

## **FOCAL POINT: Rural Homelessness Rural Homelessness**

Author: Andrea Brown

Article in *CHECKPOINT* Newsletter: The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO, March 2006

It has become apparent that much of Canada's urban "street youth problem" actually originates in small communities. Lanark County is located to the West of Ottawa and is touted as a 'scenic region offering a superior quality of life'. Its service providers however share an awareness of the lack of support for transitional aged youth (15 to 24 years) and a widespread concern regarding the issue of youth homelessness and unstable housing. Andrea Brown for the Transitions Action Coalition Rural Homelessness: The Lanark County Experience Youth who cope through "couch surfing," sleeping in tents or parked vehicles, or cramming into poorly maintained apartments have all been topics of conversation and reports for many years.

In his article "Street Youth: Differences Between Small Towns and Cities", 1991, Les Voakes reported the number of street (homeless) youth within most towns of Ontario could be calculated by multiplying 3 per 1,000 of the overall population. Therefore, a small town with 6,000 would likely have at least 18 homeless street youth at any given time. The Addiction Research Foundation (Smart et al.1990) reported their findings for Toronto with a similar calculation of 4 street youth per 1,000 of the population, but also noted that 56% of their respondents were not born in Toronto. It has become apparent that much of Canada's urban "street youth problem" actually originates in small communities. Homeless youth from Lanark County will often travel to Ottawa and other cities in their efforts to find services and housing.

In Lanark County and area there has been a growing frustration due to the ongoing lack of resources, staffing, and options. In 2002, Transitions Action Coalition (Transitions) was formed from various community agencies throughout the County in response to these concerns. Initially, Transitions wanted to illustrate the reality of youth homelessness in Lanark County, which was often denied or minimized within the community.

The first task was to conduct a preliminary survey of local high schools, by circulating a questionnaire about homelessness. Nearly 1/3 of the youths surveyed had left home at least once, prompting Transitions to conduct a more thorough assessment. The more in-depth study of 100 youth was conducted through a participatory research model that involved youth, service providers and Transitions members from a range of disciplines, including social workers, addiction specialists, teachers, sociologists and anthropologists.

A key aspect of the process was youth involvement. Youth interviewers were provided with skills development, resource training and mentoring. It was hoped that with assistance, they would also contribute to writing the final report. A training day was arranged with a variety of workshops including: interviewing techniques and skills in probing sensitive issues, personal safety, and information on resources for youth in

immediate need. Local service providers supported the youth researchers throughout the project, providing resources, consistent and accessible community contacts and assisting with problem solving.

"Transitions: Youth Homelessness in Lanark County" written in 2003, was a group effort by youth writers and Transitions members who came to be known as the 'Eh Team.' The process focused on providing information in a meaningful way for a wide audience, meanwhile having clear messages for decision-makers, particularly politicians and funders. It was also important to Transitions that the report maintain a youth voice, thereby presenting the same sense of urgency they had communicated about the issue.

The report identified and highlighted significant factors associated with rural youth homelessness including: employment, education, substance abuse, family factors, as well as mental and physical health. Of particular concern was that 63% of the respondents were 15 years of age or younger when they first became homeless. Homelessness at such a young age has obvious negative implications for all other areas of a youth's life. Specifically, 46% said their unstable housing situation affected their school performance. Another 46% had contemplated or attempted suicide. Only 1 in 3 of these youth sought out any form of assistance or intervention. 23% said they felt they had mental health concerns and only a small percentage of them had received a clinical diagnosis. These numbers suggest that a large number have not been identified as having mental health concerns and therefore have not yet received the appropriate help.

Since the dissemination of this report, Transitions has been gaining momentum and is closer to accomplishing their primary goal of developing a service and support model for homeless youth. In June 2005, Transitions received a grant from The National Crime Prevention Strategy of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness to move into phase II of their development plan. This phase included the hiring of a community developer to conduct primary and secondary research as it directly relates to homelessness in Lanark County.

This has meant convening and organizing a community forum, compiling a report based on findings of the community forum and writing a business proposal and sustainability plan for implementation. With funding support from both the National Crime Prevention Strategy and The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO, Transitions plans to host a two-day community forum on March 29th and 30th, 2006. This forum will bring together various members of the community to address youth homelessness. Key components to the success of the forum will be community collaboration and a consideration for the geographical and demographical uniqueness of Lanark County. What works in urban centres may not necessarily be a good fit for Lanark.

In summary, it is apparent that services available to assist homeless youth in rural areas are currently lacking. Many of the services are either inaccessible and or are not geared to the local youth's needs. It is Transitions' intention to change the current status of services and to provide a new and effective model of intervention that will address the specific

needs of homeless youth in Lanark County. We are committed to decreasing the number of Lanark's homeless youth who migrate to urban areas.

To access the full report, visit <<http://www.TYPS.com>>[www.TYPS.com](http://www.TYPS.com).

For more information on the community forum or about Transitions Action Coalition please contact Andrea Brown, Transitions Community Developer at Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth (sponsoring agency) at 613-283-8260 x 226 or by e-mail at <[abrown@opendoors.on.ca](mailto:abrown@opendoors.on.ca)>[abrown@opendoors.on.ca](mailto:abrown@opendoors.on.ca).