent, appropriate housing and the immediate prospect, means, or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include individuals, families, and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally, or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships (Thistle, 2017).

While designing the first survey at Red Deer College, we included the four-stage typology from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Thistle's definition (Thistle, 2017; Gaetz et al., 2017). In the survey responses, a surprising number (close to 33%) responded that they did not know or were not sure that homelessness could be associated with students. Based on the definition, 34% said they had been homeless before, though most had not thought of it that way at the time, and 54% of this group were students while homeless. At the time of our survey, of the 200 student responses, 6.5% indicated they were currently experiencing a form of homelessness, most of it hidden. Twenty percent of the sample had one or more family members in homelessness.

These responses confirm the narrative of inevitability that students and others historically had associated with the post-secondary system. But to those of us who do this research, especially as it regards intergenerational trauma and poverty, the narrative of normalcy and inevitability of housing precarity is forced on people in sometimes subtle, but very enduring, ways. The narrative was so firm, partly at least, because people did not see how it had been imposed on them and partly because students lacked a vehicle to look upstream from their feelings about their experiences. Attention was being paid to food and health,

as they were considered to follow from the K-12 narratives about poverty and school, but soon the unique manifestation of inequity for post-secondary students began to become clear. The takeaway from the definitional debate advanced throughout these pages is important: in 2016, we estimated that about 80,000 students experienced post-secondary student homelessness of some kind. Data gathered later suggest the number is higher, at 111,000. While the majority of these experiences do not involve sleeping in cars or other inappropriate spaces, many do, and all these students suffer stress, stigma, disrupted educations, and returns to homelessness because of their housing precarity.

Students are incredibly resilient, though. Remember that our survey responses and those we discuss later are from students who were in school, persevering despite the hardship. Resilience is very much what we are trying to convey in this report—to use the positive experiences of students and post-secondary sites that have faced post-secondary student homelessness and overcome it, or are in the midst of doing so, to help other sites and students do the same. Despite the resilience, we are shattered every time we are left helpless as students face the negative impact of post-secondary student homelessness.

"I have to not focus on the bills and pray food will come, or my husband will get some overtime. saying no to things my child wants to do but we cannot afford it like gymnastics or a holiday. Try not to get depressed or anxious. Feelings of being a failure and suicide often come up. I have to focus on the positive and believe that going to school will get me a good paying job. We have over \$60,000 of credit card debt. Gambling contributed to that and me not being able to get work during school hours so I could be home with my child. My husband works shift work. Sitters are expensive. For example, working at fast food places they want you available for all shifts. By the time I pay a sitter, there is no money left and I would not have seen my child. So that was pointless. Then I get depressed because you want to work and get out of this horrible situation, but it seems hopeless. I had always wanted to go to school so I applied and got a student loan. I cannot think of all the debt because I literally can't breathe at times. It is very overwhelming living like this [sic]."

(Red Deer College student)



In 2017 at Red Deer College, anecdotal evidence from discussions with students who had been homeless suggested that they were less likely to achieve their scholastic, social, personal, and professional goals. As an example, one student who struggled with addiction and needed to stay with friends to avoid a dangerous situation in her home had tried numerous times to complete her course work but simply could not do it. The stress of unstable housing, unreliable household interactions, and low income in general was just too severe. Another considered leaving her program unfinished to find work because she could not afford her rent and other needs while going to school. She spoke of how uneasy she felt while staying in someone else's place, the anxiety as she became more dependent on others, and how such distractions at the spiritual and psychic level left her with a certain sense of despair. Eventually, 56.5% of the Red Deer College survey respondents said they would leave school before entering homelessness, and close to 15% had done so; a smaller number said that housing was just one of many bills that were hard to pay. We were beginning to see in living terms how gender, age, income, mobility and other variables combined to create social actors with varying degrees of agency and how the social structures and rules around them created different kinds of inevitability in their attempts to achieve scholastic goals at the post-secondary level.

Below are some of the preliminary findings from our first surveys at Red Deer College in 2017. We do not suggest that the numbers below prove anything, and they rather serve to explore post-secondary student homelessness within a convenient sample of 184 respondents mostly in the arts and humanities. Recall that each of the responses we received was from a student aged 17–55 (mostly 17–30) and that they were in school while doing the survey. Later, we make reference to the subsequent studies and statistics. There was surprising overlap and similarity between sites despite their different geographical locations.¹

19% of students said they had previously experienced at least one form of homelessness.

49% (of that 19%) were students at the time they experienced homelessness.

70% of this was hidden homelessness.

7% had lived completely unsheltered (the remaining 23% was unclear).

1. A full presentation of these statistics and some of our observations can be found on our website, www.pssh.ca.

2.6%

While only 2.6% were homeless at the time of the survey, several responses suggested that they might be homeless by our definition but that they found it hard to self-define their experience as such.

62%

said they never hear stories about other students being homeless, versus 17% who do hear stories about it.

50%

of those who reported hearing stories suggested they heard of two or more students experiencing homelessness.

31%

of students said they worried about their housing, and for 48% of these students, this stress was a major concern impacting their performance.

40%

Almost 40% of students suggested they would do anything to find shelter. Some students joined the sex trade or gangs, slept rough, hid in cars and vans, couch surfed, and worse, by our estimation, stayed in abusive domestic situations. Some, usually women, used shelters, but this was not an option for older students with children.



In 2018, the CAEH conference was held in Hamilton, Ontario. Dr. Weissman and others with lived experience were invited to guide a small round table session on lived experience research. Some researchers and administrators referred to post-secondary student homelessness as the sector's "*dirty little secret*." While every stakeholder we talked to at conferences or on-site had heard of experiences of post-secondary student homelessness, there was no clear or established funding or paradigm for addressing it. Discussions with faculty, students, and administrators provided compelling anecdotal evidence that student homelessness was a large and costly problem that, in their experience, had always been there but was never talked about. So we asked: How big is the issue? Where does it happen? What are the costs? What other challenges and barriers is homelessness intersecting with for students? Between 2018 and 2019, our work received wide press coverage, and as it happens in academia, a network of interested people came together to discuss the work that could be done to reveal this "*dirty little secret*." Building on pre-existing research networks with Lakehead University, the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, Concordia University, Red Deer Polytechnic, and the College of New Caledonia,

discussions began about forming a research group and seeking funding. Further, Lisa Mader from Nova Scotia Community College reached out. Before long, the University of Alberta under Kevin Friese, Nova Scotia Community College under Lisa Mader, Red Deer Polytechnic under Dr. Robson, and the University of New Brunswick, Saint John campus, under Dr. Weissman began to formally redevelop and redeploy the survey elements of the research. In June 2019, we were invited by Dr. Sottomayor of York University to talk about post-secondary student homelessness. Their StudentDwellTO study included York University, the Ontario College of Art and Design, Ryerson University, and the University of Toronto and had been ongoing for four years at that point. Their work approached the issue of student housing from cultural geography and design perspectives but was open to discussions of post-secondary student homelessness. Previous conferences and media coverage had put us on their radar, and we cannot stress enough how key that is for shifting narratives. It does not happen easily; you must get your message out there, sometimes in an entrepreneurial fashion. We learned amazing things about how brilliantly student housing was evolving to take into consideration design from the point of view of students. Truly, it seems that global examples of student housing, including many from Canada, prove that we know how to build housing. One problematic area we identified was the way zoning rules, laws, housing prices, and markets impact the ability to build affordable, accessible housing. This raised questions about the roles of education institutions in providing housing and other supports and emphasized how little we knew about housing precarity. In the StudentDwellTO study, a student group revealed the deplorable housing conditions many students faced near campus: up to 16 students sharing a single townhouse, divided by drywall sheets into cubbies. They paid \$600.00 a month each.

Again, these dirty secrets.

We had been trying to get funding, but funders were not interested in studies about the prevalence of post-secondary student homelessness. We heard that secondary data analysis from Statistics Canada, educational institutions, and other support providers should provide that information. However, these sources did not have that data that we could find. There was a lot of data on housing, because the National Housing Strategy was coming into effect and Canadian researchers have done an incredible amount of work in the area of homelessness for at least four decades, but because the issue of post-secondary student homelessness for all intents and purposes did not exist, the kinds of questions we asked were not answered by the data in either qualitative or quantitative terms. However, through StudentDwellTO, we met Laurent Levesque of Utile. Utile builds amazing housing

for students in Quebec. They do a large biannual national housing survey, reaching over a million post-secondary students to ask about their housing needs. In January 2020, we discussed merging our data needs to include our questions on the prevalence of post-secondary student homelessness, but by March, new projects were difficult to pursue due to COVID-19 restrictions. By January 2021, however, Utile was set to launch a new survey, and they included a few key questions that were part of our earlier survey work. They received 18,500 responses.

Utile's survey is long and gathered a great deal of data about student housing need, demographics, and a number of other variables that impact the design and implementation of student housing. The traditional focus of their survey was not homelessness as we described it, but after StudentDwellTO, student homelessness could not be ignored.²

There is so much data, we cannot present it all, but here are a few highlights. First, as we noted, 18,500 responses were received from the sample. There are 1.4 million student renters in Canada, of whom 8% are in school residences and 69% reside in private market housing. This suggests that if the private market is problematic, institutions need to play a larger role in housing provision. Eighty percent of students stay enrolled in courses during the summer, which corresponds with the numerous stories we heard from students in graduate programs or expedited undergrad programs, especially those trying to upgrade their qualifications and re-enter the workforce. Regardless of where rent is paid, 62% of student renters earn less than \$20,000 per year. Including family support, 64% allocate more than 30% of their income to housing, so their housing is unaffordable, 18% worry about next month's rent, and 20% of those living in housing precarity also experience mental health precarity (Utile, 2022). Amazingly, 58% of students reported feeling unsafe in their housing, as they lived in substandard and structurally unsafe housing, were mistreated by landlords, and had to live with people who they felt were not safe to be around. Most importantly, the above categories tend to meet the various definitions of homelessness we provided earlier. Utile estimated, and we concurred, that almost 5%, or 110,000, of Canada's 2,140,000 students were homeless on any given day.

The Utile report was very important. Now we had figures from a larger sample. That such a high number of students were in some form of housing jeopardy was disturbing. But at the same time, COVID-19 had provided a structural upheaval that made all of us (except the elites) understand ourselves as victims of rent gouging, runaway increases in price on the housing market, mental healthcare gaps, and other calamities. The general

2. We encourage readers to look at <https://www.utile.org/nouvelles/enquete-phare-2021>.

public was beginning to feel intimately how unstable many aspects of our lives that we usually take for granted are. We also fully understood just how essential housing was to maintaining personal and public health. Perhaps most importantly, the post-secondary sector recognized that housing was more than just shelter; it was key to the well-being of the sector's lifeblood: students. Beyond this, with enrolments suffering from a massive structural upheaval, the sector risked exacerbating a growing existential impasse if they did not address housing need. In fact, we learned that, on a broad scale, students had been telling us and reaching out to school administrations about their housing precarity, but in other terms:

"Once they were educated in the systemic factors that create precarity and perpetuate homelessness, they began to realize that most students will not simply present at their front desks as homeless... Many students will present with academic problems, food security issues, financial stresses, and the like. It is only when we begin to tease apart these issues that homelessness may present itself. This has been a key learning that our [University of Alberta safe housing] project team will continue to integrate into our project efforts and homeless education work on campus."
(Kevin Friese, Dean of Students at the University of Alberta, from Weissman et al., 2019)

Finally, armed with sufficient data, we applied to Making the Shift and received funding for three years. Making the Shift was formed with National Centres of Excellence Tri-Council funding and emphasized youth homelessness prevention. We surmised going into this that post-secondary education represents a crucial time in the life course, as very practical and instrumental learning is supposed to occur that leads the student to a progressive shift in their socioeconomic role. We knew from early research that about 80% of post-secondary students were youths aged 17–25 and the remaining 20% were older, often mature adults with kids, facing unemployment or redundancy and seeking a new role in the economy (Statistics Canada, 2023). We also knew that the traditional rites of passage, such as progressive movements into new roles and statuses, were no longer linear, but had become messy; people move forward, backward, and sideways as they struggle in modern times to find economic and social security. In this, the post-secondary sector continues to play a key role as one of the arenas for gaining training, accreditation, and employment. The stakes were and remain high for all post-secondary students. Our early work did not distinguish

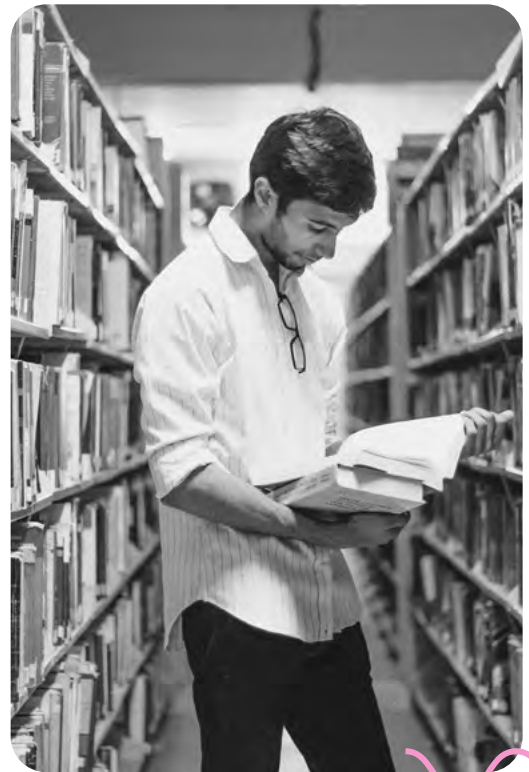
between age cohorts, whereas the primary focus of our current work has been primarily youths aged 17–25 experiencing post-secondary student homelessness or adults who had experienced homelessness as youths. This focus is compatible with recent future-facing goals, especially those of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Making the Shift, to prevent homelessness across the board, rather than step in where and when it has already arrived. The study underway, we soon met students who were not youths, but had been youths when they experienced these issues, so we included those points of view too. In fact, as we discussed the topic in the press, former students who had faced these challenges even years earlier reached out to us, and some were included. The methodology and choices for inclusion are discussed further on. Post-secondary student homelessness is a big issue. Many researchers are now working on it, and we are cautiously optimistic.

This research has always been guided by the need to know the size and shape of post-secondary student homelessness and to develop strategies to manage it from an administrative and institutional standpoint, in sync with the needs of students. In doing this, we also wanted to contribute to the prevention of long-term and chronic homelessness by helping young people and people developing new skills to complete their schooling and get their accreditation despite hardship. We are very interested in understanding what the barriers and needs are and how stakeholders of all kinds imagine the solution to these. Finally, we remain firm believers that students, faculty, and others have important stories to tell and that once we have an idea of the dimensions of post-secondary student homelessness in Canada, we can get to ethnographic and qualitative discussions to put the conversation into living colour.



ETHICS AND WORKING ON FORBIDDEN NARRATIVES WITH REAL PEOPLE

One of the major issues confronting any qualitative research is the absolute necessity of causing little or no harm to participants. The Tri-Council Policy Statement 2, the research ethics manual in Canada, lays out a number of ways of understanding harm, and often, the research ethics boards who sign off on research are most concerned with this aspect. The moral and ethical call for safety is mostly to ensure that persons or groups that become the subject of research are not physically, spiritually, practically, or in any way harmed, or if there is a potential for harm, that the participant has an opportunity to think about that potential before agreeing to participate. Anyone who does institutional research that receives public funding or that is vetted through publicly regulated research sites like universities is familiar with what we call the REB in Canada and the IRB in the US. The REB refers to the permission we receive from a research or institutional ethics board. Not wishing to provide a deep dive into the process here, it is important to note that often researchers and participants understand harm in different ways; what might seem harmless or having a low harm potential to one party may seem otherwise to another. This was an issue that our research on post-secondary student homelessness faced from the beginning in 2017 with the first surveys and to a greater degree over the last four years of gathering interview and focus group data for this study.



1. “Student Homelessness Isn’t a Thing, Is It?” — Or — “Student Homelessness Is a Big Deal!”

Catherine Church wrote about forbidden narratives in a semi-autoethnographic work on psychiatric survivors and how discussing those experiences led to her own episode of mental health crisis (Church, 1995). One of the lessons from her work is that working with vulnerable persons in deeply qualitative ways can be troubling for everyone involved. It can lead to what Schiff et al. (2022) have described as vicarious trauma and, over long periods, as burnout. In brief, the former refers to a sense of failure and impotency to resolve issues, and the latter to the exhaustion and loss of compassion (sometimes called compassion fatigue) from prolonged and emotionally intense work, such as that done by front line social workers. While these are primarily problems for the researcher, participants, especially when they are confronted with new ways of seeing themselves, can be quite disturbed. What our early surveys and this later work confirmed is that most students and communities have created popular narratives where some housing precarity is not only to be expected during post-secondary but is also part of the journey. As a result, discussions of hardship and food or other insecurities, especially expressions of homelessness, are highly stigmatized. As discussed earlier, many of the early respondents had to read the broader definitions of homelessness in order to see themselves in those terms, and that was quite disturbing or harmful in the sense that it reminded them of their fear of being rejected by their peers. The Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Network published an article in Parity’s special edition on homelessness about the role that stigma plays in doing research, negatively impacting mental health and reinforcing students’ reluctance to share with institutional personnel.

In 2022, however, when the interviews for this research began, COVID-19 had done a number on all of us, and housing issues, lack of affordability, intimate partner violence, dissolving relationships, the connection between safe and stable housing for community well-being, and more were out in the wide open. There was a shift in the narrative about students, especially when residences closed and international students had to return to their homes or otherwise move away from residences. Since this is a relatively small percentage, it might seem insignificant, but COVID-19 clearly showed schools and the rest of us that we needed to have a discussion about the role of housing, barriers to student housing, and students being unhoused. There has been a great deal of research on these issues since the pandemic. And this body of work, some of which is included here in our

section on literature, reflects a wide range of ethical approaches to talking to students about their housing. However, because housing precarity is directly related to socioeconomic status, residency and citizenship status, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and regional disparities, when we talk to students about their housing, we are often discussing problematic generational experiences that are quite difficult to talk about, no matter how common these issues might be on the internet, in the news, and finally in campus discussions. No matter how carefully potential triggers are addressed, the respondents in our work, by virtue of having serious concerns about their housing, are vulnerable, so we took care to meet the ethical concerns of our respective site research ethics boards.

2. Recognizing Vulnerability in Ourselves and our Futures

The first potential harm was that it can be shocking for people to see themselves as vulnerable or as part of a stigmatized social stratum, as they try to adjust to expectations of stigma or discrimination in their lives. It is almost as if some forms of precarity are socially acceptable, even integrating, while others are potentially alienating. Hence, as noted, students have long presented food insecurity to administrations and school friends but have been hesitant to adopt the “homeless” label. At a conference, someone rhetorically asked, “*does homeless have to mean hopeless?*” In a way, talking to students for this project jostled some feelings of insecurity where there may not have been any or agitated existing fears. Since we knew from our previous survey work that worries associated with housing precarity are not uncommon (ranging from 32% to 53% at some sites), we were confronted with the need to measure the value of information that has the potential to trigger anxiety, especially among respondents who were in the process of accepting the new label.

One of the ways we helped potential respondents feel comfortable with this new self-awareness was to explain how common this student experience is in Canada and abroad and to point to the role that their participation might play in solving it. In addition, the fact that most of the interviewers were students and had experience of various precarities and that the lead investigator is a well-known person with lived experience of homelessness made the space feel safe for sharing. We also provided contact info for each site’s mental health supports should difficult feelings arise.

3. Discrimination

An early response to our surveys in Red Deer, Alberta, suggested that there were students from that part of the province who would never admit to being homeless across the broad definition we provided because that was generally understood as an Indigenous experience, and seeing oneself in that way would be admitting a serious failure. This implicit racist bias has been discussed over the years by scholars and researchers but most impressively by Jesse Thistle in his 2017 Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada. In it, as described earlier, he addresses a number of different ways that Indigenous people understand what non-Indigenous people traditionally call homelessness. These include 12 ways that a person can be disaffiliated from people, places, the land, themselves, and more. Still, those few early remarks about Indigenous experiences, and others that associated homelessness with dire poverty, suggested to us that we needed to refine the questions and the way we addressed respondents to account for popular local ways of seeing and speaking about the experience.

Because some respondents had admitted that they or their families lived in that degree of precarity but did not see it as homelessness suggested there might be others who did not identify themselves in a survey. Although we did not encounter it often in our long-form answers, the idea that poverty and severe housing need are normal, if not acceptable, for certain racialized groups is not only racist, but it also perpetuates the idea that homelessness and severe housing need are normal according to some criteria. And this is very problematic to us.

Another dimension of this kind of discrimination is that it destabilizes students' confidence. Students in the earlier surveys had expressed that they feared being discriminated against and prevented from entering graduate or restricted programs because of their family or personal poverty and housing need. There was a perception that admitting to this need or seeking help might be a red flag for academic advancement. Hence, many students kept this truth private. In our work, we were conscious that this kind of fear was real; we made sure that respondents' identities were kept confidential and that none of the research team were in positions of institutional power over the students they were working with on the project.

It is common to anonymize to reduce potential harm. For us, this meant we only gathered personal identifiers such as name, age, gender, and sexuality on a voluntary basis, and even then, only for us to organize and interpret data. We did not use any of this data in ways that could be used to target specific persons. Again, while COVID-19 made doing

the research harder by restricting travel and limiting face-to-face interactions, as well as creating online survey fatigue, it also helped in a strange way by showing that most of us were in harm's way by highlighting the widespread housing precarity across social strata and regions in Canada.

4. Reinforcing Desperation

We were concerned that by discussing students' experiences of precarity, many triggering moments could arise. When students speak of hunger and dangerous relationships, describe the broken-down housing or freezing nights spent in a car, and are asked to imagine their lives in even the near future while all this is going on, it is troubling. So, on one hand, there was potential to stir up feelings of insecurity, but there was also a chance to link the students' feelings to those of others from our knowledge base and to share our own lived experiences, and indeed the positive responses the research gained at governing and community levels were signs of brighter futures ahead. In fact, given that there had been so much press coverage of the issue and our work prior to the latest rounds of interviews, some students felt that they were making a meaningful contribution to solutions to post-secondary student homelessness. In our research ethics board application, we anticipated that this was one of the potential benefits, as we felt the desperation was there in the student population and that participating in our work would be meaningful. We feel this came out to be true.

As for staff, faculty and administrators, we felt the potential harms were far less. We took steps to minimize identifying specific comments made by identifiable persons in specific roles. Again, since so many individuals with these roles had begun to share in news stories and journals, even in University Affairs, there was little concern for harm, other than to make sure that critical comments could not be tied to participants.

5. Delivering on Research Ethics Promises

In short, the major ethical concerns for us, those that the research ethics boards were most concerned about, focused on the students' triggers and mental well-being. For non-students, the main concern was that participants could speak freely and safely without fear of repercussions. Beyond this, we managed expectations about the outcomes of this work. We had promised to carry out the interviews, focus groups, and literature and environmental scans and to explore creating a network of students and administrators to address post-sec-

ondary student homelessness in the future. We call this network SHARE, the Student Housing Advocacy and Research Exchange, and we are still hopeful that it may materialize. Other outcomes discussed in the research ethics application included informing student homelessness and housing policy at provincial and federal levels, and we have started to achieve those outcomes, as discussed earlier. This report, the website, www.pssh.ca, and several ancillary research projects by our team members were also goals we achieved.



SCOPING REVIEW AND GLOBAL SCAN

1. Scoping Review

A scoping literature review is a form of knowledge synthesis that involves rapidly reviewing and summarizing existing literature on a given topic. Scoping reviews consist of broader questions which allow for an exploration of an array of literature relating to a specific topic. We chose to conduct a scoping review as it provides greater flexibility in analyzing the topic and allows us to include diverse literature, ranging from scholarly peer-reviewed articles to grey literature (Colquhoun et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2017). This review was completed in two parts: a formal literature review and a scan of resources and grey literature that could be located with an online search. While these two parts are easily distinguished in terms of research method and sources, the outcome of each search runs interestingly parallel to the other.

1.1. Selection Process

The formal literature review included a search for academic journal articles, books, and grey literature, including student dissertations, conference papers, reports, and policy documents. We conducted an online search to provide a comprehensive overview of existing literature relevant to student homelessness. A variety of keywords were included in the search criteria: “*education*,” “*homeless*,” “*homelessness*,” “*higher education*,” “*basic needs*,” “*food insecurity*,” “*housing*,” “*housing insecurity*,” “*college*,” “*university*,” “*post-secondary*,” and “*student*.” These keywords were used to search online databases, including library catalogues and databases, organizational websites, and internet search engines, including Google Scholar, which yielded over 550 relevant articles.

1.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This scoping review served as an exploration of relevant literature related to student homelessness. Therefore, we did not employ a specific exclusion criterion; instead, we employed parameters for literature relating to student experiences of poverty, housing precarity and insecurity, basic needs, and food insecurity. These insecurities are relevant to student homelessness experiences based on our previous research conducting surveys with student populations.

1.3. Data Extraction and Coding

The following chart provides a breakdown of the dominant themes that were identified in the selected literature:

Post-secondary, college, university (345)



Not all articles focused explicitly on post-secondary students. However, they were selected based on the age of unhoused and housing-insecure individuals and on the desire of those individuals to attend post-secondary school.

Homeless, homelessness (267)

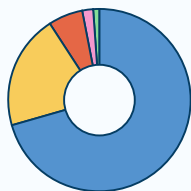


Many articles explicitly addressed challenges related to individuals experiencing homelessness.

Insecurity (240)



There was a significant focus on various insecurities for people experiencing housing precarity. Food insecurity was a primary topic, and financial insecurity was most present concerning post-secondary students.



- Food insecurity (167) 70%
- Housing insecurity (47) 20%
- Basic needs insecurity (14) 6%
- Financial insecurity (5) 2%
- Job/wage insecurity (2) 1%

Food insecurity (166)



Many articles identified in a review of housing precarity focused on food without looking directly at housing precarity, but these two go hand in hand.

Housing (128)



Like food insecurity, this keyword focuses on the many ways housing precarity is presented in the literature and the frequency with which housing is prioritized in research.

Mental health, health, well-being (113)



This is a less visible side effect of housing precarity and basic needs insecurity.

Performance, engagement, success, "GPA" (76)



This was discussed as a concerning outcome of issues like homelessness, food insecurity, etc.

Support (44)



There was a focus on how to help at-risk students experiencing precarity and on programs that pre-empt these concerns based on the basic needs of the student population.

Basic needs (40)



Addressing basic needs as an overarching requirement for post-secondary students

Foster, foster care (33)



Foster care is a form of housing precarity that codifies a history of basic needs insecurity.

Resilience (26)



4%

Resilience is more prevalent in gray literature than it is in research.

COVID, pandemic (26)



4%

This is a necessary consideration given the last three years. It may be seen as shining a light on or amplifying existing issues.

Minority, vulnerable (24)



4%

This is a necessary consideration given that this population faces increased barriers.

Financial aid (26)



4%

We considered programs that are available to students.

Services (27)



4%

This refers to existing programs that are doing palpable work (not research but including mental health services).

Community college (12)



2%

Community college students are frequently non-traditional students who experience higher rates of precarity (working students, students living in or with a history of poverty, first-generation students, student parents, etc.).

Hunger (10)



2%

Food insecurity is only sometimes directly researched in tandem with hunger's effects.

International (9)



1%

There is little attention paid to international students in the literature. This population of students requires consideration as their needs are different from those of domestic students.

Shelter, emergency shelter (9)



1%

Our search included both community-based and on campus shelters, as well as short-term, long-term, transitional, and emergency shelters.

Safe, safety (7)



1%

This frequently pertains to physical safety, but mental health concerns would be included.

Recommendations (4)



0.6%

By "recommendations," we mean how to improve current processes or address the problems being discussed in a proactive manner. There needs to be more discussion of this—most authors continue to study the problem of post-secondary student homelessness instead of developing or describing possible concrete solutions.

Community-based (4)



0.6%

Here, we focused on a type of service or support available for people experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness.

1.4. Basic Needs

The literature on basic needs has been organized into the following areas: food insecurity, housing insecurity and homelessness, and financial insecurity. There is a significant focus on various insecurities, defined as lack of certainty, for people experiencing housing precarity. Food insecurity was a dominant theme, and financial insecurity is most present concerning post-secondary students. Addressing basic needs is an overarching requirement for post-secondary students.

Numerous studies have documented that post-secondary students struggle to meet their basic needs (Cersani et al., 2022; Khosla et al., 2020; Perez-Felkner et al., 2020; Reppond, 2019). Basic needs contribute to the overall well-being of individuals and also have direct impacts on educational outcomes and degree attainment (Khosla et al., 2020). Post-secondary institutions were primarily designed for elites; therefore, insecurity regarding basic needs has been overlooked (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Post-secondary institutions are increasingly attracting diverse populations with different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, institutions must consider how a student's background impacts access to various basic needs, including housing and food (Perez-Felkner et al., 2020).

+ *Food Insecurity*

Post-secondary students are negatively affected by food insecurity. Food insecurity in the current literature is not defined strictly as a lack of food. Instead, this notion goes beyond lack of food to consider factors like diet quality. Food insecurity is a growing concern in the literature as it is often linked to other struggles, including a lack of financial resources, inadequate housing, and adverse health and educational outcomes (Khosla et al., 2020). Many articles identified in our review of housing precarity focused on food insecurity without looking directly at housing precarity. However, these two factors have a close relationship that requires attention. Many articles focused exclusively on food insecurity and the adverse outcomes attached to this experience. For example, Stebleton et al. (2020) discussed the experiences of undergraduates facing food insecurity. Central to this discussion was the struggle of completing work while hungry, the experience of anxiety when struggling with food insecurity, and lastly, their understanding that food insecurity is a widely shared and important issue. However, the authors did not discuss how food insecurity relates to housing precarity.

Food insecurity is identified as a significant risk factor for housing insecurity for students of all ages, especially for marginalized students (Bruening et al., 2017; Cady, 2016; Gerlach et al., 2021; Gilkesson, 2021; King, 2021; Maroto et al., 2015; Mechler et al., 2024; Que, 2020; Willis, 2019; US Government Accountability Office, 2019). The effects of food insecurity and hunger in post-secondary school students are shown to harm educational success, grades, and retention; these challenges grew more acute during the pandemic (Glantsman, 2022; Lederer et al., 2021). Trawver and Hedwig (2019) demonstrate the correlation between food insecurity and housing insecurity, with findings indicating that more than 30% of student participants experience housing insecurity. Other studies presented similar findings of self-reported housing precarity ranging from 30% to more than 40% of post-secondary school students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016, 2018; Bruening et al., 2017).

Crutchfield et al. (2020) discussed the “*starving student narrative*,” which has been used to normalize the struggles faced by individuals striving to achieve a higher education. This standard narrative is used to hide or normalize the basic needs insecurities, such as around housing and food, faced by post-secondary students. The post-secondary experience of eating a low-quality diet and struggling to find a place to live is frequently normalized as part of the “*college experience*” that is widely shared by students. However, these struggles significantly impede the success of students and contribute to poor physical and mental health outcomes.

+ *Housing Insecurity and Homelessness*

Housing insecurity and homelessness are a growing concern for students in higher education. Literature that discusses these issues frequently focuses on the various adverse outcomes resulting from students’ experiences of housing precarity. For example, Broton (2020) emphasized that the lack of affordable housing available to students has become a severe issue. Many factors influence affordability, including the increased cost of attending college, the decline in assistance based on needs, and the fact that family income has not increased to match rising costs.

Homelessness and housing insecurity are defined on a gradient in the literature. Housing insecurity includes those with unstable housing, including typologies from the Canadian Observatory of Homelessness: unsheltered, emergency sheltered, provisionally accommodated, and at-risk of homelessness. The literature is also concerned with student housing conditions such as affordability, quality, and overcrowding (Khosla et al., 2020).

+ *Financial Insecurity*

Evidence shows that students face financial pressures while trying to complete their degree, resulting in adverse outcomes, such as mental health concerns (Lederer et al., 2021; Mulrenan et al., 2018). Many articles explored students' financial pressures and the availability of financial aid (Chen & Desjardins, 2008; Fuller, 2014). For example, Case (2013) discussed the influence of financial pressures on students' psychological well-being. Financial insecurity experienced by students also leads to other basic needs insecurities, as previously discussed, such as around food and housing (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

1.5. Health and Well-Being

The literature on health and well-being has been organized into three sub-themes: mental health, physical health, and vulnerability.

+ *Mental Health*

The mental and psychological effects of housing precarity are less visible to students experiencing housing precarity and basic needs insecurity. However, many articles discussed the negative consequences for students who face these insecurities. There is a strong correlation between basic needs insecurities and poor mental health outcomes (Haskett et al., 2021). Students experiencing housing precarity and basic needs insecurity may face stigma or discrimination, resulting in depressive symptoms (Gattis & Larson, 2016). These populations may rely on coping strategies, whether healthy or unhealthy, as well as resilience. Students should be able to focus on success and degree attainment and not have to be resilient to finish school.

+ *Physical Health*

Physical health is impacted by insecurity around basic needs. Many studies discussed the correlation between food insecurity and physical health (DeBate et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2015). These studies discussed how improper eating habits affect physical health, leading to chronic diseases and conditions like obesity (Roy et al., 2015). In addition to causing poorer health outcomes, the inability to access nutritious food also affects academic success and degree attainment (Aldama et al., 2021; Que, 2020; Richards, 2020).

+ Vulnerability

It is important to note that community college students were frequently described as non-traditional students who experience higher rates of precarity as they are often working students, students living in or with a history of poverty, and first-generation students. Cooper (2010) discusses the accessibility of community colleges and how this makes these institutions a good option for the “*non-traditional student*” (Cooper, 2010). Other important considerations are the population segments that were discussed in the literature.

First, the literature gave little attention to international students attending institutions of higher education. Their experiences are an essential consideration, as their needs are different from those of domestic students. For instance, Msengi (2007) discusses the unique characteristics of international students that contribute to stress, poor health, and problems with academic performance, as well as their experiences of alienation and discrimination.

Second, supports and services for the population of youths transitioning out of foster care who are attending post-secondary education need much more attention. Foster care is a form of housing precarity that codifies a history of basic needs insecurity. According to Cheatham et al. (2021), this population faces challenges in higher education as they often have low levels of financial, social, and emotional support and experience housing and food insecurity, which continue as they enter their post-secondary institution. This impacts their rates of persistence and degree completion. Similar barriers affect young parents entering post-secondary.

Since this research project began, advocates and members of the research team have spent some time addressing the needs of youths and single parents in post-secondary. Since there is much overlap between these demographics, it is hard to distinguish them. Suffice to say, the literature and many of the respondents in this study spoke to the added burden and barriers resulting from being a single or young parent trying to make it in post-secondary, especially in terms of food and housing security. A new initiative in New Brunswick, ADAPT NB, was launched to assess the dimensions of young parents’ needs as they enter post-secondary.³

Third, the literature considered racialized vulnerable populations in higher education. It is necessary to consider these populations as they often face increased barriers. For

3. For more information about ADAPT NB, see: www.adaptnb.org

instance, Cooper (2010) discussed how low-income members of racial minorities are more vulnerable to dropping out of community college.

There is an existing body of knowledge that identifies circumstances which will increase a person's likelihood of experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness, with a heavy focus on primary and secondary school-aged children living in poverty and those in foster care. Likewise, there is a growing body of literature that explores the more specific risks of housing insecurity or homelessness for people in post-secondary school. Repeatedly, marginalized and multiply marginalized students are identified as having a significantly higher risk of housing precarity in post-secondary. However, there is minimal research exploring the specific needs of these populations. It is also notable that existing literature focuses on the negative experiences leading to housing precarity for Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) students, LGBTQIA2S+ students, and neurodiverse or disabled students, with minimal attention to policy shifts or institutional support measures (Castellanos, 2016; Cidro et al., 2015; Diamond et al., 2020).

Trawver and Hewig (2019) report a disproportionate risk for specific populations and cite several other authors who found the same, including students of colour, students who have previous experience in foster care, and disabled students (Trawver & Hedwig, 2020). In addition to food insecurity, BIPOC students, LGBTQIA2S+ students, and neurodiverse and disabled students struggle with discriminatory experiences on campus that further complicate educational success and retention (Garlach et al., 2021; Russomanno et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Anyaehie-Griffith (2020) identifies ten factors that influence the probability of homelessness at the age of desiring to attend or attending post-secondary school; while 75% of the participants in this thesis were people of colour, the study does not identify risk factors inclusive of marginalized identities.

The connection between race and poverty is identified as a primary factor in housing insecurity in higher education (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016, 2018). Vasquez et al. (2018) further demonstrate this point while emphasizing overlapping identities, including parenthood, and call for future research to address the intersectional identities of multiply marginalized students. Additionally, Hotaki's dissertation in 2020 uses critical race theory and a social justice lens to explore the experiences of vulnerable populations, including BIPOC students, queer students, and transgender students. These post-secondary school students are described as experiencing trauma or potential trauma by Hallet et al. (2019) who call for trauma-informed policies by institutions of higher education.

Several researchers explore gender identity in terms of trauma and increased risk. Woodford et al. (2017) cite Seelman on the importance of proactive policies on college campuses to reduce the lifetime risk of suicidality and homelessness for transgender youths. However, the authors do not address homelessness during the students' post-secondary experience. Nicolazzo et al. (2017) call for proactive efforts from post-secondary institutions to develop policies and support structures entirely from the perspective of multiply marginalized students, such as homeless transgender students. They suggest that this should be the beginning of a daily practice among post-secondary school educators. Montmarquet (2021) writes in an honours thesis focused on housing and housing precarity for transgender and nonbinary post-secondary school students that even those students in the study who reported secure housing also reported frequent micro-aggressions and transphobic experiences on campus. The author calls for additional research to specifically address housing precarity as it presents in transgender and nonbinary students, lending to the idea that otherwise secure housing where discrimination is present may indeed be more precarious than secure.

Disability, as it correlates to post-secondary student homelessness, is an under-researched topic. However, there is a growing body of research regarding disabled youths, including those with a suspected intellectual disability, who experience homelessness and have also been in foster care. Stone's 2022 dissertation investigates the challenges of being autistic and homeless, including concerns with post-secondary school attainment. They explore the intersection of neurodiversity and substance use and misuse in connection to housing insecurity and homelessness but do not directly address post-secondary education. In a master's thesis, Stanley (2020) interviews post-secondary students who identified as homeless and disabled about their experiences on campus. Participants in this study spoke of stigma and shame around one or the other of their identities, of hiding their realities on campus, and of "*wishing that there were visible supports available to them*" (Stanley, 2020, p. 45).

While the amount of recent graduate student work identified in this review is promising, there remains a need for further research regarding these high-risk populations. Smith and Knechtel (2020) report findings across two separate studies demonstrating the specific risk of housing precarity among multiply marginalized post-secondary school students. The authors recommend that institutions of higher education prioritize awareness and representation within on-campus support efforts for these

students. Further research is needed to address post-secondary school policies and on-campus initiatives to support multiply marginalized students who are experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness.

1.6. Academic

This section is divided into two subsections: performance and success and engagement. Performance and success are related to academic achievement through the evaluations and degree requirements that lead to obtaining a degree. Engagement refers to a student's level of interest and participation in the learning process.

+ *Performance and Success*

Lower academic performance and success were discussed as adverse outcomes of students facing different forms of precarity (food and housing). There is a strong negative correlation between precarity and academic success (Kamelo, 2017). To improve student success rates, this must be addressed at the institutional and individual levels; neither should be done in isolation (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

+ *Engagement*

Academic engagement is affected by precarity factors. Students experiencing housing precarity face numerous adverse outcomes, including a lack of participation in university life. This includes engagement with fellow students and the overall university experience (Mulrenan et al., 2018). Youths who experience homelessness or housing precarity are at greater risk of academic disengagement than their peers who are housed (Malenfant & Smith, 2021).

1.7. Student Resources

+ *Services and Support*

Peer-reviewed literature shows a recent tendency to consider services and supports and the outcome of such options for post-secondary students experiencing housing precarity, but this is not a significant trend. Recent legislative changes in some parts of the United States have mandated basic needs services for students, opening the door for research into these services' development and their success and challenges

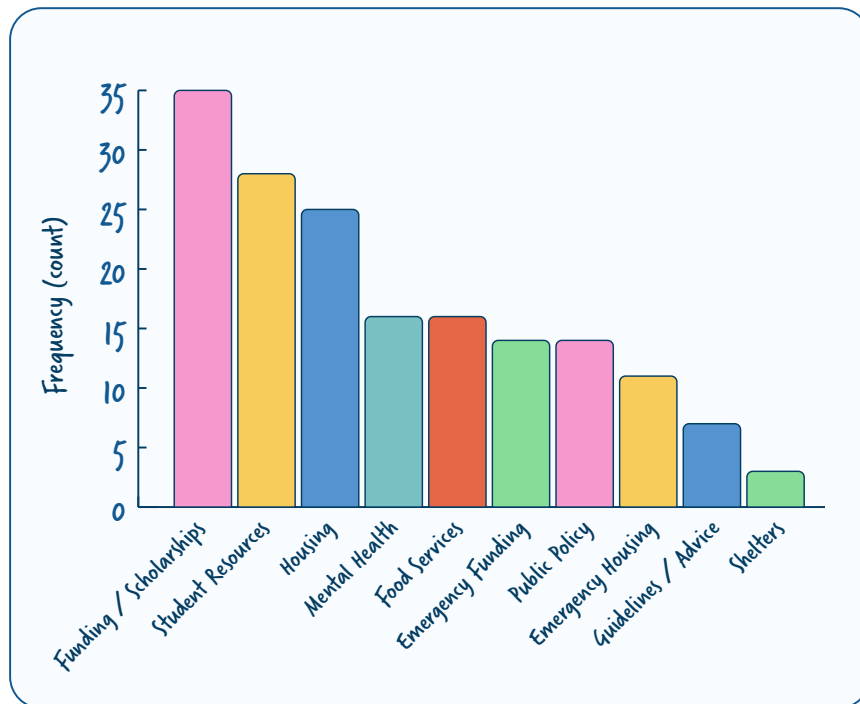
(Postsecondary Education Trailer Bill AB-132, 2021). In other parts of the United States, toolkits are used to offer education to secondary school educators, post-secondary school liaisons, and emergency or crisis case managers at post-secondary institutions.

+ *Recommendations*

Recommendations refer to how to improve current processes or address problems proactively. In the academic literature, less than 5% of the sources focused on practical recommendations for solving issues of housing precarity. Most authors continued to study the problem instead of developing or describing possible concrete solutions.

2. Global Resource Scan

A global resources scan was conducted to identify available resources, services, and programs for post-secondary students experiencing homelessness and housing precarity. This review aimed to understand what forms of assistance are available to students to support them in meeting their academic goals. The types of support included those available to support post-secondary students in their personal and academic lives. A summary of the supports mentioned can be seen in the figure below.



2.1. Selection process

The global resource scan included a search for programs available from universities, community colleges, government organizations, and non-governmental organizations. These programs were identified by conducting a comprehensive range search to identify relevant legislative and public policies, reports, government programs, funding initiatives, student and advocacy group resources, and grey literature, including news articles, blog posts, video series, and social media and social networking groups. A variety of primary keywords were used in an online search engine: *“homelessness,” “student shelter,” “food insecurity,” “basic needs insecurity,”* and *“emergency funding.”* A secondary keyword search was also conducted to expand the gathering of available resources. These terms included *“housing insecurity,” “emergency housing,” “emergency shelter,” “homeless shelter,” “transitional housing,” “food bank,” “hot meals program,”* and *“emergency funding.”* The primary and secondary keyword searches were accompanied by student-specific terms, including *“post-secondary,” “student,” “college,” “community college,”* and *“university.”* The above keywords were used to search online databases, including library catalogues and databases, organizational websites, and internet search engines, including Google Scholar and YouTube, which yielded approximately 400 resources.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The global resource scan served as an exploration of relevant resources related to student homelessness. As such, the research teams did not implement specific exclusion criteria. Instead, our scope focused on resources available to support students struggling with housing precarity, basic needs insecurity, food insecurity, and poverty as these elements relate to experiences of student homelessness.

2.3. Data Extraction and Coding

The research team reviewed approximately 400 resources. More than 50% of those resources were from Canada, approximately 40% were from the United States, and the remaining were from Europe, Asia, and Australia. Of the resource reviews, nearly 150 programs were identified that directly support post-secondary students. The dominant themes identified in the selected literature emphasize basic needs: food, housing, and financial resources. These programs were available through academic institutions and government and community initiatives. The following sections are a breakdown of available assistance and program highlights.

2.4. Basic Needs Insecurity

Prioritizing basic needs insecurity has become a significant focus for post-secondary institutions across Canada and the United States. Basic needs are increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of the academic journey for students. For instance, in California, all public colleges and universities must have an easily accessible basic needs page on their website to provide information to students in precarious situations. Basic needs are also addressed by governments and non-governmental organizations. The increased emphasis on meeting these critical needs of students demonstrates the importance of these initiatives in ensuring students succeed in their personal and academic lives. The resources related to basic needs focus heavily on food, housing, and financial insecurity. As such, the following sections provide a brief overview of the available programs for post-secondary students in these three key areas.

+ *Food Insecurity Resources*

In conducting the global scan, the research team determined that the primary response to basic needs insecurity focused heavily on food insecurity. The food support resources on campus are limited. However, when food support was identified at post-secondary institutions, it fell into four main categories: campus food banks or pantries, community gardens, meal plan strategies, and emergency grocery funds.

- » **Campus Food Banks or Pantries:** Campus food banks or pantries provide food items and meals to students in need. Volunteer student groups frequently run these food banks on campus, and all students are welcome to access this resource. The food banks on campus often rely on donated food items. Some campus programs also allow faculty and staff to donate through payroll deductions. Examples of successful initiatives include: the St. Thomas University Foodbank, the University of New Brunswick Student Union Food Bank, the Nova Scotia Community College Student Association Student Pantry, and Royal Roads University Student Food Bank.
- » **Community Gardens:** Community gardens allow individuals to grow their own food in the warmer months. These initiatives are typically volunteer-led and allow students, staff, and community members to share a plot of land to grow produce. These initiatives address food insecurity for students sustainably and provide students with fresh options. Additionally, community gardens remove

the stigma of struggling to access healthy foods while creating a community. Examples of successful initiatives include: the University of New Brunswick Student Union Community Garden, the University of Alberta Campus Garden, Dalhousie University Community Garden, and the Mount Saint Vincent Community Garden.

- » **Meal Plan Strategies:** Meal plan strategies allow students to donate meals from their meal plan to other students struggling with food insecurity. These programs vary in their implementation. For instance, Swipe It Forward at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, allows students to donate a maximum of five meals per semester from their meal plan to offer emergency food support to students experiencing food insecurity. The short-term program provides up to 6–8 weeks of meal support to students who apply and are experiencing food insecurity. Another program example is Swipe it Forward at New York University, which also allows students to make donations of meal swipes throughout the term or to donate all remaining meals at the end of the term (unused meals expire at the end of each term). Students with no meal swipes or on-campus cash on their ID card can use this program to access food by simply asking the cashier; there is no application process, and the only qualifying factor is an inability to pay for a meal.
- » **Emergency Grocery Funds:** Emergency grocery funds are programs designed to provide students experiencing food insecurity with a gift card to a local grocery store. Donations to this program vary but are frequently student-led, with the allotment decision made by the university's student representative council. This program removes the limitations on the types of food available at campus food banks and pantries and allows students to purchase fresh food to meet their needs. Examples of programs that provide grocery store gift cards include: the University of New Brunswick Grocery Gift-Card Program and the Trent University Grocery Assistance Fund.

As demonstrated above, educational institutions are implementing a variety of innovative solutions to help relieve the burden on students experiencing food insecurity. However, our findings on the availability of resources demonstrate that there is often limited on-campus food support. As such, students are frequently directed to community food banks to meet their needs.

+ *Housing Insecurity*

The availability of housing support resources on campus for students is limited. The support available through educational institutions to meet housing needs falls into the category of emergency housing. However, space is often limited, and students must turn to emergency shelters available in the community.

- » **On-Campus Emergency Housing and Shelter:** Emergency housing and shelter options on campus are extremely limited, typically short-term, and often focus on providing a way to leave violent situations. Emergency housing consists of reserved beds on campus to meet the short-term needs of students. Educational institutions have also partnered with other local institutions, local landlords, and hotels to provide short-term relief for students experiencing housing precarity. Examples of initiatives at post-secondary institutions for emergency housing include: Trojan Shelter at the University of Southern California, which is an on-campus student organization that provides housing, meals, and holistic support for homeless students; the University of Alberta's Safe House Program, which provides temporary emergency relief; and the University of Toronto's Housing Emergency Support program, which also provides temporary relief for students.

Notably, post-secondary institutions are implementing a harm reduction approach to what is often viewed as an unsolvable problem; these approaches include looking at other ways to ensure safety when students are sleeping on campus, such as providing safe parking options, such as Long Beach City College's Safe Parking Program, with open gym locker rooms and bathrooms.

- » **Emergency Shelters:** Sometimes, access to emergency housing is based on available space; no emergency housing is available on campus if the residence halls are occupied. Emergency shelters in the community often have limited space as well. Referring students to these shelters does not cater to their needs, creating significant issues (triage, safety, wellness, limited capacity, access to study space, transportation, etc.). At the same time, transitional housing programs take longer to access and have limited availability. Many post-secondary institutions' websites provide links to housing options within the community when there are no on-campus emergency housing relief options or when these are unavailable. For instance, Dalhousie University provides a page on shelters and housing

by region, the University of Victoria lists emergency housing options, and the University of Windsor lists emergency services, including emergency housing options within the community.

+ *Financial Insecurity*

- » **Emergency Student Bursaries:** Student bursaries are typically limited in number at educational institutions. These bursaries are granted in small amounts and are typically insufficient to cover food or housing expenses. Students apply to these bursaries based on need; however, many programs limit the application time to the beginning of the semester or else draw on money set aside for the next term. Examples of programs include Nova Scotia Community College Urgent Aid, the University of Alberta Graduate Students Association Emergency Bursaries, and the University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies Emergency Grant.
- » **Financial Aid:** Financial aid frequently lasts much longer, which is helpful for students experiencing homelessness. Financial assistance available to post-secondary students is often provided through scholarships, grants, bursaries, and government or institution-specific programs. Examples of resources available to students: the Ontario Student Assistance Program, Canada's Student Financial Assistance Program, the University of New Brunswick's special bursary, the University of Calgary financial needs-based awards, Mount Allison University financial aid for first-year students, and Queen's University admission bursaries.

3. Concluding Remarks

Information about available resources and accessible support is complicated to locate. Information about access to resources for basic needs insecurity is often not listed on the post-secondary institutions' websites and requires repeated effort and direct contact with people on campus. It appears that one needs to be "*in the know*" to find resources, and most post-secondary schools do not prioritize knowledge of basic needs support on their public-facing websites. Once located, resources are still heavily used and quite limited. Schools with primary resources available have limited funds and space and frequently outsource to community support organizations for homeless people. Schools frequently have funding available for emergency food purchases for students but rarely any funding

for housing; those that have emergency housing available frequently focus on students experiencing housing precarity due to violence. This housing is often subject to availability within residences on campus. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought greater awareness of homelessness and housing insecurity, but the reaction may not be fast enough. Research is clear that specific populations are most at risk, but the pandemic has increased basic needs precarity among all populations while simultaneously straining already limited funds.

This global scan shows an increased effort to provide housing support for students (subsidized housing communities, transitional living, more on-campus residence opportunities, etc.). However, the time taken to build these resources may not match the rate at which need continues to increase. Our research team also identified that people with lived experience are at the centre of creative solutions; however, real-time information sharing among those with lived experience is sparse. Some social media and blog posts share information from one unhoused or previously unhoused student to another, but these types of social networking are rare. The benefits of sharing lived experience is part of the Making the Shift Scholars with Lived Experience Network initiative.

The sociocultural priorities of individual nations appear to impact resource availability substantially, as does the presence of basic needs insecurity and post-secondary student homelessness. Countries that prioritize post-secondary education and housing as a fundamental right have housing precarity rates that reflect as much, with rates of unhoused young adults falling even as the pandemic continues. Programs reporting the most remarkable success are long-term and publicly funded Housing First programs, those that involve more extensive systems management, and those led by students with lived experience.



METHODS AND RESULTS

1. Data Collection

To ensure that the data collection remained neutral, a poster and email were distributed across the five institutions participating in the project (Nova Scotia Community College, Lakehead University, Red Deer Polytechnic, University of New Brunswick, and the University of Alberta) that contained site-specific contact information if students wanted to participate. Students who participated in the project received a \$25 grocery store gift card from the post-secondary student homelessness team at their school. No students were encouraged to participate or singled out to be interviewed, and no specific areas or populations were targeted to distribute the posters and announcements about the project. Posters were distributed equally around campuses in high-traffic areas such as central student buildings, academic buildings, student services buildings, and affiliated campus partners (e.g., residences, campus food banks, and emergency programs). Emails were sent on student and faculty email lists as well as to student governance groups, such as the undergraduate and graduate student union; student service groups, such as the international students centre, LGBTQ2+ groups, Indigenous groups, and counselling and wellness services; and administrative services such as the financial aid office, residences, campus food banks, student service coordinators, emergency housing coordinators, and faculty members. These emails contained a PDF version of the poster to display around their offices and spaces or to forward on email threads with student members. Both the emails and posters contained contact information for each site so students could voluntarily reach out to participate. Once interested students had contacted a research assistant at the specific site, the interview process was explained to them, and they had to either sign a consent form or verbally consent to allow the recording, storage, and distribution of the interview transcripts solely within the post-secondary student homelessness team. The students were also screened to ensure student status at an accredited institution by providing their institutional email, student ID number, or an official copy of their transcript. An interview was then scheduled and conducted with the student.

2. Interview Protocol

Interviews were conducted with both students with lived experience and faculty members in departments who had experience managing student concerns with homelessness. This included financial aid, emergency housing, clinical counselling, wellness support social workers, campus food banks, residences, and student services departments.

The research assistants created a 64-question interview guide to help streamline the interview process; however, no questions were mandatory, and students were allowed to freely tell their stories regarding homelessness in whatever manner was comfortable for them. The guide was split up into four sections: student and faculty demographics; current living situation; resources utilized and suggestions for alternate resources; and mental health. The interview guide was formatted to take 45–60 minutes, but recordings were shorter or longer depending on the details shared in response to each prompt or question. An alternative interview guide was created for faculty members to capture their experience supporting students affected by homelessness. Stable mental health and well-being were ensured prior to the conclusion of every interview. In addition, the research assistant sent a site-specific resource page specifically to students to ensure they had all they needed to take care of their wellness. The interview was conducted either in person on campus or virtually through Microsoft Teams or Zoom and recorded either by a handheld recorder or the software's recording technology, and this recording was turned into a transcription manually or using a third-party application, Otter.ai. The transcripts were then cleaned to remove any personal details, including the names of those interviewed. Each transcript was given an anonymous identifier to attenuate researcher bias and maintain full confidentiality. This was completed by the research assistant who conducted the interview to ensure continuous confidentiality. For storage of the interviews, each was uploaded and stored on a secure, access-only platform using a coded identifier. These audio recordings and transcripts will be kept for five years, after which they will be destroyed.



3. Data Extraction

At the time of writing, a total of 65 student transcripts were obtained from the five different institutions, representing a mix of rural and urban locations. It is important to acknowledge that the data collected may not precisely align with the typical bell curve of homelessness in Canada due to the relatively small sample size. Therefore, the data should be interpreted as preliminary findings rather than definitive statistics on homelessness in Canada. In the discussion section, we will cover potential causes for any statistics that differ from the average homelessness statistics in Canada.

At the beginning of the extraction phase, the goal was to create a natural language processing code using Python that would read the transcripts in a .txt format and output the answers to the 64 questions that were in the interview guide, including alternative phrasing styles for each question. Quickly, we realized that this project is not quantitative and that this method of data extraction was too inaccurate to be utilized in this setting. As an alternative, a well-established qualitative extraction method called "*coding*" was employed. Coding involves assigning descriptive words or short phrases to segments of language-based or visual data, capturing their essential meaning (Saldaña, 2009). The interview guide served as the foundation for the coding system, encompassing six primary categories of interest: Personal Information, School/Program Information, Living Situation, Services/Barriers, Health, and Suggestions. Each category had its own coding reference comprising main codes, any relevant subcodes, titles, subtitles, and code descriptions. Initial codes, such as age, birthplace, and pronouns, were established, and subsequent transcripts were coded based on identified themes or keywords. If a theme emerged that did not yet have a code, a new code was added to the coding reference. No themes were omitted based on their frequency of occurrence, as it was crucial to faithfully represent the interviewees' perspectives. Data extraction only involved clear and legible language directly from the transcripts, without making assumptions about unclear or incorrectly transcribed sections. The coding reference has been finalized for the 65 extracted transcripts. It is important to note that if this reference were to be used in future studies, it would continue to be expanded following the same method outlined above.

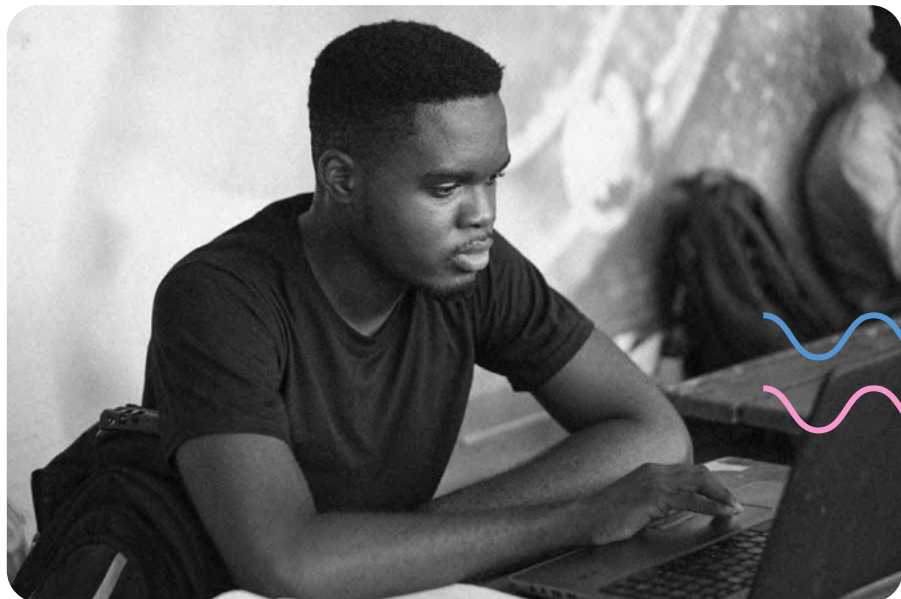
For each institution, a student spreadsheet was created, incorporating the six corresponding categories from the coding reference (Personal Information, School/Program Information, Living Situation, Services/Barriers, Health, and Suggestions). Within each spreadsheet, a table was constructed with the headers: Interview ID, Main Code, and Sub Code. This table was then populated with data from each transcript, filling out all six sections in the spreadsheet.

4. Data Analysis

After completing the data extraction process, the extracted data was downloaded as .csv files for quantitative analysis using R Studio to determine the occurrence of each theme across each school. This allowed for identifying commonalities among schools and determining the most frequently observed themes across the student interviews. Two essential packages, tidyverse and kableExtra, were installed, and the data was imported into R Studio and renamed for organizational purposes. The occurrence of subcodes was calculated and displayed in a table, grouped by their corresponding main codes. To explore the differences in demographics and needs among different institutions, extracted data was consolidated into a single spreadsheet and analyzed with the same methods described above.

5. Round Tables

Round tables were conducted at each partner institution with key stakeholders, community partners, administrators, faculty, government officials, and students. Invitations were sent out via direct email, with attendance ranging from 12 to 45 attendees. Presentations were given on the findings of the post-secondary student homelessness national project, and these were made available to attendees after. Key questions identified for each site were asked during the round tables. The data collected from the round tables were analyzed for common themes and concerns.

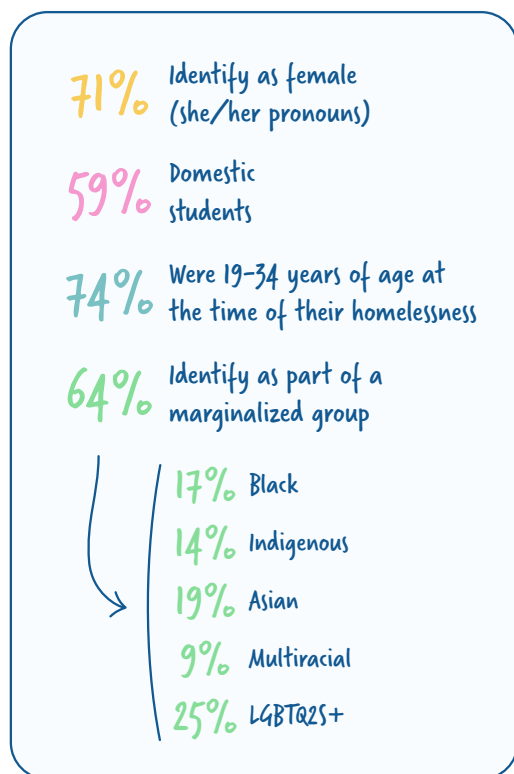


DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

1. Student Perceptions

Post-secondary student homelessness is highly prevalent on all campuses across Canada, with Utile (2022) noting close to 6% of post-secondary students experienced one or more types of homelessness. This number may be a gross underestimate as a recent study conducted by Academica in over 1,000 post-secondary schools found that almost 28% of students experienced homelessness, predominantly in the form of provisional accommodation (Danis & Herlick, 2022). As this research continues, the stigma to identify is much less than what it was, as students understand that the only way to get support is to identify. So, a rate of 28% is more likely to be accurate than 5% back at the original survey date.

In terms of demographics, the predominant age range of post-secondary students in our data set was 19–30, and females were overrepresented. The majority identified themselves as a part of a racialized group and were born in Canada, and approximately 24% identified as LGBTQ2+. This is consistent with earlier findings by Smith and Knechtel (2019) that identified a higher risk of housing precarity among marginalized post-secondary students. Looking more closely at the supports students experiencing homelessness have, the majority of students have occasional to rare contact with their immediate family. Academic success among low-income students has been associated with family emotional support, with those experiencing support demonstrating better psychological well-being and engagement (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Almost 50% of students stated that friends were the closest source of support, but 18% had minimal to no support whatsoever. Social networks during university are associated with academic success, with those who are socially isolated being more prone to dropping out of university and at higher risk of failing (Stadtfeld et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of creating a social network to bridge the gap between academic success and failure among vulnerable students.



Over 50% of students in this study worked either full time, part time, or with variable hours. Students who work while studying are more likely to drop out of their program, with 20 hours a week cited as the threshold for when part-time work presents the same risk of dropping out as full-time work (Hovdhaugen, 2013). Within our study, almost 17% of students had attended post-secondary previous to their current degree but did not graduate due to housing instability and financial precarity. Full-time students also tend to complete fewer credits per term, changing their status to part-time students (Darolia, 2014). This can have detrimental effects on their ability to receive financial aid, as most scholarships, bursaries, and loans require you to be a full-time student. Students within this study mentioned the compounding stress of trying to support themselves financially through part-time

work while also attempting to perform academically in order to break the cycle of financial stress and low socioeconomic status. Over 31% of students in this study relied on student loans to fund their education, rent, food, and other necessities. However, with growing inflation and rental costs, these loans are not sufficient to support students during post-secondary, resulting in students increasingly taking out lines of credit, racking up credit card debt, or sacrificing one necessity, such as stable housing, in order to eat. Increased student debt contributes to depression symptoms and worse general health, as can be seen among students in this study, with over 36% indicating overall poor mental health and over 90% declaring one or more symptoms of mental health issues (Tran et al., 2018).

Within the academic realm, a third of students interviewed describe having low grades, with housing instability listed as the main barrier to achieving good grades. The majority of students fund their education out of pocket or through student loans, and the feeling of financial distress is common, in addition to housing instability. Similar findings have been highlighted by Kornbluh et al. (2024), with students experiencing housing instability having a lower GPA when compared to stably housed students. They also analyzed student awareness of student services and found that students who were aware of available services had higher GPAs than those who were not. In our study, only a quarter of students were aware of three or more services available to them, with the highest barrier to access-

ing help being a lack of knowledge of services. This highlights a key area for improvement, as increasing awareness could improve student well-being and performance. Over 63% of students had missed school because of their homelessness, with various reasons as to why. Some cited the lack of flexibility of apartment viewings, as most occur during working hours, commonly 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., which is also when the majority of students have classes. They also cited the distance to school as a barrier, as accommodations close

to post-secondary campuses are commonly the most expensive, and housing decreases in cost the further you get. For some, public transportation may take them up to two hours to reach campus for potentially only one 50-minute class. As such, they would prioritize working or finding suitable accommodations rather than attending class.

Hidden homelessness was the major form of homelessness seen in this study, which included couch surfing, sleeping in public buildings, and sleeping in their cars. Hidden homelessness is, as its name suggests, unseen, and students can pass as stably housed. In fact, over 71% of students interviewed had hidden their living situation from others, and over 77% felt shame because of their living situation. Being homeless is immensely stigmatized, not only at a structural level but also at a community, interpersonal, and academic level. During interviews, students expressed that the term “homeless” immediately brings to mind literal homelessness, with no grey area. With this, a large portion of students initially did not identify as being homeless. When the different forms of homelessness were described to students, most were surprised to identify with multiple aspects, highlighting the importance of discussing homelessness and destigmatizing all its facets so we can begin to support those experiencing homelessness.

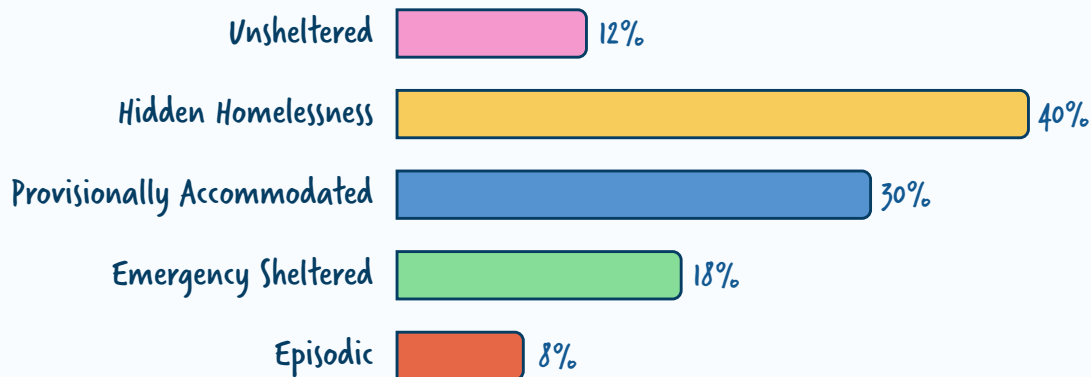
55% mentioned that housing instability is a personal barrier to getting good grades

37% had overall poor mental health during their period of homelessness

44% of students are at risk of failing or have low grades

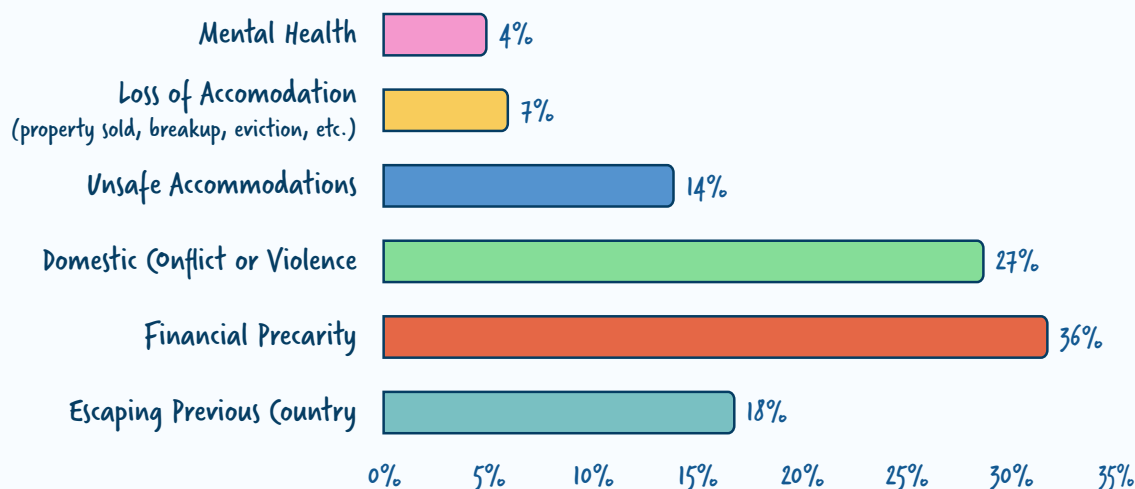
71% of students had hidden their living situation from others, and 77% of students have felt ashamed because of their housing instability

64% had missed school because of homelessness or housing instability



This graphic is depicting the percentage of students that experienced each type of homelessness who participated in our study, with hidden homelessness being the most predominant.

Financial precarity was the main cause of homelessness for students; however, domestic conflict or violence was the second. Domestic violence is known globally as a major cause of housing precarity for women and children, but it is of increasing concern to homeless youth and young adults, with almost one in five experiencing intimate partner violence (Baker et al., 2010; Petering et al., 2014). This number increases for racialized young adults, with almost a threefold increased likelihood to experience homelessness and domestic violence relative to their white peers (Evangelist & Shaefer, 2019). For students specifically, shared accommodations are more common, as they are lower cost in addition to being the form provided by institutions. However, this opens the door to other risks, such as sexual violence and harassment. Of note, international students are at an increased risk for sexual violence, with a Canadian study noting that almost 42% of international students experienced some form of sexual violence, compared to 35% of domestic students (UQAM, 2023). This may be attributed to international students being more likely to reside in student housing as well as their reliance on their support network for a place to stay during periods of homelessness, notably during the summer. Most university accommodations have rental agreements for eight months during the fall and winter semesters, forcing students to either sign an additional agreement for four months or find other accommodations, which can help reduce costs. In some instances, this results in a transactional relationship with friends and reduces their ability to form secure bonds with others. Comments from students in this study encapsulate this, mentioning a need to provide something, whether that be monetary or otherwise, to feel they are earning the right to stay. This can also force students to remain in unsafe situations, as almost 20% of students mentioned residing in unsafe conditions just to keep a roof over their heads.



This graphic is describing the common causes of homelessness among student participants in our study, with the most predominant being financial precarity.

An immense barrier exists when post-secondary students attempt to access services, and that is the lack of knowledge of what supports exist at their individual institutions. Over 39% of students had no knowledge of the services that would have been able to support them during their period of homelessness. The campus food bank was the most used service, with over 28% of students utilizing it during their homelessness. However, less than 20% used emergency housing or funding, highlighting a major gap in the promotion and visibility of these vital services. Another large barrier was the fear of not qualifying for or being rejected by a support service, with almost 38% of participants mentioning this, which reduces the likelihood of students seeking help. This is tied to the immense amount of stigma and feelings of shame surrounding homelessness and precarity in general, as admitting you are homeless to a complete stranger is extremely difficult to do. In our interviews, this was in some cases the first time students had shared their experiences, putting into perspective the inner battle that exists to share a vulnerable part of yourself with others. Among homeless Youths, peer support is positively associated with a positive affect (Griffin et al., 2019). The research around the impacts on peer support for homeless post-secondary students is severely limited; however, research on peer-delivered interventions for harm reduction may provide some insights on the impacts of peer support for vulnerable populations. The SHARPS feasibility study by Parkes et al. (2022) found that the provision of practical and emotional support by peers to people who use substances and are homeless resulted in a reduction of drug use, service engagement, and risky behaviours and an increased rate of enrolment in treatment. Peer support also has significant impacts on mental health outcomes, with measures of well-being significantly improving after online and face-to-face

peer support groups (Drysdale et al., 2022). This demonstrates the immense impact peer support and sharing your experiences can have on both mental health and lifestyle, suggesting that peer support may play a role in supporting post-secondary students struggling with homelessness while also benefiting individuals involved in peer support provision.

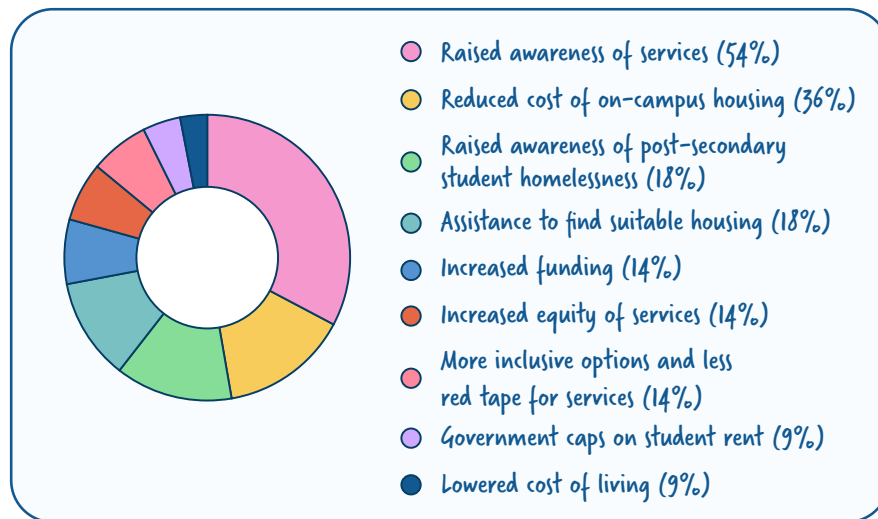
Another key finding was the lack of awareness of outside or third-party services that exist off campus. Only 1.5% of students knew of three or more services, and the most common was an emergency shelter for times of dire need. There was a shared perspective among students that the institution was responsible for providing services, and they had little hope that municipalities or governments would provide effective support. Culture also plays a large role in students' help-seeking behaviour, as different cultures have different social stigma when it comes to mental health, housing, and financial supports. Racialized groups in particular face a higher level of social stigma and are less likely to use mental health services, emergency bursaries, and emergency housing (Ting & Hwang, 2014). This may be due to concerns about negatively impacting relationships, becoming a further burden on their support network, and needing to perform for their family, all of which make it less likely they will seek help (Chang et al., 2020).

- 55% Lack of knowledge of services
- 38% Worried they won't qualify
- 24% Stigma or feelings of shame
- 27% Can't find information about services
- 6% Complexity of applications
- 6% Lack of communication or contact to connect with service

Overwhelmingly, the central suggestion students had to improve institution-based services was to increase awareness of services, with over 81% of students mentioning this in their interview. Increased visibility of these services can be a double-edged sword, as the demand may exceed the need. However, meeting the needs of only 20% of students going through homelessness, financial precarity, and food insecurity is unacceptable and something that needs to be amended immediately. The next suggestion involved reducing the cost of or subsidizing on-campus housing,

as the cost of living on campus or close by is two or three times the monthly income of students, placing them in a deficit before they can begin to think about tuition costs and basic necessities. There is also a call for raised awareness of post-secondary student homelessness to reduce the stigma and allow students to discuss their concerns and situation rather than feeling ashamed and harming their mental health. Increased equity of services is key to reducing the burden on racialized students, as the compounding layers of stigma

and oppression act to hinder their ability to break cycles of trauma and low socioeconomic status. There needs to be an active effort to provide services that are student-centred and take into consideration the complexity of student needs, as one size does not fit all.



2. Staff Perceptions

Staff concerns followed similar trends to those of students, with the main theme identified being economic barriers to accessing suitable housing. The other major themes included lack of available housing, students struggling with mental health because of housing insecurity, and poor academic achievement due to housing concerns. One University of Alberta staff member is quoted as saying:

"It's not just figuring out how to study, you know, there's a big difference if you're, if you're just dealing with stress, or figuring out how to study versus currently dealing with not knowing where your next meal is coming from. And if there is a long-term mental health issue, like depression or something like that, obviously, that's only made worse, or even created by housing and food security."

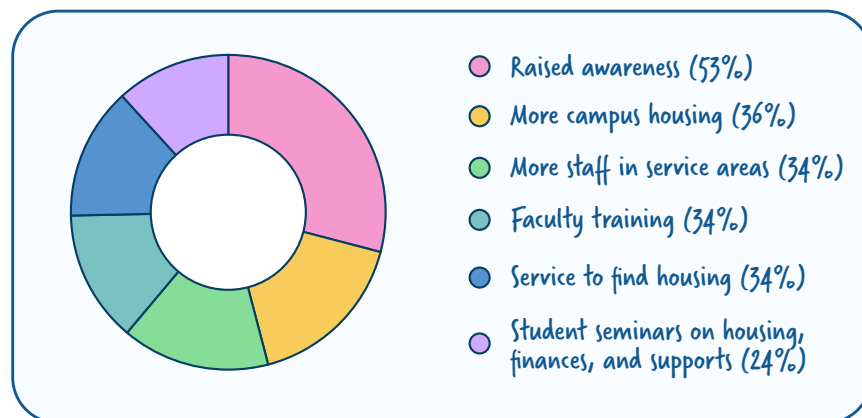
This highlights the compounding weight on a student's shoulders when insecurity and homelessness are prominent factors in their lives. Another main concern of staff was that students may not feel comfortable sharing or expressing the extent of their struggles and may feel shame when they do come forward. *"So, yeah, it's, I think, a big barrier for a lot of people, not just in post-secondary, but in the community. How much you need to share about yourself and your traumas in order to get help."* Students not only have to focus on maintaining their status as a student but, in order to receive help, have to expose their most vulnerable parts to complete strangers, often more than once, to receive often inadequate support.

"Once one of the three legs of the stool kind of gets wobbly, then everything falls apart... If you're late on money, food is getting scarce, and housing is getting scarce, if one of those things really starts to get really wobbly, then it can interrupt the student's entire ability to be at school."

(Red Deer Polytechnic staff member)

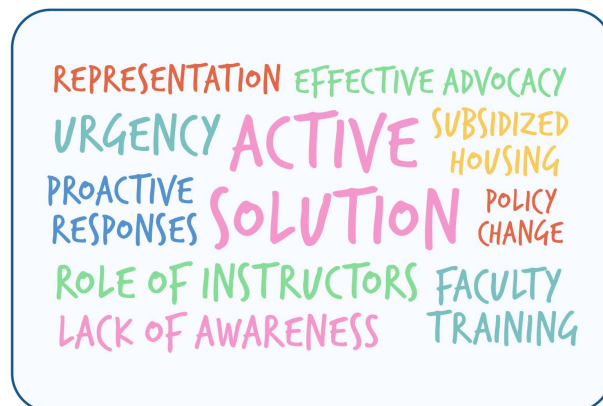
The four main supports and services available to students who came forward about their struggles with homelessness were: campus food banks, mental health services, emergency financial assistance, and emergency housing. However, staff noted a perpetuation of stigma and shame for students who require these supports and that students are at times hesitant to utilize them, reporting that, *"There's some hesitancy from some students to make use of the program [emergency housing], because they feel like there's got to be somebody who's worse off than I am kind of thing."* A lack of knowledge is another huge factor that was identified by both the students and staff interviewed, as even faculty did not know what existed on campus in order to provide resources to students. There is also a collective feeling that there are not enough resources for students, with 24% of staff across multiple campuses critiquing institutions for their lack of resources. One solution to this problem, according to a staff member, would be to *"triple the size of counselling and clinical services, quadruple the size of counselling services. Like, I don't think I've ever heard of students that have easily gotten in, and, like, it's a huge thing for them to, like, even go for their first meeting."*

All staff and faculty members interviewed highlighted that the biggest avenue to improve student support was raising student awareness of the existing services. However, the *"double-edged sword"* that exists when increasing awareness of supports was frequently mentioned, as there is a never-ending strain on the system. This led to further suggestions to increase campus housing for vulnerable students, increase the number of service staff, and create training for staff so they are aware of the resources available and are better equipped to direct students in need.



3. Round Table Discussions

The consensus from the round table discussions was a need for urgent, active solutions to better support and provide for post-secondary students, building on the above results. A notable concern arose regarding the lack of representation of vulnerable communities and of dialogue with them, there being a sentiment that the issue is only receiving attention now because it has become a problem for non-racialized communities. Another main concern is how little is being done to mitigate the impact felt by students and how little is presented to faculty and external members about the rate of post-secondary student homelessness. These concerns require effective advocacy for students facing housing challenges, with strategies such as endorsement, subletting, and other supportive measures mentioned as solutions. Additionally, a significant discussion unfolded around the impact of pets, with several participants expressing concerns about the lack of solutions for students with pets. The challenge of reaching out to students was discussed, emphasizing the need to find alternative communication methods, as the current ones are not sufficient. The main point of contention was the lack of advocacy for post-secondary students experiencing homelessness and the lack of training for faculty on how to effectively deal with this problem. Some faculty members underlined examples of what they have experienced and how unprepared they felt to manage these issues. Participants also expressed a strong desire to proactively and pre-emptively identify students at risk of homelessness, emphasizing the role of instructors in providing support and care. They felt that there needs to be not only administrative policy on how to mitigate post-secondary student homelessness, but also faculty and administrative-level training so everyone can be on the same page to best meet student needs. Finally, every attendee stressed the importance of sharing our data to create policies that put the student first, including establishing a sole advocate to receive concerns.



RESEARCH ASSISTANTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE

Lisa Mader, one of the co-investigators on this project who is also a counselling therapist, is interested in the benefits of this research for not only the participants, but also the research assistants involved. As she herself has shared with the team the many personal and career benefits she gained by being involved in this research project, she was curious to know what others have gained, especially the student research assistants who are at pivotal stages in their career development. She feels it is important to learn about and share the far-reaching benefits of conducting this type of qualitative research. This section details the nine questions she posed to the group and the information she collected.

Nine research assistants who have worked on the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Project were emailed a link to a Microsoft Forms questionnaire containing nine questions asking about their experience working on the project. Seven of the nine research assistants completed the questionnaire. The questions and a summary of responses are presented below.

Question 1:

If you can think back to before you began working on the project and what you imagined it was going to be like (reflecting on your experience), in what ways is it like what you imagined and in what ways has it been different than what you imagined?

While many of the research assistants (RAs) were prepared to hear difficult stories and approached the project with excitement and an open mind, there were still plenty of surprises and learnings. For one RA, the scope of participants' experience of homelessness was beyond what they had imagined—some students were in a bad situation, while others were doing well and just discussing past situations. Another RA knew the topic would be challenging and that they would hear difficult stories but did not

expect to be so emotionally exhausted by the details in participants' stories. For another RA, there was a surprise about the number of barriers for students to access the help they needed (mental health services, financial services), and they were unaware of the supports for those in need. Others shared that they had no idea that this many students were struggling daily and felt ashamed to come forward and that they learned about the definition of homelessness and all the aspects of the homelessness scale. Finally, there was a pleasant surprise: while most of the students who had experienced homelessness had previously left school, these individuals were now back in school and had secured housing—one RA described learning that the participants had a lot of resilience!

Several RAs entered into this project fully expecting to hear about the complexity of the issue. One RA predicted that the students lived experience of homelessness would not exist in a vacuum and that this would be accompanied by other issues (either causing or caused by homelessness), like involvement in the child welfare system, mental health issues, or addictions. Another RA was prepared to conduct emotionally sensitive interviews, given how the topic of homelessness intersects with other social problems, such as domestic violence and abuse. They commented on the impact an interview can have based on the rapport and connection made with the participant:

I had a lot of experience conducting emotionally sensitive interviews, but as a researcher you will learn that every story is different, and it can engage you in many different ways and impact your mental health based on the connection you build and maintain with interviewing during the meeting process.

This same RA commented on having conducted the interviews virtually. In some ways they wished the interviews had been conducted in person to allow for more connection with the participant, but they also saw the value of having some distance in a virtual interview to be able to think more about follow-up questions instead of getting too caught up in the person's story (maintaining eye contact, tears, etc.). Finally, this RA shared that, although they were aware that teamwork would be required for this project, they were surprised by the level of collaboration needed and the complexity of having everyone on board—they want to learn more about how to navigate interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research teamwork.

Question 2:

What have been some of the most surprising elements of working on this project?

The RA's shared many unexpected learnings from being involved in this project. For instance, one learned that you can have a house and still end up homeless when going back to school: one participant ended up living in their car as they lacked the means to keep their house and rent an apartment close to where they were studying, and the distance from their house was too far to drive daily. Another learned from seeing students go through extreme and dire circumstances and continue to push forward towards a better future: *"Some may say that it is resilience, which may be the case, but I think more and more it seemed like the students were able to flip their situations to their benefit and force through the barriers because they wanted more from their lives."* Additional surprises included hearing so many stories of students being ignored by people in government and their own student services staff (for instance, when emergency housing did not accept applications via text or email), the openness of student participants who came forward to share their experiences, learning how close homelessness is to us and how the community is ignoring the problem, and learning about the intersection of racism, sexism, homophobia and homelessness:

When I interviewed Indigenous individuals, I realized that intergenerational poverty and homelessness and white supremacy are intertwined. Systematic racism shows itself in every single social problem that we have in our cities and societies, but the level of it was shocking.

One final response commented on being surprised by the level of disconnect between students and resources, with students not being aware of resources and community resources not being aware of students' needs: *"Some primary, secondary, and post-secondary school students qualify for essential supports but have not self-identified or been identified by the school. It seems that one of the biggest issues is a systems failure, both structural and psychosocial."*

Question 3:

What have been some of the most challenging elements of working on this project?

The RAs identified several challenges faced while working on this project, and these varied from the specific challenge of working with unclear interview transcripts to working with a multi-site, multi-partner national research group. One RA spoke about individuals on the project having different educational backgrounds and diverse training, which made it sometimes difficult to manage what is expected of a research assistant by participant interviewees and site supervisors. More specific to the interview process itself, RAs spoke about how challenging it was to stay professional, keep to the structured interview, and not run over time. They identified that sharing their own lived experience at the beginning of the interview was helpful for participants and encouraged them to share lived experiences in turn, and that they would rather have longer interviews with more data than cut someone off. Some shared that it was challenging when interview participants brought up traumatic experiences, even with a social work background and access to self-care tools, and that one of the most challenging aspects was listening to these difficult stories and feeling helpless to offer any kind of support at the current time. These students may not be around to benefit from solutions that are implemented in two or three years' time. Other challenges identified include making sure that data analysis and the identification of themes are based on the raw data and not on any assumptions—this can be a learning curve for a newer research assistant, as is discovering that there is not a uniform means of offering basic needs support to post-secondary students. This is challenging when trying to find information on what supports are currently available for students.

Question 4:

Can you share some of the most memorable moments from working on this project?

The RAs shared a few memorable moments from engaging in this work. Some centred around the interview experience itself, while others spoke to the experience of sharing the findings and learning a universal truth about student homelessness. One RA shared that collectively appreciating one another when interviewing participants and letting participants know that the interviewer shares some of the same experiences helps with making participants more comfortable to share and be vulnerable. Another RA commented on the resilience shown by participants: *“Some of the moments I found memorable are the resilience that most of the participants presented. They chose to be part*

of the project because they believed that their story was important, needed to be shared, and the valuable input on solutions they provided.” Being able to laugh with the interviewees and connect with them on a deeper level (with the interviewees thanking them for allowing them to share their story) was noted by an RA along with the supportive team environment: *“I also will always remember this team and the support that we receive across the country to continue to finish this project and push towards a better tomorrow.”*

Presenting the work at an event gave one RA the ability to see how they can make a difference by doing something small that may have a large impact on the health of future students. Also, seeing the graph of all of the students’ suggestions for solutions left this RA feeling extremely empowered:

When you read all of the ideas, not one student is asking for millions of dollars or any sort of service that would take hundreds of staff and a tremendous amount of work to fulfil, but they really have come up with such simple suggestions that would make such a difference. I think it’s so easy to overlook the simplicity of certain things or try to come up with these grand ideas, when in reality the students themselves are just asking for some more clarity, a little bit of help getting through tough times. I just found it impactful to read all their ideas that would have helped them in the past.

Another RA shared that being able to present our work at an event that was also showcasing the research of other students helped them to build confidence in their presentation skills.

Finally, there were some experiences shared about the great impact of conducting this work. For one RA, the most memorable thing was the interviews and the stories shared; students offered powerful self-reflection when sharing stories about their journeys: *“There were some interviews that I cannot forget and some stories that I am sure will stay with me for a long time and will impact the way that I conduct research as a sociologist.”* That there are universal, shared experiences of trying to assist students in need and facing similar barriers stood out for another RA: *“One of the most memorable moments early on was listening to two different student liaisons on campuses more than 2000 km apart say the exact same things.”*

Question 5:

What have you personally gained from your experience on this project?

The RAs shared many personal insights gained during their work on the project. One RA expressed a gained perspective about what is going on in someone's life beyond what they initially disclose:

You truly never know what is going on in someone's mind until they share it with you. I also have gained perspective into how limited and restricted campuses are at providing support long-term and how many students are struggling at any given point. It has truly opened my eyes that everyone is struggling in their own way, and each deserves empathy, compassion, and support regardless.

Another shared that learning more about the scope of homelessness helped them realize they have had their own lived experience of homelessness:

I have gained a whole new perspective on the scope of homelessness because of this project. I can admit that I have a history of homelessness throughout my life, going as far back as my childhood, which I can only acknowledge now because of what I have learned from this project. Until I joined this project, I had not even considered myself to have lived experience with homelessness.

In addition to these perspectives, other RAs described the value of what they learned about research methods, including data analysis, interview transcription, coding, the logistics of conducting collaborative research, and the complexity of conducting online interviews. They gained methodological insight from every single interview about the struggles that post-secondary students face and the resources available to them.

As our research also included staff interviews, one RA shared that they gained more patience, knowledge, and insight into staff experiences:

Although I read a lot of stories about bad instructors, I also read a lot about instructors who have gone above and beyond to help their students and would continue to do so for as long as they can. It's really made me look at staff from a different perspective and feel more empathetic to how many stories they themselves also have and just how far they will go to help a student in need.

Question 6:

What do you imagine the research participants may have gained from your interactions with them?

There were certainly many commonalities in the RAs responses to this question. Validation was a common theme. One RA shared that they think that participants felt heard and seen: *“Knowing that their experience would potentially make an impact on the national level was rewarding for them.”* Another expressed that having someone who was interested listen to their story was valuable:

That was one of the questions that sometimes I asked my participants, and they mentioned that having someone interested in their story and eager to know more about their experience is the most valuable outcome of the difficult conversations they had during the interview. So just being an active listener was something that we could offer to our participants, and they very much appreciated it.

Yet another RA shared their thoughts about participants gaining a sense of validation (both student and staff participants): *“It’s so important to know that we aren’t alone on either side of this struggle, as those offering support or as those in need.”*

Beyond validation, one RA hoped that participants gained comfort from knowing that sharing their stories may prevent other students from experiencing similar struggles and that participants felt relief having shared their stories:

I think a lot of them felt a lot of weight off their shoulders, especially those who had never talked about this before. The students talked about how they were really excited about this project and their hopes for what this could bring in the future. The majority of students were all interested in talking to others about their experiences. I think that they all just really want to make sure that no one has to go through what they each went through, and I would hope that they feel hopeful about the impacts of this research.

One comment about what participants gained referred to the knowledge that people with lived experience are working in the field and not just academics with an interest in homelessness:

I think the most important thing that research participants have gained from their interactions with me is knowing that people with lived experiences of homelessness/housing insecurity are working in this field and within these spaces. This is important, because it means there can be unique perspectives offered in the data, and any potential reports, case studies, and articles can be written by people with the same experiences as the participants, rather than just academics with an interest in the field.

Question 7:

Have you noticed any shifts in your own values, beliefs, or understanding about student homelessness from working on this project?

There was certainly a range of responses to this question, from a paradigm shift in values, beliefs, and understanding about student homelessness to a widening of understanding. *“There has been a paradigm shift in my own beliefs and understanding of student homelessness and homelessness in general, based on what I have learned from this project,”* said one RA. Similarly, for another, their perception of homelessness was drastically changed:

I got to learn more about what homelessness was, and it goes beyond the initial perception of what people believe about homelessness. I also found that learning about homelessness shows how easy something like this can happen to anyone at any point in time, and how intense it can be for some people. I was able to look at things in a way I couldn't beforehand.

For others, working on this project increased their awareness of those around them, leaving them looking for signs of something deeper going on with everyone they meet. It shifted how they view the university and the politics that can get in the way of students receiving the help they need, which has resulted in a shift in how they value strength and independence:

I think there were so many times that being self-sufficient has hindered myself more than helped, and I never talk about my struggles or my personal life because I just feel like I should fix everything on my own. But this project has really shown me that it's OK to express when you're

struggling and it's OK to ask others for help. You don't have to feel alone or stay in a really horrible situation just because you feel like you have to. It encouraged me to make some really difficult changes in my own life and not to be scared of them.

A few RAs did not have a shift in their values and beliefs about student homelessness but expressed gaining a wider understanding by listening to participants share their stories, a strengthened passion for social justice in their community, and greater knowledge about hidden housing precarity: *"I'm not sure I have noticed shifts in my beliefs, but I have learned about more ways that housing precarity can be hidden among students."*

Question 8:

How might your own personal or career goals be influenced by your work on this research project?

While most of the RAs were already working in or thinking about a career in a field related to the areas of the current research project, a few individuals may have been more influenced by their experience with respect to their career direction. Solving the homelessness crisis will help advance one RA's goal of reforming child welfare systems in Canada and making post-secondary education more accessible for youth at risk. For another RA, the project perfectly aligned with the field they were working in—a harm reduction organization working primarily with individuals who are homeless. The experience also helped them reflect on some other areas of research that are worth exploring. Others expressed that working on this project was a great experience to add to their resume or portfolio and that they are more confident about choosing housing as their second area of expertise, and it has broadened their view of social systems and disability justice in relation to their future research goals involving vulnerable populations that are a higher risk of basic needs insecurity.

Their work on the project opened one RA's eyes to another realm of health that is not always thought about when considering determinants of mental and physical well-being: housing security.

I have always been interested in health and population health, and I think working in this project has really opened my eyes to another realm of health that we may not always think of as a determinant of mental and

physical well-being. That realm being housing security which, through this research, has proven to affect every single aspect in a person's life.

Finally, one RA is now thinking about a career in education:

I think this has shown me that a career in education might be something I'd be really interested in. I'm still very interested in the career I'm currently studying for, but I had never really thought about taking it to some sort of education or health focused space, and I'm realizing that I have a really big passion for doing something with meaning and purpose, and I think that a field similar to this would be a really great place for me to settle into.

Question 9:

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

For this final question there were many great comments, so we decided to share them directly:

"The people working on this project are doing it because they believe in it and pour their heart and soul into this passion. I could not have asked for a better team and am so grateful that they asked me to join them."

"I just am so thankful that I was able to be a part of this team and play a role in this research."

"It was a great five weeks, and I am glad that I am being given the opportunity to continue working on the project later on down the road."

"I appreciate you working on this paper and reflecting on our experiences. I will be available to talk more if you would like. Thank you and good luck!"

"I'm grateful to be a part of this work."

"The team is really amazing and there's such a sense of community, despite being from areas all across Canada. I think having such a well-knit community of people is so beneficial to this type of work. It really makes you feel like you're all working towards one goal, and no one will bring you down or try to make you feel smaller in any capacity. You can tell from the meetings that everyone in the team cares about the project and is there to make a difference for whatever reason that got them onto the project in the first place."

OVERALL LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

1. Funding

As our project was funded by Making the Shift during the pandemic, we experienced gaps once pandemic restrictions were lifted in terms of knowledge mobilization and participation in international conferences. As such, we have attended only one international conference (the International Journal on Homelessness conference in Chicago), and one of our local RAs attended a conference in the Greater Toronto Area. To date, we have been unsuccessful in gaining increased funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council to allow for knowledge dissemination at a greater scale and are limited in our ability to reach stakeholders and community partners who may benefit from our work.

2. Recruitment

Several factors potentially contributed to the low participation rates at all sites.

1. **Timing of recruitment:** Recruitment at some sites took place either near the end of term or over the spring and summer months when fewer students are available or have the capacity to participate.
2. **Participation fatigue:** Given that this research took place during COVID-19 and shortly after, all the shifts and stresses in learning, along with the corresponding financial stresses, resulted in students feeling burnt out and lacking the capacity to participate in voluntary research while attempting to get through school and work.
3. **The online nature of recruitment:** Conducting the majority of our recruitment and promotion for the project online (via social media, websites, institution newsletters, etc.) opened up the study to either sham or duplicate participants. All sites offered the option of conducting interviews virtually to help mitigate

against any barriers to participation. This along with the offer of a small monetary incentive, however, opened opportunities for sham or duplicate participants. Research team members worked to weed out the non-students who offered to participate in a virtual interview by insisting that communication come from an institutional email account or by verifying their transcripts. The interviewer was also responsible for verifying that they or another interviewer at their site had not interviewed the participant previously.

4. **Common definition of “homelessness”:** It may be the case that students who had experienced a form of housing precarity did not define themselves as homeless and thus did not volunteer to participate. While the definition of homelessness that was used in this project was very broad, the common perception of homelessness as the person in a shelter or sleeping on the street very likely overshadowed the other ways housing precarity manifests itself.

3. COVID-19

Virtual interviews were included in the research methodology to allow the research to proceed. In some cases, this may have allowed some people to participate who would not have otherwise (e.g., due to transportation challenges or health concerns). On the other hand, the toll the pandemic took on both participants and researchers was obvious. For researchers, who were also faculty members, service providers and administrators, navigating the necessary changes to their work during the pandemic negatively impacted capacity and energy for organizing and managing research at their respective sites. For the student research assistants, many of whom were graduate students, the balancing of their program work and participating as research team members was challenging. As noted above, for participants, the obvious challenges that COVID-19 created for learning likely meant that students who would have liked to participate just did not have the time.

4. Research Assistant Turnover

While a key aspect of this study was the extensive involvement of several students as research assistants, there were some challenges when students had to either drop out of the project or were unable to commit more time to project activities. The fact that this was a multi-year project also meant it sometimes did not align with the student research assistants' educational paths (e.g., some students left to pursue further educational oppor-

tunities). The student researchers were not unaffected by the same challenges around workload, time, and capacity that we suspect impacted the student participants and which resulted in low participation rates.

5. Demographic of Participants

Across the different sites, the demographics of the participants skewed heavily towards women students and international students. The potential gender norms and societal expectations on males to be the provider and to suppress their emotions may have played a role in the lack of male representation. The interviews at all sites took place prior to a notable increase in recruitment of international students at many post-secondary institutions in Canada, which may be why we lacked a proper representation of international students. Another group that was underrepresented in our opinion was LGBTQ2S+ people, which again may be due to compounding levels of discrimination and stigma already felt by members of this demographic, which acted as a barrier to sharing another layer of vulnerability.



INSTITUTIONAL TOOLKIT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participation in the Post-Secondary Student Homeless Research Project produced a number of key learnings that have informed interventions at participating sites, dialogue with community partners, and co-creation efforts with students with lived experience.

Of those who participated in the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Project, more than 60% had experienced abusive relationships, more than 70% were struggling with financial precarity, and more than 50% noted negative academic impacts. Unsurprisingly, more than 65% of students struggling with homelessness indicated negative mental health outcomes. Thus, interventions intended to meaningfully address student homelessness must include supports and resources that address the factors that perpetuate student precarity. *“Homelessness doesn’t discriminate; each student has a different unique experience of homelessness”* (University of Alberta student). Supporting students requires that we bring to bear a range of services that allow students to tailor supports to their particular context. While some students may require access to food security measures, others may need mental health supports, academic assistance, or financial aid. Failing to address these concomitant factors may result in students continuing to cycle through periods of homelessness and precarity over time.

1. Institutional Toolkit: One Consolidated Call to Action

Addressing student homelessness requires a community-based approach that is trauma-informed and founded on sound evidence. This toolkit shares practices that have proven impactful in addressing student homelessness at partner sites and have been well received by students. It is intended to present a range of actions that post-secondary institutions may elect to implement. However, the authors strongly encourage institutions to use this toolkit as a stimulus for the co-creation of supports tailored to the unique needs of their

student community. As students with lived experience are at the centre of this work, they should be invited to participate in the co-creation of the interventions they will access. Sites may choose to implement some of these recommended approaches but should do so in collaboration with their students and community partners. Interventions have been organized into four dimensions that address the systemic dimensions that perpetuate homelessness. The key recommendations from each dimension are:

1. **Collect data on the prevalence of homelessness and its impact on institutional retention and resources;**
2. **Relieve financial precarity by streamlining applications for assistance;**
3. **Educate campus staff on available supports and empower them to educate students in turn; and**
4. **Develop safe, variable-term housing options for students in need.**

Dimension 1

Data Collection, Stigma Reduction, and Education

*** Campus-wide prevalence survey**

Taking action on student homelessness necessitates first understanding the prevalence of the issue in one's own community. Post-secondary institutions should conduct a campus-wide housing survey to determine the rates of homelessness on their campus.

*** Track homelessness in institutional retention and assessment plans**

Consider including housing as one of the reasons that students choose to withdraw from their academic program, and provide students with the opportunity to share their experience to inform institutional retention data.

Similarly, add housing conditions as one of the questions included on student wellness surveys administered by the post-secondary institution.

* Student homelessness resource promotion

Include information for students on housing resources, supports, and services that are available both on and off campus in course syllabi, introductory presentations, and orientation events. This information should be presented using a trauma-informed approach that acknowledges the stigma often associated with homelessness.

* Simplify resource navigation

Simplify existing homelessness and related resource websites that are easy to navigate and aimed at students.

Make it easy for students to learn what resources are available, how to access them, where to go, and what to expect when they seek out those services. Some partner sites have created a single point of intake for homelessness programming and use social workers to assist students in navigating homelessness supports.

* Homelessness communications planning

Develop homelessness stigma reduction campaigns that utilize existing and new campus communication channels (e.g., TVs, posters, lawn signs, social media), and frame homelessness as a community responsibility rather than an individual failure.

Include homelessness resources on any post-secondary resource information for students to minimize stigma and improve clarity.

Dimension 2

Food Insecurity and Financial Precarity

* Simplified applications

Simplify applications for emergency bursaries and loans. Develop forms that are trauma-informed and account for students who may be in imminent crisis (e.g., consider what information is critical to collect in the moment as opposed to information that can be collected once the immediate safety and other needs of the student have been met).

Remove unnecessary application details, and streamline processes to remove barriers to financial access.

Train financial aid staff to recognize the factors that perpetuate student homelessness, and educate them on the services and resources that are available to support students struggling with precarity.

* Campus and community food programs

Explore partnerships with campus food banks, campus or residence food vendors, and community food agencies that can provide students with timely access to nutritious food options. Some partner sites have negotiated interim access to free food via campus food vendors to support those students accessing safe house programs.

Some food banks have partnered with post-secondary institutions to develop campus food pantries that are regularly stocked and available for students to access 24/7 on campus.

* Expand donation options

Create or expand options for those in positions of privilege and those who are not in need to donate to student services and supports that address student precarity and homelessness (e.g., bus pass donations, meal card balance donations).

Dimension 3

Mental Health and Social Support

* Increase awareness of on-campus resources

Leverage existing communication plans and channels that promote mental health and social supports to include the supports available for student homelessness.

Educate communications experts and service providers on student homelessness and the systemic factors that perpetuate student precarity so that they can incorporate this knowledge into communication initiatives.

* Educate campus service providers and academic advisors

Develop educational programming that intentionally targets campus service providers, academic advisors, and educators on what homelessness is, its prevalence within the student community, and what steps can be taken to identify and support students living in precarity. Ensure that educational initiatives are not just limited to addressing homelessness but also encompass the other systemic factors that perpetuate student precarity and homelessness (e.g., financial destitution, food insecurity).

* New staff training and onboarding

Create training and onboarding procedures for new faculty on available resources, on how to respond to a student in need, and on triaging questions to determine the correct resources to offer these students.

Dimension 4

Housing Insecurity

* Housing and related databases

Collaborate with campus and community partners to create a central database that students can use to access resources in multiple realms, including housing, housing support resources (e.g., legal information, housing subsidization programs), financial aid, and safe house programs.

* Interim safe and emergency housing programs

Partner with campus and community residence programs, hotels, and the like to develop interim safe housing options for students living in precarity. Such housing should be scalable to support the unique context of users (e.g., pet-friendly, child-friendly, multiple users). Locations of interim housing units should remain confidential to ensure user anonymity and safety, and they should be appropriately funded by the institution to support students who may require housing for extended periods (e.g., longer than a month and up to an entire term).

Increase funding to emergency housing initiatives.

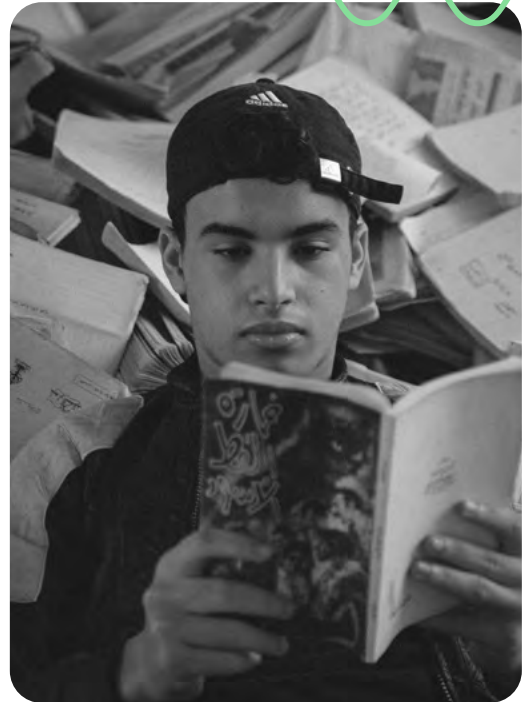
* Subsidized housing options

Explore and advocate for subsidized housing initiatives and government caps on student rent that can address student homelessness and the related factors that lead to student homelessness.

Work with local and provincial government to create affordable and subsidized housing for single students and student families.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Post-secondary student homelessness is a complex issue for the Canadian education sector, and it is increasingly being made a priority. There has been a surge of research and advocacy by scholars, education institutions, students, and governments. This increased attention is partly due to the housing crisis in Canada, which has highlighted the ubiquity of housing precarity and food insecurity across class lines and demographics. In response, provinces such as Nova Scotia, Alberta, and British Columbia have intensified efforts to provide more and better housing for post-secondary students. These efforts include interventions that address the systemic factors that perpetuate student precarity and homelessness.



As previously noted, this research project builds on our surveys administered in 2016 and was informed by one previous Canadian study, which indicated that post-secondary student homelessness is a dirty little secret shared by the entire country. Since the Post-Secondary Student Homelessness Research Network was struck in 2018, numerous stakeholders have come together to address this issue well beyond the small group that started doing so at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conference that year. This growth in awareness and action highlights the impact of academic conferences like that one in fostering knowledge mobilization and demonstrating how research, when well supported, can contribute to positive social change. Significantly, emerging research in this area is prioritizing the inclusion of lived experience. This most often involves the inclusion of students in the research and mobilization process and of students, faculty, and community members who have experienced post-secondary student homelessness as points of contact. Conducting multi-site research during the period following the COVID-19 pandemic has presented

significant challenges, but the self-organizing of students and non-profit organizations around the data collected by projects such as ours has been remarkable. While our initial goal of supporting a specific student-led network around post-secondary student homelessness proved unfeasible, students and student councils/unions have organically taken ownership of this movement. With support from major housing providers such as Utile and increasing interest from various levels of government, there is a growing movement to seed practical solutions. Examples of this include effective student housing design, rental supports, eviction prevention measures, affordable student housing options, and mental health supports for post-secondary students.



Our global scan and literature review demonstrate that significant information and experience can be leveraged to guide local approaches to student precarity and homelessness in Canada. It is important to acknowledge that while unstable student housing situations may have been normal in outdated narratives surrounding the post-secondary experience, this is unacceptable. Students represent the future; they are the planners, builders, doctors, artists, teachers, nurses, social workers, pipe fitters, and leaders of tomorrow. Post-secondary education is a key institutional sector in the life courses of people and nations. We hope this research contributes to knowledge others can use to address and develop solutions to student housing precarity in Canada.

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