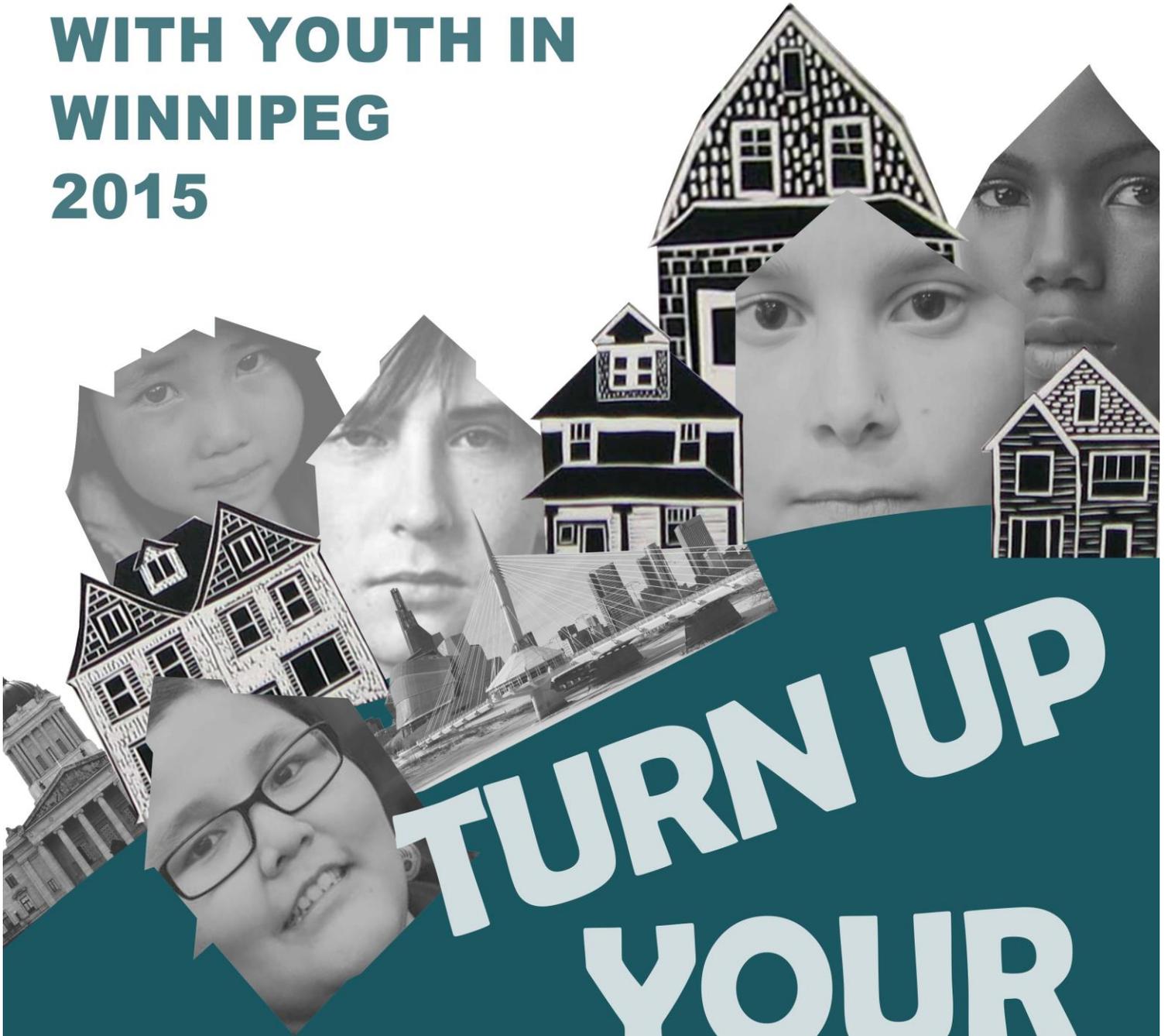


SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUTH IN WINNIPEG 2015

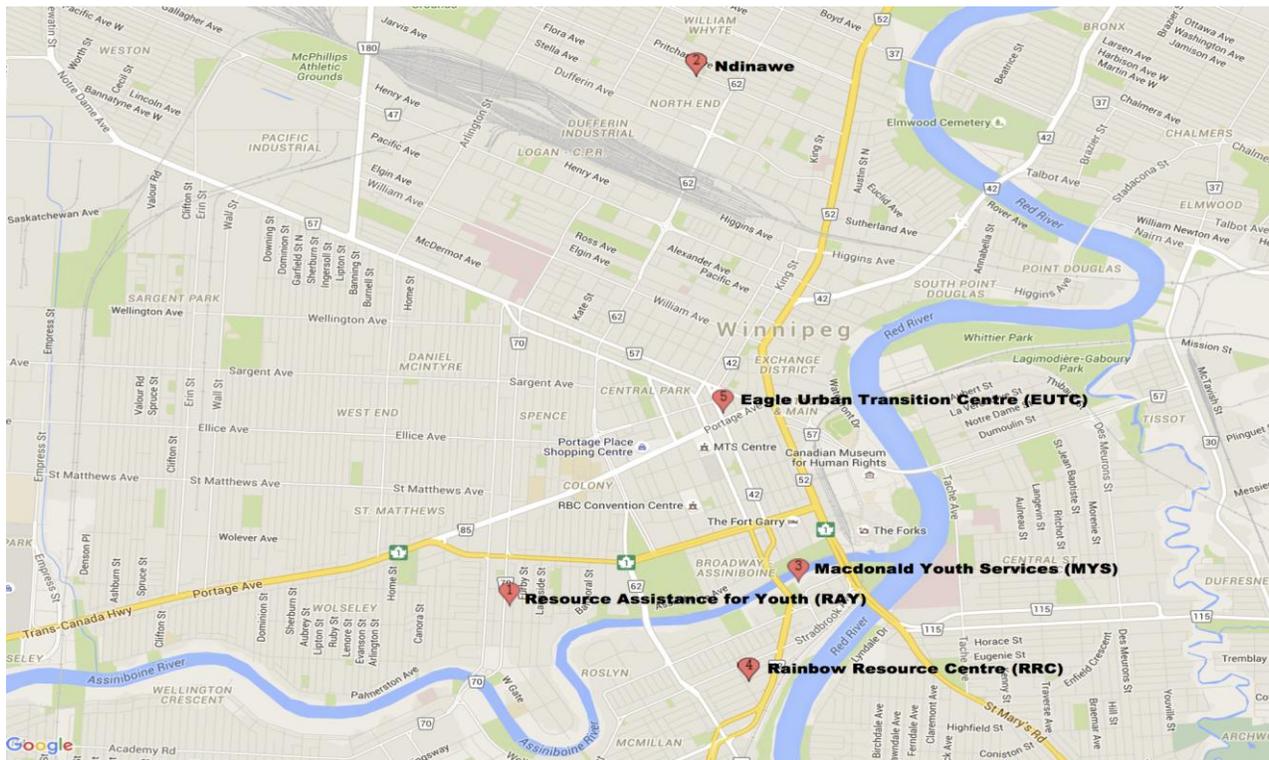


**TURN UP
YOUR
VOICE**

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Summary of Focus Groups with Youth in Winnipeg



1. Background

The Winnipeg Plan to End Youth Homelessness (WPEYH) Steering Committee was established in the fall of 2014 to coordinate and oversee the development of a collaborative and comprehensive strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness. It is composed of representatives from various youth serving agencies and government departments. While seeking funding for project coordination, The Winnipeg Foundation provided fellowship funding for Olena Ptukha, Masters student from the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba to conduct a series of focus groups to gather information on the youth experiences of homelessness in Winnipeg as well as their perspectives about the desired types of housing, service options, and prevention.

This report describes and summarizes the information collected during the focus groups with youth in August-October of 2015. Five (5) different agencies agreed to assist in organizing and providing the space for these meetings: Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY), Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. (Ndinawe), Macdonald Youth Services (MYS), Rainbow Resource Centre (RRC), and Eagle Urban Transition Centre (EUTC). Information about the dates, locations and number of participants for the each of the groups is attached in Appendix A.

2. Summary of Findings

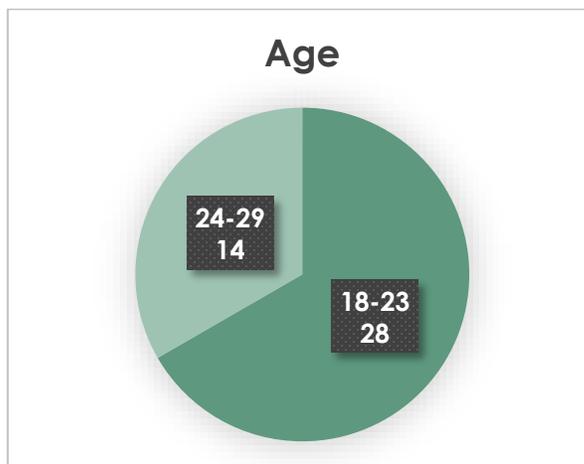
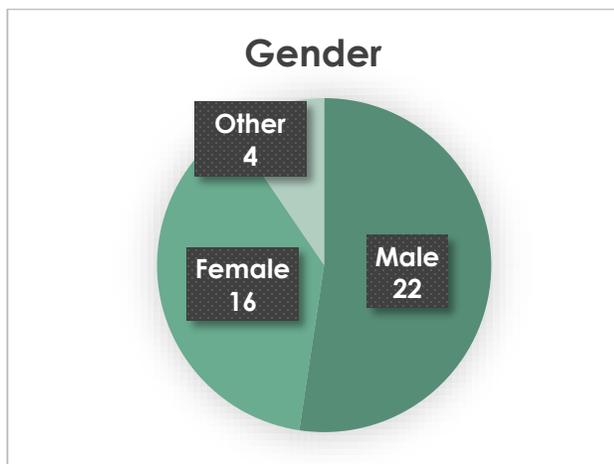
A total of forty-two (42) youth between the ages of 18 and 29 participated in the focus groups. During these conversations a large majority of participants revealed that they had previous involvement with Child and Family Services (CFS). Oftentimes they either ran away from home or were “kicked out” by their parents due to: getting into fights; identifying as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community; and using or selling drugs. In addition, many reported not having the skills to find, maintain housing and live independently when aging out of care, or exiting the juvenile justice system. A common issue was an absence of a driver’s license, which prevented many from accessing the services where an identification document was required. While also reporting an absence of a stable place to live and “couch-surfing, bouncing around from place to place”, most of the participants did not consider themselves homeless.

The perspectives on potential solutions to youth homelessness varied from site to site depending on participants’ background (Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous), age (18-23 vs. 24-29) and homelessness status (currently vs. formerly homeless). This demonstrated how different the needs and experiences of the participants were within the same age group, but yet important to note that housing was the highest priority for all. For example, when they were asked about their desired housing options, youth at RaY wanted “a big section of land where we could divide it all and to put our tents there” or “a place where I can be by myself, like a little shed”; Ndinawe youth prioritized family reunification and transitional housing where they could “learn to own a place, live alone and gain life skills”; MYS and RRC preferred independent living with slight supervision; and EUTC focused on owning a house, cabin, ranch, or “a host-home, where friends coming off reserves could stay instead of hotels”. This demonstrates the need for choices in housing models because youth are not a homogenous population.

The other most prominent themes across the groups were 24/7 safe spaces, employment, mental health and substance use resources. During the conversations, topics of discrimination and racism, parenting and CFS, and connections to First Nations communities also were raised. To maximize the youth voice, this summary includes direct quotes and specific recommendations regarding the necessary skills, strengths, and resources required for young people with lived experiences of homelessness.

2.1. Demographic Characteristics

Demographic information was requested prior to the beginning of the focus groups to provide an understanding of the target audience. The charts below reflect the answers about gender and age. The category “Other” includes transgender, agender, queer, and trans female.



In terms of Indigenous identity: 30 participants (71.4%) self-identified as Indigenous (most commonly: Aboriginal, First Nations, Ojibway, Anishinaabe, Metis and Native American), 12 as non-Indigenous.

2.2. Emergency Shelter Use

The participants of two focus groups reported the use of shelters for youth in Winnipeg: Macdonald Youth Services and Ndinawe. Length of stay on average ranged from a couple of times to several months. However, most participants had expressed that they felt uncomfortable and scared. Some youth considered Ndinawe as “a closed shelter which requires going through a long application process”, although they agreed that it was a safe place where intoxicated people were not allowed.

A large majority of participants frequently used the “adult emergency shelters”, especially in winter and when the couch-surfing option was not available. The common perceptions among focus group participants were: “there's not really enough spaces in shelters”, “there are so many homeless people”, and “we end up standing in lineups outside in the cold for hours waiting to be accommodated”. Overall, they felt that the shelters were violent and not safe. One participant described his shelter experience: “I worried about my stuff being rummaged through coz you're all sleeping in one room and there's like six beds in each room. I'd rather sleep outside or by the river”. Another youth said: “The biggest problem was getting your stuff taken, someone breaking into your locker and stealing all your stuff, your clothes. The staff wouldn't do anything about it.”

There also were some youth who avoided emergency shelters because they “heard bad things about them” or “heard that you need to pay \$12 to stay”.

Recommendations: The participants suggested to open more welcoming, barrier free locations for young people. If an individual was intoxicated, then a harm reduction center should be available. However, the broader recommendation was to create a more welcoming environment similar to Pan Am Place or a 24/7 drop-in center rather than a shelter.

2.3. Drop-in Centers and Street Outreach

The importance of having a safe place to go at any given time was voiced by participants at RAY, MYS and Ndinawe. Specific statements about day visits to drop-in centers included, “this is a good routine coming over to drop-in, especially in the winter or when it’s raining”; “you can bring a dog or another pet here at RAY. My dog doesn’t have to stay outside in the middle of winter and freeze or get stolen”; “It’s a good place to meet with friends or to use a computer”; and “I asked for housing help only because I stayed here at Ndinawe ever since it was 24/7, but now it’s not”. Youth reported that to have one centre such as Rossbrook House was not enough and that they would like to access more 24/7 drop-in centers throughout the city. In addition, street-involved youth at RAY talked positively about outreach services: “Everybody loves street outreach! Staff actually care”; “The street outreach provides socks, water, toothbrush/toothpaste, deodorant... they’ll give you that, and that’s really helpful”, and “I really like the outreach at RaY because you can call them at anytime from anywhere and they will pick you up with a shuttle”. Participants at Ndinawe also found these services provided by the agency valuable.

Recommendations: There is a need to create more centers with larger space where youth could get a free meal, a hot shower, a nap, to do laundry and dry wet clothes, as well as lockers to keep their personal items. The common statement was: “For many young people that need help, keep them open 24/7!”. Street Outreach services are a good way to connect with youth, more street outreach, or longer street outreach hours would be beneficial.

2.4. Food Security

Every participant of the focus groups was aware of the meal programs and food banks available in the city. They regularly attended Ndinawe, Siloam Mission, RAY, Agape Table and Ma Mawi to have breakfast or lunch. Some also tried the meal programs at the local churches, but not always supported the idea of “sitting through church services for food”. The majority of youth also shared that it was not an issue to get a meal. One participant concluded: “You cannot starve in Winnipeg. There’s no way to starve in Winnipeg. You can get breakfast, lunch and dinner for free from drop in centers across Winnipeg. There’s no way. The problem is you’ve got to be there on time or you’re going to miss the meal. Like Agape is only open till 10am”.

Regarding the food banks, answers were divided among the participants. There were youth who regularly used the food banks, and those who did not access them, because they did not have IDs. Typically, they would go to a food bank such as Winnipeg Harvest and Agape Table once per two weeks, and especially at the end of month “to tie up ends between pay periods”.

Recommendations: Food services in Winnipeg are largely considered effective and should be continued. Youth suggested that if they were to change anything, it would be to have a larger amount of food given at a time and programs that teach independent life skills including cooking classes and meal planning.

2.5. Mental Health and Substance Use Resources

Most youth reported feeling anxiety and depression. The participants at one of the groups voiced that mental health issues were prevalent in the LGBTQ community, but not many resources were available. One of the participants shared that he had difficulties to apply for EIA because of his high level of anxiety, “it was too scary to be in a room with all those people”. The crisis intervention lines were not considered useful by many youth because often they did not have phones, and those who had, found it harder to communicate over the phone. Describing the hospitalization experience, when one of the youth spent two (2) days in a ward due to her crisis and was treated with medication, she felt that there should have been other options. Another one reported that Health Sciences Centre (HSC) would not take him when he was addicted to crack cocaine, “it felt like I had to slow down and stop on my own because there was just no support even if you wanted to stop”. Yet others reported that the Crisis Response Centre at HSC was helpful, but the quality of service depended on the staff and type of mental health issue.

In conversations about addictions, some shared their experiences about struggles with substance abuse while they were homeless and others were proud to talk about completing treatment and successful graduation from the programs. Nevertheless, many participants said that the treatment of drug and alcohol addictions was a high priority along with housing. One participant described the benefit of going through the program: “It is stressful, but I got to the root of the problem. It is really helpful, learnt the pros and cons through sharing circles, and to get whatever off your chest”. Among the existing resources identified by youth were the following agencies: Native Addictions Council of Manitoba and its Pritchard House program, Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM), Behavioral Health Foundation (BHF), and Nine Circles. A majority of youth admitted that recovery depended on personal motivation, but sometimes they found that the conditions to work or go back to school in order to stay in the program were challenging. One participant stressed that “lots of programs will refer you to other programs and you’re always

sent somewhere else. Or when you're in the programs they put you through hoops or make it impossible for you to do things to accomplish what they want you to do". Several youth also were careful to say that the counseling should be done by a peer counselor that could relate to what they have been through.

Recommendations: Many participants would like to receive supports at their "home" agencies, for example to be able to see a mental health worker or a nurse when needed. They also suggested to develop classes on suicide awareness, health and wellness, as well as to make available CPR and safeTALK training. These and similar initiatives would promote skills training to enable peer support, instead of dependence on staff. In respect to other assistance and services, the additional support would be beneficial for vulnerable youth who apply for different government programs (e.g. one on one meeting with EIA case worker or housing specialist). Some participants advised to review the policy on non-voluntary and mandated clients of the treatment facilities, for instance individuals on probation, "so the resources are not wasted on people who don't even wanna be there". At the same time, to accept youth for treatment when needed, without the requirement to "hang out somewhere else for a couple days or weeks, and come clean". Also, they proposed to install publicly available needle disposal boxes for those who use drugs in the North End and West End areas.

2.6. Employability Skills and Employment Resources

The shared opinion was that there were enough resources available to learn how to search for jobs, write resumes and prepare for interviews. Youth would typically receive these services at Ndinawe, New Directions, Macdonald Youth Services, Rainbow Resource Centre, Neeginan Learning and Literacy Centre, RAY, Eagle Urban Transition Centre, and Ma Mawi. They also mentioned that there were opportunities to find "the odd job for one day to earn some cash", for example in construction or warehousing, although competition was severe. Employment histories varied among the participants. Several youth had full-time and some part-time jobs, others were going through interviews. One participant stated that he was self-employed: "I flag and squeegee on the streets, and always make enough to get by. And sometimes I'm upset when I don't go out, because some days I make a lot of money and distribute it to my friends and they are happy". Also, many of them reported that it was challenging to find employment due to lack of experience and an absence of a driver license. One explained further: "If you are trans and don't really look like a boy or girl, it's hard to find a job". Others confirmed that they were often judged by their appearance during the interviews. Another young man added: "Housing first, then job applications".

Most youth considered volunteer programs as a great resource to strengthen their resume and build employability skills. Some volunteered at the RAY, Ndinawe, Siloam Mission, and retirement homes. Along this same vein, a number of youth felt that having an opportunity to be

hired at the same organization after sometime would be ideal. This would allow necessary time to adjust to the work environment and pace. One young woman shared: "I've been here since 11 as a client, then as a volunteer, and now I want to work as a cook. I had the interview yesterday, but not sure if they'll hire me". In addition, participants from the EUTC and MYS groups expressed interest in learning how to start and own a business such as a restaurant or a food truck.

Recommendations: The suggestion across the groups was to increase the number of computers and work spaces in the agencies. This way youth would have more space "to do job hunting". Another recommendation was to expand career mentorship and on-the-job training programs, with emphasis on the program design that allows time to adjust and learn. Some participants would prefer daily temporary jobs with no commitment and fear to be fired as a starting point.

2.7. Educational Support

Many youth reported unsuccessfully trying to attend post-secondary school. Some mentioned their inability to cope with the pace and thrive in the classroom environment, pay high tuition fees or maintaining a satisfactory GPA. Specific statements included: "Education is overpriced, a luxury."; "If you don't have a place you won't be able to concentrate because of staying up all night. That's what prevented me from going back to school. Lack of rest"; and "I tried for one year, but it was too intense, homework every day. I can't do like that, I lost it". Most participants did not consider receiving a university degree as priority at that moment of their lives, although most believed that education would help them to obtain employment. On the other hand, there were a significant number of youth who wanted to finish Grade 12.

Recommendations: In most cases, the participants advocated for better schooling and better supports within the education system, especially to accommodate youth who have learning disabilities, came from remote and rural communities, or are preparing to become a parent. For example, for those who want to complete their Grade 12, the youth serving organizations should create specific programs. The participants would appreciate if: the schedules would be flexible; there were more afternoon and evening classes in "focus group style"; and opportunities for service-learning. Along with receiving a formal education, many youth would like to learn about financial management and healthy daily routines that may have prevented their situation from escalating to homelessness. Participants also recommended to expand programs such as Eagle Nest at the EUTC, which helps to "start learning again". Additional information about available financial assistance, scholarships and bursaries would be helpful.

2.8. Racism and Discrimination

This theme randomly emerged during every focus group and pertained to multiple experiences and forms of discrimination. Most of the non-Indigenous participants articulated that “youth are usually discriminated on looks”, meaning physical appearance or style. One participant shared his view about going to areas other than downtown: “Those people from St. James, St. Vital, or Charleswood stereotype people and don't like us, the homeless”. Many youth also felt that agencies which serve “white people get less funding than for aboriginal or black people”. Indigenous youth, in turn, reported facing racial discrimination. During one of the focus groups, a young woman talked about her experience of living in the “richer areas”, concluding that “people stared at us, that's why we returned and are still living in the North End”. Others agreed about facing discrimination unless they lived in multicultural or mixed income communities. At the same time, youth felt there was limited political will to support youth, particularly Indigenous youth, when compared with other priorities, like the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Statements included: “Why not keep trying to house the homeless instead of housing immigrants? They can't even help their own people”.

Similar viewpoints were in respect to youth service providers other than their “home” agency locations. For example, some specific statements included: “this is their side”, “you feel like you don't belong there, this feeling stops others going to other places”, and “it felt awkward being there”. In addition, several participants also did not feel comfortable enough to seek services provided by government organizations because “they require you to use your legal name, gender, do background check etc.”, and “some forms to fill are discriminatory”. Some also suggested that it would be helpful if there were LGBTQ friendly property management companies, “just put a sticker, for instance, in the signage saying that would help. It shows anti-discrimination in those places”.

The consensus within and between the groups was reached when they spoke about being ineligible for services. One youth explained: “A lot of places won't help because you're either too young or too old. One agency said I was too young (age 19 – under 21), another that I was too old (over 18). One place you have to be 21 another under 18. If you're between those ages, no one wants to help you”. Several others voiced that service providers should not be allowed to segregate based on age.

2.9. Parenting and CFS

One special topic that some participants felt relevant to discuss was their experience with CFS as a parent. There were many concerns raised and statements made concerning the system in general, difference in parenting styles, efforts to complete programs, and ability to raise children. Some of them included: “CFS is like a modern residential school. So many kids are taken every year. Mine was”; “It seems with the worker, that if you are not parenting

the way they would, it's like wrong parenting, but it's not"; and "I finished the programs, but housing is the issue. Meet me half way, let me to see kids". One young man stated that "if you have been through CFS, and when you have a kid they will try to come back at you". Some participants also shared that they were afraid to connect with services, reporting that if they had experienced difficulties and needed extra assistance, their children could be temporarily placed in foster families. This lack of trust has major implications.

Recommendations: Participants did not provide specific solutions to this issue, but shared that they "find it a strength when my organization helps to get kids back". Some mentioned that the Office of the Children's Advocate used to assist them in these cases, but no longer provided the service. Overall, the communication between CFS workers and parents, as well as procedures to screen foster families should be improved. This topic requires further explorations.

2.10. Connection with First Nations Communities

Several groups spent time discussing the reasons why they left their communities and came to Winnipeg. Most youth stated that poverty was a major factor as well the absence of perspectives for the future. The common opinions were "not much to do there", "overcrowded housing", "some reserves just have nursery to Grade 12 then nothing after", "not many jobs too", "expensive to live, prices go up the further you are up north", and "I can do more with my life". One young man disclosed that "people underestimated me and made fun of me because I am feminine. I worked as security to get enough hours for EIA, and then I left my house, car and mom, told her to sell everything if needed. That's how much I don't like that place". While some youth said they were on the waiting list for up to ten (10) years to get housing in their First Nations communities, the majority in these groups had reported that returning would be the last resort. One participant said that he had no place to stay on reserve, and his "friends and family are too transient to get a hold of". Several other participants voiced that the situation with housing in their home communities was the following: "You have to be a relative to a chief of council in order to get house".

Despite the fact of being away from their home communities, youth desired to participate in traditional ceremonies. Specific statements included "nowhere to do sweats and smudges in neighbourhoods", "not being able to go to ceremonies is hard", "no smudges and sweats, but it is cultural root identifications", and "sad, one is raised in culture and can't really learn more about it". Some of the places and ceremonies that participants would attend were: smudges at Ndinawe; events when elders talk to youth; pipe ceremonies at Pritchard House, and sweats offered by Native Clan or Aboriginal House, but youth reported that they were often crowded. Some youth also stated that there were more sweats for men than women.

2.11. Transportation and Communication

Most participants preferred inexpensive transportation such as walking or biking because they mostly traveled within their neighbourhoods. However, transportation became an issue when youth needed to attend interviews in the process of job searching. Some identified limited access to public transportation as a barrier to employment. Another reported challenge was related to communication. Many participants never had a phone and some considered it as unnecessary expense. One young man added; "I have never had a phone because I am scared and don't want to mess up my credit". Several others revealed that an absence of phone prevented them from following up on the status of applications with Manitoba Housing. Regarding social media, there were no definite answers: some actively used them, others did not. Most also would use drop-in programs and libraries to access internet and use phones.

Recommendations: Participants at one of group suggested to reconvene Safe Ride program in the North End community, but to increase a number of vans as well. Others also advocated for bus fare assistance program, extend bus service in the night and free shuttles. Youth may not have phones but they may access the internet, therefore web-based access to information and appointments could improve accessibility.

3. Desired Housing Options

Youth were asked if there were any housing options that might have prevented or shortened the duration of their homelessness. As stated above, most felt strongly that they did not want to be in a shelter setting, but expressed different opinions concerning the types of housing they would like. Ultimately, the consensus was that owning a house or condo would be ideal. Many youth, however, reported that they previously lived independently, and there were challenges to maintain their tenancy. For example, one participant said: "I aged out of CFS, they gave me 400 dollars, paid one month of my rent and said 'have a nice life'. You go from having emotional and community support, like checking up on you and caring about you, to nothing. Another big problem is the cost of rent and living". Others conveyed similar messages and described facing the challenges with paying rent, obtaining references, and finding decent accommodations. The housing options discussed during the focus groups are described in a greater detail below.

The transitional housing was described as a good starting point, however youth expressed that not many programs were available in Winnipeg. One participant shared that he went to Pan Am Place, which did not have an addictions program that he needed, but he received help, "It's a good place to stay, to eat, to get back on your feet, and relieve stress at the gym when punching a bag". Several other young men had similar experiences and valued that they were allowed to stay as long as need: "Even when you screwed up, you can stay"; and "I could do what I want, but I was able to get things done that they require. It is important". The participants in another group voiced that it would be beneficial to develop transitional housing program in

the North End. Some even felt that this program should be for men only, because there were many services for women already in place. One youth from other group completed RAY's REST program and mentioned that he was allowed to stay there for three (3) months while working on the personal goals, then moved to private market apartment. Some believed they were not allowed to have pets in the suites, therefore this program was not an option for them, even though REST staff confirm pets are permitted in the program.

The social housing programs were not accessible for most youth. Many shared information about being on a wait list for extended period of time, but they "had no hope to get in". Several youth mentioned that they rather be homeless than live in some place infested with bedbugs, cockroaches and mice. One young woman shared that she lived in Manitoba Housing and believed that "it's easier to get if you have children". Participants would like to have this option available and advocated for shorter waiting lists and more social housing units.

One group discussed the host-home as a good model for youth coming from First Nations communities to Winnipeg, and another group described a housing first model without using that term; they expressed frustration with the conditions to be employed or in school or complete the treatment program in order to obtain housing. In addition, one participant stated that government licensed rooming houses should be available in the communities. However, the common vision across the groups was that shared living and roommates create uncomfortable situations; some used statements such as "roommates suck", or "it's a horrible living with random people".

The supervised independent living programs and supportive housing programs were popular options among the youth. Participants wanted to live in houses or apartments with some support if they need it: "...staff to check on us, managing everything building related, but not someone around every day telling us what to do"; "there are less things to worry about when live in such housing and it is safer"; "they should help to gain life skills: budgeting and debt managing, cooking, cleaning". Youth also used specific terms to describe the program supports, "you should feel that someone keep pushing you forward", "emotional support", "empowerment though the transition", and "someone who actually cares about you". Overall, in their opinion, these programs should be available across Winnipeg, long-term and low-barrier affordable housing for youth who require support services to achieve successful tenancies. The preferred types were one bedroom, bachelor or studio apartments in such locations as Osborne Village, Corydon Village, St. Boniface, St. James, Fort Richmond, and Fort Garry. The provision of furniture once housing is acquired, for example beds, tables, chairs, or couch, would be beneficial.

4. Homelessness Prevention

Participants of the focus groups were asked if there was anything that could have prevented them from losing their housing. Responses to this question revealed that the prevention

strategy should be based on supportive services coupled with stable housing, particularly when combined with effective graduation from the programs or discharge from justice system and treatment facilities. The majority of participants, who had experiences of transition, reported that as individual responsibility increase, “there should be more support after things go ok”. One participant shared that he recently got a job, the requirement of the last stage in his program, and was awaiting for his EIA case to be closed. He felt that “It’s not right! There should still be support to make sure you stay housed”. Others also could not emphasized enough that continuing support was essential, and would reduce the level of anxiety and stress when graduating from the programs: “One minute you have nothing, the next you have everything and you’re unsure of how to deal with everything”. Otherwise, without the supports they felt being at risk of homelessness again. In addition, some youth talked about their peers and mentioned that some were more vulnerable than others. For example, one participant reported: “Young women often are exposed to exploitation. If they have children, then the guaranteed child tax cheque makes them more desirable”. Several other participants believed that vulnerable youth would benefit from additional and more intensive services once they housed.

Many groups were vocal about cuts in funding and closing the programs that helped youth at risk of homelessness. They also talked about the importance to provide information about the services that were available to them, especially services that might have prevented their homelessness. Many were not aware about the available assistance until they had already become homeless, and they most often learned from other youth on the street or when they got involved with justice system. Another recommendation included to improve the high school curriculums, because “youth should learn how to make budget, check credit scores, and be financially responsible”. The prevention strategies should target youth before they turn 18 and “try to be on their own”. A number of youth also felt that having a trusted friend or family member willing to intervene would have been helpful and may have prevented their situation from escalating to homelessness.

In conclusion, the participants advocated for youth specific housing programs, building more affordable housing for choice in independent living to provide “the right home”, reducing a systematic feeling of programs, and overall increasing equality in every aspect of lives. The prominent statement expressed by one of the participants, framed the response to youth homelessness: “A lot of programs attack problems, but you guys need to attack the roots of the problems. Not an overnight thing, the review process takes time. EIA, Justice, CFS, Addictions etc., they all play a role in homelessness. Every problem in the city interconnects with one another”. Most of youth also voiced that if they had more of a say, and could have been assured of safety as well as provided with formal and informal supports, they might have successfully transitioned to adulthood.

APPENDIX A

Focus Groups Dates and Locations

Agency	Date	Location	Number of Participants
Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY)	August 27, 2015	125 Sherbrook St.	7
Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. (Ndinawe)	September 3, 2015	472 Selkirk Ave.	10
Macdonald Youth Services (MYS)	September 9, 2015	175A Mayfair Ave.	7
Rainbow Resource Centre (RRC)	September 28, 2015	170 Scott St.	8
Eagle Urban Transition Centre (EUTC)	October 5, 2015	275 Portage Ave.	10
Total:			42