Alternative Report Submission Regarding the Government of Canada's Response to the List of Issues from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

A Way Home Canada | Canadian Observatory on Homelessness | Making the Shift Inc.

1.0 - Introduction

1.1 This alternative report was prepared by A Way Home Canada (AWHC), the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), and Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab (MtS) to provide supplemental information to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in light of the Government of Canada's response to the Committee's List of Issues (LOI) in relation to the combined fifth and sixth periodic report (Periodic Report) of Canada on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

1.2 AWH, COH and MtS recognize the efforts being made by federal, provincial and territorial (FPT) governments to uphold the rights of children and youth in Canada, and our organizations are committed partners in pursuing the full realization of the CRC. We wish to use this report to highlight the need for a FPT response specific to the rights of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

2.0 - Background: The State of Youth Homelessness in Canada

2.1 Youth homelessness is an extreme form of poverty and a phenomenon that is in direct contravention of children's rights. Youth make up approximately 20% of the homeless population in Canada, which translates to roughly 35,000-40,000 young people experiencing homelessness in any given year, or 6,000 on a given night.[1] National data from the 2018 Point in Time Count revealed that 50% of ALL people who were currently experiencing homelessness had their first experience before the age of 25,[2] signaling the high risk of lifelong entrenchment in homelessness and housing precarity.

2.2 The COVID-19 pandemic has put strain on youth and families who had already been living precariously, and the homeless-serving sector which had been operating in crisis management long before the pandemic. The youth-serving sector in particular was impacted by the pandemic with staff shortages, compassion fatigue and burnout,

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[1] Gaetz, S., Dej, E., Richter, T., & Redman, M. (2016). The State of Homelessness in Canada 2016. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

[2] Government of Canada. (2019). Everyone Counts 2018: Highlights: Preliminary results from the second nationally coordinated Point-in-Time count of homelessness in Canadian communities. Employment and Skills Development Canada.

program closures, and difficulties staying connected to youth.[3] These issues were and continue to be compounded with the ongoing opioid and housing crises in Canada.

2.3 The causes of youth homelessness are a complex interplay of individual and relational factors, systems failures, and structural factors, which are distinct from that of adult homelessness. Many young people leave or are kicked out of their homes due to interpersonal conflicts, including rejection by family due to sexual orientation or gender expression.

2.4 Youth homelessness and homelessness writ large are deeply connected to systems failures and barriers. There are known links between youth who experience homelessnes and involvement in other systems including child protection, criminal justice, and physical and mental health. Termed 'revolving doors' into experiences of homelessness, these systems may fail to implement proper discharge planning and take preventative action, putting young people at risk of cycling between emergency systems their entire lives.

2.5 At the structural level, colonialism and intergenerational trauma, racism, agism, sex and gender discrimination, the lack of affordable housing and numerous other issues compound to put some populations at greater risk of homelessness and a lifelong trajectories of poverty. For example, Indigenous, racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth disproportionately experience homelessness compared to the general youth population, each representing at least 30% of youth experiencing homelessness nationwide.[4]

2.6 Youth homelessness is often hidden from public view, as young people may find temporary accommodation with friends, relatives or strangers 'couchsurfing' until they are no longer welcome. Many young people would also not identify themselves as homeless, leading many to never seek support from the homeless-serving system. The lack of engagement with these emergency systems means some young people are difficult to reach and prioritize for supports, since they are not known to the system.

2.8 Youth homelessness can lead to devastating impacts on the safety, physical and mental wellbeing of young people, at times severing connections to family and natural supports. Rural and remote young people may disconnect from their home community in search of support that is not locally available. Experiences of homelessness also create barriers to access and engagement with education, employment and training opportunities, putting them at greater disadvantage into adulthood.

2.9 At a formative developmental stage in life, the experience of street homelessness and stays in emergency shelters put youth at risk of trauma, victimization, and even

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[3] Buchnea, A. & McKitterick, M. (2020). Responding to Youth Homelessness during COVID-19 and Beyond: Perspectives from the Youth-Serving Sector in Canada. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

[4] Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S., & Schwan, K. (2016). Without a Home: The national youth homelessness survey. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

criminalization. **It is vital to intervene early and quickly to prevent long-term harm and entrenchment in extreme poverty and institutionalization.**

2.10 Data also shows that young people are living at or returning to their family homes until much later in young adulthood[5], which is related to stagnating wages and social assistance rates, decreased housing affordability and rising costs of living. Therefore, it is more imperative than ever to support both young people and their families to achieve and maintain housing stability.

2.11 For further supplemental data on the experiences of young people in Canada who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, see Annex 1.

3.0 - Evolution in Responses to Homelessness in Canada

3.1 Efforts and funding to address homelessness in Canada, including youth homelessness, have primarily focused on emergency and crisis response, which includes emergency shelters, day programs, and soup kitchens to address immediate material deprivation. These actions do not demonstrate evidence of effectively ending experiences of homelessness for young people or adults.[6]

3.2 In the last decade, Housing First has been widely adopted as an intervention for providing housing to people who are experiencing homelessness, and has been particularly effective for adults with concurrent mental health issues and substance use. When adhering to its core principles, Housing First is an evidence- and rights-based approach to the provision of housing and supports, and generally positive addition to the suite of responses to homelessness in communities. Yet research has demonstrated less success with young people when there is no explicit consideration of their unique needs and circumstances.[7]

3.3 Additionally, there has been widespread prioritization of addressing chronic homelessness in Canada at the FPT and municipal levels, the rationale being that these individuals use the most public services and resources. In theory, by addressing chronic homelessness first, communities would free up resources to dedicate toward other populations experiencing less resource-intensive forms of homelessness. However, in practice, the focus on chronic homelessness minimizes and deprioritizes the experiences of young people, creating less urgency to respond when they have not been living on the street or in the shelter system long-term.[8]

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[5] Statistics Canada. Canadian Census (2016).
[6] Gaetz, S. (2020). Making the prevention of homelessness a priority: The role of social innovation. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology, 79*(2), 353-381.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

3.4 Efforts to address homelessness have also typically focused narrowly on success indicators related to whether someone is housed or not. This fails to engage with the wholistic well-being of young people (and indeed adults), such as social inclusion and community integration, connection to education and employment, and mental and physical wellness.

3.5 Despite the ongoing focus on emergency response and the lack of focus on young people, there has been **growing interest in homelessness prevention**.[9] The *Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* is a prime example of increasing conceptual and practical clarity around youth homelessness prevention.[10] Groups such as AWHC, the COH, and MtS are conducting and curating research and demonstration projects to identify, design, test, implement, and scale prevention and housing approaches that are tailored to young people in different contexts and backgrounds. These efforts look beyond housing status to address the broad spectrum of young people's interests and needs. Advocacy efforts leading up to the launch of Canada's National Housing Strategy resulted in youth and homelessness prevention being included, if at least nominally, on the federal policy agenda.

3.6 There is still significant work to be done to shift greater attention and resources toward preventing youth homelessness, requiring shared leadership, collaboration and action from FPT governments.

4.0 - Current FPT Responses to Youth Homelessness

4.1 Most action and innovation in the response to youth homelessness in Canada has emerged at the municipal and organizational level, with some communities developing dedicated youth homelessness strategies, youth-oriented programs, and engaging in national communities of practice and learning communities to advance their thinking and practice, such as the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness.

4.2 Some progress has been made to get youth homelessness recognized as a priority in FPT policy, most notably with youth being listed as one of the priority populations for the federal homelessness strategy Reaching Home. Reaching Home was noted in the Government of Canada's response to the LOI as a strategy to support children's rights. Additionally, Alberta was the first and only province to develop a youth homelessness strategy, and Ontario has youth homelessness listed as one of its priority populations. **Yet, without specific guidance on how to address youth homelessness, in practice communities are left to decide whether and how to prioritize young people.**

[9] Schwan, K., Gaetz, S., French, D., Redman, M., Thistle, J., & Dej, E. (2018). What Would it Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

[10] Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & Dej, E. (2018). The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness. A. Buchnea (Ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

4.3 Another promising development that was not included in the Government of Canada's response to the LOI is the legislated right to housing that was adopted in 2019. There is potential for the legislated right to housing to address the needs of children, youth and their families (see Annex 2 for more information about the right to housing and children and youth). However, **to date national discussions about the progressive realization of the right to housing have yet to deeply engage with what such a right means for children and youth.**

4.4 The lack of explicit focus and action to address the unique circumstances and needs of young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness between the ages 13 to 25 is a significant gap, which cannot be filled by generalized approaches to housing and homelessness. In line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights, which notes the need for special care and assistance in childhood, we call on FPT governments to give special attention to youth homelessness as a distinct issue requiring dedicated policy, planning and action.

5.0 - Promising Developments and Recommendations for Action

5.1 The experience of homelessness among young people can largely be avoided with supportive federal policy and legislation.[11] A **children and youth lens on the Right to Housing is essential** for creating the policy and legislative frameworks to support FPT and municipal action to prevent and sustain exits from youth homelessness.

5.2 Initiatives such as the Prime Minister's Youth Council and the Government of Canada's Youth Policy should **explicitly seek to increase the participation of young people who are most marginalized** to ensure that not only the voices of the most privileged or minimally disadvantaged youth are taken into consideration.

5.3 Youth homelessness is a complex, systems issue that requires a systems orientation to recognize and navigate the interrelated roles and responsibilities of FPT and municipal governments. Efforts to coordinate responses and responsibilities are needed to achieve positive impact and to create accountability for responding to youth homelessness. **A national youth homelessness strategy developed in collaboration with FPT governments would be an important step to driving forward a rights-based agenda to respond to the unique circumstances and needs of some of Canada's most marginalized young people.** Such a strategy should also work in collaboration with Indigenous governments, communities and leadership to prevent the perpetuation of colonial approaches and practices that cause harm to Indigenous young people and families. Similarly, the strategy should seek participation and collaboration with

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[11] Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & Dej, E. (2018). The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness. A. Buchnea (Ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled and other systemically and structurally marginalized youth.

5.4 Provincial and territorial governments should have the flexibility to address the unique manifestations of youth homelessness in their given contexts. Provinces and territories should work toward **greater systems coordination and integration to provide comprehensive continuity of care** to young people and their families or natural supports. Federal research and knowledge mobilization investment in MtS is resulting in a growing body of evidence and promising approaches to youth homelessnes prevention in Canada. FPT and municipal governments can draw on and adapt the learnings from this body of work for local contexts.

5.5 Provinces and territories also play a key role in building out both the housing continuum to include youth and family appropriate housing, and the prevention continuum of care (see graphic below), with many of the major public systems that play a role in youth homelessness falling under their jurisdiction. **This necessitates investment in affordable housing and prevention at the systems and community level.**

5.6 Finally, FPT governments should **create supportive policy and funding environments for municipalities and community coalitions to develop and implement local strategies or plans to prevent and end youth homelessness.** This includes supporting communities to enhance their readiness to take up cross-systems, right-based prevention approaches to youth homelessness, facilitating access to training and technical assistance to increase local capacity for sustained action, and ongoing funding for strategy implementation. The readiness and implementation phases that happen before and after community planning are often overlooked, yet are vital to seeing meaningful, positive outcomes at both the community and individual/family levels.

Annex 1 - Supplementary Data for Consideration

Without a Home National Youth Homelessness Survey
In 2015, AWHC and the COH conducted a national survey of youth experiencing homelessness, which included 1,103 youth from 47 communities across 10 provinces and territories. Some of the key findings included:

- 40.1% were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness;
- 76% had multiple experiences of homelessness, with 37% of these youth reporting more than five experiences of homelessness;
- 85.4% were experiencing a mental health crisis, with 42% reporting at least one suicide attempt;
- 38% of young women reported a sexual assault in the previous 12 months;
- 57.8% had involvement with child welfare involvement. Compared to national data (Statistics Canada, 2011), youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to have had involvement with child welfare (see also Nichols et al., 2017);
- 63.1% had experienced childhood trauma and abuse;
- 51% were not currently involved in either education, employment, or training; and
- Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ youth are overrepresented in homeless youth populations across Canada.

The Without a Home study also highlights some important linkages that show overall resilience in young people at a commitment to their futures, despite their circumstances.
- 73.9% indicated they would like to re-engage with their education
- 19.7% were employed (unemployment rate amongst youth in the general Canadian public was 13.3% at the time of the survey).[12]

UNICEF Canada's Index of Child and Youth Well-Being
UNICEF Canada released the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report (the Index) in 2019. The Index brings together a wide range of data into one framework to encourage a comprehensive and balanced view of how in Canada are faring. UNICEF is tracking 125 indicators across nine dimensions of the lives of children and youth, from birth to age 18, using the most recent population-level, statistical data.

This report is a profile of children and youth that provides a baseline from which future reports will track progress. It complements the UNICEF Report Cards that look at life for kids in the world's rich countries. Staggeringly, the Index also revealed data that suggests Cada is failing to meet the needs of children and youth across a number of focus areas that are predictors of homelessness:

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[12] Stephen Gaetz, Bill O'Grady, Sean Kidd & Kaitlin Schwan. (2016). Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

- 23.3% of 11–15 year-olds report going to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home
- 20% of children under 18 live in a household with income lower than 60% of the median (Low Income Measure)
- 3.5% of children under 18 living in deep income poverty (below 75% of Canada's Official Poverty Line)
- 12.6% of children under 18 have a core housing need; and
- 3% of Canadian youth between the ages of 15 and 17 have been homeless and/or have experienced hidden homelessness.[13]

[13] UNICEF Canada, Child and Youth Well-being, 2019 Baseline Report. September 3, 2019. https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/en/child-and-youth-well-being-index

Annex 2 - Understanding the Right to Housing's Implications for Children and Youth

Housing as a human right means that everyone has the right to housing that meets a set of basic conditions. These conditions are recognized under international human rights law. To meet the standard of adequacy recognized under international human rights law, housing must reflect the following elements that we have enhanced to show the uniqueness required for children and youth:

	DEFINITION	REFLECTS CHILD AND YOUTH NEEDS
SECURE	Security of tenure provides protection from arbitrary eviction, forced relocation or harassment	Youth can be equipped with the tools and supports (that are focused on youth) to ensure they do not lose housing.
AFFORDABLE	Housing costs should not be a barrier to meeting other basic needs such as food, and costs should be protected against unreasonable increases	Enhancing essential services and supports to youth, within public systems, can increase affordability and stability (ie. education, training, healthcare, childcare)
HABITABLE	Dwellings should have adequate space for the inhabitants, be properly maintained, and provide protection from the elements and other threats to health and well-being	Youth choice in the supports that are provided to enhance their housing. This includes options for shared accommodation to support family, chosen family or siblings.
BASIC SERVICES	Including safe drinking water, sanitation, heating, lighting, and emergency services	Supports provided to young people employ a "positive youth development" orientation, a strengths-based approach that focuses not just on risk and vulnerability but also youth's assets.
LOCATION	Close to employment and basic social services such as childcare, education and healthcare, and is not located in a polluted or dangerous area	Close to the supports that can address housing stability, mental and physical health needs, education, financial literacy, labour market attachment, and life skills development.

ACCESSIBLE	Discrimination or living in vulnerable circumstances; and for people of all abilities, particularly those experiencing	Prioritizes social inclusion by helping young people build upon their strengths, skills, and relationships to enable them to fully integrate in their community so they can engage with school and the labour market.
CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE	Respects and is appropriate for the expression of the inhabitants' cultural identity and ways of life	Enhances social inclusion, particularly for Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ2S, newcomer youth, and other communities and identity groups that may experience enhanced social isolation or exclusion.