Toward Housing Stability: Exiting Homelessness as an Emerging Adult

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This paper explores the lives of formerly homeless young people as they transitioned towards housing stability. The study employed a longitudinal design involving 51 street youth in Halifax, N.S. (n = 21) and Toronto, ON (n = 30). This paper sheds light upon the pathways through which young people transitioned away from homelessness using the developmental lens of emerging adulthood: a stage involving numerous developmental struggles (identity, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between) but also an age filled with hope and possibilities. There are numerous interrelated factors at play that allow participants to regain a sense of citizenship with mainstream society. While housing in itself did not shape these young people's sense of stability, it influenced feelings of health, happiness and security. Yet, our participants, as a particular segment of the youth population who have transitioned out of basic homelessness, continue to describe their current lives in terms of fragility and instability. For most, opportunity for experimentation and identity exploration was often curtailed by processes outside of their control and struggles with the consequences of profound disempowerment —past trauma with family and/or current struggles with public sector structures and services. As a result, many felt abandoned and stigmatized by the very resources whose mission it is to assist.

Key words: *Street youth, homelessness, housing stability, emerging adulthood, youth identity*

This study explores the lives of formerly homeless young people as they transitioned towards housing

stability. The study employed a longitudinal design involving 51 street youth in Halifax, N.S. (n = 21), and Toronto, ON (n = 30). The 'why' and 'how' of youth engagement with street life have already been extensively explored and documented throughout Canada (see for example, Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Hughes et al., 2010; Karabanow, 2004, 2006, 2008; Kidd, 2006; Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004; MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999; Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, & Watters, 1998; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998). What remains less well understood are the paths through which young people transition away from homelessness. In addition, little attention has been given to how their transition affects their developmental stage, emergent adulthood (Arnett, 2006a, 2007), or how it is used to understand their experiences and inform their journeys from being homeless to the experience of being stably housed.

Street-exiting Pathways

Youth are considered to be one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013; Laird, 2007). It is well established that the financial, health and social costs of youth homelessness are high. Homeless youth suffer from poor physical and mental health (Hughes et al., 2010; Karabanow et al., 2007; Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000; Yoder, 1999), and have extremely high mortality rates (Roy et al., 2004; Shaw & Dorling, 1998). In addition, they are a very visible reminder in our cities of the shortcomings of our service and support systems, with more than half spending time in jail (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006) at a very high cost to the state. Indeed, while shelter costs run between $30-40,000 per year to house a young person, detention costs total $100,000 per year to house a youth (Raising the Roof, 2009).

In this context, there exists a crucial need to understand the transitional processes of youth who are experiencing some success in street exiting. To date, only a small body of evidence has been accrued in this area. One area of focus has been identifying the factors that influence the ability of youth to maintain housing after they exit homelessness. A number of factors have been found to be associated with difficulties exiting homelessness and maintaining housing stability. These

include substance abuse problems (Aubry, Klodawsky, & Coulombe, 2012; Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Rhule-Louie, Bowen, Baer, & Peterson, 2008; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Roy et al., 2011), psychological problems (Rhule-Louie et al., 2008), and a history of being abused or arrested (Eastwood & Birnbaum, 2007). Those with a longer duration of homelessness have more difficulty achieving housing stability (Hyman, 2010). In contrast, involvement in supported transitional housing has been found to improve housing stability which, in turn, improves the likelihood of school engagement, particularly for women (Hyman, Aubrey, & Klodawsky, 2011). However, two areas have received little attention in this area of research: the long-term effects of exiting homelessness and maintaining housing stability, and consideration for the developmental stage of this age group. Therefore, we incorporated a longer-term design and compared our findings with a developmental framework.

This study was undertaken to consider the exiting process from a developmental perspective, employing one of the most rigorous investigations to date with this population. We interviewed youth over the course of a year and found that their stories reflected that the transition away from homelessness is part of a broader transition—a developmental stage in which one figures out who one is and establishes a meaningful life for oneself. Understanding the broader processes of this developmental stage and its link to the transition process out of homelessness has important implications for how we address the issue of youth homelessness and support youth through the transition process.

The transition we examined took place during a critical developmental stage, emerging adulthood, which begins in the late teens and continues until the mid-to-late twenties (Arnett, 2007; MacLeod & Brownlie, 2014). This a newly defined developmental stage falls between adolescence and young adulthood and is deeply focused on identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and exploring possibilities (Arnett, 2004; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007 [cited in Arnett, 2007]). In addition to these normative features, emerging adulthood is also noted for its heterogeneity. It is a time when the lives of these young people are least likely to be structured by social institutions (Arnett, 2007). Such features are in direct

contrast with previous generations in which those in this age group transitioned directly from adolescence to young adulthood and followed a predictable course of structured activities: school completion, choosing an occupation, finding a life partner, and having a child (Arnett, 2007).

In contrast, life today for this age group is far more likely to be unstructured and unstable than for past generations. It takes much longer today for them to achieve a stable living situation. Indeed, most are ambivalent about reaching adulthood and prefer to assume responsibilities gradually (Arnett, 2006b). However, while this new developmental stage may be accommodated well by those who have access to full supports, those who have experienced homelessness and are now street-exiting are required to focus on specific structured activities, regardless of whether they have the skills or supports required to do so. Arnett (2011) now stresses the idea of multiple emerging adulthoods, or variations within the concept of emerging adulthood (Mitchell & Syed, 2015); however, others (e.g., Hendry & Kloep, 2007) have suggested that the experiences of many youth diverge substantially from emerging adulthood theory, thus threatening Arnett's (2000) conceptualization of this time period as a life stage. We set out to explore this challenge.

Methods

In this study we interviewed youth who had a recent history of homelessness and were now housed. We interviewed those who consented four times over the course of a year, using a mixed-methods design of sequenced, multi-site, integrated qualitative and quantitative inquiry. In this paper, only the qualitative data are considered. The longitudinal nature of the data provided an opportunity for examining stability and instability at a process level, albeit in a circumscribed way in that no pathways were completed in this relatively short time frame.

We wanted to know about the lived experiences of homeless youth as they negotiate their changing identities among the individual, sociocultural, and economic tensions of transitioning out of homeless and street contexts and cultures.

Fifty-one youth consented to participate in the study.

Twenty-one young people were recruited from Halifax, Nova Scotia, a medium-sized maritime city on Canada's East Coast. Thirty young people were recruited from Toronto, Ontario, Canada's largest city. The study had an overall retention rate of 78% (n = 40), and 73% (n = 37) of our respondents completed all four interviews at roughly 3 month intervals throughout the year. To be eligible for the study, youth must have been homeless previously for a period of at least 6 months total (either all at once or periodically over time), and in "stable" housing (defined as anything other than shelter, street, or couch-surfing and other transient living spaces) for at least 2 months, but no more than 2 years, immediately prior to the first interview. The criteria were chosen to ensure that participants were in the process of transitioning away from homelessness, but were still in its early stages. Youth needed to be between the ages of 17 – 25 years, the most common age span for youth services. The demographic characteristics of the sample (i.e., time off the streets, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, housing arrangement, characteristics of neighborhoods and services accessed, and interactions with institutions such as the criminal justice system, schools, and employers) are presented in Table 1.

Participants were invited to engage in four in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews that lasted approximately one hour, following which they received a $40 honorarium. Interviews were iterative, starting with 'grand tour' questions about life experiences on and off the street and moving conversationally towards a more focused inquiry concerning personal coping strategies; services/interventions/supports that helped or hindered transition; processes of transition; and explorations into changes concerning sense of self, community, home and relationships. Interviews two, three, and four used a similar framework but were grounded in events and changes that had taken place since the last interview. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim (removing identifiers), and analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Thematic analysis involved identifying core themes and data patterns, developing codes that helped explain the themes, and interpreting the information and themes in the context of our theoretical frameworks (Boyatzis, 1998). Our

analysis also involved building conceptual narratives from the data through open, axial and selective coding structures which allowed for the fracturing of the data into conceptually-specific themes and categories. We rebuilt the data in new ways by linking primary categories and auxiliary themes into a path analysis and constructed narratives shaped by data integration and category construction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The qualitative data provided a comprehensive view of young people's transitions from homelessness and varied experiences with housing. Again, exploring housing as a series of "pathways" helped to illuminate that a home is more than just a shelter. We also wanted to explore whether and how the pathways into housing were connected with the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, ensconced within the locally-situated paths and conditions of street exiting.

Identity Explorations
A key element of emerging adulthood involves identity explorations. This is the only developmental stage in which explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews become identity-based (Arnett, 2000). For the first time in life, occupational explorations are matched with abilities and interests (what job would I find satisfying for the long term, Arnett, 2000), and partner explorations are matched with the hopes for a life-long relationship (given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life? Arnett, 2000) (Arnett, 2007). These explorations are a way of obtaining a broad range of life experiences before making a commitment to adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). It is important to recognize that our participants engaged in the same types of identity explorations as their mainstream counterparts. Rather than viewing them as "street kids," "delinquents," or "problems," we understood that they were attempting to carve out identities and were full of hope in ways that fit their philosophical lenses. As such, we understood their paths in the same way as we understand mainstream, non-street youth.

However, embedded within this humanistic perspective, we need to acknowledge that these young people are also

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 51)

Variable	n (%)
Gender, male	24 (47)
Race, White	24 (47)
Education	
Less than high school	27 (53)
Completed high school	14 (27)
Attended trade/technical school	3 (6)
Completed trade/technical school	2 (4)
Attended university, not completed	4 (8)
Missing	1 (2)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	29 (56)
Gay	5 (10)
Lesbian	2 (4)
Bi-sexual	9 (18)
Other	5 (10)
Missing	1 (2)
Children	25 (49)
Employment Status	
Student	19 (37)
Employed Part time/Casual	8 (16)
Volunteer	3 (6)
Unemployed	21 (41)
Living Situation Time 1	
Supportive housing, lives alone	6 (12)
Supportive housing, lives with others	18 (35)
Independent housing, lives alone	9 (18)
Independent housing, lives with others	13 (26)
Lives with parents in private dwelling	3 (6)
Missing	1 (2)
Months Homeless	25.1 (27.5)
Months Housed	8.8 (7.4)
Income or Disability Subsidy	32 (64)
	mean years (SD)
Age	20.9 (2.2)

different from their mainstream colleagues—they have been exposed to traumatic events within their families, in their relationships with child welfare institutions and within their street careers. The vast majority of participants (and the homeless population in general) come from trauma—very disadvantaged and dysfunctional family lives ripe with diverse forms of abuse, neglect, drug misuse and mental health ruptures—all characteristics well documented in the street youth literature and research to date. On the street and within the shelter systems, they again experience a sense of alienation, marginalization, exploitation and victimization.

Further, while emerging adulthood brings engagement in "risk" behavior for all young people, unlike their mainstream counterparts, the notion of risk often is captured in the form of stories of significant adversity for those who have been homeless. Indeed, lacking support and care from adults, being abused and exploited, living in very poor and disadvantaged environments, and being let down, both by personal (family, friends) and system structures of care (school, child welfare, social assistance), are just some of the "risk(ier) infused" pathways that these youth travel. Despite the progress that many participants made towards mainstream goals, they wrestled with a continued sense of marginalization, primarily in terms of frustrations with formal system bureaucracies such as Income Assistance, Disability support, service agencies, and the mental health system. This left the young people with a feeling that "the system just doesn't care."

> And it was like trying to take care of two people with bad anxiety and mental health issues living together… and not have…any help, just like, expecting we'd fill out a form and like, where people and places give random paperwork to you, expect you to be able to, or like would say like "oh you should go on disability" but not knowing how to navigate that minefield at all. (Halifax)

> And, you would think your first graduation and after going to school for five years you would be extremely honored, happy, taken out for supper, or pictures taken or spend time with family and basically I was dropped

off at my house by myself until I went to pick up my son. So, I had a little crying spree. (Halifax)

Unlike their mainstream counterparts, our participants travelled a very different risk pathway and were abandoned in time of need by both formal service resources and family support. While our study participants were definitely involved in identity exploration, their explorations were far more challenging than for their mainstream counterparts. Indeed, their explorations were often not celebrated by those whose support most mattered (family), or they were confronted with major obstacles by the very structures of society designed to assist them (government services)!

A Time of Instability

Emerging adulthood is a time of instability for all youth, one in which they frequently change plans/interests, jobs/ education, residence, roommates, etc. With each change, they learn something about themselves and hopefully take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want. However, the experience is not the same for all (Arnett, 2007). Indeed, the experience of instability for those who have been homeless is often volatile. Subjectively, their layers of trauma are deep, reoccurring and rarely treated—a characteristic that truly differentiates these youth from their mainstream counterparts in terms of the typical formation of individualization and identity construction (Côté & Levine, 1987, 1988). It is important that we understand street youth within both the lenses of "normal development of emerging adulthood" and "victimization." As Geldens and Bourque (citing Greene & Ringwalt, 1996, p. 283) observe, "The implications of bearing non-normative identities are well understood and the repercussions of such formations can be immediate and insurmountably oppressive."

Here, it is helpful to disentangle concepts of individualization from the psychological concept of "individuation." As Côté and Schwartz (2002) observe, individuation refers to the mental "separation–individuation process" that begins in early infancy when the boundary is established "between the 'me' and the 'not-me'" (p. 32). The term denotes the cognitive developmental processes involved with gaining of self and identity,

and eventually identity formation. Conversely, "individualiza-tion" is the complex set of social processes whereby individu-als attempt to compensate for a lack of collective support from their community and culture. As Côté and Schwartz note:

> The term individualization thus refers to the extent to which people are left by their culture to their own devices in terms of meeting their own survival needs, determining the directions their lives will take, and making myriad choices along the way, whereas 'individuation' refers to the basic process of developing a sense of self. (2002, p. 573)

In our study, we see both concepts expressed through the youth's experiences of their local conditions. Through a complex interplay of individual agency-level contexts, amidst a host of broader socio-political contexts, both individuation and individualization couple to re-fashion the youth's identi-ties as they struggle down exiting pathways off the street to becoming stably housed.

> Actually, my last place was the first time I was actually able to hold down housing, and I lived there for six years *(note: she lived there for the winter and would travel and rejoin street culture for spring and summers)*. But, I'm also, like, I'm twenty-five, right? Before that I had two different apartments, but because I lived on the street for so long, I got really bad anxiety, especially cause I was underage… I don't know how to explain it, but going from sleeping outside to doing all that, you know what I mean, and, being aware of everything around you and then moving into an apartment, even though it sounds great; it sounds awesome, it's really, it's hard…. I'm bipolar and I've, I've got, you know, really bad anxiety issues and shit, and for some reason sitting in a apartment alone, by myself, was too much for me. I couldn't deal with it, you know. (Halifax)

When we push the raw, real, and actual lived experiences of our research participants up against this mainstream litera-ture on identity formation, we gain a fuller appreciation for the scope of these young people's lives, both subjectively and

structurally speaking, as it relates to the dual processes of individuation and individualization.

> So, it would have been towards the end of grade ten … I just turned sixteen, so it was around sixteen. At that point, like, my dad had beaten me a lot, and before this he beat me once so bad that my brother just watched and no one did anything, and at that point it just made me decide that no one could ever care about me and no one would ever protect me, so I had to be the person to protect myself. And that gave me a strength and a reserve, and a resourcefulness, that I believe to this day is what saved my life, because it taught me that, in the end of the day the only person that can save you, the only person that can even care, and do something for you is you, you have to be in charge of your life. (Halifax)

Both youth were abandoned by society and family at early ages but engaged in resilient behavior to overcome adversity and form a sense of self. Once again, while our participants experienced a great deal of instability, the challenges with which they were confronted were beyond their control and went past those described within the developmental stage of Emerging Adulthood. Further, while institutional supports, such as government housing programs, provided some assistance, they often lacked wrap-around services necessary to enable young people to cope with their profound sense of disempowerment.

A Self-Focused Time

Emerging adulthood is a self-focused time, in that it is the stage least subject to institutional control regarding family obligations, where to go, what to do, who to be with, how to spend money, what to eat, etc. (Arnett, 2007). And while mainstream emerging adults thrive on this freedom, those who have come from family trauma and homelessness experience more vulnerability. Their circumstances offer them little choice—they must be self-focused, regardless of whether they like it or are ready for it (Arnett, 2007). Our participants shared eloquent stories of struggles and conflicts within their families, group home settings, youth shelters and finally independent housing

environments. Within such pathways, there were common themes of abuse or neglect, deep tensions with family members, feelings of marginalization, and the ongoing relationships to both mental health struggles and or drug/alcohol misuse.

Having a place to stay was not sufficient for all participants. Indeed, for several in our sample, their current living space was not "home" but rather "a roof over their head." They felt the strain and anxiety of being independent—looking after bills, having to find work, deal with budgeting, housing/landlord issues and arranging one's social life. In particular, individuals who continued to deal with deep mental health and/or addiction issues did not experience a sense of security and contentment. While independent living did provide an escape from the external world and a place to heal and recover, some individuals were not yet at a stage to take advantage of such stability. Instead, these individuals tended to feel very disconnected from their environments and somewhat angry/frustrated with their position in life. For many, the first apartment brought out many feelings of insecurity regarding how to live independently, such as questions about how to shop, budget, have friends, or deal with neighbors. There was a genuine fear of taking "on too much" at such a young age.

Deeply anchored within all of these findings is the confirming evidence that, unlike their stably-housed counterparts, youth transitioning off the streets are forced to address the challenges of emerging adulthood while also trying to overcome current and/or past trauma, and they do so without supports. Indeed, our participants have undergone deep and consistent trauma in their short lives and are now "pushed" out much too early to become adults. As one Halifax participant noted, she struggled with "not being ready" and not "having the supports" needed. These young people are describing lives where they had to grow up much too fast. They have experienced episodes of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation that have robbed them of childhood, forcing them to abandon some worlds to survive in others.

The majority of these young people have had to survive on the street, find formal and informal supports, seek out employment and subsequently locate stable living, predominantly on their own. There is also a deep contradiction within such a developmental pathway. While they have been

forced to move beyond the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood and become adults in terms of survival, they continue to be perceived by civil society as adolescents. Participants spoke to feeling overwhelmed and disrespected by the myriad rules and structures at shelters and supportive housing settings that infantilized them and ignored their developmental realities. Moreover, landlords and employers rarely took them seriously due to their ages and inexperience. Ironically, being forced to become an adult too soon places these youth at risk, and when they are ready to become stable, formal systems struggle to accept them because they are not yet adults. As one participant described it, "they hope eventually you'll slip and you won't meet all the bars and that you'll fall down" (Halifax). For this participant, having these feelings critically amplified the experience of being a single mother.

A Time of In-Between

A critical feature of emerging adulthood is the feeling that one is neither an adolescent nor an adult but somewhere in-between, "on the way to adulthood but not quite there yet" (Arnett, 2007, p. 156). However, contrary to common assumptions about what emerging adults view as critical markers of the transition to adulthood (completing school, engaging in full-time work, marriage, etc.), evidence shows that the most important markers identified by this age group include, "accepting responsibility for one's action, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent" (Arnett, 2007, p. 157).

One of the formal criteria for inclusion in our study was that participants be six months off the street, and be in what they perceived as 'stable living' (i.e., supportive housing and or independent market accommodations). As such, this is a group who have taken on the difficult tasks of making personal decisions to achieve housing stability and reconstructing their street identities into non-street senses-of-self. Having a stable place to live was often described as bringing forward a renewed sense of security, safety, peacefulness and hopefulness. For the majority of participants, having their own place translated into feeling healthier (both physically and psychologically), happier, and more "human." For many, their present

living arrangements felt like home. While providing a sense of freedom and independence (especially for those who have lived in shelters and supportive housing structures), apartments also allowed them to feel more like people and less like "street kids." Having a stable space also empowered young people to reflect more upon their future and reassure themselves that they were on "the right track." One Halifax participant saw her apartment as "an anchor." Another participant stated that, "It's weird, like, it really just goes from feeling like a box that you can hide in to a place that you can explore outwards from" (Toronto).

Notwithstanding external supports, many participants spoke to an internal and deeply personal decision making process that signaled "being ready" to get off the street and live independently, a finding also noted in Karabanow's (2008) previous study on street exiting. For others, the process was not so intense and they spoke of coming to the realization that they were now taking life more seriously and were "willing to change" (Halifax). They transitioned from short-term and impulsive thinking to thoughtfulness and delay. In other words, participants began to build self-control, a critical feature of social and emotional learning proven to improve health, wealth, and public safety over time (Moffitt et al., 2011).

> I was trying to build my life on these broken blocks and it kept on caving in, and now I have this stable environment and, like, help when I need it and it's… this flat platform that I am finally building a house on, and I feel good about it. (Toronto)

> Yet, it is probably the most difficult part of the transition … it was such a on/off, on/off, like you know, I'd be stable for a little bit and then I'd go back to the shelter. I'd be in school for a little bit then I couldn't do it anymore. And then have to go back to working or, like, you know? Just like got chaotic. Like crazy, crazy, crazy. I was coming into myself as well. (Toronto)

In terms of supports from family and friends, we found that the movement towards stability improved family relationships for some participants; however, for others, the process of transitioning required letting go of their families

because continued rejection and abuse was just too emotionally challenging. In addition, we found that making new friends was difficult for those who needed to distance themselves from their old friends during the transition to stability. Those who transitioned with their street friends often also found the changes and shifts in their relationships difficult, as they came to terms with the drifting apart that is typical of this stage.

> I can do anything I want to do but, like, the liquor stopped me for seven or eight years so, I just learnt that, I got to stay away from the liquor, be around positive people and just concentrate on work. Because work is … I kind of think of work as school now. (Toronto)

Two additional elements of emerging adulthood played critical roles in the lives of our participants as they transitioned out of homelessness: physical and mental health. While they usually described an initial improvement in their physical health as the result of improved eating and sleeping habits, many also were dealing with persistent physical impacts of homelessness (e.g., unidentified physical illness, back pain, and HIV) that interfered with their education and employment activities. Mental health also proved to be an ongoing challenge for a number of the participants in our study. In fact, transitioning did not necessarily mean an improvement in mental health, as new stresses and challenges were constantly presenting themselves. In addition, youth encountered numerous mental health system challenges involving access to treatment, continuity of care, and inter-personal incompatibility which is typically the result of a top-down, overly clinical approach to care.

What seems extremely telling within this orientation is that even as "success stories," these youth are struggling daily to maintain the basic structural stability on which their identity reconstruction hinges. The majority of our sample remain stably housed, but just barely. Indeed, one of the core themes of our work is that most remain in a very fragile state during their transitions to becoming non-street emerging adults. Boydell (2000) thoughtfully articulates this complex entanglement of identity, noting that:

Homelessness means a loss of social identity—loss of permanent address, work, school, relationships, and place to call one's own. On a personal level, homelessness can mean a loss of self. Homelessness involves much more than not having a place to live. Individuals often lose their sense of identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy. (p. 26)

However, being housed can also be a shaky experience. This fragility of this state has much to do with their in-between status. They are not certain they are fully clear of street life and are by no means comfortable, nor accepted, within mainstream civil society. In this fragile state the participants struggled with a sense of self and questions about who they are, what they desire, where they are going, and what they need. Of course, while these existential questions are endemic to the general emerging adult population, it becomes more amplified when one is working without the benefit of a subjective or structural safety net and there is the ever-present risk of ending up back in shelter, falling back into addiction, or facing a sudden decline in mental health. Once again, what becomes so very clear is, rather than having time to sort through how best to make personal decisions about their futures and accept responsibility for their actions, our participants were continually forced to manage challenges set by the very service structures whose mission it is to assist.

Many of our respondents feared losing their market rent apartments or supportive housing units if they "messed up," becoming ineligible for social assistance or disability allowances if they entered the formal or informal job market, or not having the personal and professional supports in place that could prop them up in times of despair. As noted by one participant, he feels like he is "treading water" throughout his day and currently perceives life as "one step forward, two steps back" (Toronto). For many, there is a consistent fear that they will once again be homeless if and when certain issues arise (such as addictions, mental health flare ups, losing employment, losing assistance, etc.). Moreover, there was a sense from numerous participants that their current lives could change at any moment—that they had little control around

maintaining present stability. One Halifax participant explained that, during a past bus strike in her town, she was not only highly susceptible to falling behind with school but losing her subsidized daycare spot for her child, since she lived far away from both school and daycare and system regulations stipulated that she could not miss more than a few sessions within both systems. Another young woman from Toronto highlighted the unlucky combination of having a disability and consistently being 'stuck' in casual low-paying employment.

> That's one of my biggest worries is that if I try … to get a job or try to get off disability I'm just going to screw myself over … I have … all my medical bills to pay and so it's just, like, not something that easy that I can just get off … it's not like I can just live off what dumpstering and live in a closet, like, I have, like, few hundred dollars a month in medical bills to pay for being diabetic. So, like, I really, like, want to be able to get a job in the future that does pay, that does have benefits, have a health plan. (Toronto)

It is these feelings of insecurity that underlie our participants' daily lives. As many participants suggest, instead of having opportunity to gradually test out decision-making processes and learn from the outcomes, their stability can change overnight and, as such, there is little in terms of feeling in control over one's life. This results in a layer of disempowerment that shapes their day-to-day existence, as described below:

> I'm just scared that it's gonna, like, I don't know, something's gonna give out, I just, I always have this feeling something's gonna give out, like, it's gonna happen again. I'm just gonna get homeless again or something bad's gonna happen, I'm put in a situation, something's gonna happen, you know? (Toronto)

> I'm just so always close to it, this lovely anxiety that I'm just … even like when I lost my birth certificate I was like, so now I can't cash my check. My disability check, and that was just kind of like this "oh god, it's all

gonna happen again." And like, I just have this major fear if I lose, like I said, losing my wallet, could end up … like could actually kill me, and that's like a fear. Like as soon as I go back to it and like just slowly don't take care of myself that I'm gonna get sick and die. And it's just like somebody with severe anxiety in this system it's just constantly trying to catch up and not be drowned in it. (Halifax)

As such, one of our core narratives is that, despite this population being perceived as successes once they find housing, they experience themselves as highly stressed, strained, overwhelmed, and fragile. Indeed, while being perceived by service providers and the general public as less at risk, new layers of (individualized and individuated) risk emerged as a consequence of their shaky transitions towards stability. In addition, the new risk often was triggered more by public structures and institutions than by the developmental stage of emerging adulthood.

From Basic Stability to Finding the Mainstream:
A Time of Possibilities
Emerging Adulthood is a developmental stage full of possibilities. It is a time when people have the greatest opportunity to change their lives in a potentially positive direction (Masten, Obradovic, & Burt, 2006, as cited in Arnett, 2007), and a time of great expectations and high hopes for the future (Arnett, 2000, as cited in Arnett, 2007). While our participants have endured much trauma and are far more vulnerable than mainstream youth, many of them recognized this time in their lives as one of great opportunity, as well. Further, despite the uncertainty and fragility of transitioning, the process of acquiring and sustaining housing did give many of the young people in our sample access to a new subjectivity. Surprisingly, many participants showed extraordinary resilience and retained a strong sense of hope and determination—dreaming of finishing high school, entering university/college, finding a meaningful job, buying a house and starting a family—all very middle class mainstream ideals, as described by a participant below:

because I would like to have a place to rent where

maybe there's like a piece of grass I can play with my kid on and like a street where they can ride their bike down the street or things like that, you know what I mean. Just normal shit that people take for granted, but I mean, that's basically what I'm striving for at this point. (Toronto)

The type of housing that young people had was important to how their transition unfolded. Supported housing with roommates was helpful because the price was affordable and formal supports were available, but organizational rules and conflicts with roommates often pushed youth to make premature exits into the more costly and less secure market rent. On the other side, however, supportive housing can also lead youth into a holding pattern in which they find it difficult to move beyond basic stability in terms of realizing personal goals and mainstream markers of success.

We found that the most effective supportive housing coupled support and guidance with some leeway and room for mistakes. Living in market rent alone was rare because it was expensive, leading most youth in market rent to have no other choice but to secure roommates. Once again, this strategy was most common among youth who were disconnected from the very service agencies designed to assist. Further, it was the least stable because of conflicts with landlords (who could often be exploitive) and generally resulted in trouble with roommates.

It was good, however, it turns out that the roommates I had, there was bad credit all this stuff and, like, it just wasn't working out. They were ready, one of them in particular just started being, like, late for the rent and, rent is dirt cheap. Come to figure out that that person is just a pathological liar all together … Eventually, he was just not there. (Toronto)

Establishing basic stability was essential for moving towards mainstream goals, and the loss of housing often completely derailed any forward momentum that youth may have established. Having a place to stay had important psychological benefits, particularly for those moving into housing for the first time since being on the street or in the emergency

shelter system.

But having a place to stay was not sufficient for all participants. Indeed, for several in our sample, their current living space was not "home" but a rather "a roof over their head." They felt the strain and anxiety of being independent—looking after bills, having to find work, deal with budgeting, housing/landlord issues and arranging one's social life. In particular, individuals who continued to deal with deep mental health and or addiction issues did not experience a sense of security and contentment. While independent living did provide an escape from the external world and a place to heal and recover, some individuals were not yet at a stage to take advantage of such stability.

> I find it's more like my mental health is what really defines what goes on in the physical. You know what I mean? Like if I'm happy, then most likely everything kinda falls together on its own. If I feel safe and independent and secure, I'm more likely to go pursue better things like jobs and do more positive, constructive things. You know what I mean? As opposed to if I'm f—g pissed off or sad or, you know what I mean, just down and out and like obviously, like I find that that is where, like ... 'Cause you know I can have a place on my own, but if I'm constantly stressed out and pissed off or whatever, most likely things are gonna fall apart, right? (Toronto)

Numerous young people highlighted the importance of the mundane, such as having furniture, food in the fridge, the ability to take a shower or make a cup of coffee, having technology such as video games, internet connection, and a phone, as a way to feel "normal" as well as "connected." Also, the importance of routines surfaced repeatedly among participants, particularly for those who seemed to be the most settled in their "new" lives.

> I like the routine … it grew onto me; it's like I don't know what I would be doing now if I didn't have a routine. Probably be all over, I'd be lost, I'd be all over the place, but the routine it makes me more focused on what I'm looking at, right? What I'm watching for, what I'm trying to get at. (Toronto)

In addition, it appears that notions of routine not only tie into feelings of stability and security, but in turn build a secure foundation and momentum from which to build or take on new opportunities and responsibilities. Unlike mainstream youth, for many of our participants, this was the first time in life that they had a routine of any kind and one that they could design and build on their own.

At the same time, the mundane was not without its challenges. Another key component in the transition process was a young person's life skills and comfort with the basic skills of independence. For many, the first apartment brought out many feelings of insecurity regarding how to live independently. There was a genuine fear of taking "on too much" at such a young age. One young man in a Toronto supportive housing program described wanting to take the next step, but not "having a clue what people pay for like their normal house shit."

Education and employment were similarly conflicted areas. Most respondents were in school or had plans to attend. However, as a group, the youth we interviewed have complicated lives (family stress, friend/partner drama, poverty, and mental and physical health issues) that make focusing on education very difficult. Other barriers include learning disabilities and a dislike for school stemming from a history of bad experiences within the system.

Employment is also a critical component affecting transition toward stability. Those with a steady work history tended to be particularly self-motivated and self-disciplined. However, the most common type of work for most youth in the study involved low wage service. These jobs tended to be low paying and "boring" (Halifax), and for participants, were difficult to maintain given their complicated lives.

> And so, because I had to make really tough decisions, like, do I work full-time so I can retain my livelihood or do I try to keep going to school and just hope it figures out or something. Stay on OW [social assistance] … so there was a lot of tough decisions around that. And I still hope to keep doing my school and go to, like, take courses. (Toronto)

The management of friendship networks was also complex. One of the common struggles in our participants' lives involved their numerous attempts to distance themselves from street life and street communities. Removing themselves from street activities such as drug misuse and petty thievery was important to maintaining, or developing, a non-street status. One participant stated, "I don't know what it is, it's just, they want to do the same things that we did back then, and I don't want to do those anymore" (Toronto). Forging new friendships not of the street was seen as an important marker to stability and "positive influences" in their new lives.

A significant take away from the study regarding relationships is that those who do feel safe and supported had one key individual in their lives who was consistent, present, and who provided unconditional love. Having someone in your life that can remain present with the "ups and downs" inherent in growing up was extremely significant to feeling stable and healthy. Interestingly, the majority of these young people had such an individual, and these individuals tended to be family members. This was most visible with our young mother participants and their relationships to their respective mothers. As they began to realize that their own experience often mirrored that of their parents, a re-bonding of generations started to build that provided participants with a significant source of support and stability. At the same time, these relationships often remained complex, fragile, and strained, given that the dynamics and traumas that pushed the youth to the street in the first place were often still present.

Finally, romantic relationships involved a complex terrain for the young people in our study. Having experienced neglect, abandonment, and abuse, the young people we spoke with often struggled with trust with in their romantic unions. In addition, these relationships were further complicated by the fact that the romantic partners were often individuals who also had experienced trauma or were themselves transitioning away from homelessness.

> I had met somebody in … the shelter system, at that time when I went to Vancouver as well … and then we got together and ... At first we were separate, kind of

doing our own separate things and finding our own places and everything like that. And then eventually both our situations fell apart. And then we came together and got a place together and, yeah, became a full-fledged relationship and … that was a problem and a half. (Toronto)

Conclusions and Reflections

Interestingly, our participants, as a particular segment of the youth population who have transitioned out of basic homelessness, continue to describe their current lives in terms of fragility and instability. Clearly, while housing in itself does not shape these young people's sense of stability, it definitely influences feelings of health, happiness, and security. There are numerous interrelated factors at play that allow participants to regain a sense of citizenship or a fit with mainstream society. However, the complex and nuanced pathways from "street" to "mainstream" are fraught with uncertainty and struggle.

The journey occurs during emerging adulthood—a stage involving numerous developmental struggles (regarding identity, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between)—but also an age filled with possibilities. Indeed, for many of our participants, it was a time in which they had reached, as Arnett (2008) describes, the potential for handling responsibility, skill development, and self-understanding. And while most mainstream youth proceed through this stage fully engaged in experimentation and relatively uninfluenced by institutional structures, for most study participants opportunities for experimentation and identity exploration were often curtailed by processes outside of their control and struggles with the consequences of profound disempowerment. Indeed, their past trauma with family and/or current struggles with public sector structures and services interfered with or shut down opportunities to focus on normative developmental issues. As a result, many felt abandoned and stigmatized by the very resources whose mission it is to assist.

For service providers, regardless of philosophy, mandate or mission, our study findings reinforce the critical need for their resources to be known, accessible, integrated and navigable for youth during their transition from street life to housing acquisition. In addition, evidence shows that agencies and services

need to be specifically tailored to homeless youth and to have care providers trained to understand the developmental needs and histories of this particular population (Hudson, Nyamathi, & Sweat, 2008). Generally, this can be achieved through targeted outreach and follow-up programs and services, along with caring staff, a nonjudgmental atmosphere, and flexible policies (Garrett et al., 2008). More specifically, there seems to be a need for the creation and testing of developmentally-informed interventions. Through forums like psychotherapy, arts involvement, spiritual supports, and other individual and group activities, transitional youth might be supported in constructing a new life narrative. In such spaces they could explore who they have been, who they want to be, and safely test ways of being in supportive and creative environments. Connection with peers might also help in this framework, as other young people who have successfully made the transition can provide hope and ideas about pathways out of homeless spaces, cultures, and self-concepts through credible narratives.

For policy makers, we hope our findings can focus renewed attention on the growing evidence that diverse housing stock catering to young people has proven to be a significant facilitator for successful street exiting. Evidence highlights a number of critical problems within current public policies directed toward vulnerable youth in transition: eligibility criteria that exclude youth from services that might benefit them, inadequate funding for transition services, a lack of coordination across service systems, and inadequate training about young-adult developmental issues for service professionals (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Clearly, what is needed is a developmentally appropriate and socially inclusive system of support for vulnerable youth as they move from adolescence through emerging adulthood. For all of us, understanding the resilience and struggles of this population can provide hope that it is possible to escape homelessness and take action to build healthier lives.

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