An Ethnographic Study of Homeless Youth Transitions to Independent Housing

("Phoenix", age 21)

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Ending Homelessness in Canada

Thursday May 14, 2015

Medicine Hat becomes the first city in Canada to eliminate homelessness

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Social advocates are applauding Ontario's ambitious plan to end homelessness as part of the province's new five-year anti-poverty strategy.

Harper Government supports Housing First model to reduce homelessness

"600 million dollars in new funding"

Candice Bergen, Minister of State (Government of Canada, 2013)

NEWS

We know exactly how to end homelessness in Canada

Housing First strategies are known to work — and they save us money

NEWS LOCAL

Plan to end homelessness ready

By Braeden Jones, Grande Prairie Daily Herald-Tribune Staff
Monday, April 13, 2015 5:04:54 MDT PM

March 2, 2015   Updated | March 2, 2015 | 134 pm

Calgary's revised 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness will involve 'tough decisions'

By Robson Fletcher
Metro

Knowledge Gap

Margins **Mainstream**

⬇ Education ⬆ Trauma
⬇ Employment ⬆ Abandonment

Street Families ➔ Acquaintances

Youth ➔ Adulthood
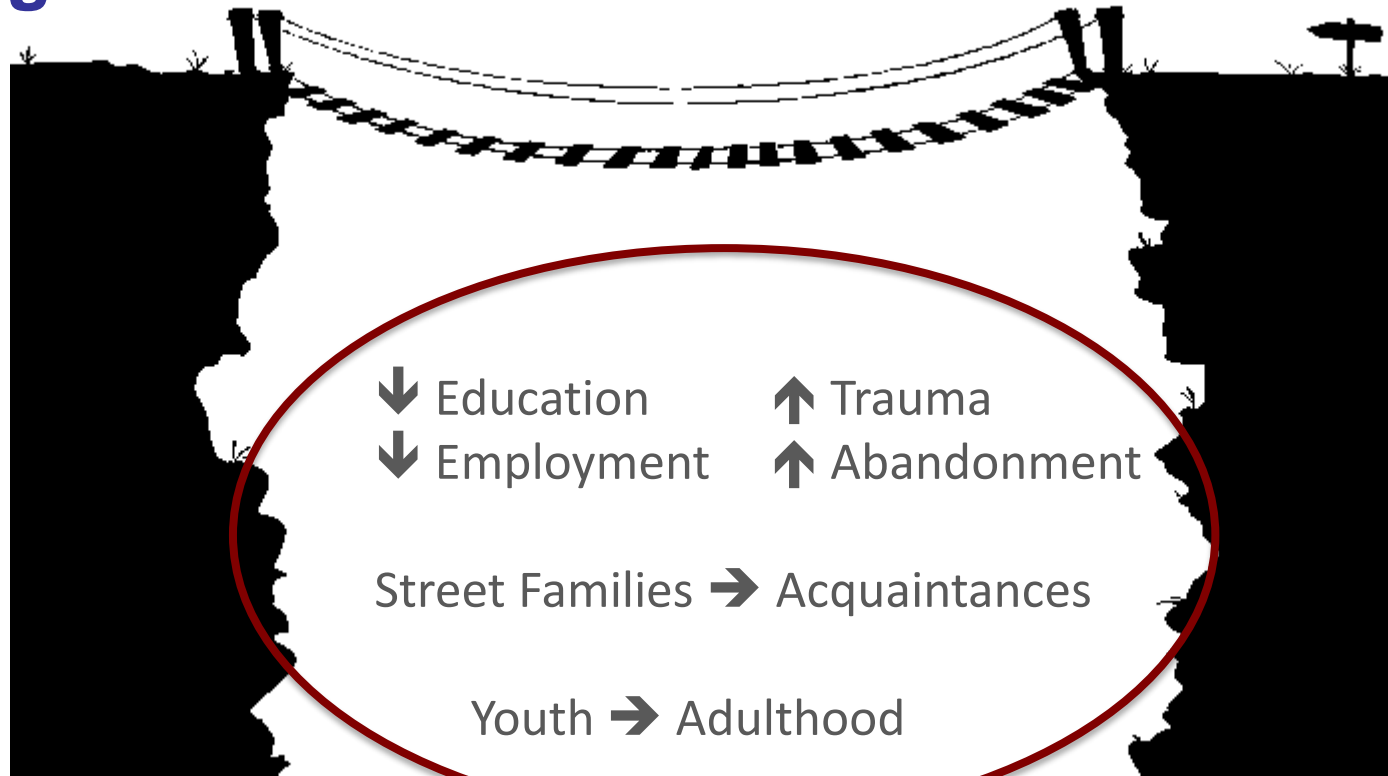
Transitioning off the Streets[1,2,3,4,5,6]

- Race against time (home = street families)

- 40% reduction in likelihood of exiting for each additional year spent on the streets

- (Re)entering mainstream culture (i.e., social integration) most difficult aspect of transitioning – especially for those living independently

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[1]Karabanow (2008)   [3]Mayock et al. (2011)   [5]Roy et al. (2014)
[2]Kidd et al. (2013)   [4]Milburn et al. (2009)   [6]Tevendale et al. (2011)

Research Goal

Provide an emic (insider) and longitudinal perspective on moving off the streets and attempting to achieve meaningful social integration.

① Describe how homeless young people **experience** the transition from homelessness into independent housing.

② Identify the range of **social support** and **social connectedness** experiences that homeless young people consider of fundamental importance before, during, and in the first six months after their transition to independent housing.

③ Explore what homeless youth consider **meaningful social integration** during their transition to independent housing.

Methodology: Critical Ethnography

- Ethnography: emic (insider) perspective through prolonged engagement

- Traditional ethnography ⟶ Critical ethnography

    (understand/explain)   (critique/advocate)

- Examine how historical, socio-economic and political context impact "choices"

-       Macro ⟵⟶ Micro

    (public/social policies)   (individual)

Method: Study Design

- Nine months
- Nine formerly homeless youth (16 – 24 years)
- Recruitment = shelter + word-of-mouth
- Transitioned into independent housing within 30 days prior to recruitment

Method: Data Generation
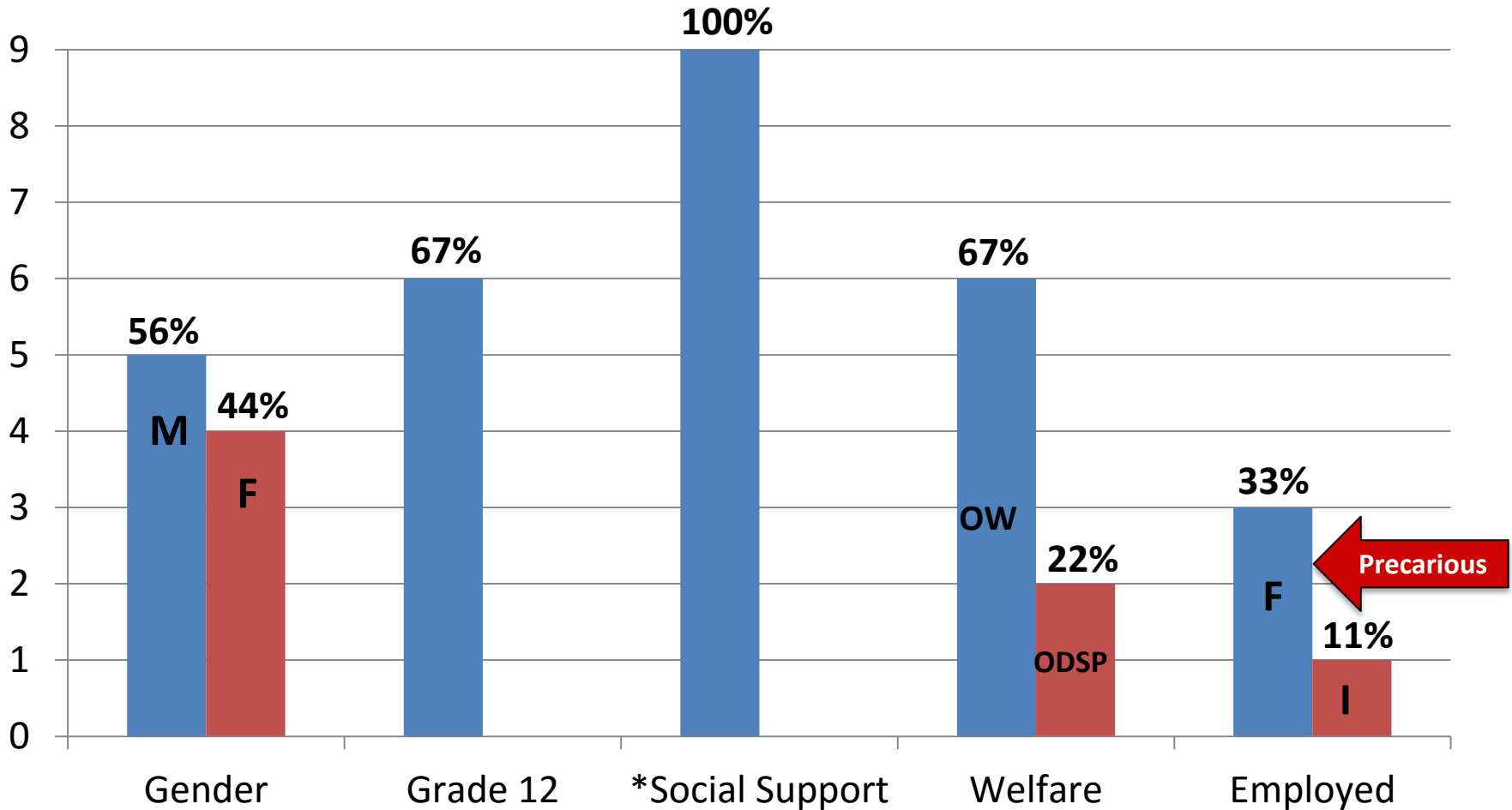
- ~ 100 interviews
- Meet on "home turf" 2x/month

Four methods of data generation:

- Participant observation
- Informal/go-along interviews
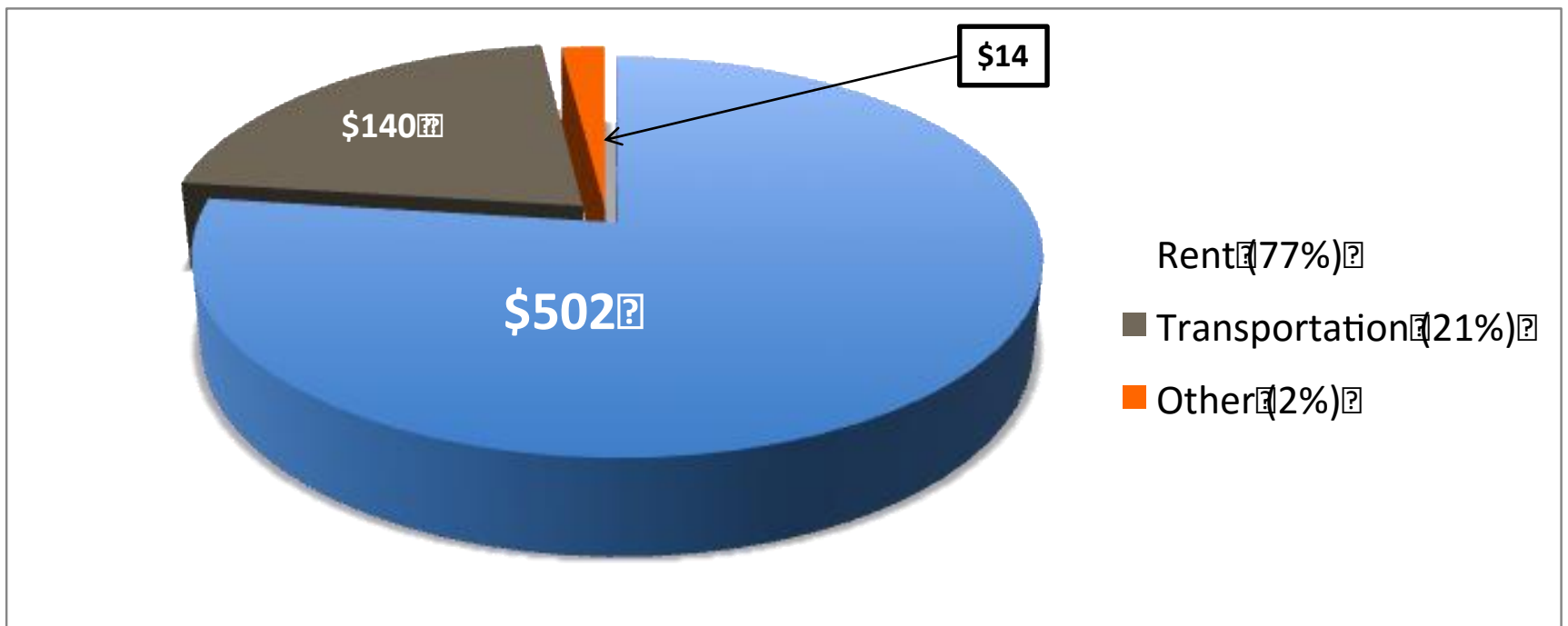- Questionnaires (baseline + monthly)
- Photo elicitation (optional)

Research Participants: Baseline

*Social Support = regular contact with shelter staff and/or parent

Welfare in Ontario
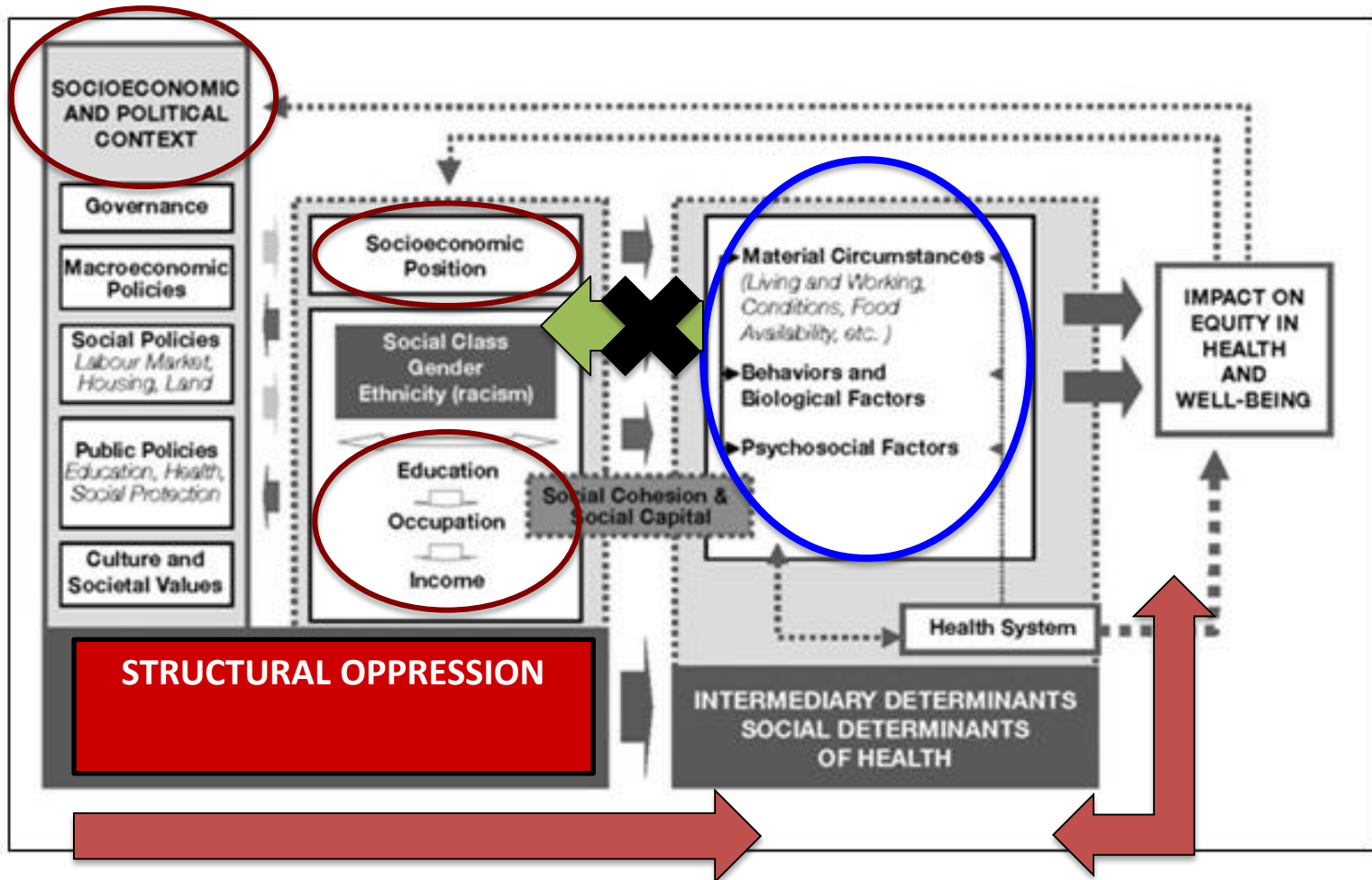
Ontario Works = $656/month

Housing in Toronto

$1,100/month

Preliminary Themes

1. Structural oppression
2. Psychosocial consequences of structural oppression

Structural Oppression

(Solar & Irwin, 2010)

Structural Oppression

- Structural oppression heaped on histories of trauma
- Structural oppression reinforces lack of control over life circumstances

"Alexandra"

- New Canadian
- Abusive home
- Sexually trafficked
- Grade 10 education
- Full-time student
- OW
- Waitlist for affordable housing
- Declared bankruptcy
- Does not qualify for OSAP
- Cash job cleaning
- Saved no money

Psychosocial Consequences of Structural Oppression

- No margin for error (eviction, hunger, no transportation, no phone, jail, etc.)

- Forced "choices" (pay rent or eat?)

- Focus on survival and day-to-day vs. forward thinking and goal setting – ?? long term impact

- Pain/shame of social exclusion

Pain/Shame of Social Exclusion

Just being really really genuinely poor is often sort of... idealized as of the whole sort of starving artist... whatever whatever... sort of trope but it's really not like that. <u>It's ugly and it's painful and it takes a great deal out of you</u> and nobody who ends up in that situation I think would turn down the opportunity to not be in that situation if they could.

(Phillip, age 20)

Pain/Shame of Social Exclusion

...you are confronted continuously on a day-to-day basis by the fact that 99% of people are in a vastly superior position to where you are financially and it does lend itself to reinforcing that sense that you are not going to get out of it. Psychologically you come to the belief that there's no way out of it, which is really the key difference between being homeless and not being homeless is just the belief that you can make it out...

(Phillip, age 20)

Questions to Consider

- How are we defining the problem?
- Are we working ourselves out of a job?
- How much of our operating budget goes to structural determinants?
- What if we sent a couple of kids to university ("full ride") instead of hiring an outreach worker?
- Have we set the bar too low?
- How many youth have changed their SEP?
- How many youth are no longer reliant on government assistance?

Implications

- First ethnographic study on homeless youth transitions into independent housing

- Important contribution to the handful of longitudinal studies on homeless youth transitions

- Add to the current discourse around housing best practice for homeless youth

- Challenge policy makers to consider that sustainable solutions to ending youth homelessness involves a greater investment than the provision of a home

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PhD Committee

- Dr. Denise Gastaldo (supervisor)
- Dr. Stephen Hwang
- Dr. Elizabeth McCay

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