PRECARIOUS LIVES: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF HOMELESS YOUTH
TRANSITIONS TO INDEPENDENT HOUSING

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
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Homelessness has reached epidemic proportions in Canada, with youth comprising a significant segment of this population. While we know a great deal about the risk factors associated with young people entering street life, we know much less about how to facilitate and sustain homeless youth transitions off the streets. To date, there have been only a handful of longitudinal studies designed to examine the trajectories of youth who exit homelessness. Moreover, none of these longitudinal studies were designed to exclusively examine the experiences of youth transitioning to independent housing, where youth pay market rent and are required to be more self-sufficient. The goal of the study was to address this knowledge gap by producing an emic (insider) perspective on the experiences of formerly homeless youth as they transitioned into independent housing and attempted to achieve meaningful social integration. To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the subjective and objective aspects of meaningful social integration, the study was guided by a Postcolonial Feminist theoretical framework alongside the World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health conceptual framework. A critical ethnography was utilized to reveal socioeconomic and political factors that shape the transition to independent housing and to meaningful social integration. During ten months of fieldwork, I met every other week with nine formerly homeless youth who had recently moved into independent housing. The majority of youth were individually interviewed 13 to 19 times. In total, I conducted 119 hour-long informal interviews. Three key findings emerged: 1) youth
appeared “successfully” housed but lived in chronic precarity; 2) youth experienced a shift in identity and employed this as a self-preservation strategy; and 3) the process of independently maintaining housing undermined the youths’ sense of mastery and control. Despite their remarkable agency, participants’ lack of tangible and intangible resources meant they were housed in poverty and remained marginalized. I propose a new conceptual framework, highlighting the tangible and intangible resources needed by youth attempting the daunting task of transitioning off the streets.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to the nine amazing young adults who allowed me to join them on their journey. Thank you for being patient with my questions and generous with your time. I feel privileged to know you and to have learned from you.

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This journey would not have been possible without the support of my husband Ryan and our three children, Madison, Mackenzie, and Jackson. Ryan, thank you for your many hours of editing and for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. Madi, Kenzie, and Jack, as proud as I am of this work, I am more proud to be your mom.

You will keep the mind that is dependent on you in perfect peace, for it is trusting in You.

~ Isaiah 26:3
# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>CAS</td>
<td>Children’s Aid Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSDH</td>
<td>Commission on Social Determinants of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ2S</td>
<td>Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, and 2-spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LICO</td>
<td>Low Income Cut-Off</td>
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<tr>
<td>OW</td>
<td>Ontario Works</td>
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<tr>
<td>ODSP</td>
<td>Ontario Disability Support Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCF</td>
<td>Postcolonial Feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTC</td>
<td>Toronto Transit Commission</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................. iv

ABBREVIATIONS ...................................................................................................................... v

TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF TABLES ......................................................................................................................... xiv

LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................................... xv

LIST OF APPENDICES ............................................................................................................... xvi

PREFACE ....................................................................................................................................... xvii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1

Transitioning off the Streets ........................................................................................................... 2

Housing Options ........................................................................................................................... 3

The Problem ................................................................................................................................... 5

Research Goal .............................................................................................................................. 6

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS ...................................... 8

Critical Social Paradigm ................................................................................................................. 9

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism ............................................................................. 10

Hybridity: Making Space in the Margins ....................................................................................... 12

Othering: Markers of Difference ................................................................................................ 12

Intersectionality: Race-Class-Gender .......................................................................................... 14

Summary of Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................ 14

Conceptual Framework: Social Determinants of Health .............................................................. 15

Social Exclusion and Health Inequities ....................................................................................... 15
Structural Determinants ........................................................................................................... 17
Intermediary Determinants ................................................................................................. 17
Crosscutting Determinant ..................................................................................................... 18

Promoting social capital and social cohesion among marginalized populations .......... 21
Summary of Conceptual Framework ..................................................................................... 21
**Summary of Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks** ......................................................... 22

**CHAPTER THREE: THE LITERATURE REVIEW** ................................................................. 24
Search Strategies ..................................................................................................................... 25

**Canadian Homeless Youth: Predominant Challenges** ...................................................... 26
Ethno-Racial Diversity .......................................................................................................... 27
LGBTQ2S Youth .................................................................................................................... 28
Child Welfare Involvement .................................................................................................... 28
Education and Employment .................................................................................................... 29
Physical and Mental Health ................................................................................................... 30
Summary .................................................................................................................................. 31

**Transitioning off the Streets: Key Findings from Longitudinal Studies** ....................... 31
Summary .................................................................................................................................. 36

**Social Support and Social Connectedness** .................................................................... 36
Social Support ......................................................................................................................... 37
Social Connectedness ............................................................................................................. 37
Summary .................................................................................................................................. 39

**Key Challenges in Achieving Meaningful Social Integration: Empirical Studies** ........ 39
Perception of Social Support ................................................................................................. 39
Participant Demographics ................................................................................................. 60
Alexandra ......................................................................................................................... 60
Ashley ............................................................................................................................... 61
John .................................................................................................................................. 61
Kat ................................................................................................................................... 61
Lin .................................................................................................................................... 61
Marcel .............................................................................................................................. 61
Phillip ............................................................................................................................... 62
Phoenix ............................................................................................................................ 62
Robert ............................................................................................................................... 62
Data Generation .................................................................................................................. 64
Participant observation ..................................................................................................... 65
Informal/Go-along interviews .......................................................................................... 66
  Interview questions .......................................................................................................... 68
Questionnaires .................................................................................................................. 68
Limitations ........................................................................................................................ 69
Data Analysis and Interpretation .......................................................................................... 70
Making Sense of the Data .................................................................................................. 70
Developing Analytical and Interpretive Depth .................................................................. 71
  Silence as data .................................................................................................................. 73
Data Reduction .................................................................................................................. 73
Writing as Analysis ......................................................................................................... 75
  The zoom model ............................................................................................................. 75
CHAPTER SIX: SHIFTING IDENTITIES ................................................................. 136
Commitment and Autonomy .............................................................................. 138
Passionate Commitment .................................................................................. 138
Fierce Autonomy ............................................................................................... 140
Navigating Relationships .................................................................................. 143
Creating Distance .............................................................................................. 143
Social Support .................................................................................................... 145
Resisting the Margins ........................................................................................ 152
Big Dreams ......................................................................................................... 152
Monetary Purchases .......................................................................................... 155
Summary of Strategies for Survival ................................................................. 157

CHAPTER SEVEN: PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF MAINTAINING
HOUSING ........................................................................................................... 159
Insecure Identities ............................................................................................... 160
Poverty as Identity .............................................................................................. 161
Stigma of Poverty ............................................................................................... 163
Anger with Poverty ............................................................................................. 165
The Game of Life ................................................................................................. 167
Chronic Insecurity ............................................................................................... 168
Overwhelmed ...................................................................................................... 170
Life as Chance .................................................................................................... 172
Alienation ............................................................................................................. 174
Isolation ................................................................................................................ 174
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants at Baseline..........................63
TABLE 2: Data Generation Timetable............................................................................65
TABLE 3: The Zoom Model.............................................................................................76
TABLE 4: Primary Source of Income at Baseline..............................................................89
TABLE 5: Accommodation at Baseline............................................................................91
TABLE 6: Age When Left Parental Home and Child Welfare Involvement......................98
TABLE 7: Cost of Post-Secondary Education in Toronto................................................102
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Commission on Social Determinants of Health Conceptual Framework ....16
FIGURE 2: Data Generation and Analysis Strategy ................................................. 71
FIGURE 3: The Hour Glass Model ........................................................................... 77
FIGURE 4: Alexandra’s Room ................................................................................. 92
FIGURE 5: Entrance to Phillip’s Basement Suite .................................................. 92
FIGURE 6: Map of Accommodations in Relation to Public Transit .................... 95
FIGURE 7: Percent of Racialized Group Members by Toronto Neighbourhoods ......112
FIGURE 8: Money Mart ......................................................................................... 115
FIGURE 9: Lottery Ticket Stores ............................................................................ 115
FIGURE 10: Outside Phillip’s Home ...................................................................... 116
FIGURE 11: Outside John’s Home ......................................................................... 116
FIGURE 12: Boys and Girls Club .......................................................................... 116
FIGURE 13: Basketball Court .............................................................................. 116
FIGURE 14: Proposed Conceptual Framework for Youths’ Meaningful Social Integration ........................................................................................................... 211
LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Search Strategy: Empirical Studies .............................................................. 249

APPENDIX B: Transitioning off the Streets: Longitudinal Studies ............................... 250

APPENDIX C: Recruitment Flyer ....................................................................................... 251

APPENDIX D: Initial Interview Guide ............................................................................... 252

APPENDIX E: Subsequent Interview Guide ...................................................................... 253

APPENDIX F: Baseline Demographic Questionnaire ...................................................... 254

APPENDIX G: Monthly Questionnaire ............................................................................ 255

APPENDIX H: Initial Coding Scheme: April 2015 ......................................................... 256

APPENDIX I: Final Coding Scheme: April 2016 ............................................................ 257

APPENDIX J: Sample Code Definitions .......................................................................... 258

APPENDIX K: Analytic Memos ....................................................................................... 261

APPENDIX L: Research Approval Process at Covenant House Toronto .......................... 262

APPENDIX M: Consent Form ............................................................................................ 263

APPENDIX N: Dissemination Strategies ......................................................................... 268
In my role as a nurse practitioner and medical director at Canada’s largest agency for street-involved and homeless youth, I have spent the past six years providing healthcare to current and formerly homeless young people. Prior to beginning my research, I believed I had a good grasp of the challenges confronted during the transition off the streets. Despite this, I always displayed great optimism when youth shared with me that they had left the shelter system and moved out on their own. As I conducted my fieldwork, my perspective shifted as my eyes were opened to structural barriers and to “outsiderness” in ways that were not possible from the safety of the shelter-based clinic. Over time, I saw first-hand how social structures can be oppressive, positioning people in ways that make it remarkably challenging to move forward.

Throughout this dissertation, I have endeavored to be transparent about my own journey from the privileged “center” to the margins. It is my hope that this reflexivity allows the reader to assess the rigour of my work and to judge whether this work truly presents a hybrid knowledge that goes beyond speaking on behalf of participants to speaking with participants. I have worked hard to offer a decentered perspective on homeless youth transitions to independent housing, tackling the complexity of meaningful social integration from an academic perspective while upholding the perspectives of the youth participating in the study.

My doctoral research has shown me that even the most well-meaning members of society are often unaware of the true magnitude of structural inequities and how challenging it can be for the socially and economically disadvantaged among us to move beyond day-to-day survival. I hope that this work makes a modest contribution in this regard, shedding light on how, as a society, we can share responsibility for and bolster the resources we offer these vulnerable youth.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. ~ Maya Angelou

Homelessness has reached epidemic proportions in Canada, with youth comprising almost 20% of this population (Gaetz, Dej, Richter, & Redman, 2016). It is estimated that between 35,000 and 40,000 Canadian youth (aged 13 – 25 years) are homeless at some point during the year and at least 6,000 on any given night (Gaetz & Redman, 2016). In Canada’s largest city – Toronto, Ontario – it is estimated that 1,000 – 2,000 youth find themselves searching for a place to sleep on any given night (Covenant House Toronto, 2016).

While homeless youth come from diverse backgrounds, they tend to have much in common. Frequently, these young people are fleeing unstable and complicated home lives. Approximately 70% of street-involved youth acknowledge a history of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse (Gaetz, 2009; Kulik, Gaetz, Crowe, & Ford-Jones, 2011). They also consistently report growing up with disturbing levels of poverty and neglect, and overwhelming feelings of alienation (Karabanow, 2009). Other commonalities include inadequate education, limited employment opportunities, and poor physical and mental health (Evenson, 2009; Gaetz, 2014b; Kidd, 2013; Kulik et al.; Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2006; Public Interest, 2009).

The definition of homelessness is viewed as a continuum (Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2005). There are those that are obviously homeless, living in places not intended for human habitation. We may see (or pretend not to see) these individuals lying on the sidewalk, sitting in a makeshift shelter, or sleeping on a park bench. Homelessness also includes people who are less visibly homeless. In Toronto, roughly 75% of homeless youth do not utilize shelters (Hwang,
2001), opting instead to drift between family, friends, and acquaintances – a term commonly known as “couch surfing” (Kulik et al., 2011). Although the transient and fluid nature of youth homelessness results in a spectrum of living situations, for ease of reference the terms street-involved and homeless will be used interchangeably in this dissertation.

Transitioning off the Streets

While we know a great deal about the risk factors associated with young people entering street life, we know much less about how to facilitate and sustain homeless youth transitions off the streets (Karabanow, 2008; Kidd, Karabanow, Hughes, & Frederick, 2013; Mayock, O’Sullivan, & Corr, 2011). Understanding pathways out of homelessness is crucial because once youth become entrenched in street life it becomes much harder for them to exit homelessness (Gaetz, 2014b; Karabanow, Carson, & Clement, 2010; Public Interest, 2009).

There have been a handful of important longitudinal (longer than six months) studies documenting street-involved youths’ pathways out of homelessness (Brueckner, Green, & Sagers, 2011; Kidd et al., 2016; Mayock et al., 2011; Milburn et al., 2009; Roy et al., 2014; Slesnick, Bartle-Haring, Dashora, Kang, & Aukward, 2008; Tevendale, Comulada, & Lightfoot, 2011); however, there is no consistent definition among these studies of “housing” (own apartment, foster home, jail, shelter, family, etc.) for the participants who became housed at various points in time during the study period. This makes it challenging to compare the studies and to understand the nuances and implications associated with the transition to specific kinds of housing options. Furthermore, only three of these studies adopted a qualitative focus (Brueckner et al.; Kidd et al.; Mayock et al.), and thus the intangible aspects of transitioning off the streets are not fully explored.

1 Kidd et al. (2016) and Karabanow, Kidd, Frederick, & Hughes (2016) references refer to the same study.
On the other hand, findings from a cross-sectional, qualitative multi-city Canadian study involving 128 homeless youth and 50 service providers do offer a more nuanced understanding of youth transitions out of homelessness, demonstrating that re-entering mainstream culture can be the most difficult aspect of this transition (Karabanow, 2008). Young people in the Karabanow study spoke of the struggle to attain meaningful social integration and to move “from identities of exclusion (i.e., being different, feeling stigmatized and marginalized) to one of fitting into mainstream lifestyles” (p. 786). Results from a recent longitudinal mixed methods Canadian study of formerly homeless youth (n = 51) echo these findings and show that obtaining stable housing does not necessarily translate into a sense of belonging or connection to mainstream society (Kidd et al., 2016). Furthermore, youth living in non-supportive contexts (i.e., independent housing) appear to struggle the most with social integration (Kidd et al.). The authors of this study assert that it is imperative to give proper attention to the psychological aspects of community integration for youth embarking on a transition out of homelessness. It is evident that the qualitative contribution of both these studies provides a more comprehensive understanding of the elusive aspects of transitioning off the streets and of the challenges in achieving meaningful social integration; however, given the limited empirical evidence in this area, there is still much to be learned.

**Housing Options**

When homeless youth are ready to transition off the streets, there are generally three housing options (apart from moving in with friends or family) available: emergency shelters,

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2 The word mainstream is used throughout this thesis and is meant as “the ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional” (Oxford University Press, 2016).

3 A holistic definition of social integration is used throughout this thesis – one that incorporates the relational nature of the inclusionary/exclusionary processes (Popay et al., 2008; Solar & Irwin, 2010). Accordingly, the terms “social integration” and “social inclusion” will be used interchangeably, with both terms understood to be the opposite of social exclusion. I address this further in Chapter Two.
transitional or supportive\(^4\) housing (congregate or separate units with built-in support), and independent housing (scattered site with no built-in support). Historically, youth have been transitioned from the streets to the shelter, from the shelter to transitional housing, and from transitional housing to their own apartment in the community (Gaetz, 2014b). The problem with this approach is that many youth cycle in and out of the emergency shelter system, either by choice or because they have not demonstrated that they are “ready” (still struggling with addiction, trouble following shelter rules, etc.) to maintain their own home, and become further entrenched in homelessness (Gaetz, 2014b).

Transitional housing models (notably the Foyer model in the United Kingdom [UK] and Australia, Eva’s Phoenix in Canada, and Covenant House in North America and Latin America) provide youth with a safe environment to develop living skills, enrol in education or training, and find employment (Covenant House International, 2016; The Foyer Federation, 2011, 2014; Transitions for Youth, 2007). However, one major critique of the transitional housing model is that it is time-limited (typically one year in Canada and one-to-two years in the UK), with funding limitations that make appropriate aftercare (ongoing assistance with education, employment, etc.) difficult to sustain (Gaetz & Scott, 2012; Smith, Browne, Newton, & O’Sullivan, 2006; Transitions for Youth). For example, an 18-month longitudinal study of former Foyer residents \((n = 126)\) in the UK found that young people continued to live in poverty either because of low welfare benefits or low employment wages (Smith et al.). In addition, extremely limited finances meant the majority were excluded from the private rental market and, in general, ex-residents did not get involved with the local community (Smith et al.).

\(^4\) Although the terms “supportive” and “supported” housing are often used interchangeably in the literature, it is important to distinguish supportive housing from supported housing. The latter is a core component of the Housing First model, where tenants are provided with subsidised, scattered site units with off-site, community-based support (Macnaughton, Goering, & Nelson, 2012).
In recent years – particularly in North America – there has been a shift away from short-term transitional housing models to other models such as “Housing First”, whereby homeless individuals are provided with appropriate supports and offered long-term housing as swiftly as possible, even though they may be facing other challenges such as addiction or mental illness (Goering et al., 2011; Hwang, Stergiopoulos, O’Campo, & Gozdzik, 2012; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). However, it is important to point out that, to date, the Housing First model has predominantly been utilized and researched in adult populations (Goering et al.; Hwang et al.). It remains to be seen whether this type of approach is appropriate for homeless youth, or will best serve the needs of these young people in the long run (Gaetz, 2014a). For example, a recent evaluation of the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary’s Housing First initiative (The Infinity Project) showed that a shortage of employment options (due to lack of experience and skill level), inadequate wages, and limited opportunities to fully participate in education (due to financial obligations), meant that many residents (aged 16 to 24 years) continued to live in poverty (Scott & Harrison, 2013). Additionally, preliminary findings from a three-year Canadian study of homeless youth (aged 16 to 25 years) living with mental illness and addiction (n = 187) revealed that a significant number (31%) of youth felt unprepared for the level of independence offered in the Housing First model (Forchuk et al., 2013).

The Problem

Youth homelessness is different from adult homelessness, and our housing interventions need to reflect this. We must appreciate the fact that these youth are still progressing through the normal stages of adolescent development, and they (just like housed youth) need ongoing support to progress toward independence. In other words, homeless youth not only need help

5 Calgary is a major city located in Alberta, Canada.
with transitioning to independent living, but help with successfully transitioning to adulthood (Gaetz, 2014a). The latter involves ensuring opportunities for employment, education, and social inclusion. Offering youth a home cannot be divorced from the context of lives layered with intersecting narratives of trauma, abandonment, poverty, poor physical and mental health, inadequate education, and limited employment opportunities. An over-emphasis on attaining independent living without addressing these factors may inadvertently condemn youth to a life of poverty (Gaetz, 2014a). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that living independently can be isolating and lonely for any youth; this is especially true for homeless youth as they begin to break ties with their “street families” and service providers (who often serve the role of surrogate parents) in order to make vital connections with those who can help them succeed in mainstream culture (Karabanow et al., 2010; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013). The qualitative work done by Karabanow (2008) and Kidd et al. (2016) demonstrates that it is these intangible aspects of trying to move from a familiar place of social exclusion to an unfamiliar place of social integration that homeless youth struggle with the most. This is especially true for youth who are moving from the streets to independent housing (Kidd et al.) – a group yet to be the exclusive focus of substantive investigation.

**Research Goal**

To advance our understanding of how best to support youth in their transition off the streets and into adulthood, a qualitative study of how youth experience a move from the streets to independent housing is needed. Moreover, research that critically examines the complex interplay among social exclusion and other determinants of health such as housing will add valuable knowledge to the limited empirical evidence of the transition process. The goal of this study is to address this knowledge gap by providing an emic perspective on the experiences of
formerly homeless youth as they transition into independent housing and attempt to achieve meaningful social integration.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Poverty is a social and psychological condition... Poverty means being excluded from whatever passes for ‘normal life’. It means being ‘not up to the mark’. Poverty also means being cut off from the chances of whatever passes in a given society for a ‘happy life’...

~ Zygmunt Bauman (2001)

The further I immersed myself in the literature pertaining to youth homelessness, the more I grappled with how best to conceptualize the complexities associated with homeless youths’ struggle to transition off the streets and achieve meaningful social integration. Much of the literature on social integration focuses on poverty and unemployment, with the idea being that money and work allow individuals to more fully participate in mainstream society; however, this relatively narrow perspective on social integration fails to capture how social inclusion and social exclusion are experienced, produced, and reproduced socially (Allman, 2012; Levitas, 1996). Furthermore, the impact of factors such as class, race, and gender are not always fully explored in the social integration literature (Allman; Levitas). For homeless youth, there may be other dynamics at play that prevent them from feeling integrated into society despite the fact that they may have obtained long-term housing and a regular pay check. Accordingly, I wanted to utilize a framework that allowed me to capture both the subjective and objective aspects of social integration. My challenge became two-fold: 1) I required a framework that allowed me to incorporate homeless youths’ varied yet similar experiences of social exclusion in a meaningful way; and 2) I required a framework that took a holistic approach to social integration.

Ultimately, I chose two frameworks – one theoretical and one conceptual – to help guide my research with homeless youth. In this chapter I begin by providing an overview of the Critical
Social paradigm. This is followed by a description of Postcolonial Feminist (PCF) theory and of the conceptual framework developed for the World Health Organization (WHO) by the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) (Solar & Irwin, 2010). The chapter ends with an overview of how PCF theory can work alongside the CSDH framework in order to better understand the challenges faced by homeless youth as they transition into independent housing.

**Critical Social Paradigm**

Both theoretical and conceptual frameworks are situated within the critical social research paradigm, which house critical theories frequently utilized by those working in social sciences and humanities to critique social conditions (e.g., socioeconomic and political environments) in order to expose the “unseen forces” (Strega, 2005, p. 208) that are perpetuating power imbalances within society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Prasad, 2005). This attention to both the objective and subjective aspects of social inclusion (and exclusion) is what drew me to theoretical perspectives under this paradigm, as I believe they will allow me to conduct a more sophisticated analysis of meaningful social integration for homeless youth.

Within the critical social theory paradigm various theories have been set forth that share a common interest in understanding and transforming marginalized populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Prasad, 2005). In truth, an argument could be made for incorporating the viewpoints of any one of the contemporary critical social theorists as a way of analyzing social integration. For example, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital improves our understanding of the impact that social connections (or lack thereof) can have on access to valuable resources within society (Kawachi & Berkman, 2011; Solar & Irwin, 2010). In other words, individuals with limited access to social capital (i.e., not knowing people in positions of power and influence) are also less likely to experience meaningful social integration.
Poststructural theorist Michel Foucault also offers important contributions that can help develop a more comprehensive understanding of social integration. Foucault’s perspective on the relational and subtle nature of power, and the relationship between power and what counts as “truth” in society is frequently utilized by social activist researchers conducting research with marginalized populations (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Strega, 2005). While matters regarding power and social capital could arguably be a suitable emphasis for my research with homeless youth, on their own these concepts fail to capture the complex, multi-faceted nature of youth homelessness. In fact, one important critique of the various critical theoretical perspectives is that many either fail to consider the impact that “difference” (non-Caucasian, non-heterosexual, non-male, etc.) makes, or treat all claims of difference equally, consequently misrepresenting the social realities of those marginalized by mainstream society (Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

**Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism**

PCF theory (sometimes referred to as Third World or Third Wave feminism) is situated within the critical social paradigm and was developed in the 1980s, in part, from the observation of Black⁶ feminists that the feminist movement up to that time was predominantly represented by White, middle-class women, and did not represent the experiences or viewpoints of other women – in particular, women of color and women living in poverty (McEwan, 2001; Rajan & Park, 2005). Black feminists argued that, for Black women, gender domination was inextricably linked to race and class (McEwan; Rajan & Park). Consequently, PCF theory incorporates elements of postcolonialism – a process of continued struggle to transcend the effects of domination by those in power – and feminism, allowing researchers to critique how class, culture, race, and gender play out in the context of everyday life (Anderson, 2000; Khan et al., 2007; O’Mahony &

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⁶ The words “Black” and “White” are capitalized throughout this dissertation when referring to a racial or ethnic group (American Psychological Association, 2010).
Donnelly, 2010). I believe that a PCF perspective is particularly helpful to address the multiple forms of difference among homeless youth.

A PCF research project is viewed through a political lens, and the lived experiences of the marginalized are situated within a larger social, economic, political, and historical context (Reimer Kirkham & Anderson, 2002). Importantly, the subjugated narratives of those living on the margins of society (the “Other”) are valued and considered the starting point in knowledge construction (Khan et al., 2007; Reimer Kirkham & Anderson). In addition, this praxis-oriented form of research means that a PCF project is a social justice project (O’Mahony & Donnelly, 2010).

PCF theory resonates with me on both a professional and personal level. As a nurse practitioner working with street-involved youth, I appreciate that these youth have multiple identities and live very fluid and transient lives. For example, a youth may be privileged by race yet classed by poverty and sexual orientation. They also may be in a home one day and sleeping on the street the next. A theoretical lens that seeks to understand (and value) these multiple perspectives seems an appropriate choice. On a personal note – and to be transparent about my own social location – growing up as a female, in a mixed-race home, as an immigrant, in a family living (for our first few years in Canada) in relative poverty, I understand the experience of being marginalized on multiple levels and find the writings of PCF scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks7, and Joan Anderson particularly inspiring.

There are several key concepts embedded in PCF discourses that lend themselves to providing insight into the lived experiences of homeless youth. I have chosen three major concepts from PCF theory that complement the CSDH framework and facilitate a deeper

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7 bell hooks chooses not to capitalize her name so that people can focus on her work and her ideas rather than her name and her personality (BlackPast.org, 2015).
understanding of the challenges associated with moving from a familiar place of social exclusion to an unfamiliar place of social integration: a) hybridity; b) Othering; and c) intersectionality.

**Hybridity: Making space in the Margins**

In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford (1990), Homi Bhabha describes the concept of hybridity – or the Third Space – as a place where binaries of the ruler and the ruled do not exist; rather, it is a place where privileged knowledge (hegemony) can be “disarticulated” (p. 221). I understand this to mean that by decentering the production of knowledge from those in “power” (the center) to those who are socially excluded (the margins), we can create a new space – a space where transformative, emancipatory knowledge is both produced and valued. This new space within the margins can become a space of power and a place of resistance (Strega, 2005). I believe that by conducting research with street-involved youth, encouraging them to communicate and exchange knowledge in ways that are most meaningful to them, we begin to create new spaces – spaces in the margins – where stories of oppression and stories of resilience can be heard. The knowledge gleaned from these stories may be key to understanding how best to facilitate meaningful social integration for youth transitioning off the streets and into independent housing. In fact, the WHO Social Exclusion Knowledge Network asserts that, in order to effectively tackle social exclusion globally, researchers must move beyond the current predominant emphasis of objectively describing the elements of social exclusion, and capture the dynamic, subjective nature of the exclusionary process by drawing on the experiences of individuals most marginalized by society (Popay et al., 2008).

**Othering: Markers of Difference**

Othering and marginalization are closely related concepts and central to PCF theory. To be the Other means to be marked as being different (Lynam & Cowley, 2007). Some of the most
visible and pervasive markers of difference include gender, class, and color (Lynam & Cowley). Ironically, this visibility – of being different – leads to invisibility as the Other gets relegated to the margins of society. Consequently, as marginalized individuals begin to question their own value, a mutually reinforcing cycle of social exclusion, education failure, poverty, and ill health frequently develops (Lynam & Cowley). A stark example of this becomes apparent when we look at Canada’s Indigenous\(^8\) population. Canada’s reprehensible history of removing Aboriginal\(^9\) children from their homes and placing them in residential schools continues to reap monumental consequences (Evenson, 2009). National reports on homeless youth in Canada highlight that Aboriginal youth comprise the largest group of non-Caucasian homeless youth (PHAC, 2006), and there are currently more Aboriginal children in the child welfare system today than there were children in residential schools at their height (Evenson). It is posited that the cultural disconnection caused by residential schooling is an important cause of Aboriginal youth homelessness (Evenson). Clearly, the legacy of colonialism remains. A PCF approach to research seeks to decolonize Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) knowledge and offers the possibility of healing, transformation, and self-determination to youth who have spent most of their lives feeling powerless and abandoned. To recognize the Other as a person of equal value and treating them the same as those holding privileged positions in society is at the heart of PCF scholarship (Anderson, Reimer Kirkham, & Khan, 2009), and will be a fundamental aspect of my research with homeless youth.

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\(^8\) The term “Indigenous” is replacing the term “Aboriginal” in Canada in order to honour Indigenous Peoples longstanding ties to Canada and their history of displacement and territorial intrusion (Centre for Indigenous Studies, University of Toronto, 2016).

\(^9\) Aboriginal populations are those who identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Metis (Statistics Canada, 2015a). Both terms are used in this dissertation because the cited authors used the older term Aboriginal.
**Intersectionality: Race-Class-Gender**

The concept of intersectionality emphasizes that the different dimensions of our lives cannot be divided into discrete and pure components (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). All our voices are simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered (Anderson et al., 2009). Furthermore, these intersecting elements of race, class, and gender will manifest differently depending on the context of one’s life (Khan et al., 2007). In the case of homeless youth who generally share a similar social class, the concept of intersectionality will play out differently depending on the youths’ gender, sexual orientation, or race. For instance, homeless transgendered youth face particular challenges finding emergency shelter in gender-appropriate rooms (Abramovich, 2012), while street-involved Black youth are more likely than street-involved Caucasian youth to be targeted by police (Springer, Lum, & Roswell, 2013). Given the overrepresentation of certain “groups” (e.g., Indigenous and Black youth, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, and 2-spirit [LGBTQ2S], and youth involved in the child welfare system) among homeless youth (Evenson, 2009; Gaetz, 2009; Kulik et al., 2011), it is important to make visible the multiple and intersecting ways homeless youth are socially excluded, how this impacts their transition off the streets, and how current structural inequities can shift to meet these needs.

**Summary of Theoretical Framework**

PCF theory facilitates a deeper understanding of the subjective nature of social exclusion. Social conditions are critiqued to expose the unseen and/or unchallenged power imbalances within society that are preventing the marginalized from reaching their full potential. Multiple forms of difference such as race, class, gender, and culture are situated within the socioeconomic and political realities of everyday life to gain a comprehensive understanding of what it is like to
be the Other. This new knowledge has the power to be both transformative and emancipatory as we allow the marginalized among us to teach us how to go about making a society where everyone is included.

**Conceptual Framework: Social Determinants of Health**

It is widely acknowledged that the primary factors that shape physical, mental, and social health are not medical treatments or lifestyle “choices”, but rather the living conditions that people experience (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; Solar & Irwin, 2010; WHO, 2008). These conditions are frequently referred to as the social determinants of health. In this section I provide an overview of the CSDH framework, highlighting how this framework can enhance our understanding of why it can be so challenging for those who are marginalized to move from a place of social exclusion to a place of meaningful social integration.

**Social Exclusion and Health Inequities**

Social exclusion consists of “dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across four main dimensions – economic, political, social and cultural – and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global levels” (Popay et al., 2008, p. 2). Consequently, socially excluded individuals are significantly limited in their ability to fully integrate into mainstream society (limited education and employment opportunities, lack of affordable housing, less access to healthcare, etc.), ultimately leading to poor health outcomes (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; Popay et al.). One of the hallmark characteristics of social exclusion is that its consequences are linked and mutually

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10 In Canada, the social determinants of health are: Aboriginal status, disability, early life, education, employment and working conditions, food insecurity, health services, gender, housing, income and income distribution, race, social exclusion, social safety net, and unemployment and job security (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010).

11 Health inequities are *avoidable* inequalities in health between groups of people within countries and between countries (WHO, 2016).
reinforcing, meaning people often get trapped in a vicious cycle of inequity (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). While social exclusion can happen to anyone, some individuals are more likely to suffer social exclusion. The key risk factors include: family conflict, low income, being in foster care, mental health problems, school problems, being an ethnic minority, age (i.e., minors and older adults), disability, being an ex-prisoner, and living in a deprived neighbourhood (Mikkonen & Raphael; Social Exclusion Unit). The WHO (2008) maintains that health needs to be understood as a social phenomenon, meaning we must appreciate how the social hierarchies that create inequities are created and how they impact daily life. Furthermore, the WHO asserts that health inequities are created through “a toxic combination of poor social policies and programs, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics” (p.1). The CSDH framework (Figure 1) offers a holistic approach to understanding both the root causes and the consequences of social exclusion.

Figure 1

*Commission on Social Determinants of Health Conceptual Framework*

(Solar & Irwin, 2010)
Importantly, the CSDH framework delineates between structural determinants and intermediary determinants, underscoring the causal priority of structural factors (Solar & Irwin, 2010).

**Structural Determinants**

One of the predominant features of the CSDH framework is the strong emphasis on how the socioeconomic and political context of people’s lives impacts their ability to achieve health and social well-being. This emphasis was intended to highlight the way health inequities can almost always be traced back to poor public policy though they rarely are (Solar & Irwin, 2010). The structural condition of people’s lives (e.g., socioeconomic and political context) defines their socioeconomic position and their level of power, prestige, and access to resources. The most powerful stratifiers of health inequities and their proxy indicators include: education, occupation, income, race/ethnicity, gender, and social class (Solar & Irwin).

**Intermediary Determinants**

The structural determinants operate through a set of intermediary determinants that help shape health outcomes (Solar & Irwin, 2010). In other words, differences in exposure and vulnerability to health-compromising conditions are very much tied to ones’ socioeconomic position (Solar & Irwin). The intermediary determinants of health include: material circumstances (e.g., housing), behaviours and biological factors (e.g., substance use), psychosocial circumstances (e.g., social support), and the health system (e.g., access to healthcare). The authors of the CSDH framework posit that even when socially excluded populations are able to access the social determinants of health, the quality of these determinants is significantly lower. For example, marginalized groups tend to be offered sub-standard housing units in high-risk neighbourhoods (Solar & Irwin) with limited access to the numerous luxuries
(green spaces for recreation and quiet contemplation, quaint local shops, well-stocked public libraries, etc.) most middle- and upper-class people take for granted.

**Crosscutting Determinant**

Linking the structural and intermediary determinants is a crosscutting determinant containing the concepts social cohesion and social capital. While Solar and Irwin (2010) use the terms social cohesion and social capital interchangeably, there are some important differences worth highlighting. In addition, Solar and Irwin acknowledge that the utilization of a crosscutting determinant is controversial because it implies that social cohesion and social capital are the responsibility of the state (structural determinant) and of individuals and communities (intermediary determinant). In this section, I examine these closely related concepts, social cohesion and social capital, and outline dominant arguments regarding the placement of these concepts within the CSDH framework.

Social cohesion “refers to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society” (Kawachi & Berkham, 2000, p. 175). The origin of the concept is generally credited to 19th century French sociologist Emile Durkheim (often referred to as the “father of sociology”), who was ahead of his time in understanding “upstream thinking” in the context of the social determinants of health (Berkman & Krishna, 2014). Durkheim’s chief contribution was to shed light on the impact of social dynamics on individual pathology (Berkman & Krishna). For example, he famously wrote about how the individualistic act of suicide was the lowest in societies that had the greatest degree of social cohesion (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Kawachi & Berkman). In the 1990s, social epidemiologists such as Richard Wilkinson began to expand on Durkheim’s work, focusing on how class inequality negatively impacted social cohesion. Wilkinson underlines the psychological damage caused by class inequities (Wilkinson, 1999;
Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). He posits that the “hidden injuries” (Wilkinson, p. 536) arising from being in a lower class lead to feelings of shame, humiliation, rage, low self-esteem, and incompetence – ultimately undermining social cohesion and negatively impacting health (Wilkinson; Wilkinson & Pickett). Wilkinson suggests that those who experience emotional trauma, domestic conflict, and poor attachment during early childhood are especially vulnerable to, and impacted by, the damaging health consequences of diminished social cohesion (Wilkinson).

Social capital is a component of social cohesion (Kawachi & Berkham, 2000). Pierre Bourdieu\(^\text{12}\) and James Coleman were among the first social scientists to formally define the term social capital (Kawachi & Berkham). Since the term was introduced in the 1980s, it has gained popularity and been taken up by academics from a variety of disciplines, notably political scientist Robert Putnam. Although Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam differ somewhat in how they define and measure social capital, they have the common idea of being able to draw on tangible (e.g., mutual aid) and intangible (e.g., trust and norms of reciprocity) resources by virtue of belonging to a social structure or network (Kawachi & Berkham). Putnam (2000, 2004) also distinguishes between bridging social capital (inclusive social networks that link people of different ages, races, classes, etc.) and bonding social capital (exclusive social networks where people form bonds because they are the “same”). Putnam (2004) suggests that bonding social capital can help people “get by”, while bridging social capital has the potential to help people “get ahead”.

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\(^{12}\) Renowned sociologist Alejandro Portes asserts that Bourdieu’s analysis of social capital is the most theoretically refined, in part because Bourdieu distinguishes between the resources themselves and the ability (or lack thereof) to access those resources because of membership in the right or “wrong” social structure (Portes, 1998).
Solar and Irwin (2010) acknowledge that the crosscutting determinant occupies an unusual and contested space in the CSDH framework. There is concern that making marginalized communities and individuals responsible for social cohesion and social capital rather than powerful institutions and policy makers (i.e., as a more downstream, intermediary determinant vs. an upstream, structural determinant) depoliticizes the social determinants of health, allowing policy makers to justify seeking non-economic solutions to social inequities (Muntaner & Lynch, 1999; Muntaner, Lynch, & Oates, 1999; Solar & Irwin). Some public health scholars assert that the deleterious psychological impact of social exclusion is a consequence of lack of structural resources, and this cannot simply be “fixed” by becoming more socially cohesive (e.g., Davey Smith & Lynch, 2004; Muntaner & Lynch; Muntaner et al.; Navarro, 2004). On the other hand, the previously cited work by Wilkinson does show that becoming more socially cohesive can positively impact health outcomes. In addition, work done by Szreter & Woolcock (2004) suggests the concept of linking social capital should be a sub-type of Putnam’s bridging social capital, used to differentiate between social connections that cross hierarchies (linking social capital) and those that do not (bridging social capital).\textsuperscript{13} Solar & Irwin concur with Szreter & Woolcock and argue that, by placing social cohesion and social capital as a crosscutting determinant, they are recognizing the fact that the concept of linking social capital emphasizes the importance of the relationships and interactions between structural elements (e.g., powerful institutions and policy makers) and marginalized communities and individuals. I will return to this argument regarding the inclusion of a crosscutting determinant in Chapter Eight when I reconceptualise the CSDH framework in light of my study findings.

\textsuperscript{13} Putnam (2004) is “agnostic” (p.669) about whether this distinction is substantively important.
Promoting social capital and social cohesion among marginalized populations. The notion that social capital and social cohesion may play a key role in the development of meaningful social integration must be applied cautiously. One major critique of this mindset is that it offers an overly simplistic, elitist, and spatially-bound perspective on health and well-being (Kawachi, 2006; Portes, 1998; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). In other words, there may be a tendency to believe that people living in impoverished neighbourhoods simply need to become more internally cohesive as this will lead to improved health outcomes. In fact, there is good evidence to the contrary. Research has shown that families who live in impoverished communities and report low levels of social capital also report less behavioural problems among their children (Caughy, O’Campo, & Muntaner, 2003). On the other hand, people living in deprived neighbourhoods report receiving greater social support and feeling more socially connected when they develop relationships outside of their impoverished communities (Cattell, 2001; Stephens, 2008). The downside of building relationships with others in similar circumstances (i.e., bonding social capital) is also apparent when one looks at homeless youth. In the book Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth, Karabanow et al. (2010) emphasize that the strong bonds homeless youth form with one another can significantly undermine the desire (and the ability) to integrate into mainstream society. Karabanow and colleagues suggest that, in order for homeless youth to successfully integrate into mainstream society, they must break social capital with other street-involved youth and build (bridging) social capital with those living in mainstream society.

Summary of Conceptual Framework

The CSDH framework is a valuable tool that helps conceptualize the complex and mutually reinforcing cycle of social exclusion. One of the hallmarks of the framework is an
emphasis on the interplay between the structural and intermediary determinants of health, signifying how social hierarchies perpetuate unequal access to the social determinants of health, ultimately impeding meaningful social integration and optimal health outcomes. Importantly, the CSDH framework helps to illuminate the potential facets (social and public policy, gender- and race-related issues, access to education and employment, psychosocial supports, living conditions, etc.) for those interested in conducting research and/or advocacy work with marginalized populations. The crosscutting determinant – social capital and social cohesion – provides a critical link between the structural and intermediary determinants of health, and may play a key role in achieving meaningful social integration; however, it is essential to distinguish between relationships that help people “get by” (or get further behind) versus relationships that help people “get ahead”.

**Summary of Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it was a challenge sorting out how best to capture the complexities associated with homeless youths’ struggle to transition off the streets and integrate into mainstream society. I wanted to utilize a framework that would facilitate a deeper understanding of both the subjective and objective nature of social exclusion and the impact this has on the ability to achieve meaningful social integration. Ultimately, I chose one theoretical and one conceptual framework, situated within the same paradigm, to guide my research. The frameworks are complimentary in that many of the concepts embedded in the CSDH framework, such as socioeconomic and political context, socioeconomic position, social class, gender, and race, are also found in PCF theory. The principal difference between the two frameworks is that the CSDH framework adopts a more objective approach to social integration, while PCF theory places a strong emphasis on the subjective, lived experience of social
exclusion. In combining the two frameworks I believe I have produced a much more nuanced analysis of social integration in my research. By utilizing a PCF perspective alongside the CSDH framework, I was able to capture both the seen and the unseen – highlighting the role of socioeconomic and political factors in perpetuating social inequities, exploring the multiple and intersecting ways homeless youth experience social exclusion, and describing how these elements impact homeless youth as they obtain independent housing and begin the transition from a familiar place of social exclusion to an unfamiliar place of social integration.
CHAPTER THREE
THE LITERATURE REVIEW

*If it takes a village to raise a child, then why is it that so many children are raising themselves?*

~ Kat (Baseline)

Prior to beginning my literature review, I conducted a scan of youth homelessness in Canada, seeking not only to learn about their socio-demographic characteristics, but to understand the predominant challenges faced by street-involved youth and the impact these challenges have on their ability to successfully transition off the streets and into mainstream society. The direction for this initial scan was derived primarily from informal conversations with street-involved youth and front-line staff\(^{14}\), and community- and government-based documents.

The literature review proved to be an iterative process – as consistent themes and recommendations began emerging from the grey and peer-reviewed literature, I brought these ideas back to the youth and front-line staff and to my PhD committee for discussion. As I immersed myself in these discussions and in the literature, it became clear to me that for homeless youth to achieve meaningful social integration would involve not only providing them with a home, but also recognition of the psychosocial, relational factors that led them to become homeless and marginalized from mainstream society. Accordingly, I prepared for my fieldwork by focusing my literature review on longitudinal studies of homeless youth transitions into housing and on the following key concepts: a) social support; b) social connectedness; and c) social networks.

This chapter is divided into five main sections. After describing my search strategies, I provide an overview of the predominant challenges faced by Canadian homeless youth. This is

\(^{14}\) Youth and outreach staff from Covenant House and the Evergreen Clinic located in Toronto, Canada.
followed by an overview of empirical longitudinal studies examining homeless youth transitions into housing. Next, I provide definitions for the concepts social support and social connectedness. The final section highlights empirical studies that employ the concepts of social support, social connectedness, and social networks in the context of street-involved youth.

**Search Strategies**

Peer-reviewed literature was searched using the databases MEDLINE (OVID), PubMed, EMBASE, CINAHL, and SCOPUS. Grey literature was utilized as a supplement to the peer-reviewed literature and explored by searching websites of organizations known to serve street-involved youth, and utilizing Google, Google Scholar, and Homeless Hub (the largest library of homelessness-related resources in the world). Hand searching through the reference lists of peer-reviewed and grey literature (primarily government and community-based reports) was employed as a final search strategy. A research librarian at the University of Toronto Gerstein Library provided consultation on my search strategy to ensure I was accurately capturing all appropriate literature related to my research question.

The search for empirical studies was executed by combining various medical subject headings (MeSH) and key words of the following search terms: homeless youth, street-involved youth, youth, adolescence, homeless, housing, transition*, street-involved, social support, support, social integration, peer support, peer mentorship, mentor*, social connectedness, belongingness, loneliness, social exclusion, social inclusion, social capital, intervention*, and study*. All articles were written in English and published between 1998 and 2016. The literature review was a cyclical process, and as new material was uncovered the search terms were repeatedly revised and previously unknown sources of information explored. For example, by
adding the MeSH term “loneliness” I was able to gain deeper insight into the concept of social connectedness – something I had not thought to do at the outset.

The search for foundational articles used to define social connectedness and social support was performed by hand searching through the reference lists of the peer-reviewed empirical studies. There were no parameters placed on dates.

Empirical studies selected for inclusion are those pertaining to longitudinal (longer than six months) studies on homeless youth transitions into housing and the key concepts: a) social support; b) social connectedness; and c) social networks. Excluded studies included literature that may have been connected to housing and to the key concepts, but the information was not helpful in shedding light on the complexities associated with homeless youth transitions to independent housing. For example, many studies focused solely on exploring the negative aspects of social networks among street-involved youth (e.g., substance abuse), and those were excluded from the review. Peer-reviewed literature was rejected first by title ($n = 681$) then by abstract ($n = 42$) and finally at full paper ($n = 60$). In total, 25 peer-reviewed manuscripts were deemed suitable for inclusion (Appendix A). Grey literature helped provide context, but was not used as a source of information for the review of empirical studies.

**Canadian Homeless Youth: Predominant Challenges**

As highlighted in chapter one, Canadian homeless youth often share comparable experiences in terms of their chaotic and complicated upbringing, disturbing levels of poverty and neglect, and overwhelming feelings of alienation. They also share similar challenges related to their race and ethnicity, expression of gender and sexuality, child welfare involvement, education and employment, and physical and mental well-being (Evenson, 2009; Gaetz, 2009; Kulik et al., 2011; PHAC, 2006).
Ethno-Racial Diversity

From July 2015 to June 2016, homeless youth seeking shelter at Covenant House Toronto \((n = 857)\) – Canada’s largest agency for street-involved youth (Covenant House Toronto, 2016) – were most likely to identify their ethnicity/race as White-North American or -European (35%), Black-African, -Caribbean or -North American (34%), Asian-East, -South East or -South (8%), or Mixed Race (8%) (Covenant House Toronto, personal communication, October 25, 2016). Other ethnicities and races (15%) included Indigenous Canadian, Indian Caribbean, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and Other (Covenant House Toronto, personal communication, October 25, 2016). This diverse mixture of Toronto homeless youth is not surprising given Toronto, Canada is heralded as one of the most multicultural cities in the world with almost half (47%) of the population reporting that they identify as a visible minority (City of Toronto, 2016).

Indigenous and Black homeless youth warrant special consideration. While Indigenous Peoples make up only 4.3% of the Canadian population, between 28% and 34% of the homeless shelter population is Indigenous (Gaetz et al., 2016). Surveillance data from the Street Youth in Canada report \((n = 5,000)\) across seven major urban centres\(^{15}\) showed an 8% rise in homeless youth who identified as being Aboriginal over the five-year study period (PHAC, 2006). Another multi-city Canadian report involving homeless youth \((n = 689)\) identified a “strong link between the institutionalization of Aboriginal children and youth and the high rates of Aboriginal youth homelessness in some cities” and calls for “intensive culturally-appropriate supports at an early age” (Evenson, 2009, p. 21). Black youth also make up a significant proportion of the homeless population in Canada (particularly in Toronto); however, most published studies on homeless youth do not give enough (or any) attention to the experience of homelessness among racialized groups (Springer et al., 2013). For example, findings from a study of Caribbean homeless youth

\(^{15}\) Vancouver, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Halifax.
(n = 43) living in Toronto showed that in addition to experiencing ethnic slurs, these youth were stopped by police and arrested at a higher rate than homeless youth that were not Black (Springer et al.). A Toronto-based study (n = 208) involving homeless Black immigrant youth found that immigrant youth tend to transition off the streets more rapidly, but are less familiar with services offered by front line agencies (Public Interest, 2009). Furthermore, immigrant youth – particularly refugee youth – find that settlement-related challenges create additional stress, low self-esteem, anxiety, worry, sadness, depression, and feelings of helplessness (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves, 2010). Given the significant number of ethnically and racially diverse homeless youth in Canada, it is imperative to utilize a research framework that accounts for the additional challenges and stigma experienced by racialized groups.

**LGBTQ2S Youth**

It is estimated that 20 – 40% of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ2S (Abramovich, 2012; Gaetz, 2009; Kulik et al., 2011). LGBTQ2S youth have an increased risk of experiencing violence and exploitation due to homophobia and transphobia (Abramovich; Evenson, 2009). Transgender homeless youth have particular challenges around housing as many shelters do not know whether these youth should be placed in a male or a female room (Abramovich). In Toronto, agencies working with street-involved LGBTQ2S youth openly acknowledge that they are challenged in providing adequate supports for this important group of youth (Public Interest, 2009), in part because there has been very little knowledge dissemination pertaining to the care of homeless LGBTQ2S youth (Abramovich).

**Child Welfare Involvement**

The previously cited multi-city Canadian study of homeless youth (n = 689) found that 68% of study participants had come from foster care, group homes, or a youth centre (Evenson,
2009). The Street Youth in Canada report highlighted that the proportion of street-involved youth who had been involved in foster care ranged from 36% to 42%, and those who had lived in group homes ranged from 40% to 47% (PHAC, 2006). Longitudinal studies of youth leaving foster care show that 31% – 46% of these young people experience homelessness at least once by age 26 (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013), and 33% face ongoing struggles with chronic homelessness or decreasing housing stability (Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). The relationship between the child welfare system and youth homelessness has been attributed, in part, to youth leaving the welfare system too soon (i.e., before age 21), a failure to help youth deal with trauma experienced while living at home, and inadequate preparation in terms of education and life skills (Dworsky et al.; Evenson; Fowler et al.; Nichols, 2013; Serge, Eberle, Goldberg, Sullivan, & Dudding, 2002).

**Education and Employment**

The majority (62%) of Canadian street-involved youth have not complete high school (Evenson, 2009), which means their employment opportunities are drastically limited. The employment rates among 15 – 24 year olds with less than a high school diploma is 36% compared to 79% for those with a postsecondary certificate or diploma (e.g., trades certificate) and 75% for those with a Bachelor’s degree (Statistics Canada, 2016). Most (73%) homeless youth are not formally employed (Evenson), and obtain money through panhandling, selling drugs, borrowing from friends or family, and social welfare (PHAC, 2006). Some are making ends meet by engaging in prostitution. The Street Youth in Canada report found that 29% of women and 15% of men survive on the streets by trading sex for money (most common), cigarettes, drugs and/or alcohol, and shelter (PHAC). In addition, 26% of women and 14% of
men acknowledge having “obligatory” sex, where they feel obliged to offer sex in exchange for things like a place to stay or a financial loan (PHAC).

**Physical and Mental Health**

In general, the physical health of street-involved youth is considerably worse than their home-based peers. The limited opportunities to maintain personal hygiene, restricted access to medical care and nutritious meals, combined with constant exposure to the elements, sleep deprivation and stress lead to a constant malaise colloquially known as “street sickness” (Kulik et al., 2011). In addition, the prevalence and incidence of many sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections are reported to be 10 – 12 times higher in street youth than in youth of the same age group among the general population (PHAC, 2006). Unplanned pregnancy is not an uncommon occurrence for youth having unprotected sex. In Canada, approximately half of street-involved women will become pregnant (Kulik et al., 2011).

In addition to the stress of trying to survive on the street, many youth are struggling to deal with psychological trauma experienced while living at home (Evenson, 2009). Mental illness commonly found among homeless youth includes major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kidd, 2013). Unfortunately, the majority of homeless youth are reluctant to access mental health services because they feel stigmatized and labeled (Public Interest, 2009). Instead, many prefer “treating” themselves. Over 50% of homeless youth report using drugs and/or alcohol to self-medicate in order to survive (Evenson). Lack of equitable access to mental health services may be an important contributing factor as to why mental health challenges rise the longer youth are on the street. A survey of Toronto area youth found that 70% of youth who had been on the street for over four years identified anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues as a concern, compared with 42% overall (Public Interest). Sadly, the rate of suicide for
street-involved youth is at least 10 times the national average for housed youth (McCay et al., 2011).

Summary

When looking at the predominant challenges faced by homeless youth, it becomes clear that these youth are marginalized on multiple levels. Ethnic minority youth and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S face further discrimination due to their race, gender, and sexual orientation. In addition, many youth who leave the child welfare system have been discarded twice – once by their biological families and once (or multiple times) by their foster families. Living as the discarded and discriminated Other is what homeless youth are most familiar with. Further, they are living this way alongside other obstacles such as limited education and employment, as well as physical and mental health challenges. Viewed from this perspective, it becomes apparent that, to integrate into mainstream society, homeless youth must seek support from the very society that rejected (and may continue to reject) them.

Transitioning off the Streets: Key Findings from Longitudinal Studies

As mentioned in Chapter One, it was challenging to find and to compare longitudinal studies of homeless youth transitions off the streets. Not only have very few of these types of studies been conducted, but the definitions of housing vary significantly among the studies. If I had focused this portion of the literature review solely on youth who were housed at baseline (i.e., the goal of the study was to explore the nuances associated with the process of maintaining housing), I would have been left with only two studies (Brueckner et al., 2011; Kidd et al., 201616). In order to provide me with more guidance prior to undertaking my field work, I expanded my search to include youth who were homeless at baseline, but the purpose of the

16 The preliminary findings from this study (Kidd et al., 2013) were examined prior to beginning my fieldwork in February 2015.
study was to examine their residential trajectories (Appendix B). In order to provide context to the study findings, I have included (when provided) notable characteristics of study participants such as years of street involvement, sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity.

A qualitative study (n = 19) conducted in Western Australia explored the experiences of young people transitioning from temporary or emergency accommodations to supported housing (Brueckner et al., 2011). During the 15-month study, researchers found that the study participants “wanted to be considered ‘normal’ home occupiers” (p. 1). Unfortunately, social support agencies sometimes undermined this need for normalcy through frequent surveillance and by offering support in a way that threatened participants’ sense of being competent, responsible tenants (Brueckner et al.). Notably, the majority of study participants (79%) were female and the average age of participants was 17 years (Brueckner et al.). Years living away from home and the number of previous exits off the streets were not provided.

A mixed methods study (n = 51) conducted in Toronto and Halifax, Canada followed young people as they transitioned away from homelessness (Kidd et al., 2016). Over the course of 12 months, there were no positive gains made in community integration, and mental health and quality of life were highly variable (Kidd et al.). Furthermore, while the study participants demonstrated incredible commitment, the structural barriers associated with the transition process led to a significant decline in hope (Frederick, 2014; Kidd et al.). Other central issues that emerged from the findings were social isolation (sometimes self-imposed as youth distanced themselves from street-involved peers) and challenges finding employment (Frederick). Almost half (44%) of the study participants lived in independent housing (Kidd et al.). Study participants had been housed for an average of nine months at baseline and homeless for an average of two
years prior to obtaining housing (Kidd et al.). The number of previous exits off the streets was not provided.

Mayock et al. (2008, 2011) conducted a qualitative study (n = 40) in Dublin, Ireland in order to explore young people’s trajectories into, through and out of homelessness. Researchers interviewed participants twice over the course of 18 months. Of the 30 youth participating in the second interview (the rest were lost to follow-up), 17 (56%) had exited homelessness (Mayock et al.). Almost all the youth who exited homelessness had returned to formal education or vocational training (Mayock et al.). Similar to the findings from Kidd et al. (2016), study participants who exited homelessness spoke of the challenge of finding new social networks and the difficulty of managing day-to-day responsibilities (Mayock et al.). Financial hardship was particularly challenging and none of the participants who exited homelessness were able to achieve financial independence (Mayock et al.). Significantly, only one study participant moved into independent housing, with the rest moving back home with family, into transitional or supported housing, or into foster or residential state care (Mayock et al.). The study authors found family to be a positive factor for many of the study youth, and found that youth who moved back home with family utilized social service providers much less than those who moved into transitional housing or state care. Years living away from home and the number of previous exits off the streets were not provided.

The transitions off the streets among newly homeless (less than six months) youth was the focus of a quantitative study (n = 183) conducted by Milburn et al. (2009) in California, United States of America (USA). Over the course of two years, 93% of participants exited homelessness at some point during the study (Milburn et al.). Encouragingly, almost half (47%) of the youth exited homelessness within three months and remained stably housed through the
remainder of the study (Milburn et al.). The rest either cycled in and out of homelessness (49%) or remained homeless for the duration of the study (4%) (Milburn et al.). Similar to the findings from Mayock et al. (2008), school attendance and support from families (in particular, maternal support) were important positive predictors of stably exiting homelessness (Milburn et al.). In addition, relationships with pro-social peers (peers still in school and getting along with their families) increased the likelihood of a return to stable housing. Older adolescents were less likely to exit homelessness, with a 40% reduction in the likelihood of exiting homelessness for each additional year spent on the streets (Milburn et al.). A large (47%) proportion of youth in this study were Latino or Hispanic; however, multivariate analyses did not show race to be a significant factor in stable exiting over two years (Milburn et al.). Notably, there was a wide range in the ages of participants (12 – 20 years), with a mean age of 15 years. In addition, there were more female (63%) than male participants. The number of previous exits off the streets was not provided.

A quantitative study (n = 365) conducted in Montreal, Canada followed the residential trajectories of homeless youth over a 21-month period (Roy et al., 2014). Residential stability was defined as 90 consecutive days of being housed and this was achieved by 68% of study participants at some point during the study period (Roy et al., 2014). Youth who had a high school diploma, were working, and had sought psychological assistance were 40 to 50% more likely to achieve stability than the other study participants (Roy et al., 2016). It is important to note that the definition of “housed” in this study was broad and included time spent in transitional facilities (e.g., detoxification centers and prisons) if these stays had been immediately preceded by housed days (Roy et al., 2014, 2016). In addition, the majority (79%) of study participants were male and most (58%) had been homeless for periods ranging from 24
months to 14 years (Roy et al., 2014). The number of previous exits off the streets was not provided.

Slesnick et al. (2008) conducted a quantitative study (n = 180) in Ohio, USA in order to identify predictors of change in homelessness among street-involved youth over a six-month period. Similar to the findings from Roy et al. (2016), the more connections participants had with social systems such as employment, education, and medical care at baseline, the less days they spent homeless (Slesnick et al.). Substance use, runaway episodes, age, mental health concerns, coping skills, and childhood abuse did not predict change in homelessness (Slesnick et al.). The number of participants achieving residential stability was not specified, nor was the type of housing. Notably, the eligibility criteria included alcohol or other substance use disorders as participants were involved in a larger study (Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers, & Glassman, 2007) examining treatment outcomes (Slesnick et al.). Most of the study participants (66%) were male (Slesnick et al.). Years living away from home and the number of previous exits off the streets were not provided.

A quantitative study (n = 426) was conducted in California, USA with the aim of identifying and predicting residential trajectories of homeless youth over a period of two years (Tevendale et al., 2011). Approximately 41% of the participants remained consistently sheltered (Tevendale et al.). Predictors of membership in the consistently sheltered group included not using drugs other than marijuana and alcohol, less involvement in informal sector activities (e.g., selling drugs and panhandling), and having been homeless for less than one year. Additionally, like the findings from Milburn et al. (2009), younger age and the ability to return home were also significant predictors of achieving consistent shelter (Tevendale et al.). It is important to note that, in this study, the definition of “sheltered” was broad and included any type of
accommodation other than the streets, abandoned buildings, and automobiles. Notably, 25% of the sheltered youth lived in independent housing (Tevendale et al.). The majority of study participants were Black (35%) or Hispanic (21%) and male (65%) (Tevendale et al.). Years living away from home and the number of previous exits off the streets were not provided.

**Summary**

While these seven studies vary in design, eligibility criteria, and definition of housing, there are similarities in the findings. The ability to pursue formal education and employment seems to increase the likelihood that youth will be able to obtain and/or maintain housing. Unfortunately, employment that provides a living wage can be challenging to obtain, leading to financial hardship. The support of pro-social peers and family members appears to be important in the transition process given these young people frequently struggle with social isolation. Finally, there is evidence to show that formerly homeless youth desire to be seen and treated as “normal”, competent, and responsible young people.

**Social Support and Social Connectedness**

A thorough understanding of the concepts of social support and social connectedness was essential for me as it helped me to understand that homeless youth perceive relationships and offers of support differently from other youth. Moreover, the perception of social support and social connectedness experienced by homeless young people highlights the relational nature of the inclusionary/exclusionary processes outlined in Chapter Two. This perspective served as a valuable tool during my data generation and analysis as I sought a holistic understanding of the complexity and the challenges associated with achieving meaningful social integration.
Social Support

The concept of social support was introduced into the scientific community in the 1970s by physician researchers Caplan (1974), Cassel (1976), and Cobb (1976). These researchers compiled compelling evidence from both animal and human studies that clearly demonstrated a strong relationship between social support and health. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of their work was their assertion that offering social support could not only positively influence the course of a disease, but could prevent it from happening in the first place – a novel idea in the 1970s. Since then, research into the concept of social support and its ability to significantly improve mental and physical health outcomes has continued and the documented evidence of its relevance has expanded (Roy, 2011; Taylor, 2006; Uchino, 2006).

The most dominant theory explaining the link between social support and health is the stress buffering theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), most often credited to the contributions of Barrera (1986), Cohen and Wills (1985), and Thoits (1986). These authors further refined the ideas of Caplan, Cassel, and Cobb by demonstrating that it is the perception (not necessarily the availability) of social support that has the largest impact on health outcomes. In other words, for social support to be effective, there must be a good match between the type of support being offered and the specific needs of the person receiving the support. Moreover, the provision of unsolicited social support may actually weaken self-esteem because it may reinforce to recipients that they are incapable of handling a stressor on their own (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010).

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness – embedded within the developmental construct of belongingness – is the subjective lens through which one sees themselves in relation to others (Lee & Robins, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1998; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). Researchers Richard M. Lee and Steven
B. Robbins (authors of *The Social Connectedness Scale*) posit that connectedness begins to emerge in adolescence, following the development of companionship and affiliation.

Companionship develops in early infancy beginning with the bond between an infant and their provider. This bond provides an important foundation for the development of self-esteem; consequently, failure to develop this bond may mean difficulty in forming and maintaining close relationships, or a preference for isolation in order to avoid anticipated rejection (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Affiliation develops during the transition from childhood to adolescence as children begin to establish relationships with their peers. Positive relationships with peers and others with similar values and opinions helps to strengthen a child’s self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Children who struggle to form bonds with others are often sensitive to perceived threats to self-esteem, and may join deviant subcultures (e.g., gangs) in order to belong (Lee & Robbins).

Connectedness is the final aspect of belongingness to develop, emerging during adolescence and extending into adulthood. Individuals who have successfully progressed through the stages of companionship and affiliation without any threats to self-esteem begin to feel more comfortable and confident within a larger social context, reflecting an internal sense of belonging (Lee & Robbins, 1995, 1998). People struggling with low connectedness may feel different, misunderstood, and disconnected both from society and from themselves (Lee & Robbins; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Furthermore, because connectedness depends on successful development of companionship and affiliation, individuals who feel disconnected often battle with mistrust, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, and loneliness (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Lee, Draper & Lee, 2001).
Summary

The concepts social support and social connectedness provide important insight into the subjective sense of self. A fractured trajectory of developing companionship and affiliation in early childhood leaves young people feeling disconnected and different from others. Additionally, while the provision of social support offers the potential to buffer stress and improve health outcomes, what constitutes support will ultimately be determined by the perception of those receiving the support. Consequently, it becomes clear that an altered sense of connectedness means that even the most well-intentioned offers of support may be met with resistance. A solid understanding of how street-involved youth develop their (mis)perceptions of support and their (dis)connection to others is crucial in order to effectively support homeless youth as they transition off the streets and attempt to integrate into mainstream society.

Key Challenges in Achieving Meaningful Social Integration: Empirical Studies

This section of the literature review examines the implications of an altered sense of social support and social connectedness, and how this may interfere with the ability to achieve meaningful social integration. The concept of social networks is also explored here as it became clear from my review of empirical studies that social networks are a crucial factor in homeless youths’ ability to successfully transition off the streets.

Perception of Social Support

It is imperative to understand that any type of support offered to street-involved youth may be viewed by them through a lens of suspicion, caution, and mistrust because of their history of rejection and abandonment (Collins & Barker, 2009). For this reason, I have chosen to highlight studies that focus on homeless youths’ perceptions of social support, as these perceptions are a crucial factor in the ability of youth to achieve meaningful social integration.
A New York City, USA study was the first to examine the relationship between homelessness and mental health over time among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth. Researchers found that participants \((n = 156)\) with a history of homelessness (an average of four years) persistently demonstrated more struggles with depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and substance abuse (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012). These symptoms were partially attributed to negative social interactions and lack of supportive relationships. Furthermore, homeless LGB youth reported higher levels of psychological symptoms than non-homeless LGB youth when both experienced similarly low levels of social support (Rosario et al.). The authors postulate that limited access to emotional and tangible supports may mean that negative social interactions are more deleterious for homeless LGB youth (i.e., no buffering effect), highlighting the need for more supportive relationships.

An Edmonton, Canada study assessing the social support needs of homeless youth \((n = 35)\) utilized in-depth interviews to identify the types of support youth want and the kinds of intervention they would prefer (Stewart, Reutter, Letourneau, Makwarimba, & Hungler, 2010). Aboriginal youth made up 48% of study participants. Their length of time homeless was not given. Overall, youth felt that access to all forms of support (emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal) were limited, in part due to the youths’ transient lifestyle and estrangement from supportive social networks (Stewart et al.). Specifically, youth spoke of the desire to share their lives with someone they could trust (emotional support), to receive assistance with housing and finances (instrumental support), receive information about available resources (informational support), and to be offered nonjudgmental support that builds their self-confidence (appraisal support) (Stewart et al.). Interestingly, the age, ethnicity, gender, and
sexual orientation of the person(s) providing support was deemed unimportant by the majority of homeless youth (Stewart et al.).

A similar study among homeless adolescents \((n = 16)\) in London, U.K. using qualitative methods had comparable results in terms of youth expressing the need for emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (Collins & Barker, 2009). The youth also highlighted the need for emotional support to be genuine and trustworthy, and informational support to be given with respect and understanding (Collins & Barker). Exactly half of study participants described themselves as Black African. Their length of time homeless ranged from two weeks to several years, with 75% of participants reporting that this was their first time living in a homeless hostel (Collins & Barker).

Trust (or lack thereof) was also identified as a crucial aspect of whether or not street-involved youth with mental health challenges (one third of study participants) would seek out or follow through with psychiatric treatment (McCay et al., 2010). The authors of this mixed methods study \((n = 70)\) stressed that establishing a trusting relationship is the basis for instituting effective interventions, as many homeless youth (especially those with mental illness) struggle with shame, low self-esteem, and expectations of rejection. The youth in this study had been living away from home (the majority living in shelters) for an average of 15 months (McCay et al.). Notably, 90% of study participants identified family or peers as being a very important source of support either currently or in the past (McCay et al.).

**Summary.** Street-involved youth – many of whom have been rejected and disconnected from society from a very young age – may view even the most well-intentioned social support interventions with suspicion. This mistrust of mainstream society may exacerbate some of the struggles that homeless youth face such as mental illness or addiction because these young
people may be reluctant to access important supports. Additionally, the perception of support may vary depending on characteristics such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, and years on the street; however, these variables are difficult to assess, as these types of questions are not always examined in studies involving homeless youth.

Altered Social Connectedness

As highlighted in Chapter One, street-involved youth consistently report overwhelming feelings of alienation (Karabanow, 2009). For this reason, I have chosen to focus this portion of the literature review on studies that go beyond discussing the implications of alienation in broad terms (e.g., limited opportunities to participate in and contribute to society) in order to capture the essence of alienation – the pervasive sense of not belonging, the perception of being the disconnected Other, and the feeling of profound loneliness. I wanted to understand (beyond the obvious) how these feelings might manifest in the lives of homeless youth as they attempt to transition off the streets.

Loneliness. It is important to understand that loneliness is not necessarily synonymous with being alone (Rook, 1984). In other words, it is possible to be surrounded by supportive social networks and still feel very lonely. In addition, the perception of social support focuses more on the strengths or deficiencies within the environment, whereas loneliness (as a consequence of low connectedness) focuses more on the deficiencies within the self (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Consequently, studies exploring the impact of low connectedness among street-involved youth frequently highlight the significant and deleterious relationship between loneliness and self-esteem.

Self-Esteem. A survey conducted with homeless youth \((n = 208)\) on the streets of New York City, USA and Toronto, Canada found that perceived social stigma had a significant
relationship with low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, feeling trapped (i.e., helpless and hopeless), and loneliness (Kidd, 2007). Gay and bisexual youth as well as youth involved in the sex trade (numbers not given) were more likely to turn perceived stigma inward, engaging in self-blame (Kidd). Kidd asserts that most homeless youth have been exposed to society’s beliefs about what it means to be poor, addicted to drugs, involved in prostitution, etc., before they become homeless, and because of their young age they have not had a chance to develop coping strategies to deal with that stigma; consequently, they are more likely to internalize those beliefs and apply them to themselves (Kidd). A significant portion of youth in this study (57%) had been homeless for more than two years, with almost half (47%) living in squat locations or directly on the streets (Kidd).

McCay et al. (2010) found a similar relationship between perceived social stigma and low self-esteem, particularly among youth with mental health challenges. Despite their high levels of mental health symptoms, only 24% of study participants (n = 70) reported using mental health services (McCay et al.). Youth participating in the focus groups (n = 16 – 20) of this Toronto, Canada mixed methods study shared that a sense of shame and low self-esteem made them reluctant to disclose their mental health challenges (McCay et al.). Paradoxically, it is interesting to note that the quantitative data revealed that overall, despite their mental health challenges, study participants demonstrated moderately high levels of self-esteem and resilience (McCay et al.).

**Suicide.** Unfortunately, the combination of loneliness and low self-esteem alongside experiences of social stigma lead some homeless youth to consider taking their own lives. Narratives from homeless youth (n = 80) living in Toronto and Vancouver, Canada suggest rates of suicidality are high enough (46% of participants in the study) that those working with
homeless youth should assume the presence of suicide until proven otherwise (Kidd, 2004). These youth described how negative perceptions of themselves and their relationship with society (i.e., lack of connectedness) made them feel lonely, worthless, helpless, and trapped (Kidd). Suicide was seen as a means of escape. The majority (76%) of participants in the study were living directly on the streets (Kidd). Their number of years on the streets was not stated.

Similar findings were uncovered in a qualitative study ($n = 29$) with street-involved youth living in Toronto, Canada. An astounding 76% of study participants revealed a history of attempted suicide (Kidd & Kral, 2002). These youth also described how a pervasive sense of low self-worth, exacerbated by negative experiences on the street, led to their suicide attempt(s) (Kidd & Kral). It is important to note that 69% of participants in this study had a current or prior relationship with prostitution (Kidd & Kral) which may account for the high rate of suicidality among study participants, especially given Kidd’s previously cited work (2007) regarding self-blame among homeless youth working in the sex trade. In addition, 44% of participants described a history of sexual abuse and how the resulting feelings of betrayal and rejection often led to intense feelings of isolation (Kidd & Kral). Those feelings were especially prominent among gay and bisexual participants (Kidd & Kral). All study participants were without a fixed address for at least one week; however, it is unclear where they were living (shelter, streets, couch surfing, etc.) or how long they had been homeless.

**Abuse.** The relationship between sexual abuse and perceptions of connectedness and loneliness was explored in a mixed methods study ($n = 96$) of street-involved youth located in Texas, USA. The majority (60%) of study participants reported a history of sexual abuse (Rew, 2002). Sexual abuse was significantly positively related to loneliness and inversely related to connectedness, leading to the hypotheses that connectedness may function as a protective factor...
from traumas such as sexual abuse (Rew). Importantly, Rew posits that it may be futile to engage in health promotion activities with homeless youth – especially those with a history of sexual abuse – without first addressing their low connectedness as these feelings of low connectedness and loneliness dominate their thinking, making it difficult to imagine a healthy outlook for the future. The majority (numbers not given) of youth in the study lived directly on the streets (Rew). Their years of homelessness were not provided.

**Resilience.** The literature on resilience and connectedness among homeless youth reveals a somewhat complicated and perhaps surprising relationship. While resilience is generally understood to be a positive attribute, for youth who have experienced an interruption in the normal development of healthy connectedness, strategies of self-protection that involve isolation create challenges for the achievement of social connectedness.

A twelve-month ethnographic study with 18 homeless youth living in Canberra, Australia revealed that youth responded to the chaos and alienation in their lives by vacillating between fierce independence (autonomy) and connectedness (relatedness) (Barker, 2014). Barker found that homeless youth developed a strong sense of preservation, as they needed to look after themselves in ways that most adolescents were not required to. However, this self-preservation strategy of fierce independence often exacerbated feelings of intense loneliness. The overwhelming pain of loneliness frequently led youth to seek out connections with other youth, but the expectations of those relationships were often unrealistic, and only served to confirm their internalized beliefs that relationships are fragile, exploitive, and filled with disappointment (Barker). Youth would then revert back to their strategy of self-preservation until the isolation became unbearable and they repeated the cycle of independence-connectedness again (Barker).
Almost half (44%) of participants in this study left home prior to 16 years of age (Barker). Only one study participant remained in stable accommodation over the 12-month study (Barker).

Kidd & Shahar (2008) assert that in the context of street life, the development of a fearful or dismissive attachment style may be adaptive – a form of “street smarts”. Their analysis of study data from 208 homeless youth living in Toronto, Canada and New York City, USA found that while good self-esteem was an important foundation of resilience and helped buffer the impact of fearful attachment on loneliness; the ability to maintain good self-esteem while remaining cautious of others may help prevent youth from being victimized. Most (57%) of the youth in this study had been homeless for more than two years (Kidd & Shahar) and almost half (47%) lived in squat locations or directly on the streets (Kidd & Shahar).

An unexpected finding from a study of 59 homeless youth living in Texas, USA was that resilience was significantly and inversely correlated with connectedness (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001). In other words, youth perceived themselves as being resilient because they were disconnected from others, relying only on themselves for support. This is not to say that these youth were not lonely. Participants in this study reported high levels of loneliness, and youth with a history of sexual abuse (47%) demonstrated significantly higher loneliness scores than other study participants (Rew et al.). The quantitative cross-sectional design of this study did not permit further exploration of the negative association between resilience and connectedness. For example, it would be important to explore whether these youth were referring to a disconnection from the general population (meaning they might still be connected to other homeless youth) or from other street-involved youth, and if these perceptions changed over time (e.g., Barker’s [2014] ethnographic study). In addition, the length of time the youth in this study were homeless is noteworthy, ranging from two months to eight years (mean
32 months), with the majority (64%) of youth reporting that they lived directly on the streets (Rew et al.). These variables were not considered during the data analysis.

**Summary.** Connectedness in the context of youth homelessness is a complex contradiction of challenges and strengths. The stigma of being on the streets combined with messages of betrayal and rejection from an early age leaves homeless youth feeling alienated and intensely lonely; yet despite this, many youth display remarkable resilience by learning to adapt to life on the streets. Unfortunately, some of these coping behaviours may be maladaptive (e.g., disconnectedness), further alienating homeless youth from mainstream society.

**Influential Social Networks**

Knowledge regarding the social networks of homeless youth has expanded over the past few years. Recent work with homeless youth demonstrates that many homeless youth maintain contact with their home-based peers and with their family members (Milburn et al., 2009; Rice, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2007; Rice, Monro, Barman-Adhikari, & Young, 2010; Wenzel et al., 2012) and these relationships are important in helping facilitate an exit from street life (Garrett et al., 2008; Karabanow et al., 2010; Mayock, Corr, & O’Sullivan, 2011; Milburn et al.). At the same time, because exiting street life is a not a linear process (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Karabanow et al.), many street-involved youth maintain intense connections with their street families (Kidd, 2003), and these relationships can either undermine or enhance the desire for a better life (Johnson & Chamberlain). Moreover, from a public health perspective, a full understanding of the quantity and quality of social relationships, and how these relationships facilitate access to the social determinants of health, is key to improving health outcomes among marginalized groups (Moore, Shiell, Hawe, & Haines, 2005; Moore, Haines, Hawe, & Shiell, 2006).
Peers. Auerswald & Eyre (2002) conducted a six-month ethnographic study with 20 street youth in California, USA. Time on the streets ranged from a few days to seven years (Auerswald & Eyre). The authors found that initiation to street life was facilitated by “street mentors” who helped ease the loneliness and disorientation of street life by teaching survival skills (“street smarts”) to youth new to the streets. The downside of these relationships was that, because street mentors eased the adaptation to street life, youth would remain on the streets longer, becoming less connected with supportive relationships in mainstream society (Auerswald & Eyre). Auerswald & Eyre posit that, just as youth are mentored into street life, they may have to be mentored out of street life by exchanging street smarts for “mainstream smarts” (p.1509).

Street youth ($n = 80$) from Vancouver and Toronto, Canada who participated in semi-structured interviews also described their street-based peers as filling mentor-like roles, providing them with the skills needed to survive on the street (Kidd, 2003). In addition, youth shared that their street-based peers offered emotional support (helping to combat feelings of loneliness and worthlessness) and tangible support (loaning them money and watching out for their safety) (Kidd). Paradoxically, some youth also reported that, because they formed such intense connections with their street-based peers, these relationships were sometimes emotionally volatile, with the termination of intimate relationships cited as being especially painful (Kidd). Kidd asserts that interventions emphasizing a break from these powerful street-based relationships will likely be met with resistance. Instead, a careful assessment of a youth’s social network is suggested in order to identify key influences and facilitate the development of relationships that produce positive influence (Kidd). Most (73%) of the youth in this study lived directly on the streets (Kidd). The number of years on the street was not given.
The importance of peers was highlighted in individual qualitative interviews with 27 current and former street-involved youth living in Washington State, USA (Garrett et al., 2008). Nearly all participants stressed the importance of developing relationships with street-based peers in order to survive, especially when first arriving on the street (Garrett et al.). Similar to the work done by Auerswald & Eyre (2002) and Kidd (2003), participants shared that street-based peers gave them a deep sense of belonging and offered information and tangible support such as showing them where to get food and finding a safe place to sleep (Garrett et al.). However, although their bonds with their street families were strong, approximately one-fifth of the youth spoke of the necessary but difficult decision to distance themselves from their street peers in order to successfully exit homelessness (Garrett et al.). Notably, all six of the formerly homeless participants in this study spoke of significant ties to housed family and friends (Garrett et al.). Garrett et al. suggest that the development of relationships with housed individuals may be crucial in helping youth exit street life. It would have been interesting to know how long the study participants had been on or off the streets; however, this information was not provided. Also, the authors acknowledged that purposive sampling of youth identifying as LGBTQ2S was not done, and eliciting the experiences of LGBTQ2S youth would have enhanced the study findings.

In order to learn more about the transition from youth to adult homelessness, Johnson & Chamberlin (2008) reviewed the case files of 1,677 individuals from Melbourne, Australia who first became homeless when they were 18 years of age or younger. Their analysis was supplemented with qualitative data gathered from 65 in-depth interviews. Participants shared that the sense of belonging they felt and the survival support they received (especially regarding what “not to do”) from their street-based peers helped ease the transition to street life (Johnson &
Chamberlin). Over time, their social networks – forged on the basis of shared experiences – transformed to consist mostly of other homeless people (Johnson & Chamberlin). Most participants who had transitioned to adult homelessness had tried returning home several times; however, they always returned to the streets because they felt more at “home” there. As one woman stated, “I get along better with other homeless people. I don’t know why. I’m more comfortable with people who have had a rough time” (Johnson & Chamberlin, p. 571). Notably, the duration of homelessness significantly increased with age. For example, only 31% of the study participants under the age of 18 years had experienced long-term homelessness (greater than 12 months); however, that number jumped to 70% for youth between 19 and 24 years of age, and to 85% for participants 25 years or older (Johnson & Chamberlin). Johnson & Chamberlin highlight the importance of early intervention programs in order to reach youth before they become entrenched in homelessness.

Rice, Stein, & Milburn (2008) examined the impact of pro-social peers on problem behaviours (e.g., stealing, substance use, and risky sexual behaviour) among 696 homeless youth living in California, USA. Newly homeless youth (defined as less than six months on the streets) were over-sampled (numbers not given), bringing the median time away from home to four – six months (Rice et al.). Having pro-social peers predicted less HIV sex risk behaviour and less anti-social behaviour (Rice et al.). Furthermore, the longer youth remained on the streets, the less likely they were to engage with their pro-social peers, choosing instead to surround themselves with peers who demonstrated anti-social and HIV risk behaviours (Rice et al.). Also, youth who did not identify as being heterosexual (24% of study participants) were less likely to have pro-social peers and more likely to engage in HIV sex risk behaviours (Rice et al.). Rice and
colleagues suggest that pro-social peers should be incorporated into intervention efforts as these relationships have the potential to exert a positive influence in the lives of homeless youth.

**Family.** In order to understand the social networks of homeless youth in emerging adulthood, Wenzel et al. (2012) interviewed 349 homeless youth (mean age 21 years) living in California, USA. Thirty-five percent of study participants identified as being gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Wenzel et al.). The length of time on the streets was not provided. Relatives comprised the second largest category of individuals in the participants’ social networks (Wenzel et al.). Furthermore, relatives were more likely to provide emotional and tangible support, less likely to be engaging in risky sex, and less likely to use substances with the youth (Wenzel et al.). Participants also cited recent sex partners and other street-involved youth as important sources of support; however, these types of relationships were significantly associated with increased engagement in risky sex and substance use (Wenzel et al.). The authors highlight that ties with family may be valuable, and interventions with homeless young adults might include helping them explore their relationships with their family and making decisions about how to negotiate potential family conflicts.

Dang & Miller (2013) undertook a unique qualitative study in California, USA to explore the characteristics of natural mentoring relationships among homeless youth (n = 23). The majority of youth in the study were either African American (52%) or Latino (30%). Their number of years on the streets was not provided. Most (74%) of the mentors were women and their average age was 39 years (Dang & Miller). More than half of the mentors were either African American (35%) or White (35%). Participants described these mentors as surrogate parents, often referring to them as “mom” or “dad” (Dang & Miller). A dominant theme that emerged from the interviews was that mentors offered substantial forms of social support
(instrumental, emotional, informational, and appraisal) in an unconditional and reliable manner (Dang & Miller). Also, youth described a deep sense of belonging and connectedness that came from being mentored (Dang & Miller). Dang and Miller suggested that, “natural mentors could feasibly serve as a bridge in a coordinated effort to assist youth out of homelessness and into a safe environment” (p. 251).

**Summary.** There seem to be critical points in a youth’s life (e.g., youth new to the streets) when they may be most open to transitioning off the streets. Building relationships with other street-involved youth is helpful in that youth learn the skills they need in order to survive on the streets; however, the longer they sustain these relationships, the more likely they are to engage in high-risk behaviours and the less likely they are to successfully exit street life. Conversely, maintaining pro-social relationships with individuals not connected to the streets significantly reduces participation in high-risk behaviours, and significantly increases the likelihood of successfully exiting street life.

**Summary of Literature Review**

It is clear from the literature that much of the knowledge dissemination pertaining to youth homelessness focuses on the reasons for and the consequences of being on the streets, and the characteristics of youth engaged in street culture. While this work is important, researchers must move beyond a focus on street youth pathology and concentrate on research that offers possibilities for prevention and intervention (Karabanow & Clement, 2004; Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2006). Furthermore, there is an urgent need to describe the mechanics behind *how* and *why* an intervention – and housing could certainly be considered an intervention – does or does not work in a way that is useful to front line workers (Karabanow & Clement; Kidd & Davidson).
There is limited but growing empirical evidence to suggest that connections to formal education and employment play crucial roles in the ability to sustain a transition off the streets. In addition, qualitative findings point to a sense of hopelessness and despair that accompanies the financial hardship and social isolation common among youth transitioning from the streets into housing. Finally, the critical need for multi-faceted forms of social support, research on the importance of restoring a sense of connectedness, and the strong influence of social networks, demonstrates that these attributes must be properly understood so they can be strategically incorporated into intervention efforts aimed at helping homeless youth successfully integrate into mainstream society.
CHAPTER FOUR
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Everything has just been a blur. Everything has just been moving so fast that I haven’t had the time to really digest and – other than the sessions with you – to learn anything about myself.

~ Phoenix (Month Nine)

In this chapter I begin by providing a brief synopsis of traditional and critical ethnographic methodologies, and highlight why the latter was more congruent with my research goal. Next, I provide an overview of the study design and participant demographics. This is followed by a comprehensive discussion of the methods of data generation, analysis and interpretation. Before concluding the chapter, I share my strategies for maintaining methodological rigour and expand on ethical considerations pertinent to my research.

As highlighted at the outset of this dissertation, the goal of this study is to provide an emic perspective on the experiences of formerly homeless youth as they transition into independent housing and attempt to achieve meaningful social integration. While the study goal remained consistent throughout my research, I expected the corresponding study objectives to evolve given the emergent, iterative nature of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2003). My initial study objectives were to:

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 six months after their transition into independent housing.
3. Explore what homeless youth consider meaningful social integration during their transition to independent housing.

During my field work, as I conducted preliminary data analysis between each informal interview, I learned that participants’ perceptions and experiences of social support and social connectedness were greatly influenced by structural barriers and by their desire to forge new identities. In addition, I saw that there were significant psychosocial consequences associated with the day-to-day process of maintaining housing amid structural constraints. Building on what I learned in the field, my study objectives evolved and became to:

1. Describe the impact of socioeconomic context and position on being housed.
2. Understand the shift in identity experienced during the transition off the streets.
3. Explore the psychosocial consequences of maintaining independent housing.

**Ethnographic Methodology**

Prominent medical anthropologist David Napier – lead author of the University College London *Lancet* Commission on Culture and Health – asserts that the failure to utilize research methodologies that explore and critically examine the role of culture and the hierarchies inherent in society is the single biggest barrier to achieving better health (Napier et al., 2014). Moreover, this failure ultimately leads to ineffective and unsustainable solutions to improving health outcomes, particularly among the most marginalized in society (Napier et al.). I chose an ethnographic design because I believed this methodology offered me the best opportunity to learn, through participant observation and interviews over an extended period of time, how dominant societal discourses and hierarchies of power were experienced by youth during their transition off the streets. I was particularly interested in understanding how the participants viewed their situation and how they saw themselves (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I believed
this information was key to producing transformative knowledge and, ultimately, to achieving improved outcomes – key tenets of my praxis-oriented theoretical framework (Anderson, 2000; Anderson et al., 2009; O’Mahony & Donnelly, 2010).

**Traditional Ethnography**

Traditional ethnography is a qualitative methodology that originated from nineteenth-century Western anthropology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Initially, the knowledge produced from ethnography relied heavily on descriptive accounts of community or culture generated by travelers and missionaries visiting locations outside the West (Hammersley & Atkinson). Over time, anthropologists began to do their own fieldwork, and ethnographic methodology consisted of prolonged engagement in the field and an interpretation of social organization and culture (Hammersley & Atkinson). Today, ethnography is utilized inside and outside Western societies, and maintains a strong emphasis on deriving knowledge from an emic perspective through prolonged engagement in the field (Hammersley & Atkinson).

**Critical Ethnography**

Critical ethnography came about in the 1960s and 1970s as a development from traditional ethnography (Breda, 2013). This new form of ethnography reflected the desire of certain ethnographic researchers to move from understanding and explaining to critiquing and changing society (Breda). Accordingly, critical ethnography is often described as traditional ethnography with a political purpose (Breda; Madison, 2012).

Critical ethnography differs from traditional ethnography in that it is more interpretive, pays closer attention to power relations, and actively seeks to bring about social change (Breda, 2013; Jamal, 2005). Critical ethnography is a good fit with critical social theories and has been described as the “doing” (Madison, 2012, p.14) of critical approaches. In particular, a
Postcolonial Feminist (PCF) perspective complements critical ethnography as both share an emphasis on understanding the “choices” marginalized individuals make in the context of the historical, socioeconomic and political realities of their lives (Breda). Researchers with an interest in improving outcomes related to health and social well-being can utilize critical ethnography to help explain counterintuitive outcomes and to illuminate the social mechanisms of health inequities (Breda).

**Study Design**

**Time in the Field**

One important way that ethnography is distinct from other qualitative methods is the extensive amount of time researchers spend with study participants. However, it is challenging to determine an ideal length of time in the field (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004). For example, using the database SCOPUS and using the search terms (ethnography) and (homeless youth), I was able to find ten ethnographic studies published in English between 2001 – 2013. Time in the field ranged from 6 to 21 months with wide variation in how long and how often researchers met with research participants (typically, the longer the study the less often researchers met with participants).

Ethnographic researchers Jeffrey and Troman (2004) offer a pragmatic approach on how to design a rigorous ethnographic study given the academic and funding realities (and consequent time constraints) of ethnographic research. They suggest researchers interested in looking for changes in narratives over time choose a recurrent time mode whereby research participants are followed at predetermined and regular intervals. This type of approach is the most demanding on the researcher, but allows for a deeper analysis of social structures and the ability to explore why participants may be exhibiting behaviours that seem contrary to their
previous perspectives (Jeffrey & Troman). For these reasons, I chose to undertake a ten-month critical ethnographic study using the recurrent approach as I believed it offered the best opportunity for me to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of meaningful social integration.

**Recruitment**

Youth were collaboratively recruited by front-line staff at Covenant House Toronto through flyers (Appendix C) and word-of-mouth. Study participants were given $20.00 each time they met with me for an interview. This figure was based on the incentives offered in the studies cited in my literature review (typically between $15.00 and $25.00) and after discussion with Research and Evaluation Specialist Faviola Fernandez at Covenant House Toronto (personal communication, December 18, 2014).

**Sample**

I initially aimed for a purposive sample of 10 – 12 youth. I chose this sample size after reviewing the ethnographic studies on homeless youth mentioned earlier in this chapter. I noted that the sample sizes were smaller ($n = 5 – 12$) in the studies where the researcher(s) spent more time at the research site(s) interviewing study participants (e.g., Hanna, 2001; Penzerro, 2003; Saewyc, 2003); therefore, a smaller sample size seemed appropriate given the recurrent time approach I was utilizing in the study. I also sought a balanced representation of participants who self-identified as male or female. Rolling recruitment took place from March to July 2015. I was able to enroll nine study participants during this time frame. Participants who remained throughout the study duration were followed for six to nine months.

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17 Participants were followed for up to nine months. Due to rolling recruitment, I was in the field for ten months.
Participant retention can be particularly challenging when working with street-involved or homeless populations (Abrams, 2010). I had hoped to retain at least six participants (67%), as previous longitudinal studies of homeless individuals have retained 60% – 85% of participants over 18 – 36 months (Goering et al., 2011). I was able to attain my goal of retaining six participants. Two participants were unable to remain in the study as they moved back into the shelter system. I lost contact with a third participant. All of the participants agreed that I could use their data even if they dropped out of the study.

**Inclusion Criteria**

Youth eligible for study inclusion were between the ages of 16 and 24 years at baseline. This age range was chosen because it is most commonly cited in definitions of homeless youth in Canada (Evenson, 2009) and because shelters for homeless youth in Toronto, Canada do not typically serve youth outside this age range. All youth were assessed on their capacity to provide meaningful data and informed consent.

I sought participants who had transitioned from homelessness (defined as living on the streets, in a shelter, or couch surfing) into independent housing (i.e., not enrolled in a Housing First or transitional housing program) located within the city of Toronto, Canada within 30 days prior to recruitment. I became interested in following youth just beginning their transition off the streets after reading *Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth* (Karabanow et al., 2010). In this book the authors suggest that, on average, formerly homeless youth lose their homes after three – four months. I wanted to ensure I captured this crucial period of time.

**Exclusion Criteria**

Youth who were expected to be incarcerated during the study period were excluded from the study. Due to potential differences in access to social service resources, youth living outside
of Toronto were also excluded from the study.

**Participant Demographics**

In general, participants were a racially diverse group (Table 1) with five identifying as male and four as female. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 years. Six had completed high school. At baseline, five participants were unemployed and seven were receiving welfare subsidies. All of the participants lived in a youth shelter immediately before moving into independent housing. Four had never attempted to move off the streets and three had only once attempted it. Only one participant was co-parented by his biological mother and father. The rest were raised by their biological mothers and had minimal contact with their biological fathers. All of the participants cited various forms of family dysfunction (typically physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse) as the reason for leaving home, and five lived in homes where the child welfare system was involved.

What follows are brief narratives about each of the nine participants. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms (chosen by the participants) are used throughout this dissertation. I am also deliberately vague on specifics such as country of origin and family composition.

**Alexandra**

Alexandra was a nineteen-year-old Black youth born in Africa. She immigrated with her family to Toronto when she was a teenager. Alexandra had lived away from home for one year prior to enrolling in the study. This was Alexandra’s first time living independently. Alexandra remained in the study for nine months and was interviewed 18 times.

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18 In this study, participant’s self-identified gender was congruent with their sex.
Ashley

Ashley was a twenty-four-year-old youth of Asian descent born in Asia. She immigrated to Toronto as a child. Ashley had lived away from home for four years prior to enrolling in the study. This was Ashley’s fifth time living independently. Ashley remained in the study for seven months and was interviewed 15 times.

John

John was a twenty-two-year-old mixed race youth born in Canada. He had lived away from home for three months prior to enrolling in the study. This was John’s first time living independently. John remained in the study for nine months and was interviewed 19 times.

Kat

Kat was a nineteen-year-old White youth born in Canada. She had lived away from home for eleven years (predominantly in foster care and group homes) prior to enrolling in the study. This was Kat’s second time living independently. Kat remained in the study for seven months and was interviewed 13 times.

Lin

Lin was a nineteen-year-old youth of Asian descent born in Asia. She immigrated to Toronto when she was a teenager. Lin had lived away from home for one year prior to enrolling in the study. This was Lin’s first time living independently. Lin remained in the study for two months and was interviewed four times.

Marcel

Marcel was a twenty-four-year-old Black youth born in Canada. He had lived away from his family for nine years (predominantly in shelters and couch surfing) prior to enrolling in the
study. This was Marcel’s sixth time living independently. Marcel remained in the study for five months and was interviewed nine times.

**Phillip**

Phillip was a twenty-year-old White youth born in Canada. He had lived away from home for two years prior to enrolling in the study. This was Phillip’s second time living independently. Phillip remained in the study for nine months and was interviewed 19 times.

**Phoenix**

Phoenix was a twenty-one-year-old Black youth born in Canada. He had lived away from home for one year prior to enrolling in the study. This was Phoenix’s first time living independently. Phoenix remained in the study for nine months and was interviewed 17 times.

**Robert**

Robert was a twenty-one-year-old White youth born in Canada. He had lived away from home for nine years (predominantly in foster care and group homes) prior to enrolling in the study. This was Robert’s second time living independently. Robert remained in the study for two months and was interviewed five times.
Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants at Baseline (n = 9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 – 21</td>
<td>6 (66.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 – 24</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 (44.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5 (55.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigration Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian citizen</td>
<td>8 (88.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent resident</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>7 (77.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-sexual</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed high school</td>
<td>5 (55.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended post-secondary school (not completed)</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attending School (high school upgrading)</strong></td>
<td>2 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Situation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent housing, lives alone</td>
<td>7 (77.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent housing, lives with roommate</td>
<td>2 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally employed full-time</td>
<td>2 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally employed part-time</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informally (cash job) employed part-time</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welfare Subsidy</strong></td>
<td>7 (77.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years Living Away from Home</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 – 4</td>
<td>6 (66.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – 10</td>
<td>2 (22.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most Recent Previous Accommodation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>9 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Previous Exits</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (44.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 (11.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Welfare Involvement</strong></td>
<td>5 (55.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Generation

In an ethnographic study, data generation\(^\text{19}\) can roughly be divided into observation and interviews (Kusenbach, 2003), characterized by the following features (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007):

- Participants are studied in everyday contexts as opposed to highly structured interview situations (i.e., preference for informal over formal interviews).
- The iterative relationship between data generation and analysis means that the questions asked during participant encounters are not fixed; rather, they emerge from the analysis of data, which occurs throughout the research process.
- The focus is on only a few participants in order to facilitate in-depth study.

Keeping those tenets in mind, and to be consistent with the recurrent time approach, I maintained a relatively fixed (but flexible) timetable (Table 2) during the data generation process, seeking multiple forms of data from the day-to-day experiences of youth who had transitioned to independent housing. The biweekly meetings with participants were set up in person and we communicated via text message if either of us needed to reschedule. The meeting locations were chosen by the participants. Generally, we would meet in or around their new homes, but sometimes participants suggested we meet at places meaningful to them like outdoor spaces where they enjoyed “hanging out.” In my travel to these meetings, I forfeited the use of a car so I could get a better sense of what it was like for participants to traverse the city on foot and/or using public transportation. During my ten months in the field (March 2015 – January 2016), the following three methods of data generation were utilized: 1) participant observation; 2) informal/go-along interviews; and 3) questionnaires.

\(^\text{19}\) The term “data generation” is used instead of “data collection” as it more accurately describes the co-creation of knowledge produced between the participants and myself during the interviews.
Table 2

Data Generation Timetable – Typical Month with Nine Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Hours/Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week One</strong></td>
<td>P₁: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₄: 1 hour</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P₂: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₅: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P₃: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week Two</strong></td>
<td>P₆: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₅: 1 hour</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P₇: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₉: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week Three</strong></td>
<td>P₁: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₄: 1 hour</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P₂: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₅: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P₃: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week Four</strong></td>
<td>P₆: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₅: 1 hour</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P₇: 1 hour</td>
<td>P₉: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P = Participant

Participant Observation

One of the key elements of ethnographic research is to observe research participants in the day-to-day context of their lives (Creswell, 2014). In critical ethnography, participant observation is taken a step further, and the everyday lives of research participants are critically examined as the researcher seeks to expose unequal social conditions that limit the opportunity for research participants to fully participate in mainstream society (Madison, 2012). For me, this meant observing for clues that helped me get a sense of what it was like for participants to try to integrate into mainstream society. For example, I documented interactions with people of influence (e.g., landlords, teachers, neighbours, close friendships, social service providers) and took notes and sometimes pictures of the environments where participants lived, worked, studied, and “hung out.” I paid particular attention to the socioeconomic context of their lives (monthly income, food expenses, neighbourhood demographics, type of employment, etc.) and
documented my perceptions regarding how those factors seemed to be influencing their transition to independent housing.

One critical drawback of participant observation is that researchers are documenting their own perceptions regarding how participants are interacting in their “natural” environments (Kusenbach, 2003). While these perceptions are important, they tend to reveal more about the researchers than the participants, and may only capture a superficial view of the lived experiences of research participants (Kusenbach). In order to understand whether my observations were shared by, or meant anything to, my research participants, it was important for me to combine observation with interviews at each participant visit.

**Informal/Go-Along Interviews**

One of the advantages in combining participant observation with interviews is that the data from one method can illuminate the other (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Consequently, interviews act as a form of data triangulation, allowing the researcher to confirm inferences made through participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson). For ease of reference, I have chosen to separate my roles of observer and interviewer here; however, it is important to point out that these roles overlapped, and I spent time both observing and interviewing participants at each field visit.

Informal interviews are closer in character to conversations than traditional interviews (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007). Discussion flows in a more natural way, with the researcher gently guiding the conversation to cover issues germane to the research objectives and to test inferences arising from the developing analysis (Hamersley & Atkinson). One of the drawbacks to conducting interviews is that they often take place with the participant sitting down as opposed to engaging in activities associated with everyday life (Kusenbach, 2003). This can
make it challenging to fully comprehend the lived experience of research participants (Kusenbach). In addition, both the participant and the researcher may miss invisible, important aspects of day-to-day life (Kusenbach). In order to attenuate the downside of sit-down interviews, I also engaged in “go-along” interviews with research participants.

A go-along interview is, as the name implies, a method of interviewing where the researcher accompanies the participant on seemingly mundane, natural outings (e.g., getting groceries or walking to work), asking questions and observing the participant as they engage with their physical and social environments (Kusenbach, 2003). These types of interviews are especially useful with marginalized populations as they demonstrate genuine interest and respect on behalf of the researcher, thereby helping them gain legitimacy with research participants, gate-keepers, and others close to the research participants (Carpiano, 2009). The aim of a go-along interview is for the researcher to access and make visible thoughts and emotions participants usually keep to themselves (Kusenbach). For example, participants may avoid certain places because of negative experiences, while other environments may bring them a sense of comfort and belonging. Go-along interviews also illuminate the complex web of connections participants have with people (various types of relationships, hierarchies, power dynamics, etc.) and how they situate themselves within this social landscape (Kusenbach). Conversations are generally audio-recorded and accompanied by field notes taken during the interview (as long as this does not interrupt the flow) or very shortly thereafter (Kusenback).

Sometimes my go-along interviews were planned, but often they were impromptu. For example, it was not uncommon for participants to travel with me on foot or on public transit if we were going in the same direction after our scheduled informal interview was over. On those occasions, I found it easier and more natural to avoid audio-recording and simply to chat with
participants about whatever it was that came to our minds during the route. I would ask them all sorts of questions on topics such as their neighborhood, favorite places, perception of the transit system, etc. I also took note of how I perceived other people might be viewing the participant and/or our interaction. After we parted ways, I would immediately type up my notes about the informal/go-along interviews.

**Interview questions.** While ethnographic researchers do not usually decide beforehand the *exact* questions they want to ask, they do go into each participant encounter with a list of relevant topics that need to be covered based on preliminary analysis of previous interviews (Hamersley and Atkinson, 2007). Furthermore, the more specific and thematic the interview, the less complicated it is to organize and analyse the data collected (Madison, 2012). I developed a preliminary list of questions for participants based on my research goal and the themes found in the literature review (Appendix D). As expected, those questions evolved as I spent more time in the field learning from participants about their transition into independent housing (Appendix E). Madison cites two classic approaches developed by Michael Patton (1990) and James P. Spradley (1979) as well as her own strategies that can help uncover the deeper truths critical ethnographers seek. Examples include asking value questions (e.g., “What do you believe is the value in…”), advice questions (e.g., “What advice would you give to other youth who…”), and once-upon-a-time questions (e.g., “Could you tell me a story about a time when…”). I found these tactics to be an effective interviewing strategy during my fieldwork.

**Questionnaires**

In addition to the questions posed during the informal/go-along interviews, I developed two questionnaires that were utilized during the data generation phase of the study. The first questionnaire (Appendix F) was a baseline demographic questionnaire that helped orient me to
the historical and socioeconomic experiences of each research participant (gender, race/ethnicity, education, involvement with child welfare, number of previous attempts at transitioning off the streets, etc.). The second questionnaire (Appendix G) was administered monthly during my field visits. The purpose of this questionnaire was to track structural (e.g., education, occupation and income) and intermediary (e.g., rent, food availability and access to transportation) determinants of health over the course of the research project. Both questionnaires incorporated key concepts from my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and helped facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of meaningful social integration.

**Limitations**

Despite spending an extensive period of time generating data, six to nine months is still a relatively short period of time in the lives of people attempting a major life change. Moreover, by focusing on young adults who were newly housed, I may have captured the most challenging part of their journey toward independence. While it is essential to highlight these challenges, the resulting picture of the transition process may appear more bleak than might have been the case if the study had covered a longer period and/or included youth who were housed longer at baseline. However, as will be discussed in Chapter Eight, participants in the larger Kidd et al. (2016) study had similar outcomes in terms of disillusionment and limited social integration even though they were housed longer at baseline and followed for a full year. On the other hand, my study participants may have had more favorable outcomes compared to other formerly homeless youth in terms of maintaining housing as most had finished high school, none of them were struggling with substance use, and only two had been diagnosed with mental health conditions – a concerning notion given the state of chronic precarity experienced by all of the “successfully” housed participants.
Data Analysis and Interpretation

Before I delve into my strategies for data analysis and interpretation, it is important to acknowledge that, in qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation is not a linear process, nor a distinct period in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Instead, particularly during an ethnographic study, data analysis and interpretation is complex and iterative. (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). My analysis preparation began pre-fieldwork as I searched the literature, (re)formulated my research objectives, and informally developed ideas about what I might uncover in the field. The iterative process of analysis and interpretation continued during my fieldwork as I attempted to make sense of my interview transcripts and field notes, identified new interview questions, and returned to the field for my bi-weekly field visits with each participant. Moreover, after the fieldwork concluded and my analysis grew more nuanced, I was compelled to return to the literature, reread my interview transcripts and field notes, reconsider my research objectives, and reconceptualise what I uncovered in the field.

Making Sense of the Data

Over the course of 10 months, I amassed data from 119 informal interviews, 64 questionnaires, and 119 field notes. Clearly, this meant I had to be very strategic in how I organized and analyzed the data. Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I consulted the literature (e.g., Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007; Madison, 2012) to devise strategies that would assist me in making sense of the data (Figure 2). In addition, I kept the central tenets of critical ethnography and PCF theory (e.g., critique of socioeconomic context and dominant societal discourses, social justice orientation, and intersectional analysis) at the forefront of my mind as I read through the interview transcripts, coded the data, and devised new
interview questions prior to returning to the field. I was constantly building and rebuilding my analysis, maintaining the tension between identifying emerging themes and remaining open to the possibility of other invisible social mechanisms at play.

Figure 2

*Data Generation and Analysis Strategy*

![Data Generation and Analysis Strategy Diagram]

**Developing Analytical and Interpretive Depth**

Conducting data analysis and interpretation while in the midst of fieldwork was much more emotionally and mentally draining than I had anticipated. Engaging in sustained data analysis alongside data generation was difficult and demanding (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007). The sheer volume of data generated during each field visit was overwhelming – especially during the early days of fieldwork when I cast a “wide net” in order to avoid missing information that may later prove to be important (Creswell, 2014; Hamersley & Atkinson; Madison, 2012). I was
particularly challenged by the prospect of taking on the role of “expert” (or colonizer), using my power and privilege as a researcher to attribute meaning to the subjugated narratives of the research participants.

During my fieldwork, I enrolled in two classes\(^2\) that were invaluable in helping me come to terms with my place in the research, and significantly advanced my understanding of how to conduct rigorous critical qualitative inquiry. I learned to recognize that reality is dynamic, co-created, and socially situated (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). In other words, participants talk and act the way they do based on their perceptions of reality, and those perceptions have real social consequences. Sociologists term this phenomenon the “‘Thomas theorem’ – if people believe ideas are real, they are real in their consequences” (Kvale, 1996, p. 223).

Viewed from this perspective, I realized it was my responsibility as a researcher to delve deeper into my interview transcripts in order to interpret how meaning had been socially constructed by my participants. I began to problematize and interrogate my data, making the familiar strange by moving from a hermeneutic of faith (viewing participant accounts as “reality”) to a hermeneutic of suspicion (viewing participants accounts as “disguised” and in need of interpretation) (Jardine, 1992; Josselson, 2004; Kvale, 1996).

As my analytical skills grew, I realized there were multiple methods one could utilize to interpret meaning. As a novice researcher, I initially found the process of data interpretation rather unwieldy and daunting. Eventually, I learned to embrace the complexity associated with interpretation. Using my tacit knowledge gained during ten months of fieldwork, and drawing on the wisdom of various scholars (e.g., Funk & Stajduhar, 2009; Kvale, 1996; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998), I posed questions to my data to assist with interpretation. Some of the questions posed

\(^2\) Qualitative Research Methods (Dr. Ping-Chun Hsiung); Qualitative Analysis and Interpretation (Dr. Brenda Gladstone).
included: What does the text tell me about the participant’s self-understanding?; What does the text tell me about societal “common sense” knowledge, cultural context, and social structures?; What does the text look like when placed within my theoretical and conceptual frameworks?; How did I contribute to the text?; What does the text tell me about the participant’s interpersonal relationships?; What does the text tell me about how the participant is choosing to represent themselves?

**Silence as data.** Silence is an important yet underappreciated communication strategy, conveying meanings and feelings in ways that are sometimes more effective than words (Kawabata & Gastaldo, 2015). Initially, I did not fully appreciate the significance of silence and sought only to analyze and interpret the *words* of my research participants. Over time, as my understanding of qualitative research methods deepened, I learned to look for “evidence that resides ‘between the lines’ or in silence” (Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2003, p. 190). During the latter half of my time in the field, I began to listen not only for literal silence, but also for vague or short responses and uncooperative tones (Kawabata & Gastaldo), mumbling or responses of laughter (Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005), and “veiled silence” (Morrison & Macleod, 2014, p. 695) whereby the participant responds with “empty talk” or “noise” (p. 695) as a way of evading the question. I also returned to the earlier interviews that seemed less “successful” and realized that the provision of vague answers and/or going off on a tangent were disguised but valuable pieces of data that deserved greater analysis and interpretation.

**Data Reduction**

I began coding my interview transcripts shortly after beginning my fieldwork using a web-based application called Dedoose (SocioCultural Research Consultants, Limited Liability Company). My initial coding scheme (Appendix H) was guided by key concepts from my
research objectives, literature review, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and by the participants’ responses from the initial interviews. Almost immediately, I began to see that my research was going to proceed in an unexpected direction as more than half of my initial codes were not neatly fitting into my preconceived categories. For example, the pain and shame of poverty and the struggle for day-to-day survival was not something I had anticipated (although in hindsight this was certainly naïve) given my participants were no longer homeless. Over time, with input from my supervisor and my PhD committee, my coding scheme evolved (Appendix I and Appendix J), reflecting greater analytical complexity.

Coffey & Atkinson (1996) posit that the process of coding – segmenting data into related ideas or themes – is an important analytic strategy but should not be thought of as the analysis itself. Codes are simply tools to help us to think (Coffey & Atkinson). For me, chopping up my data into coded segments started to feel too reductionist and I began to feel that I was losing my sense of the participants’ narratives as a whole. Coding was no longer helping me to think about my data in a meaningful way.

After discussing my frustration with my supervisor, we decided that, after coding one third of the transcripts (in chronological order), I would move on to utilizing analytic memos – making notes beside large portions of my interviews – and only code what was not present in my initial coding scheme. In addition, I moved from an on-screen approach back to paper as I found the ability to “touch” my data (underline, circle, make notations, etc.) and flip back and forth between pages enhanced my ability to analyze and interpret what I was reading. I also utilized my coded field notes to revisit (coded and un-coded) places in the interview data that, in light of my evolving analysis, warranted further exploration. Finally, immediately prior to writing up my results, I decided to reread all 119 interview transcripts and accompanying field notes, just to
reassure myself that I had not missed anything. During this final comprehensive rereading of the transcripts, using paper and pen, I summarised each of the participant’s interviews on one page and wrote analytic memos in the margins (Appendix K). For me, this final step was an important way of visualizing my fragmented data as a whole and making sure the analysis was comprehensive.

**Writing as Analysis**

As I began to write up my results, I quickly realized that writing was yet another iterative stage – a key stage (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) – of the data analysis and interpretation process. For this reason, I returned to the data, coding scheme, analytic memos, and reviewing of literature. As I moved between inductive and deductive reasoning, expanding and reducing my data, my analysis and interpretation grew more nuanced and my findings slowly began to take shape.

During my writing, I drew on two analytic tools that were particularly helpful for me to organize and talk about my data. As mentioned earlier, posing questions to my data and recognizing the various forms and significance of silence were enormously helpful; however, I needed a template of sorts to help me discuss my findings in a way that coherently linked what I saw at an individual (micro) level back to structural (macro) factors.

**The zoom model.** The Zoom Model was developed by Barbra Pamphilon (1999), who uses the metaphor of a zoom lens of a camera to illustrate how one can analyze, interpret, and discuss their findings from various vantage points (Table 3).
Table 3

*The Zoom Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro-zoom</th>
<th>Meso-zoom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant discourses</td>
<td>Narrative process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative form</td>
<td>Narrative themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort effect</td>
<td>Key phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-zoom</td>
<td>Interactional-zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauses</td>
<td>Transaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Reaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Pamphilon, 1999)

The Zoom Model assisted me in writing about the intricate and intrinsic connections between my participants and society. At the macro-zoom level, I revealed how participants drew on societal and cultural discourses to make sense of their lives. At the meso-zoom level, I focused on the narrative process, highlighting what the participants said and left unsaid. At the micro-zoom level, I emphasized the way participants shared their stories. Finally, using the interactional-zoom, I tried to be transparent about my place in the research process, revealing my role in the co-creation of knowledge.

**The hourglass model.** Alasuutari (1996) posits that the chief aim of data analysis and interpretation is to challenge and develop the initial framework that provided the lens for the way the study was designed and the data generated. By reconstructing the initial framework, the researcher offers a new perspective on ways to understand the phenomenon under study, and simultaneously develops a framework that can be applied in studying other things (Alasuutari).

Alasuutari (1996) suggests researchers think about theorizing their data using an hourglass metaphor (Figure 3). The top of the hourglass is the framework in place at the beginning of the study. Data generation and analysis is at the center of the hourglass. The bottom of the hourglass is the final phase of the study where one discusses the results within a framework that has been developed and modified from its original form.
The process of theorizing my data – thinking and writing about how my data had been interpreted and putting the findings back together into an analytic whole – was the most challenging stage of the writing process. Ultimately, as will be discussed in Chapter Eight, I was able to produce a modified conceptual framework – one that incorporated the study findings as well as features from my initial theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

**Rigour in Qualitative Research**

In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the instrument through which data is analysed and interpreted. Consequently, it is imperative that the researcher be as transparent as possible about their own social location, adopt multiple strategies to enhance the study trustworthiness and dependability, and provide adequate detail about the context of the study (Creswell, 2014; Loiselle, Profetto-McGrath, Polit, & Tatano Beck, 2004). In this way others reading the research can draw their own conclusions about whether the study findings are credible and potentially transferable to other settings.

**Reflexivity**

The concept of reflexivity posits that, because the positionality of the researcher – their personal background, experiences, culture, etc. – will inevitably influence the research process, it is imperative that the researcher constantly look inward by examining how their own privilege, power, and preconceived ideas are framing the “reality” of the research participants (Creswell,
2014; Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007; Madison, 2012). To be clear, the purpose of reflexivity is not to “confess” one’s social location so that the research can be deconstructed, separating the researcher from the research participants in order to uncover “true reality” (Hsiung, 2010). Rather, it is the transparent examination of how one’s idiosyncratic concepts, stereotypical assumptions, and theoretical frameworks influenced the knowledge production process (Hsiung).

For me the process of reflexivity, like each and every stage of my doctoral work, was iterative and began early in the PhD program. Initially I read the literature on homeless youth in a fairly superficial manner, taking the findings of the empirical studies at face value without questioning how the social location of the author(s) might have impacted the study design and analysis. In addition, I had little insight into how my own social location as a middle-class female, mother, clinician, immigrant, and PhD student, and my life experiences might impact my understanding of the literature. As I learned more about critical social theory and the social determinants of health, I reread the literature multiple times, each time exploring particular elements with deeper insight into the challenges associated with obtaining meaningful social integration. I learned to jot down my emerging ideas on paper and shared these ideas with my fellow PhD students, current and former street-involved youth, and colleagues at Covenant House Toronto. In turn, they challenged me on how I was “seeing” the problems associated with youth homelessness.

As I embarked on the data generation and analysis phases of my research, I was acutely aware of the importance of remaining reflexive, and critiqued my own evolving assumptions about youth homelessness while critiquing the predominant views of those living in the mainstream. To assist with this, I maintained a personal journal, jotting down my thoughts and feelings during my time in the field and in the months that followed. On occasion, I could not
resist the parent/clinician impulse to give encouragement or provide advice to study participants – challenges experienced by researchers involved in the longitudinal Kidd et al. (2016) study as well (Karabanow, Kidd, Frederick, McLuckie, & Quick, 2016) – and I found it helpful to debrief about this with my supervisor. Regular meetings with my supervisor and my PhD committee throughout my doctoral work provided me with crucial feedback on how my own positionality might be influencing how I generated, perceived, and wrote about my data. I have intentionally woven a reflexive tone throughout this dissertation in order to be transparent about my academic progress and to make it easier for the reader to assess the rigour of my work.

**Trustworthiness**

The central question underlying the concept of trustworthiness is whether the findings produced by the research are accurate from the standpoint of the participants, the researcher, and those reading the research study (Potts & Brown, 2005; Creswell, 2014; Loiselle et al., 2004). I integrated multiple strategies into my research design to help ensure the trustworthiness of the study: data triangulation with three methods of data generation, prolonged field engagement, rich description of research setting and participants, reflexivity, ongoing member checks with participants, searching for and engaging with evidence contrary to emerging themes, peer debriefing with PhD committee, and maintaining an audit trail.

During my ten months of field work and in the months that followed, I met monthly with my supervisor and approximately every three months with my committee to discuss and refine my coding scheme. During the latter part of my field work I engaged in two sessions – one with my PhD committee and one with a group of fellow PhD students as part of a class on qualitative data analysis and interpretation – where group members were given raw transcripts and asked to code or make analytic memos without the assistance of the study coding scheme. The codes and
memos produced during those meetings were remarkably similar to my evolving coding scheme. These sessions, along with ongoing feedback from my supervisor and committee, provided me with important feedback and enhanced my confidence in the credibility of my findings.

**Dependability**

The dependability of the data refers to a consistent or stable approach in data generation and analysis over the life of the research project (Creswell, 2014; Loiselle et al., 2004). Procedures that I incorporated in order to enhance data dependability included: checking the accuracy of interview transcripts, constantly comparing data with the codes to ensure there was consistency in code definitions, and meeting regularly with my supervisor and PhD committee to discuss emerging themes from the data analysis.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study findings can be transferred to other settings (Loiselle et al., 2004). In order for others to judge whether transferability is possible, it is essential for the researcher to provide a rich, thorough description of the research setting and the research participants so the findings can be understood in the appropriate context (Loiselle et al.). While transferability is not always possible (or desired) in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014), one important objective of critical ethnography is to produce practical knowledge that others can use to bring about social change (Breda, 2013; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Madison, 2012). I see transferability as a desirable goal for my study and endeavored to incorporate as much information as possible around context in Chapters Five through Seven, keeping in mind an international audience.

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21 Transferability is used over the term “generalizability” as the intent of qualitative research is to produce context-specific findings, not generalizable findings (Creswell, 2014).
Rigour in Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

As discussed in Chapter Two, one of the central tenets of PCF scholarship is to allow the voices of those marginalized by society (the Other) to become the starting point for knowledge construction. When utilizing a PCF analytical framework, the researcher has a social obligation to: 1) simultaneously examine race, gender, culture, class, and history; 2) connect micro and macro levels of analysis; 3) construct knowledge that reflects the multiple social locations of those who have been marginalized; and 4) use the research as a vehicle for transformation (Khan et al., 2007; Reimer Kirkham & Anderson, 2002). These principles helped frame how I understood my role as a researcher and how I analysed, interpreted, and wrote about the data.

I was particularly drawn to the idea of combining PCF theory with critical ethnography, using the subjugated knowledge from study participants as the starting point in knowledge construction and linking this back to macro-level structural inequities (Khan et al., 2007; Reimer Kirkham & Anderson, 2002). I knew there was much to be learned and contributed through prolonged engagement with youth who had exited the streets and moved into independent housing. However, while the notion of opening up space for subjugated knowledge to be heard seemed fairly straight-forward in theory, in the messiness of field work it became nuanced and complex. Indeed, one of the major critiques of the operationalization of PCF theory is that it is too theoretical, not sufficiently rooted in material circumstances, and represents the interests of the intellectual elite (McEwan, 2002). In other words, outside the confines of academia, the aforementioned key tenets of PCF theory are challenging to uphold in practice.

I was particularly apprehensive about how to incorporate the PCF tenets of “giving voice” (Khan et al., 2007, p. 231) to participants and “helping participants to understand their situation” (Anderson, 2000, p. 227). I had to perpetually push myself to move beyond merely
exposing structural inequities to find ways of enabling participants to “speak back” to these inequities (Khan et al.; McEwan, 2002; Reimer Kirkham & Anderson, 2002). One of the ways I endeavored to do this was by making participants aware that we were co-generating knowledge. For example, each time I met with a participant I would share my perspective on the previous interview, elicit feedback, and then together we would discuss what this meant in terms of answering the study objectives. Sometimes, as will be highlighted in Chapters Five through Seven, this was accomplished by me challenging the dissonance between what participants said and did. At other times, I showed participants how I was linking their struggles back to broader structural factors. For example, I showed several participants a pie graph I had produced for a PowerPoint presentation that illustrated how the majority of them had almost no money left each month after paying rent and purchasing a monthly transit pass. That visual aid elicited several conversations about how challenging it was to move forward in life, especially when trying to do so while living solely on welfare income. During those conversations, it seemed to me that participants felt reassured that it “made sense” why they were struggling and that it was not “all in their heads.” All of them expressed satisfaction that I would be sharing my pie graph with a broader audience. In fact, each time I presented my preliminary findings, participants would eagerly ask me to recall audience feedback. It seemed to me they genuinely felt they were speaking alongside me. Participants also seemed to take some comfort in the fact that there were other youth in the study experiencing similar struggles. I sensed that this knowledge helped them understand and situate their struggles within a broader perspective. Even during the writing phase of my doctoral work, several months after I had concluded participant interviews, a few of the study participants would drop by the clinic from time-to-time, eager to hear about my
progress. On those occasions, I would share my developing insights and they would respond to those emerging ideas.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are important ethical considerations that must be considered with any type of research. This is especially true for the critical ethnographer who endeavours to study, represent, and advocate for those marginalized by society. Representation has consequences, not only for the research participants but potentially more broadly, as practice and policy decisions may be based on the knowledge produced by the research (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007). I have touched on some ethical principles already in this chapter (e.g., representation and power dynamics); here, I provide an overview of how I addressed common ethical concerns.

**Ethics Approval**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Toronto Health Sciences Research Ethics Board as well as the Research Review Committee at Covenant House Toronto (Appendix L).

**Conflict of Interest**

In order to manage any real, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest, I kept my nurse practitioner and medical director roles at Covenant House Toronto separate from my researcher role. This meant that I did not provide healthcare to any of the youth enrolled in the study. Also, I did not actively participate in recruiting youth for the study other than providing outreach staff with recruitment flyers. No flyers were posted in the clinic. Prior to enrollment, all of the youth were made aware they were still welcome to receive healthcare services at Covenant House Toronto and would be directed to one of my physician colleagues. To my knowledge, none of the study participants attended the Covenant House clinic while enrolled in the study.
Power Differential

I was aware that my role as a nurse practitioner and as an academic researcher placed me in a position of power. In addition to the reflexive account woven throughout this dissertation, I believe my choice of a PCF theoretical framework along with the way the study was designed and implemented (meeting participants on their own “turf”, preference for informal over formal interviews, allowing the narratives of the participants to guide data generation and analysis, etc.) speak to my desire to minimize power differentials.

Consent

Free and informed consent (Appendix M) was obtained verbally and in writing from all study participants. I made a concerted effort to ensure the consent form was in plain language, and highlighted throughout the document that informed consent was an ongoing process that could be negotiated at any time – a point I reiterated from time-to-time throughout the study. The potential risks and benefits of participating in the study were clearly delineated in the consent form and restated by me when I was gaining consent. In particular, I emphasized that, given the length of time we would be spending together, it was important for participants to feel comfortable telling me if our informal interviews ever needed to be stopped or redirected. I also stressed that, should the need arise, I could refer participants to counselling services at Covenant House Toronto. None of the participants ever asked me to stop an interview, but I certainly shortened or redirected the interviews whenever participants directly asked or implied (e.g., short or vague answers) that I do so. No participant requested to be referred for counseling.

Participant Withdrawal

As noted in the consent form, participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were also informed that I intended to use data
from participants who did not continue in the study unless they declined, which they could do at any time. None of the study participants asked to have their data deleted.

Confidentiality

All of the data collected were kept in strict confidence. Participants choose a pseudonym that was used in place of their real name on all documents related to data generation. All electronic data (e.g., interview transcripts and field notes) were stored on an encrypted USB flash key and on a secure server at the Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto. Hard copy data (e.g., questionnaires and consent forms) were kept in a locked filing cabinet at the Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing in a room accessible only by electronic key. Digital audio recordings were destroyed once transcribed.

The consent form indicated that limits to confidentiality applied if a participant disclosed that they intended to hurt themselves or others, or if they informed me that someone under the age of 16 years was suffering abuse and/or neglect. I did not have to break confidentiality at any time during the study.

Dissemination Strategies

Critical ethnographers are ethically obligated to produce and disseminate “really useful knowledge” (Jordan & Yomans, 1995, p. 401) accessible to a wide audience. Moreover, advocacy must always be woven into dissemination strategies and the social conditions of research participants not only described, but highlighted as problematic and in need of collective action (Breda, 2013; Madison, 2012). While the majority of dissemination will take place after I complete my doctoral studies, I do feel a strong ethical responsibility to share my findings broadly. With this in mind, I have begun to devise comprehensive dissemination strategies geared toward academic (e.g., university-based researchers and students) and community (e.g.,
social service providers and the general public) audiences (Appendix N). Importantly, several study participants have expressed interest in helping to disseminate the study findings, and I hope that they will be able to join me for some of the dissemination activities.

Summary

To my knowledge, this study is the first ethnographic study to exclusively examine the experiences of formerly homeless youth as they transition into independent housing and attempt to achieve meaningful social integration. Critical ethnographic methodology aligns well with a PCF theoretical perspective as both share an emphasis on a social structural analysis of inequity, linking micro-level individual findings back to macro-level structural inequities. This enhanced perspective opens up the possibility for a youth-centered dialogue; one that contributes to our limited knowledge in this area and challenges current assumptions about how best to assist young people in their transition off the streets.
CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT AND POSITION

Nobody controls my life. I control my life by myself. I have to go to school, I know that, because I don’t want to go back on the street. I don’t want to stay with the [welfare] caseworker…they can cut off my money anytime. I want a good job, work full time, get enough money, be like other people, and make my dream true.

∼ Alexandra (Month Six)

As I journeyed with the young people in my study, I began to see that society was structured in a way that made it extremely challenging for them to integrate into the mainstream. Navigating society as an undereducated and inadequately employed youth was much more difficult than most of them had anticipated. They were housed, yet structural factors made it almost impossible to achieve a simple level of well-being that comes from food security, the opportunity for stable employment, and the ability to participate in social activities most of us take for granted. They were denizens (inhabitants) not citizens (members) of society (Standing, 2011). Over time, I witnessed the study participants grow exhausted by the relentless struggle against oppressive structural conditions.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the socioeconomic context and socioeconomic position of study participants (including the ways they experienced that context and position) and to highlight the myriad factors that made it challenging for them to achieve meaningful social integration. I begin the chapter by providing a brief overview of the demographics of Toronto, Canada. Then, I provide a summary of the socioeconomic context of the study participants. In particular, I concentrate on income, housing, and transportation. The rest of the chapter is
devoted to an examination of the participants’ socioeconomic position. Here, I focus on age, education, employment, race, class, and gender.

**Toronto: Demographics**

Toronto is Canada's largest city and the capital of the province of Ontario. It is the fourth largest city in North America, and home to a diverse population of approximately 2.8 million (5.5 million including the surrounding Greater Toronto Area) people (City of Toronto, 2016). Toronto is a global hub for business, finance, arts, and culture, and is consistently ranked one of the world's most livable cities (City of Toronto). However, the city does face some significant challenges, particularly regarding income inequality and poverty. The gap between the top 1% of income earners and the rest of Torontonians is the 2nd largest in Canada; furthermore, at 31%, Toronto’s income inequality growth rate over the past 25 years is more than double the national rate of 14% (Toronto Foundation, 2015). Toronto has the highest number of working poor (10.7%) among Canada’s 10 largest cities, with precarious employment and youth unemployment on the rise (Toronto Foundation). It is estimated that by 2025, almost 60% of Toronto neighborhoods will be low or very low income (Toronto Foundation).

**Socioeconomic Context**

In order to begin to appreciate the structural barriers study participants faced, it is essential to understand the socioeconomic context of these newly housed youth. In particular, it is crucial to recognize that, while all of the study participants were housed, their income levels dictated the location and the quality of the housing they were able to obtain. In addition, it is important to identify the central role public transportation played in their lives.

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22 After tax income below the low income cut-offs set by Statistics Canada.
23 18% compared to Canadian youth (aged 15 – 24 years) unemployment rate of 14% (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013)
Income

All of the youth in the study were living below Canada’s low income cut-off (poverty line) at baseline. This did not change over the study period.

Table 4

*Primary Income Source at Baseline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Source*</th>
<th>Annual Income (after tax)</th>
<th>Low Income Cut-Off** (after tax)</th>
<th>Low Income Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OW (welfare)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Alexandra</td>
<td>$656 x 12 = $7,872</td>
<td>$20,160</td>
<td>$12,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ John</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Lin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Marcel***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Phoenix</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Robert</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODSP (welfare)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Kat</td>
<td>$1,098 x 12 = $13,176</td>
<td>$20,160</td>
<td>$6,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Philip</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Ashley</td>
<td>$1,600 x 12 = $19,200</td>
<td>$20,160</td>
<td>$960</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*OW = Ontario Works; ODSP = Ontario Disability Support Program
**Single person living in a Canadian city with ≥ 500,000 inhabitants
*** Marcel was employed full-time at baseline but quit before receiving his first full-time paycheque

(Income Security Advocacy Centre, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2015c)

As noted (Table 4), the majority of participants relied on welfare as their primary source of income at baseline, with those on the Ontario Works (OW) program (welfare for those without a diagnosed disability) trying to exist on $7,872/year – significantly below the poverty line cut off of $20,160/year. None of the youth who were on welfare at baseline were able to gain stable employment and exit the welfare system during the six to nine months they were in the study. The reasons for this will be explored later in the chapter. Living in poverty permeated every aspect of the study, with impacts ranging from lack of access to material resources and educational opportunities to diminished self-esteem and lower social standing. Importantly, limited financial resources significantly impacted participants’ ability to move forward in life.
Housing

During the study period, Toronto was the most expensive place to rent in Canada and had the 4th lowest vacancy rate (Toronto Foundation, 2015). There were approximately 80,000 Torontoonian households waiting for affordable housing (social housing for low income residents) with a wait list potentially multiple years long given only about 3,000 people were housed the year prior – the lowest in six years (Toronto Foundation). Consequently, study participants understood that they had very few options in terms of accommodation once they left the shelter system.

At baseline, almost all of the youth in the study were living alone (Phoenix and Marcel lived together) in accommodations scattered throughout the city of Toronto. Most youth utilized the help of shelter outreach staff to help them find housing. Sometimes, shelter outreach staff were also able to assist by providing free furniture, bedding, kitchen utensils, etc. in order to help the youth get set up in their new places. Nearly all of the suites were located in basements with a common area containing a small kitchen and bathroom shared with up to three other tenants (almost always strangers). During my initial visits, I was often struck by how eerily quiet these common spaces were given how many tenants shared them. I suppose, I was expecting to hear the typical happy sounds I associate with home.

Market rent. All youth in the study were paying market rent, which ranged from $430.00 to $800.00 per month (Table 5). Some youth were not offered lease agreements and some landlords insisted on cash payments. Youth renting under these stipulations had no recourse if the landlord wanted to make changes. For example, nineteen-year-old pregnant Lin suddenly faced a rent increase of $200.00/month when a new landlord took over the rooming house Lin was renting.
Table 5

*Accommodation at Baseline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Monthly Rent</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>Rooming house (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$430.00</td>
<td>Shared with three other tenants – each had own room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tiny room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Basement suite (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$800.00</td>
<td>One bedroom – low ceilings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Basement suite (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$550.00</td>
<td>Shared with three other tenants – each had own room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Smelled of animal urine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tiny room and no window</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat*</td>
<td>Bachelor apartment (slept in living room)</td>
<td>$800.00</td>
<td>Sink leaked and fridge broken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two-bedroom apartment (shared bedroom with boyfriend)</td>
<td>$400.00</td>
<td>Boyfriend’s mom’s place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>Rooming house (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$560.00</td>
<td>Top floor – shared with three other tenants and no kitchen/laundry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcel</td>
<td>Basement suite (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$495.00</td>
<td>Shared with roommate – each had own room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip*</td>
<td>Bachelor apartment (slept in living room)</td>
<td>$800.00</td>
<td>Sink leaked and fridge broken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Basement suite (slept in living room)</td>
<td>$550.00</td>
<td>One bedroom shared with a friend – each paid the same amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Significant state of disrepair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>Basement suite (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$495.00</td>
<td>Shared with roommate – each had own room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Rooming house (own bedroom)</td>
<td>$480.00</td>
<td>Small room on main floor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Moved during the study*

Almost all the youth were paying rent out of their monthly welfare cheques. As previously mentioned, most of the youth were on the OW program and, for them, this meant approximately 77% of their monthly cheque was going toward rent. Two of the youth in the study – twenty-one-year-old Phillip and nineteen-year-old Kat – were “lucky” because they were on the Ontario Welfare Disability Program (ODSP), meaning they received approximately $450.00/month more than the youth on OW. Both Phillip and Kat used this extra money to get above ground bachelor suites; however, each of them moved out after only a couple of months.
because, even though the $800.00/month rent meant they were “only” using 62% of their income toward rent, they still could not afford to live there.

**Substandard accommodation.** I was surprised at how little one gets for giving nearly all of their money over to a landlord. In general, the suites were quite tiny – usually only big enough to hold a single or double bed and a dresser (Figure 4). The windows in most of the suites were very small, causing me to wonder if they were legal. One suite did not have a window at all.

Pregnant Lin lived on the top floor of a rooming house that contained ten rooms but no laundry facilities or kitchen. My overall impression of most of the suites was that they were haphazardly constructed with the sole purpose of offering accommodation to low income tenants with few options. Slowly, I became used to the youths’ substandard living conditions; however, I was not prepared for my visit to Phillip’s new, more affordable home (Figure 5).

Figure 4

*Alexandra’s Room*

Figure 5

*Entrance to Phillip’s Basement Suite*
I met Phillip at his new place after he had been living there for about six weeks. As previously mentioned, Phillip decided to move as he was unable to afford the $800.00/month rent at his initial place. His suite was located at the back of a duplex that had been split into three levels, with rooms on each level being used as rental units. Phillip was feeling happy about finding a place for only $550.00/month (he split the $1,100/month rent with a friend). This meant he finally had more money to spend on things like food and clothing. In my field notes, I documented my reaction as Phillip proudly took me around to the back of the duplex and invited me into his basement apartment:

I try hard to hide my shock. It appears as though we are walking into a dilapidated shack. There are garbage bags piled by the entrance and my foot gets stuck in a mixture of mud and whatever is leaking from the garbage bags. The door appears to be broken. When we enter, Phillip apologizes for the mess. There is drug paraphernalia scattered on a table. The place smells of cat urine. More garbage bags are inside. Phillip tells me they had to bag up all their clothes because of cockroaches and bed bugs. An exterminator has come and sprayed the place. There is a blown-up air mattress in the middle of the floor. This is where either Phillip or his roommate sleeps, as it is a one-bedroom unit. The windows are few and tiny. The floor is a mixture of cement and old lino. It has absolutely no feeling of home, but rather more of a place where squatters sleep. This seems lost on Phillip.
(Month Five)

Admittedly, Phillip’s living situation was significantly worse than the other participants in the study; however, the key point here is that Phillip moved to this location because he believed he had no other options.

It is important to note that, while I considered most of the accommodations I saw to be substandard, most of the youth did not complain about their living situations. In fact, all of the youth expressed gratitude for having a place where they could live independently, away from the rules and regulations associated with shelter life. Furthermore, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, all of the study participants were aware of the limited housing options in Toronto, especially for those living below the poverty line. Consequently, all of the youth were simply grateful to be housed.
Transportation

None of the homes were located within walking distance (i.e., less than 20 minutes) to places important to the youth such as low-cost grocery stores, their schools and/or places of employment, welfare offices, neighbourhoods of friends and family, shelter drop-in centres, etc. (Figure 6). This meant all the youth relied heavily on public transit. Phillip was especially reliant on public transit as he walked slowly and with a visible limp caused by nerve damage he sustained from lying unconscious in an awkward position for several hours after a drug overdose the year prior.

Public transit. Residents of Toronto are fortunate in that they have a fairly comprehensive public transit system. In fact, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) is the 3rd largest transit system in North America (TTC, 2016a). There are four subway lines in Toronto, spanning a significant portion of the city. Most of the study participants took the subway almost every day of the week, either walking (15 – 30 minutes) or taking a city bus (5 – 10 minutes) to get to the nearest subway station. Once on the subway, youth would often have to transfer to another subway line and then take a city bus in order to reach their destination. It was not uncommon for them to spend 45 – 60 minutes each way on a typical daily route. While all the youth simply took their commuting method and time for granted – it was all most of them had ever known – I found it quite draining, particularly on the days when there were transit delays or inclement weather. For me, it reinforced yet another aspect of life beyond participants’ control.

At the time of the study, a monthly TTC pass cost $112.00 (student fare) – $140.00/month (adult fare). After paying rent and purchasing a TTC pass, the majority of youth in the study were left with $14.00 – $32.00/month to purchase food, clothing, etc. The significant
cost associated with transportation often meant youth had to make the choice between purchasing a TTC pass or purchasing food, paying rent, going to work/school, etc.

Figure 6

*Map of Accommodations in Relation to Public Transit*

Note: The yellow, green, and purple lines indicate major subway lines in Toronto. The downtown core is located in and immediately around the yellow loop, south of the green subway line.

(TTC, 2016b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Home Location(s)*</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Home Location(s)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>☯</td>
<td>Marcel</td>
<td>☯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>☯</td>
<td>Phillip</td>
<td>☯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>☯</td>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>☯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>☯</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>☯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>☯</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Phillip and Kat moved during the study, living in the same apartment at different times. Phoenix and Marcel were roommates.*
Public transit played an essential role in helping youth access things like employment, education, and healthcare. Phillip and Kat had mental and physical health challenges requiring regular visits to specialists located outside their neighbourhoods. Lin required regular prenatal care, and her health care provider was not within walking distance. Both Kat and nineteen-year-old Alexandra attended high schools located a significant distance from their homes. None of the youth who were employed had jobs located near their new homes, and most job sites were at least two forms of transportation (e.g., subway and bus) away. Fortunately, Phillip, Kat, and Alexandra all received a monthly transportation allowance through the ODSP and OW programs (because of frequent medical visits [Phillip and Kat] and high school attendance [Kat and Alexandra]); however, if their TTC passes were lost or stolen – the latter happened to Alexandra at a party – they were unable to purchase public transportation for the rest of the month. Youth in the study unable to afford the TTC fare often resorted to walking, sneaking on the subway, streetcar or bus for free, or, more commonly, they simply stayed home.

**Summary of Socioeconomic Context**

In summary, all of the study participants lived below the poverty line throughout the study, with the majority of youth living in extreme poverty. After exiting the shelter, their “choices” regarding accommodation were limited, unaffordable, and inadequate. Because their new homes were scattered throughout the city, the youth relied heavily on costly public transit in order to access supermarkets, education, healthcare, and employment. After paying market rent and purchasing a TTC pass each month, most of the youth had essentially no money left to meet even their most basic needs. Consequently, they were forced to make impossible choices like whether they should purchase food or pay their rent. These structural obstacles reinforced the lack of control and choice study participants had over their lives. In other words, even though
they were no longer living in a shelter, they were still the “Other”, living in the margins, unable to actively participate in mainstream society. It was almost as if they were being set up to fail.

**Socioeconomic Position**

This section builds on socioeconomic context, highlighting the impact of age, education, and employment on the ability to sustain a transition off the streets. The more subtle, intersecting influences of race, class, and gender are also examined in order to understand how these factors can perpetuate a lower socioeconomic position, ultimately hindering the ability to achieve meaningful social integration.

**Age**

Solar and Irwin (2010) do not identify age as a separate determinant in their CSDH conceptual framework, and age-based inequities are not commonly discussed in PCF discourse. Nevertheless, I found that, for the study participants, their young biological and developmental age contributed significantly to their low socioeconomic position and, ultimately, their ability to integrate into mainstream society.

All of the study participants were 19 – 24 years of age at the beginning of the study. Almost all of them had left home before the age of twenty and more than half of them came from households where child welfare was involved (Table 6). It is important to note that Kat, Marcel, and Robert had been living with minimal parental input for a significant number of years. In addition, Lin and Marcel spent a notable portion of their childhoods with extended family outside of Canada.
### Table 6

**Age When Left Parental Home and Child Welfare Involvement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age When Left Parental Home</th>
<th>CAS* Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18 (lived with family outside Canada ages 1 – 16)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcel</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15 (lived with family outside Canada ages 10 – 14)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CAS = Children’s Aid Society (child welfare)*

While it may seem natural to leave home between the ages of 20 – 24, the reality is that 59% of Canadian young adults aged 20 – 24 years still live at home (Statistics Canada, 2015b). This number has been steadily rising over the past 30 years (it was 42% in 1981) and has been attributed, in part, to the cost of housing, pursuit of higher education, difficulty finding employment, and the need for parental emotional support (Statistics Canada). Furthermore, cumulative adverse childhood events (e.g., abuse and/or household dysfunction) – acknowledged by almost all youth in the study – negatively impact a host of health and developmental outcomes, including coping skills (Felitti et al., 1998; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). In other words, study participants were trying to live independently – something most Canadian youth are not able to do – with limited coping skills and, generally, minimal and/or detrimental parental involvement.

**Education**

Education is a strong determinant of future employment and income (Solar & Irwin, 2010). As mentioned in Chapter Three, there is a staggering difference of roughly 40 percentage
points in the employment rates between Canadian youth (aged 15 – 24 years) who have not finished high school and those with a postsecondary certificate or diploma (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Six of the nine youth in the study graduated high school – much higher than the 38% reported in the literature (Evenson, 2009). For this reason, I was initially quite optimistic about the youths’ job prospects. Unfortunately, it quickly became evident that a grade 12 education – especially when one graduates from the applied\(^{24}\) (less abstract and more practical-focused) stream and/or with poor marks – means job opportunities are drastically limited. Furthermore, there were significant economic barriers to pursuing post-secondary education and limited guidance as to what career/employment opportunities were possible and available.

**Undereducated.** It seemed to be common knowledge among study participants that obtaining a high school diploma was necessary in order to have any hope of obtaining meaningful employment. Furthermore, all participants were keenly aware that, in the current job market, having *only* a high school diploma likely meant they were only going to be able to obtain minimum wage jobs and not be able to truly move ahead in life. As previously mentioned, a significant number of study participants had a high school diploma. However, as the study progressed, I learned that several participants were not particularly confident with their academic knowledge because, shortly after they entered high school, they started missing classes, hanging out with the “wrong crowd”, etc.; consequently, their marks suffered.

\(^{24}\) Canadian students taking mostly applied courses in grade nine are less likely to graduate in five years compared to those taking academic courses (40% vs. 86%). Furthermore, students from the lowest income neighborhoods are significantly more likely to take the majority of their courses as applied courses compared to students in the highest income neighborhoods (33% vs. 6%) (People for Education, 2015).
Throughout the study, twenty-two-year-old John – who completed grade 12 – shared that he would like to pursue post-secondary education; however, whenever I pressed him about this, he seemed a bit uncomfortable. One day, John opened up regarding his regrets over his academic performance in high school:

John: (...) I should have taken school more serious.  
Naomi: Yeah? So, if there was one thing you had to pick [wishes for his life], for you it would be that you wish you had taken school more seriously?  
John: Yeah. I just remember I skipped and smoked weed.  
Naomi: Yeah? So, if you had to go back and talk to yourself in the past, you’d be like, “Don’t skip?”  
John: I would do that, but it would probably be...like, “Who are you? I’m not even talking to you.” (laughs)  
Naomi: (...) Do you think your life would look different now if you had gone to classes?  
John: I don’t know...I think I’d probably have a career right now.  
Naomi: Yeah? (...) Do you do you think that next year you’ll pursue it [post-secondary education], or do you think that you can get by, maybe, without it?  
John: Definitely can’t get by without it.  
Naomi: Cannot get by without it?  
John: Definitely.  
Naomi: Why?  
John: Because in the 21st century, you need to go to college. You need a career. Minimum wage does not cut it. (Month Seven)

Overtime, I came to understand that, the reason John was so uncomfortable about pursuing post-secondary education was because, even though he had a high school diploma, his lack of attendance during high school meant he was not confident regarding his academic knowledge or potential – a sentiment expressed by most of the study participants. Furthermore, John, like most of the study participants, was streamlined in the 9th grade (15 years of age) into the applied stream, in a sense marking him as incapable of succeeding alongside his university bound (academic stream) peers. Consequently, John felt overwhelmed about the prospect of enrolling in a post-secondary institution.

25 (...) denotes omitted material and … (no brackets) denotes pause.
The women in the study were the most vocal regarding the need to pursue post-secondary education. Kat had been removed from her home by the Children’s Aid Society at the age of eight and spent the rest of her life moving between various foster homes where she was physically, sexually, and emotionally abused. Kat had a grade 11 education and was enrolled in an alternative school for high school upgrading. One crisp fall morning, we sat on the steps of a beautiful old church in downtown Toronto and discussed post-secondary education:

Naomi: So, on a scale of one to ten, or zero to ten, how committed are you to going beyond high school?
Kat: Oh 100%, ten out of ten, maybe even 15 out of 10. I fully believe in furthering your education no matter how hard it may be. The three most smartest debts you can put yourself into is a home, schooling, and probably business.
Naomi: And if you didn’t finish your…if you didn’t pursue post-secondary education, what do you think life would be like for you?
Kat: It wouldn’t be a life. It would be surviving. Right now, it’s just surviving and enjoying, enjoying what I do have, but it is not living to the fullest, it’s not experiencing my full potential. (Month Four)

Kat sums up what several participants told me about post-secondary education – it was necessary to move out of “survival mode” and to reach one’s full potential, but it would likely mean going into debt.

**Economic barriers.** I found myself perpetually frustrated by the economic barriers facing study participants interested in pursuing post-secondary education (Table 7). The thought of the costs associated with obtaining a post-secondary degree or diploma seemed daunting given their economic realities. Furthermore, several youth had incurred outstanding debts related to unpaid credit card and phone bills, or defaulted Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) loans. This meant that they were unable to qualify for student loans.
Table 7

Cost of Post-Secondary Education in Toronto

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-Secondary Goals* (Program Time Frame)</th>
<th>Total Cost of Tuition**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building Renovation Technician (Two Years)</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment and Urban Studies (Four Years)</td>
<td>$28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary Technician (Two Years)</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered Nurse (Four Years)</td>
<td>$28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensed Practical Nurse (Two Years)</td>
<td>$9,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism (Four Years)</td>
<td>$28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chef (One Year)</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Event Management (Two Years)</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child and Youth Worker (Three Years)</td>
<td>$10,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participant names are not attached to education goals in order to protect their anonymity.

** Approximate and generally does not include textbooks, personal computer, or other incidental costs.

(George Brown College, 2016; Ryerson University, 2016; Sheridan, 2016)

Twenty-four-year-old Marcel had spent the past six years in and out of jail, couch surfing, staying in shelters, or renting rooms for short periods of time. This was his 6th attempt at living in independent housing and this time he was determined to remain housed, in part because he was about to turn 25, meaning he would “age out” of the youth system and have to stay in adult shelters. Marcel had previously accepted an OSAP loan but never went to school (because he went to jail) and never repaid the loan (Marcel maintained the money was stolen when he was in jail). By the second month of the study, Marcel had obtained employment as a cook and was waiting to receive his first paycheque when he learned he had been accepted into a Culinary Arts program at a college in Toronto. The $150.00 required to hold his spot was due in one week and he would not be getting paid before the money was due. Furthermore, he was one month late paying rent. It was painful to listen to Marcel wrestle through how he was going to come up with $150.00 to hold his spot in at the college:

Marcel: (…) I don’t know how I’m going to get money, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’m going to ask my mom but like I doubt my mom can help me. And then what after that? Now what? Right? (bitter laugh) It’s like…so everything I did was just for nothing then. You know what I mean? (Month Two)
Marcel ended up setting up an account on a crowd funding website. He sent me the link to the site where he had very articulately acknowledged his past mistakes and pleaded for help paying for school. Marcel was a very proud young man and I was moved by how hard this must have been for him.

**Limited social and cultural capital.** While almost all the youth in the study expressed an interest in completing post-secondary education, in general, the youth knew no or very few people who had accomplished this task. In other words, they had very little access to the tacit knowledge that gets passed between friends and family regarding what programs are available, how the application process works, etc. Furthermore, I learned that the road map to post-secondary education becomes even more complicated when one is an immigrant.

Alexandra immigrated to Canada three years prior to enrolling in the study. Initially, Alexandra lived in Toronto with her family; however, she found herself on the streets after a physical altercation with her stepfather. Unfortunately, a woman who sexually trafficked young women befriended Alexandra and took her into her home. Alexandra shared that she was trafficked for several months. One night, Alexandra fled that situation and moved into a youth homeless shelter for a few months until she felt ready to move out on her own. Despite many setbacks during her first three years in Canada, Alexandra was determined to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse; however, at various points during the study, I shared her frustration regarding the complexity of navigating the education system.

When Alexandra first arrived in Canada at the age of 16, she was put back from grade eleven to grade nine. Then, after she turned 18, she was told she had to move to a high school for adults. Frustrated, Alexandra enrolled in a government program for new Canadians where she was paid to train and work as a dental assistant. Alexandra did not understand that the program
was only twelve months long, and after that she would no longer receive an income and would still not have a high school diploma:

Alexandra: They tell me they gave me that training to give me extra Canadian experience. They were like, “That will help you next time so that you can go and do something else.” (...) Even when I was going through my training, I thought I was starting something to give me experience...a certificate to say that I completed this school, but the only thing they wanted was for their program to move and they forgot about my future. If I knew that was going to happen, I would have never worked there. I would just go right away [and do high school upgrading] because I lost almost a year and a half with that bullshit...I didn’t even get anything out of it. I thought that after I finished the training I was going to go right away to college, because I thought I had already started that. But it was not like that. They sent me back to the adult school. (Month Two)

To complicate matters, when I met Alexandra, she was enrolled in a French adult high school, presumably because she was fluent in French. Then, later in the study when Alexandra began looking into Nursing programs in Toronto, she was told she needed an English and not a French high school diploma in order to apply. So, during the seventh month of the study, Alexandra dropped out of the French high school and enrolled in an English adult high school, but was disappointed to learn that her several months of hard work at the French adult high school had not advanced her grade level as much as she had hoped. Furthermore, Alexandra told me that her stepfather had taken out several credit cards in her name and defaulted on all of them, meaning she could not apply for an OSAP loan when she completed high school. In summary, by the end of the study, Alexandra (who was now 20 years of age) had spent almost four years trying to navigate the Canadian education system and was still trying to finish high school. In addition, when Alexandra finally does obtain a high school diploma, she will likely be unable to pay for a postsecondary education.

Employment

As mentioned earlier, Toronto has the highest number of working poor among Canada’s 10 largest cities, with precarious employment and youth unemployment on the rise. In fact, less
than half (46%) of Toronto’s workers have the most secure form of employment – permanent full-time employment with benefits (Toronto Foundation, 2015). So, it was under those circumstances, combined with limited social capital, that study participants were searching for employment and attempting to enter mainstream society.

At baseline, only three out of nine study participants were formally (i.e., not “under the table”) employed – in keeping with the literature on youth homelessness (Evenson, 2009). Twenty-one-year-old Phoenix worked part-time in a clothing store, twenty-four-year-old Marcel worked full-time in a restaurant, and twenty-four-year-old Ashley worked full-time as a receptionist. All of them were receiving minimum wage ($11.00/hour) and none of them signed contracts or received employee benefits such as health insurance. Phoenix was fired from his job during the second month of the study and Marcel quit his job before receiving his first paycheque. Only Ashley was able to count on consistent, full-time hours throughout the study.

In general, employment opportunities for all youth in the study were limited to minimum wage jobs with inconsistent hours. As noted earlier in this chapter (Table 4), minimum wage – even with consistent, full-time hours – still meant living below Canada’s low income cut-off. Furthermore, being on OW or the ODSP seemed to provide a disincentive to obtaining formal employment, as youth were aware that their welfare cheques would be reduced and, in some cases (depending on the income), stopped altogether. If the latter happened, youth also lost access to health benefits such as free prescription drug coverage. In fact, Ashley, the sole participant who maintained full-time employment throughout the duration of the study, lost her free prescription drug coverage and could no longer afford to pay for medication to help her combat psoriasis, a condition she was quite embarrassed by. Some of the youth resorted to informal forms of employment because a cash income and no paper trail led them to believe they
could avoid reporting their income without risk of detection. Overall, these types of jobs were inherently risky and exploitative as they exposed study participants to the potential for physical and emotional harm and/or criminal prosecution.

The welfare system. I was immediately struck by how little the study participants understood about the welfare system, especially since many of them had been on welfare for several months or even years. For example, all the participants on welfare correctly understood that if their welfare workers found out that they were receiving an income, their welfare cheques would be “clawed back”; however, every single youth had a different impression regarding how much money they were actually allowed to make before being penalized. Consequently, most of the youth endeavored to circumvent surveillance by the welfare system through non-traceable sources of income such as informal jobs where they were paid in cash. One youth falsified a termination letter from their employer (a criminal offense) so they could continue to receive money from welfare and from their part-time job. Some of the youth believed that because their welfare cheques were directly deposited into their bank accounts, welfare staff had access to all their banking information and were monitoring their banking transactions. This was partially true as youth would be asked for a financial update and would sometimes have to produce banking statements during their mandatory quarterly meetings with their welfare worker. As a result, some youth had more than one bank account, while others preferred to keep cash.

Limited formal employment opportunities. The nominal academic credentials of the youth in the study seemed to relegate them to precarious, part-time, minimum wage employment. Some of the local shelters offered job skills training programs that included a job placement. These job placements offered the potential for full-time employment. Twenty-one-year-old
Robert (who only had a grade nine education) informed me at his baseline interview that he was hopeful that he had been accepted into one of these job skills training programs.

Robert had been on his own since the age of twelve, shuffled between several foster and group homes. He had attended various schools in the Toronto area, often getting expelled for “behaviour issues” such as missing classes, verbal and/or physical confrontations, etc. Robert dropped out of school during grade ten after a physical altercation with a teacher. In the past, Robert had sold marijuana to make ends meet. This time, he was determined to make money legally, but the process was slow and frustrating:

**Robert:** …It's a [job skills training] program through [name of agency]. It’s a year long. It's about four weeks of employment training and eight weeks of placement and then you decide what you want to do and then they help find you a placement in that type of field like security, cooking or something like that…for eight months and then altogether it’s a year long. (…) I’ve already applied. They picked their candidate. They are just waiting on funding. They don't have funding right now so it's just really slow.

**Naomi:** So, when do you expect to hear back?

**Robert:** It was supposed to start March 2nd but we’re on two weeks now so who knows…

**Naomi:** So, do you think you didn't get in or they didn’t get funding?

**Robert:** They're supposed to call even if you didn't make it. They are supposed to contact me. I got a phone call about a week and a half ago and they just told me that they have not received funding and to keep in touch… (Baseline Interview)

Two weeks later Robert excitedly told me that the agency had received their funding and his application had been accepted. His face lit up when he talked about starting work as a roofer – a job his estranged father had done as well. However, two weeks after that, Robert still had not started work. By this point, Robert had been living independently for over a month and was struggling to survive on his monthly OW cheque. When we met for our third interview, Robert looked thinner, despondent, and agitated. I did most of the talking during that interview, as Robert was clearly not in the mood to chat:

**Naomi:** So, what’s happening with the job?

**Robert:** I’m still waiting on a call back for when I can start.

**Naomi:** Ugh.
Robert: But I did the training and everything so all I need is that one phone call and then I can start, so…
Naomi: So, you’re just waiting for that?
Robert: Yeah.
Naomi: And how are you managing money wise?
Robert: (…) I’m getting really aggravated waiting.
Naomi: Yeah…it’s stressful, right?
Robert: Yeah.
Naomi: (…) So how are you doing with money? Like is your money all gone already for the [month]…
Robert: Yeah…right now, yeah.
Naomi: Are you going hungry?
Robert: (…) I’m good at not eating (…) that’s why I’m so skinny, right? (…) I can go ‘til tomorrow even though…like I’ll be hungry, but I have nothing.
Naomi: (…) It must be super stressful, right?
Robert: Yeah, it definitely is.
Naomi: (…) It must be tempting, I would imagine, when you can make money selling pot, to want to go do that when you are hungry, right?
Robert: Yeah, of course.
Naomi: Must be really hard. So, you’re just sitting around, getting aggravated until you get a call. Have you talked to them about when you might be getting a call?
Robert: Yeah, I talked to them this morning around…like, an hour ago? She’s still waiting and they’re just trying to figure out how they’re going to get us in and a whole bunch of other stuff…I don’t know… It’s a whole bunch of nonsense right now.
Naomi: Just frustrating. It must be frustrating because you feel like you’re not in control of it, right?
Robert: Yeah, exactly.
Naomi: Yeah, because you’re waiting on a bunch of other people.
Robert: I could’ve started work yesterday. I would’ve started work yesterday.
Naomi: Yeah, of course.
Robert: And that’s what they told me last week, “Monday, you’ll probably be starting…if the weekend is nice you might get a call”…but no call so… (Month One)

I included this dialogue around employment in its entirety to capture the frustration and the sense of not being in control that is experienced by youth with limited job opportunities. In addition, our verbal exchange highlights how tempting it is for youth to seek informal jobs that provide quick cash to purchase taken-for-granted items such as food. Like Robert, most of the youth in the study (including Ashley with the full-time job) ran out of money to purchase food at some point every month. Some of the youth returned to a shelter drop-in center – an environment they were trying to get away from – in order to eat.
Unfortunately, Robert’s job through the skills training program did not work out as planned. He worked intermittently for a few months as a roofer but quit after a disagreement with his boss over job safety. Robert also lost his housing when he got into a verbal altercation with his landlord. Robert dropped out of the study at the end of the second month. We kept in touch via text message and I saw him from time-to-time at a local shelter. The last time I saw Robert he looked dishevelled, pale, and thin. He told me he was still looking for employment.

**Informal and illegal jobs.** All but one youth in the study spoke of the ongoing temptation to seek informal or illegal employment. In fact, more than half of the youth ended up working at these types of jobs during the study. In general, informal and illegal jobs were easy to come by and offered quick cash. Importantly, cash jobs meant no “claw backs” to welfare incomes. But these forms of employment came with a price – they were risky and exploitative.

By the end of the first month of the study, Phillip, initially determined not to go back into the drug scene, began to consider selling marijuana, in part because he was struggling to make ends meet. Phillip had a grade 12 education and was extremely bright and articulate (he spent junior high in a school for gifted children); however, his previously mentioned physical disability combined with his mental health challenges (he was on medication for bipolar disorder) meant the opportunity for meaningful employment was limited. By the second month of the study, Phillip began selling marijuana full-time, something he continued right up until the end of the study. Marcel and Phoenix briefly sold marijuana. John worked for a few months doing renovation work for cash. When I pointed out to John that he was only being paid $5.00/hour, he seemed unconcerned, stating he was just happy to have a steady job.

Alexandra was the only woman in the study that ended up working for cash. By the end of the third month of the study, Alexandra was considering returning to sex trade work to help
pay the bills. She even went to a strip club with a female friend, but when she got there, 
Alexandra changed her mind, deciding she could no longer live that life. Instead, Alexandra 
answered an advertisement in the newspaper, was hastily hired, and started working nights and 
weekends (i.e., when not in school) as a cleaner. Sadly, it quickly became apparent that her new 
employer was trying to take advantage of her:

Naomi: (…) You’re working, but you haven’t got cash yet.
Alexandra: No, I’m getting it Friday.
Naomi: This Friday. And how much do you think you’re going to get?
Alexandra: (…) Like $1,000 something.
Naomi: That will be nice!
Alexandra: Yeah, I work so hard. That job is so hard.
Naomi: Yeah? So how is that going to work? Do you go somewhere and they give you 
cash?
Alexandra: No, my manager says he’s going to (…) So he was supposed to give me that 
[cash] Thursday, but he said Thursday he doesn’t have time (…) He said, “I’m going to 
come see you.” I gave him my address to come to give me money, but I don’t really feel 
comfortable. I was like, “Okay you can call me anytime. I can come and pick up the 
money.” But it’s just…it’s just weird. My manager, I don’t know…He’s weird and he 
scares me.
Naomi: Yeah? So, he’s coming to your house?
Alexandra: He say he’s going to come to my house, and I just told him, you know, I 
explained to him, “No, you can give me…just tell me anywhere, I can meet you and then 
come and take the money.” And he’s like, “No, don’t worry, just give me your address, I 
will come drop it.” And then last time, last time he tried to touch me, like, hold me and I 
was like, “No! I don’t feel comfortable…”
Naomi: Oh, Alexandra! So, he has come to your house before?
Alexandra: I’m scared. No, he has never come.
Naomi: Oh, you mean when you were at the job he was trying to touch you?
Alexandra: Yeah. And then one day he scared…it was Saturday he scared me. I was 
bringing the garbage out, so there was somewhere you pass, it’s a big space with nobody, 
and you can see there is not enough light. And I was scared because I didn’t know 
somebody was behind me, and I was like, you have to stop that. And he looked at me, 
and I’m like, “No, don’t touch me, I don’t like people who do that.”
Naomi: Good.
Alexandra: And he was like, “Oh, I’m just joking.” (Month Five)

Alexandra worked for this man for almost four months and arranged for her mother to be 
employed there as well. From Alexandra’s description, it seemed that her employer 
predominantly hired Black women living in poverty, seeking non-traceable sources of income.
During the time that Alexandra worked for her employer, he continued to make sexual advances, and persistently paid her late and/or less than what she felt she was owed.

**Racism**

Racialization produces social divisions and discriminatory practices in a variety of contexts (Solar & Irwin, 2010). Belonging to a marginalized racial/ethnic group influences every aspect of life, including social status, opportunities, and life-course trajectory (Solar & Irwin). In Toronto, racialized groups are much more likely to live below the poverty line than non-racialized groups (33% vs. 17%) and overwhelmingly live in neighbourhoods with inequitable public investment (Toronto Public Health, 2013). In addition, Black Torontonians are 17 times more likely than White Torontonians to be arbitrarily stopped and questioned by police (Toronto Foundation, 2015).

Six out of nine youth in the study belonged to a non-dominant ethno-racial community. Initially, I did not think race was going to play a significant role in how these youth transitioned into mainstream society, in part because the youth did not speak about race, and because, generally, I did not witness any overt racial discrimination during my encounters with study participants. However, as the study progressed, I began to understand that racial discrimination was so commonplace for these youth – Black youth in particular – they normalized it and rarely thought to mention it during our conversations. For example, during my field visits, I noticed there were far more people with brown and black skin in the low-income neighbourhoods (Figure 7) – where most study participants lived – compared to the higher-income neighbourhoods in the city. However, all youth in the study grew up in lower-income neighbourhoods so, for them, it was common to be surrounded by people who were not white.

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26 The term racialized refers to non-dominant ethno-racial communities who experience race as a key factor in their experience of inequality (Toronto Public Health, 2013).
Furthermore, racial discrimination was so inextricably linked to socioeconomic position, I think it was challenging for the youth to discern if they were being discriminated for their race or simply for being poor, unemployed and undereducated. Nevertheless, when I directly asked study participants about racial discrimination, most responded that this was an everyday occurrence, particularly for Black men, who all youth perceived were more likely to be targeted by law enforcement.

Figure 7

*Percent of Racialized Group Members by Toronto Neighbourhoods, 2006*

Note: The black dots denote the location of participants’ homes. The majority of participants lived in communities with a significant percentage of racialized group members.

(Toronto Public Health, 2013)
White versus Black experiences. John was the only mixed race Caucasian – Black youth in the study, and I found it interesting that he identified as “light-skinned” rather than Black, especially given he looked more Black than Caucasian. When I asked John about this, his response revealed a desire to distance himself from how he perceived society viewed Black people:

John: (…) I don’t like how the world looks at Black people sometimes, so I just classify myself as light-skinned.
Naomi: Because to you, is that different than being Black?
John: At the end of the day, I am Black. Like there’s a White line and a Black line and I’d be on the Black line; there’s no middle. (…) I just think that the world looks at Black people like we’re ignorant (long pause) I’m trying to describe it but I’m at a loss for words…
Naomi: (…) Do you think the police look at you differently when you are walking around the streets?
John: I think it depends on how you dress. (…) If you walked around in a business suit all day, the police wouldn’t even bother to harass you, but if you’re walking with your pants sagging, with a bunch of other friends, in certain neighbourhoods, they will pull you over.
Naomi: Has that happened to you?
John: Twice.
Naomi: Does that upset you at all? Offend you?
John: No, that’s society. (Month One)

It is clear from this excerpt that John had internalized dominant cultural discourses regarding Black people; consequently, to distance himself from these negative stereotypes, he chose to regard himself as light-skinned rather than Black. John perceived that society viewed Black people as “ignorant.” Furthermore, John had resigned himself to the fact that, if he aligned himself with “other friends in certain neighbourhoods” (i.e., other Black youth in low income areas of the city), he would be detained by law enforcement. In other words, John expected to be treated inequitably because he was Black.

Alexandra began talking about racism in the context of a recent visit to the OW office. Compared to John, Alexandra’s thoughts on racism were much more overt and angry:

Alexandra: The OW workers, they have attitude, all of them…especially when you’re Black.
Naomi: (...) Yeah? What makes you think that they are worse to Black people than to, say, White people?
Alexandra: Because you can tell. (...) You can tell. You know the people who sit in the front? [receptionist] Like, if it’s a White lady who is coming in, “Hi!” (friendly tone) and a good smile and everything. If you’re Black, “How can I help you?” (angry tone) Like that.
Naomi: (...) Have you found since coming to Canada, just in general, people treat you different because you’re Black?
Alexandra: Yeah, some of the people. Most people, they don’t like us.
Naomi: Most people don’t like Black people?
Naomi: Black people and Native people?
Alexandra: Yeah, I don’t know why. And Chinese too. Chinese and Indian.
Naomi: So, anyone that’s not White, basically.
Alexandra: Yeah. (Month Eight)

It is important to note that this excerpt regarding race was not solicited; I was not asking Alexandra about race prior to these comments. We were discussing how embarrassed she felt to be on welfare. For Alexandra, it was a taken-for-granted assumption that “most people” in society “hate” people of color. Consequently, being a Black woman on welfare was stigmatizing on multiple levels (hooks, 2000).

Classism

Classism refers to the effects of class ideology – the (often unspoken) belief that characteristics of worth and ability are based on social class (Class Action, 2016; hooks, 2000; Solar & Irwin, 2010). Classism is held in place by cultural attitudes that rank people according to economic status, level of education, type of employment, family lineage, and other divisions (Class Action). Those in the dominant group (middle- and upper-class) define for everyone else what is “normal” in the class hierarchy and see their good fortune as a sign that they are deserving, special, and chosen (Class Action; hooks). Class is an inherently relational concept defined by relations of power and control (Solar & Irwin). Moreover, while class is among the
strongest known predictors of health and illness, very little research has been done on the effects of class ideology (Solar & Irwin).

As I walked through the neighbourhoods of the study participants (Figures 8 – 11), spoke with them about their upbringing (Figures 12 & 13), and discussed their social circles, it became apparent to me that there was a huge gap between where they were and where they needed to get to in order to escape poverty. The drastic income and wealth disparity between my study participants and the majority of Torontonians was much more pronounced than I had anticipated. However, like the concept of race, study participants generally did not talk about class distinction unless I pointed it out to them. I came to understand that classism, like racism, was another taken-for-granted, internalized concept; consequently, study participants did not consciously give classism much thought as they went about their day-to-day lives.

Figure 8  Figure 9

*Money Mart*  *Lottery Ticket Stores*

I saw many “quick cash” stores (with high interest rates) and convenience stores selling lottery tickets (and sometimes marijuana upon request) in all the neighbourhoods I visited.
These signs seemed to suggest that Phillip and John were living neighbourhoods that required additional vigilance and surveillance.

The photos of the Boys and Girls Club (for “priority” youth) and the basketball court were taken during a visit to the low-income neighbourhood where Phoenix grew up – an area often linked to gang violence.
**Class culture gap.** I quickly noticed that, in general, most youth only travelled to places accessible with a TTC pass, or places with which they were familiar. It struck me, as a middle-class woman, that the experience of living in Toronto, and the opportunities available in the city, were vastly different depending on income. In other words, study participants’ cultural norms were very much shaped by their lower social class. For example, John was born and raised in Toronto, yet he displayed little knowledge or interest regarding common attractions within the city such as local universities, upscale shopping districts, or landmark hotels:

Naomi: (...) what's really hitting me is that a lot of people are sort of restricted by the TTC route, like they don't wander a lot. Like you went to Mississauga [suburb of Toronto] which was kind of a thing but that doesn't happen all the time, right?
John: No.
Naomi: Have you ever been, for example, to the University of Toronto campus?
John: No.
Naomi: You haven't been there...Have you been to, or would you ever like go downtown to like, I don't know, a fancy hotel, like the Royal York Hotel or something for any reason?
John: No.
Naomi: Where do you mostly hang out? Up here? [north east, lower income part of Toronto where he lives and grew up]
John: Yeah.
Naomi: Do you ever feel like you would like to wander outside of the TTC loop or outside of this area and see what else is in the city?
John: There's like...one time I did that. I like going down to Yonge and Dundas [well-known busy downtown intersection].
Naomi: Yeah. It's so like alive there, right?
John: Yeah, even at 3:00 in the morning.
Naomi: Yeah, I know it...it never sleeps. So, you've hung out around there...but not really outside of, like, do you ever hang out in the west-end [fewer racialized communities] very much?
John: No.
Naomi: No. Do you want to?
John: No.
Naomi: No, you're just happy...
John: (interjects and seems a bit uncomfortable) I don't know...there's no reason for me to go there. (Month Five)

John had lived in Toronto all his life and yet, he displayed little knowledge regarding common landmarks located outside his lower income community. Furthermore, even though he
denied an interest in visiting these locations, when I pressed him on this, he grew uncomfortable, informing me that there was no reason to go. On further reflection, I believe that John was telling me that he did not *belong* there. The University of Toronto campus and the Royal York hotel are places in the city noted for their prestige. People who frequent these locations can do so because they have money. John was not one of those people.

Twenty-four-year-old Ashley was different from youth like John in the sense that her employment as a receptionist required that she venture into parts of the city she might not otherwise frequent. Ashley had the “best” socioeconomic position in the sense that she was the only one in the study with a full-time, steady job; however, she was still very much aware that she existed in a lower social class. One evening over pizza Ashley, a very private person, shared with me her sensitivity regarding the class culture gap between herself and those living “successfully” in mainstream culture:

*Ashley:* (...) I see it [class culture gap] everywhere, you know, it doesn’t have to be someone in my life. I see it, you know, on the train, I can see people, like, on the train you see a lot of successful people working at these big companies, and the way they dress, you can just tell, they’re not even trying to survive, like, they are there. They are middle class, but it’s like, they’re still getting…They still have other money…they don’t have to worry about…Like, yeah, they’re probably going to worry about their rent and all that, but it’s not as big as my worries are.

*Naomi:* When you look at somebody like that on the train, how does…How do you feel when you see someone like that?

*Ashley:* It’s not fair. That’s how I feel.

*Naomi:* Why?

*Ashley:* I feel like it’s not fair because I’m…I have to work harder to be able to have fun, and they can just easily, like…I can hear their conversations too. I hear conversations on the train of all…like, going out drinking after work, or like, people my age that they’re working and they’re going to school, but at the same time they have all this money, you know? They don’t have a worry, they don’t have no worries about debt, they have no worries about their rent because they can afford it or they can borrow it from, like, a family member. It’s, to me, I just feel sometimes, you know, I just feel like really…I don’t know…I guess you can say jealous, but I wouldn’t put it like that, I would just say, it’s not fair that I have to struggle… (Month Five)
Of course, Ashley was not verbalizing those comments to the people she saw on the train each day. Ashley was *internalizing* the commonplace conversations around her that are inherent in our consumer-driven culture. For Ashley, and for many of the youth in the study, overhearing these mundane exchanges between those occupying middle- and upper-class society further reinforced the difference between the subordinated (lower class) and the dominant (middle- and upper-class) members of society.

**Limited social capital.** As I became familiar with the lives of each participant, I began to realize that relationships with people that could help them improve their socioeconomic position (i.e., linking/bridging social capital) were either non-existent or extremely limited. Furthermore, if these types of relationships existed, they were with social service providers or with those in their own lower social class. These types of relationships, while valuable, did not offer youth the opportunity to extend their social networks to those in a higher social class. This became apparent when, one day, I asked each participant about people in their lives who could help them “get ahead.” Kat struggled to identify anyone outside the foster care system who could provide her with tangible assistance:

**Naomi:** If you wanted to…say enrol in some university program somewhere, do you have anybody in your life that’s done that…let’s say has graduated with…a nursing degree or a teaching degree that could actually guide you?

**Kat:** I have my uncle D., [lives in Eastern Canada] but I don’t know if he actually graduated from like a college or a university because he is a police officer…I really don’t know most of my family. I have social workers that would be great influences to me…I have… I have…old foster parents that have graduated and stuff, so they would be…

**Naomi:** That’s what a lot of people say…it’s more people, sort of in the system…

**Kat:** Ya… (Month Two)

It was painful to watch Kat struggle to think of someone outside the foster care system that could help move her ahead in life. There were several pauses in her response, indicating her challenge with answering this line of questioning. Ultimately, Kat listed former foster parents
and social workers; however, she was unable to articulate any tangible benefits from these relationships in terms of providing her with opportunities that would allow her to participate in a higher social class.

John also seemed to have no adults in his life to help guide him with important decisions such as pursuing post-secondary education:

    Naomi: ...I was asking about you if you knew people in your life that went to university. Other than them [two friends from high school], do you know any adults? Like your mom you were saying got pregnant with you [she dropped out of post-secondary education after becoming pregnant with John]...Do you know any adults in your life that...
    John: (quickly interjects) No. (Month One)

The following month, John and I were discussing how he wanted to upgrade his high school marks. Again, John was unsure who could help him with this:

    Naomi: (...) if you wanted to go to adult school who would you talk to?
    John: Not quite sure.
    Naomi: Yeah? Would you talk to your mom maybe? Do you think she would know?
    John: (quickly) No. She wouldn’t know. (Month Two)

Unlike Kat, John did not even try to think of anyone that could help him. John seemed resigned to the fact that he would have to navigate the education system on his own. The responses from the rest of the participants to questions regarding social capital were similar. Everyone but Phillip was predominantly raised by a single mother (Phillip’s parents divorced when he was eighteen) who was either unemployed or worked at jobs with seemingly no informal contacts to draw from in terms of helping study participants gain employment, further their education, etc. Furthermore, the whole notion of social relationships (outside of social service providers) as currency to move one forward in life seemed like a foreign concept to study participants. It was as if they had never seen these types of relationships – taken for granted by many of us in mainstream society – in action.
Gender and Sex

Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics associated with men and women, whereas sex refers to characteristics that are biologically determined (Solar & Irwin, 2010). Disadvantages related to gender range from women’s disproportionate caretaking responsibilities, reduced lifetime earning capacity and increased risk of poverty to men’s increased risk of substance abuse, homelessness, and suicide (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; Solar & Irwin). Gender divisions within society can also perpetuate negative health effects through biosocial (sex and gender) processes (Solar & Irwin). For example, single mothers are at high risk of entering poverty because of lower wages and lack of affordable childcare services (Mikkonen & Raphael; Standing, 2011). Furthermore, sociologists posit that young men raised in impoverished homes with no male role models to emulate become more alienated and anomic (socially disconnected), and are unable to motivate themselves to “grow up” (Standing). Finally, poor and racialized men and women suffer the most deleterious consequences related to gender, reinforcing that gender relations cannot be neatly separated from racism and classism (Anderson, 2000).

It was interesting to witness the role gender and sex played in the potential success or failure of maintaining housing and sustaining an exit off the streets. Like race and class, gender was another concept that seemed to be naturalized by study participants; consequently, it was not readily apparent to participants that cultural gender norms might be impeding the likelihood of successfully integrating into mainstream society. Accordingly, talk around gender roles and expectations were never discussed as something problematic.

Femininities. The four women in the study – Ashley, Alexandra, Lin, and Kat – all presented as strong, hard-working, determined, goal-oriented young women. Overall, they
seemed more mature than the men in the study in the sense that they could clearly articulate long-term objectives regarding education and employment. In addition, at baseline, they all exuded a strong sense of needing to “grow up” and move forward in life. While these young women were very different from each other in terms of upbringing, education, race, and years in Canada, they were all intriguingly similar in the way that their intimate relationships with men threatened to (and in one case did) derail a successful exit off the streets.

Alexandra and Ashley maintained long-term relationships with men who were incarcerated. Financially, this was a tremendous strain as both young women regularly sent their boyfriends spending money and paid for expensive “trapp calls” (allows mobile phones to receive collect calls from prison). It was a common occurrence for their boyfriends to call at some point in time during our visits. As Ashley and Alexandra grew more comfortable with me, they would speak briefly to their boyfriends while I was sitting beside them. I was struck by the caretaker role Ashley and Alexandra played in these relationships, often giving their boyfriends lectures regarding the importance of maintaining good behaviour, not calling too much (the calls were expensive), preparing for life outside of jail, etc. In addition, I was amazed that the expectation was that these incarcerated boyfriends would be cared for financially by their girlfriends on the outside. This perceived obligation to support their boyfriends placed an incredible strain on Alexandra and Ashley, who were barely able to support themselves. In fact, while Alexandra and Ashley both articulated the desire to save up for post-secondary education (neither qualified for OSAP loans due to unpaid debt), I watched each of them send their meagre savings (Alexandra’s obtained through her exploitative, cash job) to their boyfriends. One day, Ashley and I discussed what it might be like to have a relationship typical for someone her age:

Ashley: So I tell him [her incarcerated boyfriend] all the time, I’m like, honestly nowadays like I just feel like I don’t know…sometimes I just feel so tired just being in
this relationship. Like I love him, I’m not going to lie, like I do love him and I’ll always be there for him no matter what, but I feel like, sometimes I just feel like I just want to be by myself. You know like…

Naomi: Yeah, well I imagine this surviving business is exhausting.
Ashley: It really is…it really is.
Naomi: Yeah?
Ashley: So…
Naomi: (...) Would it be nice to go on a date where somebody else paid? (…)
Ashley: You’re going to make me cry now.
Naomi: No, I mean, I’m just – I’m not trying to make you cry (…).
Ashley: I always look at that, and honestly, when I see couples like that on the bus, like on the subway, I just feel like, why can’t I be in that – that’s something like I always picture in my head you know, even when I was younger. It’s like, I know it’s foolish but…
Naomi: Why is that foolish?
Ashley: Like about fairy tales, you know, because I love romance, that’s…that’s…
Naomi: (...) It’s interesting that you use the term fairy tale (...) because it’s not a fairy tale, it’s like real life for…that’s how lots of people live.
Ashley: Yeah. (despondent)
Naomi: But maybe to you it feels that way?
Ashley: Yeah. (Month Four)

I was struck by the fact that Ashley used the term “fairy tale” to describe a relationship where someone else might share the financial burden associated with dating. When I tried to trouble that notion by pointing out that many young adults in their mid-20s have more financially equitable relationships, Ashley indicated that she was aware of this (and wished for this as a child), but had resigned herself to the fact that these types of relationships were “foolish” dreams. To me, this signalled once again that, like other youth in the study, Ashley had internalized the belief that she was not allowed the luxury of pursuing the same dreams as the rest of mainstream society. She was the “Other.”

Ashley’s boyfriend was released from jail and moved in with her less than one month after this interview. For the rest of the study, I watched Ashley continue to struggle to support them both (he was unemployed and never applied for OW) and was twice served with eviction notices for unpaid rent.
Kat was also willing to sacrifice almost anything to maintain an intimate relationship – even her high school education. I vividly remember the first time I met Kat outside her alternative high school. It was a beautiful September afternoon and Kat came bouncing out the front door wearing a pretty floral dress and was beaming, thrilled to have completed her first week of school. Kat had a grade 11 education and was determined to finish high school and pursue her dream of becoming a veterinary technician. Two weeks later, Kat introduced me to her boyfriend of six weeks. During our encounter, I noted the strong caretaking role Kat played in the relationship and documented this in my field notes:

A few minutes before our scheduled meeting, Kat sends me a text to let me know that her boyfriend will be joining us. He looks young and Kat does most of the talking for him. He is seventeen and left home to move in with Kat with only the clothes on his back. There is a missing persons report out for him but he tells me that he has been in touch with his parents and they know he is safe. As the three of us speak, I wonder if, at some subconscious level, Kat is replaying her own traumatic upbringing where someone took her away from her family, except this time Kat will ensure the person being taken away will be cared for. They have only known each other for six weeks and I am struck by the intensity of their relationship. It will be interesting to see how this evolves. They are on their way to school this morning to register him at the same school Kat goes to.

(Month Two)

Two weeks later they broke up. An alleged physical altercation ensued and both pressed charges against the other. Less than one month after Kat ended that relationship, she was in a new relationship that continued until the end of the study. Slowly, I watched Kat be consumed by her new relationship. The young man she was dating was on the ODSP (related to mental health challenges) and unemployed. The two of them were inseparable and, again, I noted that Kat was the caretaker in the relationship. Soon after the relationship began, Kat stopped going to school. Early in the relationship, I challenged Kat about the discrepancy between her reported love of school and her skipping classes:

Naomi: (…) So you’ve been together for a month. It’s your anniversary.
Kat: Yeah.
Naomi: But in the month that you’ve been together, you haven’t been to school that much?
Kat: No, because I’ve been busy maintaining our relationship, doing other things to help myself and him...
Naomi: (interjects) Yeah. I guess that’s what I’m getting at…
Kat: As opposed to just myself…yeah.
Naomi: I guess that’s what I’m getting at. Do you…I’m just sharing with you what I’m seeing…do you see it too that you kind of prioritize that over school right now? It kind of looks that way.
Kat: Yes.
Naomi: And what do you think about that?
Kat: Yes and no because I do want to go back to school but at the same time I know about the stress of school added on with the stress of court, added on with the stress of like maintaining a relationship and just maintaining family issues, maintaining my apartment…everything is just piling on right now and it’s really hard to keep myself even.
Naomi: Yeah?
Kat: So when Tom (pseudonym) is around he really helps me a lot.
Naomi: Yeah? (…) Is it fair to say that that…that what you just described, having somebody in your corner, sort of trumps everything else for you right now?
Kat: It really does because right now my main focus is my mental health.
Naomi: Do you feel like it’s not doing very well, your mental health?
Kat: Yes and no because when I’m around him I’m happier…
Naomi: Yeah?
Kat: He’s one of those stones that like no matter what, I can depend on him.
(Month Four)

Kat did not return to school after that interview. She was briefly enrolled in a full-day paid cooking program but dropped out the first week. Eventually, Kat gave up her apartment and moved in with her boyfriend and his mother. Kat continued to play a caregiver role in the relationship and maintained that the relationship was vital to her mental health.

I came to understand that Kat’s need for connection superseded everything else – even school – and was crucial for her mental well-being. Paradoxically, while Kat described Tom taking care of her, what I witnessed was Kat taking care of Tom. In fact, Kat often spoke to Tom like a mother might speak to a child, reminding him about financial matters, errands he needed to
run, etc. Unlike Ashley, Kat (at least for the time being) did not resent this caretaker role; however, the consequences could be similar in that Kat’s decision to care for an unemployed man at her own expense could end up with her remaining in a life of poverty.

Like Ashley, Alexandra and Kat, Lin also took on a caretaker role, but in a much more literal sense. Lin had been in her new place for less than a month when she found out she was pregnant. Lin had dated the father of her unborn baby briefly, while she was living in the shelter. He had since moved on to another relationship and they were no longer in contact. I watched Lin struggle to survive on the income from her OW cheque. Each time we met, she was running low on food, and her hunger was often accompanied by pregnancy-associated nausea. Lin was determined to live independently and pursue practical nursing at a local college; however, as the study progressed, it became clear that Lin simply could not afford to live on her own:

Naomi: (…) You were describing two weeks ago that you were still sort of just surviving day-to-day. Do you feel that way still?
Lin: (…) I'm still surviving. Especially now this whole pregnancy thing…I'm still surviving. I mean I don’t really know how to explain it…I don’t have a job…I’m unemployed. And I just got into OW like…what…a week ago? It’s still not gonna be enough. A few days from now I’m gonna pay my rent. And what’s left from the OW? Nothing. I will still have to wait until the end of the month when the government sends me money again. And it's going to be like a surviving period throughout the middle of the month. Do you get what I mean?
Naomi: I do. After you pay your rent…
Lin: Exactly. And what's going to be left for me? Hundred dollars or something, which is not going to be enough. I'm pregnant and I eat a lot. It's hard for me to control it…because I can't control it. It's my body that's fighting against me. It's ridiculous. I also feel like…I’m like starving myself and my child. It's not good.
Naomi: Because you're eating less than you would like to?
Lin: Yes. I have to budget food that I eat. But sometimes the hunger is there because I’m eating for two people. I'm not eating for myself but also for my child. Surviving. Yes.
(Month One)

By the end of the first month of the study, Lin had moved back into the youth shelter she had recently left. She shared her disappointment with me about having to put her dreams on hold:
Naomi: So tell me about where you are now compared to where you want to be. Lin: …I am still far from where I want to be…You remember when I used to live with my mom? I just graduated high school and then things happened [Lin told me her mom repeatedly physically abused her]…after that I had to go to a shelter for like seven months. If only I hadn’t gone to the shelter…I would be in second year of college right now but look where I am…I am nineteen and I’m pregnant and I’m single and struggling with my life… (Month One)

Shortly after that encounter, Lin moved into a shelter for pregnant young women. Because of that, it was not possible for Lin to remain in the study; however, we remained in touch and, before the end of the study, she sent me a picture of her baby. Lin now lives in the transitional housing program attached to the shelter where she lives with her child and attends college.

Lin’s story is different from the stories of Ashley and Kat in that it combines the influence of sex (pregnancy) and gender. What is similar is the fact that, because of gender-based factors such as the propensity to take on a caretaker role and the obligations associated with single motherhood, all of these young women are at a disproportionately higher risk of remaining in poverty.

Masculinities. The men in the study – Marcel, Phoenix, Phillip, John, and Robert – seemed to experience the transition off the streets quite differently from their women counterparts. For the most part, their priorities seemed less about securing steady employment and more about seeking things that brought them pleasure such as recording music, going to dance clubs, playing video games, or “binge watching” television. It was not that the young men did not want jobs – they did – but when they talked about their rationale for working, their reasons focused on short-term (some might argue short-sighted) purchases such as cars, video games, music recording equipment, etc., while the women in the study tended to speak more about using their employment cheques to pursue an education, purchase a home, etc. Overall, I
got the impression the young men felt that “growing up” was something to be pursued in the distant future.

Initially, I assumed that their perspectives were “typical” young adult male behaviour; however, as the study progressed, I sensed the men in the study were struggling to find their identity and either used thrill seeking behaviour or avoided people altogether as a means of disengaging or escaping from reality. This lack of confidence regarding identity was most evident when the young men spoke about their past.

Marcel had only been out of jail for three months when we first met in his new home – a basement suite that he shared with study participant Phoenix. At our baseline interview, Marcel was extremely well mannered; he even offered to hang up my coat and make me a cup of tea. In fact, I was surprised to learn that Marcel had a lengthy history of incarceration, substance use, and violence. Initially, Marcel spoke in positive terms about his mother (he never knew his father), even though he acknowledged leaving home at the age of fifteen. However, one morning, feeling badly about getting into an alcohol-related physical altercation with Phoenix the night before, Marcel tearfully revealed how he felt his mother had abandoned him:

Marcel: There was no childhood. Like, I had moments here and there, but there was no childhood.
Naomi: Did you feel you had to grow up really fast?
Marcel: Yeah.
Naomi: Why?
Marcel: Like, I’m always looking after people…but then no one is going to look after me…You know? Everybody’s good now.
Naomi: What do you mean everyone is good now?
Marcel: Like, everybody is good now, like everyone grew up; they’re on their shit now, but, like, no one’s here to help me. No one’s here to fucking watch over me, you know?
Naomi: Did you feel that way growing up…that you wanted someone to take care of you?
Marcel: Yeah, but no one did take care of me.
Naomi: What about your Mom?
Marcel: My Mom was just always working and shit. Like, I don’t blame her. You have to work, you know what I mean? But she was always at work.
Naomi: And you didn’t have a Dad and you needed a Mom. You needed a parent, right?
Marcel: Yeah, and then I felt abandoned when she frigging just sent me off to Jamaica, because, like, it really fucking pissed me off.
Naomi: I didn’t know you got sent to Jamaica. How old were you?
Marcel: I don’t know, like, I was young. Young…young.
Naomi: Like 10?
Marcel: Yeah, around there.
Naomi: She sent you to live with family in Jamaica?
Marcel: Yeah.
Naomi: How long were you there?
Marcel: I came back when I was, like, 13…14.
Naomi: And what was that like, being in Jamaica, away from your family? Away from your Mom?
Marcel: Bullshit. It was like, I needed her, I wanted her so bad…it was just like…Like, she tried her best to be there, but like, why did you have to send me away, you know?
Naomi: Yeah. Have you ever asked her that?
Marcel: No. There’s no point. It’s just like…whatever… (Month Four)

This was the most transparent Marcel had ever been with me. Prior to this excerpt, Marcel and I were discussing his internal battle between the “good Marcel” and the “bad Marcel”, something we had discussed in prior interviews. This was the first time Marcel articulated a link between his propensity for violence and alcohol addiction (the “bad Marcel”) to the fact that he was angry about having no one in his life to “watch over” and care for him. Trying to integrate into society with limited support seemed to trigger Marcel’s feelings of abandonment – something he often numbed with alcohol.

I met Marcel again three weeks after this interview. He had significantly cut back his alcohol consumption, attended an orientation session at an addiction treatment center, and had started a new job. Unfortunately, the positive direction did not last and I never saw him again after that.

Phoenix and Marcel were improbable street brothers. Unlike Marcel, Phoenix had never been incarcerated and this was his first time exiting homelessness. Nevertheless, Marcel and Phoenix were similar in that they were both struggling to find a sense of self. Early in the study,
Phoenix shared with me the reason behind his recent name change and how this was related to his rough childhood and to his confusion around his sexual orientation:

Naomi: (...) I’m curious about why you want to change your name now? Like later in life.
Phoenix: (long pause) I…had like a really…rough childhood I would say. Like…my childhood was only great because I made it great, because I focused on positive things. You know what I mean? But like…I realized that people…they…made me someone that I’m not. You know? And they said things about me that eventually became true later on in life. (...) People never look deep within and realize that this is what happened to create this.
Naomi: Right, yeah.
Phoenix: So…me realizing all of that, I realized that basically…how I feel about certain things is a lie.
Naomi: Can you give me an example?
Phoenix: My sexual orientation. (...) I didn’t really like my name. My last name is my dad’s last name and he was never around…it was always my mom, so I wanted to change my last name to my mom’s last name…because I realized how much she’s done for me and stuff like that. (...) So the one thing that saved me was Japanese culture, I feel, and the longing to be somewhere else. Because I was living in like Jane and Finch [racialized neighbourhood] where everybody was just closed minded and not open minded to how certain people act. And everybody would just call it gay, or everybody would label it when it’s not really like that… (Month One)

It is clear from this excerpt that Phoenix wanted to distance himself from the stigmatism he experienced within his racialized community. So much so that he changed both his first and last name. Phoenix changed his first name to a word meaning “pure” – a revealing choice – just before he left the shelter system and moved in with Marcel. In addition, the pseudonym he chose – a bird rising from the ashes – is intriguing and highlights Phoenix’s desire to reinvent himself and transcend his painful childhood.

Phoenix wrestled with his attraction toward men throughout the study. At times, this resulted in self-loathing. During the second month of the study, Phoenix’s father called after being out of Phoenix’s life for about two years. This resulted in feelings of anger and confusion toward his father. Phoenix confided that he blamed his father’s absence (Phoenix was raised by his mom) for his sexual desires toward men.
Like Phoenix, Phillip also had a complicated relationship with his father. Phillip ended up in a shelter after his father evicted him from their family home for dealing narcotics. When I first met Phillip, he had been on his own for two years, couch surfing and living in shelters. At our baseline interview in his new bachelor apartment, it was interesting to hear Phillip talk about how his conflicts with his father led to a disdain for mainstream society:

Phillip: (...) The mental issues that I struggle with are definitely genetically inherited from my dad's side of the family. My father is just a very…he's a very angry type of guy. He has issues in terms of alcoholism…that sort of thing. It was pretty rough growing up in that sort of environment. To this day I still don't really like being around him too much. But that's life and you can't choose who you are born to. (...) I think I caught the brunt of the emotional stress between my father and my mother and also just between my father and myself. (...) I guess I was sort of the most sort of immediate target being the oldest kid you know? I grew up with a disregard for the way normal life was presented. I always felt very discouraged. In some ways, I found it depressive just the idea of all these people kind of moving in a straight line through various educational institutions without really knowing what they wanted to do and then making some money and then ending up really unhappy… (Baseline Interview)

Throughout the study, Phillip predominantly talked about two things: his love of making music and his aversion to mainstream society. In fact, when Phillip was not busy selling marijuana, he was making music. To me, it seemed that Phillip had “checked out” of mainstream society at a young age, in part because of the conflict between himself and his father. Phillip was extremely bright and articulate. I frequently thought what a loss it was to society that Phillip preferred to live on the margins.

John and Robert were different from the rest of the young men in the study in that they never said anything negative about their upbringing, even though the CAS was involved in each of their female-led, single-parent homes. When I brought this up at John’s baseline interview, he blamed the CAS, not his mother, for their involvement:

Naomi: (...) You mentioned that you never lived in a foster home, yet CAS was involved with your family growing up.
John: Yeah.
Naomi: So what was that about?
John: Just stupid people calling CAS. Not minding their own business.
Naomi: So other people were calling, because they were worried about how you were being raised? Or…
John: I guess so…like…I remember when I was younger, well I don’t really remember, but like my second youngest brother, or oldest, he’s 19 now…
Naomi: Okay…
John: Basically, I was with his father and I don’t really remember, but from what I was told my leg got broken. And then for like a couple months I was living with my Grandma because the CAS got involved and everything.
Naomi: How did your leg get broken?
John: I don’t know.
Naomi: You don’t know. So, did they think that he [his brother’s father] had something to do with it? Or…
John: I don’t know.
Naomi: You’re not sure. And then why did you have to live with your grandma then?
John: Maybe because they thought my mom was like a danger to me…I don’t know.
Naomi: Or not taking care of you well or…
John: Something like that.
Naomi: Did you ever feel that way?
John: (firmly) No. (Baseline Interview)

John began to get visibly uncomfortable with this line of questioning so I stopped probing. In fact, every time I pressed John about an issue that deviated from his “everything is fine” mantra, he quickly shut down the conversation. This soft-spoken, well-groomed, polite young man presented like he did not have a care in the world. He had chosen his new place (with no window and an overwhelming smell of animal urine) and his new job (cash job for $5.00/hour) and he wanted me to know that he was in control of his life.

Healthcare researchers Funk and Stajduhar (2009) suggest that participants’ responses to questions might simultaneously be an articulation of experience that draws on broader ideologies (e.g., dominant cultural discourse of independence), as well as an attempt to cope with those experiences. I believe that by crafting a narrative of choice, John was provided with a sense of control and was better able to align himself with the dominant cultural discourse regarding what is expected of a 22-year-old young man.
Robert employed a narrative of choice in a different manner. Robert spoke of his mother having no choice but to place him in a foster home, relinquish her parental rights, and allow Robert to become a crown ward (making him the legal responsibility of the government) at the age of twelve. Robert briefly spoke about being angry with his mom, but quickly blamed himself for having to remain in the child welfare system:

**Robert:** (...) I really only grew up with my mom...my dad wasn’t really there.
**Naomi:** You said your sister is a lot older...you said she is 31...
**Robert:** Ya – 31 so...
**Naomi:** So just you and your mom...
**Robert:** Ya, just me and my mom.
**Naomi:** Did you worry about your mom or think about your mom...she was by herself and you were gone (to a foster home)...
**Robert:** I did but I didn’t. Those times I was kinda mad...I was really mad at her to be honest...because like you left me in jail...you didn’t bail me out...and now I’m going through all this stuff...I put the blame on her, but back then compared to now when I look back I’m like fuck...I needed that...I didn’t want to listen I didn’t want to do this I didn’t want to do that...what other choice did she have, right? (Month One)

As mentioned earlier, Robert had spent almost half his life being shuffled between various group homes and foster families. During my conversations with Robert, it was never completely apparent why he was removed from his home at such a young age. According to Robert, the CAS was involved because Robert was challenging to raise (i.e., he was the “problem”), not because there were concerns regarding his mother’s parenting ability. Like John, Robert presented as polite and soft-spoken, yet I always sensed anger simmering beneath his calm exterior. As mentioned previously, Robert was often in trouble with school authorities because of physical and verbal altercations and dropped out of school at the age of fifteen. Robert had also been incarcerated for anger-related offences.

I believe that Robert coped with his challenging upbringing and sense of parental abandonment by viewing himself as a “problem child.” While this perspective allowed Robert to
portray his mother as a good parent, it was detrimental in that it was challenging for Robert to move from being a problem child to a well-adjusted young man trying to integrate into society.

**Summary of Socioeconomic Position**

During the six to nine months that I followed study participants, I did not witness a positive change in socioeconomic position other than the fact that they were housed and no longer visibly homeless. The youth in the study were trying to live independently at an age when most Canadian young people live at home relying heavily on parental supports. All the participants had internalized the dominant societal discourse around the importance of obtaining a post-secondary education but not of them had the financial means or the social and cultural capital necessary to do so. Moreover, most of the participants had been streamlined by the age of 15 into the applied stream as if to prepare them for a lower level working life.

Attempting to navigate society as undereducated and inadequately employed young adults reinforced the lack of control and choice study participants had over their lives. In addition, the welfare system seemed to be set up in a way that penalized those hoping to transition into formal full-time jobs as welfare money was deducted as soon as the youth reported employment income. Consequently, some of the youth sought informal or illegal forms of employment that were risky and did little to move them forward in life. Overall, it seemed to me that, given their limited education and financial stressors, study participants were expected to be grateful for part-time, temporary, dead-end jobs.

The complex and simultaneous operation of disadvantages related to race, class, and gender served to further marginalize study participants, marking them as inadequate to fully participate in mainstream society. Black study participants *expected* to be treated differently
because they were Black. All the youth began and ended the study in the same low social class—a place they had occupied all their lives. None of the participants had informal relationships with people who had class privilege such as those who live in the “right” neighbourhoods, have inherited money, occupy prestigious jobs, or hold knowledge regarding how systems of power operate. Gender-based factors played out differently among the men and women in the study; yet, the dynamics were similar in that the outcomes point to a trajectory of cyclical poverty. All the women in the study took on a caretaking role even though it potentially meant giving up their goals of maintaining a home, pursuing an education, etc. Almost all the men in the study were raised by single mothers, who, years earlier, had ventured down the same path as the young women in the study. In turn, these women raised the male study participants in low income neighbourhoods, with limited (or no) parental support, resulting in young men who struggled to find their identity and seemed disconnected from mainstream society.

**Summary of Socioeconomic Context and Position**

In this chapter I have endeavoured to situate the experiences of the study participants within a broader social context. All the study participants were housed; however, they continued to live as denizens, not citizens, with lives dominated by uncertainty, insecurity, humiliation, and debt (Standing, 2011). Structural barriers made it almost impossible to achieve meaningful social integration. Over time, I witnessed study participants grow exhausted by the relentless struggle against oppressive structural factors. Their strategies for survival and the corresponding psychosocial consequences will be discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.
CHAPTER SIX
SHIFTING IDENTITIES

The thing is, adversity and poverty breed tremendous inner strength and maturity and also a lot of creativity. But the outside world, they don’t understand what comes out of hardship. They don’t understand it’s surviving through hardship and developing resiliency, that’s really the part of it that’s interesting...that’s something that you should try to revive in your own life.

~ Phillip (Month Nine)

One important critique of the discourse regarding social inequality and health inequity is the tendency to either a) develop a narrative of structural constraints that is so powerful that the possibility of change does not seem feasible, or b) overemphasize people’s ability to make proper choices despite powerful structural constraints (Carroll, 2012). Carroll (citing Giddens, 1984) suggests that, rather than adopting a polarizing, dualistic approach to structure vs. agency, a more balanced “duality of structure and agency” (p. 45) is needed. He adds that by transcending dualism and embracing duality, it becomes “much easier to conceptualize the integrated, multi-level, multi-strategy approach” (p. 46) needed to improve outcomes among marginalized populations.

Admittedly, because Chapter Five focused so heavily on structural constraints, the risk is for study participants to be portrayed as helpless victims doomed to live as the Other. This would be an unfair characterization and a grave injustice to the participants in my study. Furthermore, this type of dualistic thinking weighted on the side of structure in the structure vs. agency debate would add nothing new to the current rhetoric regarding how best to help formerly homeless youth achieve meaningful social integration. As I journeyed with the study participants, I came to recognize two truths: 1) structural constraints seemed oppressive and insurmountable, and 2)
participants displayed remarkable agency, determined to carve out new identities as normative, self-sufficient emerging adults despite structural barriers. To fully realize the psychosocial consequences of holding these two truths, it is necessary to give adequate attention to both viewpoints. This chapter is dedicated to honoring the agency of study participants. In Chapter Seven I focus on the psychosocial consequences of holding both perspectives.

Throughout this chapter, I make a concerted effort to offer a decentered perspective on the study participants’ attempt to integrate into the mainstream. In other words, the focus of this chapter is less about dominant public health discourse on the macro-level determinants of health (i.e., the “causes of causes”) and more about micro-level, individual attitudes and behaviors. This deliberate shift in focus is important because it creates space for the construction of transformative knowledge – knowledge that begins with the viewpoint of those who have been marginalized and, by challenging our privileged, professional and academic construction of the Other, produces a new and deeper perspective (Anderson, 2000; Anderson et al., 2009; Khan et al., 2007).

As evidenced by Phillip’s quote at the outset of this chapter, even though study participants faced significant adversity imposed by structural constraints, they displayed remarkable inner strength and maturity. In many ways, the youth in the study saw themselves as successful, resilient young adults. In fact, as Phillip suggested, those of us in the “outside world” can learn a great deal from the lessons learned from those navigating and surviving life in the margins. Moreover, this decentered perspective produces important insights that, when combined with previously highlighted structural constraints, allows a more nuanced understanding of how best to assist formerly homeless youth to integrate into mainstream society.
In this chapter, I highlight some of the strategies employed by study participants as they attempted to realize meaningful social integration. I begin by emphasizing the commitment and autonomy demonstrated by participants. Next, I describe how participants were particularly skillful at navigating their relationships with their shelter-based peers and with shelter outreach staff. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the normative age-related strategies, such as conspicuous consumption, employed by participants as a way of resisting the margins.

**Commitment and Autonomy**

Each time I met with a study participant, I was amazed by their dedication. Despite the challenges highlighted in Chapter Five, all the youth remained passionately committed to remaining housed throughout the duration of the study. They valued and guarded their new-found autonomy fiercely, and were determined to “make it.” In many ways, study participants were like other mainstream emerging adults, learning to take responsibility for themselves, making independent decisions, and aiming for financial independence (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Of course, unlike other youth, study participants were striving for self-sufficiency without many of the taken-for-granted resources available to most young people the same age. Still, the participants’ determination was formidable.

**Passionate Commitment**

At the baseline interviews, all the study participants were infectiously enthusiastic about living independently. Over time, their passionate commitment to remaining housed never wavered, even though the struggles associated with chronic insecurity were exhausting. Many times, I asked participants if they were considering other housing options such as less expensive transitional housing, or even moving back to the shelter. Each time I asked questions of that

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27 Psychology professor Jeffery Arnett coined the term “emerging adult” in recognition that the transition to adulthood is a distinct period in the life course (late teens to mid- to late- twenties) where one is no longer an adolescent but only partly an adult (Arnett, 2000, 2007).
nature, the response was a decisive “no.” Participants shared that the short-term nature of supportive housing models (typically one – two years) coupled with increased surveillance (from on-site support workers) was too much like returning to the shelter system. To them, losing their housing would be a failure. In fact, none of the participants perceived they had any other option but to succeed at living independently as they did not have a safety net in which to fall if things did not work out as anticipated. Failure was not an option.

During our baseline interview, Kat spoke about the tremendous pressure associated with making the giant step toward independence:

Naomi: (…) How do you feel now about moving out on your own? Are you excited? Scared? Both?
Kat: I have to be honest…I am quite happy but I am also so nervous. I’ve been having many anxiety attacks because I just want to make sure I make it in life. I don’t want to fail. I want to be able to show everyone that it is possible to go from being nothing in the world to being something. (…) I just want to make it in life. (Baseline)

In this interview excerpt we see that the connection between being able to “make it in life” is closely tied to living independently. In other words, to “fail” at independent living would be to fail at life. In addition, there is a strong sense that Kat had something to prove to the world. This sentiment was expressed by many of the other study participants as well. All of them had faced significant adversity prior to (and during) their episode(s) of homelessness. They wanted the world to know that, despite their hardships, they were capable of maintaining a home just like other young people the same age.

During the first month of the study, Alexandra passionately described her desire to distance herself from the low expectations of others and prove that she was born for a very special purpose:

Alexandra: (…) when other people see my manager [the woman who trafficked Alexandra] kicked me out they put in their mind that I’m always gonna stay in like dirt…down…I’m gonna be homeless like other people…I’m gonna sell drugs and then be
crazy like other people. But that was not on my plan. Then other people they always think that I’m gonna be pregnant…just a street girl like this…like a dog…a shit girl…but me, I don’t see myself like that. That is why I want to prove to people…what they have in their mind is not what I have in my mind. I know why I am born. I am born for something…and I don’t know what thing but I was born for something.

Naomi: You know you were born for something.

Alexandra: I was born for something. I was born to be something. I know I will be that person one day. But I have to work hard and focus on it. (...) Never give up. Just keep going. No matter what, I keep going. No matter what, I just keep focus and be who I have to be. And after, I will show people that what they think in their mind or who they think I am…I am not that person. I am the person who I am. I will show them that I am very different than the way they were taking about me. (Month One)

Like Kat, Alexandra expressed an intense desire to demonstrate to others that she could make it in life. In addition, Alexandra and Kat had strong assumptions regarding how others perceived them when they were homeless. Words like “nothing,” “dog,” and “shit girl” illuminate their internalized shame regarding life as a subaltern (subordinate person). From this standpoint, it becomes easier to appreciate why study participants were so passionately committed to being seen as housed, contributing members of society – their very identities were inherently linked with remaining housed.

**Fierce Autonomy**

All the youth in the study were fiercely independent and eager to gain a sense of mastery over their own lives. The desire for autonomy is a common characteristic among emerging adults and important to achieving psychological well-being (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Quality of Life Research Unit, 2016). All the study participants spoke of their distaste for the rules and regulations associated with shelter life which, at times, made them feel like children. In their new accommodations, participants established their own routines and gained a new-found sense of control.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, the majority of youth did not criticize their living quarters even though their new homes were cramped, expensive, and sometimes haphazardly constructed.
Even when youth did have complaints to make about their accommodations (leaking sink, malfunctioning fridge, abrasive landlord, etc.), they always maintained how proud they were to be living independently. It seemed to me that a home was an important marker of self-sufficiency.

At our baseline interview, Lin invited me up to her room located on the top floor of a ten-room rooming house. She beamed with pride as she began to point out every single item that she had purchased with her own money:

Lin: (…) when I got this place I was proud of myself even though it’s not that big…at least I have established something for myself. I have something for myself that I can say that I’m proud of because I worked hard for this place. Every single thing in this room I bought with my own money. I mean I left my house with nothing. Like the microwave…the air conditioning…Everything in here (gestures around room) I provided by myself and I’m proud to call it mine. I established it for myself. Moving from the street to the shelter to here…well I can say…I’m proud of myself because I’ve established something for my own self. Even though it’s hard, it is really hard because you have to pay for rent, your food, your phone bill, metro pass, transportation. Especially now that I’m pregnant…I provide myself with vitamins…extra food…maternity clothes. Even those little tiny things you have to provide for yourself like soap, lotion, shampoo…all that kind of stuff. You have to be attentive to everything you need like laundry soap…paper towels…everything. You are responsible for everything.

(Baseline)

As Lin spoke, I could see that she was incredibly proud to declare that she had established something for herself. This truly was an accomplishment given that, several months earlier, this nineteen-year-old had fled an abusive home and was sleeping in a park. Yet, as Lin talked, I could see that the responsibility associated with maintaining a home – not just the bills but all the mundane purchases like toiletries, kitchen supplies, etc. – were somewhat unanticipated. This was true for most of the study participants, who did not initially comprehend the full financial cost of being housed.

Overtime, even though the economic reality associated with independent living began to take its toll, the youth never wavered in their desire to assert their independence. During the
fourth month of the study, Phoenix reiterated that, even though it was a struggle, he was going to prove to himself and to others that he was able to manage the responsibilities associated with living independently:

Naomi: [previously discussed Phoenix being hungry and out of food and money] That’s hard. (…) Is it worth it?
Phoenix: Yeah, it is.
Naomi: Yeah? It’s a struggle though, right?
Phoenix: It’s a struggle, but (…) When I really sit down and analyze it…I was struggling at home just in a different way…so who am I to not accept the struggles of what I wanted for myself. The struggle I was going through at home was something that was completely unnecessary. I didn’t have to be going through the things I was going through. I didn’t put myself in that situation. But I put myself in this situation, so I’m going to accept everything that comes along with it. It’s wrong for me to be like, “Oh, I wanted to move out but I can’t handle this and now I’m stressed and at this place or whatever.” No. I’m the one that chose to do it. I’m going to accept the good and the bad. (Month Four)

The narrative of “choice” is especially strong in this interview excerpt and reflects what all the study participants directly stated or implied about living independently. Like Phoenix, all of the participants experienced varying degrees of hardship while living with their biological parents and/or in foster care. They all realized that what happened in those environments, to a great degree, was out of their control. For example, Kat and Robert did not choose to get placed in foster care as children and Lin and Phillip did not choose to have abusive parents. However, like Phoenix, all of the participants felt that they “chose” to move into a shelter and then chose to leave the shelter and move into market rent accommodations. The sense of autonomy and control that came with those housing-related decisions cannot be overstated. For participants to voice concerns regarding the hardships associated with independent living would be, in a sense, an affront to the idea that they were self-sufficient young people capable of directing their own way through life.
Navigating Relationships

The way study participants managed their relationships with shelter-based peers and with social service providers was somewhat unexpected. For example, while I expected participants to create distance between themselves and their street-based peers as part of the transition process (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Garrett et al., 2008; Karabanow, 2008; Kidd, 2003), the speed and apparent ease with which they did so was unanticipated. Additionally, I knew that street-involved youth highlight trust, honesty, and a non-judgmental attitude as being crucial attributes of effective social support interventions (Collins & Barker, 2009; McCay et al., 2010; Stewart et al., 2010), but I was not expecting study participants to perceive the available social supports being offered as not relevant to their needs.

Creating Distance

In general, youth in the study were firm in their resolve to distance themselves from most of their shelter-based friends. While all of the participants maintained contact with one or two shelter-based friends, the location and the nature of those interactions was very much controlled by the participants. Additionally, the three youth who did not remain independently housed for the duration of the study (Robert, Lin, and Marcel), lost their housing because of factors (unemployment, pregnancy\(^{28}\), and alcohol addiction) not directly attributable to their street-based relationships. In fact, Robert, Lin, and Marcel all expressed a strong desire to create distance between themselves and other homeless youth. A notable exception to this (as discussed in Chapter Five) was the intimate relationships with men maintained by Ashley, Kat, and Alexandra.

Very early in the study, I was somewhat surprised to learn that the majority of participants seemed to have spent time – likely prior to leaving their shelter accommodations –

\(^{28}\) The father of Lin’s baby was a housed youth attending post-secondary school.
re-evaluating the usefulness of their shelter-based relationships. I knew that participants had few (or no) relationships with youth in the mainstream, so I anticipated that participants would be keen to maintain their shelter-based relationships, at least initially. Instead, even at the baseline interviews, participants used words like “uncivilized,” “hoodlum,” and “childish” to describe youth still living in the shelter. Participants seemed to link their former shelter-based friends with their old identities as homeless youth and were eager to distance themselves from that association. In fact, I was taken aback at how quickly the majority of participants began referring to their shelter-based friends as “acquaintances.”

At Robert’s baseline interview, he balked when I used the term “street family.” It was clear that he did not consider other homeless youth his family:

Naomi: (...) Some people use the term street family. Have you heard people use that term?
Robert: Yeah.
Naomi: Do you have a street family?
Robert: Not really, no.
Naomi: No. Do you think that's a good thing or bad thing?
Robert: I think that's a good thing. Because saying street family is pretty much saying you're homeless. It's kind of like you have nowhere to go so you make friends with people that are on the streets and make connections with them on the streets but like those people might not want to better themselves and do the stuff that they need to do so it kind of puts you at rock bottom as well. (Baseline)

As mentioned in Chapter Five, Robert had been living in the foster care system since the age of twelve. He had also spent a few years in and out of the shelter system prior to entering the study. For that reason, I anticipated that Robert would have close ties to other homeless youth. Instead, it was clear that he considered homeless youth to be at “rock bottom,” the lowest rung on the social ladder. In his mind, people who maintained friendship with “those people” had nowhere else to turn.
Ashley was another youth who had spent a few years in and out of the shelter system. In fact, she had spent almost one year at the same local shelter prior to moving into her basement apartment. Ashley only spoke of one close friend who lived outside the shelter, so I assumed Ashely would find it especially challenging to create distance between herself and her shelter-based friends. However, like Robert, Ashley was not interested in maintaining the relationships she developed while living in the shelter. During the third month of the study, Ashely described what it was like when she ventured to the downtown core and encountered some of her shelter-based peers:

**Ashley:** (...) Nowadays people think like...they’ll call me a bitch sometimes...even the guys. Like downtown, they’ll call me a bitch because I won’t say, “hi” or I won’t do anything. I just walk by people that I used to hang out with.

**Naomi:** Why don’t you even say, “hi”?

**Ashley:** Because I don’t want to get caught up in drama. And every time I used to go downtown, I’d get caught up in drama, people’s drama. I don’t like that. I really don’t. I avoid it. (Month Three)

As alluded to in this excerpt, past failed attempts at exiting homelessness (this was Ashely’s fifth attempt) had taught Ashley that it was important for her to distance herself from youth still living in the shelter because it was too easy to get caught up in and derailed by the “drama.” Like Ashley, many study participants also spoke of the drama associated with shelter life – a turbulent life they were determined to leave behind.

**Social Support**

Another unexpected finding was study participants’ limited utilization of shelter outreach staff. Four of the nine youth in the study were connected with a shelter-led program that linked newly housed youth with a dedicated community outreach worker. The outreach worker’s role was to connect with youth who had transitioned away from homelessness. The other five youth
in the study were all able to name at least one shelter worker that they could access consistently via phone, text message, or by meeting in person at the shelter.

Initially, I assumed that the ready availability of social support would make a fundamental difference to the achievement of meaningful social integration. However, over time I saw that the study participants did not initiate contact with outreach workers in the way I had anticipated. In fact, it would be fair to say that the workers, while providing some housing-related supports, did not play a crucial role in helping the youth integrate into society. On the surface, it seemed that the participants were at fault for not utilizing the outreach workers more effectively. However, a more nuanced examination revealed that the rejection of social support—because of the way it was provided—was a testament to the participants’ inclination to reject (well-intentioned) interventions that were not grounded in the day-to-day context of their lives. In other words, there was a disconnect between what social service providers thought participants needed and what participants knew they needed.

One beautiful fall morning during the fourth month of the study, Kat and I met at a downtown park and she shared with me that she was feeling generally overwhelmed with juggling all the responsibilities associated with independent living. She described herself as “surviving day-to-day” and was willing herself to “stay happy.” To make matters worse, a former boyfriend had pressed assault charges against her (Kat maintained it was self-defence) and Kat had ten days to find a lawyer.

Kat had been assigned a community outreach worker through a local shelter and I asked Kat if she had reached out to her worker for help. She responded that she only reached out to her worker for “super major issues.” That confused me because her current situation definitely appeared to warrant some immediate assistance, especially given Kat felt so overwhelmed that
she had not attended high school for two weeks. Kat informed me that, other than system navigation (help with housing, welfare, etc.), she was unsure how to utilize the aid of a community outreach worker. We went on to discuss “the system” and how challenging it was to survive in society as an undereducated young person living on welfare. I asked Kat if the expectations set by social service providers for young people exiting homelessness were congruent with her own:

Naomi: (...) Do you think that, in general, the system – and by the system I mean like shelter staff or whatever – we’ve set the bar too low, too high, or just right for young adults that are…
Kat: (interjects) It really depends on the person that you are setting it for.
Naomi: So, everyone needs a different bar?
Kat: Yes, they really do. The general bar is to get them out of homelessness [describes various forms of housing-related supports] (...) it all really depends on the individual and their own life experiences.
Naomi: That’s a good point. I asked you that Kat because, several times throughout the study, you have said to me that you really appreciate people, as you put it, giving you a “kick in the butt.” Right?
Kat: I like people to be blunt to me. I hate when people sugar coat it, because, you know what, sugar coating is lying about the truth. I would rather you be 100% honest with me. Blunt. I do not care if I fucking cry from it. I want the truth. I hate being lied to. That’s all people ever did to me in the group homes.
Naomi: Yeah, I believe that. Here’s why I’m asking…another way of saying a kick in the butt is that somebody is actually saying, “Kat, I am holding the bar higher for you because you are just jumping over this little bar down here and you are capable of a lot more.” That’s another way of saying it.
Kat: We don’t have to do the low jump. We can do the high jump. (Month Four)

As Kat spoke, two things stood out to me: 1) Kat understood that the “general bar” was simply to get and keep youth out of homelessness, and 2) Kat desired a trusting, honest relationship with someone who would push her to “do the high jump.” I immediately understood why Kat did not reach out to her community outreach worker for help. From Kat’s standpoint, because she had attained the general bar of being housed, none of her current stressors qualified as “super major issues.” She assumed that all the non-housing related tasks were her responsibility so she was trying her best to handle things by herself. Additionally, Kat was
looking for someone who would care enough to give her a proverbial “kick in the butt.” She knew she was capable of doing the “high jump,” but needed someone to urge her along. Kat went on to explain that she was hoping for a worker who would act more like a friend and touch base with her on a consistent basis:

Naomi: [previously discussing program where transitioning youth were connected with an outreach worker] And I think that was the idea (to urge youth along) behind [names program offering community outreach workers] but I don’t see it playing out that way in people’s lives.
Kat: No, it really doesn’t. (…) We aren’t fully aware of the extent that the workers can work with us.
Naomi: Okay, so it’s almost like maybe we need to kind of give them permission to sort of push you a bit or set the bar higher…or be more involved maybe than just helping you navigate the system?
Kat: I really do think that regular check-ins are somewhat good but you have to do it in the right situation and with the right person because some people are a little more withdrawn depending on their life circumstances and what they went through. So when you meet the youth, you can evaluate them, get to know them on a more personal basis. Try and become their friend before their worker so that they can have confidence in you.
Naomi: Oh, that’s a really good point. Does your worker check with you every week?
Kat: No. [names the worker] sometimes checks in with me once a month…sometimes checks with me once a week…once every four days…it really does depend.
Naomi: On what?
Kat: It depends on how often [names the worker] sees me at [shelter drop-in centre] or whether or not they are hearing good or bad things about me from my friends.
Naomi: Do you think that, just in general, they should maybe have a mandate of like, every week you’ve got to touch base with the person on your caseload?
Kat: Yes. Even if it’s just a text message saying, “Hey, how’s it going? Are you doing okay? How’s school been?” Just call them up and just be their friend to create a bond, and then be their worker in some situations. I do understand the point of professionalism, but a lot of young adults need…we do need more of a friend before a worker. (Month Four)

As Kat noted, her outreach worker tended to connect with her when the worker thought she was in trouble, rather than reaching out just to be a “friend.” However, Kat stressed the importance of developing a personal, trusting relationship before offering “professional” support. Kat highlighted that outreach workers should “become their friend before their worker” in order to foster a sense of confidence. In other words, confidence needed to be earned and not assumed.
Other youth in the study also expressed the need for more of a friend or mentor rather than someone predominantly focused on housing-related supports. As noted in the previous section, many of the study participants had intentionally created distance between themselves and their shelter-based peers; however, none of them had the opportunity to create new friendships with mainstream youth while living in the shelter. That meant they had very few people in their lives that they could speak openly with. I immediately realized that when I began the study. Many of the youth told me how much they looked forward to my biweekly visits. It was not uncommon for someone to exclaim, “I have so much to fill you in on!” or, “So much has happened in the past two weeks!” before I turned on the audio recorder. I was genuinely astonished and humbled by how quickly they included me in their lives. Looking back, I realize how hungry they were to connect with someone about their successes, their challenges, and even just the day-to-day mundane aspects of their lives.

Another important feature of Kat’s interview excerpt is that her worker expected to see her at the shelter drop-in centre rather than suggesting they meet in the community. I found that to be the case with other youth in the study as well. On the surface, meeting at the shelter was a “win-win” situation – the outreach worker did not have to leave their office and the youth received access to a hot meal, the food bank, health care services, etc. However, this was problematic because study participants were trying to carve out new identities and create distance between themselves and the shelter system. As noted earlier, some participants wished to avoid contact with their shelter-based acquaintances and the resulting “drama.” Consequently, they prefer to limit their time at the shelter since it was another harsh reminder that they had not truly integrated into mainstream society.
The notion of a community outreach worker connecting predominantly for major (i.e., housing-related) issues was also a consistent theme for Ashley throughout the study. Ashley proactively requested a community outreach worker before she left the shelter. Previous attempts at remaining independently housed led Ashley to believe that an outreach worker would be able to help ease the transition process. However, during our third interview, Ashley told me that her worker informed her, “I don’t really have to chase you for anything. You’re doing well, so if you ever need anything just message me because you’re not really a high maintenance priority.” Ashley spoke with pride as she reiterated the worker’s comments. To her, this meant that she was more successful than other “high maintenance” youth on the worker’s caseload.

Unfortunately, that statement by Ashley’s community outreach worker, no matter how well intentioned, set the tone of their relationship as being a needs-based connection. Because of that, even though Ashley was intensely lonely and struggling to survive, she never initiated contact because, as a housed and employed youth, she felt she did not meet the needs-based criteria for support. That was especially evident during the third month of the study:

Ashley: Yeah, we (Ashley and her community outreach worker) don't really talk much, but I tell [names the worker] I’m okay…like you know, I’m fine. I am struggling but it's not like…it's not like it's something I can't do. I know how to budget whatever money I have left over from anything.
Naomi: So you don't say to [names the worker], “I had trouble paying the rent this month?”
Ashley: Well, sometimes I tell them. I’ll be like, yeah, I had trouble but you know, I’m getting by. It's not like, you know…I don't need to have like…(long pause) Really, [names the worker] told me they weren’t really concerned when they got me as their case because [names the worker] even told me, “You've matured a lot. I don't have to be on your case 24/7 to be like, ‘Did you pay your rent?’ I know you're going to pay your rent. If you ever have a big problem or anything, just call me or text me.” (Month Three)

Ashley did not have the same community outreach worker as Kat, but each of their worker’s predominant focus on housing elicited the same response. Ashley did not reach out to her worker because, like Kat, she did not feel that her day-to-day struggles constituted a “big
problem.” Moreover, reaching out for help would be to acknowledge that, “it’s something I can’t do.” Three months later, Ashley had not initiated contact with her outreach worker despite her ongoing struggles and her desire for friendship:

Naomi: (previously discussing her mounting emotional stress) Is there anything that a [worker from the community outreach program] could have done that would have been helpful?
Ashley: Just to listen to me.
Naomi: Yeah?
Ashley: Yeah.
Naomi: What about giving you advice?
Ashley: Yeah, that too. Basically, like listening to me…I think it would have been really helpful. It’s just that I don’t…for me it’s just…I have so much on my plate. I don’t have the time to email [the worker]. [The worker] said, “If you ever need me then just email me.” There was no follow-ups, no nothing like that. Because they knew basically…they were like, “It looks like you have it all figured out.” And I did have it all figured out in the beginning.
Naomi: Yeah?
Ashley: And then I just kind of…like I still have it all figured out now, it’s just…it’s just at certain times when it’s just…it gets really bad and it’s…I don’t really know what to do. I can’t really tell other people…people are just going to be like...(long pause)
Naomi: What do you think? You mean being judgemental? You think people…
Ashley: (interjects) Yeah. (Month Six)

Again, Ashley was looking for a relationship with a friend and mentor – someone who would listen without judging. Even when I suggested she needed advice, Ashley reiterated that she wanted someone to simply listen. Importantly, the person doing the listening needed to understand that she still had “it all figured out.” In other words, support had to be offered in a way that did not undermine her sense of mastery over her own life.

Unfortunately, by the seventh month of the study, Ashley had given up on the relationship entirely:

Naomi: Is there anything that [the worker] could offer you at this point in your journey?
Ashley: Nothing really. They never really did help me, so...
Naomi: That was going to be my next question. Maybe you didn’t need the transition program?
Ashley: I thought I did. I thought they could help me more but it was like…I was always busy whenever [the worker] wanted to meet up. I had things that I need to get done, so
we never really hung out and actually talked. I don't know…it's…[the worker] is a nice person, they really are, but it’s not…we didn’t really connect. (Month Seven)

Ashley never made time for her community outreach worker because, in her mind, the job of her worker was to help with “big problems.” Despite that, Ashley expressed disappointment over the fact that they “never really hung out and actually talked.” Like other youth in the study, Ashley wanted (and needed) someone to help her integrate into mainstream society. Unfortunately, frequently the offers of social support were not presented in a way that was meaningful to the study participants, so they either rejected or minimally engaged with those supports.

**Resisting the Margins**

As noted in Chapter Five, study participants were expected to integrate into mainstream society with inadequate education, precarious (or no) employment, and extremely limited social capital. Initially, some of the behaviours participants exhibited, given their structural constraints, seemed a bit strange and counterintuitive to my privileged, “insider” way of thinking. For example, I did not understand why Phillip devoted countless hours each day to recording music instead of searching for a job or why Phoenix used part of his rent money to host a birthday party in a downtown hotel. In my mind, due to their precarious financial situations, none of the study participants had the luxury of participating in those types of frivolous activities. Over time, my attitude softened and I came to see those types of behaviour as a testament to their resilience and their desire to resist the margins.

**Big Dreams**

Despite the fact that the odds were stacked against them, all of the youth in the study had big dreams for the future. Their occupation-related goals included becoming an obstetrician (Alexandra) and running a home renovation company (John). Phillip and Phoenix had somewhat
unconventional aspirations in that both of them hoped to make a career through their music. While it would be easy to categorize some of those dreams as unrealistic, it is important to note that exploring various life possibilities is a key feature of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007) and part of the journey toward an optimal quality of life (Quality of Life Research Unit, 2016). So, from that (admittedly narrow) perspective, study participants were typical of other young people the same age.

Of course, the reality was, it was going to be much harder for study participants to realize their dreams than for young people the same age who were raised and living in much better socioeconomic contexts. Because of that, my instinctive thinking was that the participants must work harder and aim lower in order to escape poverty. In a sense, I was expecting more (i.e., work hard to achieve less) of study participants than I would of other individuals the same age. Over time, I came to cherish their “lofty” dreams and saw that those aspirations were an integral part of keeping the participants motivated despite their dismal life chances.

One hot summer evening during the fifth month of the study, I waited for Phillip outside an old church located near a major intersection in downtown Toronto. As I sat on a worn wooden bench and watched Phillip walk toward me, I suddenly understood the importance of dreams. After our meeting, I tried to capture my thoughts in my field notes:

As Phillip walks toward me I smile as he is clutching a mic stand in his hand. His clothing is dishevelled and he is dressed too warm for our current heat alert. I enjoy talking to Phillip on this hot summer evening. He shows me that he has borrowed a microphone from a buddy. The image of him walking toward me on College street, clearly poor, clutching a borrowed mic and stand in his hand, will be etched in my memory for a long time. To me it symbolizes him clutching his dream of being a rap artist despite the fact that he is too poor to afford much of anything. The dreams for the future these youth have may seem unrealistic, but if we take those away, what do they have left? (Month Five)
Throughout the study, Phillip regularly shared his song lyrics with me. They were raw, articulate and insightful, frequently revolving around issues of homelessness and mental illness. I often thought that those of us who work with youth like Phillip could learn a great deal and likely produce better health outcomes if we paid more attention to these types of non-traditional, non-dominant forms of knowledge.

Like Phillip, Phoenix also devoted a great deal of time toward his dream of becoming a singer. One day during the seventh month of the study, I asked Phoenix why he was so determined to pursue his dreams when his dreams were not helping pay the bills:

**Phoenix:** (...) sometimes it's hard to try and convince...because people are just like, “Oh you need to have a backup plan.” And then it's hard to try and convince them about the inner feeling and destiny and stuff because everybody is so wrapped up in reality. I get why they are because you don't want to be on the street...so I get why everybody is about the reality...but the reality is not all that there is to life...there is more to you and I than just the reality...there's dreams...there's the soul. You know what I mean? I feel like my life and my...I guess path as a human being, is more soul-driven than it is reality-based. You know what I mean? And sometimes it hurts because you are too wrapped up in fantasies and things that will never come true.

**Naomi:** Well maybe there's a way you could have both. You could pursue post-secondary education and pursue music. Why does it have to be one or the other?

**Phoenix:** (...) I'm not doing it (post-secondary education) because I want to make more money and don't want to be on the street. I will do it because it has to be something that I feel within me to do.

**Naomi:** But wouldn’t it still be an okay reason to do it because you want more money and you don’t want to be on the street?

**Phoenix:** I guess so, but then I won't amount to anything.

**Naomi:** Why?

**Phoenix:** (...) life is not just about like doing things to be okay, you have to do things from your soul. You have to like...underneath our exterior we are much more inside. You know what I mean?

**Naomi:** Yes, I do.

**Phoenix:** And that's how I know I won't amount to anything (if he pursues post-secondary education).

**Naomi:** Right, you want to be totally inspired.

**Phoenix:** Yeah, like I don't want to do it because everybody is telling me I have to do it right away because then I'll lose my focus, and I'll lose my light. You know what I mean? And right now, my light is music and that's what I'm following and it's getting me somewhere whether no one sees it or not, it's getting me somewhere. (Month Seven)
As we talked, I noted how Phoenix began by telling me how hard it was to convince people who were “wrapped up in reality” that he had a right to pursue a “soul-driven” life. Indeed, throughout the interview he frequently asked, “Do you know what I mean?” as if he needed to convince me – someone admittedly wrapped up in reality – to affirm his desire to follow his dream of becoming a musician. For Phoenix, and for the rest of the study participants, much of their reality was bleak and dark. Their dreams were their light. Sometimes, holding on to a dream of a better life was the only thing that kept them going.

Like Phoenix, other participants also expressed a desire to pursue a career that was meaningful, rather than following a career path that was designed simply to give them more money and to keep them off the streets. The implications of this are significant and tie back to their dogged determination and to their ability to navigate relationships – participants were quick to reject pathways out of homelessness (education, job, social supports, etc.) that did not align with their sense of self, threatened to undermine their right to self-determination or labeled them as something other than self-sufficient young adults.

**Monetary Purchases**

Postcolonial feminist author and social activist bell hooks (2000) posits that conspicuous consumption is one common strategy employed by the poor as a way to mitigate class distinction. In addition, the stress associated with being mired in poverty seems to produce a feedback loop whereby individuals living in poverty become more short-sighted, favoring immediate financial rewards (in order to alleviate their stress) over delayed gratification (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014). In other words, people are only willing to delay gratification if they believe that life is fair (Tepperman & Gheihman, 2013). The macro socio-structural inequities associated with short-sighted, conspicuous monetary purchases are significant and are taken up
in Chapter Seven. In this chapter I have endeavored to locate myself from the standpoint of the participants, using a lens of agency to understand participants’ desire to acquire material possessions.

As I mentioned at the outset of this section, Phoenix used part of his rent money to host a birthday party in a hotel. It was the eight month of the study and Phoenix’s decision to spend $300 to celebrate his twenty-second birthday meant he was in danger of being evicted. I was confused by this because he had been doing so well in paying his rent on time. During our interview, I asked Phoenix to help me understand why he chose a hotel party over paying rent:

Naomi: (...) for other people that are looking from the outside and going, “Okay, so the guy might be homeless now and he decided to book a hotel room for his birthday?” Can you help people understand that decision? (...) What did it mean to you to celebrate your birthday like that?
Phoenix: That’s a good question. I guess it just meant that...like...I just...you know when I was in the hotel getting ready for my birthday...nobody came yet...and I got to check out the suite and a few of my friends came and helped me to blow up the balloons and everything. And it took me a while but I finally went into the shower to start getting ready and they had like a soaking bathtub and I just laid in there for the longest time thinking about how far I’ve come. I was just like, “Wow, I’m celebrating my birthday in a hotel, I’m doing something for myself...like something fun. I’m still enjoying my youth.” The biggest thing I feel about street kids is like, yeah, you need to grow up and pay rent and have all the responsibility but you always want to keep the youth in you alive and the adventure in you alive. That’s why I wanted to book it at a hotel.
Naomi: Yeah? Do you think that this is something that sort of “normal kids” [gestures with fingers] your age do?
Phoenix: Yeah.
Naomi: Have birthdays in hotels?
Phoenix: Yeah. They do. And I never had a telly [hotel party] before, and I’ve always wanted to. (Month Eight)

There were many pauses in Phoenix’s response. I could tell he really wanted me to understand how important it was to him to celebrate his birthday in a hotel. For one night, Phoenix simply wanted to forget about all the responsibilities associated with exiting homelessness and enjoy life like other youth his age. He had no friends or family able to afford
to give him a “telly” party, so he took matters into his own hands not just to celebrate his birthday, but to commemorate the fact that he had come so far.

It would be easy for me to pathologize Phoenix’s behavior and the behavior of other youth in the study who, from time-to-time, spent a portion of their money on things like Christmas presents, fashionable attire, or fast food. It is tempting to attribute their short-sighted financial decisions solely to social class and the failure to set prudent financial priorities. However, to do so would be to fail to recognize their behavior as that of normal emerging adults striving to learn what it means to become self-sufficient. Indeed, the fact that, despite all their structural constraints, participants were still pushing against the margins and trying to assimilate into mainstream society is a credit to their incredible resilience.

**Summary of Strategies for Survival**

Despite structural constraints, study participants displayed remarkable determination to claim mastery over their own lives. Like other mainstream emerging adults, participants were striving for self-sufficiency through independent living. Moreover, the ability to manage the responsibilities associated with maintaining a home was seen by participants as an important marker of self-reliance and intrinsically linked to their new identities as housed young adults. Independent housing offered the potential for self-determination and control in a world otherwise filled with insecurity and uncertainty.

Participants seemed resolute in their desire to distance themselves from their shelter-based relationships in order to move ahead in life. Furthermore, many perceived the well-intentioned offers of housing-focused support from shelter outreach staff as not being relevant to their needs. This created a paradox – participants estranged from their shelter-based relationships were in need of support yet they purposefully distanced themselves from the supports being
offered. Over time, I came to understand that many participants were seeking a friendship-like relationship with shelter outreach staff—one built on trust and respect for autonomy—not a relationship focused predominantly around housing-related issues. Moreover, many of the supports available to participants (food bank, free meals, counseling services, etc.) were based out of local shelters, which was problematic because participants were trying to distance themselves from the shelter system and carve out new identities as mainstream, housed young adults.

In many respects study participants were like other emerging adults, dreaming of various life possibilities and learning to juggle financial wants vs. needs. Moreover, their ability to maintain those dreams and to occasionally “reward” themselves (as we all do) despite oppressive structural constraints was remarkable. Participants also made it clear that they desired pathways out of homelessness that would align with their need for mastery over their own lives. Participants desired pathways to a successful life—not pathways designed simply to keep them off the streets.
CHAPTER SEVEN

PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF MAINTAINING HOUSING

I just live day to day. Now I live day to day. My situation doesn’t make it possible to think far ahead…it doesn’t work now…something always comes up that I need to pay for.

~ Ashley (Month Seven)

When I began my research, I believed that the young people in my study would have ready access to the experience of living independently and would be able to easily articulate those experiences during my field visits. Accordingly, my preliminary interview questions consisted of queries regarding system navigation (welfare, employment, education, etc.), social networks and social support. While the answers to those initial questions were helpful, they did not do justice to the heaviness and sense of unease and inadequacy I sensed as I conducted my informal interviews. Over time, I came to understand that many of the mechanisms that contributed to social inequity were invisible (Anderson, 2000; Tepperman & Gheihan, 2013); consequently, the corresponding psychosocial consequences were complex and challenging for participants to access or to verbalize. These consequences were something I had to experience alongside my participants (tacit knowledge) in order to truly “see” and understand the challenges associated with trying to achieve meaningful social integration.

This chapter is devoted to highlighting the psychosocial consequences associated with the relentless struggle against the oppressive structural factors outlined in Chapter Five. In keeping with an intersectional analysis, my focus moves beyond an emphasis on resource access to an emphasis on the social relationships of power (Anderson, 2000; Reid, Pederson, & Dupere, 2012). Throughout this chapter, I endeavour to link micro-level narratives of social identities (i.e., data generated during participant interviews) to macro socio-structural inequities (Reid et
I begin by exposing the shame and anger associated with living in a perpetual state of poverty. Next, I show how study participants lived with the pervasive fear that they were just one wrong move away from ending up homeless and, because of this, many participants viewed life as a game of chance. The chapter concludes with an examination of how isolation and boredom became the consequences of being poor in a consumer-oriented society.

**Insecure Identities**

Economist Guy Standing (2011) posits that people existing in unpredictable, precarious economic environments (the precariat) struggle to find a secure identity. This is especially true for emerging adults in today’s society as inequalities based on age are socially constructed and often translate into exclusion from full membership in society (Tepperman & Gheihman, 2013). For example, traditionally, young adults were prepared to tolerate a short period of being an outsider (e.g., while pursuing a post-secondary education or starting at an entry-level job) because they knew that eventually they would become insiders (Standing). Young adults today must face the reality that it will likely take them longer than generations past to become economically viable (Tepperman & Gheihman).

For the youth in my study, this economic reality was compounded by the fact that they were attempting to integrate into society with minimal education, negligible finances, and limited social capital. In other words, they had little prospect of being identified as an insider in the foreseeable future. Study participants were existing in a sort of “no man’s land,” no longer an insider in the homeless community and barred from insider status in mainstream society. Moreover, in mainstream society, their poverty was exposed in a way it had not been when they were dwelling alongside other homeless youth. Study participants were now spending their time
alongside those in much better economic circumstances. In mainstream society, they felt identified by their poverty. This internalize inadequacy led to feelings of shame and anger.

**Poverty as Identity**

During my ten months in the field, I developed a heightened awareness of the fact that study participants were constantly being bombarded with messages reinforcing the importance of material success. Of course, all of us are barraged on a daily basis with advertisements showing the (purported) happiness consumption brings; however, these messages resonate with us differently depending on where we are within the social hierarchy. As I repeatedly travelled on foot to the neighborhoods of the study participants, I realized that the youth in the study passed by those same shops each day but were unable to afford what they saw in the windows. For them, the merchandise behind the glass windows served as another taunting reminder that they were attempting to integrate into a society that required one to “pay to play.”

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2001) maintains that today’s society is a society of consumers, judged by the ability and freedom to choose. The more freedom of choice, the higher one is placed in the social hierarchy (Bauman). All of the youth in the study were able to plainly articulate this dominant societal discourse on the relationship between choice and social status. During the first month of the study, Robert had not yet found employment and quickly realized he had almost no money left after paying rent. He regularly went to a local shelter drop-in centre for a free meal – generally his only proper meal of the day. One afternoon we met at the drop-in centre and Robert described for me what it felt like to have no money in his pocket:

_Naomi:_ When you don’t have money in your pocket, Robert, and you are sort of walking around, does it make you feel different than other people?

_Robert:_ Me personally, yes (...) It’s like…I don’t know…I feel like I’m…a lower class…I don’t…like…I don’t know how to explain it.

_Naomi:_ No, keep going, that’s good.
Robert: I just feel like…you know, like there’s people that I see and I know, oh that guy has at least $50,000 in his bank account. In the meanwhile, I don’t even have five bucks in my pocket. So it’s like, he’s probably looking at me like, “Oh look at this bum, I’ve got this amount of money in my pocket, he can’t even buy a cellphone, he can’t even buy this…I could buy him a cellphone right now if I wanted to.” So, it’s just…I don’t know. Me personally, it makes me feel low… (Month One)

Robert clearly describes a class consciousness common to all of the youth in the study.

All of the study participants compared themselves to others and made assumptions about others just as they believed others were making assumptions about them. Even though participants were no longer homeless, they felt marked by the fact that they were still living in poverty and believed that, somehow, everyone else could sense their inadequacy as well.

Hooks (2000) suggests that those existing at the bottom of the social hierarchy believe that class difference can only be transcended through participating in consumerism. The notion that class difference could be – at least in part – transcended through consumerism was another ideology common among study participants. One evening, Alexandra and I met in her room and she proudly showed me two new pairs of shoes. I noted aloud that the money coming in from her cash job was quickly dissipating. It seemed to me that she was more careful with her money when she was unemployed. Alexandra acknowledge that this was true and tried to help me understand the thinking behind her recent footwear purchase:

**Alexandra:** (...) sometime when you see everybody wearing Jordans (Michael Jordan running shoes) and you are wearing cheap shoes, you feel like…I’m underground.

**Naomi:** What does that mean?

**Alexandra:** Because usually here [in Canada], people always look at what you are wearing.

**Naomi:** But what do you mean when you say underground…you feel underground…what does that mean to you?

**Alexandra:** You feel like you are the only one who is cheap.

**Naomi:** And so underground, do you mean like less than them? Low down? Is that what that means?

**Alexandra:** Yeah. (Month Seven)

Alexandra and Robert do not share the same gender or race, yet their comments are
similar because they are bound by class. Key phrases – “low class,” “bum,” “low,” “underground,” “cheap” – found in both of these narratives are important markers that denote the relationship of Self to society (Pamphilon, 1999). Both Alexandra and Robert believed that having money or dressing like others in society would help minimize their class distinction.

**Stigma of Poverty**

Economic prosperity is often seen as a sign of divine blessing (hooks, 2000). Responsibility for poverty is frequently placed on the poor; consequently, being poor is a sign of worthlessness (hooks). Almost all of the study participants voiced the pain and shame of living in relative deprivation within a consumer-driven culture. They quickly realized that money was connected to almost every aspect of their lives and the “ticket” to participating in mainstream society. Living in poverty was stigmatizing and reinforced that, even though they were no longer homeless, they were still the Other.

One fall evening Ashley and I conducted our interview at a local pizza establishment. I documented in my field notes how exhausted she appeared. I was worried about her. Ashley was the only one in the study with a full-time, minimum wage job but, like everyone else in the study, was struggling to make ends meet. To make matters worse, the financial stress had made her psoriasis flare up and she was unable to afford the medication for treatment. When we met, I noticed she had tried to cover her unsightly facial plaques with heavy makeup. Ashely shared how isolating poverty was:

Ashley: (...) Money...it’s connected to: “How am I going to get to work if I don’t have money? How am I going to buy my food if I don’t have money?” It’s weird…I go out and I find I can’t even shop. I just look at all those people. That’s why I don’t even go to the mall anymore, cause I can’t window shop.
Naomi: Do you feel like a bit of an outsider in some ways? Do you know what I mean by that?
Ashley: Yeah. That’s why I mostly stay home. I’m mostly at home because, if I have extra money, I can’t go shop, cause I know that there’s going to be something that is going to come up.
Naomi: There would be another bill.
Ashley: (sadly) Yeah. (Month Four)

I went on to ask Ashley what would need to happen in her life in order for her to escape the trap of poverty. She despondently replied, “Win the lottery.” Four months of struggling as an outsider had taken its toll. Ashley was losing hope that she would be able to pull herself out of poverty. In other words, Ashley felt little sense of mastery or control over her own life – elements crucial to achieving meaningful social integration (Rootman & O’Neill, 2012).

Bauman (2001) posits that those marked as inadequate consumers must contend with the “subjective sense of insufficiency [and] with all the pain of stigma and humiliation which accompany that feeling…” (p. 332). During our final interview, Alexandra expressed the shame she felt as a welfare recipient:

Naomi: If you had to do it all over again, what would you wish for, that you had, to make it easier for you to leave the shelter and be on your own?
Alexandra: I would wish to have more money. I’m not happy that the government is helping me.
Naomi: You’re not happy that the government is helping you.
Alexandra: No. I appreciate that they are helping me, and I’m thankful, but for me, that is not good because it makes me feel lazy.
Naomi: It makes you feel lazy?
Alexandra: Yeah, because I feel like I live for free. The government pays for me for everything. But for me, I want to make my own money and say, “I worked for this.” Sometime it’s embarrassing, if somebody asks you and you just say, “Yeah, I’m on the government.” They just look at you like, yeah, cheap. (Month Nine)

As mentioned in Chapter Five, Alexandra went to school full-time and worked evenings and weekends at a cash job as a cleaner. Despite this, she described herself as being lazy because she was receiving welfare. Alexandra and Ashley were hardworking young women; yet, their financial situations made them feel inadequate and not truly full members of mainstream society.
Anger with Poverty

As noted in Chapters Five and Six, at baseline, all of the participants were very enthusiastic about their new homes. A home seemed to be marker of self-sufficiency and an important first step to achieving meaningful social integration. Phoenix repeatedly told me it was “like a dream” to have his own home. None of the participants seemed to realize they would still be living in poverty. Within a relatively short period of time, their initial enthusiasm gave way to frustration as participants struggled to make ends meet. I too became frustrated and also angry as I felt that participants had been duped into believing that equality of opportunity actually existed. It was hard to watch them struggle to assimilate into society with limited social capital and minimal education alongside the previously discussed challenges posed by race, class, and gender (see Chapter Five). By the second month of the study, Phoenix’s dream turned into a nightmare when he was arrested for shoplifting groceries. He was utterly ashamed.

Marcel was the most overtly angry about not having enough money. By the end of the first month of the study, he was unemployed and out of money. Marcel felt confined by poverty. He had been accepted to a Culinary Arts program at a local college but was unsure how he was going to pay for his schooling (as mentioned in Chapter Five he had defaulted on an OSAP loan making him ineligible for more OSAP funding). He had three months to save enough money for school but quickly realized that most of his income was taken up with rent:

Naomi: Last time we talked you were worried about whether you would be able to pay the rent or not. Were you able to scrape enough money together for rent?
Marcel: Yeah, I’m not worried about rent. Rent is not a problem. It’s just…I want extra money. I feel like all my money…all my fucking money goes to fucking this. (gestures angrily to living quarters)
Naomi: This? You mean this place that you live in?
Marcel: Yeah.
Naomi: It does. Like 70% of your money right now is going there. It’s a lot of it, almost all of it.
Marcel: Yeah, its bullshit.
Naomi: Do you think it is worth it, Marcel?
Marcel: It’s worth it, but in some areas it’s not worth it.
Naomi: Yeah? What would be the other option if you didn’t do this? If you didn’t have your own place?
Marcel: I don’t know…fuck, I’d probably be in like a little bachelor or a room (rooming house) or like…
Naomi: But even then, still most of your money would be going towards rent, right?
Marcel: Yeah, but not necessarily. Not necessarily. Even if I got a room or whatever…I don’t know. Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just need money. I need money. That’s it. I just need money. Like I can’t be spending my money on frigging one thing all the time.
Naomi: And the one thing is?
Marcel: This (gestures again to living quarters) frigging thing.
Naomi: So, you’re sick of doing this already and its just been a month, right?
Marcel: (angrily) I’m tired. (Month One)

During that same interview, Marcel shared that he felt he would have to go back to drug trafficking in order to move ahead in life. Hooks (2000) warns that those living in poverty sometimes view illegal jobs, such as drug trafficking, as the only economic enterprise that will enable them to acquire the same resources as those in better socioeconomic circumstances. Standing (2011) concurs and cautions that success measured by consumption is conducive to shoplifting and theft.

Ashley, a very private person, sheepishly shared with me that she was considering participating in illegal activity. Like Marcel, she too saw this as a means to alleviate the daily struggle to make ends meet:

Ashley: No matter how many times people tell me to go shopping (…) where am I going to get the money? I don’t want to take out another loan and then have to pay the loan back. I don’t like owing people back. I don’t. It’s so annoying cause I have to figure it out. Sometimes it…my mind just goes back to bad things…You know? Doing stuff that I don’t want to do anymore. [Ashley used to steal merchandise and then resell it] So it’s really annoying and it’s frustrating and it’s like to the point where I am just not…I’m not happy…I’m really not. And it’s really stressful. So that was my last two weeks. (despondent tone)
Naomi: I can see you are not happy.
Ashley: Like that’s my two weeks. I’m not happy. It’s just the situation.
Naomi: It’s just the situation.
Ashley: And what I’ve been through already and I’m still struggling? By now I thought I would be stable, have money. You know? So it’s…it’s not turning out the way I thought it would. (Month 6)

Hooks (2000) asserts that those living in a lower social class often spend “an inordinate amount of time fantasizing about the power of money, of what it can do…[creating] psychotic lust preventing people from realistically confronting their economic reality or using the time and energy to constructively respond to the world in which they live” (p. 155). I found this to be a common scenario among the youth in my study. They were frustrated and sometimes angry about the fact that they did not have enough money because they saw money as a crucial tool to achieving meaningful social integration.

**The Game of Life**

In the book *Habits of Inequality*, sociologists Tepperman and Gheihaman (2013) posit that many in society think about life in terms that can be likened to the popular Milton Bradley board game “The Game of Life.” Dominant societal discourse asserts that, the game spinner spins the same for all of us, and if we work hard enough and make the proper choices, we can all successfully play the game of life. The reality is the spinner does not spin the same for the rich and the poor. The spinner is weighted in favor of those from powerful, rich, and famous families. Furthermore, the choices available – college, career, home – to those playing The Game of Life are often not available in real life to those from disadvantaged, poor, and unknown families (Tepperman & Gheiham). In other words, everyone is born with different life opportunities – different choices to make and different resources with which to make them (Tepperman & Gheiham). Moreover, many of our real-life choices are not made consciously or freely (Tepperman & Gheiham). The paradox is that we live in a society that promotes choice, however, “what is free choice for some is cruel fate for some others” (Bauman, 2001, p. 305).
Over time, I witnessed how disempowering it was for study participants to be constrained by inadequate finances and lack of social capital. Everything seemed out of reach and out of their control. Choice appeared to be an illusion. The youth had no margin for error. If anything went awry with their finances, they faced the very real prospect of being back on the streets. Throughout the study, participants lived with chronic insecurity and often felt overwhelmed. To them, the game of life was a game of chance.

**Chronic Insecurity**

Chronic insecurity is a hallmark feature among the precariat (Standing, 2011). The precariat lives with the pervasive fear that one mistake may mean losing everything they possess (Standing). This was certainly true for the participants in my study. On countless occasions, participants shared that they had run out of money and were unsure how they were going to make ends meet. Generally, this happened during the second week of each month, after the welfare checks had been used to pay rent and purchase food. Sometimes, participants had not set aside enough money for rent and so they worried about being evicted.

Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I believed that the provision of a home would have a domino effect, setting into motion a chain of events that would open doors to other opportunities such as satisfying jobs or the ability to pursue post-secondary education. At the baseline interviews, I shared my study participants’ enthusiasm regarding their futures and felt confident that, with some encouragement, the youth could realize the same possibilities for their lives as other young people their age. Regrettably, both my participants’ and my enthusiasm for the future was squelched by the chronic insecurity that one mistake might mean being back on the streets. Quickly, their ability to formulate long-range goals became impeded by the need to focus
on day-to-day survival. Much of the participants’ time was spent thinking (or trying not to think) about how to provide a basic sense of security for themselves.

Phoenix was distraught during our final interview. He had recently learned that he had been fired from his job as a dishwasher because, on three occasions, he had either been late or failed to give proper notice when cancelling his shift. I felt sad for Phoenix because I knew how much he loved working at the upscale Japanese restaurant where he had been employed. I remember the first time we met outside the restaurant – he came to greet me in his all black work uniform with a beaming smile. He was so proud of himself. We met three times outside the restaurant and, each time we met, he would frequently say, “konnichiwa” (hello in Japanese) to co-workers that passed by (as noted in Chapter Five Phoenix credited his study of Japanese culture with “saving” him from the racialized neighborhood where he grew up). Phoenix told me that the people in the restaurant felt like family. Sadly, two months later, he was unemployed.

We conducted our final interview in Phoenix’s small basement apartment. The cupboards were bare and he had no money for groceries. He was delighted when he found a loaf of bread on top of the fridge and quickly pulled out a slice. As he began eating, he noticed that mice had been eating the other end of the loaf. He paused, looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, and continued to eat. As he hungrily devoured what was left of the bread, he shared how the stress of day-to-day survival had taken its toll:

Phoenix: (...) I’m just going...everything is just a go go go and sometimes that takes a toll on you. That’s why I don’t want to go to work because I’m tired and...but everybody in Toronto is tired too...that’s no reason...you’ve got to still go...and I don’t understand these things because there’s no one to tell me that.
Naomi: What are you tired of?
Phoenix: Just the struggle...the struggle. Because that’s what made me not want to go to work too. (...) a big part of that [not showing up for work the final time] was because I’m looking at my paycheck, this lady is telling me I’m only going to get $8.00 from OW [because of claw backs related to employment income] and that stresses you out. Do you know what I mean? I’m only getting $8.00 from OW so now I’m already worrying about
January and December…and it’s just a stressful thing to wake up every day and you know… I don’t think about it so when I do, it blocks off everything. It blocks off me wanting to go to work, it blocks off me wanting to hang out with people. It’s not really a depression state, I just don’t want to be around…like I just get very introverted. And it sucks because you can’t be like that. You have to be professional and go to work. It’s easier said than done. (Month Nine)

Themes of fatigue, struggle, and stress were woven throughout this narrative; however, Phoenix did not use his chronic economic insecurity to justify his actions. Instead, he blamed himself for losing his job because he drew on dominant societal and cultural discourses that “everybody in Toronto is tired too…that’s no reason…you’ve still got to go.” That type of reasoning was common among study participants. It was challenging for them to fully comprehend that their “choices” were different from others in society, in part because they had a different set of life circumstances and different resources at their disposal.

**Overwhelmed**

Standing (2011) asserts that it is hard for those belonging to the precariat to enjoy a satisfying way of life because social and economic policies do not provide basic security and a sense of being in control of time. The precariat is always overwhelmed, struggling to survive. Tepperman and Gheihman (2013) suggest that people are only able to tolerate uncertainty (delayed gratification) if they know that, in the future, they will get what they deserve. For many youth in the study, they had either: a) never been taught to delay gratification, or b) learned that delayed gratification did not always guarantee improved life circumstances. Furthermore, like others in the precariat, they were perpetually faced with the fact that there was no affordable or tolerable way to recover from disaster (Standing). All of these factors contributed to study participants being perpetually overwhelmed – a sentiment expressed more often by the women in the study (as discussed later in the chapter, the men were more likely to talk about life as a game of chance).
Kat was the most overtly overwhelmed youth in the study. As mentioned in Chapter Five, she had spent most of her life in foster care. Kat’s mother and father had met and conceived Kat while they were homeless youth. Kat maintained contact with her mother throughout the duration of the study; however, they frequently had disagreements and I was left with the sense that Kat’s mother had her own mental health challenges. During the third month of the study, Kat reunited briefly with her father and spent a few days with him at his apartment located in a social housing complex. Unfortunately, their reunion did not last long and Kat informed me that he was verbally abusive and stole some of her belongings. Kat and I met shortly after the altercation with her father. She shared how daunted and depressed she felt when she considered all the things she needed to do to move forward in life:

Kat: (...) It’s always been like that [life filled with chaos]. One thing will go right and 15 things go wrong.
Naomi: Yeah?
Kat: It’s always been like that. That’s why I say I’m cursed.
Naomi: Do you really think you’re cursed?
Kat: Yes. I think I was handed a very, very, very bad card in life. I have to always think about the fact that...I have to tell myself…it’s not that I’m going to kill myself, but I always want to. I think that you know what…I can’t survive in a world where I don’t feel like I’m ever going to make it. I really don’t. In my heart, I don’t feel like I’m going to be able to make it in life. But in my brain, I know I will be able to one day.
Naomi: What’s going to need to happen for you to make it?
Kat: First of all, I need to get a part time job. I need to get jobs. I need to work. I need to make more money. I need to get a better apartment. I need to get a better living situation. I need to get my school done. I need to get more experience in the real world. I need a job. I have no working experience. (Month Three)

Kat accurately described a host of needs – employment, finances, better living standards, school upgrading, acquiring “real world” and work experience – common to all youth in the study. All of them were attempting to integrate into mainstream society with significant disadvantages. It was interesting to note that Kat used “jobs” (plural) and spoke about part-time (as opposed to full-time) employment. Like other youth in the study, Kat took for granted that
precarious part-time employment was all that was available for someone with her inadequate education and limited job experience.

**Life as Chance**

As mentioned in the previous section, study participants coped with chronic insecurity differently. The women in the study were more likely to acknowledge feeling overwhelmed, while the men in the study were more likely to talk about life being a game of chance. Hooks (2000) posits that nihilism is a direct consequence of the helplessness and powerlessness produced from living in poverty within a society where everyone is socialized to define their value, if not their overall meaning, by material success. Hooks terms this kind of thinking “psychic genocide” (p. 130).

As mentioned in Chapter Five, John rarely said anything negative about his experience of transitioning from the shelter into mainstream society. He also repeatedly denied worrying about anything, even though he had plenty to be concerned about, including an upcoming court case that would determine whether he had to return to jail. One day, during the first month of the study, John briefly acknowledged his aversion to dwelling on difficult circumstances:

*Naomi:* (discussing upcoming court case) Is there a chance you could go to jail?
*John:* There’s always a chance. I’m hoping not. I’m hoping I just get more probation.
*Naomi:* Yeah? Do you worry about that?
*John:* From time-to-time.
*Naomi:* Yeah?
*John:* But like…
*Naomi:* Try not to think about it?
*John:* Yeah…because then it stresses me out. (Month One)

John’s use of the words “chance” and “hoping” demonstrate he felt little sense of control over the situation. In a sense, this was true, in part because he was relying on a busy public defender to handle his case. Like many youth in the study, John had grown up in an environment where helplessness and powerlessness were ingrained. His single mother was still struggling to
make ends meet and John had no active relationships with anyone outside his lower social class. John coped with this insecurity by pushing aside his feelings, hoping for the best. By the end of the sixth month of the study John opened up more, acknowledging he was afraid of failure and assumed it would occur; consequently, he avoided thinking about or pursuing things that might have negative outcomes. In other words, despite the outward bravado he did worry, but believed he had little power to change his life circumstances.

During the first month of the study, Phillip beautifully articulated his struggle to avoid nihilistic thinking:

Phillip: (...) really the key difference between being homeless and not being homeless is just the belief that you can make it out or whether or not you let yourself fall into the trap of thinking this is just my life and this is the way it has been and this is the way it always will be. Naomi: So, what about you? Do you believe that this is it for you? That you are going to succeed? Phillip: You can never place money on anything as a 100% sure fire way. Definitely, the first time I was homeless…after I came off the streets…on that occasion…that's for sure what I thought. (...) and less than a year later I was back in that exact same scenario. So, you know you can never tell for sure but I would say that I don't foresee myself becoming homeless as a result of any foreseeable eventuality. Hopefully I would say for the rest of my life, but then again, I said that before and been proven wrong before so…I guess I’ve just got my fingers crossed… knock on wood…so… (Month One)

Notable from this excerpt is that fact that, while Phillip hoped he would not end up homeless, he had given little thought to why he ended up homeless the last time he left the shelter; furthermore, he was unable to articulate strategies – other than “fingers crossed” and “knock on wood” – he could put in place to assure the same situation would not happen again. That type of fatalistic thinking, while more commonly expressed by the men in the study, was a consistent theme among all the study participants. Youth like Phillip who had unsuccessfully tried to exit homelessness in the past only had a vague idea of what they would do to ensure they did not once again become homeless. Youth who were new to transitioning off
the streets seemed woefully unprepared for the financial and emotional challenges; consequently, they had minimal strategies in place to cope with such trials. Participants knew that achieving meaningful social integration was difficult, but they did not fully understand why. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the social mechanisms that contribute to social inequity are invisible. From this perspective, it is not surprising that study participants were unable to articulate what strategies (other than more money) would best help them successfully navigate mainstream society. They simply jumped into the game of life, hoping for the best.

**Alienation**

Sociologist Melvin Seeman combined the insights of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud to create a multi-faceted concept of alienation (Tepperman & Gheihman, 2013). Seeman’s six dimensions of alienation include: powerlessness (sense of little control); normlessness (incomprehension of dominant societal norms); meaninglessness (inability to make sense of the world); cultural estrangement (rejection of commonly held values); self-estrangement (engagement in activities [e.g., dead-end jobs] not intrinsically rewarding); and social isolation (sense of exclusion or rejection) (Tepperman & Gheihman).

None of the study participants spoke overtly about the concept of alienation. As highlighted in Chapter Five, most of the participants had grown up with inadequate financial resources and limited social capital; so, for them, living in the margins was simply “life as usual.” Instead, they used words like “alone,” “quiet,” and “bored.” Over time, I came to understand that these types of words signaled an innate sense of alienation.

**Isolation**

As mentioned in Chapter Five, most of the accommodations I visited were eerily quiet. In particular, I was struck by the extremely limited interaction between tenants sharing the same
roof. No one seemed interested in fostering a sense of community. In addition to this physical isolation and the previously discussed isolation related to poverty, there was a kind of self-imposed isolation related to the desire to keep their past lives (homelessness, trouble with the law, sex work, family upbringing, etc.) private from others. After all, their lives were markedly different from most youth the same age.

During our initial interview in her new home, Lin shared how surprised she was at the silence. Like other youth in the study, she had spent the past few months living in a homeless shelter and had grown accustomed to having a roommate and being surrounded by other youth. Lin’s bed consisted of a mattress on the floor, and since this took up most of her tiny living space, we conducted our interview on her bed. Lin revealed that, even though the isolation was hard to get used to, her complicated life story made it challenging to form new relationships:

Lin: (discussing new accommodations) The silence is deafening. It is very quiet. It's very surprising because you know, it's the middle in the center of downtown and it's a very quiet neighborhood.
Naomi: (…) Do you have support people in your life?
Lin: What do you mean?
Naomi: Like friends or…
Lin: (interjects) To tell you honestly, I don't have friends but I do have lots of people that I know. I don't call them my friends. I have people that I know.
Naomi: Why don't you call them friends?
Lin: (…) I just have people that I know…I don't really hang out with them because…because for me when you call somebody your friend you hang out with them…go out with them…share secrets with them…I'm not the kind of person that I would share everything about myself unless I feel comfortable with you. (…) It's very personal. And also, I have a very complicated life story and I don't want other people to be like, “Don't be friends with Lin because, because she is like this or like that.” I'm a private person I guess. (Baseline)

Lin’s comment, “the silence is deafening” stuck with me throughout the study. Indeed, in many of the homes I visited the silence seemed to scream, “You. Are. Alone.” As previously mentioned many study participants were similarly reluctant to confide in others, further contributing to a sense of isolation. For example, Ashley was too embarrassed to tell her
coworkers that her limited finances made it challenging for her to contribute to the office coffee fund. When Phoenix learned he had been terminated from the Japanese restaurant he loved, he briefly contemplated confiding in his employer about the stress associated with his precarious living situation. He decided not to, informing me that his employer would think, “He’s from a shelter, he’s a street youth, he’s just going to mess up, he’s not going to like to do his job.”

At various points during the study, all of the participants used degrading words to describe their taken-for-granted knowledge of societal perceptions of the homeless community. Participants used words like, “dirty,” “disgusting,” “uneducated,” “hopeless,” and “crazy.” Those dominate cultural narratives regarding the homeless community had been internalized by study participants, creating the desire to distance themselves from those ideologies. Unfortunately, that self-imposed isolation led participants to distance themselves from the very people (coworkers, employers, etc.) that might have been able to assist with integration into mainstream society.

**Boredom**

The concept of boredom was an unanticipated study finding. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, my initial interview questions revolved around factors associated with system navigation, social networks and social support. It never occurred to me to ask about boredom. Nevertheless, after the first month of the study, I noticed the word “boring” would come up during my informal interviews – especially with the men in the study. At first I thought participants were simply bored with the mundane nature of life. I surmised that, like other emerging adults, study participants were simply adjusting to the responsibilities associated with living an “ordinary” life. However, as the study progressed I began to understand that
the participants’ use of the word “boring” was associated with something much deeper than a natural adaption to adulthood. The way participants described (and lived out) boredom was closely associated with the concepts of powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, estrangement, and isolation found in Seeman’s dimensions of alienation. In other words, boredom was an expression of alienation.

During the latter months of the study I made a concerted effort to explore the concept of boredom during my informal interviews. Phoenix expressed how boredom reminded him that he was “average”:

*Naomi:* You used the word bored. What does boredom mean to you?
*Phoenix:* Like, bored of the repetition, doing the same thing I guess.
*Naomi:* What does repetition remind you of? Like what does that symbolize for you?
*Phoenix:* What does it symbolize?
*Naomi:* Yes.
*Phoenix:* (...) Repetition I guess reminds me that my life is average. I don't want my life to be average. I want it to be extraordinary. You know what I mean? I want to travel. I want to…do all these things.
*Naomi:* What does average mean to you?
*Phoenix:* Just like…repetition…boring (...) [goes on to describe working full-time at a minimum wage job]
*Naomi:* Right. So, if I understand you correctly, if I was an average person, I would have perhaps a minimum wage job somewhere that I go to every day that I wouldn't really love. Is that the average?
*Phoenix:* Yeah. (Month Nine)

Prior to this interview excerpt Phoenix was explaining to me that, even though he enjoyed the atmosphere at his new job as a dishwasher, he did not want to commit to being there every day because it was “boring.” When I pressed him on this, his response helped me understand that working a minimum wage job reminded him that he was not where he hoped to be in life. Moreover, his description of an “average” person as someone working a
minimum wage full-time job is telling of Phoenix’s social class – a class he wanted to escape.

During our final interview, Phillip eloquently described how boredom represented a state of disillusion with life:

Phillip: (...) just the dullness of day-to-day reality starts to imprint itself on you more and like you just remember a time where there is always an easy fix [drug use] to being bored.
Naomi: So let’s explore boredom a little bit, because I feel like there’s something more to boredom. What does that represent?
Phillip: It represents… it represents kind of a state of disillusion.
Naomi: With what?
Phillip: I think just with the general quality of life all together, or with the general quality of your life even. Because life is always presented to you as being full of limitless opportunity and you know… just better… you’re able to just… like do whatever you want… be whatever you want to be. But then those people they end up feeling that they can’t really do whatever they want to do and be whatever they want to be. They have to sort of come to grips with the fact that a lot of like… it’s difficult to see it as something other than filler, kind of. (...) It is sort of like waking up and eating oatmeal every morning for breakfast. It’s great like a few times in a month or whatever. (...) After a while it’s, “I don’t really care that it’s healthy for me. I want to down a bunch of brown sugar with syrup on it.” I feel like that’s… that’s a lot to do with it you know… people sort of want… they want to feel that their lives are really exciting and interesting.
(Month Nine)

Like others in the study, Phoenix and Phillip described the desire to lead lives that were extraordinary, exciting, and interesting. All of the youth exited homelessness with great aspirations for the future and, indeed, all of them had tremendous potential. Unfortunately, the need to focus on day-to-day survival meant that, for them, life was not full of limitless opportunities; instead it was a constant, boring reminder that they were trapped in the margins.

Summary of Psychosocial Consequences of Maintaining Housing

In Chapter Six I highlighted the agency of study participants; however, the reality is that agency is never divorced from one’s place in the social structure (Pederson et al., 2012). Study participants quickly realized that they were attempting to integrate into a consumer-oriented
culture without the proper resources. They were housed, yet their inadequate financial capital marked them as inadequate consumers. The stigma associated with poverty undermined and eroded their sense of mastery and control, leaving them frustrated and angry with the fact that they were not fully able to participate in mainstream society. Living in a state of unrelenting precarity led to a shift from long-range planning to day-to-day survival. Overwhelmed, participants began to see life as a game of chance – a game they were underprepared to play.

Study participants were eager to distance themselves from societal perceptions of the homeless community, but this meant keeping their past a secret from those in the mainstream. In addition, participants were quick to realize that, with limited education and scarce financial resources, life in the mainstream was extremely boring. It was hard to live out a purpose-driven life without the financial, cultural, and social capital required for full societal participation. Admission into the mainstream was costly and participants could not afford the price of the ticket.
CHAPTER EIGHT
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

More than any other issue facing our nation, housing will be the concern that will force citizens to face the reality of class.

~ bell hooks (2000)

The goal of this study was to produce an emic perspective on the experiences of formerly homeless youth as they transitioned into independent housing and attempted to achieve meaningful social integration. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Describe the impact of socioeconomic context and position on being housed.
2. Understand the shift in identity experienced during the transition off the streets.
3. Explore the psychosocial consequences of maintaining independent housing.

This final chapter outlines the key findings from my research. Each of the key findings generally align with one of the study objectives; however, given the intersectional nature of this research, it will be apparent that the study objectives are also reflected across all key findings. I begin by comparing my findings with the empirical studies from the literature review (Chapter Three). Here, I predominantly focus on the longitudinal studies of homeless youth transitions off the streets. Next, I highlight unique theoretical and conceptual insights produced by using Postcolonial Feminist theory and the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health conceptual framework (Solar & Irwin, 2010). I also propose enhancements to the latter framework in order to reflect key findings from my research. Before concluding this dissertation, I discuss implications for practice, policy, and research.
Key Findings

As previously mentioned, it is somewhat challenging to compare my study with the handful of longitudinal studies on youth leaving homelessness due to different study designs, different residential contexts, wide variations in participants’ ages, and different eligibility criteria (i.e., most studies examined the residential trajectories of youth homelessness at baseline). Additionally, the majority of studies either do not specify participant race/ethnicity or the participants were predominantly Caucasian (Appendix B). A notable exception is the mixed method Canadian study – “one of the most rigorous investigations to date” (Karabanow, Kidd, Frederick, & Hughes, 2016, p. 123) – that followed 51 formerly homeless youth over the course of one year (Kidd et al., 2016). Similar to my study, participants in the Kidd et al. study were housed at baseline. That study also had a strong qualitative component, participant demographics (i.e., age and gender) were comparable to my study, and a significant number of study participants (44%) were living in independent housing.

What distinguishes my study from the aforementioned study is that I did not include youth living in supportive contexts (e.g., transitional housing or living with parents) and I conducted significantly more interviews with each participant (maximum 19 vs. maximum 4). I believe this makes my study the first to exclusively examine the experiences of formerly homeless youth transitioning into independent housing. Moreover, the intense amount of time I spent in the field, journeying alongside formerly homeless youth, provides a perspective currently missing from the literature on homelessness youth exits off the streets.

In keeping with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks woven throughout this dissertation, I will maintain a lens of social inclusion, critiquing and relating individual findings

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29 Brueckner et al. (2011) describe study participants as residing in independent accommodations, but all lived in a Housing First model with rent subsidies and built-in support services.
with broader socioeconomic factors that impact the achievement of meaningful social
integration. This broader perspective on homeless youth leaving street life has received little
attention (Kidd, 2012) and shifts attention away from simplistic, individualistic portrayals of
homeless youth toward society’s portrayal and treatment of them (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney,
2010).

**Key Finding #1: Housed in Chronic Precarity**

Unfortunately, being housed produced no positive change in the participants’ broader
socioeconomic context and position. In other words, addressing housing as an intermediary
social determinant of health did not impact structural inequities – a point that will be taken up
later in this chapter. All of the participants lived below the poverty line throughout the duration
of the study. All but one participant started and ended the study on welfare, meaning the majority
of participants struggled to survive on an income of $7,872.00/year – 61% below the low income
cut-off (see Table 4). Most of the formal employment opportunities available to young people in
the study were minimum wage, temporary, and/or part-time jobs with no guarantee of full-time,
permanent employment with benefits. Furthermore, if study participants obtained these
precarious forms of employment (in hopes of transitioning to better paying, full-time, permanent
work) their meager welfare supplements were immediately decreased, adding to their financial
pressure. All of the participants understood the importance of pursuing post-secondary education
in order to escape the “welfare trap” and “dead-end” jobs, but their absolute lack of financial
resources and limited exposure to knowledge of the post-secondary education system made
pursuit of this goal seem almost unattainable. In addition, lack of adequate housing and high
market rents exposed participants to new forms of stress as they had to make impossible choices
between purchasing food or paying rent. They lived in chronic precarity, simply struggling to survive.

It was blatantly obvious that all of the study participants left street life woefully underprepared for the harsh realities of the mainstream. Despite the fact that the majority of participants had graduated from high school and some gained income through formal and informal channels, they were all undereducated and inadequately employed given today’s economic realities and had virtually no financial or social capital from which to draw. Moreover, they were expected to independently integrate into the mainstream at an age when most Canadian young adults are still living at home, relying heavily on parental supports. In other words, there was an expectation that, despite the fact study participants were beginning the transition to adulthood from a shelter instead of a family home and lacked supports comparable to mainstream youth of the same age, they should somehow be able to “make it” in life. In addition, the intrinsic and inextricable link between socioeconomic context and position and disadvantages related to race, class and gender served to further marginalize participants, reinforcing the fact that, even though they were housed, they were still the Other.

More than half of the study participants sought informal or illegal forms of employment in order to meet their financial demands. While these jobs were risky and exploitative, they gave participants access to cash that could not be traced back to the welfare system, thereby negatively impacting their poverty-level welfare subsidies. The particular informal or illegal jobs chosen by the participants and their attendant risks were influenced by gender and race. For example, as noted in Chapter Five, the majority of the men in the study sold marijuana at some point during the study. In addition to the risks inherent with this type of activity, Marcel and Phoenix faced the added worry of being arbitrarily stopped and questioned by the police because they were
young Black men (Toronto Foundation, 2015). Alexandra worked for cash as a cleaner alongside other Black immigrant women. As noted in Chapter Five, her male employer constantly made sexual advances and paid her late and/or less than what she was owed. He knew that he could get away with this behavior because Alexandra, like the other women hired by him, had little recourse – they were Black women living in poverty, trying to make ends meet.

This key finding of chronic precarity is similar to findings from studies carried out in the UK and North America (highlighted in Chapter One) that demonstrated how youth involved in transitional and Housing First programs (former and current residents) continued to live in poverty, in part because the income provided by their minimum wage jobs was not enough to help them meet their financial obligations (Scott & Harrison, 2013; Smith et al., 2006). Findings from the Kidd et al. (2016) study echo these findings, with study authors revealing that it was “disheartening” (p. 211) to find that the transition away from homelessness was often “demoralizing” (p. 211) – the majority of participants struggled over the course of one year to move beyond marginal or basic stability. In addition, no gains were made in community integration and participants’ hope declined significantly during the latter half of the study (Kidd et al.). These findings are especially concerning given participants in the Kidd et al. study were housed longer (mean of 8.8 months at baseline) than the participants in my study. The study authors posit that declining hope may have been related to the “false promises that attend housing life” (Kidd et al., p. 216). Participants described feeling unprepared for and overwhelmed by the realities associated with their socioeconomic context and position, undermining their confidence in achieving larger life goals (Karabanow et al., 2016) – core narratives from my research as well. Importantly, similar to the findings from my research, Kidd
et al. highlight that study participants tended to blame themselves for their struggles and minimized the role played by structural factors.

As noted in Chapter Three, other studies where participants were homeless at baseline have found that structural factors such as education and/or employment played key roles in the ability of youth to exit homelessness and/or achieve residential stability (Mayock et al., 2011; Milburn et al., 2009; Roy et al., 2016; Slesnick et al., 2008). Slesnick et al. and Roy et al. posit that residential stability is more likely to be achieved among young people involved in education and/or employment because exposure to these types of social systems provide opportunities for social integration. Furthermore, Slesnick et al. found that intermediary determinants such as substance use, mental health concerns, and coping skills did not predict change in homelessness during the six months that study participants were followed. Consequently, the authors suggest that facilitating connections to social systems like education and employment may be more a more powerful immediate target of intervention than interventions targeting intermediary determinants such as substance use and mental health concerns (Slesnick et al.).

It is important to point out that none of the aforementioned studies (except for Kidd et al., 2016) provide details regarding the context of participants’ education (secondary vs. post-secondary) or employment (full-time vs. part-time) during the study period. It is likely, especially given the wide ranges in age (12 – 25 years), that the quality of and the opportunities for social integration varied greatly depending on educational and employment contexts. Moreover, the process of independently maintaining residential stability in the face of economic realities was not explored. This is critical because, while the majority of participants in my study were “successfully” maintaining residential stability, the day-to-day financial and emotional struggles associated with that process were exhausting and often turned their attention away from
longer-term goals (e.g., educational pursuits) that could potentially make a positive change in their socioeconomic context and position (and lead to better social integration). So, while Slesnick et al. (2008) may have found that factors such as mental health concerns and coping skills did not predict change in homelessness over the short-term, this does not mean that these intermediary determinants should not be addressed alongside structural determinants such as education and employment. In other words, interventions targeted at the long-term process of maintaining residential stability – especially for youth living independently – will likely be different (and more extensive) than interventions aimed at the short-term goal of getting youth off the streets.

**Key Finding #2: Identity Shift**

Despite structural constraints, participants were determined to distance themselves from the stigma associated with homelessness and to carve out new identities as housed, self-reliant young adults. The shift in place (away from the shelter) resulted in a shift in identity. The young people in the study (rightly) perceived the move away from homelessness and into their own homes as an important marker of success and they eagerly embraced their new-found independence. Moreover, their transition off the streets was embedded within a broader transition to adulthood, meaning that even as study participants struggled against oppressive structural factors, they were also progressing through the normative phases of emerging adulthood, learning to take responsibility for themselves, striving for financial independence, and making independent decisions. The youth in the study exercised agency in the face of tremendous adversity – a testament to their incredible resilience and a crucial self-preservation strategy employed in the process of remaining housed.
As mentioned earlier in this chapter, study participants tended to minimize the role played by structural factors. In some respects, this worked in their favor over the time that I followed the participants, allowing them to press on in the belief that, one day, like other young people they would be able to realize all that mainstream life had to offer. Study participants did not see themselves as victims and distanced themselves from relationships and offers of support that did not align with their emerging sense of self. To me, it did not appear that they wanted to be identified or treated as “formerly homeless youth” but as young adults progressing through the normative stages of emerging adulthood.

Other studies on youth leaving homelessness have also found that being housed provided study participants with a new identity (Brueckner et al., 2011; Karabanow et al., 2016; Mayock et al., 2011). Participants in the Brueckner et al. study were eager to “(re)position themselves within the discourse of a ‘normal’ home occupier” (p. 9) and wanted to be treated as competent, responsible young adults. Moreover, study participants emphasised that workers providing social housing support inadvertently served to “(re)position them outside [italics added] the community of ‘normal’ home occupiers” (Brueckner et al., p. 11) because the workers’ presence made participants feel that they were under surveillance and undermined participants’ sense of competence – a point I will return to later in this section. Mayock et al. also found a shift in self-perception among youth who found housing. Despite the economic and personal challenges associated with the transition off the streets, participants shared that being housed provided a sense of purpose, achievement, and self-worth. Importantly, all of the participants who were housed no longer identified with the term “homeless” (Mayock et al.). Karabanow et al. have written extensively on the link between identity and the transition off the streets. Study authors describe housed youth as feeling “more human” (p. 132) and “more like people and less like
street kids” (p. 133). The authors also emphasize that those new-found identities were fragile because study participants were deluged with oppressive structural factors beyond their control. Karabanow et al. underscore the need to appreciate the struggle and the resilience associated with homeless youth leaving street life.

Karabanow et al. (2016) found that one of the common (but necessary) struggles among their research participants centred around disassociating from street life and street communities. Mayock et al. (2011) also found that breaking ties to former street peers was a challenging but imperative prerequisite for exiting homelessness. In contrast, other than the intimate relationships with men maintained by the women in the study, I found study participants less conflicted in their desire to distance themselves from their shelter-based friendships. It was not uncommon for participants to use derogatory language when referring to street-involved youth and many participants shared that they were eager to escape the “drama” associated with shelter life. Participants seemed to perceive their former shelter-based relationships as a threat to their new identities as responsible, competent, housed youth. The majority of participants in the Karabanow et al. and Mayock et al. studies were living in supportive housing contexts (e.g., transitional housing or living with family). It could be that, because all of the youth in my study felt ready to live independently, they had already begun the process of formulating new identities and were consequently further along in the process of disassociating from their old, shelter-based identities.

As highlighted in Chapter Three, other studies where youth were homeless at baseline have found that youth with connections to prosocial peers (e.g., youth attending school and/or maintaining a relationship with their family) and/or family were more likely to achieve residential stability (Milburn et al., 2009; Rice et al., 2008). In addition, preliminary findings
from an ongoing mixed method study suggest that maintaining ties to the homeless or marginally housed community hinders homeless youth transitions off the streets and into permanent supportive housing (Brothers, Schonberg, Lin, Karasek, & Auerswald, 2015). This negative peer influence is not surprising and these findings have been replicated elsewhere (e.g., Auerswald & Ayre, 2002; Garrett et al., 2008; Kidd, 2003). What is concerning is that, while participants in my study were relatively quick to distance themselves from other homeless youth, they either replaced those relationships with marginally housed youth (e.g., youth living independently and precariously employed or on welfare) or simply lived in increased social isolation. There were little to no avenues for study participants to make connections with youth living in significantly better socioeconomic contexts. It is conceivable that, over time, relationships with marginally housed youth and/or the lack of relationships with prosocial peers may undermine study participants’ budding new identities, ultimately derailing a crucial self-preservation strategy employed in the process of remaining housed. In other words, because their identities are new and just beginning to shift away from their old identities as homeless youth, it will likely be critical to spend time alongside those who can support and foster these new identities.

Unfortunately, there is no guidance in the empirical literature on how formerly homeless youth living independently are expected to make connections with prosocial peers given their significant structural constraints and lack of social capital. For example, if post-secondary educational goals are set aside in order to focus on day-to-day survival, youth will lose an opportunity to integrate with those in the mainstream.

In addition to distancing themselves from their shelter-based friendships, I found that study participants underutilized the transition supports offered by shelter outreach staff. I was unable to find this underutilization of transition-related supports reported in any longitudinal
studies on homeless youth exits off the streets. My finding may be attributable to the fact that I exclusively examined exits to *independent* housing, where youth were given a choice as to whether and how they would use transition-related supports. Formerly homeless youth participating in other studies such as Karabanow et al. (2016), where the majority were living in supportive contexts (predominantly transitional housing), were presumably not presented with the same social support options as youth living independently (social support services are embedded within transitional housing programs). Interestingly, participants in the Karabanow et al. study did share that shelters and supportive housing settings “infantilized them and ignored their developmental realities” (p. 133). It would be interesting to learn if, over time, this perception of being treated like a child translates into an underutilization of transition-related supports.

As previously mentioned, Brueckner et al. (2011) found that the well-intentioned support provided by social service workers reinforced to study participants that they were not “normal” home occupiers and interrupted participants’ self-perception as responsible, competent young people. Study authors emphasize that, in addition to providing practical support, those in the social service sector must be mindful that the acquisition of a home is inherently linked with the desire to identify with those in the mainstream. Accordingly, social services workers are encouraged to foster these nascent identities alongside the provision of housing-related supports (Brueckner et al.). Literature on youth transitioning out of foster care also supports the cultivation of agency and adult identity, and suggests that cultivating these attributes may be just as or more important than addressing independent living skills (Paulsen & Berg, 2016; Lee & Berrick, 2014). Furthermore, there is a risk that youth will refuse well-intentioned offers of support if the balance between assistance and autonomy is inadequate (Paulsen & Berg).
discussed in Chapter Three, in order for social support to be effective, there needs to be an appropriate match between the type of support being offered and the specific needs of the person receiving the support. In youth with histories of homelessness, the demonstration of trustworthiness and respect are crucial components as to whether they will accept or seek out the support being offered (Collins & Barker, 2009; McCay et al., 2010; Stewart et al., 2010).

Moreover, an altered development of social connectedness means that many street-involved youth tend to demonstrate their resilience by being fiercely independent and cautious of others (Barker, 2014; Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Rew et al., 2001). This adds to the importance of providing support in a way that fosters the positive attributes of these resiliency skills.

My findings align with Brueckner et al. (2011) and with the studies on social support and social connectedness from the literature review. I believe a key reason that outreach workers played a minimal role in helping the youth in my study transition off the streets is because the workers’ predominant focus on housing-related supports inadvertently made participants feel that they were adolescents who required surveillance, and did little to reinforce participants’ new identities as independent, responsible, emerging adults. Participants perceived that the role of a community outreach worker was to address material deficits, but participants were seeking a friendship- or mentor-like relationship with someone who would foster their strengths. In addition, many of the transition-related supports available to study participants (e.g., free meals, food banks, employment assistance, healthcare) were located within the shelter system – a community that reminded them of their old identities as homeless youth and the fact that they were only “one wrong move” away from returning. To be clear, participants were grateful for the supports available to them; however, they expressed discomfort over having no choice but to access those supports alongside homeless youth. Similar to Karabanow et al. (2016), my findings
suggest that the emerging identities of study participants were fragile because they were developing alongside oppressive structural factors – dynamics that served to remind participants that they did not belong in the mainstream. From this perspective, it becomes easier to recognise the tremendous agency required to forge new identities. Moreover, it is understandable why study participants rejected or underutilized offers of support that did not align with those new identities.

It is important to view these spurned offers of transition-related supports from a lens of agency instead of a lens of pathology. Doing so will assist in the design of appropriate transition-related interventions. For example, a systematic review of natural mentoring – generally defined as an important non-parental adult that exists in a youth’s social network – found that youth transitioning out of foster care benefited from a supportive adult not “tasked with enforcing daily rules and addressing misbehavior” (Thompson, Greeson, Brunsink, 2016, p. 48) and resulted in “improved psychosocial, behavioral, and academic outcomes” (p. 48). These findings are similar to the study of natural mentoring relationships among homeless youth discussed in Chapter Three (Dang & Miller, 2013). Identifying natural mentors or incorporating positive characteristics of natural mentors (i.e., more of a friendship-like role) into transition-related supports may be a promising practice and is certainly supported by the findings from my study.

**Key Finding #3: Mastery and Control Undermined**

Over time, living in a state of chronic precarity undermined participants’ sense of mastery and control. Despite their remarkable agency, oppressive structural factors combined with a lack of social and financial capital reinforced a sense of inadequacy and “Otherness.” Participants’ formidable determination to carve out new identities as self-sufficient, competent, emerging adults was perpetually challenged by the stigma associated with being poor and undereducated in
a consumer-oriented, credential-driven society. Without the tacit knowledge and financial resources required to thrive in the mainstream, their confidence was perpetually under attack. Despite outward appearances of being “successfully housed,” the relentless day-to-day process of maintaining stability was exhausting. Before long, long-term planning was set aside as participants were forced to focus on the short-term goal of day-to-day survival. It was as if they were trapped inside a “hamster wheel” of poverty – struggling to move forward but staying in the same place. At times, the young people seemed to waver in the belief that they were the ones in control of their destinies. Many began to see life as a game of chance.

In the book *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, Bauman (2004) highlights that one of the most common recommendations given to young adults faced with inequitable life chances is simply to be grateful. They must learn to not ask too many questions, to treat dead-end jobs as opportunities, and to cease searching for life purpose (Bauman). At the same time, these same young people are immersed in a society that marks them as inadequate consumers. They are made to feel like redundant human waste (Bauman). Robert Putnam (2015) likens the challenges faced by disadvantaged young people to “struggling to catch up on a down escalator” (p. 184). Standing (2011) cautions that, over time, the relative deprivation, humiliation, and irritation at the blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life give way to frustration, anger, and disengagement – features exhibited, in varying degrees, by all my study participants.

This key finding of chronic precarity and disempowerment developing alongside the acquisition of housing runs counter to approaches such as Housing First (see Chapter One) that emphasize the notion that providing homes for homeless individuals “exemplifies the creation of a supportive environment for health….emphasizes the empowerment and development of clients’ personal skills….and [allows for] control over one’s life circumstances” (Frankish et al.,
While these optimistic outcomes may bear out for formerly homeless adults with mental health and/or addiction challenges residing in supported housing contexts (the premise behind the Housing First model), that was not the reality for the independently housed youth participating in my study.

Given these contrasting outcomes, one may be inclined to assume it was the type of housing (i.e., independent vs. supported or supportive) that was to blame for the negative psychosocial consequences experienced by my study participants. In theory, the financial and personnel resources (e.g., rent subsidies and community support workers) that accompany supported housing models such as Housing First should diminish some of the stress and precarity associated with exiting street life. Nevertheless, one of the key findings from the Karabanow et al. (2016) study – where the majority of youth were living in supportive housing contexts – is that, “despite this population being perceived as successes once they find housing, they experience themselves as highly stressed, strained, overwhelmed, and fragile” (p. 138). The similarity between my findings and the findings from Karabanow et al. seem to indicate that chronic precarity and lack of control have to do with factors beyond the type of housing youth receive once they exit homelessness. Although moving into independent housing is likely the most challenging exit a homeless youth can make, there are broader structural and psychosocial factors at play that make the transition off the streets challenging regardless of the housing context.

Other than the aforementioned Karabanow et al. (2016) study, little has been written about the psychosocial consequences experienced by formerly homeless youth as they struggle to maintain stable housing. The assumption is that, once youth are engaged with the appropriate social supports (e.g., supportive family, prosocial peers, subsidized accommodation, assistance
with employment and education), housing stability will be much easier to achieve and to maintain. While there is evidence from quantitative studies to support that assumption in terms of achieving residential stability (e.g., Milburn et al., 2009; Roy et al., 2016; Slesnick et al., 2008; Tevendale et al., 2011), none of those studies were designed to journey alongside housed youth who already had some of those social supports in place. For example, all but one youth in my study either had a high school diploma or were engaged in high school upgrading, all had at least one supportive family member, and all had ready access to an outreach worker. Moreover, those studies were not designed to examine the relationship between the acquisition of a home and meaningful social integration. Consequently, our well-meaning but privileged assumptions about what formerly homeless youth want and need in order to maintain residential stability may not match the lived-out experiences of these incredibly resilient and insightful young people. The youth participating in my study made it clear that, like other youth, they desired more than residential stability – they desired pathways to a successful life. They wanted to be citizens, not denizens (Standing, 2011).

Their desire for citizenship and the determination to carve out new identities as competent, emerging adults was perpetually challenged by the realities of the participants’ socioeconomic context and position. Their day-to-day struggle to maintain residential stability cannot be overstated. The participants’ challenge was not in merely maintaining a home with meager resources, but doing so amid constant reminders that they were in a lower social class – poor, undereducated, and inadequately employed. Chronic precarity permeated every aspect of participants’ lives, from maintaining a home to developing friable new identities as self-sufficient adults. This precarity threatened to destroy their belief that they were the masters of
their own destinies – especially concerning given mastery and control are primary criteria in
determining whether or not an initiative is health promoting (Rootman & O’Neill, 2012).

Without the financial or social capital required to participate within a consumer-oriented,
credential-driven culture, study participants were left in the margins. Standing (2011) warns that
disengagement develops as a consequence of living in relative deprivation with few avenues for
achieving a meaningful life. Those with no option but to accept precarious, unfulfilling jobs with
no sense of control or sustained autonomy experience “a profound lack of purpose” (Standing, p. 35).
Bauman (2001) asserts that, in modern society, to be constantly busy and perpetually short
of time is a marker of affluence. Conversely, the poor are “crushed under the burden of abundant
and useless time they have nothing to fill with….In their time, ‘nothing ever happens’….They
can only kill time as they are slowly killed by it” (Bauman, p. 307). Money is lauded as the
illusive prescription for boredom, and without it the poor are forced to live in “internal exile”
(Bauman, p. 329), constrained to place and time. Indeed, Kidd et al. (2016) characterized a
significant group of study participants as “stable but stuck” (p. 211) – a description that could
easily be applied to all of the youth in my study who remained housed.

Paradoxically, the move away from homelessness and into independent housing
reinforced to study participants that they did not really have the same life chances as other young
people. Instead, the move off the streets exposed their low socioeconomic position, highlighted
how little control they had over life circumstances, and challenged their quality of life. Over
time, I witnessed these factors take a toll on participants’ mental well-being. Standing (2011)
asserts that struggles with mental health are natural consequences of living in chronic precarity;
however, too often mental health challenges are pathologized and mental health interventions
(rather than dealing with structural causes) are lauded as the solution. Certainly, whenever I
asked study participants for their insights regarding social supports, more often than not they would respond with something along the lines of, “I just need more money.”

**Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions**

As discussed in Chapter Two, I employed two frameworks – one theoretical and one conceptual – in order to help me capture both the objective and the subjective factors associated with meaningful social integration. Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I suspected that there would be tangible and intangible factors associated with social integration. As anticipated, the utilization of two frameworks enhanced my understanding of how social exclusion is produced, experienced and reproduced. Moreover, the frameworks provided an invaluable compass and lens during my ten months of fieldwork and the eight months that followed as I further analysed and interpreted the ample amount of data generated during my research.

**Theoretical Insights**

Utilizing a Postcolonial Feminist (PCF) theoretical framework alongside the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) conceptual framework served to deepen my understanding of the subjective, relational aspects of social exclusion. The use of PCF theory demanded that I look beyond the superficial in order to appreciate the experience of existing in relative deprivation – living in the mainstream but being unable to fully participate. Over time, as I journeyed alongside study participants, I was better able to understand the context of their lives and the larger social processes that were shaping their transition into independent housing. In particular, the use of PCF theory helped me recognize how social categories of difference such as gender, race, and class intersected and further complicated participants’ ability to maintain their housing and achieve meaningful social integration. As noted in Chapter Two, I chose three key concepts from PCF theory to help me conduct my analysis – hybridity, Othering, and
intersectionality. In this section I use each of these concepts to focus on various aspects of my key findings.

**Hybridity.** As discussed in Chapter Two, the concept of hybridity encompasses the notion that, by moving the generation of knowledge away from dominant societal ideologies (the center) toward the margins, we create space for a “hybrid” of knowledge production – a Third Space – that incorporates both perspectives. To be clear, the purpose of this approach is not to “find proof” of structural oppression, but to start with the everyday experiences of the marginalized and work backwards toward the center (Reimer Kirkham & Anderson, 2010).

I gained a much deeper understanding of this concept as I progressed through the various stages of my research. Initially, it was difficult to see beyond structural constraints; nevertheless, over time I began to shift my perspective and was able to view the transition off the streets from the viewpoint of the study participants. It was from this place – the margins – that I was able to achieve a perspective currently underdeveloped in research regarding homeless youth leaving the streets. I made a concerted effort – particularly in Chapter Six – to avoid presenting an essentialist perspective of study participants (i.e., ascribing immutable characteristics devoid of context). Instead, I offered a decentered perspective on the transition off the streets and emphasized the agency of study participants. Additionally, I endeavored to highlight the “in-betweenness” of study participants’ identities – no longer homeless but not fully integrated into the mainstream – in order to produce a new way of thinking about and assisting with transitions off the streets.

Key to achieving hybridity is the refusal to engage in binary thinking (Khan et al., 2007). Throughout this study, I struggled to reconcile two prevailing truths: 1) participants lived in chronic precarity, and 2) participants were extremely proud to be living independently.
Ultimately, I learned to hold both perspectives, recognizing that by attending to both we can design more effective interventions to help youth transition off the streets and integrate into the mainstream.

Every youth in the study was connected with at least one outreach worker; yet, the workers’ impact proved to be minimal, in part because they apparently failed to recognize that addressing intangible, identity-related needs (i.e., the need for study participants to be seen as self-sufficient, competent young adults) was just as important as addressing tangible, housing-related needs. This is a crucial finding, especially in light of the fact that in 2013 the Canadian government aligned its strategy to tackle homelessness with the Housing First approach, which incorporates “wrap-around” supports such as community outreach workers (Government of Canada, 2016). If these supports do not address young peoples’ tangible and intangible needs, the supports are likely to be underutilized or rejected outright. Not only would this result in poor return on investment, it may give the impression that formerly homeless youth either a) do not want help, or b) are beyond help. Nothing could be further from the truth.

All of the youth in the study did, in fact, desire outside assistance; however, they underutilized potentially crucial supports because they did not align with their need to preserve a sense of mastery and control. Other studies have also discovered this paradox of high need and low utilization of social support. As noted in Chapter Three, cross-sectional studies of homeless youth have found that youth deemed highly resilient were also found to have low social connectedness (Barker 2014; Rew et al., 2001) and low utilization of mental health services (McCay et al., 2010). It could be that youth in those studies were displaying agency by

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30 The Canadian government has pledged 600 million dollars over five years (2014 – 2019) as part of its Homelessness Partnering Strategy (Government of Canada, 2016).
disconnecting from people and social institutions that failed to treat them as competent, emerging adults – an attribute that should be properly understood and fostered, not pathologized.

Researchers using PCF theory as a framework must be cautious to not inadvertently undermine the agency and resilience of research participants in the quest for “advocacy”; rather, the unmasking of oppressive structural factors impacting health and well-being must be informed by participants’ perspectives (Reimer Kirkham & Anderson, 2010). By infusing participants’ subjugated knowledge into practice, we can design better interventions in order to achieve social justice and equity (Anderson, 2000).

**Othering.** The participants began and ended the study as the marginalized Other. In mainstream society, their desire to be identified as normative emerging adults was perpetually challenged by structural constraints and by well-meaning workers tasked with the job of trying to assist youth in their transition off the streets. Study participants were marked by their poverty, unable to fully participate in the consumer-driven culture into which they were trying to integrate. Moreover, their “choices” – deciding between eating or paying the rent, or choosing which dead-end job to pursue – reflected their inequitable life chances. The majority of participants were able to maintain the transition to independent housing, but they seemed stuck, spinning inside a hamster wheel of poverty although “successfully” housed.

Standing (2011) describes the precariat as being in a “permanent spin” (p.204), chronically overwhelmed and insecure, forced to account for their time in order to prove that they are not lazy, and lacking the inter-generational transfer of knowledge on how one moves forward in life. Bauman (2001) portrays the poor living in today’s society as being “chained to place” (p. 307) like a “postmodern version of slavery” (p. 308). Over time, as oppressed groups internalize and accept their subordinate status, a mutually reinforcing cycle of marginalization
develops as the poor “refuse what they are denied” (Carroll, 2012, p. 42), leading to further alienation in the form of cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, and social isolation (Tepperman & Gheihman, 2013).

As noted in Chapter Seven, participants used words like “bored” to signal the innate sense of alienation that accompanied their inability to achieve meaningful social integration. Tepperman and Gheihman (2013) posit that alienation develops as a by-product of existing at the bottom of the social ladder, lacking knowledge of one’s future, skills, and talents, and making decisions behind a “veil of ignorance” (p. 18). Alienation is also a consequence of being unable to fully participate in a consumer-oriented culture (Bauman, 2001; hooks, 2000). Hooks (2000) warns that young adults are particularly vulnerable to consumerism as they have an underdeveloped core identity and lack a sense of belonging; consequently, it is challenging for them to ward off the allure of the notion that consumption will help place them on equal footing with those in a higher social class. Indeed, shame over the inability to consume or consuming without the means to do so (e.g., spending rent money on a hotel) was evident among all of the participants at various points during the study.

Othering results in inequitable access to resources required for health and well-being (Anderson et al., 2009). This does not necessarily mean that the resources are not in place; rather, it is the demeaning way in which these resources are provided that limits access by marginalized groups (Anderson et al). In other words, marginalized groups like street-involved youth will underutilize supports that further stigmatize them (e.g., McCay et al., 2010) – a reality I witnessed among the youth participating in my study. The positioning of transition-related supports (e.g., free meals, healthcare services, and employment programs) within homeless service delivery channels also led to the underutilization of supports. While this may seem
counterintuitive, I believe this reflects our limited empirical data on homeless youth transitions off the streets. Though offering transition-related supports under one roof may indeed seem convenient, study participants made it clear that they were no longer interested in identifying with the homeless community. They wanted to be perceived as housed, normative, competent, emerging adults. It may be beneficial to embed transition-related supports within the mainstream sector (e.g., family practice clinics, churches, universities, and libraries) as a way of encouraging “natural” integration and facilitating social capital. It is critical that those of us tasked with assisting youth in their transition off the streets do not unintentionally reinforce marginalization through our service models.

**Intersectionality.** Soon after I began my fieldwork, it became clear that my understanding of intersectionality was underdeveloped. At an academic level, I understood that elements such as gender, race, and class could not be neatly compartmentalized (Brah & Phoenix, 2004); however, in practice, I found myself wanting to do just that. PCF scholars acknowledge that intersectionality can be the most challenging aspect of PCF theory to grapple with (Khan et al., 2007). As the study progressed, I realized it was impossible to examine gender without examining race, and it was futile to discuss either of these constructs without acknowledging class. Additionally, all of these elements played out differently among the study participants. For example, as illustrated in Chapter Five, Alexandra’s mistreatment as an impoverished Black woman led to her firm belief that most of society “hated” Black people. Similarly, John understood (and accepted) that Black men in a higher social class (evidenced by wearing business suits) were less likely to be targeted by police than Black men in a lower social class (evidenced by wearing baggy clothes and communing in low income neighborhoods).
In Chapter Five, for ease of reference, I presented my findings regarding gender, race, and class separately; however, elements of each were visible even when I endeavored to artificially separate them. For example, when I visited lower income neighborhoods in Toronto, I noted significantly more people with black and brown skin. Additionally, all but one of the study participants was raised by a single mother who struggled to make ends meet. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of poverty became apparent as I witnessed nineteen-year-old Lin lose her housing and become a single mother and I watched the other women in the study give significant amounts of their time and/or finances to young men they had met in a shelter who, like them, had been raised by single mothers with limited financial resources. I observed first-hand how participants simultaneously lived their lives as racialized, classed, and gendered persons (Anderson, 2000). Moreover, even though all the participants shared challenges related to class, their different social locations (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation) meant that the transition off the streets was unique for each of them – an important point to keep in mind when designing interventions aimed at assisting youth in their transition off the streets.

A particularly troubling aspect of study participants’ low social class was that this was fundamentally linked with their young ages. In other words, disadvantages related to age relegated participants to a class within a class (“youth-as-class” [Côté, 2013, p. 1]) – a perspective not typically considered in PCF theory. Over time, I gained a deeper appreciation of how society normalizes age-related inequities for all young people, regardless of socioeconomic contexts. For example, as highlighted in Chapter Five, the majority of Canadian young adults aged 20 – 24 years live with their parents because of the need for advanced levels of education for even entry-level positions, the inadequate supply jobs that pay a living wage, and the exorbitant cost of housing make it financially challenging to live independently. This delay of
functional independence is common in many Western countries and has generally gone unopposed and not been linked back to the rise in globalization and neoliberal policies (Côté, 2013; Putnam, 2015; Standing, 2011). Instead, these socially constructed, age-related inequities have been normalized and even further legitimized through societal discourses regarding biological inferiority like the use of the term the “adolescent brain” (Côté, p.4) – the subtext being youth under the age of 25 are simply not “ready” to become fully contributing members of society (something unheard of in recent generations). While it can be tremendously beneficial to incorporate developmental perspectives regarding adolescence into health-related interventions (e.g., assisting youth with recognizing and managing their tendency toward emotionally-driven coping strategies [Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014]), it is important to point out that this knowledge can also be used to perpetual age-related inequities. For example, if we perceive young adult as being biologically inferior, it becomes easier to justify enhanced surveillance by the social service sector and to dismiss their outrage regarding structural inequities as age-related, emotionally-based responses.

For young adults raised in better socioeconomic contexts, these age-related inequities have been masked, in part, by parents who have found a way to support their children in the normalized prolonged transition to adulthood (Côté, 2013; Putnam, 2015). The youth participating in my study were not so fortunate. Their transition off the streets and into independent housing further exposed their youth-as-class status because the transition required them to draw on extremely limited tangible and intangible resources in ways that had not been required of them within the shelter system. Moreover, the pervasive societal ideology regarding what was “normal” for emerging adults to accomplish seemed to trickle down to the social service sector. It appeared to me that little was expected of study participants beyond
maintaining a home, getting a high school education, and securing a minimum wage job. As noted in Chapter Six, the bar for achieving “success” seemed to be set quite low. However, as Kat stated, youth exiting homelessness were quite capable of doing “the high jump.” They just needed someone to show them how.

Conceptual Insights

The CSDH conceptual framework provides a practical snapshot that assists our understanding of how challenges associated with social integration can ultimately be traced back to inequitable structural factors (Solar & Irwin, 2010). For example, the financial precarity experienced by my research participants seems inevitable (and preventable) when traced back to the lack of affordable housing in Toronto (Toronto Foundation, 2015) and to welfare subsidies far below the LICO (Income Security Advocacy Centre, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2015c). This differentiation between structural (causal) and intermediary (consequential) determinants of health is crucial and currently missing from the Canadian context, where the social determinants of health tend to be presented as a grouping of “upstream” approaches to improving health outcomes (e.g., Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; PHAC, 2011). In contrast, the CSDH framework makes explicit that there are some determinants that are further upstream than others. Moreover, the framework highlights the unidirectional relationship (i.e., causal priority) between structural and intermediary determinants of health (Solar & Irwin, 2010). In other words, addressing intermediary factors such as housing will not “work backwards” and change structural factors such as socioeconomic context and position.

While the unidirectional relationship between structural and intermediary determinants may be apparent, there seems to be a pervasive view within broader society that the provision of housing and social supports (intermediary determinants) for the homeless will indeed work
backwards, influencing structural determinants such as education and income (e.g., Government of Canada, 2016). Admittedly, at the outset of my research, I too believed that the acquisition of a home alongside readily available support from community outreach workers would provide study participants with the secure springboard they needed to achieve other goals such as vocational training or post-secondary education. Instead, I found structural inequities overshadowed gains made at the intermediary level, making it extremely challenging for participants to move beyond a focus on day-to-day survival. The move off the streets and into independent housing laid bare study participants’ lack of tangible resources such as financial and social capital. All of the participants lived in poverty throughout the study, and the majority had no relationships that could be used as “currency” to move them forward in life. Despite their best efforts, participants’ personal agency was not enough to overcome structural disadvantages. Moreover, the supports provided to help ease the transition off the streets (e.g., outreach workers and shelter-based services) inadvertently served to weaken participants’ agency because the way these supports were presented undermined participants’ fragile new identities as normative emerging adults.

While the CSDH framework does highlight the importance of financial and social capital, it does not explicitly address the importance of identity formation in the journey toward meaningful social integration. This is not surprising given the framework was designed for the general population and not as a youth-specific model. As discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the key findings from my research was that carving out new identities as self-sufficient, competent, emerging adults proved to be a crucial self-preservation strategy employed by participants in the process of remaining housed. In other words, there was a significant
relationship between identity and agency. Given this finding, it seemed essential to integrate this discovery into the CSDH framework.

In my search for further insight into how to bolster emerging identities (thereby bolstering agency), I came across the Identity Capital Model, developed in 1996 by sociologist James Côté (Côté, 1996). Côté uses the term “identity capital” to refer to the tangible (e.g., financial and social capital) and intangible (e.g., self-efficacy and sense of purpose) resources needed by all young people (regardless of socioeconomic background) to integrate into today’s society with its eroded structural supports. What is interesting about the Identity Capital Model is that the “portfolio” (Côté, 2016, p.4) of tangible and intangible resources Côté deems crucial for success closely mirrors the very resources my participants were lacking. While the Identity Capital Model has predominantly been utilized with post-secondary students (typically from middle- and upper-class backgrounds), Côté urges the use of this model among youth whose “backgrounds do not nurture intangible identity capital resources such as self-esteem, internal locus of control, purpose in life, and ego strength” (Côté, 2016, p. 55). For example, the enhancement of identity capital has been proposed to help improve outcomes among youth transitioning out of foster care (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Côté developed the Identity Capital Model as a response to the impact of late modernity and the rise of individualization on the transition to adulthood (Côté, 1996; 2002). The model posits that, without adequate tangible and intangible resources (identity capital) to assist in contemporary transitions to adulthood, young people are more likely to default to a passive life course (default individualization) “dictated by immediate circumstance and caprice, with little

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31 Late modernity refers to “an era in which market-oriented policies and consumption-based lifestyles are replacing community-oriented policies and production-based lifestyles” (Côté, 2002, p. 117).

32 Individualization “refers to the social process by which people attempt to compensate for lack of collective support from their community and culture, which may or may not implicate their parents” (Côté & Schwartz, 2002, p. 573).
agentic assertion [personal agency] on the part of the person” (Côté & Schwartz, 2002, p. 574). Moreover, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to take the route of default individualization because overcoming oppressive structural constraints requires high levels of personal agency (Côté & Bynner, 2008).

To be clear, Côté is not normalizing the rise of individualization. Côté is very critical of neoliberal policies that disproportionately exploit young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., the challenge to earn a living wage with only a high school education) and calls for these policies to be rectified rather than accepted (Côté, 2016, 2013, 2002; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Côté & Schwartz, 2002). At the same time, Côté (2016) asserts that, rather than adopting a privileged position of calling only for structural change, we (society) must help young people maximize their life chances given the realities in which they find themselves. Côté (2016) challenges the “pejorative attitudes” (p. 15) exhibited by those who suggest that structural change, not agency, is the only solution for improving the lives of the marginalized. Instead, Côté (2016) posits that young people from disadvantaged background are the most in need of learning “how to identify and mobilize their own internal potentials if they are to improve their life chances” (p. 14). An important example of mobilizing internal potential is the 12-week, asset-based Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) intervention implemented in Calgary and Toronto, Canada with street-involved youth (McCay et al., 2015). Youth who participated in the intervention (n = 60) demonstrated significant improvements in social connectedness, resilience, self-esteem, and mental health challenges (McCay et al.). Moreover, these gains were sustained at four and 10 weeks post-intervention (McCay et al.).

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33 DBT is designed to address emotional dysregulation and is particularly effective at addressing life challenges across multiple domains (McCay et al., 2010).
Côté (2016) posits that those hoping to “change social classes” (p. 7) must learn things as adults that those coming from better socioeconomic contexts take for granted. He argues that strategically mobilizing intangible assets such as personal agency is something that can be learned. The Identity Capital Model offers a portfolio of identity capital resources to be used by young people to “compete effectively in the late-modern identity markets of adult communities and occupational systems” (Côté, 2016, p. 50). Côté emphasizes that an important intention of the model is to assist young people who are socially excluded. To critics who suggest he is “blaming the victim” he asks, “What would we recommend to our own children when counseling them on strategies to maximize their life chances…?” (Côté, 2016, p. 8).

I believe that the concept of identity capital has much to offer youth transitioning off the streets. Findings from my research indicate that participants had minimal levels of the tangible and intangible resources deemed essential in the Identity Capital Model. Furthermore, the enhancement of identity capital did not appear to be a central feature of the transition-related supports available to the youth. From this perspective, it becomes clearer why the participants’ agency was so quickly exhausted. Participants lacked the identity capital – in particular, the intangible resources – needed to mount personal agency in the face of massive structural constraints. Moreover, their sense of chronic precarity was linked, in part, to the fact that their new identities were predominantly linked to being housed – something they were in constant fear of losing. Accordingly, I propose that the CSDH framework be modified to incorporate identity capital (Figure 14). This new determinant of identity capital emphasizes the importance of buttressing the normative needs associated with emerging adulthood (e.g., sense of purpose and control) while also addressing the insufficient accumulation of structural resources (e.g., education and workplace skills) and limited social capital common among young people from
inequitable socioeconomic and political contexts. Moreover, by embedding identity capital within the CSDH framework (rather than a stand-alone model), the importance of socioeconomic and political context and factors such as race, class, and gender are preserved, thus presenting a more balanced, less stigmatizing view of structure and agency. In other words, rather than conceptualizing formerly homeless youth as the helpless Other, this new framework embraces the duality of structure and agency (Carroll, 2012), highlighting that, with the proper tangible and intangible resources, these resilient young people can realize meaningful social integration. Moreover, from a systems level, the proposed framework offers a more strategic and integrated approach to helping youth—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—be more successful in the mainstream.
The proposed framework preserves many of the same elements as the current CSDH framework. For example, the modified framework maintains the unidirectional relationship between the structural and intermediary determinants of health, emphasizing that intermediary-based interventions in and of themselves will not change structural inequities. Identity capital has
been placed as a structural determinant to denote the priority this should be given when assisting youth in transition. Specifically, identity capital has been incorporated under socioeconomic position because my study findings indicate that identity capital, like race, class and gender, influences socioeconomic position. I have also added age and sexual orientation. Given social capital is a core component of identity capital, the crosscutting determinant has been eliminated. I found the inclusion of a crosscutting determinant in the original CSDH framework to be problematic because it appeared too easy for the state to overemphasize the responsibility of disadvantaged individuals and communities to facilitate social capital. I believe bridging/linking social capital is a crucial component currently underemphasized in the ways we assist youth exiting homelessness, and it is unrealistic to expect for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds to generate their own. Finally, I have included examples under many of the determinants. Notably, social support is listed under psychosocial factors to emphasize that support is an intermediary determinant and does not necessary result in “social currency” that enables one to move forward in life (see Chapter Two for a discussion of bridging/linking social capital).

**Recommendations for Practice-Policy-Research**

This praxis-oriented study has helped to illuminate the social mechanisms influencing the “choices” available to young people as they begin their transition off the streets and attempt to integrate into the mainstream. Rather than a secure linear path from the streets to the mainstream, study participants were forced to take a precarious path full of structural gaps that left them stuck, spinning, and exhausted by day-to-day survival. This enhanced understanding opens up the possibility for dialogue that challenges those in practice, policy, and research arenas to consider that sustainable solutions to youth homelessness involve a greater investment than simply providing youth with a home. In this section I have endeavored to present recommendations that are pragmatic, empowering, and sustainable.
Practice

A key feature of this research is the emphasis on producing practical knowledge that is easily accessible to those working directly with current and former homeless youth. Front-line social service providers are encouraged to use the findings from this study to inform current practices on the types of support that must be in place before, during and after a move into independent housing. The following are recommended:

1. Incorporate teaching regarding identity capital for shelter staff
   - Assists front-line workers to support the development of tangible and intangible resources for all youth regardless of housing status
   - Facilitates the provision of developmentally appropriate supports that are responsive to contemporary transitions to adulthood

2. Offer more supports (e.g., counseling, food programs, and health care services) away from shelters (decentralized but coordinated)
   - Fosters sense of new identity as mainstream youth
   - Facilitates move away from the passive and sometimes demeaning experience of receiving charity
   - Allows youth to naturally integrate with those in the mainstream (e.g., waiting room of a “regular” medical clinic)

3. Incorporate friendship focused “natural mentors” into transition-related supports
   - Moves beyond a predominant focus on housing-related supports
   - A friendship-oriented relationship builds trust and allows youth to dictate the direction of the relationship and identify the forms of support they desire (this will likely change over time)
4. Offer mental health supports that respond to the needs of transitioning youth
   - Consider approaches such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy that assist youth in “holding two truths” (e.g., internal locus of control despite inevitable adversity) Note: This does not negate the need to address structural inequities.
   - Foster autonomy and choice in all aspects of program delivery (start this while still living in shelter)
   - Incorporate mental health promotion (i.e., proactive self-care, not coping skills alone) into community outreach

5. Develop programs that foster bridging/linking social capital
   - Match transitioning youth with someone in better socioeconomic circumstances in order to foster a sense of inclusion and a sense of the possible
   - Fosters cultural capital

6. Re-define success – set the bar higher than “no longer homeless”
   - Be transparent with youth about the likelihood of escaping poverty with limited education and inadequate job skills (and develop a plan to directly address this)
   - Change outcome measures (e.g., How many youth no longer need welfare because of our program?)

7. Align programs for transitioning youth based on up-to-date evidence
   - Utilize evidence based on rigorous research (ideally longitudinal studies that incorporate the perspectives of youth) when designing interventions
Reassess current programming continually and modify delivery as appropriate in order to align with emerging evidence.

Regularly elicit and incorporate feedback from youth who are receiving the programs.

Public Policy

This study has highlighted how challenging it is for formerly homeless young people to achieve meaningful social integration (and simply to survive) given the structural inequities inherent in society. In the long run, failure to address these inequities will result in a poor return on investment as homelessness ends up being managed and not stopped. The following are recommended:

1. Adopt a broader perspective toward ending homelessness
   - The provision of a home without addressing structural factors (e.g., limited education and underemployment) will not end homelessness.

2. Provide more affordable and better quality housing
   - Rent geared to income
   - More transitional-type housing (longer than 1 – 2 years) for employed youth and for youth attending secondary or post-secondary education.

3. Ensure all Canadian youth living independently are not living in extreme poverty
   - Meet or exceed LICO $20,160.

4. Consider providing a basic income instead of welfare
   - Basic income at LICO ($20,160)
   - Eliminates complex (and costly) system navigation and provides more dignity.
5. Provide free tuition plus associated costs (e.g., rent and books) for post-secondary education\textsuperscript{34}
   - Allows youth the opportunity to more quickly integrate into the mainstream
   - Free tuition alone will not provide a realistic chance to attend post-secondary schooling (youth unable to cover other costs)

6. Develop programs that assist to achieve jobs offering more than minimum wage and limited upward mobility
   - Match job skills with aspirations of youth
   - Ensures program offer certification transferrable to other jobs or to post-secondary education

\textbf{Research}

My doctoral work has highlighted the extremely limited evidence regarding how best to help youth maintain a transition off the streets. Simply put, we need more research. In particular, we need research that provides a social structural analysis of inequity, linking individual findings to broader structural factors. Kidd (2012) asserts:

If such macro-level models of inquiry were to enter the homeless youth discourse it might reduce the marginality of the population, placing them within a problematic socioeconomic system in which we are all involved and for which we all have some responsibility. (p. 539)

Incorporating identity capital into transition-related supports is novel and

\textsuperscript{34} Starting in the 2017-18 school year, the province of Ontario will be providing an Ontario Student Grant. The changes will make average college and university tuition free for the majority of eligible students whose parents make a combined household income of less than $50,000 per year. The grant will be available to full-time students only (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2016). It is unclear whether receiving this grant will result in a “claw-back” of welfare income (Ontario Works supervisor, personal communication, September 27, 2016).
has yet to be tested with street-involved youth. The proposed conceptual framework that I have developed (Figure 14) has potential to broaden our understanding of meaningful social integration and may prove useful to front-line social service providers.

The following are recommended:

1. Incorporate critical qualitative inquiry when conducting research with marginalized populations
   - Links individual circumstances to broader socioeconomic and political context (micro-macro link)
   - Allows marginalized participants to share what works in the context of their day-to-day lives
   - Challenges taken-for-granted assumptions – increase likelihood that future interventions will be effective

2. Incorporate an intersectional analysis into research with marginalized populations
   - Provides context of the relationship between social categories of difference (e.g., race, class, and gender) and health outcomes
   - Avoids a “one size fits all” approach
   - Social justice orientation

3. Implement more longitudinal studies focused on how best to assist youth in their transition off the streets
   - Depicts “real world” challenges to social integration
   - Highlights gaps in social supports and public policy

4. Develop a transition intervention based on identity capital and conduct a mixed method evaluation
o Allows for testing the relative importance of each dimension (e.g., social
capital, formal credentials, self-efficacy, sense of purpose, etc.)

o Provides feedback from front-line social service providers and from youth
regarding the usefulness of this approach

**Conclusion**

My doctoral work offers a unique emic perspective on the experiences of formerly homeless young people as they transitioned into independent housing and attempted to achieve meaningful social integration. Despite remarkable agency, participants’ extremely limited tangible and intangible resources made the day-to-day experience of maintaining housing oppressive and exhausting. Study participants were expected to be self-sufficient at an age where most Canadian young people are still living at home, relying heavily on parental supports. Six of the study participants were able to maintain the outward illusion of being successfully housed; however, they were housed in poverty living precarious lives. They were still the Other.

This study adds weight to the limited but emerging evidence that formerly homeless youth do not have adequate supports in place to successfully integrate into the mainstream. This is especially true in contemporary society where youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionally impacted by globalization and neoliberal ideologies. Many of these youth, like the youth in my study, are likely to be undereducated and inadequately employed with limited financial and social capital on which to draw. Moreover, my work highlights the fact that current transition-related supports are likely to be underutilized or rejected outright if they are not offered in a way that fosters young peoples’ fragile new identities as normative, self-sufficient emerging adults. It is essential that we design transition-related interventions using a lens of agency, rather than of pathology. Incorporating identity capital into the way we conceptualize
young people’s transition off the street offers promise as a way of understanding and assisting them toward meaningful social integration.
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Appendix A

Search Strategy: Empirical Studies

Total references retrieved (includes hand searches)
\[ n = 808 \]

Total abstracts screened
\[ n = 127 \]

Total full papers obtained
\[ n = 85 \]

Total papers included
\[ n = 25 \]

Rejected at title (includes duplicates)
\[ n = 681 \]

Rejected at abstract
\[ n = 42 \]

Rejected at full paper
\[ n = 60 \]
Appendix B

Transitioning off the Streets: Longitudinal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s) (Year)</th>
<th>Method*</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Gender**</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity**</th>
<th>Months Followed</th>
<th># Interviews</th>
<th>Housing Type (independent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brueckner et al. (2011)</td>
<td>QL</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16 – 22</td>
<td>79% Female</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Supported (none)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick et al. (2014); Karabanow et al. (2016); Kidd et al. (2013); Kidd et al. (2016)</td>
<td>QT/QL</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17 – 25</td>
<td>53% Female</td>
<td>47% Caucasian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Various (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayock et al. (2008); Mayock et al. (2011); Mayock et al. (2011)</td>
<td>QL</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15 – 24</td>
<td>53% Male</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Various (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milburn et al. (2009)</td>
<td>QT</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>12 – 20</td>
<td>63% Female</td>
<td>47% Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Various (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy et al. (2014); Roy et al. (2016)</td>
<td>QT</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>18 – 25</td>
<td>79% Male</td>
<td>Not specified (91% born in Canada)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Various (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slesnick et al. (2008)</td>
<td>QT</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>14 – 22</td>
<td>66% Male</td>
<td>41% Caucasian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Various (not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tevendale et al. (2011)</td>
<td>QT</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>14 – 24</td>
<td>65% Male</td>
<td>35% Black</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Various (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*QT = Quantitative; QL = Qualitative
**Predominant Gender/Race/Ethnicity

Note: The definition of “housing” was wide and included emergency shelters (e.g., Tevendale et al.), state care (e.g., Mayock et al.), and prison (e.g., Roy et al.). The eligibility criteria for Slesnick et al. included substance use.
Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

Moving Into Your Own Place?

We are seeking youth aged 16 – 24 years to participate in a nine-month study about what it is like to move off the streets and into your own home.

Participation involves:
- Meeting with a researcher every two weeks for about one hour to talk about how things are going in your new home

Requirements:
- Must have moved into independent housing (i.e., not supportive or transitional housing) within the past 30 days
- Not facing jail time during the nine-month study period

Compensation:
- $20.00 each time you meet with a researcher

For more information please contact Naomi Thulien at: naomi.thulien@mail.utoronto.ca
Appendix D

Initial Interview Guide

1. Independent housing
   a) How does living here compare to where you were before?
   b) How would you describe your experience so far with living independently?
   c) What advice do you have for youth who are about to live independently?

2. Social integration
   a) How do you feel about moving away from street life?
   b) Could you describe an average day?
   c) Can you help me understand what it is like living more “mainstream”?

3. Social support
   a) Who do you turn to when you need help?
   b) Can you give me an example of something someone has done for you that has made your transition to independent housing easier?

4. Social connectedness
   a) Could you tell me a story about a time when you really felt like you belonged?
   b) Can you describe what the term “street family” means to you?

5. Social networks
   a) Who are the important people in your life?
   b) In your opinion, do social networks need to change when people move off the streets?

---

35 These questions were used to guide my initial, informal conversations with study participants. They were based on the initial research objectives and themes found in my literature review. As expected, these questions evolved over time.
Appendix E

Subsequent Interview Guide

1. Socioeconomic context
   
a) How much debt did you have when you left the shelter? Can you describe your plan to tackle this? How is that going?
   
b) If someone had a magic wand to help with your transition off the streets, what do you wish they could help you with the most? Can you explain why?

2. Socioeconomic position
   
a) Did anyone you know well go on to postsecondary education?
   
b) Is leaving the streets different if you are white or non-white, male or female? If yes, could you give me an example?
   
c) What steps do you think you need to take so you don’t get stuck in poverty?

3. Identity
   
a) Can you describe your dreams for the future? Do they still feel realistic?
   
b) Where do you think someone your age should be in terms of housing, job, etc.?
   
c) Have you been in touch with anyone from the shelter recently? Why or why not?
   
d) Can you describe the qualities you value the most in people and why?

4. Psychosocial consequences of maintaining independent housing
   
a) How much time do you spend thinking about money? What does that feel like?
   
b) Do you miss any part of shelter life or wish your housing was transitional-style?
   
c) If you got evicted, where would you go?
   
d) Does this feel like a house or a home? Can you help me understand why?

---

36 These questions are examples of what was asked later in the study in light of the evolving study objectives. They were modified for each participant based on the context of the interviews.
Appendix F

Baseline Demographic Questionnaire

NAME: ___________________ DATE: _______________

Please answer the questions below. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with.

1. What is your age? _______________

2. Do you self-identify as: Male □ Female □ Neither □

3. What is your race/ethnic background? ____________________________

4. Were you born in Canada? Yes □ No □
   If no:
   Where were you born? ____________________________
   When did you come to Canada? ____________________________
   What is your immigration status? ____________________________

5. How long have you lived away from your biological parents? _______________

6. Has the Children’s Aid Society been involved with you or your family? Yes □ No □

7. Have you ever lived in a foster or group home? Yes □ No □

8. Do you have any children? Yes □ No □
   If yes, where do they live? ____________________________

9. What is the last grade you completed? __________________

10. Where were you living prior to moving into your own home? _______________

11. Have you ever been in transitional or supportive housing? Yes □ No □

12. How many times have you moved off the streets and into your own home? _______________

13. Who helped you this time with finding housing? ____________________________
Appendix G

Monthly Questionnaire

NAME: ___________________ DATE: ________________

Please answer the questions below. **You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with.**

1. Are you a student? Yes ☐ No ☐
   
   If yes, what kind of school are you attending? ______________________

2. Do you have a job? Yes ☐ No ☐
   
   If yes:
   
   What type of job? ________________________________
   
   How many hours do you work per week? ________________
   
   How much money do you make each month? ________________

3. Are you making money outside of “regular/typical” employment? Yes ☐ No ☐
   
   If yes:
   
   Doing what? ________________________________
   
   How much money do you make each month? ________________

4. Are you on OW or ODSP? Yes ☐ No ☐

5. How much is your rent each month? ________________

6. How much do you spend on food each month? ________________

7. How much do you spend on transportation each month? ________________
Appendix H

Initial Coding Scheme: April 2015

Coding Scheme: April 2015

*Social Connectedness
  1. Isolation
  2. Fear

*Social Integration
  3. Race
  4. Class
  5. Gender

*Social Support
  6. Influential Relationships
  7. Trust
  8. Creating Distance

*Transition
  9. Education
  10. Employment
  11. Transportation

Resilience
  12. Pride
  13. Independence
  14. Dreams for the Future
  15. Surviving
  16. Dedication/Commitment

Other
  17. Grieving Former Life
  18. Boredom
  19. Life as Chance/Luck
  20. Poverty as Pain/Shame
  21. Great Quotes
  22. Excitement of Spending
  23. Life on the Margins

*Key concepts from initial research focus
Appendix I

Final Coding Scheme: April 2016

A. Socioeconomic Context and Position
   A.1 Socioeconomic Context
      A.1.1 Income
      A.1.2 Housing
         A.1.2a Substandard
         A.1.2b Market rent
      A.1.3 Transportation
         A.1.3a Limited mobility
         A.1.3b Prohibitive cost
   
   A.2 Socioeconomic Position
      A.2.1 Age
      A.2.2 Education
         A.2.2a Undereducated
         A.2.2b Economic barriers
         A.2.2c Limited guidance
      A.2.3 Employment
         A.2.3a Limited opportunities
         A.2.3b Illegal jobs
            A.2.3b1 Exploitative cash economy
            A.2.3b2 Precarious
      A.2.4 Racism
         A.2.4a Black vs. White experiences
      A.2.5 Classism
         A.2.5a Class cultural gap
         A.2.5b Limited social capital
      A.2.6 Gender
         A.2.6a Masculinities
         A.2.6b Femininities

B. Psychosocial and Biological Consequences of Socioeconomic Context and Position
   
   B.1 Psychosocial Consequences
      B.1.1 Poverty as pain/shame
      B.1.2 Anger
      B.1.3 No margin for error
      B.1.4 Life as chance/luck
      B.1.5 Pervasive fear
      B.1.6 Grieving former life
      B.1.7 Isolation
      B.1.8 Boredom

   B.2 Biological/Physical Consequences
      B.2.1 Hunger
      B.2.2 Unhealthy living environment

   B.3 Strategies for Survival
      B.3.1 Creating distance
      B.3.2 Relationships
         B.3.2a Social support
         B.3.2b Re-evaluating relationships
         B.3.2c Leveraging social capital
         B.3.2d Comfort with street-involved friends
      B.3.3 Fierce autonomy
      B.3.4 Dedication/commitment toward a better life
      B.3.5 Big dreams
      B.3.6 Monetary purchases as reward/escape
      B.3.7 Acquiescence with life circumstances
## Appendix J

### Sample Code Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B.1 Psychosocial Consequences of Poverty/Exclusion</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.1.1 Poverty as pain/shame</td>
<td>The psychological discomfort associated with living in poverty.</td>
<td>When I have no money in my pocket it’s like I feel like people look at me differently like, oh that’s a homeless guy dadada. Even though they’re probably not, they don’t know, but sometimes it feels like that’s the way they look at me, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.2 Anger</td>
<td>Feeling angry about the struggles associated with being poor and being excluded from all the “regular” things mainstream youth get to experience.</td>
<td>I’m just so over it. I’m over it. I’m over trying to make a budget. I’m over it. I’m over everything. I’m just like whatever… I just need money, I need money, that’s it, I just need money…I want extra money. I feel like all my money, all my fucking money goes to fucking this [basement apartment].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.3 No margin for error</td>
<td>No room for anything to go wrong – with finances in particular – or youth face being back on the streets.</td>
<td>I don’t have a job….I’m unemployed. And I just got into OW like…what…a week ago? It’s still not gonna be enough. A few days from now I’m gonna pay for my rent. And what’s left from the OW? Nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.4 Life as chance/luck</td>
<td>Sense that they have little control over good or bad circumstances and the resulting consequences.</td>
<td>I would say that often there is an element of chance, and I’d say also that sometimes life just seems to arbitrarily deliver extremely vehement consequences, you know sort of just very vindictive, just retributions for a person’s behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.5 Pervasive fear</td>
<td>Pervasive sense that they are just one step away from losing everything. This fear is usually related to economics, but may also be related to things like an upcoming trial date.</td>
<td>But I’m still worried about if I get approved [for OW] or not. I really do hope that I will be approved. Because I told myself if I won’t be approved then the last resort would be going back to the Covenant House.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.6 Grieving former life</td>
<td>Either missing certain elements of former life – lack of responsibilities in particular – or grieving how bad it was.</td>
<td>I don’t want to have to worry about school, I don’t want to have to worry about nothing, for the whole day I don’t want to have to worry about nothing. I just want to do what I want to do. You know? I wanna go to the beach and just get drunk. That’s what I like to do and I haven’t done that yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.7 Isolation</td>
<td>Feelings of loneliness and the sense of separation from supportive people (friends, shelter staff, etc.) that accompanies independent living.</td>
<td>Sometimes here I feel like kind of like lonely. When I’m at home [mom’s house] like my friend’s there, my brother’s there, and it’s just... it’s always good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.1.8 Boredom</td>
<td>Boredom as a trigger for unhelpful behaviours.</td>
<td>Try to find something productive to do with your time because boredom is a real killer. And that's often what leads people to behave in extreme ways because they're so bored with how things are. They just go off the rails due to cabin fever... just having nothing to do. The old phrase is idle hands are the devil's workshop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.2 Biological/Physical Consequences of Poverty/Exclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.2.1 Hunger</td>
<td>Familiarity with going without food and the sense of hunger that accompanies this.</td>
<td>I’m good at not eating, and I don’t know, that’s why I’m so skinny, right? I can go ’til tomorrow even though... like I’ll be hungry but I have nothing...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.2.2 Unhealthy living environment</td>
<td>Sub-standard housing situation with potential short- and long-term health consequences.</td>
<td>[Field Notes] The place is dirty, cluttered and cramped. I am taken down to the basement. I don’t see any windows, at least not in John’s room. I am almost overcome by the smell of urine and wonder how John can stand the smell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3 Strategies for Survival</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.1 Creating distance</td>
<td>Deliberate decision to separate from people or places that may be a detriment to moving ahead in life.</td>
<td>Sometimes it’s hard if you have too much friends because sometimes they want to come to your place because they’re still in the shelter or they’re still in the street, and they want to come to your place, and other people, they want to sleep over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.2 Relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.2a Re-evaluating relationships</td>
<td>A re-evaluation of the trustworthiness of relationships in terms of considering how these relationships may help or hinder the transition off the streets.</td>
<td>…people who I used to give love I used to give trust is the same people who keep hurting me...I don’t want to be hurt again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.2b Leveraging social capital</td>
<td>The ability (on a notably small scale) to leverage social connections to help them get something they could not otherwise obtain on their own.</td>
<td>N: How did your rent get paid? M: My [OW] worker paid for like my two months rent and stuff... N: How did you get your worker to agree to pay for rent?! M: Basically...I don’t know...I just told her everything...I sent in my eviction notice...and she is like, “Why haven’t you been paying rent?” And I’m like, “Because I have just been drinking away my money.” She is like, “Listen, I am gonna submit this...” [to her manager]...and they approved it...they approved it... and then today I seen my rent receipt for $990 and I’m like, “Yeah!”...for two months [rent]...I’m like, “Yeah!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.2c Comfort with street-involved friends</td>
<td>An ease, sense of comradery and trust they have with current and former street youth that they don’t have</td>
<td>The truth is I feel more comfortable when I’m just in more of a disreputable environment I guess. I feel...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.3 Fierce autonomy</td>
<td>Strong value/pride placed in self-determination and in the importance of maintaining an outward display of strength.</td>
<td>I can’t show people my weakness, you know? I have to show people that like, yes like I can do… like you know? I can do this, you know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.4 Dedication/commitment toward a better life</td>
<td>Demonstration or talk of the intense commitment required to move ahead in life.</td>
<td>...it’s not just a cheque every month from the government. I’m actually putting in initiative to go out, wake up at six o’clock in the morning, be at Downsview Station or be down there at Queen and John for seven, eight o’clock in the morning…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.5 Big dreams</td>
<td>Wishes for a better/different life that seems disproportionate to their current reality.</td>
<td>N: So let’s just imagine Kiyo five years from now. Where... like realistically, where do you see yourself? P: I probably won’t be working any sort of job. I’ll probably be like... hopefully, living off my music. Yeah. Maybe like at the Juno’s getting a Juno. Or like... because that’s... five years is a long time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.6 Monetary purchases as reward/escape</td>
<td>The thrill of having cash and the exhilaration of making a purchase that isn’t associated with rent, food, transportation, etc.</td>
<td>...in a lot of ways it is just the process of having the money in your hand and going into the store... going up to the guy in a park that has whatever it is you want...making a purchase...I think it releases probably some sensation of maybe like positive endorphins of some kind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.3.7 Acquiescence with life circumstances</td>
<td>A resignation to the substandard and inequitable living and working conditions.</td>
<td>[Field Notes]... I ponder out loud the fact that he [John] is making significantly less than minimum wage for his cash job [~ $5/hour full-time]. He says that he knows but that is okay and he is happy just to be working... His room is very hot (and he has no window). He says he needs to pursue the a/c installation with his landlord and takes full responsibility for this not being installed yet [this was promised weekly by his landlord]... His allergies are bothering him [there is an empty bottle of Reactine on his shelf] but he says this is normal for him and has nothing to do with his apartment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix K

Analytic Memos

$3,700/day = 1 million

$3,700/day = 1 million

Correct math

Beth (17) * Won't come

John (17) * Won't come

John (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

Prison

Prison (17)

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Prison (17)

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Prison (17)

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Prison (17)

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Prison (17)

Prison

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Appendix L

Research Approval Process at Covenant House Toronto

- Determine alignment with mission and strategic priorities of Covenant House
- Identify overlap with ongoing, or recent past or future approved or completed research
- Note researcher(s)’ declaration of conflict of interest or partiality
- Review incentives to participate provided to youth, if any
- Determine if institutional ethics review and approval have been provided and that ethical considerations are addressed in proposal

- Review relevance, need and interest to Covenant House / Homeless Population
- Review alignment with Guidelines for Conducting Research and General Principles
- Review Forms for Informed Consent to Participate and Withdrawal at any point without penalty
- Review Interview Guides, Questionnaires, Statistical Plans, Data Collection, Storage, Transmission, and Destruction Protocol
- Alignment with PIPEDA, Personal Health Information Protection Act, and other relevant legislation, s well as with CHT’s Personal Information Protection Policy – Clients, CHT’s Internal and Public Use of Images Policy

- Identification of potential benefits and risks to youth participants
- Identification of potential benefits and risks to Covenant House
- Mitigating strategies to minimize risk
- Propose changes to minimize risk,
- Researcher to provide acknowledgment, rationale and counter-proposal, as appropriate
- Determine if researcher rationale or modifications are appropriate
- Require review of external consultants in Committee if assessed risk to participants is more than minimal

- Covenant House Toronto’s capacity to host and/or organize research during proposed period
- Sample Size and Sampling Strategy
- Recruitment Strategy
- Any direct financial impact on Covenant House or impact on time and resource capacity of staff to support research

- Submit recommendation to approve, reject or propose deferral to Executive Director
- Communicate with Researcher(s)

(Covenant House Toronto, 2014)
Appendix M

Consent Form

Participant Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Searching for Home: An Ethnographic Study of Homeless Youth Transitions to Independent Housing

Principal Investigator: Naomi Thulien, NP-PHC, MN, PhD candidate, Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent, it is important that you read this form carefully so you understand what is being asked of you. Please let me know if there is anything on this form that you do not understand or anything that needs further explanation.

Why this study is being done:
We don’t know enough about what it is like for homeless youth to leave the streets and move into independent housing. This makes it hard for us to know what kind of support you need when you leave the streets. The purpose of this study is to learn from you about the pros and cons of independent housing and how this impacts other areas of your life.

Study Design:
There are 12 youth enrolled in this study. I will meet with each of you separately, twice a month, for nine months. We will meet wherever it is convenient for you – ideally in or around your new home. Each time we meet we will talk about things like:

- What it is like living on your own
- Supportive (or non-supportive) people in your life
- What it is like living more “mainstream”
- How things are going in terms of school or getting a job
In addition, if you choose, you can take pictures of things related to your new life, and we can talk about them when we meet.

**What is required of you?**

- A commitment to meet with me for about one hour every two weeks for a period of nine months

*NOTE: If you lose your housing you will no longer be able to continue in the study.*

**What happens when we meet?**

It will likely be a bit different each time. Generally, we will sit for a while and then walk around and talk about how things are going for you. I will audio-record a portion of our meetings and take lots of notes. If at any time you want me to stop audio recording or taking notes, just let me know and I will stop.

**Will I get paid?**

Each time we meet I will give you $20.00.

**What if I change my mind about participating?**

You can change your mind about being in the study at any time. Even after the study is over you can contact me if you change your mind about sharing some of the things we talked about. However, it is important to keep in mind that, at a certain point, it may be too late to retract some of the information you have provided (e.g., material already published or presented at conferences).

*NOTE: If you are no longer able to continue in the study, I will still use the information you provided unless you tell me not to, which you can do at any time.*

**Can you still see me as a patient if I come to the Covenant House clinic?**

No. Unfortunately, I will not be able to take care of your healthcare needs while you are enrolled in this study. It is important for both of us that I keep my nurse practitioner and researcher roles
separate. However, you can still come to the clinic and I will connect you with another healthcare provider at Covenant House.

**Potential Harm:**
I do not anticipate that any harm will come to you because of your participation in this study. You may feel uncomfortable or find it stressful if I am asking too many questions, or asking questions that are really personal. Please let me know if this happens. You do not have to talk about anything you are not comfortable with. Should the need arise, I can connect you with counselling services at Covenant House Toronto.

**Potential Benefit:**
There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. You may find it helpful to have someone to talk to on a regular basis about how things are going for you.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:**
Anything you share with me will be kept in strict confidence. The only limit to this is if you tell me that you have a plan to hurt yourself or hurt other people, or if you tell me about someone under the age of 16 who is suffering abuse and/or neglect. If this happens, I am required by law to report this to the appropriate authorities.

Each research participant will be given the option to create a pseudonym (fake name) that replaces their real name. This pseudonym will appear on all documents related to this research. In addition, whenever I talk about this research, I will only use your pseudonym, and never your real name (unless you want me to). Any paper documents related to this research (like the notes I take when we meet) will be stored in a secure location only accessible by me. All typed documentation related to this study will be stored on an encrypted memory key and password-protected computer.

**Audio-recordings:** The audio-recordings taken at our meetings will only be heard by me. The digital audio files will be stored on a password-protected computer. After I type up the
transcripts of our audio-recorded meetings, the digital recording will be deleted. As previously mentioned, you can tell me to stop audio recording at any time.

Photographs: Any photos you share with me will only be loaded on to my password-protected computer with your consent. If you change your mind at any time about sharing these photos, I will delete them from my computer. However, it is important to keep in mind that, at a certain point, it may be too late to retract the photographs you have provided (e.g., photos already published or shared at conferences).

**Who will you share the results of this study with?**
I am most interested in sharing the results with you and other current and former homeless youth. I also hope to share the results of this study with social service providers (e.g., people working with street-involved youth), policy makers (e.g., politicians), university students, and at professional conferences. In addition, my goal is to publish the study findings in a few journals. Again – I will never use your real name unless you want me to.

**Questions?**
You can contact me (Naomi Thulien) at: 647-460-0781 or naomi.thulien@mail.utoronto.ca. Alternatively, you can contact my PhD supervisor (Dr. Denise Gastaldo) at: 416-978-4953 or denise.gastaldo@utoronto.ca.

This study has been reviewed by the Research and Ethics Board at the University of Toronto and by the Research Review Committee at Covenant House Toronto. If you have any questions related to your rights as a study participant or about ethical issues related to this study, you can contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at: ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. You can also contact Covenant House Toronto Research and Evaluation Specialist Faviola Fernandez at: 416-204-7046.

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**Participant**
By signing this form, I confirm that:

- The study has been fully explained to me
- All of my questions have been answered
• I understand what is required of me
• I understand the potential harm and benefit of participating in this study
• I understand that I can withdraw from the study or change my mind about letting you use the information I have provided at anytime
• I understand that I do not have to answer any questions or meet in places I am not comfortable with
• I have carefully read each page of this consent form
• I have been given a copy of the consent form

Name of Participant __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date ______________
(print)

Investigator

By signing this form, I confirm that:
• This study and its purpose has been fully explained to the participant named above
• All questions posed by the participant have been answered
• I have given the participant a copy of the consent form

Name of Investigator __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date ______________
(print)
## Dissemination Strategies

### Academic Dissemination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral/Poster Presentations</th>
<th>Predominant Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conferences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Canadian Conference on Ending Homelessness</td>
<td>a) Front-line social service providers, policy makers and researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Family Medicine Forum</td>
<td>b) Family practice healthcare providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Nurse Practitioner Association of Ontario</td>
<td>c) Nurse practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) In Sickness and in Health</td>
<td>d) Academics, researchers, and students interested in critical inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic institutions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) University of Toronto – Dalla Lana School of Public Health</td>
<td>a) Interdisciplinary group of students enrolled in the collaborative Global Health program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) University of Toronto – Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing</td>
<td>b) Nurse practitioner students enrolled in the Primary Healthcare – Global Health program and students enrolled in qualitative critical inquiry courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publications</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target journals</strong></td>
<td>Publication Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Canadian Journal of Public Health</td>
<td>a) Bimonthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Journal of Urban Health</td>
<td>b) Bimonthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) International Journal of Qualitative Methods</td>
<td>c) Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research</td>
<td>d) Quarterly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Community Dissemination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral Presentations</th>
<th>Predominant Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth shelters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Covenant House</td>
<td>a) Front-line staff and managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Eva’s Phoenix</td>
<td>b) Front-line staff and managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Café scientific (hosted with research participants)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Toronto – location TBD</td>
<td>a) Members of the general public, current and former homeless youth, researchers, and agencies working with homeless youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature</th>
<th>Predominant Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Single-page research summary with policy implications</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Local and national media</td>
<td>a) Member of the general public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Social service agencies</td>
<td>b) Social service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Government</td>
<td>c) Politicians at municipal, provincial, and federal levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Single-page research summary with practice implications</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Social service agencies</td>
<td>a) Social service providers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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