

Feature Series

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Poverty robs children of their youth, says advocate

24 In the summer, those youth might spend the night on the beach in Burlington or under a bridge in Oakville, added Tina Blatchford, executive director of the Children's Aid Foundation of Halton.

"Youth homelessness is a complex situation and there are many reasons," said Levac. "The fact is that no one chooses to be homeless. Two prevailing issues are often parents with addictions, or blended family issues around conflict in the home. Youth leave home when they do not feel safe."

BTG offers homeless youth three different housing options: the host home program, where willing families provide a room to a youth in crisis; the Bridge House program — one house in Burlington and one in Milton — which helps young people transition to independent living, and case management where BTG staff help youth coordinate their own housing.

The complexity of situations involving Halton youth is increasing, said Levac.

"Our youth in Halton seem more isolated and more alone in their life situations. There are more issues with regards to developmental/cognitive functioning, greater presence of mental health and addiction, as well as youth who are pregnant and/or parenting."

Complicating the situation is the increase in housing, public transportation and food costs, said Levac.

"Youth need an ongoing support network to assist them in managing day to day," said Levac. "This would normally be fulfilled by family — opening a bank account, learning to budget, grocery shopping, taking transit — but without that support, the day to day living lessons of life get filled through formal support service."

An organization working to make grassroots change is RAFT (Resource Association for Teens), a drop-in centre for youths located in St. Catharines.

Executive Director Michael Lethby said the centre is primarily focused on ending youth homelessness in that region.

It operates a 16-bed shelter for young males and females where youths can stay while they work on getting home, or finding a new place to live.

"If returning home isn't an option, we work to find them independent housing," said Lethby, adding it partners with community agencies to make that happen.

"Youth homelessness isn't driven by poverty. They don't all come from impoverished homes, but once they do end up homeless, they are definitely impoverished youths," he said.

The goal, though, is to intervene before it gets to that point. Through its award-winning Youth Reconnect program, RAFT works to



Youth homelessness isn't driving by poverty, according to RAFT executive director Michael Lethby. However, once they are homeless, they are "definitely impoverished youth," he said. *Thinkstock photo*

identify kids before they become homeless and focus on having them stay in school, while working on whatever issues are causing the current situation. This program, Lethby said, is in place across the region and relies on assistance from teachers and school officials to identify need.

"They're well aware of students' conditions and will make the referral to us," he said.

Once a youth is identified, they work to make his or her conditions better. The key, Lethby said, is to ensure they stay in school. If staying in their home isn't possible, they work to find a place in their community where they can stay so they don't have to leave their school. If a Fort Erie youth, for example, has to come stay in the St. Catharines shelter, transportation is provided to their home school to maintain continuity.

RAFT also works with Niagara Region to set up after-school programs to give youths, especially those living in poverty, a break. Lethby notes for a lot of children growing up in single-parent households, the older siblings end up looking after their younger siblings while their mother or father is at work. As a result, they miss out on a lot of social opportunities like extra-curricular activities. To combat that, RAFT's after-school programs are a chance for both older and younger siblings to engage with peers.

"Even if their family can afford these programs, sometimes the problem is they can't physically get there, so we brought the programs to them," he said, adding programs

range from sports and recreation to arts and homework help.

In larger communities, like St. Catharines and Niagara Falls, people are aware there is a problem with poverty and youth homelessness. In more affluent communities, like

Grimsby, where poverty rates are low, it's not always as easy to gather support.

"Youth leave home when they don't feel safe."

STEVE LEVAC
BTG Program Manager

"It creates a bigger issue because people assume there aren't problems because they live in such a well-off community... But there's hidden homelessness everywhere," he said.

Such is also the case in Halton, where homelessness and poverty remain hidden in the mostly-affluent community.

But the Halton Poverty Roundtable reports that poverty affects one in 10 residents in Halton, with 11,120 of those impacted being children.

And across Canada, Campaign 2000 reports that one in seven users of homeless shelters are children.

Bridging the Gap serves 300 Halton youth annually

SOURCE
BTG

"The thing about child poverty is it robs youths of their youth," said Lethby, the executive director of the youth drop-in centre in St. Catharines. "They no longer have space to be young anymore. They have to make adult decisions about their schooling, whether to enter the workforce earlier. These are adult decisions being made by youths and

it's a real detriment that robs youths of the chance to be young."

"When our kids become homeless, in the past the only opportunity for them was to go

downtown... our goal is to wrap around these kids and change their situation."

That means housing support that gives them time to develop life and employment skills, partner them with a mentor and slowly work their way up to affording market rate rents.

In York Region, the organization 360 Kids Support Services provides supports to youth between the ages of 13 and 26. Its Director of Operations is Bonnie Harkness, who is working on adopting the Britain's NightStop program that would see community members, who have a spare bedroom in their home, partner with youths who need a place to stay. "It's really getting the community involved in dealing with the issue," she explains.

Simcoe Hall Settlement House has been reaching out to Oshawa families living in poverty for 81 years, said executive director Elizabeth Fernandes, and still the problem of poverty persists.

Before becoming executive director, she ran the organization's food bank for eight years and saw a mix of families looking for support. Some were generationally poor, Simcoe Hall clients, who visited as children now visiting with their own kids, while others suffered from situational poverty as the region's manufacturing industry hit tough times.

In 2015, the organization served 8,023 people, including 2,432 children.

Families can visit the food bank once a month and Fernandes said she wishes people could visit more frequently, but the organization already goes through 60,000 pounds of food every three months.

Like Harkness, Fernandes emphasizes the importance of life and employment skills as the key to breaking out of poverty. One program, conducted through the local YMCA sees youths paid a minimum wage to take a four-week course where they learn those essential skills. A similar program can be accessed in York Region, said Harkness.

"It's been a great course because I've seen some of the kids that have been with their parents that are in this generational thing of the OW (Ontario Works) and that going on and they're breaking out of it," said Fernandes. "It's how to address a person when going somewhere and looking for a job, and just giving them those coping skills, how to budget your money, how to find a job, how to go about doing up a resume, all those things." Fernandes said the key to helping children experiencing poverty is helping their parents and, as it stands, there are a lot of barriers to people breaking the cycle.

Next week, Growing up poor continues to look at homelessness and the Milton-based organization helping those break the cycle of poverty.