

Examining harm reduction in Housing First for youth experiencing homelessness and concurrent mental health and substance use issues

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Land Acknowledgment



Session Objectives

The objectives of this session are to:

1. Address the knowledge gap on harm reduction in Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) programming
2. Highlight factors promoting and limiting harm reduction delivery in HF4Y
3. Discuss actionable recommendations for future Housing First (HF) research, service delivery, and practice

Background



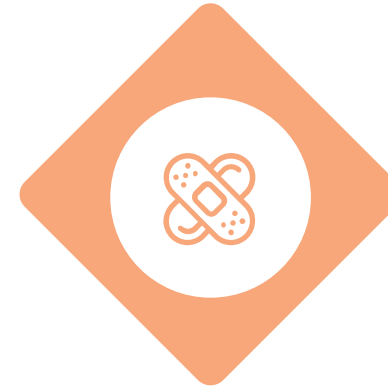
Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness is a growing concern across Canada



Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)

Effective approach to addressing the harms associated with youth homelessness



Harm Reduction

Central tenet of HF4Y framework, but literature on harm reduction operationalization in HF programming is limited

Objective & Research Question



How are the principles and philosophies of harm reduction **operationalized** and **implemented** in an HF4Y program for youth experiencing homelessness and concurrent mental health and substance use issues?

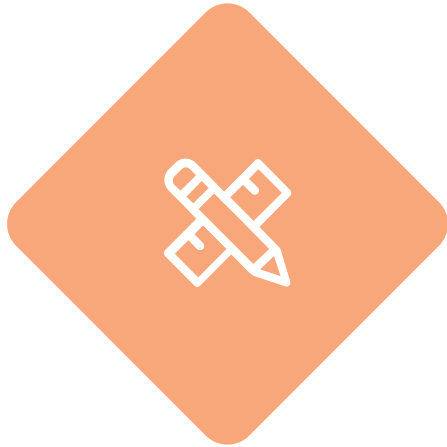
Methodology



Research Context:

- Nested within a larger outcome and process evaluation of an HF4Y program for youth experiencing homelessness and concurrent disorders in Kelowna, BC, and Toronto, ON
- This study was drawn from process evaluation interviews conducted in Kelowna, BC

Methodology



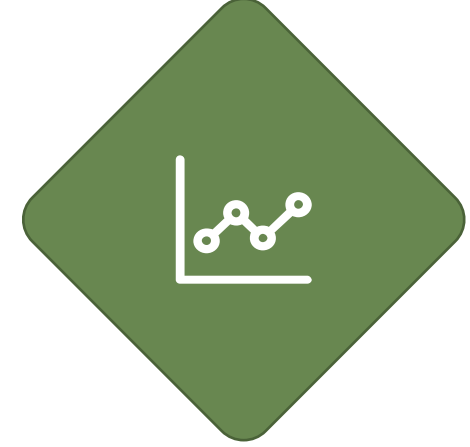
Design

- Triangulation of qualitative interview data & program documents



Sample

- 8 program leader & service provider interviews
- 15 program documents



Analysis

- Thematic analysis of interview data
- Content analysis of program documents

Findings: Harm reduction in HF4Y

Delivery of harm reduction in the Restart HF4Y Program

1) Working with youth to ensure they are using substances as safely as possible

- i. Providing and supporting youth to access clean supplies

How can we do that [drink or use drugs] the safest way possible? [...] If you're going to be drinking, do it in a safe place, do it with safe people. If you're going to be using substances, are there ways you're using substances? Are they harm reduction? Are they... If you inject, are they new needles? Do you have the swabs, do you have the cooking pots? Do you have everything you need if you're smoking?
(Service Provider)

- ii. Providing resources for overdose prevention
- iii. Providing education on safer substance use
- iv. Safety planning

Findings: Harm reduction in HF4Y

Delivery of harm reduction in the Restart HF4Y Program

2) Connecting youth to services in the community

- i. Connecting youth with opioid agonist therapy (OAT), treatment, or detox when they are ready
- ii. Connecting youth to other health and social services in the community for mental health and substance use support

Findings: Harm reduction in HF4Y

Delivery of harm reduction in the Restart HF4Y Program

3) Providing youth with individualized support

- i. Getting a clear understanding of where youth are at

We find out like, what are they thinking? Kind of get an update on how they're feeling, their mental health, their history. What are they currently connected to, like with primary like service providers? What's going on in their life? We get a pretty comprehensive understanding. [...] And just really getting a clear understanding of what they're going through, what they need, how we can best support them, and what their goals are. (Service Provider)

- ii. Adjusting the harm reduction approach based on the youth

Findings: Harm reduction in HF4Y

Delivery of harm reduction in the Restart HF4Y Program

4) Reducing stigma around substance use

- i. Operating from a non-judgemental standpoint
- ii. Facilitating open conversations around substance use

Yeah, it's one of the big things for us. There should never be a question that a client asks us for help that's taboo to ask. [...] So I mean as far as the harm reduction services that we offer for clients, that can be anything from talking about the advantages and disadvantages of drugs that they may be doing/trying, where they can get their drugs tested... (Service Provider)

Findings: Harm reduction in HF4Y

Delivery of harm reduction in the Restart HF4Y Program

5) Empowering youth who use substances

- i. Respecting and promoting youth choice

Never telling them “no”, but always telling them options. That if they want to change their rate of usage, or if they want to stop using it for anything, the resources are always there, but it's their call, and doing everything as safe as possible. (Service Provider)

- ii. Involving youth in reducing harms to themselves
- iii. Client-directed care and treatment planning

Findings: Harm reduction in HF4Y

Delivery of harm reduction in the Restart HF4Y Program

- 6) Creating environments where the risk of harm is reduced
- 7) Building strong relationships with youth

Findings: Tensions with harm reduction in HF4Y

Factors impeding harm reduction delivery

- 1) Lack of housing options for youth who use substances
- 2) Inclusion of crime-free housing statements in rental agreements
- 3) Narratives that some landlords would prefer tenants not use substances

Findings: Tensions with harm reduction in HF4Y

Age

- Unique barrier to empowerment and true harm reduction delivery

I mean, there's some caveats to it [harm reduction approach] for like younger youth, for example, and if there was a 15 year old, who was just getting into injection drug use, our approach with harm reduction would be a bit different than with a 25 year old, but we still we kind of try to mediate the age, the philosophy, the guidelines, as best as we can... (Service Provider)

Limitations



1

Examined harm reduction in the context of one HF4Y program



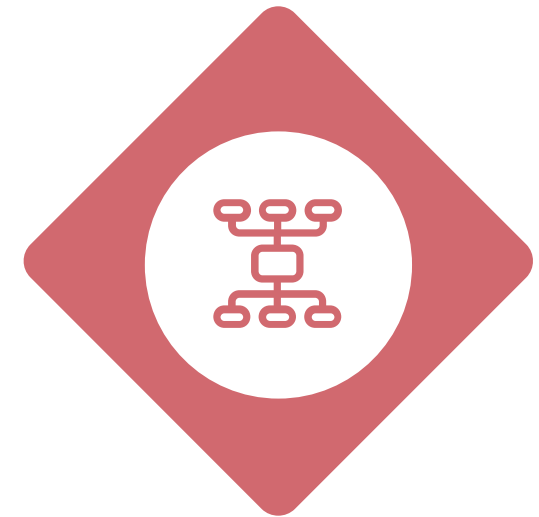
2

Findings rely solely on the perspectives of program staff



3

Smaller sample size than anticipated



4

Nested within a larger evaluation

Recommendations

Future HF Research

Greater emphasis on gathering service users' perspectives and experiences with receiving harm reduction in HF & HF4Y programming

Service delivery & practice

- 1) More guidance from HF & HF4Y model guiding documents and training materials on the implementation of harm reduction in HF & HF4Y programming
- 2) Address the power imbalances inherent to the HF4Y model and constraints placed on youth choice
- 3) More advocacy from the non-profit sector & policymakers for low barrier, youth-oriented housing options for youth experiencing homelessness and substance use issues

Restart Project Kelowna site changes

Program changes since study was conducted:

- 1) Removed crime-free statement that prohibits substance use from market rental leases to facilitate harm reduction approach
- 2) Explored more scattered site rentals, based on availability

Conclusions

- Findings demonstrate the ways service providers operationalize and implement harm reduction in HF4Y
- Uncovered systems-level barriers to harm reduction delivery, namely the lack of low-barrier, youth-oriented housing options
 - Emphasizes the need for greater advocacy for low-barrier housing options for youth who actively use substances
- To effectively practice harm reduction in HF4Y, further research is needed to identify and address other contextual factors promoting and limiting harm reduction delivery in HF4Y programming

Acknowledgments



Canadian Mental
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Kelowna



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MAKING THE SHIFT^{INC}

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