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# Social Innovation in Preventing Homelessness amongst Young People in Canada and Wales: International Engagement as a Key Driver

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Social innovation involves finding new solutions to old problems; solutions that are “more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions” (Phills et al., 2008. p.2). One of the pathways to social innovation is through international engagement and exposure to new ways of thinking and doing. Using the examples of Canada and Wales, we explore the ways in which international interactions are contributing to the transformation of how we respond to homelessness among young people, involving a shift from an emphasis in both practice and investment from a crisis response, to a stronger focus on prevention. We begin with a review of the shift to prevention in Canada and the role of international engagement, to a discussion of the flow of knowledge between Wales and Canada. We conclude with a discussion of emerging opportunities to enhance international engagement to support the shift to the prevention of homelessness among young people.

As is the case in many countries, young people’s homelessness is a seemingly intractable problem in Canada. Over the course of the year there are between 35–40 000 young people between the ages of 13–24 who experience homelessness, and on a given night at least 6–7 000 (Gaetz et al., 2014).<sup>1</sup> The current and dominant approach to addressing the problem of young people’s homelessness, which typically involves relying on emergency services and time-limited support, unfortunately leaves young people vulnerable and exposed to further trauma, worsening health, declining mental health and well-being, criminal exploitation including

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<sup>1</sup> Canada has a population of approximately 37.5 million people.

vulnerability to human trafficking and the sex trade, involvement in the criminal justice system, and social and economic exclusion (Gaetz et al., 2016; Kulik et al., 2011; Kidd et al., 2017). The longer young people experience street homelessness, the greater the challenges of sustainably exiting homelessness. Making matters worse, in Canada 42% of young people experiencing homelessness had their first episode before they were 16, and for that group we generally offer little in the way of support (Gaetz et al., 2016).

There are several conclusions that come from Canadian research. First, we are waiting far too long to intervene for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Second, the prolonged exposure to homelessness can potentially have a devastating impact on the health and well-being of young people. Third, some young people – particularly indigenous young people, LGBTQ2S (in Canada, the ‘2S’ refers to ‘two spirited’ people of an indigenous background), Black youth, newcomer, and young women – experience the additional burden of ongoing discrimination. Fourth, emergency responses that do not prevent or help young people exit homelessness rapidly are ineffective and inadequate solutions. Finally, the need to shift from the crisis response to a focus on prevention and sustainable exits from homelessness is also a view that those with lived experience strongly profess. In a national consultation, young people spoke strongly about the need to focus efforts on prevention, and that “by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn young to hardship and trauma, we actually ensure it” (Schwann et al., 2018a, p.13).

Making the case for the prevention of homelessness among young people in Canada has been challenging. Since modern mass homelessness emerged in the late 1980s, the main focus of our efforts (and investment) has been in the crisis response – emergency shelters, day programs, soup kitchens, and in many cases the use of law enforcement (Gaetz et al., 2013). In the past ten years, our response has evolved in a positive way, largely influenced by looking south of the border to draw on American strategies (plans to end homelessness), campaigns (100k Homes, Built for Zero), and perhaps most significantly, evidence-based interventions such as Housing First (Tsemberis, 2015; Tsemberis and Eisenberg, 2000; Tsemberis et al., 2004). In Canada, the latter was taken up as government policy after the highly successful At Home / Chez Soi project which was arguably the largest research project on Housing First, resulting in over 130 peer reviewed scientific articles (Goering et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2012; Aubry et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2014).

The strong influence of American approaches to addressing homelessness has resulted in a ‘new orthodoxy’ whereby solving or ending homelessness is seen to be possible only if we optimise the homelessness sector to effectively implement Housing First, with a narrow mission focus of prioritising chronically homeless

individuals with mental health and addictions issues. This approach no doubt has its strengths, including emphasising Housing First, the use of data, and implementation of coordinated access. What is notably absent has been any consideration of the role of prevention in ending homelessness. Additionally confounding is that the new orthodoxy exposes individuals facing homelessness, including young people, to the prospect of prolonged experiences that undermine health and well-being while waiting to be sufficiently ill to qualify for housing and support. It should be noted that in Canada, 50% of people currently homeless had their first experience before the age of 24 (Government of Canada, 2019). If we intervened early and effectively to help young people in crisis, could we have a longer term and sustainable impact on chronic homelessness? We need to alter our system that makes people wait for help.

## **The Centrality of International Engagement to the Homelessness Prevention Agenda**

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The lack of a focus on prevention in policy and practice in Canada led the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) to actively look abroad for important insights and good examples of prevention supported by evidence. What has been very helpful in contributing to a paradigm shift has been a broader approach to international engagement over the past ten years, which has yielded important insights into the potential value of prevention. First looking to Australia, the COH encountered a profoundly different orientation to young people's homelessness involving the prioritisation of school-based early intervention in order to help young people and their families through Reconnect (Australian Government 2013; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998; Crane et al., 2006) and more recently the Geelong Project (since renamed Upstream) (Mackenzie and Thielking 2013; Kelly et al., 2016; Mackenzie, 2018).

This contributed to the beginning of a paradigm shift in some quarters in Canada. The emergence of A Way Home Canada (AWHC) accelerated broader consideration of the role prevention could play in addressing youth homelessness. AWHC's collaboration with the COH led to the production of the Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness (Gaetz, et al., 2018a).

International engagement in pursuit of insights into the prevention of youth homelessness accelerated, resulting in intensive and fruitful collaboration involving a bi-directional flow of information, knowledge, and innovation. Working with FEANTSA Youth brought awareness of the Canadian adaptation of Housing First, called Housing First for Youth (Gaetz, 2014a, b; 2017; Gaetz et al. 2021a, b), leading to a situation where the intervention was taken up more rapidly in Europe than in Canada. Collaboration

yielded the emergence of the A Way Home model in a range of countries and regions in Europe, all of whom were committing to an agenda where the prevention of homelessness among young people would be prioritised. From the Canadian perspective, these international links exposed the COH and AWHC to innovations in the area of homelessness prevention in a number of countries.

## **International Engagement in Action: Wales and Canada**

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A key feature of successful international engagement is the exchange of research and practice knowledge. In Canada, understanding the conceptual framing and implementation of the highly innovative Welsh (and subsequently British) legislation on homelessness prevention had a huge impact in how prevention was considered in Canada. The Housing (Wales) Act of 2014 clearly lays out a structure and legislated requirements that would mandate the implementation of early intervention (Mackie, 2015; Mackie et al., 2017; Ahmed and Madoc-Jones, 2020). Central to this legislation is the notion of a 'duty to assist', whereby local authorities, if they become aware that a person is at risk of, or is experiencing homelessness, have a duty to offer assistance, and if accepted, to make efforts to remedy the situation within 56 days. Research has identified the success of this policy, whereby inflows into, and returns to, homelessness have demonstrably been reduced in a number of jurisdictions. Similar legislation has since been passed in England and there is potential for policy transfer elsewhere, including Scotland (Wilding et al., 2020). While in Canada it is unlikely at this time that any order of government would implement such legislation in the near future, there are emerging efforts to retool 'duty to assist' from the ground up, whereby public institutions (such as the education system, child welfare, criminal justice, and the health care system) rather than local authorities would be properly equipped to fulfil a mandate to offer assistance to youth who are at risk of homelessness through connecting them to necessary supports. Work has been underway to utilise human centred design to prototype, plan, and implement 'duty to assist', like an intervention in the public school system in Hamilton, Ontario (Gaetz et al., 2018b; Bridgeable et al., 2019).

Reflecting the flow of knowledge between the two countries, homelessness policy related to young people in Wales has been influenced by thinking from Canada (and, via Canada, from the USA and Australia). This thinking was introduced through a number of interconnected intermediaries, including the coalition End Youth Homelessness Cymru, which brings together NGOs, public bodies, academics, and consultants, and through the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP), a knowledge brokering organisation based at Cardiff University. In 2017 the Welsh Government asked the WCPP to identify research on young people's homelessness prevention in order to support its commitment to end youth homelessness in Wales

by 2027. The WCPP commissioned researchers at the COH and AWHC to undertake an international evidence review, which focussed on the causes of youth homelessness and the characteristics of effective policies, programmes, and strategies to prevent it (Schwan et al., 2018b). The review drew upon Gaetz and DeJ's (2017) fivefold typology of prevention, identified models of good practice such as the Geelong Project/ Upstream and Housing First for Youth, and made recommendations including the need for early identification programmes and a sharper and better-informed focus on the specific needs of young people in homelessness and related services.

Housing First for Youth and variants of the Upstream model – one variant piloted by the Welsh Government building on existing structures for early identification of young people at risk, and another developed by End Youth Homelessness Cymru (EYHC) and being piloted in three local authorities – are becoming important elements of the Welsh approach. Announcing in November 2018 the details of the additional funding which the Welsh Government made available for homelessness prevention for young people, the then Minister for Housing and Regeneration based her statement on the framework set out in the WCPP's evidence review and referred several times to the Geelong model of early intervention as one to follow (Senedd Wales 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the emphasis on early prevention, which directly built on international evidence, has led to an increased role (and increased funding) for local authority youth services in addressing homelessness. Youth work's emphasis on sustained and holistic support meant that it was well aligned with the principles underpinning emerging international models, but although these services are provided by the same local authorities that provide more generic homelessness services, there had often been little connection between the two. This meant that officers were often unaware of what had worked elsewhere and how to best use the resources available to them. WCPP and EYHC worked with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) youth work network to develop understanding of homelessness prevention for young people, and in March 2020, they brought researchers from the COH and AWHC to an event in Cardiff to reflect on progress in Wales and hear more about innovative solutions elsewhere in the world. Bringing homelessness practitioners, experts and youth officers together can spread knowledge of best practice and ensure that a preventative approach can be embedded across systems. But the specific insights about prevention that Wales has accessed from and through Canada have emphasised, for example, the value for a greater role for services such

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<sup>2</sup> 7. Statement by the Minister for Housing and Regeneration: Investing in Early Intervention and Cross Government Approaches to Tackle Youth Homelessness <https://record.senedd.wales/Plenary/5365#C140139>

as youth work, whose principles and practices can underpin a more holistic and effective approach. This is a long-term project and will require resourcing, but there are indications that this is starting to happen in Wales (Price and Russell, 2020).

We suggest that a number of factors have contributed to Wales' openness to international approaches to homelessness among young people. Wales is a small country with a small and comparatively close-knit (young) homeless policy community. Relations between members of that community are generally good, and indeed the Welsh Government has devoted time and effort to building productive relationships with NGOs and local government actors which facilitate shared policy and practice development (Connell et al., 2017; 2019). There is an openness to considering new approaches and funding streams have been made available to facilitate this. But importantly, the community is not exclusively focussed on Welsh issues and practice: it includes academics who are actively involved in groups such as EYHC and in work with NGOs and the Welsh Government and consultants and NGO staff who participate in international fora such as FEANTSA. So, there are routes by which international ideas can enter Wales, and networks through which they can be diffused and adapted within Wales. It may also be that the wider interest generated by the Welsh homelessness prevention legislation helped generate a stronger sense, within the Welsh (young) homelessness policy community, of Wales as an actor on the international policy stage. This may have engendered a further appetite for, and openness to, international policy learning – leading in turn to further distinctive and internationally recognised domestic policymaking.

### **Bringing It All Back Home: International Learning and Social Innovation and the Impact on Canada**

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While international engagement has contributed to thinking about how to address young people's homelessness and the important role prevention can/should play, the challenge has been how to enhance uptake of this new knowledge.

Several promising developments over the past five years suggest a shift towards prevention in Canada is possible. First, the Government of Canada, through its Reaching Home Strategy to address homelessness, has for the first time prioritised prevention, making reductions in inflows to homelessness as well as returns to homelessness two out of four mandatory priority outcome areas for communities it funds. The second indicator of change is that while prevention was embraced by only a handful of organisations in Canada in 2016, since that time many more communities have expressed their commitment to move towards prevention, with several implementing preventive interventions.

While there is emerging momentum towards prioritising prevention in Canada, there are still considerable challenges in moving to broad implementation. The first is that there is often a scepticism regarding whether innovations developed in foreign countries can be applied in Canada given the differences in policy context. The second is that many people have internalised the argument that there is an insufficient evidence-base for prevention, thus making it risky to move in this direction – the fact that most of what we do in responding to homelessness lacks a strong evidence-base is notwithstanding. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is a lack of knowledge and capacity within community-based organisations and government about how to actually do youth homelessness prevention.

In order to address these concerns and with the goal of facilitating the broader adoption of homelessness prevention in Canada for young people, the COH and AWHC have collaborated on an ambitious project to drive social change. Making the Shift – Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab<sup>3</sup> (MtS) was launched in 2017 with a mandate to build an evidence base on youth homelessness prevention that will lead to uptake in policy and practice.<sup>4</sup>

Social Innovation Labs provide a structured process for tackling complex societal challenges requiring systems change through developing novel ways of doing things that produce better outcomes for youth and their families. Making the Shift is designed to develop the evidence base for youth homeless prevention, to adapt international innovations to the Canadian context, and to build resources and technical assistance to help governments and community organisations to implement prevention in practice.

Through a community engaged process, Making the Shift has developed and implemented a research agenda with five key theme areas designed to enhance our understanding of how to effectively prevent homelessness among young people. To date, Making the Shift has funded 29 different research projects across Canada, focusing on developing our knowledge regarding what works and for whom in the area of the prevention of young people's homelessness, including early intervention, supporting sustainable exits from homelessness, indigenous led solutions, and exploring how to leverage data and technology to drive policy and practice.

MtS also operates Demonstration Projects that blend experimental programme delivery with research and evaluation. Employing design thinking, the demonstration projects are intended to expand our knowledge by identifying, developing,

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<sup>3</sup> Making the Shift <https://makingtheshiftinc.ca/>

<sup>4</sup> MtS has received substantial funding from Canada's Research Tri-Council as well as the Government of Canada's Youth Employment and Skills Strategy.

prototyping, testing, evaluating, and mobilising innovations in policy and practice. It is currently running demonstration projects on Housing First for Youth (4 sites) (Gaetz, et al., 2021a; b) Upstream (2 sites) (Sohn and Gaetz, 2020), Enhancing Family and Natural Supports<sup>5</sup> (8 sites) (Borato, et al., 2020) and Youth Reconnect (1 site) (Gaetz et al., 2020) with a plan to pilot a youth-focused Duty to Assist in the future (Gaetz et al., 2018c; Bridgeable et al., 2019).

Developing quality research will not on its own drive a transformation agenda. Our approach to research impact begins with a recognition that we must have a solid understanding of knowledge users and their needs, different pathways for mobilisation, as well as the factors that enhance or inhibit the uptake of research and the conditions necessary for policy and practice to incorporate new knowledge. Continuous and meaningful engagement with policy makers and service providers is key to mobilising knowledge for impact. This includes providing support for uptake and implementation including a robust Training and Technical Assistance strategy drawing on the knowledge gained from our research and demonstration projects, supported by practitioners with extensive experience of preventive interventions.

The outputs of the MtS research are intended to support programming, funding, and policy decisions that will lead to better coordination between public systems, break down silos, and reorient investments away from the crisis response to homelessness among young people through foregrounding the importance of prevention. The early success of MtS has led the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe to declare this body of work as the Toronto Centre of Excellence on Youth Homelessness Prevention at York University which will enhance the possibilities for future international collaboration and has been fundamentally important to furthering this work. Taken together, these initiatives are designed to heed the calls of young people: do more sooner; well before young people find themselves in situations where homelessness is imminent and unavoidable.

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<sup>5</sup> Family and natural supports programmes work with young people and meaningful adults in their lives (including family members) to strengthen relationships, keep young people 'in place' in their schools and connected to education, and address underlying issues that increase the risk of homelessness. To find out more, see: **Family and Natural Supports: A Framework to Enhance Young People's Network of Support.** (Borrato, Gaetz & McMillan, 2020)



## Conclusion

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Canadian efforts to transform the response to homelessness for young people to focus on prevention highlight the importance of international engagement to an innovation agenda. Engagement with Wales in the wake of the application of their prevention legislation has accelerated learning in Canada and presents a real opportunity to disrupt current approaches that focus on emergency responses and which are not rights based. The relationship and interaction with partners in Wales is clearly reciprocal. Welsh researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have worked to learn from and implement preventive interventions, adapting them to the local context. The scale and rapidity of this work is truly impressive. The extent and breadth of collaboration between Canada and Wales on the prevention of youth homelessness in policy and practice demonstrates the efficacy of international collaboration and the possibilities for enhancing social innovation in many other jurisdictions through such strategies of engagement. Going forward, the launch of the Centre of Excellence promises to enhance and broaden such opportunities.

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