Reflections on Peer Researching the School Based Experiences of Young People with Lived and Living Experiences (PWLLE) of Youth Homelessness Using Participatory Action Research

By

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Abstract

This participatory research investigates the school-based experiences of homeless youth, addressing the question: how might schools intervene in homelessness? Firstly, theories of representation, structure, and agency are presented alongside youths’ narratives of stigmatisation, punishment, substance use, exclusion, and more, within the education system. This MA thesis highlights how sociological theories might help educators, youth and others move beyond harmful perceptions of homelessness where youth are misunderstood as perpetrators of deviance rather than victims of unjust structures. Researchers increasingly desire collaboration with people with lived/living experience (PWLLE) of studied topics, yet publications by PWLLE on research practices are few. The second main question this work addresses is: what is it like to do participatory research as a scholar with lived experience (SWLE) of youth homelessness? This thesis argues that neoliberal structures that contribute to homeless students’ punishment and neglect in schools are the same that create research as competitive, marketized spaces sometimes at odds with ethical engagement.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to Youth Homelessness

This MA thesis argues that the education system could play an important role in the prevention and alleviation of experiences of homelessness for young people. This research asks: What are the school-based experiences of homeless and at-risk youth? The reports of young people with lived and living experience (PWLLE) of homelessness presented in this thesis spotlight how youth experiencing homelessness are largely misunderstood and let down by educational institutions structured in ways that neither ensure young PWLLEs’ educational attainment nor respond to their housing precarity.

The second question this study addresses is: How can schools help young PWLLE of homelessness? This question is important because the sectoral shift from emergency responses to youth homelessness to effective prevention requires “points of failure” be transformed into points of prevention (Sauvé et al., 2018, p.17). Knowledges youth shared in this project indicate multiple ways schools might better support young PWLLE including educational interventions, holistic approaches, material supports and more. The final question this study answers is: What is it like to engage in Participatory Action Research (PAR) with homeless youth as a scholar with lived experience (SWLE) of youth homelessness? While not originally a focus of this study, the data that was organically produced in response to this question was too important to leave out.

Increasing inclusion of PWLLE within qualitative research methods makes it important to document how people are being asked to participate and what their experiences are (Roche et al., 2010).
This thesis argues that large structural and systemic forces are often missing from teachers’, principals’, students’, young PWLLEs’ and others’ theorisations of the experiences of homeless youth. For example, the common myth that homelessness is caused by a person making bad choices fails to acknowledge capitalism, racism, sexism and other structural entities that ensure some individuals will be excluded from their human right to safe housing. A deeper understanding of how homelessness persists as a systemically stigmatised injustice might help us to create interventions and supports that prevent and end instances of youth homelessness. This work encompasses data collected during three separate, though connected, research studies conducted during 2018 and 2019. Like other works (see Fisher, 2018; Gaetz, 2014; Sohn et al., 2019), these studies envision the education system as a viable site for the successful prevention and intervention of youth homelessness. The first study collected the school-based experiences of homeless young people. For example, interviews investigated how young people perceived their treatment by school personnel before and during instances of homelessness. The second research project continued data collection from the first, expanding to a second city and incorporating PAR methods into its design. For example, project design included hiring and supporting a team of young PWLLE of homelessness. The Youth Action Team (YAT) provided feedback on the research process and data analysis throughout the second study and engaged in the mobilisation of preliminary findings.

Chapter 1 provides a review of existing literature on youth homelessness and details the theoretical concepts applied to the experiences of young people in later chapters. Rather than focus narrowly on one major concept or theoretical framework, this
thesis brings together multiple theoretical perspectives to highlight how social theory can contribute to diverse ways of knowing and understanding lived experiences of homelessness. Chapter 2 describes the research methods that guided this work, including PAR and peer methods as well as research from the margins (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Chapter 3 explores some of the experiences reported by young people during this research, alongside sociological theories that offer alternative ways to view what youth described during interviews. Much of the narratives shared by youth corroborate the findings of previous academic works that have identified the Canadian education system as generally lacking in its response to student homelessness (Gaetz, 2014; McParland, 2020; Sauvé et al., 2018; Schwan et al., 2018). The goal of Chapter 3 is to offer students, SWLE and young PWLLE, different ways of theorising and understanding youth homelessness, thus highlighting the strengths of academic sociological theory for its propensity to inspire critical thought and offer diverse perspectives to complex social issues. Chapter 4 explores experiences of peer research (PR) and what it was like to conduct this work as a SWLE. Chapter 5 provides a brief summary of key findings and provides some youth-informed recommendations for improving the experiences of homeless youth within the education system and within research processes.

Malenfant and Nichols (2021, p.13) work emphasises “points of possibility” within the education system whereby some schools are already engaging in practices that unofficially meet the unique needs of young people experiencing homelessness. Similarly, many points of possibility were identified during this thesis research. For example, several participants reported adverse impacts of bullying from their peers, as well as being punished or pushed out of school by teachers and principals who did not
understand youths’ circumstances. However, many respondents also believed that increased awareness, including education on homelessness, might lessen the prevalence of harmful misunderstandings and other negative school-based outcomes. This thesis outlines some of the school-based experiences that homeless young people have had within Ontario schools. It also presents potential interventions through a LE and youth-informed perspective that might work to prevent, alleviate, or end instances of homelessness for students in the future. Finally, this thesis describes some of the complexities of PAR and PR work that attempts to engage young people and offers some critical reflections around supporting SWLE and PWLLE in participatory research.

Review of Literature

The following section is a review of existing literature that provides a snapshot of the state of youth homelessness in Canada. Understanding the deadly severity and prevalence of youth homelessness (see Gaetz et al., 2016; Hulchanski et al., 2009; Jasinski, 2005; MacDonald & Johnston, 2018; Murphy, 2016) is fundamental to legitimising the argument that schools should respond to this issue. Relatedly, it is important to highlight the impossibility of identifying and quantifying youth who are experiencing homelessness because this bolsters the argument that the education system, through which almost all children are filtered, must become involved in the identification and intervention of homelessness (see (Kauppi et al., 2017; Rodrigues et al., 2020; Sauvé et al., 2018; Schwan et al., 2018; Segaert, 2017). Additionally, the literature in this section outlines who is currently experiencing youth homelessness, including a discussion on marginalised identities that are overrepresented in homelessness (see Abramovich, 2012; Castellanos, 2016; Neidhart, 2017; Springer & Rosewell, 2006; Thistle, 2017).
Finally, this chapter looks at literature that represents many of the challenges homeless youth are known to face within the education system, as well as policies and school-based practices that have been shown to alleviate instances of homelessness for young people (see Miller et al., 2004; Nichols, 2019; Noble et al., 2015; Watson, 2011).

The Urgent Issue of Youth Homelessness

Gaetz (in MacDonald & Johnston, 2018, p.24) states “We wait too long to help.” Dominant responses to youth homelessness have traditionally focused on providing emergency support to young people (Gaetz et al., 2016). However, emergency responses are problematic because they only come into effect once a youth has lost their housing. Youths are likely become targets for all kinds of abuse and exploitation after they end up on the streets (Jasinski, 2005). For example, one youth in this study described having to ceaselessly walk for hours each night to avoid assault while trying to sleep unsheltered. Emergency supports do not prevent the many harms that youth face once they are on the streets.

People of all genders experiencing homelessness are far more likely to be victims of violence than those who are housed (Jasinski, 2005). Murphy (2016) found that one in five homeless youth reported involvement in the sex trade, and many of them reported severe psychological and physical consequences. Emergency supports are often limited to temporary (and not necessarily safe) shelter provision and do not mend or protect against the mental and physical harms people experience once on the streets (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). Furthermore, people residing in shelters are between two and eleven times more likely to die than people who are safely housed (Hulchanski et al., 2009). Emergency
shelters often become spaces where a person must accept an unsafe environment to sleep with a roof over their head (Hulchanski et al., 2009).

If and when a young person does live long enough to exit the streets, they are left with lifelong implications. The legacy that experiences of homelessness leave in a person’s life can include chronic unemployment and underemployment (Slesnick et al., 2009) addiction issues (Thompson et al., 2010) and social exclusion (Dej, 2021). These adverse impacts do not disappear just because someone gets housing; remnants of the past can reverberate throughout a lifetime in subtle yet devastating ways. An adult who experienced homelessness as a youth is likely to have poor(er) physical, emotional and mental health (Abramovich, 2012). Several participants in this study, who were housed at the time of their research interviews, reported continued challenges directly or indirectly linked to previous instances of homelessness. Sylvestre et al., (2017) state that some previously homeless youth are at a high risk of re-criminalisation due to punitive legal conditions (e.g., red zones, no contact, non-association probation orders) that follow them even after they attain housing.

Given that young people are highly likely to suffer irreparable harm once homelessness has occurred, it is easy to understand why a sectoral shift is taking place within what Dej (2021, p.24) refers to as the “industrial complex of homelessness.” Organisations, governments, researchers and other stakeholders are beginning to recognise the urgent need to develop policies and practices that prevent homelessness. Gaetz & Dej, (2017) assert that prevention efforts should begin as early as possible and come into effect before a young person ends up in a shelter or on the streets. One youth in this study explained that school-based interventions should begin as early as
kindergarten. Initiatives that focus on preventative interventions are referred to as “working upstream” (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p.36). Buchnea (2017, para 3) asserts that moving away from emergency approaches and working upstream means addressing “the chain of events that lead to an individual or family’s experience of homelessness, rather than at the point where they are accessing emergency shelters and soup kitchens.” To work upstream is to locate the very beginnings of homelessness, addressing the constellation of systems, social constructs and circumstances that mean some individuals end up on the streets.

**Structural Factors**

Pathways to homelessness are unique to the individuals who end up there. Individual choices indisputably contribute to that pathway’s appearance (MacDonald & Roebuck, 2018) however, acknowledgement of youths’ agency does not justify the argument that youth are responsible for their own homelessness. Several youths in this research described situations where each of the limited choices available to them were problematic in one way or another. For example, a youth may be choosing between option a) sleep outside or b) go home to a violent adult or c) report the violence and be taken into a child welfare system that has proved harmful for children and youth. In this thesis, homelessness is understood as the result of a combination of large-scale socio-structural factors, “system failures,” and “individual and relational factors” (Schwan et al., 2018, p.2). Colonialism is an example of a structural factor because, since Canada’s settlement, colonialism has determined the status of Indigenous peoples as inferior and legitimised horrendous conditions of violence against them that continue today. Ontario Works (OW), Ontario’s social assistance program, which penalizes recipients for saving
income or working while receiving assistance, is an example of a systems failure (Matthews, 2004). Family conflict and addiction are examples of individual and relational factors—though these factors cannot be viewed outside of their connection to structural factors and systems failures.

It is important to distinguish between the instances and events that trigger an episode of homelessness and the pathways that lead people into homelessness. An entrance into homelessness should be understood as the result of a “process rather than a single event” (Porter, 2017, p.10). The process of entering homelessness is one that involves a combination of historical conditions, such as colonialism and governmental austerity regimes, alongside individual and relational factors, such as experiences of childhood sexual abuse (Gaetz et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2017; Schwan et al., 2018). This thesis defines a trigger as the particular moment when the person physically begins an episode of homelessness, within pathway into homelessness. For example, a family disagreement that results in a parent telling their child to leave the house might trigger an instance of homelessness; yet, the argument alone is not representative of a pathway into homelessness. This view stands in contrast to Castellanos (2016, p.626), who states that a “trigger of homelessness [can be] sexual orientation itself.” Castellanos’ (p.627) remark hides the historical demonisation of homosexuality “rooted in deep sociocultural and religious views” that uphold pathways into homelessness for individuals who do not fit heteronormative ideals. The trigger into homelessness might be when a youth discloses their sexuality to their parents; however, their pathway into homelessness is paved by complex history in which homosexuality was deemed an evil “sin against nature” since the birth of Christianity (Larsen, 2015, p.629), an “unspeakable crime” punishable by
death by lawmakers in the Middle Ages (Altman, 2012, p.52), and sickness by psychologists as recently as the 70s (Wickberg, 2000).

The distinction between pathways and triggers is an important one. When we reduce our understanding of pathways to triggers, it can alter our understanding of how people become homeless. Wright (1993, p.2) notes that North Americans “consistently choose to blame the victim” when it comes to issues of homelessness. Our culture of victim-blaming is likely supported by reductive representations and perceptions of homelessness. For example, when a youth agentively leaves their parental home, this can be misinterpreted as a youth choosing life on the streets over stable housing with their parents. Misinterpretations and the stereotypes they uphold influence perceptions of who/what is to blame for homelessness. Hyatt (in Ruiz-Grossman, 2018, para. 22) points out that “when you ask someone on the street why they became homeless, no one’s going to say it’s because of decades of federal disinvestment in affordable housing.” How we envision the way youth enter homelessness impacts how we respond to this issue. For example, when we imagine homelessness as the result of a singular moment in which a young person made a choice, prevention efforts might focus on increasing youths’ capacity for decision making rather than addressing the plethora of circumstances that ensure youth face lose-lose choices. The existence of choice, regardless how freely or constrainedly we imagine individuals’ choices to be decided and enacted, should not be used to determine who is deserving or undeserving of acceptance, protection, and resource allocation.

**Hidden Homelessness**
Our inability to accurately quantify the phenomenon of homelessness significantly contributes to our collective inability to adequately respond to this issue. Tallying up the number of people experiencing homelessness is hindered by the prevalence of hidden homelessness. The term hidden homelessness applies to those who are provisionally housed (Rodrigue, 2016), couch surfing (Gaetz et al., 2016) or precariously housed in unsafe and unstable conditions (Sauvé et al., 2018). Women are thought to be particularly susceptible to hidden homelessness as they sometimes partner with a man in an attempt to keep a roof over their heads regardless of the conditions they are subjected to beneath it (Kauppi et al., 2017). Hidden homelessness does not simply mean these individuals are out of sight, but also that their experiences are not captured by statistics that measure homelessness and inform government responses to it.

People who experience hidden homelessness do not always recognise their situation as a legitimate form of homelessness which can affect the type of services they access (Sauvé et al, 2018). For example, a couch surfer might not consider themselves homeless and might seek out stable housing by searching rental advertisements instead of accessing a social service for housing. In this study, several youths noted feeling like they were ‘not homeless enough’ to access a particular support. In other situations, youth might actively work to hide their homelessness from peers and others (Schwan et al., 2018). Furthermore, when homelessness or surrounding issues are a cultural taboo, people are less likely to report their circumstances (Sauvé et al, 2018). In other cases, services or institutions may fail to recognise a person’s homelessness. For example, teachers in schools (Sauvé et al., 2018), nurses in hospitals (Buccieri et al., 2019) or
adults in families (CAMH, 2014) might think that couch-surfing is an adequate housing situation, and therefore fail to intervene.

The harmful disconnection from services caused by hidden (or hiding) homelessness is two-fold. On the one hand, individuals do not benefit from access to resources that might help alleviate or end their homelessness. On the other hand, recording the number of individuals who use emergency services is a primary data collection method for governments (Kauppi et al., 2017). Thus, statistics showing only a fraction of people experiencing homelessness might be inadequately used to allocate funding for programs and services. Misleading calculations contribute to a sector that is consistently unable to meet the needs of its target demographic.

The (Inaccurate) Numbers

Current statistics show us how many people are counted as homeless in Canada. Though an underrepresentation, these numbers spotlight a devastating national crisis. In 2014, beds inside emergency shelters across the country were occupied by almost 14,000 individuals on an average night (Segaert, 2017). In the same year, it was estimated that more than 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness in one of its many diverse forms each year (Gaetz et al. 2016). To visualise this, we can imagine at least ten professional hockey arenas, each with spectator seats filled to maximum capacity with homeless individuals. This estimate highlights the gap between the amount of homelessness captured by shelter statistics and the much greater number of individuals who are actually experiencing homelessness. Alarmingly, between 6,000 and 7,000 youth between the ages of 14 and 16 years of age sleep (or attempt to) without safe and stable housing each
night (Gaetz et al. 2016). Youth represent 20% of Canada’s recorded homeless population (Gaetz et al. 2014).

Canada’s capital city is no role model for homelessness. Bulthuis (2017) reports that 844 youth occupied a shelter bed for at least one night during 2016 in Ottawa. Furthermore, only 287 of these youth were able to access shelters officially designated for youth (Bulthuis, 2017). When there are not enough youth-specific supports in the city, youth are forced into adult services. Between 2015 and 2016, city statistics showed decreased numbers of individual youth accessing youth designated shelters (Bulthuis, 2017). However, the same city statistics also showed an increase in shelter length stay, highlighting another way that statistics can be deceptive. For example, when the youth-serving sector prioritises younger youth, they can do this by allowing sixteen and seventeen-year-olds to stay longer in emergency shelters. Longer shelters stay per younger youth then translate into reports that show fewer numbers of individual youth accessing the shelter. However, rather than being a sign that youth homelessness is decreasing in the city, older youth are either pushed into the adult system where they are often (wrongfully) counted as adults or pushed into hidden homelessness where they are not counted at all.

(Further) Marginalised Identities in Homelessness

All people experiencing homelessness are marginalised by that circumstance, meaning they are pushed to the margins of society and excluded from full participation in the mainstream. However, personal attributes such as sex, gender, sexual orientation and racialisation compound challenges for youth experiencing homelessness, further
marginalising some youth (Sauvé et al., 2018). A person’s identity shapes their experiences on the streets and their pathways into homelessness (Schwan et al., 2018). Subsequently, some identities are overrepresented in homelessness. For example, youth who are Indigenous or who are newcomers to Canada, as well as those who identify as LGBT2QS+, collectively represent around 88% of Canada’s homeless youth population (Gaetz et al., 2016).

After coming out within homophobic and transphobic families, being kicked out by parents or guardians is one primary way that LGBT2QS+ youth enter street life (Abramovich, 2012). LGBT2QS+ youth experiencing homelessness often report that their disclosure of sexual orientation triggered their first instance of homelessness (Ray in Castellanos, 2016). After becoming homeless, people with genders and sexualities that do not conform to the rigid social norms of cis and hetero normativity must navigate systems that are not designed for them within a society that frequently victimises such identities. Abramovich (2016) notes that when transgender youth interact with emergency services, the legitimacy of their identities is repeatedly questioned. Youth are pushed through a system (e.g., emergency shelters) that is made to accommodate, distinguish between, and often segregate only two genders. Furthermore, service providers often lack specific training to support LGBT2S+ youth, and organisation employees do not generally reflect diverse identities (Sauvé et al., 2018).

Youth who become homeless after immigrating to Canada also face unique challenges. Racialized youth and families are frequently targets of discrimination within the education and justice system, as well as within the housing market and more (Springer & Rosewell, 2006). Neidhart (2017) notes that one in every five racialized
Canadian families live in poverty compared to only one in twenty non-racialized families. Newcomer youth might also be at-risk of homelessness when their values do not align with their parents' values, such as religious practices or cultural values (Canadian Association of Mental Health (CAMH), 2014). Family conflict is not unique to newcomers; however, their identities can shape conflict and their experiences of homelessness. Baker et al., (2017, p.5) state that “gaps in policy, knowledge, and service delivery” also prevent newcomer youth from accessing formal supports. CAMH (p.14) notes, “newcomers tend to access informal networks before formal housing supports due to varying degrees of close community affiliation and shame.” This highlights how a newcomer experiencing homelessness might enter hidden homelessness. Once homeless, racialized youth must survive new forms of hardship within a society that is already pitted against them. In trying to avoid further discrimination, these youth are sometimes reluctant to access services for fear of being a “burden on the system” (CAMH, 2014, p.14).

**Indigenous Youth Homelessness**

In this thesis, the term ‘Indigenous youth’ refers to First Nations, Metis or Inuit youth whose ancestry is connected to the first human inhabitants of what is referred to by settlers (including myself) as Canada. Patrick (2014, p.10), argues that Indigenous peoples “are the most materially, socially and spatially deprived ethno-cultural group in Canada.” Indigenous homelessness is complex and bound up in a history of genocide and colonialism that persists in Canada to this day. Distasio et al., (2018) note that while 1 in 128 non-Indigenous people are likely to experience homelessness on any given night, the
rate is much higher for urban Indigenous peoples for whom one out of every five is likely to spend the night without stable shelter.

Furthermore, Indigenous peoples’ homelessness cannot be understood in the same way as non-Indigenous homelessness. The Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (2012 in Thistle 2017, p.6) states that “Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews.” Investigating Indigenous homelessness requires applying knowledge and ways of knowing that are beyond the scope of Western knowledges. Thistle (2017) outlines an Indigenous definition of homelessness that features 12 dimensions that describe far more than a lack of material housing. Each dimension can be viewed as a type of homelessness in and of itself, and each can also be seen as a potential cause of material homelessness. “Historic displacement homelessness” describes how Indigenous peoples have been violently displaced from their lands by colonial forces beginning as early as 1600 AD, and this is fundamental in shaping Indigenous experiences today (Thistle, 2017, p.10). Since settlement, Indigenous peoples have continued to be kept from and/or been suppressed on their settler-occupied lands. Thistle calls this “contemporary geographic separation homelessness” whereby Indigenous peoples continue to be subject to separation from not only their lands but also their cultural and spiritual knowledges, known as “spiritual disconnection homelessness” (Thistle, 2017, p.10). One Indigenous youth in this study talked about wanting to learn their cultural history but not knowing who to ask.

Colonial history and its modern-day dominance mean that Indigenous peoples also experience “mental disruption and imbalance homelessness” (Thistle, 2017, p.10).
Importantly, the dimensions that Thistle (2017) describes can be experienced by Indigenous peoples regardless of whether they have a physical house or dwelling. For example, “overcrowding homelessness” is one dimension that speaks to how Indigenous peoples in both urban and rural areas, who are physically housed, often have to deal with crowded living spaces that are unhealthy, unsafe and which individuals are frequently pushed out from (Thistle, 2017, p.11). The “relocation and mobility homelessness” dimension describes how Indigenous peoples must often travel between rural and urban areas in order to meet their educational, financial, housing, social needs etc., (Thistle, 2017, p.11). Often satisfying one need by sacrificing another. Moving around can also lead to material homelessness. One Indigenous youth in this study described leaving their reserve because of the poor conditions there, known as “escaping or evading harm homelessness” (Thistle, 2017, p.11), only to move to an urban centre where they had nowhere to sleep except on the streets, known as “nowhere to go homelessness” (Thistle, 2017, p.12). Nowhere to go homelessness is the most visible to settlers and others who walk past Indigenous peoples sleeping on streets all over cities that are built upon unceded (i.e., never legally surrendered) Indigenous lands. However, settler society is generally ignorant of, or refuses to acknowledge, its colonial origins, and Indigenous peoples are often treated as if they chose to be, or deserve to be, on the streets. As well, settlers often fail to see how Indigenous peoples have been “impacted by their unique relationships with the Government of Canada and associated agencies, Christian churches and mainstream society” (Patrick, 2014, p.7). Individuals are judged on what is seen in this moment and not on the socio-historic and structural forces that put them there.
The Education System

To effectively prevent youth homelessness and thus prevent more deaths as quickly as possible, there is a growing consensus that we must “build on existing structures” (Gaetz, 2013, p.471). The education system is one pre-existing structure that might successfully respond to this issue (Hyman et al., 2011; Nichols, 2019; Schwan et al., 2018). However, without significant work and reconfiguration, schools are not likely to protect youth and children from homelessness. The education system currently represents a “point of failure” (Sauvé et al., 2018, p.11) in the recorded experiences of homeless youth (Gaetz et al., 2016; Nichols, 2019). Schools are sometimes aware of students’ adverse circumstances or predict a student’s entry into homelessness. While there may be exceptions (see Miller et al., 2004), schools frequently fail to respond in ways that would prevent, end, or alleviate instances of homelessness for their students (Sauvé et al., 2018). Miller et al., (2004, p.704) note that while youth in their study report high school graduation is very important to them, many are forced to drop out because “school has not met their needs.” In Canada, more than 50% of homeless youth do not graduate from high school, compared to a national average of only 9% who do not finish (Nichols, 2019). Thus, schools are not only failing to prevent youth from becoming homeless, they are also failing to ensure access to education and diploma attainment for student who do become homeless.

Barriers to education are another way that youth experiencing homelessness are further excluded from mainstream socioeconomic participation (Jones, 2005). In cases where youth try to maintain connection to the education system amidst housing instability, they often experience barriers to continuous attendance (Nichols, 2014).
Furthermore, when youth become disconnected from the education system during instances of homelessness, they often face barriers to re-entry. Hyman et al. (2011) note that lacking access to school reports, transcripts and immunization records can all become barriers to re-enrollment. This reflects my own experience of dropping out of the school when I first became homeless; later, when I attempted to re-register for school, I could not easily access important documents that my parents, who I was no longer in contact with, had not given to me. Bureaucracies can be hard to navigate as a young person, and even filling out paper work correctly can be challenging. Some youth have reported their shelter, or transitional living, as a barrier to school participation because they are warehoused with others all struggling with similar issues (Miller et al., 2004). For example, these youth might lack the opportunity to connect with young people who are not entrenched in street life and with whom they might form a social network supportive of school attendance. When youth are successful in re-entering the education system, they are likely to struggle in the school setting because of their unstable circumstances (Moore et al., 2018).

To say that sleeping outside, in shelters, or living without safe and stable housing can be very anxiety-provoking is a monstrous understatement. For example, a young girl might walk empty streets for hours each night, knowing that she will probably be assaulted if she lies down to sleep. Hyman et al. (2011) note that housing-related stress is linked to behavioural and psychological difficulties that frequently disrupt school attendance for youth experiencing homelessness. Some youth nap through classes to cope with sleep deprivation associated with life on the streets (The Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness (ICPH), 2017). In addition, youth might engage in or express
other seemingly deviant acts, such as truancy, poor behaviour or missing deadlines because of their circumstances (MacDonald, 2010) which might mean students are punished for the symptoms of their homelessness (Sauvé et al., 2018).

There is a saying within addiction recovery that goes: *the opposite of addiction is connection.* The same saying might be applied to homelessness—an experience that also requires a recovery period of sorts. Sauvé et al.’s (2018) study of twenty-three formerly homeless youth found that respondents were sometimes able to point to one individual among school personnel who went above and beyond the status quo to assist them somehow. These findings hint that school attendance, even with low or disrupted achievement, might be beneficial for homeless youth as there is potential to develop meaningful connections with adults. For example, in Schwann et al. (2018, p.73), one youth states, “almost everyone has, like, the one teacher that they really trusted and liked, or the one school counsellor that was cool and not scary.” Thus, schools might provide safe spaces where youths could make valuable connections to responsible adults.

**Why Schools Should be a Focus for Prevention and Intervention**

In the province of Ontario, young people are obligated by law to attend school until the age of 18 (Education Amendment Act (EAA) (Learning to Age 18), Bill 52). This means that, outside of exceptional cases, a young person enters homelessness only after or during their engagement with the education system. Other studies note that teachers are often the first adults outside of the private sphere to become aware of a young person’s adverse circumstances (Gaetz et al., 2016). Schools serve as a primary area of socialisation for young people, within which youth are essentially under
surveillance (Davies & Guppy, 2018). Thus, schools are prime sites for education on
homelessness and well as for the identification, prevention, and intervention of
homelessness. Schools already harness education as a tool to mitigate social issues faced
by their students. The efficacy of prevention education to tackle negative social
phenomena (e.g., addiction, suicide) has been well documented (Bonyani et al., 2018;
Ghelani, 2010).

There is currently no federal policy addressing homelessness in Canada. The
McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) established in 1987 provides an example of how a federal
government might address homelessness through policies aimed at the education system.
The MVA is a US policy designed to protect homeless Americans and address the issues
they face (Canfield et al., 2012). Protecting homeless children and youths’ right to
education is central to the MVA (Canfield et al., 2012). The MVA attempts to remove
common obstacles to school participation for homeless youth by insisting upon schools’
admittance of homeless youth even when they lack proof of residency, immunization, and
school records (Canfield et al., 2012). The MVA mandates that school districts must
provide transportation to and from school for homeless children and youth and provides
schools with a standardised conceptualisation of homelessness (Miller et al., 2004).
Miller (2011, p.425) credits the MVA with having “effectively eliminated schools’
prerogatives to ignore homelessness and/or deal with it in isolation of other schools and
community agencies.” The MVA works, in part, by employing ‘liaisons’ who advocate,
monitor transportation needs and reception, facilitate student matriculation into programs
and schools, as well as educating schools and parents about MVA (Miller, 2011, 430).
The MVA has been credited with increasing school attendance rates by 17%. However,
despite the positive impacts that the MVA has made over the past 20 years in the US (Miller, 2011; Canfield et al., 2012), there is no similar policy within Canada.

Education can also be used to prepare young people for independent living. Raleigh-DuRoff (2004) asked formerly homeless youth how to help others exit homelessness. The author states that skill-building (e.g., social and coping skills), increasing access to information on how to seek help, and facilitating the fulfilment of needs beyond basic survival (e.g., creativity) would positively impact youth attempting to exit homelessness. Thus, there are a number of ways in which schools might help youth prevent, mitigate or even end their homelessness. However, in the absence of policy to ensure standardisation of responses to issues around housing in schools, successful school-based interventions have not yet been made a Canadian standard.

Some homeless youth have pointed to the necessary but insecure connection between housing, employment and education, whereby stable housing or homelessness sets the foundation for educational and employment outcomes (Schwan et al., 2018). However, employment or activity within the informal economy (e.g., sex work) is often necessary for homeless youth to access housing (Watson, 2011). Similarly, due to a “rise in credentialism” (Noble et al., 2015, p.29) a high school diploma is often required for even the lowest-paid work. Therefore, schools must work to prevent and end homelessness amongst their student body because housing is a barrier to successful and consistent participation in school. If at-risk youth are expected to fulfil Ontario’s mandatory attendance, stay alive, and possibly avoid several lifelong implications of youth homelessness, schools need to start addressing homelessness.
Review of Theory

This thesis is distinct from other academic representations of homelessness because it uses an assemblage of theoretical concepts rather than one major social theory to explore and present this issue. The theories and concepts presented here share one commonality: they all point to the material and ideological structural forces that shape individual experiences of homelessness for young people. This section outlines many of the concepts that are useful in analysing and understanding young peoples’ experiences of homeless. Theories of representation, such as Goffman’s frame theory, illustrate the connection between dominant images and narratives of homelessness, public and individual perception, individualisation stigmatisation and policy (Benford & Snow, 2000; Dej, 2021; Gulliver-Garcia, 2016; Hutson, 1994; Mao et al., 2011; Milaney et al., 2020; Persson, 2019). Concepts such as Habitus (Bourdieu) and Genealogy (Foucault) can help us understand how youths' choices and actions are shaped and constrained by history, by our individual socio-economic environment, major life events and other entities that are outside of individuals power to control (Barker, 2016a; Davis, 2019; Heft, 2012; McNay, 1999b; Nash, 1990; Wang, 2006). Finally, theories of neoliberalism spotlight how political and economic ideals become embedded in institutions and internalised by individuals who then inadvertently perpetuate a fundamentally unjust society (see Harvey, 2007; Jones, 2005; Navarro, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2002b; Sylvestre et al., 2017; Zaccone, 2017). Importantly, this section demonstrates how social theory can facilitate diverse ways of knowing and help us think about the ways in which individual experiences of youth homelessness are interconnected to a historical web of material and ideological conditions.
Issues of (Mis)Representation

The way homelessness has traditionally been represented (e.g., by governments, media, research etc.) is partially to blame for our societal failure to address this issue. Representation plays a significant role in determining public perception of social issues (Mao et al., 2011). To highlight how the media influences public perception of who is homeless and who is a real expert, Mao et al., (2011) refers to a newspaper article featuring contrasting reports from advocates against claims made by researchers about the rate of mental illness amongst people experiencing homelessness. Schneider, (2010) notes that for individuals who do not regularly see or interact with people experiencing homelessness, media accounts provide a primary source of information on homelessness. Relatedly, collective social perception directly impacts which policies are formed and which solutions are deployed to treat specific social issues (Mao et al., 2011). For example, the swaying of public support can swing the pendulum from government funding of prisons to government funding of community wellness programs to address the very same issue—crime. This thesis attempts to help re-frame homelessness and represent youths’ experiences in ways that honest and useful rather than those that are harmful or intentionally obscured to be helpful.

Reductive representations prevent us from recognising who is homeless and how they came to be there. Hutson (1994) notes that the concept of youth homelessness was only identified as a distinct social issue in the 1970s. In the past, media and charity campaigns often favoured representations that depicted homelessness as a problem limited to older single white men (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016). However, the reality of Canadian homelessness is diverse, including whole family units, children, youth, women,
and others (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016). Youth represent one of the fastest-growing sub-populations among Canada’s homeless population (Rachlis et al., 2008). Partial representations of homelessness make these diverse groups seem homogenous, rendering some people’s experience invisible and neglected. For example, several times during this study, I encountered people and groups who had not realised that some youth and children could be homeless in Canada.

Misrepresentations are harmful because they contribute to the adoption of inadequate or violent responses to homelessness (Mao et al., 2011). One way to understand issues of representation is through Goffman’s (1974 in Baran and Davis in Mao et al., 2011, p.3) “frame theory”. Frames are "a specific set of expectations used to make sense of some aspect of the social world”. This theory suggests that the message or meaning derived from what we see is not solely based on what our eyes are recording. Instead, we interpret what we see based on what we already think we know about the thing we are observing (Persson, 2019). Media outlets frame social issues by displaying representations that emphasise a few specific elements of an issue whilst omitting others (Benford & Snow, 2000). For example, a news article on domestic terrorism might accentuate those cases in which the perpetrator was non-white and non-Christian and leave out numerous instances in which someone white and Christian perpetrated the same act.

Advocates and others working to help in homelessness must understand the dominant frames used to represent issues around housing. Dej (2020, p.10) argues that experiences of homelessness have historically been “positioned as personal and individual failings.” Reflecting on the historical framing of homelessness could allow us
to challenge old ways of theorising and present alternative understandings (Greenberg et al., in Mao et al., 2011) and thus respond to this issue. This thesis holds that homelessness should never be understood as the result of individual failure. Media representations of homelessness have often used “episodic frames” that frame individual people as causing their own adverse circumstances (Mao et al., 2011, p.5). Within this type of framing, certain information about the individual is emphasized, such as drug use, mental illness, and criminalisation. Meanwhile, structural factors, such as the (un)availability of housing and employment, as well as the prevalence of “policy that results in structural violence” (Milaney et al., 2020, p.12) are omitted from the episodic framing of homelessness. Negative framing has led to a sectoral focus on changing individuals rather than changing the social systems and structures around them (Mao et al., 2011).

When homelessness is misrepresented and framing aims at “individualizing the homelessness phenomenon” (Dej, 2020, p.32), youth are further victimised. For example, youth homelessness has often been painted as the consequence of “runaways” (Staller in Kelly, 2006, 30): a term that emphasizes a youth’s agency in leaving, rather than, for example, the danger of staying in an unsafe home. This narrowed framing is a form of victim-blaming that fails to acknowledge or alter the structure and systems, such as the child welfare and justice system, that lead to poor outcomes, including homelessness, for young people who pass through them (Fowler et al., 2017; Nichols et al., 2017; Schwan et al., 2018; Slesnick et al., 2009).

Several scholars (Noble et al., 2015; Sauvé et al., 2018; Schwan et al., 2018) assert the need to reject “individualized understandings of homelessness (Dej, 2020,
The rejection of the “individualisation of social problems” (Dej, 2020, p.64) is important because it is powerful in shaping societal views on homelessness, as well as in shaping how people who experience homelessness might come to view themselves. Bó (2019, p.328) states that the “internalization of negative stereotypes are associated with detrimental mental and physical health outcomes.” Similarly, Dej (2020) highlights how victim-blaming, supported by individualised theorisations of homelessness, can cause victims of homelessness to understand the negative experiences they could not control as a result of their own making.

Milaney et al., (2020, p.5) explains that when we focus on agency (i.e., personal freedom and action), our attention is on the choices that individuals make rather than seeking to understand the systems they are “forced into dependency upon.” Dilts (in Hamed et al., 2020, p.191) asserts that rather than aiming at “agents and intentions” we must focus on the violence that is “built into structures, institutions, ideologies, and histories.” Milaney (2020, p.3) defines “structural violence” as the harm caused to people by the social structures and institutions around them. The author describes how many newcomers to Canada face barriers to meeting their basic needs, including housing because immigration laws (legal structure) render newcomers ineligible for many supports and services. In addition, newcomers often face structural violence because racism is embedded within institutions such as the criminal justice system, housing sector and more. Importantly, structural forces are outside of the individual's control yet are immensely powerful in shaping individual lives. Structural forces determine the range of possibilities within which a person can enact their agency.
Theories of Structure versus Agency

Hay (2002) notes a high volume of academic literature devoted to the structure versus agency debate. Interestingly, this theoretical tension was of great interest to one member of the Youth Action Team who asked to learn more about structure and agency after hearing about it during a guest lecture led by the peer researcher. The term agency describes our capacity and ability to act of our own accord. Barnes (2020, p.4) asserts that agency is synonymous with “free-will.” Freedom is never absolute; therefore, the importance of problematizing social structures is not necessarily to ensure more-freer freedom for individuals, but to disentangle notions of freedom, free-will, agency and choice from that of welfare, inclusion and protection. A person’s agency is impacted by structure, and, likewise, structures are affected by the agency of individuals. In this context, the term structure refers to forces that “are historic, pervasive, and influence life chances and quality of life” (Barnes, 2020, p.3). Structures include systems and institutions such as the legal, education, and healthcare system, government and media; structures also include ideologies such as racism, sexism, homophobia etc. (Barnes, 2020). Laws prohibiting same-sex marriage are an example of people having their agency, i.e., the ability to use their free-will, constrained by the structure.

One way to envision the power that structure has over individual agency is to use Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (in McNay, 1999). Where agency describes what we can and choose to do, habitus offers an explanation of why we decide to do what we do. Habitus can be defined as the dispositions (i.e., character) of individuals as determined by the internalization of the structures surrounding them (McNay, 1999). Through this lens, our environment, including our structural surroundings, inform our individual character.
and how we enact our agency. Habitus is understood as both a prerequisite for success and a predictor of failure for people who are navigating systems (McNay, 1999a), such as the education system. Thus, a person can internalise a set of dispositions that ensure their success or failure within a given system or scenario.

One of the most common examples of how habitus works relates to the education system where socioeconomic status invariably correlates with academic achievement. Essentially, children from middle-class families do better in school than children from working-class/working-poor families (Davies & Guppy, 2018). This is not because of intelligence but because different social classes entail different structural experiences internalised into a habitus equipping the middle-class to navigate schooling with more ease than the working class. Bourdieu (in Nash, 1990, p.436) explains that schools are “responsive to an intrinsically arbitrary class cultural code accepted at all levels of the educational system.” The author suggests that middle and upper-class individuals and groups have built the education system. As such, this system speaks a language to which those with a middle-class habitus are apt to respond.

A school system controlled by the socially and culturally dominant classes, it is supposed, will perceive students who possess the habitus of the dominant classes as evidence of "readiness" for school knowledge, and perceive students who possess the habitus of the dominated classes as evidence of a deficit of the child or the home, as cultural deprivation, rather than as an indication of a deficiency on the part of the school to develop pedagogic practices responsive to the mental formation and behavioural dispositions such children bring to school (Nash, 1990, p.436).

Habitus can provide insight into the experiences of homeless youth. Habitus, in the Bourdieusian sense, is viewed as originating from ones’ socioeconomic background, yet several scholars have shown that habitus can also be the product of events such as
immigration (Wang, 2006), identities such as gender (McNay, 1999a), and circumstances such as homelessness (Barker, 2016). The unifying aspect of all these origins of habitus is that they are external to the individual; they are either structures themselves or issues/events that are (partially) produced or maintained by structure. Understanding homelessness as an origin of habitus might explain why youth from middle-class backgrounds in this MA research did not report better experiences in schools than those from lower socioeconomic classes. In this non-traditional understanding, habitus still originates from class; however, a “class of conditions” (Barker, 2016, p.668) and not strictly a class of economic conditions. Thus, understanding habitus as a product of a class of conditions renders this concept much more appropriate for investigating experiences of youth homelessness, which are not limited to one particular socioeconomic class.

Although our character (habitus) is shaped by structure, we are not purely passive victims of structure. Agents (individuals) shape structures, whether they realise it or not. McNay (1999, p.99) asserts that an institution can only exist if it is objectified (made real) in bodies; in the form of durable dispositions that recognise and comply with specific demands of that institutional area. In other words, the ideals, related actions and attitudes of a particular institution (structure or system) that individuals are exposed to are, over time, are absorbed into their minds and inscribed upon their bodies and, subsequently, individuals work to support these institutions. Thus, habitus is one way of theorising how we come to be who we are and why the world around us is the way it is.

While habitus shows us how structures become embodied within individuals, the concept of genealogy urges a deeper investigation of how structures become structured,
and how our current individual attitudes and opinions have historical roots that are often obscured as natural fact. The importance of history in our day-to-day lives is captured by Foucault’s theoretical perspective and method of inquiry, “genealogy” (Cronin, 2016, p.57). Using genealogy, Foucault sought to explain “systems of thought” (Herft, 2012, p.14). Foucault came to believe that our capacity for thought (and thus action) is determined by the time and space that we exist in. In this view, many common ways of thinking in our society have a particular point of origin, which subsequently lead to social conditions that maintain such thought (Heft, 2012), for example, the common view that people experiencing homelessness are dangerous can be (wrongfully) perceived as a time-told truth. However, this stigmatising discourse has a historical origin from which social conditions have emerged, including policy and laws that criminalise homelessness, that bolsters the claim: to be homeless is to be dangerous.

Capacity for thought, also known as our “knowledge system-paradigm” (framework) or “epistemes”, is determined by socio-historical conditions (Heft, 2012, p.13). Within epistemes, some thoughts become possible whereas others impossible (Heft, 2012). For example, it is now impossible for us to justify treating women or racialized peoples as property, unlike how these groups have been considered in the past. Foucault refers to this phenomenon as “the stark impossibility of thinking that” (Heft, 2012, p.13). A decade ago, it would have been unrealistic to think of the government supplying ‘addicts’ with their drug(s) of choice, for free; yet now safer supply programs are gaining credibility and government support (Government of Canada, 2021). Thus, we might dare to hope for an end to financialized housing, poverty and homelessness, even as a new alternative to capitalism is all but impossible to conceive.
Foucault (in Heft, 2012, p.19) states that genealogy is an attempt to “set free” historical knowledge to “enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary […] discourse.” This is important because developing ways of thinking that might allow us to transform our social reality is a central goal of research from the margins (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Crack cocaine provides an excellent example of the use of genealogy to uncover the historical impact on our daily lives (Heft, 2012). While crack (cooked, hard) and coke (soft, power) are the same chemicals in different forms, crack is less socially acceptable than coke. Heft (2012) notes that possession of crack comes with steeper legal punishments than that of coke. However, applying genealogical thought to the unwarranted distinction between crack and coke reveals a social history entrenched in racism, classism. While coke is viewed as the drug of the white-middle class, crack is understood as the drug of the people of colour and of lower classes (Heft, 2012).

The global war on drugs set a precedent in terms of the relationship between housing and substance use. Gordon (2006, p. 59) notes that although more has been written about the relationship between substance prohibition and neoliberal policy in a US context, “‘the war on drugs’ is an important feature of neoliberalism in Canada”. In the US, a zero-tolerance ideology is reflected in the approach of former President Bill Clinton (in Heft, 2012, p.122) who once said, “if you break the law, you no longer have a home in public housing, one strike and you’re out.” A Foucauldian view of the stigmatisation of drug use highlights the way that “the system continues to reinforce itself” (Heft, 2012, p.123); drug use can lead to jail, serving jail time can result in loss of income and loss of housing. Meanwhile, a lack of housing and income can easily lead a person to recidivism, where a person re-commits act(s) that has been deemed a criminal
offence. This cycle, referred to by prison guards as “the revolving door” (Personal Communication, 2013), happened to me often when I was homeless. Borrowing Foucault’s theory of inquiry might help us understand why and how things are *how they are*, demonstrate their origin, and fight back against points of inequality that are generally taken for granted as a natural fact.

**Neoliberalism**

One powerful structure that shapes our world is neoliberalism, which has both material and ideological dimensions. O’Sullivan (in Sylvestre, 2013, p.365) defines neoliberalism as “an all-encompassing political-economic theory and ideology.” Understanding neoliberal theory, its implementation, and impacts are essential to investigating any contemporary issue, as this entity is embedded throughout our social world (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Harvey (2007) explains that neoliberal theory emerged in response to, and is (in)famous for replacing, Keynesian theory. Harvey states that the principles of neoliberalism are “deeply opposed to state interventionist theories” (20). National leaders supporting neoliberalism have historically implemented policies that reduced government support and protection for the individual whilst promoting the ideal that individuals should be responsible for their success or failure (Harvey, 2007; Navarro, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2002b). Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is famous for the message she gave citizens as she worked a neoliberal overhaul of the British government: “there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women” (in Harvey, 2007, p.23). Thatcher’s words indicate how neoliberal theory has contributed to the individualisation of social problems described by Dej (2020).
Keynesianism centred around state intervention as a means to govern and support the social whole. Things like a minimum wage, social assistance (e.g., provincial welfare programs), and publicly funded (i.e., free for everyone) healthcare were all outcomes of Keynesianism (Zaccone, 2017). These supportive interventions emerged in the wake of WWII as a response to the harsh socioeconomic conditions of the Great Depression (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism is important in this thesis because its material and ideological elements are evident within the experiences of young people interviewed throughout this research. For example, some youth talked about the lack of state support for housing, while several others asserted the importance of individual responsibility. Reflecting Bó's (2019 p.330) assertion that individuals are likely to replicate the patterns of oppression they experience, some respondents rejected the idea that state support is essential to individuals’ survival. A few went as far as to say that many people experiencing homelessness do not deserve such support.

Much academic literature asserts that homelessness did not emerge as a significant social problem until the early 1980s when neoliberalism took hold (Gaetz et al., 2016; Jones, 2005; Misetics, 2017). Indeed, “roll-back” (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p.391) policies associated with neoliberal reform did have a significant impact on housing. For example, the 1990s saw the cancellation of Canada’s federally sponsored social and affordable housing (Suttor, 2014). Similarly, Jones (2005, p.98) states, “if there is any factor that has created the conditions for youth homelessness, it is [the recession of the 1980s] and the restructuring of the labour market which followed it.” However, homelessness is not an exclusively neoliberal era issue. While a Keynesian government was undoubtedly more apt to respond to homelessness, one can easily imagine that
certain people, such as racialized and Indigenous peoples, were always excluded from those benefits. Harvey (2007, p.10) describes a Keynesian state as one that intervenes in an (unfree) market when necessary to ensure things like the “full employment, economic growth, and welfare of citizens.” Thus capital (i.e., the wealth in society) was sometimes restricted within Keynesianism for the benefit of the social whole (Harvey, 2007).

In contrast to its predecessor, neoliberalism is supported by the ideal that liberation (i.e., freedom) of capital is guaranteed to benefit everyone (Navarro, 2007). This is an ideal because an ideal is defined as a thing that “exist[s] only in the imagination; desirable or perfect but not likely to become a reality” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Despite this, we often treat ideals as formulated ideas capable of becoming or that already exist in reality. For example, the ideal that neoliberal social organisation and regulation is “natural” and “necessary” (Harvey, 2007, p.41). However, history shows us that there are alternative ways to social and economic organisation, none of which are naturally occurring. In this context, to say the neoliberal socioeconomic organisation is natural or necessary is to justify its continued existence and limit support for other possibilities.

People often look to the government to affect positive change in regards to homelessness, but by gaining an understanding of neoliberalism, we can see how this strategy might not be effective. According to Wacquant (in Woolford & Nelund, 2013, p. 293), the main characteristics of neoliberal society, are: “economic deregulation; welfare state devolution, retraction, and recomposition; an expansive, intrusive, and proactive penal apparatus; and the cultural trope of individual responsibility.” The material side of neoliberalism includes the institutions, textual policies, and practices constituted and
maintained by neoliberal theory. Wacquant (2010) describes neoliberalism as a punitive (punishing) force whereby poor people and groups are systemically, structurally and culturally punished. Wacquant (p.198) describes how, in the US, the welfare state was retracted and then recomposed as a “workfare state.” Although Canada and the US are distinct nation states, several scholars note important similarities between them (e.g., neoliberalisation) thus, following other academic works, this thesis references some US-focused literature in order to illustrate issues that are prevalent on both sides of the boarder, within a Canadian context (Gordon, 2006; Gulliver-Garcia, 2016; Hajnal, 1995; Patrick, 2014).

The consequences of the neoliberalisation of Ontario is evident in both the title and rollout of the provincial social assistance program. Maki (2011) explains that the term welfare was dropped in favour of Ontario Works (OW) in 1997. The welfare program was redesigned to “offer financial assistance in return for employment participation” (Maki, 2011, p.47). Peter (2018, p.1) asserts the claw back of OW, in which individuals are asked to return money deemed overpay, was “created to provide financial incentives to work while also aiming to reduce or deter reliance on social assistance.” Thus, the material conditions of neoliberal society emphasise and ensure market values, such as labour-power, just as adequately as do the ideological conditions

Marginalised peoples are frequently stigmatised for accessing resources within the limited range of neoliberally acceptable social assistance initiatives available to them (Peter, 2018). One reason for this is that to accept material assistance within the neoliberal ethos is to challenge one major ideological underpinning of this theory—the cultural trope of individual responsibility described by Wacquant. Importantly, being
subjected to social stigma does not mean that stigmatised individuals will not subject others to social stigma. Woolford and Nelund (2013, p.294) explain that “marginalised individuals draw on pervasive societal values when discussing their lives.”

The ideal that people must exercise their labour-power to be entitled to certain benefits, such as having their basic needs met, is expressed through textual policy such as “welfare-to-work programs” (Peter, 2018, p.2). However, such ideals and their material outcomes contribute to feelings and perceptions of individual failure whereby forces and structures that individuals are powerless to control are concealed. The victims of poverty are blamed for their circumstance. Peter (2018) asserts that workfare policies mean that marginalised citizens are first overpromised and then under-delivered sustainable employment. Thus, the ideological veins that pump into the heart of neoliberalism are expressed as textual policy, and similarly, the material veins circulate right back into supporting the ideological tenets of neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalisation of the Education System**

There are several multidirectional connections between neoliberalism, the education system, and the issue of youth homelessness. Firstly, the public education system can be said to have been neoliberalised (Baltodano, 2012). Secondly, justification and support for the neoliberalisation of the education system were generated using a “crisis narrative” centred around the concept of at-risk youth (Schram, 2015, p.137). Furthermore, the education system is an important factor in the life outcomes of the children and youth who are filtered through it because this system is a site of “social reproduction” (Kurt, 2015, p.224). Domina et al., (2017, p.315 and p.316) assert that schools should not be considered egalitarian institutions in which all young people are
treated as equals, but rather as “social sorting machines” that generate “persistent inequalities.” Thus, the education system plays a role in determining who will have the greatest capacity to fulfil their housing and other essential needs and who will not.

Neoliberal theory is helpful in understanding the school-based experiences of all youth and, in this thesis specifically, understanding the experiences of at-risk and homeless youth who attempt to participate in education. The neoliberalisation of the education system refers to both the (re)constitution and (re)organization of educational institutions, as well as, the impacts of these institutions on all individuals who engage with them (Schram, 2015). This process has transformed schools from spaces centred around the ideal of education as a public good to areas organized around the idea of education as a market good (Basu, 2004; Schram, 2015). Neoliberal supporters would argue that whatever is good for the market is also good for the public (i.e., trickle-down economics). However, this has not proven to be the case within neoliberal societies which simultaneously display rapid capitalist gain and growing social inequality (Peck & Tickell, 2002a). In the mission to create a good market, market logic becomes the system of principles that shape the education system (Schram, 2015). This logic, along with other institutional embodiments of neoliberalism, is particularly dangerous as Milne (2015) asserts that market logic and human rights are utterly incompatible.

One consistent technique of neoliberalisation is to first create a problem and then offer itself, through marketization, privatization, financialization or punitive measures, as a solution (Peck & Tickell, 2002a). Basu (2004, p.621) describes this process as one of “rationalization strategies” whereby those in power “gain acceptance for themselves in the eyes of those who are governed by them.” Through such strategies, individuals
subjected to power come to accept those individuals whose power they are subject to. For example, Schram (2015, p.137) suggests that the strategy used to justify the neoliberal reform of the education system was a “crisis narrative” founded on the discursive creation of the “at-risk youth.”

The term ‘at-risk’ is used across diverse fields to describe a variety of conditions. In this thesis, at-risk refers to those young people who are/were at-risk of experiencing homelessness. In the crisis narrative described by Schram (2015), at-risk youth are those who are economically at-risk of not being able to translate their education into active market participation. The creation of economically at-risk youth in the 1950’s made salient the notion of a future economic catastrophe and therein legitimized radical state intervention to the tune of a neoliberal reform of the education system (Schram, 2015). Neoliberalism has transformed schools from institutions concerned with the production of (white) democratically active citizens to institutions concerned with the production of docile citizens (Baltodano, 2012). Docile citizens are conditioned to operate in aid of the market and do not threaten the status quo.

Before the neoliberalisation of schooling, students would have been considered at-risk if they were unable to translate their education into the creation of their own subjecthood as politically informed and active citizens (Schram, 2015). Some might argue that the latter has never been the case for racialized students and, only recently, for women. For example, Howard and Smith (2011, p.64) note that the last racially segregated classroom in North America was only abolished in 1983. However, the notion that the original mandate of the education system focused on the production of politically active citizens is supported by several scholars (Baltodano, 2012; Basu, 2004; Davies &
Guppy, 2014; Schram, 2015). Despite the historical exclusion of certain individuals and groups from this educational mission, one can assert that the type of individual schools generally sought to produce has altered from civic responsibility to market actor. Durkheim (in Ottaway, 1955, p.6) states, “The man which education is obliged to make of us is not the man as nature has made him but as society wishes him to be; and it wishes him to be such as its internal economy.”

The neoliberalisation of the education system includes adopting market logic throughout its structure, thus creating schools and their districts as competitors within an arena that mimics the market (Schram, 2015). Schram (2015) notes that (US) reforms within the education system included the introduction and rapid increase of competitive standardized testing to hold teachers and students accountable and connecting school test results to funding. In Canada, funding is based on a per head model; however, higher test scores do serve as a form of advertising that boosts enrollment, so the result is the same. Milne (2015, p.106) states, “the priorities [e.g., the market] valued in the context of neoliberalism...run counter to...ethical and empathetic engagements with human rights.” This statement further problematizes market logic as one that impedes the production of politically active citizens and threatens the human rights that have been strived for and gained by such citizens in the past (e.g., the civil rights movement, the feminist movement etc.).

A parallel can be drawn between neoliberalism as a global inequality-producing force and schools which work to reproduce social inequalities through class reproduction (Howard & Smith, 2011). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p.6), argue that all education, or as they put it, “pedagogical action”, is the “imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an
arbitrary power.” Despite emphasising that all forms of education are capricious impositions, the authors underline public schools as those institutions that impose the dominant middle-class culture upon students. Children from a middle-class background generally fare better within an education system that essentially speaks the same cultural language those children are exposed to at home (Davies & Guppy, 2014). Zwick (2002) explains that research has consistently determined a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and test scores, with SAT scores increasing alongside the income of one’s family. Therefore, a neoliberalised education system does not only aid market elites but also benefits and reproduces the middle-class. Bourdieu’s theorisations would suggest that the habitus of middle-class children and youth, the internalisation of their external environment, better prepares them to succeed within an education system that subsequently ensures their middle-class status.

The Argument

Understanding how education has become neoliberalised might help us realise schools do not have to be the way they are, market values do not have to be worth more than individual young lives. Along with the literature presented above, this thesis research helps make salient the notion that schools represent a site of hope in the fight against youth homelessness. Many youths in this participatory work suggested that school could have been a convenient place for them to access supports or learn about resources and skills that might have helped prevent or alleviate their homelessness. The following chapters highlight how research participants navigated an education system that, in general, did not recognise or respond to the issues surrounding their pathways into homelessness. This thesis argues that experiences and outcomes for young PWLLE
would be improved if an understanding of the structural forces and systemic inequalities that drive homelessness was embodied in the education system, other institutions (e.g., healthcare, judicial etc.) and the individuals within them. By presenting multiple social theories alongside the experiences described by youth, I hope the reader will be encouraged to think critically about youth homelessness, its causes and complexities.

Conducted by a scholar with lived experience of youth homelessness acting as a peer researcher, this thesis emphasises the need for people with lived and living experience of homelessness to be at the centre of innovating solutions aimed at homelessness. Related to this necessary inclusion, this thesis argues that researchers should work to improve engagement practices and ethical standards in order to support more meaningful collaborations that honour youths’ experiential knowledges. Researchers must go beyond mere inclusion of ‘youth experts’ and work towards designing research processes that are entirely collaborative. Researchers might increase the impacts of their work by employing people with lived experience of the research focus at the earliest stages of the research process. To accomplish this, researchers will likely have to advocate for change within academic institutions where policies act as barriers early inclusion, prioritisation, fair treatment and compensation of people with lived and living experiences of homelessness.
Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

This participatory action research (PAR) study is guided by the qualitative research methodology of “researching from the margins” (Kirby and McKenna, 1989) and incorporates the “peer research method” (Roche et al., 2010) to explore the school-based experiences of homeless youth. In addition to an exploration of how the education system might work to prevent homelessness, this study also sought to engage youth in the research process and collaborative action around this social issue. Qualitative methods hallmarked by a capacity for “emergent design” (Van den Hoonoord, 2015, 20) are ideal for this study because the capacity to be flexible is critical when collaborating with young people experiencing homelessness (Gomez & Ryan, 2016). This chapter details the methodology and methods used to carry out this PAR, as well as project limitations.

Researching from the Margins

A sense of outrage and anger can be enabling in doing research. While status quo researchers may describe the social world as an interesting thing to study, people on the margins often have a compelling need to do research because they find the status quo so outrageous, inequitable and unsatisfying (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.35).

Following Kirby & McKenna's (1989, p. 44) conceptualisation of “research from the margins” the design of this study is “rooted in experience.”. Specifically, it is rooted in my lived experience (LE) of youth homelessness. Kirby & McKenna (p.21) note that this approach is centred around self-reflection and envisions the researcher as a participant in the co-creation of knowledge. Importantly, this method is hallmarked by the researcher continuously cataloguing their “conceptual baggage.” This term refers to
those personal ideas and experiences that connect the researcher to the object of study in an “immediate and central way” (Kirby & McKenna 1989, p. 21). The authors note that conceptual baggage should be recorded systematically, in a specific notebook or file, and updated regularly including entries, reflections and dates. I catalogued my baggage by keeping detailed field notes throughout the study, including through the writing of this thesis.

Kirby and McKenna (1989, p.16) compare research from the margins to progressive literacy work which holds that literacy training should enable the “learner to intervene in reality.” The central tenet of this ideal is that we must break free from those practices that only allow us to function within the status quo. Learning to function within the mainstream is undoubtedly beneficial, especially for those of us with histories of exclusion. However, the ability to function in aid of the status quo does nothing to assure us anything beyond more active participation within a broadly unjust system. Language without socio-cultural understanding amounts to talk without impact. Kirby and McKenna (p.16) suggest that, just as in literacy, researchers must go beyond their chosen epistemology (i.e., tools of inquiry) and gain awareness of the social context so that we can “interact with and change society.” Research that fails to recognise and attend to the social context from which it originates, only operates within and works to maintain existing conditions. For example, research aimed at ways to increase school participation for youth experiencing homelessness that ignores the necessity of stable housing for equitable educational attainment merely works to cope with youth homelessness rather than eradicate it (Schwann, 2018).
Research is often regarded as a highly specialized process that requires institutionalised expertise (Lushey & Munro, 2015; Van den Hoonaard, 2015). However, Kirby & McKenna (1989) remind us that research is a natural element of the human condition. All human beings conduct research every day by identifying problems, asking questions, collecting information (data) and making sense of it (analysis). Research from the margins honours the human propensity for curiosity and sensemaking. The importance of this acknowledgement is that it breaks with traditional notions of objectivity within research and elitism within academia. The rejection of objectivity is essential to this study because as a researcher with LE, there is no pretence of objectivity. Additionally, my experiences within academia as a grade-10-drop-out struggling through tasks that I perceived as simple for others within post-secondary, motivate me to challenge its unnecessary elitism. In practice, this means clearly demonstrating that most claims in this work are a result of my own (and others’) subjectivity. A key goal of this work is to generate research outputs and actions that are inclusive of, and relatable to, young people and others without academic expertise.

To illustrate research from the margins, Kirby and McKenna (1989, p.17) point to graffiti that states “If voting could change the system it would be illegal” as an example of an individual both making sense of the information they collect and taking action to mobilize their findings. Highlighting the nature of research in our everyday lives, Dr Alexis Shotwell once told me “no one can theorise your participants’ lives better than they can” (Personal Communication, 2019). Thus, this type of research works to amplify the raw voices of those with lived experience rather than obscure them through abstraction and high theory. Kirby and McKenna (p.162) note that researchers from the
margins are not limited to description and can engage with theoretical analysis; however, “overall reporting should reflect the voices of participants.” In practice, this means forgoing thematic analysis of data which limit participant voices to those statements that are most frequently shared, and instead, presenting those statements which contrast one another, or which are often glossed over.

This method conflicts with traditional ways of conducting research and requires those of us working from the margins to do research differently. Kirby and McKenna (1989) point to research from the margins as an ideal tool for students who attempt to research in ways that their supervisors find unsuitable, or, for those students who struggle to fit their object of study into pre-existing theoretical frameworks. For example, I struggle with academic work on youth homelessness that uses Bourdieu’s (1997) concept of social reproduction. Applying this lens to analyze data is fruitful in some ways, yet significantly lacking in others. This theory fails to explain certain pathways into homelessness, specifically those from middle-class families because it focuses on the social reproduction of economic class. When the concept of social reproduction is limited to an economic perspective, its use might perpetuate the status quo by contributing to the invisibility of middle-class experiences of homelessness and strengthening the misrepresentation that homelessness is only a problem of the poor. This example speaks to another goal of research from the margins that seeks to address the issue of those in power deciding what is “fit to print or air and what parameters are available for interpreting such news” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 23).

How academic experts do research often means that “information about people who live in the margins is limited and often distorted” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, 23).
This distortion is evident in research on youth homelessness in that much of the available literature is clustered around a narrow set of themes. For example, many work focus on the individual choices and actions of homeless young people, emphasising youths’ agency rather than the structural forces that shape their individual behaviours (Milaney et al., 2020). Reading the literature as SWLE does more to spotlight the gaping holes in, and elitist nature of academic conversations around, homelessness than it does reveal something new or useful about homelessness. In contrast, research from the margins requires the researcher to be honourable, which can only happen when we disconnect ourselves from institutional ways of knowing and doing. “Being honourable” involves being authentic and using our experiences as a touchstone to guide our work, rather than merely justifying the ways in which our positionality inadvertently impacts our work (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.33). To conduct oneself honourably in research requires “purposefully recognising/embracing the contractions and questions that often make us most uncomfortable” McKenna, 1989, p.33)

Research from the margins problematizes traditional ways of researching and provides an alternative. Problematic methods can arise out of the best of intentions. Research on those who live in the margins might be distorted in an attempt to right points of inequality. For example, researchers and others might frame youth homelessness as an issue that is tied to family poverty. This may be a way to highlight that poverty can lead to deadly consequences that the middle class is often spared. Distortions and misrepresentations might arise in attempt to challenge the harmful stereotypes. However, as Kirby and McKenna suggest, we must be able to speak the (uncomfortable) truth. In practice, this means finding ways to show that youth from middle-class families are at-
risk and do become homeless, without harmfully equating the struggles and conditions of the middle class to those of the working class. Interestingly, limited accounts and distortions could surely not be so prevalent if research findings were more frequently mobilized outside of academic journals where those from the margins can access, understand, contribute to and challenge them.

Research from the margins allows us to say things that might otherwise remain unsaid. Kirby and Mckenna (1989, p.24) note that “one characteristic of oppressed peoples is that they often are required to perform a kind of doublethink/ doublespeak; lies are needed because the truth is not allowed.” This speaks to the common phenomenon whereby large-scale inequalities, such as gender inequality, colonialism, and classism, are replicated and expressed in diverse ways across space and time. In this, even those areas meant to address inequality can end up contributing to it. Academic research is sometimes part of this phenomenon (Thyer, 2011). Kirby and Mckenna assert that research from the margins is necessary in order to share hidden truths about society. By using this method, this thesis reveals truths not only about youth homelessness but also about research processes and the power relations that define them.

The ultimate goal of research from the margins is to take action and produce change. Kirby and McKenna (1989) assert that such research is necessary for action and change. Thus, this thesis presents alternate ways of understanding and responding to youth homelessness as well as alternate ways of conceptualising and conducting research with people with LE. Kirby and McKenna (p.25) suggest the action piece of research is often missing from research method discussions which “emphasize data gathering and analysis” rather than “discussion of responsibility to act on what is known.” This research
sought to contribute to change and take action through the establishment of short and long-term benefits for individual participants and the local community. For example, short term benefits included monetary compensation and opportunities in skill development for young participants throughout the studies and provision of additional supports such as transportation. Long-term benefits and goals of this work include the establishment of a scholarship for homeless youth at Carleton University and a growing network of people with LE and allies to support youth in Ottawa. Action is a defining feature of the entirety of this thesis work, perhaps because, like Kirby and Mckenna (p.24) suggest, “the data and me are begging for such a release.” This release is motivated by living through an experience that leaves deep scars and, for me, an overwhelming sense of survivor’s guilt.

**The Peer Research Model & Engaging with Young PWLLE in Research**

This thesis work, which evolved into PAR from the margins, made effective use of the peer research method (Barker & Maguire, 2017; Buffel, 2019; Hawkins, 2015; Lushey & Munro, 2015; Roche et al., 2010). Barker & Maguire (2017, p.598) refer to “peers” with a shared experience, such as homelessness, as “experts by experience [who] represent individuals or groups who share a common experience of a social and health issue.” Similar to researching the margins, conducting research as a peer legitimises the methodological incorporation of my own personal experiences of homelessness throughout this study. In contrast to research from the margins, the peer research method is concerned explicitly with researcher-participant relationships.
The peer research method refers to research that employs experts by experience to carry out, guide, or work on research aimed at the community to which the person belongs (Hawkins, 2015, p.486). The peer research method was essential to this thesis for two main reasons. Firstly, complementing the principles of working from the margins, the PR method allowed for the meaningful and legitimate incorporation of my own experiences. This use of lived experience (LE) allowed me to build rapport and maintain meaningful relationships with young people. Secondly, because the use of peers is an emerging practice, this method allowed the freedom to conduct research differently. For example, it allowed me to challenge the prescribed role of the researcher and explore several consequences of the unpredictable aspects of peer work in research.

Peer methods are linked to several unique benefits within academic research. According to Roche et al. (2010), peer methods can enhance the quality of the data collected, gain greater access to the most marginalised voices in the community, and increase the validity of research findings. These authors also suggest peer methods can be empowering for those with LE who become peer researchers and can build capacity within their communities. There are multiple ways to implement the peer method. Roche et al., notes that peer researchers are generally recruited in an advisory capacity or as a paid employee who takes on research activities. Peer research fosters the collaborative production of knowledge (Roche et al., 2010). It demonstrates the importance of participatory and margin methods, which “emphasize the participation, influence and control by non-academic researchers in the process of creating knowledge and change” (Israel et al., 1998 in Roche et al., 2010, p. 433).
Within the literature on methods, a peer researcher is usually someone without academic experience (Greene et al., 2009) who is trained and supported to assist in one or more stages of the research process (Roche et al., 2010). The literature does not reflect my experiences as a peer researcher because I was both an undergraduate, and later, graduate student training in sociological research methods and someone with LE of the research topic. More studies are needed on the academic experiences of scholars with lived experience (SWLE). However, as Kirby and Mckenna suggested, academic works are often limited by that which came before them. Chapter 4 features a nuanced discussion of what it means to conduct peer research as a young scholar.

Titles matter; they can help to maintain, obscure, or shift power dynamics. Throughout this work, I have self-identified as a peer researcher to participants and others. I have also been formally identified, by others, as a peer researcher in research grant proposals and more. As the literature suggests (Lushey & Munro, 2015; Roche et al., 2010), introducing myself as a peer to participants proved a useful technique for rapport building. During introductions with youth, I explained to participants what a peer researcher is. I told participants that I was not a professional service provider and that I likely shared some similar experiences with them. Lushey and Munro (2015, p.525) claim that “...young people may be willing to discuss issues with peer researchers that they would not be willing to raise with academic researchers.” In practice, my past experiences on the streets meant that I was familiar with the sub-cultural language that some participants used (e.g., chopping means to sell drugs, a bucket refers to someone who smokes crack). This benefit also speaks to Kirby and McKenna’s (1989) assertion of the importance of context within research. My lived experience often enables me to
intimately understand and respond to the context that homeless youth exist within, thus (hopefully) limiting gross misinterpretations and misrepresentations during analysis. This thesis found that the peer research method can help generate an interview environment conducive to knowledge sharing for young participants.

The peer method allowed for the inclusion of peer support during youth engagement within this PAR. Barker & Maguire (2017) note that peer support is based upon the notion that peers “have a unique capacity to help each other based on a shared affiliation and a deep understanding of particular experience” (598). In practice, this meant that I was able to provide emotional support to participants who reached out and requested help. Furthermore, acts of peer support were considered a legitimate part of the research process rather than an aside to it. For example, one youth requested that I accompany them to an appointment to have blood taken because they knew that the needles might trigger them to relapse (a feeling I am familiar with). Acts of peer support helped me to build and maintain relationships with participants over a substantial period (as long as three years and ongoing with some). These relationships, as Roche et al., (2010) suggest, contributed to rich research practices. For example, the youth with whom I have such relationships are often interested in providing formal and informal feedback on analysis, co-creating knowledge mobilization and more.

Peer methods have gained popularity and credibility in recent years (Buffel, 2019). This is possibly indicative of a “new direction of qualitative research where stakeholders and researchers together co-create knowledge that is realistic and pragmatically useful and is rooted in local understandings” (Hawkins, 2015, 476). Buffel (2019, p.539) claims that peer research is positively associated with the rise of self-
advocacy movements and funders who emphasize “user engagement.” However, there is a distinct “lack of clear models” for peer research (Roche et al., 2010, p.4) within the field of qualitative research. According to Roche et al. (2010), this gap has presented some peer projects with complex challenges such as failing to meaningfully engage and include peers at all levels of the research project.

Roche et al. (2010, p.7) identify three “emerging models of practice.” In the “advisory model”, peers act as steering or advisory committees to provide guidance on one or more stages of the research design or process. In the “employment model”, peers are involved in paid research tasks, such as data collection. Finally, in the “partner model”, peers are co-leads or collaborate at all stages of the research project. This PAR combined two of these models. The advisory model, as we recruited five formerly and actively homeless youth to provide feedback on findings and research processes. The employment model, because research funding allowed me to be paid to conduct this study and pay youth for emergent research tasks and opportunities (e.g. presentations and public engagement). Unfortunately, youth were not able to co-lead this research.

Despite the potential benefits of the peer model, there are some documented considerations to take note. There are some notable challenges with the peer research employment and advisory method concerning confidentiality, identity and accessibility (Roche et al., 2010). For example, Ottawa is a relatively small community. There were times when the data being analysed might have allowed PWLLE on the research team to identify respondents in the data. There were also times when youth were asked to participate in discussions that were not accessible to them due to the unnecessary use of elitist language within academic settings.
Roche et al. (2010) suggest that peer researchers might be exposed as having had an experience or condition and are potentially stigmatised for it within their community. For example, during this work, I was outed as having experienced youth homelessness to other students in my Sociology programme; however, I was not stigmatised when outed. In public settings, a peer researcher might be outed by other members of the research team or participants without their consent, posing issues of confidentiality (Roche et al., 2010). Being labelled a peer (or PWLLE) can be challenging or even harmful in some circumstances. For example, it sometimes felt uncomfortable to be introduced as a “Lived Experience Expert” because although I can speak to my experience, I was simultaneously baffled by some of the research processes within which I was engaged. Relatedly, members of the Youth Action Team (YAT) and other young PWLLE who engaged in the research process sometimes voiced their frustrations at their inability to understand the elitist language they were often subjected to. Both examples highlight the potential tensions between one’s identity as an ‘expert’ in certain contexts, as well as issues of accessibility and inclusivity in participatory and peer research projects.

**Participatory Action Research**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) marries nicely with doing research from the margins (Kirby and McKenna, 1989) because PAR’s central concern is rich social context, and PAR’s main purpose is action and social change. Participatory approaches go beyond the prioritization and amplification of participants’ voices (Kirby and McKenna, 1989) and employ participants as co-researchers to co-create the research design, co-lead research, and collaborate in action(s) for social change. This type of inquiry is promoted as “democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing” as it
attempts to ensure that those usually excluded from knowledge production have a say in the research process and outcomes within their own community (Macdonald, 2012, p.35). The gold seal for PAR is “full and active participation of the community at all levels of the entire research process” (Macdonald, 2012, p. 39). Although many projects fall short of being wholly participatory, PAR approaches are often perceived as more equitable than traditional methodologies that are not concerned with community inclusion. Participatory practices attempt to “break down barriers between the researcher and the researched” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995 in Maiter et al., 2008, p.306). Sometimes defined as a “dynamic educative process,” PAR acknowledges that understanding and responding to social issues requires the meaningful inclusion of PWLLE (MacDonald, 2012, p.36). Within PAR, researcher-participant relations are shifted from the researcher as the expert and educator to a bilateral educational relationship.

In theory, each collaborator’s expertise is recognised, and learning flows between researchers, participants and community continuously (MacDonald, 2012). In practice, this means researchers must support PWLLE in opportunities, trainings and education necessary for successful participation. It was often difficult to ensure meaningful youth participation in this work because YAT members did not have adequate knowledge or training in, for example, data analysis, theoretical concepts and writing skills, which would have enabled YAT members to contribute to much more of the research process. Knowledge mobilisation was the main area in which most of the YAT could frequently fully participate. For example, it was easy to allow the YAT to have creative freedom when we were engaging in public speaking together. I encouraged youth to speak their truth rather than co-crafting a script that complemented the themes identified in the data.
Although I consider creative freedom a signifier of meaningful participation, witnessing the YAT have creative freedom was sometimes uncomfortable; especially when I wanted to make certain claims that youth did not touch on or make claims youth sometimes even outright contradicted. However, these moments taught me what was truly important to the young people I was working with, and what they considered important often nothing to do with the education system—the focus of this thesis.

Macdonald, (2012, p.38) tells us that PAR “is not only research that is followed by action; it is action that is researched, changed, and researched within the research process by the participants.” In this research, action took on various forms across many elements of this work. For example, before the first round of data collection was even approved, I was already translating my observations into practices that could be included in my own work. For example, homeless youth often discuss traumatic intimate details of their lives during interviews and other research activities and I strongly believe youth should receive significant compensation for sharing knowledge which could be re-traumatising to them. Therefore, when I started my own research, I immediately sought ways to increase the compensation I could provide to participants. To this end, I managed to get two large grocery chains to donate gift cards for participants. This meant I was able to give each interview participant $20 cash and $35 worth of gift cards. In the later stages of this project, action took the form of co-delivered presentations and workshops, as well as other public education initiatives with members of the YAT around Ottawa City.
Youth Action Team

The participatory aspects of this work centred around the employment of a team of five, and eventually nine, young people who had lived or living experience of homelessness. The team was established in the summer of 2018 after the first round of data collection. The members were recruited by contacting those youth who had consented to a “follow up” at the time of their initial interview. There was no formal or equitable interview process. I reached out to participants that stuck out in my mind, and the first to agree to participate were hired to attend bi-weekly and eventually weekly team meetings. This team provided feedback on my interpretations of the data (i.e., findings). For example, before presenting the preliminary findings of this work at the Alliance to End Homelessness Forum 2019, I met with the youth team and demonstrated the presentation I had planned for the forum. Youth generally agreed with the key messages I had identified and also contributed their ideas, which I used to expand and improve the forum presentation before it was delivered.

Feedback sessions resemble a research method known as “member checking” (Van den Hoonoord, 2015, p.15) or “participant validation” (Birt et al., 2016, p.1082). Birt et al. (2016, p.1802) tells us that member checking methods are techniques for “exploring the credibility of results,” allowing (some) participants to view data or results to “check the accuracy and resonance with their experience.” For example, analysis of interview transcripts revealed that education on youth homelessness was absent from schools and that youth had indicated this type of education could have helped them know
what to do when they became homeless. After presenting this to the YAT they were able to think about and discuss this information in relation to their own experience. The YAT came to the conclusion that education on youth homelessness might have a range of benefits, in addition to those identified in the data, including the potential to lessen the stigmatisation that homeless young people face within these spaces. The YAT also asserted that education on youth homelessness should be led by PWLLE.

The team’s members were originally hired to join an advisory team, with the intention that this team would shape research processes. It became clear to me that I didn’t have capacity to act on the brilliant suggestions the youth team gave me. For example, team members often expressed ideas that were both brilliant and beyond the scope of the project, such as building youth-led supportive housing or developing a cell phone application that would help connect youth with services based on their GPS location and individual needs. This reflects Banfield's (2020, p.31) assertion that “it is tokenistic to consult people with lived experience if you are unwilling or unable to use their recommendations.” In other cases, the project was too far along to implement recommendations that youth made. For example, switching focus from schools to other institutions, or switching participants from students to teachers, are ideas that would have needed to be incorporated into the proposal writing and ethics approval stage of the research process. This highlights several weaknesses of academic research in that the institutional structures that govern it, such as Research Ethics Boards (REBs) and traditional power dynamics positioning academics as the real experts, may be at odds with values of emergent participatory methods (Flicker et al., 2007; van Draanen et al., 2013). Since the ability for youths’ advice to actually shape this project was so limited,
this thesis refers to the group of youth who were employed as the Youth Action Team. This term recognises that the majority of youths’ work centred around knowledge mobilisation and action.

**Reflexivity**

Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience (Rich, 1979 in Kirby & Mckenna, p.1)

The cataloguing of conceptual baggage is one product of reflexivity, yet researcher reflexivity entails much more than this. Whereas the recording of conceptual baggage has a clear model of practice, as laid out by Kirby and McKenna (1989), the ways in which reflexivity is conceptualised and employed are much more ambiguous. Reflexivity is unique to the individual. Reflexivity, sometimes known as “critical reflection” (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, p.2), is the practice of purposeful mindfulness on the part of the researcher. Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017, p.2) refers to this method as “internal dialogue and critical self evaluation” wherein the researchers acknowledge ones’ social and emotional position in relation to participants (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) and the studied phenomenon. Reflexivity was the (not always met) goal throughout each stage of this research process, from how I physically approached participants to this thesis's word choices and presentation. I learned of reflexivity before I learned of research from the margins. It is reflexivity that drove me to seek a methodology that would support a break from traditional ways of doing and understanding research that researching from the margins provides. The degree to which I was more or less reflexive impacted all research activities and outcomes.
The label of peer highlights the ways in which I am similar to participants (Roche, et al., 2010) and the job of reflexivity is to acknowledge how those similarities impact this study whilst also ensuring that such an acknowledgement does not obscure the important differences between myself and participants. Van den Hoomaard (2015, p.159) notes that when researchers engage in the method of reflexivity, they “recognize that their own experiences and status (gender, age, class, profession etc.) affect […] participants interactions with them […] as well as influence their interpretation of the data.” Thus, another important function of reflexivity in this study was to ensure my recognition of the ways in which I am distinct from participants.

In practice, this meant that before I began to textually record my conceptual baggage, I was both aware and critical of my increased empathy for female-presenting interview participants. For example, I was much more likely to offer these participants extra supports or agree when they asked for help—even when it was inconvenient. This is because my experiences on the street were impacted by my gender. I did not see my male street friends being treated the way I was; neither pimped out nor tossed around like a rag doll for entertainment and so on. Rather, I witnessed men using girls in horrible and violent ways for both their own basic survival and to feed their substance use (another element of survival). For example, my male friends would not go out and do sex work to buy crack. They sent us out to do sex work, and they got their share of crack when we returned. In this case, reflexivity did not mean trying to balance and make amends with this bias, but understanding it and accepting it for what it is—my truth. I still more readily support homeless girls, even when I cannot afford to, not because I think it will
prevent them from having to do terrible and dangerous things, but because it might give them at least a little break.

The cataloguing of conceptual baggage is ad hoc, taking place only after content or process has been engaged with. In contrast, reflexivity, when successfully carried out, occurs in the moment. One way to highlight the function and significance of reflexivity as a peer researcher is to reflect on an occasion when I cancelled a YAT meeting only hours before it was meant to occur without considering how this cancellation might impact the youth. They reacted in a variety of ways, one cried, one hung up, another expressed anger at being ‘ditched.’ Financial dependence might be one reason for this adverse impact on youth, as they were relying on income from their participation. However, members also reported that their participation was meaningful and important to them; the YAT wanted to work on the project even if we could not pay them.

This instance shows a distinct lack of reflexivity on my part, and while the cataloguing of conceptual baggage helped me reflect on this after the fact, the practice of reflexivity would have meant asking youth what their needs were and finding a way to respond to those needs. For example, if youth were relying on financial compensation, it was my job to find an alternative means of paying them, whether the meeting went on as planned or not. Alternatively, youth might have been counting on the social aspect of the meeting, in which case it was my job to ensure the meeting went ahead even in the absence of funds for honoraria.

Reflexivity means that researchers ‘must think about themselves in relation to others in order to be thoughtful about ethical dilemmas’ (Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017, p.2)
For example, I know that many PWLLE of youth homelessness have been let down, time and time again, by adults around us who were meant to care for us. Reflexivity would have ensured I acknowledge the ways in which my differences from participants might impact my treatment of them. For example, viewing youth through the lens of labour to be carried out when ordered versus viewing youth as resilient co-creators of knowledge who require and deserve specialised responses because of the complex circumstances they are likely to have experienced. A cancellation might be a celebration for a graduate student whose schedule is full. Yet, for a recently housed or homeless youth, a cancellation might be a painful site of re-traumatisation.

In relation to participants in this study, my positionality might be envisioned as a dichotomy between similarities and difference or what Finefter-Rosenbluh, (2017) describes as insider versus outsider status. The author (p.2) states that researchers can range from “being an outsider, striving to explore an unknown environment and learn its characteristics in depth, to being an insider, serving as a member of the group as well as its observer.” I am somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, I generally share some experiential similarities with young homeless participants. I have bonded with young people over things like the panic that comes with having no one to call and nowhere to go, the exhaustion of hiding homelessness or abuse, the harmful coping mechanisms we adopted to escape, and more. On the other hand, I am distinct from participants in many important ways. I am a university student, meaning plenty of the work I have done with young people has been evaluated, graded, or supervised somehow. Thus, the knowledge(s) youth share with me are being extracted for my own purposes—wage
earnings, credentialism, status in my field—and not just for the general social good. I am not simply a peer.

Data Collection

Youth homelessness refers to individuals between 13 and 24 years who are living independently from their guardians (Gaetz et al., 2016). However, some studies consider individuals as old as 35 as a youth (Sauvé et al., 2018). Participants in this research ranged between 16 and 23 years of age. This age range was selected for two main reasons. It would have been more challenging to recruit participants under the age of 16 in terms of both ethics approval and the prevalence of hidden homelessness. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that respondents had recent experience within the education system, so it did not make sense to interview those older than 23. Recent experience within the education system was necessary to ensure that research findings are relevant and not outdated.

This thesis includes a data set comprised of 41 in-depth (approximately an hour-long) qualitative interviews with homeless young people in both Ottawa and St. Catharines in Ontario. Interviews focused on the school-based experiences of participants prior to and during their instances of homelessness. Not all of the interviews are explicitly referenced in this thesis because it would have been much more than I could adequately capture here. However, I read through all of the transcripts and each has shaped the final product of this work, to some degree. Data in this thesis also hails from engagement with the YAT where sessions were either audio recorded or documented through observation and field notes. The rich documentation of youth engagement as a
PR is necessary to promote an awareness of the complexities within PAR for PWLLE. Furthermore, the data collected on youth engagement can be applied more broadly in work with homeless young people and is not limited to research processes. In addition to knowledges shared by young participants during interviews and YAT feedback sessions, this thesis also includes some of my personal experiences of homelessness and research involvement.

Other researchers have also used their own lived experiences as data within their research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Humphreys, 2005) to illustrate particular issues. For example, Humphreys’ (2005, p.852) autoethnographic work highlighted that “not all academics have the ‘standard’ career that begins with an early Ph.D.” I chose to include personal narratives in this work to break away from my habit of employing purposeful forgetfulness when it comes to many events from my past. Rather than hold on to it for analysis, I have often pushed my past to the margins of my mind and done everything possible to bury it there. Thus, the recording of personal data in my own work is cathartic. The inclusion of my experiential knowledge also has a comparative benefit. This is because my experiences as an at-risk and homeless youth within the education system might hint at a transformation, or lack thereof, within the education system over the past decade.

**Sampling & Recruitment**

A combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling was used when recruiting participants for this study. Purposeful sampling meant that I purposefully recruited participants between the ages of 16 and 23 by posting on Facebook and by
connecting with two youth-serving organisations. Personnel at each organisation (one in Ottawa and one in St. Catherine’s) made youth aware they could participate in my study. I was also allowed to sit in these organisational spaces and casually invite youth to participate. “Snowball sampling” (Van den Hoonoord, 2015, p.108) is associated with increased access to “hidden populations” (Tracy, 2013, p.136). In this work, snowball sampling entailed asking my own friends who have been, or still are, homeless to connect me with street youth in their circle. It also meant I generally asked interview participants to pass on my contact to any friends that met the criteria and would be interested in participating.

The youth-serving organisations partnering on this research represent “gatekeepers” (Tracy, 2013, p.85); it is through their permission that researchers are granted (or are denied) access to clients’ knowledges on youth homelessness. Building rapport with these gatekeepers allowed me to solicit and interview young people in a space where participants could also access the supports. For example, some participants were able to debrief with service providers after being interviewed for this study. This is important because, in general, participants shared deeply personal and often violent narratives about their lives. Using organisations to recruit for this research made it was important to explain to youth that their participation would not impact the services they received from that organisation. Youth were told that they were under no obligation to participate and that choosing not to participate or terminating an interview would not result in any consequence. Importantly, organisation staff in Ottawa told me that researchers are frequently successful in accessing their organisation and that their young clients are used to research invites and very capable of declining them. This indicates that
front-line staff might reject the idea that they are, or should be, gatekeepers, and that youth are capable of being their own gatekeepers.

This study’s sample includes 23 participants from St. Catharines and 18 from Ottawa. Ten of 41 participants identify as Indigenous. Twelve of 41 participants identify as LGBTQ2S+. Only three of 41 identify as immigrants to Canada. Thus, diversity within this sample is notably limited. Lack of equitable representation is likely due to my positionality as a PR who looks white as well as to systemic racism whereby many youth services consistently fail to meet the needs of Indigenous, newcomer and LGBTQ2S+ identifying young people (Abramovich, 2012; Milaney et al., 2020). Gender represents another limitation in this sample as only three youth identify outside of the gender binary. Twenty-five participants identified as male, with 13 identifying as females. Interestingly, a staggering 34 of 41 youth in this sample reported struggling with one or more mental health issue (depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder etc.). Theses demographics reflect Ottawa City’s (2018) point-in-time count which found 23% of homeless youth in Ottawa had entered Canada as refugees or immigrants, 25% identified as Indigenous, 25% identified as non-heterosexual, 50% identified as male and 44% as female. However, equitable representation in this study would have addressed both the tendency of published works to focus on the white experiences and the likelihood that (further) marginalised identities within the homeless population are probably facing significant rates of hidden homelessness and therefore not captured in city stats.

**Consent**

Each interview participant signed a detailed consent form that I went over (by reading key point out loud) with the youth prior to the interview. This meant carefully explaining the
purpose of the study, interview processes, confidentiality, and research outputs. In cases where youth did not consent to have their voice recorded, I offered to write down their answers so they could still participate. Each consent form featured an invitation for participants to leave their contact information and select “consent to follow up.”

Interviews

As a peer researcher, my technique most closely reflected that of Oakley’s “friendship model” of interviewing, where participants are treated as “intimate friends rather than objects” (Tracy, 2013, p.142). This method is said to allow researchers to be “human” during interviews by doing away with the performance of objectivity (Tracy, 2013, p.142). For example, one participant shared a unique story of meeting their biological parents with me. I reciprocated by sharing my own experience of adoption and reconnection. After the interview, we both shared that we had never met anyone else like us. The friendship model works particularly well with the PR method because, as a peer, the connections that I make with young people sometimes continue long after the initial interview.

Interviews were semi-structured, with many open-ended questions focused on the school-based experiences of homeless youth. Preliminary data analysis simultaneously occurred as interviews took place. Van den Hoonnaard (2015, p.156 - p.157) notes that “analysis goes on throughout the life of a qualitative study,” beginning, “as soon as you being to collect your data.” It was impossible to listen to the knowledges shared by youth and not begin open coding mentally— identifying significant themes (e.g., parental abuse etc.). Tracy (2013, p.114) suggests that researchers take notes after, or even during, interviews or observations—as soon as possible—known as “raw records.” In addition to
mentally mapping and coding from what young people shared, I also took detailed field notes in the form of process and content reflections. Over the course of two years, I met with participants in spaces designated by organisation staff or quiet locations chosen by youth. Flexibility in location was necessary to ensure youth safety and comfort. For example, youth were sometimes banned or otherwise avoiding drop-ins and other formal spaces. Thus interviews sometimes took place outside in parks, parking lots or elsewhere. Regardless of the location, I introduced myself as a peer researcher with lived experience of youth homelessness to each participant.

Data Analysis

As Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggest, research (i.e., the process of investigating and sense-making) is a natural human process and not an academic invention. This section outlines the steps that I took to organise and understand the knowledges shared by young participants. Following Kirby and McKenna, it is important to note that analysis was not isolated to any one chronological phase of this study. Rather, analysis was continuous, occurring simultaneously throughout every stage of this work. For example, as interview participants spoke to me, sorting, identifying, and attempting to understand and reveal connections between and insights within, what youth shared was already happening in my head. Researchers need to recognise these early assumptions as this is part of cataloguing our conceptual baggage in regard to both content and process (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

For researchers following the methodology of researching from the margins, data collection and analysis is three-fold. Within this methodology, a researcher must collect data that respond to their research question whilst systematically recording their own reflections on both the research process and content of the knowledges shared by participants. In all truthfulness, I
was not aware of Kirby and Mckenna’s (1989) guide to research from the margins when I began formulating my research question back in 2018, nor when I began interviewing participants. However, detailed field notes taken on a whim allowed me to go back and sort this personal data into the two categories required for this research methodology.

Kirby and Mckenna (1989, p.128) assert that analysis should be a time of “living with the data” in order to “get comfortable with what it has to say.” I did not want to revisit the raw data because it is exactly that, raw. Often painful to look at and consider. The thought of reading through transcripts was very disturbing to me, and subsequently, I began coding too late to include all interviews in my discussion. Although I conducted 33 interviews, only 27 of them were coded before writing this thesis. I began coding transcripts by reading through each interview and marking points of significance in different colours. I had codes for family, systems intersections, points of failure within schools and points of opportunity within schools, points of alleviation of the symptoms of homelessness within schools, and more.

Data analysis requires intersubjectivity, whereby all participants are “are respected as equally knowing subjects” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.129). In practice, this means avoiding coding in ways that privilege those phenomena that occur frequently. For example, exploring data that contradicts significant findings and presenting those experiences reported by only one youth. Research from the margins seeks to amplify the voices of those who are often left out of knowledge production. That means that even within the margins, we must be concerned with those voices and phenomenon that are not seen as characteristic of the group. For example, at the time of his interview, one youth in this study wanted to remain homeless, which is contrary to what was reported by all other participants and challenges my assumption that no one truly wants to be homeless. Kirby and McKenna (1989, p.129) tell us that the duty of a researcher from the margins is to give each bit of the data “equal opportunity to speak in the analysis.”
Following Kirby and McKenna (1989), my data was organized into two files. One file labelled ‘content’ housed selections from transcripts identified during coding as well as my personal reflections on that content. The second file was labelled ‘process’ and housed all of the fieldnotes I had recorded since the beginning of this work that provides commentary on the research project. I continued to add to the process folder as I reflected on the process of data analysis and of writing this thesis. Common themes do not organize the data presented in the following thesis chapters because as the youths’ stories are told, the reader can capture common themes for themselves. In an attempt to honour young PWLLE, I have written the knowledges they shared with me in narrative form throughout the data chapters. This is important because, in the past, I have fallen into a technique of presenting only the smallest slices of youths’ narratives, specifically, those tidbits that support the claims I wanted to make. Through reflexivity, I have come to believe that it is unethical to artificially dissect moments of a youth’s experience without providing supporting information that tells their story as they told it to me.

In reductive presentations with sewn-together fragments of rigidly organized data, we can miss out on the complexities and contradictions that research from the margins works to reveal. In leaving the stories (more) whole, it is possible to address the research question whilst being open to, respectful of and reporting on a wide range of important information embedded throughout youths’ stories. Storying rehumanizes the data after coding (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), rather than reducing youths’ lives into short quotes and excerpts. I hope that the data chapters in this thesis give the reader an accurate snapshot into the lives of homeless youth and that for readers who are PWLLE, that it resonates with them and honours their and others’ experiences.
Considerations

This study had several serious limitations. PAR is easier written in a research proposal than carried out in practice (Ngarachu, 2016). It was extremely challenging to ensure meaningful youth participation throughout all aspects of the research. Researchers require hefty funds to and time in order to allow young PWLLE the capacity to co-create or inform the research process. Additionally, providing research methods training for young PWLLE would help to alleviate confusion and support youth contributions. I argue that for young PWLLE should also have the option to engage in paid training regarding the theoretical concepts that researchers intend to use during their analysis.

Ensuring an accessible method of reporting research-related discomfort for young PWLLE was another challenge during this work. My “friendship” approach to research (Tracy, 2013, p.142) might mean that youth were less inclined to disagree with me. I always emphasised to the YAT that disagreements were invitations for fruitful discussions and not something to be avoided, but this does not mean they were always comfortable disagreeing with me or reporting issues to me. Consent forms directed participants to contact Carleton University’s ethics board if they encountered any issues or concerns, yet REBs are largely inaccessible and underutilised by young PWLLE. For example, many youth threw out their consent forms on the way out of the interview space.

While peer methods are “committed to the [meaningful] participation of the subjects of research within the research process” (Ngarachu, 2016, p.92) such a
commitment comes with several considerations. Researchers who employ peers risk unknown obstacles (Closson et al., 2016; Ngarachu, 2016; Roche et al., 2010) and require constant reflexivity (Roche et al., 2010). I argue that peer and participatory methods also require flexibility so that material research conditions can be adapted to reflect the reflexive process in more than word and thought. Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) notes that researchers with insider status might entangle their own experiences with participant responses. My own experiences of homelessness cannot help but be expressed throughout my data analysis. For example, elements of youth narratives that resemble my own stood out when I read transcripts or conducted interviews. However, I have tried to look for significance in seemingly mundane details and take special note of those accounts that challenge my own of homelessness.

The following statement by Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017, p.3) aptly summarises my views on the methodology and methods that comprise this research: “I, the insider-researcher described in this [work], wish to stress that I do not claim to accuracy in my perspective taking but do include myself with other individuals, who strive to hone their social perspective-taking skills” that is, their ability to go “beyond one’s own literal or psychological point of view to consider the perspective of another...” This thesis is a subjective reading of the school-based experiences of homeless youth, shaded by my own lived experience, and mediated by the feedback of the YAT.

Chapter 3: The School-Based Experiences of At-Risk Youth:

This chapter explores school-based experiences reported by youth in this study. Experiences of homelessness are not linear, and many participants moved in and out of
homelessness whilst engaged in this research. Thus, while this chapter begins by investigating pathways into homelessness, data is not organised in any particular, thematic, or pseudo-chronological way; youths’ experiences are presented and analysed according to several sociological perspectives that can provide insights into youth homelessness. This chapter illustrates the issue of youth homelessness in relation to the education system by using a combination of “restorying, theorising, and narrative segments”, including my own lived experiences (Creswell, 2007, p.106). This style of data organisation is generally a product of the “narrative inquiry” method (Creswell, 2007), yet is well placed here because researching from the margins emphasises the need for researchers to be “honourable” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 31). Being honourable means “openly recognising our experience of marginalisation and using it as our touchstone” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.31).

Blane (2018) states that “statistics are human beings with the tears wiped away” (p.43); however, I find seeing friends’ lives and deaths reduced to statistics brings more tears than not. My past experiences of homelessness have led me to be critical, if not outraged, when reading academic works in which youth-derived knowledge is dissected and likely unrecognisable to them. There may be analytic value in such fragmentation of peoples’ lives (McAlpine, 2016), for example, lived experiences of homelessness can be chaotic, confusing, muddled with contradicting feelings, actions and outcomes, and research findings are supposed to make clear, concise, empirical statements. However, I regard techniques that encourage the hyper-categorisation into neat digestible packages as fundamentally disrespectful to the lives they seek to represent.
The high risk of death that young people experiencing homelessness face is too often reduced to statistical abstractions within research (Auerswald et al., 2016). However, for myself and other people with lived experience (PWLLE) of homelessness, these abstractions can be a source of contention. Dead youth are not statistics and these losses are vividly etched into our minds, whereby lasting grief maintains old wounds brought about by the truth of our missing peers. Thus, I have tried to ensure that the presentation of data and analysis here honours the life of each young person who made this thesis possible. Unfortunately, I was not able to include storied versions of each participant; however, I will ensure they are told within future academic and non-academic publications and outputs.

Marcus (1998, p.37) asserts that “you can’t really say it all; all analyses, no matter how totalistic in their rhetorics, are partial.” Rather than artificially reducing youths’ narratives into those claims that would generously support one major social theory, this chapter presents sociological theories as different lenses through which to view another’s lived experience. The message then is not concerned with which theory is correct but rather how different theorisations (i.e., explanations of why) might emphasise, obscure, or erase certain aspects of peoples’ lives. Lynd (in Scheff, 2000, p.91) states that “every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.” Some might argue that contrasting and surface-level theory application dilutes data analysis; however, I advocate for the importance of community-based work to produce outputs that can be understood by and useful to its participants and other community members.

In writing this chapter, it has been useful for me to reflect on my and others’ experiences in artificially distant, abstract, and alternate ways by applying various social
theories. Briefly removing my predominant analytical lens, the one created by my past, and replacing it with others, has had therapeutic value. For example, learning about structural theories of social phenomena showed me that many of the things I experienced leading up to and during my homelessness were outside my control. In opposition to what neoliberal theories of individual responsibility would suggest (Woolford & Nelund, 2013), a structural lens indicates that I am not responsible for what I endured nor wholly responsible for the decisions I had made as a young woman on the streets. Similarly, learning about Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (in Nash, 1990) helped me view much of what I previously considered to be just my nature as originating from my environment. I am hopeful that in the (unlikely) event any young PWLLE read this chapter, they might find a grain or two of healing from seeing their experiences presented through someone else's eyes.

Pathways, Disclosure and Identification of Youth Homelessness

Participant responses highlight the complexity of pathways and the diversity of trigger points into homelessness. Whereas pathways are forged over time, out of individual and relational factors combined with large-scale historical structural factors (Schwan et al., 2018), triggers are those specific moments in which an episode of homelessness begins. Triggers reported during this study include moments like being dropped off at a shelter by group home staff for fighting, being told to leave after smoking pot inside a guardian’s home, fleeing a physically violent mother, and more. This study distinguishes between pathways and triggers to avoid reducing the complexity of the former to the relatively less significant and fleeting occurrence of the latter. Importantly, I argue that the composition of triggers and pathways into homelessness
might become barriers to the identification of youth experiencing homelessness within the education system.

Chuck (he/him)

Just like me, Chuck was kicked out during Grade 10. He had been living with his aunt because his father was dead and his mother in jail. Castellanos (2016, p.602) notes that “parental prison convictions” pop up frequently within the histories of youth who experience homelessness. Similarly, Wacquant, (2010, p.198) asserts that a primary mechanism for continuously “punishing the poor” within neoliberal society is a process known as “prison fare” whereby conditions “spawned by economic deregulation” are dealt with by using police, courts and prisons. Chuck’s trigger into homelessness was his aunt’s discovery of his pot smoking in her house. In the future, once he eventually finishes high school, Chuck wants to go on to college and learn to be a welder like his father was.

Chuck’s experience is telling of a link between pathways into homelessness and broader issues of social stigma and inequality. More so than any individuals’ one choice or action, it is our sociohistorical conditions that create and support pathways into homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016; Schwan et al., 2018). For example, Chuck’s experience is shaped by a history marked by the stigmatisation and criminalisation of drug use. Erickson (1992) explains that the US and Canada have been partners in the prohibition of illicit substances since the early 1900s, aligning their policies and practices to minimise the flow of substances across the world longest boarder. Heft (2012, p.20) notes that
President Nixon’s war on drugs means that at least one generation “has grown up with drug prohibition and addict demonization, as the way things have always been.”

Foucault’s concept of genealogy provides us a style of thinking about experiences of homelessness, within which no occurrence is taken for granted. Instead, we look for the historical conditions that allowed for the thoughts and actions that result in said occurrence. Genealogy means adopting a critical lens when looking at “accepted narratives” (Heft, 2012, p.15). For example, Chuck being kicked out for consuming drugs that have been defined as illegal (at the time of our interview) likely sounds reasonable to many people because the accepted narrative within North American society is that ‘drugs are bad.’

Despite being removed from his guardian’s home for socially demonised behaviour, Chuck chose to self-disclose his homelessness to personnel at his school. Chuck reports, “a few teachers knew [I was homeless]. I told them. I got to school at 5 am, they let me sleep in the teacher’s lounge, gave me money food, then contacted [a youth shelter] for me” (Personal Communication, 2019). After being identified as homeless, Chuck’s school-based experiences were initially positive. However, the supports that Chuck was offered by his school appear to be crafted out of what little resources the institution, and individuals working there, had. Chuck was not offered any specialised formal supports within the school. After being provided with a place to sleep during school hours, some financial support that might have been out of teachers’ own pockets, and being connected with a local resource, Chuck was eventually thrown out of school. He had begun to skip classes and take drugs on school property because, as he puts it, “I just didn’t see the point” (Personal Communication, 2019). In this way, we can
see evidence of Foucault’s notion that systems reinforce themselves (Heft, 2012) on a micro-scale as well as a macro-scale: Chuck’s aunt kicks him out for using a substance and then, without a home to go to, Chuck gives up and begins using substances at school which contributes to him ending up with no housing and no school to go to, essentially leaving Chuck in a state where drug use is likely to continue or increase. The argument that substances and substance use are negative is not inherently true. However, the notion that drugs are bad can and does become a truth (partially) because of the systems of thought that perpetuate this view and shape our opinions and subsequent actions, structures, policies etc.

The principal gave me three chances, no bullshit, don’t get into any trouble. The principal knew about the situation. He offered me a way to go back [to school], gave me a workbook, said I needed to work on it each week and meet with a teacher every Friday, to help me get my diploma. I didn’t do it (Chuck, Personal Communication, 2019).

In contrast to one-strike-and-you-are-out rhetorics, Chuck’s school principal might seem generous. However, this principal placed an expectation of scholarly commitment on a youth who was not accessing any specialised supports whilst dealing with a series of adverse circumstances. Loss of housing, problematic substance use, loss of parental support etc., would rationally take most people away from their schoolwork. Therefore, a school’s ability to identify homelessness is only one piece of the puzzle. Addressing homelessness and attempting to ensure educational attainment for homeless youth is a whole other wall to dismantle and rebuild. In Chuck’s case, his school was aware of his homelessness and tried to ensure his educational attainment. However, they did not offer to help him attain housing beyond connecting him with an emergency shelter.
When youth are penalised for substance use in schools, these spaces fail to acknowledge the growing understanding that substance use and substance use disorder (i.e., addiction) are often the symptom of a problem rather than the central problem to be cured in itself (Khoury et al., 2010). Zugazaga (in Piat et al., 2014) notes that people who end up experiencing homelessness are more likely to have experienced extremely stressful life events in the past, for example, the death of loved ones, physical and sexual violence, psychiatric hospitalisation, foster care and more. The president of Carleton University states, “People say alcohol and drugs are a problem. For the people who use them, it’s often an attempted solution to the problem of living with trauma” (in Rubinstein, 2021). The content reflection below shows the use-value of drugs beyond the accepted and harmful narrative of recreational use.

Drugs provided the perfect escape from my reality of being kicked out by the only family I had this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Drugs also soothed old wounds, the ones left by years of strange and stressful occurrences, from my uncle having sex with me as a child, to my favourite step-dad running away with my schoolmate’s mum. Substance use allowed me to forget yesterdays and get through today (C. Smith, Content Reflection, 2020).

**Gavin (he/him)**

Issues such as violence, chronic conflict and substance use disorder (Castellanos, 2016) within the family home can, directly or indirectly, lead youth into homelessness. Gavin was in grade 9 when his father died. The death of a guardian was not identified within existing literature as a potential trigger for homelessness. However, for Gavin, death and grief laid the foundation of his pathway onto the streets. After losing his dad, Gavin sank into a depression and attempted to die by suicide. Gavin shared, “[My dad] was my world, and when I lost him, I kind of lost sight of everything else in between”
The death of Gavin’s father led his home situation to become “toxic” (Personal Communication, 2018). Gavin described how his mother was “destroyed” by the loss of her husband and that she became physically and emotionally violent towards him (Personal Communication, 2018).

Gavin coped with the violence by avoidance. He stayed at his school-friends parents’ houses and, when that was not an option, he slept outside in local parks. He reported thinking, “she can’t hit me if I am not home” (Personal Communication, 2018). Thus, school attendance might benefit at-risk and homeless students by facilitating connections to and helping to maintain social support networks. However, like Chuck’s, Gavin’s school lacked formal supports specific to his unique circumstances. Peressin (2009, p.15) stresses the importance of demographically specific supports based on age and gender because groups of people have different “etiologies [i.e., causes] for their homelessness.” The author notes that interventions should be “tailored to meet [the] specific needs” (p.15) of that sub-population and, going one step further, this thesis argues that: interventions should be tailored to individuals rather than populations or sub-populations. Many respondents described barriers to benefiting from inflexible supports where they often felt treated like a ‘number’ rather than a person.

Gavin emphasised that his school did try to support him during his heartbreaking grief but that his institution did not feature any formal supports specific to coping with death or grief. For example, Gavin was granted permission to leave class whenever he wanted to. He often used this accommodation to visit his guidance counsellor, though he perceived the counsellor's efforts to be “scripted” and began to feel like a burden.
You can just kind of read it from [...] the guidance counsellor’s face, it wasn’t a smile any more, it was just kind of an exhausted expression and I didn’t really feel like what I was feeling was justified. It felt like I was… uh… like annoying. I just felt so… alone. They didn’t really bring me to where I needed to be, I got there on my own (Gavin, Personal Communication, 2018).

Although death has not commonly been associated with pathways into youth homelessness, one scholar does note the propensity for loss and grief once a youth has become entrenched in life on the streets. Gaetz (2007, para 7) states, “these people, at such a young age, were mourning […] and attempting to deal with a series of losses that were intimately connected to their experience of homelessness.” Therefore, it makes sense to offer specialised grief counselling within schools if we are to make the education system safe for, and supportive of, young PWLLE.

At sixteen, Gavin made plans to move out of his childhood home where the relationship with his mother had become “venomous and a constant battle” (Personal Communication, 2018). However, he did not disclose his plans for independent living to his school counsellor because he feared that the child welfare system would become involved. What Gavin describes as his counsellor having “the power to take it into their own hands” (Personal Communication, 2018), is formally known as “duty to report” (Government of Ontario, 2019). Under Ontario’s Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA), each member of the public is obligated to report to the Children’s Aid Society if they suspect a person under the age of sixteen is physically, sexually or emotionally harmed or neglected (Government of Ontario, 2019). While the CYSFSA is intended to protect young people from harm, it can also be a barrier to disclosing victimisation and seeking help for youth. Gallagher-Mackay (2014) explains that some teachers are aware that their duty to report can cause tension between themselves and the students they want
to help. One teacher in Gallagher-Mackay (p.257) states, "If I call and nothing happens, and I have just blown the relationship [with the student], what is the point?"

Gavin chose not to disclose the violence he was experiencing at home because he believed that if the child welfare system were contacted, “my brother and I would be taken away from [my mother], and you know, she is all that we have left” (Personal Communication, 2018). His statement highlights another complexity of disclosure that was frequently reported during this study. Regardless of the severity of neglect or harm youth have been subjected to by parents or guardians, respondents often described their desire and efforts to protect these adults. Some youth described a fear that adults might face punishment, while others feared their disclosure would cause emotional distress, including embarrassment or shame to adults in their life.

The origin of Gavin’s distrust of the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) was not captured during our interview; however, his concern is not unfounded. Buckareff (2011) asserts that CAS is vulnerable to corruption because it is a profit-driven government agency. The author explains that CAS operates using a model that rewards the agency based on the number of children it apprehends into its care. Buckareff (p.6) states that “the emphasis becomes not on helping the child or the family, but on apprehending children and spending as little as possible to maintain them.” Similarly, Castellanos (2016, p. 626) suggests that the child welfare system often addresses the “immediate safety” of a young person, whilst simultaneously increasing that youth’s risk of experiencing homelessness, of poor health outcomes, and of victimisation.
Other scholars document high rates of violence and trauma experienced by children and youth that have been temporary or permanent placement in care (Biehal, 2014; Euser et al., 2013; Hobbs et al., 1999). Several participants in this study shared feelings of awkwardness around how they felt others perceived their circumstance. For example, the perception that a youth chose to leave home for sheer fun rather than to flee harm or save their own life can present a barrier to disclosure. Castellanos (2016, p.627) notes that “despite leaving home, and perhaps because of it” homeless youth “found greater sense of self, freedom, and authenticity.” However, even when necessary, prematurely leaving one’s parental home is not a simple process. Like many others, it was not easy for Gavin to remove himself from his unsafe home.

I said [to my mother], yah I have a job and I can afford it, I’ve been saving up. She started yelling and screaming ‘is that why you fucking got a job, to get away a me, am I so bad? You need to fucking disappear from my life to just like your Dad did’ and immediately it was a guilt trip (Gavin, Personal Communication, 2018)

Gavin did not disclose to his school when he left his mother’s home. Gavin’s school found out he had gotten his own apartment because his mother called the school to say she would no longer be responsible for him. Once aware of his circumstances, school personnel told Gavin, “if anything goes wrong, let us know,” but without offering any substantial resources that might help prevent something from going wrong (Personal Communication, 2018). What his school did do, was connect him to a “diversity club” where he made strong social connections and eventually became the group’s leader until his graduation.

Until graduation Gavin juggled a job in retail as well as the demands of high school. Gavin states:
I was always so tired, I was exhausted all the time. But every single time that I would have friends over and not have to worry about my mum yelling at me. Just the thought that I can actually get up and make food any time I want instead of my mum locking the food in the cupboard, right. When I was hungry I was able to eat. I just kept reiterating those things in my head and when things got hard, it made it easier, but I definitely struggled (Personal Communication, 2018).

Gavin’s school never punished him for missing deadlines or being late to class. However, telling of the obscure awkwardness that can come with leaving an unsafe home, Gavin explained that his teachers “wouldn’t really punish me but they would tell me like …you put yourself in this situation” (Personal Communication, 2018). Rather than respecting youth by assuming they left their parents’/guardians’ home for a legitimate reason, teachers and other adults sometimes demonise youth agency. It sometimes seems as if emancipated youth are treated like children playing at being adults for fun, rather than children scrambling and sometimes failing to engage in adult tasks as their only means of survival. Though not necessarily malicious, these misunderstandings can be harmful and undoubtedly contribute to a lack of trust between youth and adults within schools and other institutions.

Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition might help to explain the ‘you’ve made your bed, now lie in it attitude’ that youth in this study, including Gavin, described concerning their schools’ responses to their homelessness. Misrecognition refers to individual and collective misunderstanding of how a space operates (James, 2015b). The belief that school tests scores are an indicator of an individual’s natural aptitude, as opposed to an indicator of their socioeconomic background, is an example of misrecognition. Central to Bourdieu’s misrecognition is the assertion that “underlying processes and generating structures […] are not consciously acknowledged” by
individuals in their daily lives (James, 2015, p.100). According to James (2015), misrecognition is always functional. Gavin’s teachers misrecognising his fleeing from a violent home as a tough situation that he ‘put himself in’ serves the function of placing the responsibility onto the victim.

Nearing graduation, Gavin disclosed to school personnel that his landlord would not be renewing his lease and that he would have to find a new residence. Gavin shared, “It wasn’t sudden, I had the time to look for other places, but it got to the point where I just ran out of time, I couldn’t find a place” (Personal Communication, 2018). Gavin was busy studying for his final exams. His grades had gone up since leaving his unsafe home and he successfully graduated high school whilst trying to plan for his lease ending. Unfortunately, when his lease ended, he did become street-level homeless, this time without any of the support that being a student had previously afforded him.

Honestly it was of my own accord that I was not able to find a place...I sold almost everything that I had, at such an insanely cheap price and I packed as much as I could in my briefcase and my bag and I would stay at friends houses a lot and I kept looking every single day for a few places to live but it just never really worked out...um...so once again I would mostly stay in parks... (Gavin, Personal Communication, 2018).

Similar to how his teachers misrecognised Gavin’s adverse circumstances as self-induced, Gavin theorises (i.e., makes sense of) his transition into homelessness as a result of his own doing. I am familiar with this way of understanding homelessness because it is also how I understood my own pathway into homelessness for many years. However, temporal distance from my homelessness combined with sociological education has granted me a new perspective. I now theorise/understand that the choices we make when
we are homeless and at-risk do shape our pathways, but this is not the same as our circumstance being our own fault.

Misrecognition “is an embodied belief rather than an intellectual awareness or understanding” and is helpful in explaining how “power structures are imposed on and incorporated in individuals (Bowman, 2010, 7). Thus, this concept is helpful in understanding why many youths in this study described personal beliefs and ways of understanding that are stigmatising of themselves and others, and that help to support the conditions of their marginalisation. If we misrecognise our homelessness as our fault, we might also easily blame others for their homelessness.

Young people who are trying to graduate high school should not have to choose between studying for their final exams and finding safe and stable housing. Dion et al. (2014, p.11) emphasise the likelihood that emancipated youth will face challenges when trying to “navigate the housing search process, negotiate relationships with landlords, or choose roommates all on their own.” Furthermore, individual choices are the least powerful within global systems of inequality. For example, ageism, including negative stereotypes associated with young people, might prevent youth from renting available housing or the capitalist financialisation of housing renders available housing out of reach for those who are not financially privileged. Porter (2017, p.10) notes that the first entrance into homelessness for youth signals “the loss of connection to people upon whom they are economically and socially dependant.” Thus, lack of experience in, and capacity for, independence is one distinction between homelessness that begins as an adult compared with that beginning as a youth.
**Intersecting Systems**

This chapter focuses on the documentation of youths’ experiences within the education system. However, it is impossible to investigate youths’ experiences without acknowledging how their experiences connect to other systems that contribute to youths’ school-based experiences and life outcomes. During interviews, youth often shared narratives woven across various social structures and institutions. For example, many participants reported various degrees of interaction with the child welfare system, ranging from a distant fear of it to physical and legal entrapment within it. Similarly, several young people disclosed involvement with the criminal justice system. The propensity for youth experiencing homelessness to be caught up in several systems is outlined by other scholars and often referred to as “systems-involved” (Nichols, 2014, para 1) or “multisystem-involved” (Vidal et al., 2019, p.1) youth. Therefore, this chapter is not restricted to discussion of school-based experiences.

**Marcel (he/him)**

When we met, Marcel’s highest level of education was grade 9, and he was planning on returning to school. He had plans to go to university or college and find a job working with animals which he believes will help keep him calm. Marcel, who is Indigenous, spent much of his childhood moving around group homes and foster homes after being taken into the child welfare system at three years old. Once in care, he experienced a variety of harm from which he often fled. However, “AWOLing” (being absent without leave) only got him moved from one group home to another and institutionalised in treatment centres later on. Marcel reported believing that education
was important since he was a child, yet he often “gave up on it”, knowing he would have to switch to a new school the next time he ran away or got kicked out of his state-sponsored unsafe housing. The trigger that finally launched Marcel into street-level homelessness was a disagreement with group home staff. Staff subsequently dropped Marcel outside of an adult homeless shelter in Ottawa, with all his belongings bagged up in plastic garbage bags. He was 18 years old.

There is a known connection between the child welfare system and the prevalence of youth homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Nichols et al., 2017). Gaetz et al. (2016) found that more than half (57.8%) of Canadian youth experiencing homelessness have been involved in the child welfare system. Marcel told me that being dumped at a shelter by a staff member “actually happens to a lot of group home kids after they turn 18” (Personal Communication, 2018), and this was echoed by other participants in this study who shared similar experiences. Like Marcel, many young people flee from “state care environments” hallmarked by a lack of adequate care (Gaetz et al., 2016, p.8). The link between care and homelessness cannot be reduced to cause and effect. It is not fair to say that the child welfare system causes youth to become homeless, although Marcel’s story shows that it can. Gaetz et al. (2016) note that events and circumstances that lead protection agencies to become involved in a child or youth’s life (e.g., histories of abuse and neglect, etc.) are the same as those circumstances which can lead to homelessness. Thus, with or without intervention from child welfare organisations, young people might end up on the streets. Furthermore, the child welfare system seeks to protect children against some of the same harms that this system simultaneously perpetuates (e.g., abuse, neglect etc.).
With its powerful ability to intervene in the lives of at-risk children and youth, the child welfare system exists as a space in which prevention of youth homelessness is highly plausible. Marcel told me that none of the group homes he had lived in had ever prepared him for independent living. Nobody at his final group home attempted to assist him in finding housing nor connect Marcel with a specialised service before kicking him out. This highlights a huge oversight within a system designed to protect children and youth from harm. Marcel’s experience as a youth in care also clarifies the connection between the child welfare system and successful participation within the education system. Marcel’s status as a youth in-care notably impacted his school-based experiences. He described being in care as “a lot of bull crap because some days I would sit there trying to get an education and then other days I just give up on it because I know I am going to move in the next few months” (Personal Communication, 2018). Not only was being in care a barrier to educational attainment, but it was also a factor in Marcel’s choice not to disclose the issues that he was facing to school personnel. Stigma surrounding involvement in the child welfare system can manifest as a barrier to receiving and seeking help for youth. Marcel reflected, “I never actually told anyone [in school] about anything because I was a group home kid and no one usually believed the group home kid” (Personal Communication, 2018).

Canadian media has showcased the tendency for people in positions of authority to fail foster children by not believing them. Mazur & Krause (2019) detail a case in Ontario, where a ten-year-old girl reported sexual assault against her foster father only weeks after another ten-year-old girl made the same claim. Neither allegation was taken seriously until five years later when a third victim in the same abuser's care came
forward. Movements like the Me Too movement raise awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse by breaking this taboo phenomenon and placing it on the front page of media across the globe. However, it is essential to remember that certain individuals are particularly vulnerable to having their claims treated as a fabrication because of their identity (e.g., racialisation, sexuality, etc.) or their circumstance (e.g., homeless, foster child, etc.). When young people have their claims dismissed, this can lessen the likelihood that they will place trust in adults and others by disclosing personal information in the future (Nichols & Malenfant, 2021). Many youths in this study reported not being believed by adults around them. Similarly, Nichols and Malenfant (2021) found that young people are frequently not believed when reporting harmful events and situations. The link between the stigmatisation of youth in care and distrust between adults and youth is highlighted in the Personal Communication(2018) excerpt below:

*Peer Researcher: Why would teachers and staff at your school not believe you?*
Marcel: Because every group home kid that has ever gone to the one school… that I actually tried to go to, the school heard that those kids were mentally unstable, and those old kids used to just flip out in school.

*Peer Researcher: Did you ever try to tell staff something and then have them not believe you, or did you just say ‘fuck it’ I am not even going to bother because I know they won’t believe me?*
Marcel: Both

*Peer Researcher: What would happen when you tried to tell them?*
Marcel: Well, people would just look at me funny and say that I was lying, or it was mostly my fault because I was in the group home for something that actually never even happened

Marcel’s status as a young Indigenous man who has experienced life on a reserve contributed to the shape of his pathway into homelessness, his school-based and many other experiences that he described. Unfortunately, adults in Marcel’s life failed to
acknowledge his past and present circumstances in relation to his behaviours and challenges. Group home staff punished him for “flipping out,” yet Marcel theorised that his issues around anger and reactivity were the product of his childhood experience rather than a conscious choice to engage in deviance (Personal Communication, 2018). Marcel told me that when he was first taken into care, the Children’s Aid Society would place him in foster homes close to his family home so that he could still visit frequently. There were stretches where the Children’s Aid Society allowed him to return home, but the stays got shorter and shorter each time he would ‘flip out’ until placing him close to home was no longer a priority.

[…] all of my life I have seen people who haven’t given any craps about anything and just flip out themselves […] It’s because I have lived on the Res for a few years. And I have never actually seen a stable environment and back on the Res I have just seen people flip out, hit people, literally just punch people and that’s kind of where I learned to do it (Marcel, Personal Communication, 2018)

This failure to acknowledge and attempt to understand the origin of Marcel’s behavioural issues, as evident in the Children’s Aid Society’s punitive responses to his issues, is indicative of a much broader problem. Gaetz, (2013, p.306) asserts that “Solutions to youth homelessness require a holistic approach, one that addresses both individual concerns and broader structural barriers.” Just as we cannot look at one system outside of its connection to all others, we cannot separate these systems from the sociohistorical context in which they developed, such as colonialism.

The terms colonialism and colonisation do not just refer to past events during which land now called Canada was invaded and stolen by Europeans. Colonialism continues today and is embedded across most Canadian structures and systems. Baskin (2013, p.406) states that the child welfare system continues to be a “strong arm of
colonization.” Thus, when trying to understand the experiences of Indigenous youth, it is essential to acknowledge how colonialism continues to shape Indigenous life outcomes violently. While only 5% of Canada’s population are Indigenous, Indigenous peoples are enormously overrepresented in homelessness (Caplan et al., 2020).

Residential schools, a keystone in the genocide of Indigenous peoples, were institutions operated by the Canadian government and various churches. Between 1870 and 1990, thousands of Indigenous children and youth were removed from their families and forced into residential schools (Union of Ontario, 2013), where the practice of their cultures and expression of their identities were brutally forbidden (Gabriel, 2015). Residential schools were hallmarked by the “extreme neglect, torture, and physical, sexual, and psychological abuse” of Indigenous children (Gabriel, 2015, p.23). Marcel and other youth in this study described several harmful experiences within the child welfare, health care, and criminal justice system; the connection between the assimilating, eradicating force of residential schools and the punitive, life-destroying force exerted on Indigenous bodies by current state systems is impossible to ignore.

**Educational Disconnection and Reconnection**

More than half of the participants in this study were not enrolled in school and had not yet graduated high school at the time of the research interview. Respondents described various causes that led to their educational disconnection. For example, geographical separation due to moving, punitive measures imposed on youth by their schools (e.g., suspension/ expulsion), youth choosing to drop out to take care of their immediate survival needs, etc. Almost all participants reported (when prompted) believing that education is important in general and that attaining a high school diploma
was important to them. However, several youths described barriers to remaining connected to and reconnecting with educational institutions.

**Banting (he/him)**

Banting reported that since dropping out and reconnecting with school, trying to forge a career in cooking stalled his attempts to graduate high school. However, at the time of our interview, Banting was enrolled in adult education and committed to getting his diploma. Banting described his initial disconnect from schooling as a consequence of his “recreational” drug use. While Banting termed his use recreational, he also described the lead up to his substance use as one marked by physical and emotional loss.

Banting played competitive soccer at school, which he described as “an outlet” that he loved. When he tore his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), a ligament in his knee, Banting was forced to quit that outlet. Following his injury, Banting moved to a new school in a new city, and, without sports, Banting started hanging out with other students who used substances “because they were accepting of everyone.” He described the benefit of joining a group of peers where all you had to do was “show up with $20” to participate meaningfully. Around the same time as being injured and switching to a new school, Banting lost his grandmother, who he described as his “favourite person in the world” (Personal Communication, 2018). Banting shared that his grandmother was “my mum when my mum wasn’t around, and I could talk to her and tell her about all of my problems” (Personal Communication, 2018). Thus, the substance use that Banting theorises as the origin of his problems in school, alternatively, can be theorised as the result of personal, relational and structural elements combined into a recipe for
educational disconnect. Banting reported, “everything had mounted and I completely shut down emotionally” (Personal Communication, 2018).

Before his struggles in school began, Banting lived with his parents, who he described as “busy”, whereby his mother was “always exhausted from work” (Personal Communication, 2018). Conversations around homelessness are not shy to mention its structural roots in capitalism (Gaetz, 2013; Laster Pirtle, 2020; A. Marcus, 2005). However, it is particularly important to consider the micro impacts of our socioeconomic structural surroundings (i.e. macro forces). Banting’s reflection that his mother was always exhausted and unavailable due to work can be linked to the intense demand within advance capitalist societies for individuals to spend a significant portion of their daily lives labouring for a wage in a competitive market alongside increasing “precariousness of employment” (Butler, 2019, p.201).

[Politicians] who talked about the homeless never proposed a housing policy, or even mentioned housing, and [politicians] who promoted the image of drug-dealing scrape-out-your-mama's-gold-fillings-for-a-crack-pipe, ghetto super-predators, avoided mention of the employment market (Marcus, 2005, p.46)

The quote above shows how easily we can ignore the interconnectedness of all social phenomenon. When we consider how capitalism contributes to homelessness, it is important that the focus not be limited to economic stratification and poverty and include micro, meso, and macro forces and impacts simultaneously. It is essential to understand how the socioeconomic structure of our society affects all relationships, the ones we have with ourselves, our family and others (Butler, 2019), and how these (partially) structurally determined relationships shape life outcomes for individuals. For example, Banting shared that although he wanted to get an education, he needed money to survive,
as capitalism ensures we all share in that need. However, Banting described his employment as a threat to his attempts at sobriety, often draining on his mental health and a barrier to educational reconnection and sustained attendance.

Banting’s choice to join a group of peers who were accepting of him cannot be viewed outside of his lack of parental support due to economic demands outside of their control. Similarly, Banting’s assertion that he did not have “a way to express” himself or “get those emotions out” (Personal Communication, 2018) during high school cannot be considered outside of the reality whereby the structure of the education system is not necessarily one that works to ensure young people can express a diversity of emotions through a variety of supported outlets. Sports and arts are only two potential outlets for young people to express themselves in schools. A common theme among participants in this study is that young people often faced adverse consequences from expressing emotions such as anger, frustration and panic. A lived experience expert and good friend of mine once said, “the difference between an eccentric and a criminal is housing” (Stu Pitts, Personal Communication, 2019). There are significant implications to not having a space in which to vent emotions, regardless of how ugly or alarming those expressions might be.

Banting was transferred to an alternative schooling program at 16, where the collective circumstances of the student body disproportionately reflected several of the issues that he was also struggling with, including family conflict, educational disconnect, and substance use. Attending this program meant that he would have more flexibility over his learning and be required to attend fewer hours in class. However, Banting still ran into problems in this space because the way the school was structured did not allow
him to succeed. Independent learning, whereby the student decides the order in which they work through their credits (e.g., which subject to work on when), was a central feature of the alternative institution that Banting attended. However, all students were required to first take and pass a ‘life skills’ class before gaining access to independent learning. Although he enjoyed parts of the class, Banting also reported, “no matter how hard I tried, I could not be on time [for class]. So that was a problem, and they didn’t want to pass you if you didn’t [show up on time]” (Personal Communication, 2018). Therefore, even while Banting took the life skills course three times, frequent tardiness meant that he never passed and was not allowed to progress and take the other classes he needed to graduate high school. He said, “just my small thing of being not on time preventing me from learning as much as I could” (Personal Communication, 2018).

Banting emphasised the importance of the life skills class and how repeating the class helped him learn different self-care styles. Banting stated, “the more I did [the course], the more I understood” and explained that he wished life skills had been an ongoing class that began in kindergarten (Personal Communication, 2018). Banting said, “we learned Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and I haven’t forgotten that, you know?” (Personal Communication, 2018). Banting’s retention of Maslow’s theory highlights how learning a variety of theorisations that can be applied to our lived and living experiences, might help young people and others understand ourselves better, including our circumstances, actions, and outcomes. Should I find a way to make this thesis accessible to youth (hopefully through in-school presentations), I hope that it will help them theorise their experiences in beneficial ways.
When you’re stuck on the bottom level of that basic needs of finding a place to live, finding a job, finding, you know, just a place to be comfortable its kind of just, you get stuck in the cycle of basic needs and survival mode and it does become almost a blur” (Banting, Personal Communication, 2018).

**Street-based versus School-based education**

For the heart of the school's function is not to be found in the daily dispensing of information, but in the day-to-day social encounters shaped by the structural properties of the education (Giroux, 1978, p.148). Education is an important part of the lives of young people, whether they receive it formally within institutions or informally through peers, the media or enculturation. Many young people in this study described learning how to cope with life on the streets from their unhoused peers, who often learned from other homeless youth and adults how to survive. All but two youth in this study reported that their school did not teach them about homelessness. Furthermore, many respondents explained that they did not know that homelessness was a possibility in their lives until it happened to them. The two participants that reported having received education on homelessness at school shared that the topic was addressed as something that happens in other countries and/or to older people.

**Bianca (she/her)**

Bianca, who is Indigenous, faced “mental abuse” at the hands of her parents, who both struggled with problematic alcohol use (Personal Communication, 2018). While the abuse was not physical, Bianca told me that it took both a physical and emotional toll on her. The first time Bianca left home, she was sixteen and did not yet know any other youth experiencing homelessness. Bianca turned to her housed friends for support, and
they all advised her she should go back home. The misinformed or uninformed recommendation from Bianca’s peers highlights the limitations of a support network comprised of young people who have not been educated on youth homelessness. When Bianca returned home, the situation worsened and remained that way until she left again, this time for good.

“It was a better choice to leave. So my decision was to just leave that situation [at home] and then try to fix this one. Try to build from this situation [on the streets]” (Bianca, Personal Communication, 2019). Evidently, Bianca chose to leave home, not because she thought that life on the streets would be a good time but because she perceived leaving as a safer choice than staying. Davis (2019, para 8) notes that “many teens can’t return home because the problem that caused them to flee is still there.” Thus, the idea that youth experiencing homelessness can simply return home is a myth.

Furthermore, Bianca’s statement shows that her choice was not one of impulse. She analysed the realities of life at home, theorised that both staying and leaving would be challenging, and concluded that leaving would allow her a better chance at fixing what was bound to be a tough situation either way.

Bianca had not received explicit lessons on homelessness. However, her school-based experiences did teach her something about being at-risk of homelessness. Before leaving home, school personnel knew about the issues that were playing out in Bianca’s family home, yet instead of being offered specialised school-based supports, Bianca was told to leave her problems at the door. This highlights Jackson’s assertion (in Giroux 1978, p.149) that within schools, students learn to “suffer in silence.” The harmful results
of this dismissive approach to Bianca’s experience of family breakdown are evident in the interview excerpt below:

[my school] just offered me a counselor and told me to leave home stuff at home and [that] when I come to school it’s a brand-new thing […] It made me feel hurt. Like they just told me everything is going to be okay just cos like they don’t want to take time out of their day to be like what’s up? What’s happening? So it’s just like oh don’t worry about it. Leave that stuff at home, you’ll forget about it just focus on school. And it’s not really like that at all you know (Bianca, Personal Communication, 2019).

Bianca went on to describe her inability to focus during class as a direct result of the circumstances at home. Instead of sitting in class without focus, she began to skip classes. However, rather than alleviate her mental strain, absenteeism led to more distress because she did not have the capacity to catch up on missed material. Absenteeism also landed her in trouble with teachers who told her she was “lazy” (Bianca, Personal Communication, 2019).

What teachers reportedly interpreted as laziness, Bianca theorised as the result of her childhood: “I grew up by myself like I basically raised myself but with my parents’ help, it sounds stupid but… I basically grew up by myself, yeah. With adults around me who were drinking” (Personal Communication, 2019). Bianca reports that her lack of focus in school, for which she was punished and ridiculed by teachers, was a reflection of the exhaustion brought about by her life at home. This misrecognition, whereby Bianca’s school-based behaviour was “not recognised for what it is” served as a lesson to Bianca (James, 2015, p.100). This example shows evidence of Bourdieu’s (in James, 2015, p.100) assertion that misrecognition is “functional.” In Bianca’s case, teachers who misrecognised her circumstances as laziness helped to ensure the homogenous treatment of an undoubtedly heterogeneous classroom. Furthermore, it shows how misrecognition
always connects to, and supports, larger systems of inequality in that Bianca’s teachers failed to recognise the “social determinants of the educational career” (James, 2015, p.101).

The public education system's impact on individuals extends far beyond the formal lessons we are taught and tested on. Giroux and Purpel (1983, p.IX) state that schools are “agencies of socialisation” meaning they shape individuals’ participation, actions, attitudes, and behaviours within institutions and society. The hidden curriculum refers to the “unstated norms, values, and beliefs transmitted to students through the underlying structure of schooling” (Giroux, 1978, p.148). This concept is one way of understanding the significance and implications of Bianca’s school-based experiences. Giroux (1978, p.148) argues that students learn “more from the hidden curriculum than from the official curriculum.” Giroux asserts that the hidden curriculum is important to recognise because any attempt to reform the education system that does not acknowledge this socialising force will be ineffective. The hidden curriculum is not simply an unspoken code of conduct invented by educators and discreetly enforced on students. It is a set of teachings and learnings that are determined by the structure of the education system. In Bianca’s case, her classroom learning (like most) was standardised. Regardless of their diverse circumstances outside of school, each student is expected to limit their focus to the teacher. No matter what class she was attending, the implicit lesson aimed at Bianca was that she should not allow herself to be distracted by her personal circumstances. Parsons & Jackson (in Giroux, 1978) identified three structural elements of the education system from which the hidden curriculum emerges: Homogeneity, whereby diverse individuals are grouped together and expected to perform standardised
tasks. Distinction, whereby the teachers and students exist as polarised (i.e., divided and opposing) entities. And finally, discipline, whereby the educator rewards or punishes students based on a system of evaluation.

The leave-your-homelessness-at-the-door classroom Bianca experienced exemplifies the notion of a hidden curriculum and, particularly, the structural homogeneity that supports it. Thus, the teacher’s request that Bianca not bring her ‘home problems’ to school likely has less to do with the morality of this individual teacher and more to do with the structural/institutional demand to treat and evaluate all students equally rather than equitably. Similarly, Bianca reported that her issues were beyond the scope of her school counsellor to respond to. When a student body is treated as a homogenous group, the resources, practices, and attitudes within it are bound to fail, neglect or harm many individuals whose identity or circumstances places them outside of the capacity of standardised entities to respond.

In addition to formal and informal learnings from the education system, young people in this study frequently reported informal peer-to-peer learning. Peer-to-peer learning taught youth how to access certain services, cope with life on the streets, alleviate problematic substance use, and more. This type of learning is not often discussed within the literature on youth homelessness. Nichols & Malenfant (2021, p.25) state that discourse on “entrenchment” frequently focuses on the negative implications of street life for young people. However, the authors argue that youth can benefit from their connection to a community of street-involved peers (i.e., entrenchment). The authors (p.26) explain how their conversations with young people led them to “view young people’s continued participation in street life as potentially protective” because youth
linked their participation to “stability, particularly in the face of ongoing issues with food
security, efforts to make money, and struggles with mental health.” Peer-to-peer learning
plays an important role in young peoples’ experiences of homelessness as well as in their
survival.

**Bristol (she/her)**

Bristol, who used to fall asleep during every class in school, left her parent’s
home due to an overcrowded living space. After getting her own place, Bristol was
evicted by the landlord for having too many friends over. This highlights an important
need for youth housing to support youths’ needs and lifestyles, including their social life.
Bristol was able to attain her high school ‘certificate’ but wants to go back and get her
real diploma as she reported, “for a job, if you don’t get a diploma, you won’t get a real
job” (Personal Communication, 2019). Ontario offers a multi-tiered system for high
school completion. Students who turn 18 and have not completed all of their Secondary
School Diploma requirements are sometimes awarded an Ontario Secondary School
Certificate (Province of Ontario, n.d). Other students who have met even fewer
requirements might be awarded a Certificate of Accomplishment (Province of Ontario,
n.d). This tiered approach, which further contributes to the theorisation of schools as
“social sorting machines” appears problematic because although young people graduate,
it is not necessarily with the accreditation necessary to progress on to post-secondary
education (Kerckhoff in Domina et al., 2017, p.5).

One participant described how they were issued a certificate by their school to
leave, so that school personnel would not have to deal with them returning the following
year. Furthermore, some participants expressed confusion over what credentials they had attained in school and whether they would access post-secondary education or employment. Domina et al. (2017, p.6) state that “schools explicitly position themselves as gatekeepers, intentionally sorting students into the social roles that they will ultimately play in a complex and highly specialized adult society.” When schools fail to intervene in homelessness, punish youth for the symptoms of adverse circumstances and omit homelessness education, homelessness becomes another cog in the sorting machine.

Bristol reported that she never received any school-based education on youth homelessness but that it could have helped her know more about substances and not get into as much trouble on the streets. After becoming homeless, one of Bristol’s friends showed her crystal meth, and she later became dependant on that substance. “Peer influence” has traditionally been believed to increase the risk of substance use amongst young people (Reed & Rountree, 1997, p.143). However, what some theorise to be peer pressure, others might theorise as peer-to-peer education. Young people teach one another coping mechanism to deal with various issues, and substance use is one possible mechanism. I often offer marijuana to my peers because using this substance continues to help me sleep, stay calm, avoid relapse and more. However, just as frequently, I encourage my peers to try other things that I use for wellness, such as spending time with animals and working out.

Bristol managed to quit meth by staying away from the friend that introduced her to it and by forging new relationships with other youth experiencing homelessness that were not entrenched in meth use. Bristol stated, “I have my friend helping me. She stays with me for a while for the most part to make sure I’m staying away from [meth]”
This echoes Nichols and Malenfant’s (2021, p.26) assertion that youth who exit the streets sometimes continue to “give back” to others who are still struggling by offering “support, guidance and opportunities for peer learning.”

Bristol's experience of peer support is echoed by another youth in this study, Jack:

Everyone thinks that you are just nothing when you are homeless. You have more peer support though. Everyone has everyone’s back in the city, the homeless youth here stay very connected (Personal Communication, 2019).

At the time of our interview, Bristol was actively participating in a supportive program for youth experiencing homelessness. Importantly, Bristol learned how to access this support through referrals from her peers, not through a formal institution or agent. Tripp, (2005, p.543) found that peer-led education is “more effective, resulting in greater positive changes” for students than adult-led initiatives. Some young people in this study reported being referred to services by their family members. Additionally, some participants asserted the need for teachers and school administrators to be more aware of the services and supports they could direct youth towards.

**Fragmented Education & Shelter Living**

Most of the young people in this study were actively experiencing homelessness at the time of the interview. Around half of the respondents reported that they were staying in a shelter. Several youths described how their shelter stay was not guaranteed each night and how they had to be back by curfew or follow other rules in order to have their bed reserved for them. One young man described the guilty feeling of gaining access to a shelter bed whilst knowing that a bed for him meant another youth had been kicked out. Several participants explained that attending school whilst living in the
shelter was extremely challenging. Most expressed a need for housing before they could fully reconnect with and succeed in school.

**May (she/her)**

May, who loves art and drawing and who moved all around Ontario throughout her childhood, was one of the youngest participants in this study. She was fifteen and living in a youth-specific shelter at the time of our interview. Unlike several other shelter-staying participants, May considered herself homeless even while she was able to stay physically sheltered by an emergency service. She reported, “I have to share [the shelter] with a whole bunch of people I don’t know and they’re just random people that are coming in” (Personal Communication, 2019). Thus, May might theorise her circumstance as one of homelessness because of the lack of privacy and safety rather than because of the presence, or lack of, physical shelter. Frequent moves meant that May’s schooling was often fragmented, transitioning from one institution to another. She said, “I’ve been to a lot of schools. It’s hard to remember all of them.” In another world, this might have meant May got to sample different institutional strategies for addressing at-risk youth; instead, she said, “no school really helped me” (Personal Communication, 2019). May recalled, “it was a busy school. And the classes were like usually really full. Um, and they were always usually really busy so I don’t know if they really could have done anything” (Personal Communication, 2019).

For May, living at the shelter meant displacement from informal social supports in her (most recent) hometown, as well as from the medical care that she required. Rather than receiving treatment for her physical ailments within the proximity of her shelter May
had to rely on her child welfare worker to arrange travel for her to attend appointments
booked more than an hour away. This invites the question: what is the cost of relying on
professional supports for day-to-day necessities? May described living in the youth
shelters as a mixed bag. On the one hand, the shelter supplies her with a bed and regular
meals; on the other, the shelter requires May and all other residents to be off the property
for several hours during the day. Thus, even while literature praises the development of
youth-specific services, these resources are not necessarily holistic and can leave many
gaps in support and cause youth harm in other ways.

May explained how the shelter imposes rules on the residents, such as curfew and
policies on behavioural conduct that often results in youth being removed from the
shelter. Several other respondents problematised shelter rules and their punitive policies
for being too strict or out of touch with youths’ lifestyles. May did not break the rules but
did find herself barred from accessing the shelter for more than one week during her time
there. When one of her friends became homeless but did not meet the eligibility criteria
for the shelter, May left to help keep them company. When May tried to return the
following night, her bed had already been given to another youth in need. Undoubtedly,
kicking youth out or finding other ways to limit the duration of their stay is a necessary
part of the shelter sector because there are simply not enough beds for all youth, adults
and families without homes to be sheltered each night. However, punitive measures
should not be the mechanism through which inadequate resources are unevenly
distributed.

Instances of family homelessness notwithstanding, May reports her first experience
of independent homelessness beginning when she was only fourteen and continued
periodically since then. Notably, while May describes frequent moves in and out of different family members’, friends’ and strangers’ houses, she also expressed bafflement at the resulting bouts of homelessness:

First everything goes stable and then just goes whoooo. And then I’m back to being homeless and never understand why. Whenever I have money it goes to like helping wherever I am. And like, the people that I’m around, I’m always a nice person to. I’m usually a quiet person. I’m not always like in someone’s face or anything[…] I’m grateful for people that have helped me (Personal Communication, 2019).

May’s description of housing instability might provide clues as to why she continues to experience homelessness. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is one social theory that can be applied to May’s experience of transient and unstable housing. Habitus is one way of theorising how we came to be the way we are as individuals and why we do the things we do. This might be especially useful in gaining insight into those moments when our performed actions are at odds with our asserted goals. The most valuable aspect of habitus is its potential to provide “clues for how change occurs in practice” (Barker, 2016, p.665). Maybe if we understand how we came to be, we will be better equipped to shape who we become.

Barker (2016, p.665) applies the concept of habitus to experiences of youth homelessness to demonstrate that “instability and uncertainty can become an organising theme in people’s lives.” According to the author, habitus operates at the unconscious level, representing an informal, practical knowledge that directs an individual’s actions preconsciously. One danger to viewing experiences of homelessness through a lens of habitus is that it can sound a lot like victim-blaming, which is why is it important to emphasise that habitus develops, informs and is performed unconsciously. In contrast to
victim-blaming, whereby a line is drawn connecting an individuals’ choices to adverse outcomes, habitus explains how our agency is symbiotic with our structural environment.

Traditionally, Bourdieusian theorists have described habitus as the product of socio-economic class in which concepts such as a middle-class habitus and working-class habitus are common (Hong & Zhao, 2015; McNay, 1999a; Wacquant, 2016). However, Barker’s observation that groups of people “share similar conditions of existence and, in turn, a similar habitus” more closely reflects my own interpretation of Bourdieu’s work. In this non-traditional understanding, habitus still originates from class; however, a “class of conditions” (Barker, 2016, p.668), not strictly limited to economic conditions. Understanding habitus as a product of a class of conditions renders this concept much more appropriate for investigating experiences of youth homelessness, which are not limited to one socioeconomic class.

Habitus is the “internalisation of externality” (Barker, 2016, p.673). While this concept should be seen in opposition to victim-blaming, we must also acknowledge the potential for discourse around habitus to be weaponised as a form of victim-blaming. May’s first experience of an emergency shelter occurred around 3rd grade when she was taken out of school to flee domestic violence with her mother. Interestingly, whilst I reviewed Ontario school board policies, the only policies to explicitly acknowledge the potential for students to be caught up in the shelter system were those articles addressing domestic violence. Even before 3rd grade, May and her mother moved in and out of several provisional, shared and precarious residences where their transition from one residence to the next was often abrupt and marked by sudden crisis. As May’s mother
sought to keep them both sheltered by navigating between temporary residences, one can imagine how that trajectory might be internalised by May.

At the time of our interview, May expressed confusion over the persistence of housing instability in her life. The notion of habitus would suggest that May’s “experiences are structured in terms of a logic derived from the past, as homeless young people perceive and reproduce instability in their present conditions” (Barker, 2016, p.673). For example, it is possible that May ends up getting kicked out frequently (even when she believes herself to be a respectful house guest) because the logic she unconsciously derives from her past directs her to seek or accept shared housing from individuals who are generally unable to provide a stable environment. Barker (2016) uses habitus to argue that solutions for homelessness must be based on the understanding that structure and agency are inextricably bound together.

Marcie (they/them)

Marcie is a maths whizz who always took extra credits when possible, never getting lower than an A+, even when experiencing homelessness and attending school at the same time. This accomplishment is impressive because in general, “residential instability [has] a negative effect on student academic achievement (Cumming & Gloeckner, 2012). At the time of our interview, Marcie was thinking about pursuing a career in accounting. Marcie and I stayed in touch after the research interview but have since lost contact. I hope that they are surviving, wherever they are. Marcie struggled with anger issues growing up and, during the interview, reported they would have liked to
have specific supports in school that could have helped with those emotions. For Marcie, family breakdown is tied to their gender identity:

> [my parents] started treating me like shit [...] when I came out as trans initially. I came out about a month before grade nine and that’s when they stopped buying me clothing. They stopped letting me cut my hair. They stopped buying food for me (Personal Communication, 2019).

Gender identity (e.g., trans, cis, non-binary) and sexual identity (e.g., gay, straight, poly) are distinct, however, individuals whose gender or sexual identity is not cisnormative or heteronormative often face discrimination and stigmatisation known as transphobia and homophobia (Abramovich, 2016). Castellanos (2016 p. 601) notes that LBT2QS+ youth often enter homelessness as a result of “long-term processes of family disintegration in which [...] disclosure of homosexuality exacerbated pre-existing conflict.” Similarly, disclosure of one's gender identity might also serve as a trigger into homelessness for young people because many people continue to choose to believe that, for example, all people born with vaginas are women (Abramovich, 2016). Thankfully, the transphobia that Marcie experienced at home was not reflected’ by the adults at their school. Marcie’s school approved their name change (from legal to chosen) in the system immediately after they inquired with the administration. Marcie’s school-based experience is not typical of trans students who often encounter school personnel who are reluctant to use preferred names without explicit parental consent (Davis, 2015).

Although Marcie reported their school to be a safe space, they risked punishment at home by attempting to access the resources available to them at school.

I would ask for like help at school with food and stuff like that and like clothing. And, like, anytime that they would find out about it, like, my parents, they’d get really mad and be like, oh, you’re asking for help. You’re going to get us in trouble.
Like, stuff like that. And it’s like, well, then you should be doing that for me (Marcie, Personal Communication, 2019). Marcie's guardians might have been ashamed of their negligence or only afraid of punishment; in either case, Marcie’s home circumstances became a barrier to them accessing school-based supports and resources. Thus, when we think about the rolling out of resources for at-risk youth, we must also consider the way onlookers, including parents, peers, and others, perceive such resources. Another respondent described their younger brother being handed the lost-and-found box at the end of the year by teachers who knew the family was struggling. Unfortunately, the unintended consequence of this act of kindness was that the respondent's brother felt singled out and was subsequently bullied by peers. It is important for schools to be mindful of and reduce the social cost of accessing resources for students.

In grade 11, as the family conflict at home did not improve, Marcie began to get more depressed. That depression led to feelings of exhaustion which in turn led Marcie to begin missing classes. Marcie reported that their school did not punish their absenteeism because they kept the teachers informed about their home situation. However, despite Marcie’s impressive academic performance, the missed classes angered their mother. Several youths in this study described how their inability to uphold good conduct in school, including absenteeism and declining grades, exacerbated family conflict issues and thus contributed to their risk of homelessness. Educators and administrators should be aware of the relationship between school performance, including academic scores and general conduct, and family conflict.

Neoliberalism might give us some insight into the school-based experiences of Marcie and other young PWLLE. Systems, structures and individuals shape each other
simultaneously. Evidence of how advanced capitalist socioeconomic organisation has (re)shaped education can be found in “markets in education” within which parents can shop around for the educational forms (public, private, extracurricular etc.) they wish their children to attain (Hill & Kumar, 2009). Marcie’s report did not describe their parents as consumers of education, however, their parents’ increased anger at Marcie’s declining school attendance might indicate another impact of neoliberalism on individuals.

Koshy (2013, p.345) explains how within neoliberal society human abilities are viewed as “sources of potential income.” The authors (p.2) assert that within neoliberal society, “profit is God” and the market to be ensured at all costs. All social spheres come to resemble markets whereby market goals become the goals of the sphere and the individuals within it (Koshy, 2013). In thinking about capitalism and neoliberalism, it becomes easy to imagine why many parents see school attendance as so important, and why some parents become so enraged (with some even kicking their children out) due to poor educational attainment/attendance.

When Marcie’s guardians asked them to leave their home permanently, they were 18 years old and in their final year of high school. By this time, someone at her school had already connected Marcie to a worker from a youth shelter. The shelter worker picked Marcie up right from their mother’s house; however, all of the shelters close by were full, so Marcie was taken to youth shelter a substantial distance away from her school and hometown. Displacement is another way that accessing essential supports might come at a cost for youth. Displacement was common within the narratives of participants from rural Ontario. The community partners in this research reported that the
Niagara region has relatively few resources for homeless youth. The region’s lack of supports is likely why many of the youth I interviewed in St. Catharines had travelled (been displaced) there during a crisis. Interview participants that congregated at youth services in St. Catharines hailed from anywhere within about a two-hour radius. In contrast, most Ottawa participants were living locally at the time of their entrance into homelessness.

For Marcie, displacement meant they eventually dropped out of school because it was too far from the shelter. School admins knew that Marcie was living in a shelter that was miles away and was understanding of their situation; however, Marcie reports that administrators “didn’t really do a whole lot” so she eventually just stopped going (Personal Communication, 2019). Thus, the efficacy of self-advocacy is limited by institutional capacity and commitment to respond. Unlike many respondents, Marcie was able and willing to disclose their circumstances at school, yet this did not ensure them adequate assistance in return. Moving into a shelter also cost friends as Marcie reported their peers did not understand why they were sleeping in another city.

**Whose Failing Who?**

Within a neoliberal order, in which the wealth of nations has come to be measured by their human capital rather than just their physical capital, education (particularly scientific and mathematical knowledge) is widely seen as the key to success and economic dominance (Koshy, 2013, 347).

Several participants described their inability to succeed in school. Sadly, youths often theorised their poor scholarly achievement as a reflection of their intellect or as a personal failure. Similarly, Nichols and Malenfant (2021, p.69) found that many young
research participants felt they were “at fault for dropping out, not trying hard enough, or being ‘bad’.” Meanwhile, the authors’ (p.69) analysis of the youths’ accounts identified clear evidence of an “exclusionary and discriminatory educational context” whereby youth are denied or neglected the supports that could have allowed them to succeed in school.

**Benny (he/him)**

Benny grew up on a small reserve with a population of around 600, where he started using substances with friends. He left the reserve independently, around the age of sixteen. His trigger into homelessness coincided with his exit from problematic substance use. Benny reported, “it was my own addiction that caused me to leave [the reserve], I was losing friends and family… after that, pretty much on and off housing here and there, homeless then housing again then homeless” (Personal Communication, 2019). When he moved away from the res and into the city, Benny went to rehab and entered a relationship with a girl struggling with an unstable/unsafe situation in her parents’ home. Benny helped his girlfriend leave her unsafe housing situation, and together they supported one another on the streets. Benny credits his sustained sobriety with his having to care for his girlfriend. While Benny expressed that educational attainment is important, he also described his challenges to schooling: “I’m not very bright” (Personal Communication, 2018).

When Benny attended school on his reserve, substance use hindered his attempts to meaningfully participate in education. He also reports not getting much support in his family home. Benny became involved with the child welfare system in his early teens and
began a “back and forth” between his parents' residence and institutionalised care. Benny shared his experiences of the child welfare system:

It’s like kid jail. Like there’s two of them near my reserve. One is just for kids that is not as bad, like you’re allowed to run around in the building, but there’s always be doors locked and the other one it’s just like jail but it’s for kids. Like you have your own cell doors and stuff like that there, it’s pretty bad (Personal Communication, 2019).

Benny was subjected to the scared straight approach rather than having access to helpful resources within these spaces. Institution staff told Benny to “smarten up” or else face real jail later on (Personal Communication, 2019). A youth in Nichols and Malenfant’s study (2021, p.70) describes how being told they would go to jail by school personnel did nothing to alter their behaviours and instead signalled to them that they were “a horrible monster of a human being.” Benny reported that he did end up in jail. However, Benny’s criminalisation is not an indication of the staffs’ ability to predict the future; rather, it is indicative of the care-to-prison pipeline that several scholars have described (Summersett Williams et al., 2021; Nickel et al., 2020; Steele, 2019) as well the continuation of colonialism that has ensured the unceasing carceral warehousing of Indigenous and racialised peoples since settlement (Chartrand, 2019; Maynard, 2017).

At the time of our interview, Benny felt the reserve had become a place where he would only be entrenched in substance use, and he reported that he never wanted to return. However, the narrative Benny shared highlights the despicable results of both past and present (neo)colonialism and the segregation and displacement of Indigenous peoples that this structural process continues to ensure. Macdonald (in Chartrand, 2019, p.69) states that “Canada’s prisons are the new residential schools.” Importantly, Benny’s experiences of growing up on an Indigenous reserve are directly related to the Canadian
government’s establishment of the reserve system as a means to segregate and oppress Indigenous peoples (Kidd et al., 2018).

Benny reported that the only addiction supports available to him on his reserve were Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) (both abstinence-based). Benny reported that accessing support groups meant that individuals were required to go to some form of treatment first. However, detox and rehab facilitate were located hours away from Benny’s reserve and difficult to access. Kid et al. (2018) found that reserve-raised youth reported more substance use challenges whilst growing up than Indigenous youth who were not raised on a reserve. Benny described his school-based experiences as a combination of poor achievement, punishment, and absence. Benny summed his schooling up as, “Getting in trouble, not attending, getting detention and losing marks is pretty much it” (Personal Communication, 2019). Benny’s experiences highlight the sticky web that connects our individual experiences, including our individual choices and actions, to our broader environment, including those unseen sociohistorical forces, obscured within systems and institutions, that shape our life outcomes.

The propensity for young people to experience punishment in schools was evident throughout participants’ responses. Wacquant’s theorisations of neoliberalism might help us understand why young people face punishment for the symptoms of their homelessness. Wacquant (in Lynch, 2011, p.237) wrote of “Punishing the Poor” as central to neoliberal society. In this view, prisons and criminalisation are only one way in which poor people are punished. Lacey (in O’Malley, 2015, p.1) states that neoliberalism “has been associated with an intensification of penalty.” Lynch (2011) asserts that the
same ideals that fuel carceral (i.e. prison) expansion spill out into other systems and institutions within neoliberal society. Thus within neoliberal society, many institutions and structures are organised and governed by punishment (Wacquant, 2010). Justification for punishment is provided by the neoliberal ideal of individual responsibility. If we believe people are individually responsible for all that happens to them, then we are more likely to be supportive of punitive measures.

Some young peoples’ stories seemed to describe schools using punishment for punishment’s sake. For example, Kayla reported school being a safe place for her away from the group homes she was forced to live in. However, suicidal depression, that she theorises as a result of medical conditions and a childhood spent tangled up in the child welfare system, caused her to start avoiding school. Kayla got good grades until her depression got so bad that she could not get out of bed in the mornings. Even though her school knew that Kayla was having a hard time living in group homes, her principal soon called to tell her that she was being suspended for absence.

Why would forced absence in the form of suspension be viewed by the education system as useful punishment for absenteeism? Mora and Christianakis (2012, p.2) argue that neoliberalism has “given rise to a new punitive common sense which normalises the economic competitiveness of the neoliberal economy, the insecurities involved in the wage and labor market, and criminalization of poverty.” The punishment of individuals, for actions, behaviours and circumstances that have structural and systemic roots, is normalised within by the education system. Importantly, punishment has not been identified as effective in altering students’ behaviours. For Kayla, getting suspended for mental health absenteeism did not ensure her returned to successful school
participation and at the time of our interview she was still trying to reconnect with the education system.

Mora and Christianakis (2012) state that the education system has come to embody a neoliberal culture of penalty whereby zero-tolerance and other policies are used to remove problematic bodies from these institutions. The authors note that suspensions and expulsions are a common school-based response to youth who are at-risk of failing to become a neoliberalised body—someone who is active in the competitive wage labour market. Chicken reported that his school “just dealt with me by detention, suspension, and expulsion that was pretty much it” (Personal Communication, 2019). Further evidence that schools are sites of punishment for marginalised individuals can be found in the school board policies reviewed during this research. School board policies regulating institutions in this study each featured attendance policies that made allowances for things like musical training, athletic pursuits, medical issues and religious practices. None of the attendance policies recognised homelessness, risk thereof, nor housing instability as a legitimate, non-punishable excusal. In fact, homelessness and housing instability were absent from all school board policies reviewed during this research.

**Conclusion**

To ourselves and others, the most visible and heinous perpetrator amongst our experiences of homelessness is often ourselves; however, social theories can reveal less obvious antagonists and allow us to identify the structural roots of homelessness. I hope that this thesis will contribute to helping young PWLLE of homelessness understand their
experiences in relation to broader structural and system forces such as neoliberalism and colonialism. By presenting a variety of social theories alongside some participant’s narratives, I hope the value of academic education is highlighted as supplementary to experiential knowledge rather than superior to it. The school-based experiences of young people in this study showed that the structure of the education system is not one that adequately addresses issues of housing. Similarly, the education system does not ensure educational attainment for young people who experience homelessness.

This thesis argues that a neoliberalised education system is one that perpetuates inequality rather than addressing social inequality and marginalisation amongst students. This argument centres around homelessness as a structural and systemic issue rather than an individual issue. However, the power of individuals to persevere despite the punitive structures they must navigate is evident in participant responses that described instances of innovation in survival, resistance, and success. Similarly, the power of the individual to improve outcomes for others was highlighted by participant responses that described champion teachers who went above and beyond to help several youths in this study. Although champion teachers were not successful in ending or preventing homelessness for their students, reports of teachers providing emotional and material support were one of the most beneficial school-based experiences described by youth during data collection. Most importantly, this chapter demonstrates a need for young people with lived experience of youth homelessness to be consulted on issues of homelessness within schools. One of the most actionable findings from this work is that youth are not being educated on homelessness in schools. Peer-led education on homelessness is one way to
ensure that the education system is not inadvertently (or conveniently) contributing to the invisibility and stigmatisation of youth homelessness.

Chapter 4: Peer Research from the Perspective of a Peer Researcher

As participatory and peer research methods rise in popularity and (perceived) legitimacy (MacKinnon et al., 2021), it is essential to reflect on the experience of people with lived experience (PWLLE) who engage in this work. Participatory action research (PAR) methods mark the rejection of conventional research methods (Kemmis et al., 2014) and centre around meaningful co-creation with participants (Coughlin & Yoo, 2017) and subsequent action to mobilise research findings. PAR is increasingly used to engage youth and amplify their voices within their communities (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). Similarly, the inclusion of peer researchers (PRs) who have lived experience (LE) of the study’s topic of inquiry is thought to support more active youth participation (Lushey & Munro, 2015a) as well as lead to more relevant research (Coughlin & Ackerson, 2017) and richer data collection (Gomez & Ryan, 2016). This chapter outlines some of my experiences as a PR with LE of youth homelessness, as I attempted to engage young PWLLE in this study.

In this chapter, I discuss the emotional toll of doing PAR as a PR and describe how challenges in emotional labour shaped interactions with participants and eventually led me to self-healing. Additionally, I explore some parts of the peer researcher-participant relationship, characterised by shared understanding (Roche et al., 2010), whereby PRs might find themselves tightrope walking the line between the frontline and research. Most importantly, I assert the importance of reciprocity in PR-participant
relationships and highlight the culture of community, urgency and action that emerged during this work. From this perspective, I conclude by detailing how this relationship can support rich and meaningful research practices and outcomes and strengthen communities when well supported.

Researching from the margins, the methodological guide for this project, holds that the researcher and researcher’s reflection of the research process(es) produce data that are as worthy of analysis as any other data (e.g. interview responses) in the study (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Kirby and McKenna (1989) state that a researcher should create two data folders, one labelled content that includes data about the central research question and one labelled process. The process folder contains dated “records of all steps of the research processes”, including reflections on “decision making” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.124). Following that method, the data that comprises this chapter hails from the detailed field notes and reflections that were continuously recorded during the research process. This chapter spotlights the strength of research from the margins because while this study intended to focus solely on the school-based experiences of homeless young people, the surplus data emerged as one of the most insightful outcomes.

**Emotional Turmoil & Labour in Peer/Participatory Research**

Within community-based participatory research, I argue that being a researcher with LE heightens the emotional toll of this already tough work. During this research, there were two significant spheres of emotional labour that echo the analytic categories of research from the margins, content and process (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Firstly, whilst regularly engaging with young people I perceived to live through the same hell I have
lived caused me a lot of turmoil. And secondly, in trying to navigate and shape the research process as a PWLLE, I encountered much tension and conflict.

As a PR, I was responsible for the demands required of all researchers (e.g., upholding REB protocols, reporting to PI, etc.). By formal job description and by my identity as a person with lived experience (PWLLE), I was also charged with identifying problematic elements of the research process that had (or could have) adverse impacts on the young people we sought to engage. For example, when assisting with the development of this study (research proposal, design, ethics application etc.) I had to honour the demands and expectations of my employer and the institution of academia whilst also flagging and challenging instances where those expectations seemed at odds with the just treatment or meaningful inclusion of LE participants. The emotional aspect of this work was significant in shaping my interactions with participants. For example, the more I embraced my emotional reactions to this work as rational and human as opposed to unprofessional and un-researcher-ly, the more I allowed myself to explore new possibilities for what a researcher can do. Subsequently, those interactions and the PR-participation connection that stemmed from them often intensified the emotional labour necessary to continue this work. For example, former participants have sometimes stayed (briefly) in my home because they had nowhere else to go, or I have sought to get them food, medical attention or other necessities. Choosing to help youth was not completely selfless (few things are); it was an attempt to alleviate the emotional distress I felt when I did not try to help.

PRs in Kelly et al. (2020) report similar turmoil at their inability to aid participants. However, rather than simply alleviating my guilt, helping youth became an
emotionally charged chain reaction that required even more emotional labour to navigate. Similarly, advocating for changes to research practices to better support youth, including my assertion that PRs and other researchers can and should do more to aid participants, became a rabbit hole of conflict and tension that was emotionally laborious and draining. Gross et al. (2020) assert that “Frequent ethical disagreements between research teams and peer researchers” are common amongst participatory works with PWLLE (5).

It is much simpler to describe the emotional consequences of hearing youths’ stories than to (attempt to) textualise the complexities of the emotional unease caused by the research process itself. However, these matters are both inextricably intertwined. Researchers, with and without LE, have documented the need to practice “emotional intelligence” to ensure empathy and togetherness with participants (Gair, 2012, p.135). However, genuine togetherness is no easy feat. Emotional intelligence was absent from my first one-on-one interview. I was so nervous and focused on communicating questions from the interview guide that I barely heard the responses I knew would be available to read later as a transcript. Thyer (2011, p.5) explains how scholars might have their “academic inclinations distorted by institutional demands to obtain funding.” I argue that SWLE and PRs who are working to attain a degree as they co-conduct research might also have their ethical and moral inclinations distorted by institutional demands. My need to attain good grades sometimes overshadowed my need to meaningfully engage or support young PWLLE during this work. For example, during my undergrad and MA course work I would sometimes draw from the research and data used in this thesis; however, my analysis of the data tended towards traditional formats that I knew would score the highest grade possible rather than truly honoring the experiences of youth.
Over time, I got better at being truly present during the interview, actively listening to and being affected by each word a participant spoke rather than planning my next question as they responded to the last. However, engaging genuinely in the retelling of an individual’s LE can have “emotionally triggering” (Ross, 2017, p.333) results. Kemmer (in Bamu et al., 2016, p.574) refers to this aspect of research as “emotional labour” and asserts that researchers are at risk of powerful negative feelings. Researchers without LE are also vulnerable to (potentially overwhelming) negative emotional impacts because “feelings which participants exhibit may sometimes be transferred” to the researcher (Bamu et al., 2016, p. 575). However, the authors (p.575) also note that the “influence of emotions” on the researcher can be more intense when the researcher shares experience similar to that of participants.

My connection to homelessness and the emotional impact of witnessing youths’ testimonies manifested in muddy and overlapping ways. Firstly, there is the phenomenon whereby my interactions with young participants led to “transformational learning”(Preston et al., 2014, p.55); paradoxically, these learnings left some of my old wounds re-open while simultaneously healing others through a process of “reawaken[ing] issues” (Kelly et al., 2020, p.10,) from my past. In an early process reflection I write:

This experience is challenging for me but totally worth it because it allows me to transform my shitty past into something that can be used for good, to meaningfully connect with youth. It gives me new insights into my own past, a new sense of grief and hope for the future (Process Reflection, 2018).

Why did I experience grief after hearing youths’ experiences of homelessness? Partly because I began to mourn the loss of past possibilities that I had never known existed.
Youths’ narratives often revealed how the young people were failed by many of the adults, institutions, and systems around them—who were supposed to support and protect them. For example, Jason’s parents skipped town without telling him, leaving Jason to be evicted from their home and fend for himself at 15 years old; school personnel knowingly sent Nichola back into a home where she was experiencing physical and sexual harm; and several child welfare workers refused to believe their young clients' reports of abuse from within spaces the workers had placed them. Thus, one of the most emotionally distressing parts of the data collection process was the unavoidable realisation that youths’ suffering, and therefore my own, could have been prevented.

As a homeless young woman, I blamed myself for everything bad that had happened to me. Before my research involvement, I often felt that my homelessness was a creation of my own doing—poor choices, bad judgement and recklessness. Self-blame was something that several participants also expressed during this research, corroborating Nichols and Malenfant (2021) assertion that youths’ experiences frequently lead youth to believe that they are the problem. For example, when I asked Jason if his parent’s leaving the province without telling him contributed to his becoming homeless a few months later, he replied, “…It was more or less my fault that I ended up homeless in the first place.” In contrast, I theorise that Jason’s parents could have taken steps to ensure Jason had access to stable housing even as they chose to extend a vacation into a permanent move.

When I was on the streets, I used the adult shelter system and was nearly oblivious to youth services; I felt completely alone. Surrounded by homeless adults, it seemed as if I was the only one who had made such terrible mistakes at such a young age.
However, listening to participants, it was clear that youth were not at fault for their experiences of homelessness nor victimisation. Hearing participants' stories opened my eyes to the sad fact that the most harmful, weirdest and most skin-crawling things that have happened to me have happened to others. Most importantly, I realised that if the participants were not to blame for the things they had to endure, neither was I.

Despite having only one face-to-face interaction, an interview that took place nearly two years ago, I think about Sophie often. They are the only person that I have ever met, inside or outside of research, who was given up for adoption and then re-acquired later by their biological mother. Just like me, their biological mother kicked them out within a few years of their reunion (C. Smith, Content Reflection, 2020).

Acquiring a new lens through which to view my past is indicative of “transformative learning” (Martin et al., 2008, p.244). Transformational learning does more than advance one’s knowledge; it transforms one’s way of knowing, thinking or behaving. Preston et al. (2014, p.55) define transformational learning as that which is “influenced by personally relevant experiences” and which emerges “through social interactions, peer dialogue, and self-reflection.” For example, I recently ran into a participant I had not heard from since our isolated research interaction more than three years ago. The participant explained that the interview had a positive impact because it helped them understand their lived experiences differently. While this feedback left me feeling quite proud, I must still acknowledge that the very same process one participant may find healing, another may find re-traumatising and that these two outcomes are not mutually exclusive.

Self-reflection, awareness and consideration (i.e., reflexivity) are fundamental to epistemologies (methods of inquiry) within qualitative research (Van den Hoonaaard,
Thus, it follows that participant-researcher interactions within this study were enriched by learnings that I have found transformational. Importantly, such lessons were arrived at through a mixture of re-traumatisation, anger, and sadness. These feelings reflect Mezirow’s (1997 in Preston et al., 2014) assertion that transformational learning tends to involve discomfort, disorientation and confusion. My involvement in this study transformed my understanding of myself and my knowledge of the path that led me to become this self. In this, I have grieved for a past that never was, a past where adults, institutions and social systems protected from things that were not my fault.

Re-Experiencing the Past in the Present

My interactions with youth often spurred painful memories such as those of many lost friends, experiences of abuse, etc. In these cases, I often encounter flashbacks of my past and get stuck on negative thought patterns; cycles of self-blame and anger mixed up with survivor’s guilt. In a process reflection in 2018, I wrote:

All the girls remind me of Boots today. I cried all the way home. When I drove past Fanny Adams’ old house I had to pull over cos I couldn’t see the road for tears. I couldn’t save them, and I won’t be able to help these girls either. Life is so cruel.

Many participants shared experiences that had “emotionally triggering” (Ross, 2017) results for me because they prompted memories about my past and negative thoughts and feelings followed those recollections. When Olsen told me about his struggles with addiction and how he felt trapped in a cycle of substance use, I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness because I continue to feel consistently hopeless in my own struggles with problematic substance use. In other cases, interviews were triggering because they reminded me of my peers’ sufferings. For example, when participants spoke of being
harmed during their involvement in the child welfare system, I felt sadness and anger. As a teen, I witnessed some of my friends being traumatically ripped away from their family homes in the name of child protection, often with catastrophic consequences for the whole family.

It is not only peer researchers who might experience emotional distress during and after listening to participants. McGowan (2020, p.5) states that she was “mentally and physically exhausted, feeling a mixture of upset, anger, sadness.” at the experiences of abuse her participants relayed during data collection, despite McGowan not identifying as a victim herself. Thus, while no researcher is immune to emotionally triggering work, I argue that PWLLE are likely to experience more frequent, intense, and lasting emotional assaults with greater consequences. I have been touched by and witnessed plenty of what participants describe and furthermore, I still maintain a social network comprised of people who have both lived and living experience of homelessness. I am tied to the issue of homelessness by multiple aspects of my past and present and often have a strong desire to act urgently. Malenfant, who is a researcher with LE states, “my research is intimately connected to my life and the people I love who are still experiencing homelessness” (Malefant & Sanz, 2020, p.64).

We might be safely housed, but we’re still holding fiercely onto the limbs of our friends who are without. We are still cemented to the front row of a horror movie that has been playing on repeat for longer than research on homelessness has existed. Wide-eyed and powerlessly watching the devastating impacts of homelessness: new characters facing the same unaddressed problems, and, every time the credits roll, the ‘in memory of’ section grows (C.Smith, Process Reflection, 2020).

McGowan (2020, p.6) notes that difficult interviews where participants recounted traumatic occurrences “seemed to ‘harden’” her. My experience was different. Living on
the streets hardened me, and, in contrast, hearing countless harrowing stories from young people only worked to unravel me. Despite McGowan (p.5) having support from professional mentors and supervisors, the researcher describes some prolonged instances of emotional distress during her research as a “maelstrom of affect” that kept her from focusing on daily tasks. Similarly, the feelings I experienced during PR-participant interactions stayed with me for a long time after the interaction. In fact, some still play through my mind years later. For example, I think of the girl in the green skirt with the great spirit, the one with arms and legs the size of toothpicks, covered in sores, nonchalantly explaining how her mother had sold her for a toke. During these maelstroms, I unintentionally embark on mental detours that take me away from whatever task is at hand and frequently dissolve into a vortex of horrific thought spirals. I think about the girl in the green skirt, I think about the things I have done to score a toke, I wonder where she is now, I feel, I think, I try to forget, and that cycle continues. My mind becomes a whirlpool of experiences, mine, and others, imaged and real, rational, and not. This is likely one reason that I struggled with substance use and relapse during this research. Thus, not only is it possible that researchers with LE experience more adverse and turbulent emotions throughout the research process, some of us might also have more harmful coping techniques.

The Opioid Crisis:
I remember all our plans, our dreams and our plots.
That’s a lie, I’ve forgotten lots.
Your laugh, your voice, that thing we were gonna do when we got out.
All faded. The places you held in my heart, just empty slots.
I remember when I thought we’d live forever.
That’s a lie, I just didn’t care if we died.
That said, I never wanted our friendship to sever.
Can’t Rewind.
Tension & Conflict

Much literature on research emphasises the need for researchers to maintain a professional distance from participants (Kaida et al., 2019; B. Kelly et al., 2020; Yassour-Borochowitz, 2004). Kaida et al. (2019, p.8) assert that PRs “who want to intervene and help a participant who may be struggling, [need] to remember their role as a PR and to maintain professional and personal boundaries.” In contrast, I argue that researchers who engage with homeless young people, who fail to intervene where possible, need to remember their privileged role as human beings within a violently stratified society.

Kelly et al. (2020, p.12) describe the tension between several PRs and researchers when the PRs’ desire to maintain contact with and assist participants was barred by researchers. Instead of supporting the PRs to help participants, the researchers insisted upon helping PRs “manage those endings” and limit the PRs contact with participants to the research interviews. Importantly, the authors (p.12) state that future studies could “allow and plan for a more personal approach [to the research process] including an option for peer researchers to move on to a peer mentoring role. The assumption that the PR-participant relationship or interaction is (or should be) limited to one (or several) clearly defined research interactions does not acknowledge the participant's agency or the PR's humanity. How can PRs be asked to build trust and rapport with youth on the one hand and to perpetuate experiences of neglect and inaction on the other?

Sometimes it feels like I am using my lived experience as bait. Like “here kids, I’ve been homeless too so trust me” come tell me your deepest darkest secrets so that I can impress my supervisor with my superior research skills (C. Smith, Process Reflection, 2018).
The above reflection remains as uncomfortable for me to read now as it was for me to realise and record back then. I undoubtedly benefit from my own involvement in research a great deal more than any of the participants do. My LE might contribute to youths’ perception of safety and increase their comfort during interviews; however, this disproportionately benefits the researcher and the research. Dilemmas can represent points of opportunity for betterment when they are acknowledged. However, during this work, it was not possible for me to openly discuss or justly report any of the adverse impacts of this research without causing tension and conflict amongst the academic portion of the research team. The propensity for academic researchers to downplay the negative implications of qualitative and participatory works is described by Sousa & Clark (2019, p.1) as “Sanitized representations of research.” Without acknowledging ethical dilemmas, as a PR, I feel like a traitor to my people, like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Like Sousa & Clark (2019), I argue that acknowledging our missteps is awkward, unpleasant, and essential.

Young participants often divulged what I considered to be traumatic experiences during interviews. Moving forward, researchers should consider designing interview guides using a trauma-informed approach (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017). This approach can reduce the likelihood that participants will share re-traumatising information that does not directly responding to the research questions. PRs, SWLE and others can encourage their colleagues ensure that professional supports, such as social workers, are included in research budgets and available to participants. Zembylas (2008) notes that contemporary society is somewhat preoccupied with tales of trauma. Some of the
traumatic experiences that youth shared with me were so detailed that (I felt) I could feel some of their pain along with them.

Narratives that reveal respondents’ pain are often the focus of presentations on research findings. People crave to hear about the most horrific accounts of homelessness. This is likely because of what Zembylas (2008, p.10) refers to as “the fetishization of trauma.” A researcher might find themselves torn between the ethical refusal to reduce their participants' stories to “narrations of horror” (Niezen, 2016, p.922) and the desire to present research in a way that effectively mobilises it by drawing audiences’ attention. This sick realisation was a significant motivator driving me to find ways to ensure that research benefits participants as much as possible and as soon as possible. To recognise the fetishisation of our LE, one YAT member hand-crafted a shirt that read Trauma Porn Star to wear during public presentations.

**Participatory-ness & the Youth Action Team**

The Youth Action Team represent the most participatory and collaborative aspect of this work. The YAT’s power to shape knowledge mobilization remained limited because not all forms of mobilization were feasible. However, within the realm of public speaking (including interactive workshops, walking tours, and presentations) YAT members had a high degree of autonomy over what they could do and say. This is because, once in front of an audience, nobody could police what or how the YAT members chose to present their LE or other forms of knowledges. This is important because participants in other participatory projects have reported not being “allowed to fully be themselves” (van Draanen et al., 2013, p.183). However, the ability to be oneself
was not necessarily a uniform experience. Throughout this work, youth who were less confident in verbalising their needs in general, and/or less confident in public speaking, often looked to those of us in positions of perceived authority for instruction.

The majority of the action(s) and ideas that youth working on this project wanted to undertake were deemed too time consuming or too costly for the allocated. One PR in another study notes that it would have taken years in order to accommodate a truly participatory process. Researchers attempting to meaningfully engage young PWLLE should pay special attention to designing the research and its budget in ways that can support co-creation and innovative action. Thyer (2011) asserts that researchers write proposals in such a way as to maximize the likelihood of being granted funding. Thus funders should ensure that they are supporting participatory research and that their funding structure is one that recognises the significant and necessary costs of meaningfully included PWLLE in research processes. Supporting meaningful participation of PWLLE (Kelly et al., 2020) and the implementation of action requires significant amount of time, resources and commitment (Burke et al., 2017). However, from my observations grant applications require you to demonstrate that you can accomplish a lot in a short amount of time. Regardless of how generous the budget is, academic precedent, such as large allocations of funding for conference travel and graduate student employment etc., means that funding is disproportionately under-allocated to PWLLE, as well as generously allocated to data collection, analysis and traditional outputs rather than for innovative action. Thyer (2011) argues that the structure of academia is such that researchers waste valuable portions of their careers seeking research funds. Peck (in Thyer, 2011, p.7) states that attainment of funds has
become the central goal of science, thus harmfully “reducing and devaluing innovation [and] marginalizing the slow work that requires long time periods.”

A group presentation at City Hall in Ottawa provides an example of the constrained and complex state of youth participation in this project. Only two meetings were aimed at preparing the YAT for this event and some youths were instructed to present and respond to a narrative of their past experiences of homelessness. After the presentation, one member of the YAT expressed frustration that parts of their story which they did not want shared had been outed by the way the research team organised the presentation. Another YAT member reported discomfort at having been asked to talk about their LE when they believed that presenting the city counsellors with concrete recommendations instead would have been more useful. This instance highlights the problems that can arise from disorganization and lack of well-facilitated meetings within participatory works (van Draanen et al., 2013) as well as how LE can become unintentionally tokenised within research processes.

Researchers should be transparent about how LE is being used in research processes and ensure that PWLLE are comfortable with those uses. Additionally, researchers should allow space and support for PWLLE to make informed decisions on how they mobilse knowledge that directly or indirectly relate to their LE. Researchers should not dictate how PWLLE share their knowledges. The wildcard nature of unscripted YAT presentations sometimes emerged as a point of anxiety for me during the course of this work because it was possible their message would contradict my own findings (which the sometimes did). However, upon reflection, these were (unevenly) the most equitable and genuine moments of youth engagement and participation within this
project. In line with the principles of research from the margins, the relationship that developed between me and the YAT has strengthened our collective and individual ability to take action (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), both then and now. The formation and continued connectedness of the YAT has led to the “empower[ment of] the people who are normally just the object of research, to develop their own capacity to research their own situations and evolve their own solutions” (Kirby & McKenna, p.26). For example, in the future, I will apply the feedback I received from YAT members on the research process in order to better my youth engagement practices. One YAT member reflected on the public speaking element of this participatory work:

I don’t get much preparation before presentations. I’m just sort of thrown in to just wing it. We do not get to meet enough to really prepare. There are lots of times where I don’t like speaking about my experiences because it just runs my mind into the thought of it again and there’s always a chance it could happen again (YAT Member, Feedback Session, 2019).

There is a frustrating saying frequently used amongst me and my colleagues: we are building the plane as we are flying it. It is generally used to justify conditions of disorganisation and confusion by asserting there was no way to prepare for a task, event, or project in an organised and clearly communicated fashion because of the pace at which the project had to get off the ground. Expeditious approaches might be common place in academic research where deadlines are strict and pressure to produce outputs are intense and bound to the pursuit of tenure, however, this approach is not necessarily conducive to engaging young PWLLE—who are often not familiar with how research is generally structured. In one process reflection I write:

Originally, I thought that the vagueness of the YAT hiring process would ensure the freedom to shape the team, its objectives and processes collaboratively. I was
wrong. Ambiguity did not produce any beneficial flexibility. Unclearly defined roles, expectations and parameters led to much confusion and frustration (C. Smith, Process Reflection, 2020).

When hiring youth for participatory projects, researchers should clearly articulate what the young people will be asked to participate in, their job description and what the possible outcomes might be. Funding bodies and academic institutions could support researchers in supporting youth by allowing extensions on deadline and providing emergency funding for participants and employees with lived experience of homelessness.

**Adverse Impacts for Youth in Research**

It is impossible to know the adverse impacts that this research had on the youth who participated. Klocker, (2015, (author’s emphasis, p.2) highlights a tendency for participatory action researchers to justify distress caused to participants by thinking that “something good will come of it”. Participants were not contacted after the research interview to evaluate how it might have impacted them. However, during interviews, youth were sometimes visibly distressed. For example, Olsen cried so much during his interview that I asked multiple times if he wanted to continue. It is much easier to identify adverse impacts amongst young people who participated on the Youth Action Team (YAT) because our research interactions were not limited to a single encounter and because part of my job as a peer researcher was to record the YAT’s experiences.

Building trust with participants requires a significant amount of emotional work. Conversely, fear of losing that trust can also become an emotional burden. Many young PWLLE find it challenging to build trusting relationships with adults because of poor
experiences within programs and systems (HYCDE, 2014). Importantly, establishing trusting relationships with adults can be tremendously important in exiting and maintaining an exit from homelessness (HYCDE, 2014). Therefore, when trust is at risk or broken, it is not only the participant-researcher relationship that is impacted. Instances of trust-breaking might reinforce a history that has taught youth to distrust, providing more evidence to support young peoples’ theorisations that they should not trust adults. Building and maintaining trusting relationships with youth during participatory work is essential and precarious. This is something that has caused me much anxiety over the course of this work.

Trust between myself and youth was put in jeopardy several times. Sometimes because of mistakes (to put it lightly) that I made and, sometimes, due to circumstances largely outside of my control. For example, the YAT worked on co-creating a workshop to teach elementary and high school students about issues around youth homelessness. The workshop included an activity called the What Would You Do? Challenge (see appendix 1) in which students read a scenario of an experience of homelessness and were asked to engage in a class discussion on what they would personally do if they found themselves in the position described in the scenario. Once students told us what they would have done (e.g. ask a teacher for help, access a youth shelter etc.), the YAT and I would reveal to the class that the scenarios were real accounts of our lived experiences of homelessness. Myself and YAT members would then stand up and talk to the class, telling our own story and responding to points raised by students during the challenge. For example, if a student read my scenario and answered that they would have reported
their foster dad for having sex with them, I would stand up and explain why I did not report the abuse I experienced in the child welfare system.

The first What Would You Do? Challenge was demonstrated in a third-year university class with myself and two YAT members. The class had a lively discussion around the things they would have done if they were navigating the scenario depictions, and I wrote the students responses on the blackboard. For example, some said they would have committed crimes in order to survive, others said they would have welcomed jail as a form of respite, others suggested they would have tried to ask teachers or friend’s parents for help and so on. After the students had finished explaining what they would have done, I invited the YAT members to stand up, and I told the class that the three scenarios really happened to us. Both YAT members were visibly nervous. I normalised this because since becoming involved in research, I have been asked to speak regularly about my LE and always get extremely nervous beforehand. The first YAT member talked loudly and confidently about their lived experiences. However, they also disclosed details we had not previously discussed and announced to the class that they would not usually share this information in public. No amount of preparation can likely protect against the open-faucet effect of speaking about our LE in public. I have said countless things on stage that I have later regretted. After the presentation, the first YAT member was extremely happy, reporting this experience had been rewarding due to the students' reactions. One student in the audience wrote feedback stating:

The [WWYD challenge] was really eye opening for me. I had Scenario #1 and after read it, it was really eye opening to even conceptualize something like that happening to me. It really helped me think about what homeless youth are actually going though. I had no idea that the two [youth] and Charlotte were the people in those scenarios, so having that realness really put things into perspective. I can’t
remember the [youth’s] name but having [them] stand up and say “that was me” had me in tears (Student Feedback, Field Notes 2019).

This student was not the only one who ended up in tears. The longer that the second YAT member spoke of their LE, the more their whole body began to vibrate. They left the classroom and the campus quickly as soon as they finished speaking. When I followed up, the YAT member told me they were fine, yet that was not my perception. That presentation was first and last for that youth. They never returned to YAT meetings nor any other research activity I invited them to since. The youth had trusted me to take care of them, and I failed by placing them in an unfamiliar situation where they recounted traumatising experiences without a professional mental health support readily available to them. After a failure like this, a PR might have to live with the awareness that they likely contributed to a youth’s rational and damning mistrust of adults. Working as a PR I found it useful to reflect on the question: what unintended lessons am I passing on to youth?

**Research Revealing Truths or Perpetuating Harms?**

Few scholars have noted the propensity for the research process to perpetuate some of the harms it claims to be addressing (Klocker, 2015), while more have written of the tendency to tokenise PWLLE (Gray et al., 2000). Throughout this work, I began to observe how I was part of perpetuating some of the harms we identified during data collection. For example, many young people reported not being believed by adults around them who did not understand their lives and circumstances. Fear of not being believed was identified as a barrier to seeking help during this research. Researchers should ensure that young PWLLE involved in research have avenues outside of the REB to report any concerns or adverse experiences. Several youths brought concerns to my attention
throughout this research, thus a peer support or RA might provide a trusted way for young PWLLE to report adverse impacts in a way that is more accessible than the REB.

I theorise that professionalism is one way in which research might perpetuate that which it seeks to problematise. Several interview respondents described perceiving that the adults around them were simply there for a pay cheque and did not genuinely care for them. When the YAT engaged with this information, we discussed how professionalism might be a barrier to youth accepting and benefiting from resources and supports. For example, the YAT did not necessarily believe that adult helpers are only in it for the money but did understand how other participants might have theorised their experiences this way. Acting professional might seem like the opposite of genuine care. Jecker (2004) describes the tension between professionalism and ethical engagement with human participants. Jecker (p.11) points out that discourse on professionalism creates professional attributes as those with the “appearance of ethical absolutes.” The author suggests that professionalism can actually become a barrier to ethical human engagement because it establishes a standard that is as much about one’s status as it is about responding to the needs or desires of another human. Jecker’s argument resonates with me because while I was sometimes criticized for being unprofessional or too close to participants, these instances were moments where I made an informed choice to try to do for young people what they were telling me they needed.

Engaging in front-line-like practices may be likely for PRs and others who engage in participatory works with young PWLLE. Responding to youths’ crises might be perceived as outside of a researcher’s wheelhouse. However, if a PR’s job is to support youths’ meaningful participation in research, emergency responses are sometimes
necessary and should be supported by researchers and institutions. Youth in this study sometimes experienced barriers to participation when they were worried about, for example, where they would sleep that night. On one occasion, a youth (through no fault of their own) showed up to a presentation shirtless and while I prepped the event, another RA went and bought the youth clothing. There were many times were ensuring participation for youth reflected a front-line approach.

Wear & Kuczewski, (2004, p.1) argues that under the label of professionalism is subsumed a “seemingly immutable […] group of attitudes, values, and behaviours” that are valorised as the right way to do things. However, as Spijkerboer & Widdershoven, (2016) the rules of professionalism can create ethical dilemmas themselves. For example, professionals are expected to uphold the bureaucratic rules of their institution, even when these rules become a barrier to helping an individual. Spijkerboer & Widdershoven note that one professional could not help a particular youth who experiencing homelessness because the youth was not homeless enough to meet the criteria defined by the institution that the professional worked for. The authors (p.27) note that ethical dilemmas often occur when “institutional indication criteria force them to do things that are, in their opinion, against the well-being of the client.”

Moving outside of the professional requirements of my position as an academic researcher was not without consequence. I burnt out often and worked many additional unpaid hours. However, I argue that the challenges of doing more for youth are produced by a structural process that is inequitable and problematic and should not be seen as the result of researchers or PRs acting unprofessionally. Universities, funding bodies and REBs should allow and encourage researchers to ensure young people have necessary
materials and supports to ensure youth can meaningfully participate in PAR. Researchers working with homeless youth can do more to advocate for institutional and structural changes that would ensure participants needs can be met. For example, research grants should include an emergency budget that can address youth crises as they arise.

Using LE to (re)Shape Research Processes

Despite the tension and conflict that it caused, I often sought to shape the research process by privileging LE knowledges. In some cases, this meant adapting the research process based on assumptions made based on my own LE. For example, I maintained a storage container of dried goods and donation items that we made available at each YAT meeting. In other cases, it meant attempting to adapt processes based on feedback from the YAT. For example, increasing the number of YAT meetings before presentations. Additionally, knowing how frequently people (especially adults) pop into, only to drop out of, homeless youths’ lives, it was important for me to leave the door open to future communications with interview participants. After meeting participants for research interviews, I invited youth to take my contact information should they ever require access to a peer. I made it very clear that I was not professional support and not affiliated with any organisation. Many young people did choose to stay in touch with me.

Maintaining contact with youth has proven to require an intense amount of emotional labour yet has also yielded many benefits. Working with YAT, it became clear that our collective goals were to produce a visible change in our community. Maintaining contact with research participants evolved into a community of peers that we now call LivEx Alliance—a group of adults and youth with lived experience of homelessness, and adult allies, working together to help support marginalised youth in the community. As a
group, we continue to mobilise the findings from this research, as discussed in the sections below. The development of this research into a grassroots organisation reflects Watters et al., (2010, p.8) assertion that participatory action research is a way for “people to gain support from others facing similar issues and challenges” as well as working to bolster the voices of individuals by supporting a “louder collective voice.”

Urgent Action Required

As [a] peer researcher it was very hard for us to simply recruit people, hear their story, and then just walk back out of their lives. I see myself as in a place of huge privilege right now [as an undergraduate student], having the chance to be involved in research. I can’t speak out against poor treatment of marginalized people in our society and then conduct research where I don’t meaningfully engage with participants by doing any small thing I can to help them out, such as buying them cigarettes or driving them to work after an interview (C.Smith, Process Reflection, 2018)

During this research, I have had a chance to meet many PWLLE, including youth, scholars, professionals and others. The urgency with which these PWLLE and SWLE sought to address youth homelessness was palpable. This urgency is sorely underrepresented within academic culture, whereby outdated findings and impotent outputs are routine (Thyer, 2011). I argue that the culture of urgency and commitment to take action amongst PWLLE of homelessness the most understated benefit of LE to qualitative research. My experience of PAR is limited to the few studies that comprise this thesis and a couple of others where I was employed either as a PR or LE consultant. Not long into my first PAR, I became distressed over a gap I perceive between the theoretical goals of PAR, “to understand and improve the world by changing it” (Baum et al., 2006), and the reality of research impact in PAR. For example, while an academic
researcher might consider publications to be an important output, I argue that reports alone are not enough to generate social change nor honour the PWLLE who contribute to them.

The distance between research outputs and participants’ experiences were an emotionally draining aspect of the research process. For example, while young women tell us they are afraid to sleep at night because they will be assaulted, as a researcher, I output this information at an academic conference. Tripp (2005) explains that the individuals and groups involved in action research value different outputs. The author (para 5) states, “when university academics work with school teachers […] the valuable outcomes for the teacher tend to be in terms of improved practice, [and] for the academic […] consultation fees and publications.” In contrast to the teachers in Tripp’s example, there is no identifiable output of value for young participants in this research, although some youth did report deriving value from certain aspects of their collaboration on knowledge mobilisation. For example, one YAT member shared that:

[Joining the YAT) was a chance to have my voice heard. A lot of people could go down the same road I went down, and I think that can be prevented. Being part of something like this gives me a chance to help prevent others from becoming homeless (YAT member, Feedback Session, 2019).

The initial outputs (planned in the proposal) produced from this research were academic publications, conferences, presentations, and the partial development and pilot of a youth-led educational workshop on homelessness. The unfinished workshops are far more valuable to me than to the youth who helped create them. As an aspiring researcher, I can flaunt past works to funding bodies to entice investment in future projects.

Importantly, Youth Action Team members and other young collaborators experienced
much hardship (e.g., housing instability) while working on this project that I did little to respond to. Thus, the issue of urgency was two-fold. On the one hand, the LE portion of the research team grew frustrated at our collective inability to make crucial changes within our city; on the other hand, I grew frustrated at my inability to address the critical, immediate needs of the YAT and other young PWLLE. Researchers who want to meaningfully engage young people in participatory works must acknowledge and respond to the complex circumstances that young PWLLE are likely contending with during their participation in research.

The time it takes to effect social change (e.g. policy) or even produce superficial research outputs (e.g. community report) is emotionally distressing. We write grant applications, submit article abstracts and give conference presentations while the people whose stories we tell die on the streets. Thyer (2011, p.6) states that “the lack of impact that research findings have on real-life practice, are discouraging” to scholars. As a SWLE, it is awful to know what young people face, know that many thousands of research dollars are funding my PR paycheque, and be unable to respond to the urgent needs of the people who are making my career possible. At the end of January 2020, Ottawa became one of the first Canadian cities to declare its rate of homelessness an “emergency”, whereby one counsellor emphasised the need to call “911 on housing” given that peoples’ lives are at stake (Osman, 2020). Yet, research is the antithesis of calling 911. Burke et al. (2017, p.587) describe their PAR as having “failed [participants’] vision [because six years after initiating the research] the youth remain puzzled and at times disillusioned” at their unfinished action. Burke et al. (2017, p.587) note the importance that we “hold ourselves accountable for a promise[s]” that we make
to participants. I argue that we also need to generate the promised outcomes quickly because the truth is, some participants did not live to see the end of this research.

**Navigating Death & Loss**

Social determinants of health. Most won't understand this concept the way you do when you can look back & see many of your friends gone. Not from the blade or needle or cancer that took their last breath, but from the rapes, assaults & abuses that allowed those toxins (C. Smith, Content reflection, 2020).

Scholars and other PWLLE who are working as PRs and engaging in research processes might be surrounded by death and loss. It took plenty of emotional labour to navigate the grief, death and loss (both past and present) that became a considerable element of the research process. The disproportionately high mortality rate of homeless youth is well documented (Gaetz, 2013). Many of my friends have died. When I was living on the streets, it was normal for people to be dying around me. Now I am housed, death is still just as frequent because my social network contains many PWLLE of homelessness. Meeting youth is always a mixed bag of emotions because even when they want to stay in touch, they might be dead before we get the chance to reconnect. Death sometimes brought the research team together in positive ways. YAT members and other youth experienced the loss of multiple loved ones and peers during this work. I did not know how to help youth deal with grief and before I figured it out, members of the YAT showed me how. One morning, I woke up to the news that someone had died and within an hour one of the YAT members called me to see if I was okay. I was initially shocked to hear from them, but the youth explained that Ottawa is small and assumed I knew the deceased. It became a healthy habit for me and the YAT to reach out and check on each other when we heard about a death in the community.
The death of one interview participant continues to haunt me. Chicken reached out to me several times after our first (and only) interview. Sometimes he just wanted to update me on how he was doing or where he was travelling. He often sent pictures and videos of him hanging off the side of freight trains, making his way across Canada. Other times, Chicken wrote of his desire to share more of his story and to help others. Chicken asked if we could do a second research interview because he had more to say. Imagining future research projects, I promised Chicken that one day we would record another interview. During our initial interview Chicken explained: “[I want to] explain my life to [other youth] and show them this is where I went because of everything that I did, and you're doing the same things and you're going to eventually end up where I am…I've explained my life to a lot of people and I hope I open their eyes to it” (Personal Communication, 2019). Research project constraints did not allow Chicken and I to meet again; however, we stayed in touch informally as peers until his premature death on Ottawa's streets. I wish that I could rewind time and capture the rest of what he wanted to share with the world. The things he wanted to talk about were not directly related to schools so I thought that I could not ethically go back and record him. In hindsight, I would argue it was more unethical to record only those parts of his story that work in favour of my artificially narrowed research focus.

My feelings of failure and remorse are undoubtedly caught up in my guilt about other friends I have lost to homelessness, my inability to say goodbye, honour their life meaningfully, or even know how to cope with their being gone. At an academic conference in Vancouver 2019, I binned a formal presentation script and told Chicken’s story instead, pulling as many quotes and messages from the interview transcript as
would fit onto a PowerPoint. Chicken often spoke of British Columbia, where he had hitchhiked and hopped some cheeky train rides so the conference site had symbolic meaning. This was my way of saying goodbye to Chicken. However, I am almost certain that my tears were alarming and seemingly unprofessional to the academic audience there. Thus, emotional labour within PAR might be compounded by a close emotional attachment to the topic of study and could also be a site of judgment and criticism for a PR.

**Action in Research**

The three years of research that comprise this thesis have not resulted in any policy nor any other significant change for youth experiencing homelessness at either of the field sites. Despite our collective efforts at ‘action’ the YAT has seen first-hand how the “amplifying youth voice,” (Gardner et al., 2019, p.18) has not driven local policymakers to act differently in their handling of homelessness in any identifying way. For example, in the summer of 2019, the YAT presented their stories and recommendations to a group of Ottawa City counsellors who expressed great interest in the youths’ stories and expertise. However, following that presentation, the majority of those counsellors voted ‘no’ to the establishment of a new, larger and more resourced shelter in the city, despite the YAT advocating the need for more beds.

The YAT and other young PWLLE worked to mobilise some of the findings from this research in innovative ways. Influenced by academic tradition, I originally wanted to co-author journal articles with youth, the same way established researchers have invited me to co-write. However, writing articles was not a good way to collaborate with youth
on knowledge mobilisation. One week, a YAT member would be housed and on time for a meeting; the next week, they would be homeless and absent for the next three meetings as their situations constantly changed. We needed to find ways to do action, where collaboration did not require YAT members to fulfil rigid requirements and successfully apply their existing skillsets.

I want to get my high school, so I can be a conductor or engineer, I also want to go for Horticulture Medical Science, so I can learn about cannabis… the medicinal aspects of cannabis rather than just the recreational you know (Chicken, Personal Communication, 2018)

As the above quote suggest, interview data indicates that many participants wanted to attend post-secondary education. The YAT emphasised that the assumption that young PWLLE do not care about school or education is a myth. In December 2019, the YAT, along with myself and an RA ally, joined forces with Carleton University to establish the campus’ first bursary for young PWLLE of homelessness. The Chicken & Boots Bursary, named after two young people who died whilst experiencing homelessness in Ottawa, was a great way to mobilise our research findings. The establishment of the bursary started important conversations about homelessness and barriers to education on campus and around the city. It also gave us a chance to honour the lives of two young people. Raising funds was essentially the bi-product of our knowledge mobilisation. The YAT and others canvased the city, did presentations and online events where we emphasised the need to increase access to education for young PWLLE. The Chicken and Boots Bursary is one way to educate and remind our community that youth experiencing homelessness do not lack the motivation to pursue
education, but they do need support to re-engage with school, to achieve success, and to move on to higher levels of education and training if they desire.

Basic needs were frequently mentioned during conversations with interview participants and the YAT. Most of the participants in this study were accessing social assistance, either Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Some youth described social assistance as meeting their basic needs; however, youth also highlighted the gaps in essential materials and supports that this small amount of income left. Youth described missing out on many of the privileges and beneficial experiences their housed peers got to do, such as vacations, wellness activities and more. In the summer of 2019, to demonstrate that youth need more than just their basic needs covered, I ran a fundraiser to bring two youth who were actively experiencing homelessness from St. Catherines to Ottawa for Canada Day weekend. Similar to the Chicken & Boots Bursary, fundraising became a platform for effective knowledge mobilisation. I established a Go Fund Me page where people could donate to the trip as well as learn about the struggles that homeless youth face and the importance of providing diverse opportunities for young people to have more than just their basic needs covered.

The girls enjoyed three days in Ottawa. They got to spend more than $2000 on whatever they wanted. This included clothing, day trips, food and tattoos. I updated the Go Fund Me throughout their trip so that the people who donated could see the beneficial experiences they had contributed to. On July 1st the girls went on CBC radio to talk about how experiences like the field trip are important for young people experiencing homelessness. Unlike the Chicken & Boots Bursary, the youth field trip did not leave a visible legacy. However, many of the individuals who read our messages and donated to
that cause continue to follow LivEx Alliance today. This means that when youth in the community reach out to us for supports, we have a pool of individuals who are informed, ready and willing to lend us their support. Importantly, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, the LivEx Alliance was able to provide emergency material supports to more than 25 young PWLLE and their families in 2020. This emergency support was funded almost exclusively by individuals and groups who have been following the knowledge mobilisation of the YAT since we began this work.

**Conclusion**

I am proud of my work as a PR and will continue to advocate for greater inclusion, supports, protections and compensation for SWLE, PRs and PWLLE within PAR. The peer ethic that emerged during this work will continue to guide my future work. It is an ethic of solidarity, urgency, and reciprocity whereby experiential knowledges are privileged above other ways of knowing. While Kirby and McKenna (1989, p.128) assert the importance of “living with the data”, I hope this chapter has conveyed the importance of *living the findings*. As a SWLE of homelessness I can do more than just represent these research findings, I can live them; by incorporating the knowledges shared by young people into my daily life, attitudes and actions. I conclude that the goals of a PR should be: to be a good peer, always prioritise the interests of the participants above academic interests, meaningfully incorporate feedback from young PWLLE into ones practices and, especially where institutional constraints might prevent equitable practices, be active identifying and problematising unjust research structures and processes, and finally, be vocal in advocating for institutional change. Researchers attempting to engage PWLLE, must reflect on how research processes might be harmful to PWLLE in ways that are not captured by current structures that govern research, such as REBs. Furthermore, researchers need to find ways to include PWLLE from the very conception of their studies. Where
researchers encounter institutional and bureaucratic barriers to achieving full and meaningful collaboration with PWLLE, researchers should advocate for change within their institutions and be vocal about the barriers to inclusion that they are facing.

Findings related to the public education system have to be acknowledged in relation to this academic study and the structural environment from which it was designed, funded and conducted. Schnews (in Hill & Kumar, 2009, p.22) state that “Education in the West is fast becoming indistinguishable from any other industry.” This quote can be applied aptly to both my peer researcher reflections on the research process and the school-based experiences of homeless young people. The same drive for profit and economically active citizens that creates schools as largely punitive institutions that sort young people into successes and failures is the same that ensures academic research is competitive, fast paced and not necessarily impactful.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

[Schools are] a factory and we'll tell you what to do and you do it…And the standardized test scores there, ha! The standardized test score stuff came in the eighties, and it still has a fairly stronghold on our education system. It’s like the literacy test is next Wednesday. We're spending huge amounts of energy on it. If we spent a fraction of that energy on homelessness or the opioid crisis, we'd probably make a dent in it, right, so it's priorities (Miss Frizzle, Personal Communication, 2019)

This thesis has emphasised that: it is essential to ensure the meaningful inclusion of people with lived and living experiences throughout research, policy making, public education and other processes aimed at addressing homelessness. Furthermore, social theory when made accessible, should be acknowledged as a potentially powerful tool for people and scholars with lived and living experiences of homelessness that might bolster their capacity to engage in transformative action, activism, advocacy and more. The methodologies used in this study highlight one way to allow more safety, freedom, and
solidarity for scholars with lived experiences within participatory research. In the future, more methodologies that specifically account for the complexities of working with PWLLE in research could be co-created with scholars and people with lived experiences. This chapter summarises some key findings from this thesis and outlines some clear recommendations for how the education system might work to improve school-based and other experiences for at-risk and homeless children and youth in Ontario.

Rather than waiting until at-risk and emancipated youth have entered homelessness, a state of precarity where they are often exposed to a slew of harmful, if not deadly circumstances, I argue that researchers and others must immediately mobilise the knowledges that youth have shared and meaningfully implement them throughout the education and other systems. As we work to mobilise youths’ knowledge, it is important to: 1. Incorporate youths' knowledges into our own work as much as we advocate for the same knowledge to be implemented in other areas. 2. Be continuously reflexive and mindful of our capacity to perpetuate the harms we seek to address. 3. Collaborate with youth and other PWLLE of youth homelessness in the mobilisation of knowledges and ensure an ongoing culture of consultation so that our advocacy and action efforts are relevant and grounded in experiential knowledge.

Youths’ reports in this research included several suggestions for improvement within educational institutions that could also be mobilised within research processes and personal practices. Several youth pointed to the absurdity of being required to participate in mandatory educational attainment while struggling with their at-riskness or active homelessness. Similarly, within the participatory aspects of this research, there was evident tension between my goal to engage youth meaningfully throughout the process
and the youths’ housing precarity and other immediate challenges that frequently hindered their participation in research related activities (e.g., public speaking or regular research meeting attendance). Some youth suggested that schools should provide students with essential materials youth might be lacking in their personal lives; including food, clothing, footwear, emergency shelter, and financial aid as required. Furthermore, several youth noted that access to material resources within school should either be discrete so that youth do not have to ‘out themselves’ as homeless, or that supports and awareness of housing precarity should become normalised throughout the education system so that the stigma associated with accessing housing and wellness related supports is eradicated.

In addition to material and financial supports, youth also indicated that several non-material school-based supports could have helped prevent or alleviate their experiences of homelessness. Many youths noted that schools lacked specialised forms of mental or counselling supports, and at-risk students were often directed to an on-site one-size-fits-all guidance counselling service that was ill-equipped to address their complex circumstances. Three youth in this study explicitly stated that supports aimed to help them with their anger and emotional issues could have really helped them, while many other respondents noted issues with their emotional regulation or anger. In addition to counselling, professional supports, peer supports, and group supports, one youth emphasized the importance of having a physical space in which a youth can safely release their anger and other normal (but often deemed unsightly) emotions. Jason described how a champion teacher had invested his own money in renovating a spare room within the school so that students could punch walls and destroy things without fear of punishment.
As researchers work towards encouraging schools to provide students with a holistic network of supports, we can also mobilise these findings within our own practices. For example, I began leaving a plastic tub at our Youth Action Team meeting locations that I kept stocked with non-perishable food supplies and, when possible, clothing, and other donations. In cases where researcher’s lack the funding or other institutional supports necessary to provide youth in their participatory works with material needs, researchers might attain these materials through community partnerships with local organisations (e.g., food banks), or by the researcher accessing their own personal and professional networks to seek out essential item donations. In terms of professional service provision, I argue that research budgets should include the employment of a professional mental health support that can be made available to research participants and employees who have lived experiences of the topic being studied.

In discussing these findings with youth and others, many have pointed out that schools cannot reasonably be expected to provide all the supports that youth at-risk of homelessness need and deserve. However, I argue that it is reasonable to expect schools to be intimately connected to the community they are situated within; in such a way that ensures students have access to, and information about, local resources. Similarly, researchers fashioning themselves as *community-based* should also have a knowledgeable connection to the local community within which their research participants are situated. In addition to adding essential resource value, school-community (and researcher-community) connections could represent valuable sites for multi-lateral and transformative learning. Classrooms could engage with local issues and teachers could
support students in mobilising to assist in action and activism within their community. In Ottawa, several neighbourhoods have seen tenants organise to fight mass reno-victions (Rockwell, 2018), yet two school teachers in affected districts reported being encouraged to keep these controversial issues out of the classroom rather than use them as a tool for learning, community engagement and solidarity building. Researchers can also engage with local issues in diverse ways; rather than limiting themselves to academic engagement with local issues; many researchers have the potential to literally stand shoulder-to-shoulder in community action with some of the people their studies focus on.

In addition to having classrooms engage with diverse local issues that directly or indirectly impact a portion of their student body, it is essential that all students have access to education that is relevant to their day-to-day lives and not only to potential academic and necessary employment pursuits. Several youth in this research asserted that life skills should be taught regularly throughout each grade rather than in one-off instances or in alternative education programs for youth over 16. Youth reported that life skills should include financial learnings including loans, credit cards, savings, and taxes, how to identify and avoid abusive relationships and maintain healthy ones, tenant laws and housing rights, more relevant learnings on mental health and substance use, employment, independent living and more. Importantly, the Youth Action Team asserted that while lessons in life skills would have greatly improved their experiences, such lessons are important for all young adults, regardless of their background or circumstance.

Within the research process, researchers should work to ensure a culture of knowledge sharing in which all parties are recognised as having equally valuable,
diverse, ways of knowing, knowledge, and expertise. Youth have much to teach older community members, including researchers, yet children and young people are often seen empty “vessels to be filled with knowledge” rather than as sources of unique knowledges beneficial to knowledge sharing, analysis, and mobilisation (Bhattacharya, 2020, 403). During knowledge mobilisation in this research, some of the youth began to ask questions about social theory, a branch of knowledge that transformed my own understanding of my experiences of youth homelessness and opened my eyes to the structural forces that form the stage upon which our lives are played out. Thus, I argue that institutionalised, theoretical knowledges are one form of capital that researchers can share with youth and others with lived experiences that they engage with.

Content change was not the only curriculum-related recommendation from youth in this study. A conversation about the omission of homelessness from classroom learnings, and the propensity for this omission to help invisibilise youth homelessness within schools led the Youth Action Team to problematize who educators are and how relatable they are to youth. Thus, I argue that peer and youth-led education should be embedded throughout the education systems, for all ages. My limited observations of knowledge mobilisation in this study indicate that children and youth engage more freely and authentically with educators who are closer to their own age (e.g., Youth Action Team). Thus, it would be beneficial to have more participatory action research focused on peer and youth-led learning, community engaged learning, and radical pedagogy within the education system as a means of improving experiences for marginalised students and others.
One of the ugly truths this thesis revealed is the propensity researchers and others to perpetuate some of the harms we seek to address. Thus, reflexivity and a willingness to continuously learn from PWLLE and adapt one's practices, to be honest about mistakes and challenges, and to commitment to doing better is essential. It is important to acknowledge that the same massive, punitive and injustice upholding structures that shape experiences of youth homelessness also shape researchers’ engagement with homeless youth. For researchers to truly impact homelessness it is very likely that, as this research has shown, they will need to fight for necessary change to the status quo in several spheres, including academic institutions and structures, simultaneously.
Appendix 1:
What Would You Do? Challenge

You’re 21-years-old and you are smoking crack every day. One of the main ways you support your addiction is boosting (stealing things like baby clothes and cologne and trading it with dealers). This means that you have a criminal record. You’re also banned from most of the shopping malls, which makes it harder and harder to support your addiction.

Sex work is the only way you’ve got left to support your addiction, because this won’t get you arrested. Since you began smoking crack, many of the people you know have successfully tried to pimp you out, so you are used to having sex for money now. You prefer to steal because you don’t always like selling your body for sex. You’re very very skinny, you can see every bone in your body. You are always dirty.

Your days consist of trying to find someone who will let you stay with them and trying to find a way to get drugs. You don’t have time for anything else, and even when you want to change, it feels impossible and like your life is already over. You sometimes don’t eat or sleep for days at a time.

You’re looking for housing and have some places lines up see and you’re trying to get on welfare, but you get caught stealing tuna snacks from the dollar store. Because you’re already on probation (which means you’ve just committed 2 crimes, stealing and breach of probation) you’re taken to the jail on Innes road right away. You know that when you get out you have nowhere to go but the shelter downtown where you will use drugs. Many of your friend have Hep C and Aids now. You’re scared to get out of jail because you think you are going to die.

What do you do now?
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