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Reimagining Responses To Youth Homelessness

Uprooting the causes of Youth
Homelessness with Stephen Gaetz

A pair of hands is shown holding a small, white, disposable cup. The cup is filled with several coins, likely pennies. The hands are positioned around the cup, with fingers visible. The background is dark and out of focus. The image is partially obscured by a vertical black bar on the right side.

The Current State

- Insufficient amount of evidence supports any real change is happening to reduce the number of homeless in Toronto
- To see a real change occur, focus on innovative long-term prevention responses than relying on emergency services
- A focus on prevention responses will yield results:
 - Edmonton has seen a 30% reduction in homelessness between 2008 and 2012
 - Medicine Hat virtually eliminated chronic homelessness

Focusing on Youth

- Many chronically homeless adults started their homelessness as teenagers, and with time have developed complex mental health and addiction issues
- By ensuring that vulnerable young populations are provided with the support to live healthy lives we can prevent homelessness in their adulthood





Effective Responses

- Addressing youth homelessness varies from community to community:
 - Hamilton, ON and Red Deer, AB uses a community-level response by outreaching to different community members
 - St. John Newfoundland uses **Choices for Youth** program that develops housing support and employment
- There are many successful and effective responses, but these programs lack the research and evaluation to adapt them to new communities

We're starting to build, in a sense, really good examples in this country. Now what we have to do is build the means for other communities to learn from and adapt those models to their own communities.

STEPHEN GAETZ

Interrupted Adolescence

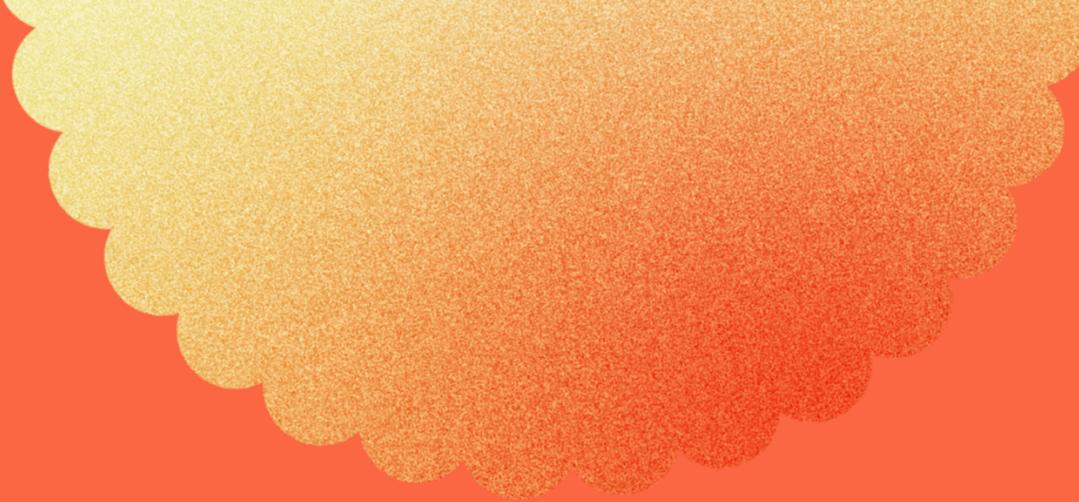


- Adolescence is a vital stage of life and should occur gradually
- When youth become homeless that gradual process of becoming an adult dramatically accelerates
- We have created a system that puts an emphasis on becoming independent as quickly as possible
- Homeless youth suffer from that system as they cannot bear those demands, thus their ability to move forward in life gets comprised and they get involved with the law or drugs

The Foundational Response

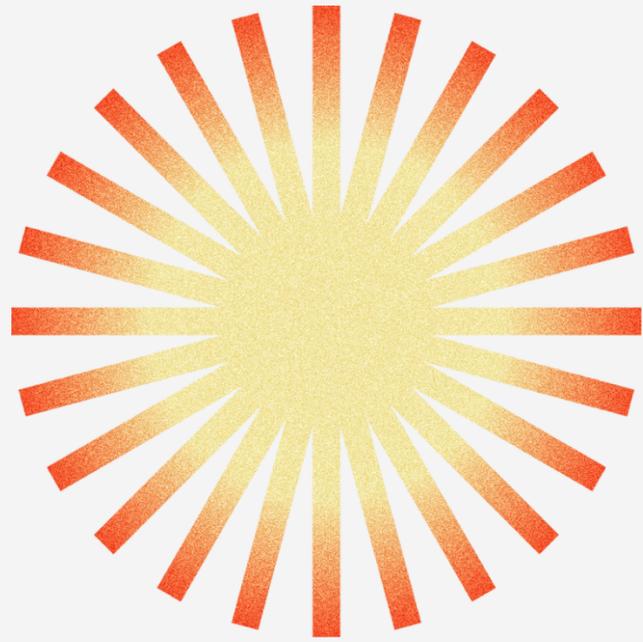
- Shelters need to be more individual-based: understanding that each young person matures into adulthood at different rates
 - To be successful, they need financial support, adult mentoring, a chance to develop relationships and learn life skills (taking as long as necessary)
- Our response should ensure that they have the time to grow into adults, and not be restrained by time





“These are the very young people who need support and need time and need the chance to grow into adulthood to repair the damage that maybe contributed to their becoming homeless in the first place.”

STEPHEN GAETZ



Discussion Questions

I

Since solving homelessness looks different in various communities, how do you think the solution would look like for Toronto?

II

Stephen brings up the notion of "interrupted adolescence." Do you feel it is harder to be a teenager now than in the past, and why?

III

Why do you think Toronto still hasn't made a dramatic change in reducing homelessness compared to other cities?

IV

Reflect on Gaetz's second quote. What does it mean to you? Think about your own experiences as a teen.



I

Discussion

Since solving homelessness looks different in various communities, how do you think the solution would look like for Toronto?

Nick: Because Toronto is a big city, I feel like the solution would have to be on a wide scale. Considering we have the largest population in Canada, it's very challenging to micromanage everybody's needs.

David: I definitely agree with that. To solve this problem you definitely can't go small with it. Though it has to be wide-scale, it must also be specific to the community. Toronto is very multicultural, and you have to tailor the program to the communities' unique characteristics. Not only do you have to consider the culture, but you should also understand the space there. Consider the economic situation and the businesses/jobs. You can't run exactly the same program that worked Downtown in Scarborough. It's a different environment, requiring different needs.

Nicholas B: Honestly, I didn't know homelessness was such a complex issue. But, after reading the article and hearing about it with you guys, it really is a bigger problem than I initially thought. With that said, I agree with what you guys are saying. It definitely must be a wide-scale approach simply because of the sheer number of people in Toronto while still tailoring to individual needs.



I

Discussion

(CONT'D) Since solving homeless looks different in various communities , how do you think the solution would look like for Toronto?

Neil: Obviously, homelessness is a big issue in Toronto, especially now with COVID-19. However, to solve this problem, the government should allow the homeless the freedom to do whatever they can to get shelter. Last month homeless people were building up encampments at Lampert stadium, and the city took them down. And, now, that is an issue because where are they going to sleep and have comfort? At the end of the day, you can give as much food and money as you want, but if they don't have any home to find comfort in, then that isn't really adding any practical value.

Discussion

Stephen brings up the notion of "interrupted adolescence." Do you feel it is harder to be a teenager now than in the past, and why?

David: I think it is harder to be a teenager now than in the past. Of course, this is coming from a teenager now, so take this with a grain of salt. Thirty years ago and even before that, there were fewer regulations and health and safety standards, and the economy was booming. There was a lot more social mobility. The thing with teenagers now is that they are on social media a lot, which often deteriorates social skills. And, the fact that you can access anything you want at any time through the internet lends itself to be a concerning problem in adolescent development.

Nick: If I can add, there are more expectations weighed upon us now than in the past. We have to find a job, learn how to invest, manage a bank account, maintain high grades, figure out our career path, and learn how to drive at the prime ages of 13 to 20. There are so many responsibilities weighing upon us that being an adult is quite challenging. Especially for those who experience an "interrupted adolescence," it is very unfair because, on top of carrying all those responsibilities, they have to endure the hardships of not having a home.

Discussion

(CONT'D) Stephen brings up the notion of "interrupted adolescence." Do you feel it is harder to be a teenager now than in the past, and why?

Neil: If you are a homeless teenager, you already have a disadvantage in life. And, now, considering we are in a pandemic, that puts you farther back because you can't put yourself in a safe position 24/7. Obviously, you have no home and are looking for ways to feed yourself and your family. With so many responsibilities, opportunities will no longer be there for you. Plus, you have to carry the trauma of losing a parent, sibling, or friend. Essentially, I feel like it's definitely harder to be a teenager now because we are expected to have the same responsibilities back then but find out our way through life alone.

Nicholas B: With COVID-19, being a teenager has been way harder, but if we look past COVID-19, I would argue that it would be an even playing field. Back then, they were worried about getting drafted to war. There were a lot more serial killers, crime, and violence. However, now that we know our life expectancy is 82, we know we have more time with our lives. It's in our best favour to pursue a good education, get jobs, and innovate. Although we are worrying about school and our social lives, teenagers in the past were worrying about their safety and getting drafted into the war. However, with that said, COVID-19 has definitely made it harder for us to do school and interact with people.

Discussion

Why do you think Toronto still hasn't made a dramatic change in homelessness compared to other cities?

Neil: I think the city isn't doing enough. As I mentioned earlier, they were destroying the homes of the people who were trying to build their shelter in Lampert stadium. All that did was make it worse for them. And, if the city focused more on having a long-term plan to improve the rates of homelessness, it should drop significantly.

Nick B: It's always about the money when it comes to doing anything with the government. Regardless of your views, it ultimately comes down to not having enough money and having too many places to spend that money. For instance, giving money to homeless youth is good. But, by doing that, you are taking away from these chronically homeless men. So, you can't just leave them out in the streets high and dry. It is a matter of balance. But, at the same time, it is tricky because there is only so much money going around.

Discussion

(CONT'D) Why do you think Toronto still hasn't made a dramatic change in homelessness compared to other cities?

David: To add onto Nicholas, it really is about money. The thing is, for a lot of housing companies, it is profitable to not solve homelessness. They are actively profiting off these people living off the streets, and they are benefiting from them. Usually, these companies consist of people who have a lot of power that can often influence the government. So, if we want to solve homelessness, we have to use that money wisely and possibly tax the wealthy. Also, though it is profitable not to solve homelessness, we should still do it because it is simply the just and right thing to do.

Nicholas B responded: You mentioned that people were profiting off of homelessness, which I found to be a very interesting viewpoint. So, I was wondering how does that work exactly?

David: Basically, the housing market thrives off of homeless people because there is not enough homeless for everybody. It's not that there are too many homes, it's that there are not enough. And, you can't have a housing market without people who don't have a home.

Discussion

Reflect on Gazet's second quote. What does it mean to you? Reflect on your own experiences as a teen.

Nick: This is a heavy quote because it uproots the cause of homeless from youth to adulthood – time, kids need time to mature into adulthood. Not everybody is fortunate to have two parents, a good family of support, or friends of encouragement. Youth need that time to grow and make mistakes and learn. All in all, this quote makes me feel very privileged and fortunate to have what I have right now in my life.

David: Yeah, I definitely agree with Nick. A lot of homelessness happens in cycles, and that cycle can go on generationally. Reading this quote puts into perspective everything that happens in their lives and our lives. Helps you realize how fortunate you are.

Neil: Again, it goes back to them having to figure out life by themselves. They are forced to think like adults at a young age. And, the sad thing, most of them are not fortunate as we are to have older parents or older people, in general, to guide us in our adolescent stage. It is important to know a mentor and have someone to guide you and help you blossom

Discussion

(CONT'D) Reflect on Gazet's second quote. What does it mean to you? Reflect on your own experiences as a teen.

Nicholas B: I definitely agree that it really makes us grateful for having the support we do and having, hopefully, both parents. It's terrible that there are kids like us who don't have these things, and after having my eyes opened by this conversation it's incredibly heartbreaking to learn about just how many people there are like this.. Nick said he realized how much of a privilege this is, and I disagree. Not because we aren't privileged (that's a whole other conversation), but I don't think that having enough money to live and having 2 loving parents is a privilege, it should be a right. Whenever I am reminded of how some kids in Africa don't have access to clean drinking water, while I feel grateful for living somewhere where I can get clean water very easily, I definitely don't feel privileged. I believe that being able to live without being homeless should be a human right, not a privilege. Privileges can be taken away, and no one should have to live their life homelessly.

David: I definitely agree with you Nicholas about housing being a human right. Your point about it not being a privilege is kinda...nitpicking. It's a powerful point, but most of the time when people talk about privileges, they mean a leg up. It can be something that everyone should be entitled to, but that doesn't make it not a privilege. They are not mutually exclusive.