



REPRESENTATIVE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

# Raising Young Peoples' Voices on the Issue of Youth Homelessness

Special Report

February 2020



Feb. 20, 2020

The Honourable Darryl Plecas  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly  
Suite 207, Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, B.C. V8V 1X4

Dear Mr. Speaker,

I have the honour of submitting this Special Report, *Raising Young Peoples' Voices on the Issue of Youth Homelessness*, to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia.

This report is prepared in accordance with Section 20 of the *Representative for Children and Youth Act*, which enables the Representative to make a special report on matters the Representative considers necessary.

I request that Members of the Legislature consider this report as well as the accompanying report by Katherine McParland, *From Marginalized to Magnified, Youth Homelessness Solutions From Those With Lived Expertise*.

Sincerely,



Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth  
Representative for Children and Youth

pc: Ms. Kate Ryan-Lloyd  
Acting Clerk and Clerk of Committees,  
Legislative Assembly of British Columbia



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# Raising Young Peoples' Voices on the Issue of Youth Homelessness

The Office of the Representative for Children and Youth fills a number of key roles in overseeing the child- and youth-serving systems of British Columbia. Those include investigating injuries and deaths of children and youth receiving government services and monitoring the effectiveness of public services provided for vulnerable children, youth and families in the province.

But at the heart of our organization's work is advocacy. RCY Advocates help individual children, youth, young adults and their families to navigate what can often be confusing and conflicting systems of services.

Since our Office's inception in 2007, we have opened more than 20,000 advocacy cases. Our Advocates also conduct regular outreach work, letting young people know about their rights under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and teaching self-advocacy skills to hundreds of children and youth per year to help them find their own voices regarding those rights.

This accompanying report – *From Marginalized to Magnified: Youth Homelessness Solutions from Those with Lived Expertise* – is, in many ways, an extension of our Advocacy work. By assisting with the creation of the report, produced by University of Calgary graduate student and A Way Home Kamloops Society Executive Director Katherine McParland and her advisory group of youth leaders, RCY staff have helped to bring forward the voices of a cohort of young people who are too often marginalized in our society.

In addition to our Advocates, RCY staff from our Monitoring and Communications teams, have also assisted on this project. Bringing forward youth voices in meaningful ways such as this report is another key function of our Office and one we will continue to expand upon.

Youth homelessness is a serious issue in B.C. and young people who are in government care or receiving services can be among the most vulnerable to experiencing homelessness due to the trauma, disruptions and adversity that they have experienced.

Our Advocates regularly witness first-hand how the fear of homelessness affects the young people who are approaching their 19th birthday without proper planning or supports in place. Our Critical Injury and Death Reviews and Investigations unit sees the tragic effects that homelessness – or the threat of it – can have on a young person through the injury and death reportables the team receives and reviews monthly from the Ministry of Children and Family Development and other public bodies. But one doesn't have to work at RCY to realize the seriousness and breadth of this issue in our province. Visit virtually any city in B.C. and, before too long, the signs of youth homelessness become evident.

The *UNCRC*, which underscores much of our work at the RCY, includes a child's right to nutrition, clothing and safe housing (Article 27). It also includes a respect for children's views and diverse modes of expression (Articles 12 and 13). What better project, then, for the RCY to sponsor and help raise the voices of those with "lived expertise" – the young people who have lived through various forms of homelessness, ranging from being on the street, to living in encampments, to couch-surfing, to staying in shelters and temporary residences?

RCY staff began working with Ms. McParland and her advisory group – Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C. – two years ago. That advisory group, along with RCY staff, helped Ms. McParland to organize 13 youth forums across B.C. exploring the topic of youth homelessness in-depth. The resulting report features an analysis of the input collected from those forums, as well as an online survey, and research by the author. It also includes direct messages from Youth Against Youth Homelessness B.C. and photos and artwork contributed by the youth. Although RCY supported and facilitated the production of this report, it is truly a report by youth with lived expertise about youth homelessness.

Young people participated in various ways through this project to identify the pathways that can lead youth into homelessness, the impacts of being homeless, and the barriers that can prevent them from accessing housing and receiving effective supports and services. Those aspects are all examined in the accompanying report, which also shines a light on some of the good work being done in the province to address youth homelessness. The report concludes with a number of solutions proposed by the youth who participated in the process.

The provincial government has acknowledged the need to take action on homelessness in Together BC, its poverty reduction strategy. However, there has not yet been any specific recognition of the unique experiences and needs of youth who face homelessness – often after being in government care. The lone recommendation of this youth-voice report calls for government to develop a distinct plan to end youth homelessness and to involve youth with lived expertise in the development of that plan.

I agree with that recommendation and echo these young peoples' call for a youth-specific plan to address the issue in B.C. I also call on government – led by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction in collaboration with other ministries and public bodies – to include youth in the development of that plan and, as part of that process, to carefully consider the solutions offered in the accompanying report.

Respectfully,



Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth  
Representative for Children and Youth

# Contact Information

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