

# CHILDREN'S NEEDS: RECOMMENDATIONS

<p><b>Child-supportive Shelter and Security</b></p>	<p>There needs to be recognition that there are children who are homeless with their families. We need increased public discussion of this problem, with children included in these discussions. Short of widescale structural change to address this homelessness, we need well-staffed services providing 1) a sense of safety and security, 2) counselling support, 3) children's programming, and 4) access to outdoor play spaces</p>
<p><b>Programming and Computer Use, Including Specific Programming for Older Children</b></p>	<p>Shelters that house children should consistently provide the type of formalized and consistent programming found in the after-school program in this report. Shelter services for children should include designated computer time separate from other programming activities. We suggest offering opportunities for people to visit and provide engaging learning experiences for the children. Shelters should include programming that is specifically aimed at older children, as they often did not attend the program.</p>
<p><b>Supportive Relationships and Connections With Animals</b></p>	<p>Shelters for homeless families should consider ways to promote meaningful and supportive relationships among children and their peers, shelter staff, and other adults in the shelter. Shelter services might consider strategies to facilitate pet-keeping and/or interactions with trained therapy animals, or through organized visitations at a local animal shelter.</p>
<p><b>Wi-Fi and Other Resources, Including Food, Games and Pop Culture Experiences</b></p>	<p>Shelter services that are specifically geared towards families with children would ideally include access to Wi-Fi and other resources, including a playground and computers, toys and games, sporting equipment, and craft materials. The provision of snacks and even meals should be considered and could include collaborative food-preparation activities to increase children's knowledge about healthy eating and food preparation practices.</p>
<p><b>A Nuanced Consideration of the Children's Lived Experiences</b></p>	<p>Attention should be given to the nuances in the children's lived experiences, the challenges they face, and their strengths and capacities. While it is crucial to recognize the adversities and challenges in the children's lives, it is equally important to consider their strengths and capacities to navigate these challenges.</p>
<p><b>Strategies for Addressing the Issue of Stigma</b></p>	<p>Shelters could organize group-based "uplift activities" to address stigma with children around homelessness, offer emotional support, and practical strategies for handling bullying at school. Steps might also be taken to explore alternatives to having the children take lengthy or multiple buses to and from school</p>

*Thank you to all the children and staff members who generously shared their views and stories over the course of our research.*

**Full Report**

To read the full report, access references, and learn more about the report findings, please scan this QR code!



...it is somewhere where they feel comfortable; here they could be themselves and [not] have to worry about anyone judging them.



# CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS IN SHELTER LIVING

**In 2022, the YWCA partnered with Drs Rebecca Raby and Christine Tardif-Williams to embark on a research project into the lives and experiences of children who are homeless with their families. This report outlines the data collection process, shares key themes, and presents recommendations.**

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YWCA NIAGARA REGION  
Hope for Homeless Women and their Families since 1927



# DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANTS

24 participants

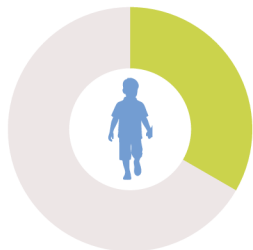


16 boys

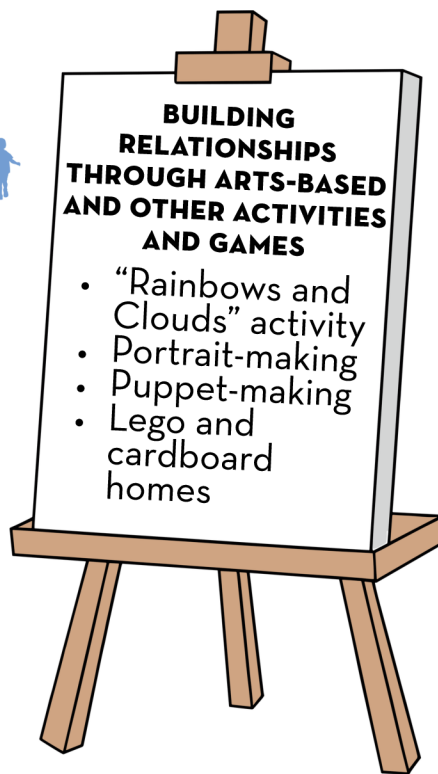
8 girls



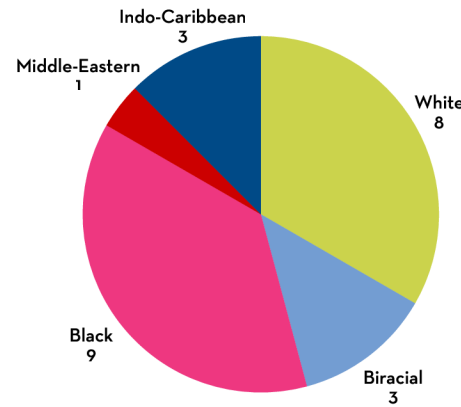
Ages 5-10



Ages 11-14



## Race of Children in Program



YEARS OF OBSERVATION



YWCA STAFF INTERVIEWED

# KEY THEMES CONT'D

Similarly, we were never sure when someone might leave the program because they had found housing or had moved to a different shelter. Children shared sadness about losing things that bring them joy such as their toys, which were often sold or placed in storage.

Some children missed pets that had to be given away or were temporarily being cared for by other people. Other participants missed the privacy of having their own bedroom.

## Poverty and Other Intertwined Issues

Children are homeless when their parents are. Poverty was relevant to our child participants' lives in many ways, including missing basic needs such as food, clothing and other items.

### ► Food Insecurity

Food insecurity was evident around snack time as well as conversations the children had with us around food. Sometimes they hid snacks in their pockets and up their shirts to take them upstairs with them. Other things, like clothing, were also issues. When imagining what he would do if he had a lot of money, a participant said he needed shoes.



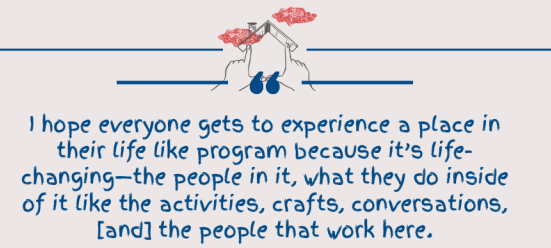
### ► Entwined Stressors

Some of the children shared that they had experienced challenges in navigating family relationships and some had witnessed family violence at home due to the exacerbated stressors associated with homelessness. The children also worried about their family's housing situation.

## Stigma

A staff member noted that it can be difficult for families to find housing because "a lot of places don't want to rent to people on ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program), or OW (Ontario Works)."

Some participants shared their feelings of social disconnection and embarrassment when having to take two school buses to get to school only to still arrive late. Children also reported instances of bullying at school, as peers noticed where the children lived during school bus pickups and realized they were homeless. A participant told us that his friends at school did not know where he lived and that he chose not to tell them because "it's upsetting to say it".



### ► Activities for fun and skill-building

"Doing other "extra-curricular activities outside of school [like sports and going to clubs] is not always going to be an option for the kids", stated a staff member.

The most popular activity of all was being on one of the community room computers. Many children also loved going outside. They enjoyed sports like soccer and basketball, as well as hanging out at the park across from the building. Other program activities, including artwork, dancing, and games, were also important.

### ► Academics

There was an emphasis on homework help and academic programming, such as science projects. The STEM camp programming allowed them to discover new skills and alleviated some of the children's apprehension around math. Some parents requested assistance in helping their children read.

### ► Parental Support

Program gave the parents a few hours for some downtime to plan things such as dinner or chores as they are trying to have a "normal life" in a very stressful context. During March Break, a parent told the research team how grateful she was that the children were able to attend the program to release their energy and engage in activities.

## The Children's Personal Skills, Capacities and Joy

The children were actively involved in building relationships and teaching each other skills. Children who were already established in the program welcomed new children, played together, and took care of each other.

Children participated in creating connections with staff members, ourselves as the research team, and with the community around them. The children frequently expressed happiness or excitement when we arrived and seemed very content to include us in their activities.

Despite the challenges going on in their lives, the children brought their engagement, skills, and joy into the program.



had to close or adjust its hours due to lack of staffing and related funding challenges.

## Shelter and Program Rules

### ► Pets and Belongings

When asked about things that negatively impact children and their families, Staff explained that not being able to have or keep their pets with them could be difficult for the children (and for their pets). In shelter, there are restrictions around how many belongings people can bring with them. Items that often brought the children comfort were locked away in a storage unit or sold.

### ► Rules Around After-school Programming

Because of numbers, diversity in ages and limited staffing, only certain children could participate in the after-school programming. Only the children living in the shelter could come to the program but the children in the separate transitional housing program could not. These children found it difficult to miss program and adjustments were eventually made to let them join.

### ► Intake

Younger children were often present during the intake process because of a lack of space and staffing to take care of them. Staff was concerned that children would overhear difficult information about their housing uncertainty when they were present for their parent's intake interview.

## Lack of Funding

Almost every staff member talked about this challenge. They emphasized the need for more funding from various levels of government. In terms of the after-school programming itself, our work with staff members indicated the need for a second staff member to ensure that absences could be covered without shutting down program. There was also an ongoing need for more resources for the children, including equipment and snacks.

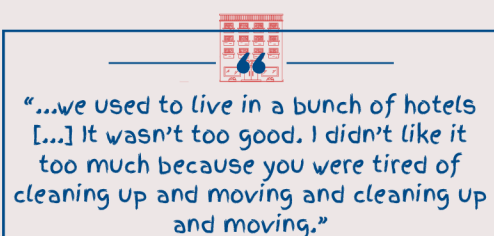
# KEY THEMES

## CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN'S HOMELESSNESS WITH THEIR FAMILIES

### Instability and Disruption Around Displacement

Homelessness brings instability, including frequent moves, disconnection from community, and consequent worry (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016). Many moves made it hard for some of the children to develop long-term supportive relationships in their communities or schools, as often they had to change schools. This instability affected children's engagement with school as well.

Instability was also linked to eventually leaving the shelter. The children worried about when their friends might leave, for instance.



## STRENGTHS ASSOCIATED WITH LIVING IN SHELTER AND ESPECIALLY THE AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM

### Stability of Shelter

The shelter offered a feeling of safety for some of the children. For the children at the shelter, this was home and while they dreamed about more permanent housing where they could decorate their rooms and have their stuff, and sometimes pets, around them, for the time-being, the shelter was home.

### The After-school Program

#### ► Social and Emotional Support and Safety

Staff members talked about how the shelter provided a sense of normalcy and a sense of community in a situation of uncertainty. The program itself provided opportunities for the children to play and hang out with each other in a mutually supportive community space. For the children at the shelter, this was home and while they dreamed about more permanent housing where they could decorate their rooms and have their stuff, and sometimes pets, around them, for the time-being, the shelter was home.

## CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH LIVING IN SHELTER

### Other Residents

Shelters such as this one often provide accommodation for a variety of people, including some who are experiencing difficult circumstances. A participant explained that living in shelter can be scary. His mom once called the police because someone had seemingly overdosed. Others talked about another person who got arrested for hitting his girlfriend. Experiences like these can leave a mark and the kids learned to be alert. Staff argued that the children and their families should ideally be in a separate building, but she understood that costs prevent such a solution.

### Programming Inconsistencies

Program was an anchor for children's positive experiences in shelter. Unfortunately, there were times when the program