



## ***FINAL EVALUATION REPORT – SEPTEMBER 2011***

### **DIRECTIONS YOUTH SERVICES CENTRE: YOUTH HOMELESSNESS INITIATIVE PROJECT**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Directions Youth Homelessness Initiative aimed to assist homeless youth ages 19 to 24 in finding and maintaining housing and in developing their life-skills. McCreary evaluated this two-year initiative using a methodology that incorporated self-report surveys and focus groups with youth and staff.

Findings from the evaluation highlighted the challenges that vulnerable and homeless young people face once they turn 19, including barriers to finding and maintaining housing. Further, findings indicated that all 30 youth who completed an intake survey at Directions got housed at some point during their involvement in the housing program. Additionally, they reported moving fewer times while taking part in the program than in the six months before starting the program. Youth also reported that their involvement in the housing program helped to shorten the gap between the time they lost one accommodation and found another.

Youth and staff also indicated that youth learned important life-skills as well as knowledge of rental rights and responsibilities through the housing program. Most youth also reported improvements in their social-emotional functioning, including hopefulness and community connectedness, as well as increased knowledge of their treatment options and a better ability to engage in education and employment planning. Further, youth were more likely to feel ready to live independently toward the end of the program as opposed to when they first started.

Both youth and staff felt that the greatest success of the housing program was the role of the housing worker. Staff said that if the housing program were to receive more funding, the emphasis from the outset would be more on the development of life-skills and less on finding and maintaining housing, given the reality of the housing situation and the needs of the youth that Directions serves. In fact, there seemed to be a shift after the first year of the program from focusing on meeting youths' basic needs and helping them find accommodations, to focusing on the development of life-skills.

Youth felt that the program provided them with invaluable support and assistance. Youth and staff also provided suggestions for how the program could improve if it received additional funding (see the subsection entitled Youth's and Staff's Suggestions).

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Directions youth homelessness initiative operated inside a 24-hour health and social service centre for homeless youth, and involved a specialist youth worker employed by Directions Youth Services Centre. The objective was for this worker to work with 20 homeless youth, ages 19 to 24, over a two year period with the goal of assisting them in seeking, acquiring and maintaining housing and in bolstering their life skills (e.g., banking, rental rights and responsibilities, employment planning and job skills development, education planning, treatment options, and accessing social and recreational opportunities).

McCreary conducted an independent evaluation of the Directions housing program. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the program in helping youth to develop life-skills and to find and maintain housing.

Directions staff reported 198 intakes into the program from June, 2009 to June, 2011. However, due to resource constraints the program only collected in-depth data on 20 youth participants at a time (i.e., tracked every three months through the evaluation surveys). When one youth left the program, another young person was then included in the tracked group of 20. This process led to a total of 30 youth who completed intake evaluation surveys. The housing worker had been seeing eight youth regularly until the end of the program.

Staff explained that it was not practical to limit the program intakes to 20 youth because a large number of young people aged between 19 and 24 came to Directions to access housing support and services although might not return for follow-up assistance, given the obstacles and flux in their daily lives. However, some youth reconnected with the program, even several months later.

All the youth who completed an intake evaluation survey got housed at some point during their involvement in the Directions housing program. Twenty of these youth were able to maintain housing and were currently housed as of September, 2011, but these accommodations were not necessarily their original housing units.

<b>Information from Directions Staff</b>	
Total Intakes	198
Completed intake evaluation surveys	30
Number who got housed (of those who completed surveys)	30
Number who maintained housing (of those who completed surveys)	20

For clarification on any of the numbers, please contact Directions.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Surveys*

Following consultation with Directions staff and pilot testing with homeless youth, McCreary developed a youth self-report survey as well as a companion survey for Directions staff.

The youth survey included questions that had been used in other McCreary studies. The survey tapped the following areas: Housing experiences, perceived safety in current living accommodations, obstacles for finding and keeping housing, resources and supports accessed, usefulness of accessed resources, discrimination, money management, effects of the 2010 Olympics, and direct evaluation questions pertaining to the Directions housing program.

The brief staff survey canvassed staffs' perceptions on how safe the youths' living accommodations were, obstacles youth have faced in finding and maintaining housing, and youths' money management skills.

A repeated-measures design was used to assess changes over time. The initial plan was for Directions staff to distribute surveys to youth at intake (Time 1, baseline) and every six months thereafter. However, at the time of the interim report, Directions and McCreary staff made a shift to distributing youth surveys every three months because six months was deemed as too long of an interval for tracking this group of transient youth. This shift resulted in the distribution of surveys at six time-points (Time 1 through Time 6).

Youth were assigned a unique participant identification number so that their surveys could be matched at the various time-points for the purpose of conducting repeated-measures analyses. Identifying information (e.g., youths' names) was not included on the surveys.

### *Youth Survey Variables:*

<b>Section</b>	<b>Variable/Measures</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>1. Background information</b>	Items from McCreary surveys	Age; gender; ethnicity; living in government care; as well as money management; and experience of discrimination in the past year based on race, having children, etc.
<b>2. Housing</b>	Items from McCreary surveys	Items ask about current and past housing accommodations, number of moves, length of time in current location, and perceptions about why youth have had difficulty finding and maintaining housing.
<b>3. Community support/resources</b>	Items from McCreary surveys	Whether participants accessed relevant community services, and if these were helpful. Also, who participants sought help from and how helpful it was; who do they talk to if faced with a problem.
<b>4. Feedback about the program</b>	Developed by McCreary	Taps what participants like most/least about the program, etc.

### *Focus groups*

To supplement the quantitative data, McCreary staff facilitated four focus groups at Directions, with two in 2010 and two in 2011.

The first two focus groups took place on September 16, 2010. The first involved nine Directions staff members (outreach and youth workers), including the housing support worker for youth ages 19 and older. The second included eight youth (five males, three females) who were involved in the Directions housing program. These youth belonged to the group of 20 who were being tracked over time with in-depth self-report surveys. The purpose of these focus groups was to supplement the self-report survey data with more in-depth qualitative accounts and to compare staffs' and youths' perceptions of housing, homelessness and the support the young people received from the Directions housing program.

The final two focus groups took place in July, 2011. The youth focus group was held on July 20<sup>th</sup> and involved eight youth (five males, two females, one transgendered). The staff focus group occurred on July 25<sup>th</sup> and involved six Directions staff members from various programs, including the housing support worker for youth ages 19 and older. The purpose of these two focus groups was to assess changes that took place since the focus groups the previous year, and to canvass participants' reactions to the termination of the Directions housing program.

## SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

A total of 30 youth completed a Time 1 baseline survey. As illustrated in the following table, the sample size was relatively small at each subsequent time-point and there was attrition between most time-points.

Time-point	Youth surveys
Time 1 (baseline)	30
Time 2	17
Time 3	20
Time 4	14
Time 5	10
Time 6	5

Therefore, the middle time-points (Time 2, Time 3, Time 4), which involved identical surveys, were combined to maximize statistical power and to facilitate the reporting of results in a more concise manner. This process yielded a total of 24 youth who completed at least one of these three “interim” surveys.

Merging was also carried out with the last two surveys (Time 5, Time 6) which were identical to one another in content. This process yielded a total of 10 youth who completed at least one of the two “final” surveys.

Time-point	Youth surveys
Baseline (Time 1)	30
Interim (Time 2, Time 3 or Time 4)	24
Final (Time 5 or Time 6)	10

Staff surveys were merged in a similar way, which resulted in a comparable number of staff and youth surveys at each of the three time-points (baseline, interim, final).

### *Demographics*

Youth who completed a Time 1 survey ranged in age from 19 to 25 years, and the average age was 21.4 years. Most participants (60%) were male, whereas 37% were female and the remainder were transgender.

The majority (67%) reported European heritage, while 20% indicated Aboriginal heritage. Other reported ethnicities were South-East Asian, West Asian, Latin American, and African (youth could choose more than one). Additionally, 33% reported a background other than those listed, with most of these youth identifying as Canadian or French Canadian/Quebecois.

## FINDINGS

Through focus groups and surveys, youth and staff not only shared their views on the Directions housing program but also on issues that impacted program participants. These issues included turning 19 and transitioning out of government care; challenges young people face in finding and maintaining housing; and supports that young people would benefit from.

Given that only 10 final surveys were completed by youth, many of the statistical analyses conducted with these surveys could not be reported due to small cell sizes and insufficient power to detect differences. However, qualitative data from the final surveys (from open-ended questions) are reported here. The quantitative analyses thus focus predominantly on the intake and interim survey data.

### Program Description

*“They gave me a job when I got here, food when they were able to, and provided me with dog food and housing advice” – youth participant*

Staff explained that the Directions housing program was for ‘at-risk’ street-involved youth between the ages of 19 and 24. The program was developed in response to the lack of housing support and options available to young people over age 19. Staff estimated that around 70% of youth who accessed the housing program had been in government care or otherwise supported by MCFD before their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.

When asked whether the Directions housing program was different from other housing programs, staff said that Directions served a different population of youth, specifically those who were more street-entrenched and ‘higher risk,’ and who tended to seek the Directions housing program as a last resort. They also noted that some housing programs had access to housing units, or were for specific populations (e.g., Aboriginal or parenting/pregnant youth), unlike the housing program at Directions which was open to anyone ages 19 to 24 but did not have housing units or subsidies to offer. Youth were asked the same question in both focus groups, and they remarked that the Directions program was more supportive, accepting, and sensitive to their individual needs than other programs they had been involved in. They also appreciated that the program was less “rule-based” than some other housing programs.

In the first staff focus group, staff said that the goals of the housing program were for youth to learn independent living skills, and to find and maintain housing. They defined success as youth being housed for more than a month, and deemed staying housed for six months as highly successful. However, in the second staff focus group 10 months later, staff revisited this issue and explained that it was difficult to measure success for a number of reasons. For instance, two youth may have maintained their housing for longer than a month but one youth might have been partying regularly and causing disturbances whereas the other might have been applying prosocial life-skills. Staff also explained that they did not consider youth moving into unsafe housing or an SRO as reflective of program success. For these reasons, some staff felt that learning life-skills which “youth can use for their entire life” should be considered the benchmark of success among this group of youth, rather than finding or maintaining housing.

Staff stated that another goal was to instill realistic expectations among youth in the program, both in terms of the reality of the housing market as well as the process of finding housing. For example, some youth had assumed that a rental vacancy would automatically translate into the landlord offering them a tenancy simply if they indicated that they would like to move in.



### *Life-skills*

Staff in both focus groups felt that learning life-skills was “the biggest piece” that youth needed in order to be successful in finding and maintaining housing, and said that a major focus of the housing program was on the development of life-skills. Key skills that the housing worker addressed with youth were communication skills (e.g., talking with landlords or corresponding with them by email), hygiene (e.g., cleanliness when attending appointments with landlords), punctuality (showing up and being on time for appointments with landlords), and money management (e.g., paying bills; dealing with Income Assistance). Other skills the program addressed were resume writing and self-advocacy.

Staff also highlighted the importance of teaching youth the social norms and skills associated with living indoors, which was often more of a challenge with older compared to younger youth who were more likely to be street entrenched. Youth in the first focus group also mentioned that the transition from living on the street to indoors was a difficult one to make, and they would value learning more life-skills for living indoors and maintaining their units. Staff added that youth in the program needed to learn skills and receive guidance in the area of affect regulation and anger management. Staff related that some youth spat on the floors, tore out walls, or drew graffiti in their own units, stemming in part from not knowing how to manage and express their emotions in more appropriate ways. Staff recognized that addressing these issues with the youth was integral for youth to maintain their housing, and was a goal of the housing program. Staff explained that youth who lost housing were offered an opportunity through the program to learn from this experience and gain a better understanding of how their behaviour and attitude may have contributed to them losing their housing.

### *Housing worker's role*

As explained by Directions staff in their first focus group, the role of the housing worker was to help youth find and maintain housing, and to provide support with related issues such as accessing income assistance and developing life skills. Youth indicated meeting with the housing support worker as often as they wanted, with some meeting once a week and others meeting less regularly. Staff explained that there was flexibility around meeting with youth and consideration of their schedules, although the ideal would be for youth to meet often and regularly with the housing worker, and in some cases even daily. Staff also explained that contact with the youth might be sporadic; for example the housing worker may have met with a youth a few times a week but the youth may have then lost contact with the worker for several weeks before reconnecting.

Staff outlined that the housing worker conducted an assessment to determine the most appropriate accommodation for each youth. A plan could be made to help youth find housing outside of the downtown core to assist them in making positive changes in their lifestyle and peer group, if youth were looking to do so. Staff remarked that the idea of the program was to support youth in moving out of homelessness, but some youth became more street-entrenched due to the peer contacts they made through Directions. As a result, Directions sometimes referred youth to other housing programs where youth had the opportunity to connect with a different group of young people.

The young people reported that they would first approach the housing worker for any help or advocacy around housing but would also access other services at Directions. Staff added that the Directions housing program was different from other services at Directions in that it was more specific and focused on housing. However, given that the youth tended to need and

benefit from other services offered at Directions, they often accessed other Directions services in addition to those offered through the housing program. Staff anticipated that the termination of the housing program would affect other Directions services because the programs at Directions are “interlinked.”

Although the housing worker had been informing youth for almost a year about when the program would be ending, most youth in the second focus group (July 20<sup>th</sup>) were unaware that the program had ended on June 30 because they had not accessed services at Directions for some time. Although they felt they no longer needed these services, they stated that the housing program should continue to operate for those youth who would benefit.

## **Turning 19**

Directions staff felt that the biggest gap in youth services was for young people ages 19 to 24 because there were insufficient mental health and housing supports for older youth who needed these supports. They stated that youth who had been receiving support up to age 18 often did not initially recognize how many services ended at age 19, but soon realized that the available adult services were not as sensitive and sympathetic to young people’s needs as were services for youth under 19. They said that youth who successfully transitioned to adulthood were able to do so with help from dedicated workers, but there was a two-year waitlist to see a transition worker (outside the Directions program).

Youth expressed mixed views about the services available to young people turning 19. Some maintained that it is not difficult to find support at age 19 “if you look,” whereas others argued that there are not as many services for young people ages 19 and over as there are for younger youth, and that most services for youth end at age 21.

Both staff and youth agreed that young people transitioning to adulthood would benefit if allowed access to services that already existed for adolescents under the age of 19, including services that help with employment and housing. The youth also suggested that those ages 19 and older should have access to semi-independent living accommodations similar to those currently available to youth under age 19.

The youth listed other factors that would help young people who were transitioning to adulthood, including more advocacy for young people; better governance of SRO’s so they were cleaner and safer; more safe and affordable housing; landlords who were more understanding and accepting of young people on welfare; and the ability to provide landlords with cash rather than cheques from Income Assistance so that youth could live in illegal basement suites which would be safer than living on the street. Staff felt that the transition process should begin years before youth turn 19 so they had services in place on their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## **Past Difficulties Finding and Maintaining Housing**

Directions staff explained that it was difficult to help young people find accommodations due to the shortage of safe and affordable housing in Vancouver. According to staff, youth who were interested in taking part in the Directions housing program often assumed that the program had units available for them, and were not aware of the long waitlist (over one year) at BC Housing and at other programs that offered supplementary financial support. Youths’ assumption sometimes came from hearing recommendations about the Directions housing program from other young people. Staff voiced frustration that they could not directly offer youth any affordable housing.

Although staff expressed frustration with being unable to provide more help in meeting youths' housing needs, they felt that the youth appreciated the support and advocacy the housing program offered. The youth acknowledged that the Directions housing program did as much as it could to assist them and that young people were faced with financial constraints and other challenges beyond Directions' control when it came to finding and maintaining housing.

### *Finding housing*

*“My dog is why it took so long for me to find a place” – youth participant*

The youth recounted their challenges in finding housing, including landlords who were reluctant to accept young people on welfare due to uncertainty that they would receive regular rent cheques, and some landlords' fear that their illegal suites would be discovered. Other challenges included feeling uncomfortable or unsafe around some landlords, or feeling judged by landlords based on youths' physical appearance. Staff pointed out that some youth have had difficulty understanding or accepting social norms surrounding finding housing and meeting with landlords, including hygiene issues (e.g., showering), and these youth felt they should be accepted as they were.

In addition to challenges relating to landlords, youth and staff agreed that the suites the young people could afford were often unsanitary and unsafe. For example, there were no locks on doors, there was violence in the hallways, and non-functioning toilets. Further, suites were infested with bed bugs and rats. One staff member remarked, “There are no bed bugs in the park” in reference to why young people often chose to stay on the street rather than in the housing units available to them.

Staff explained that although some youth may have perceived these housing conditions as sufficiently safe and sanitary, the staff were reluctant to recommend these types of accommodations to young people, and even unsanitary units could have one-year waitlists. Moreover, the staff pointed out that it was difficult to foster the self-esteem and self-worth of youth who were faced with such dire housing options.

According to staff, another barrier to finding housing was that youth wanted to live close to resources, which tended to be limited to a small area of downtown. The youth concurred that living anywhere other than downtown and requiring transportation created barriers for accessing services located in this area.

Staff offered suggestions for reducing young people's obstacles to finding safe and affordable housing, including youth being given more income assistance, more transitional housing for young people ages 19 to 24, and the provision of more safe, low barrier accommodations containing supportive resources.

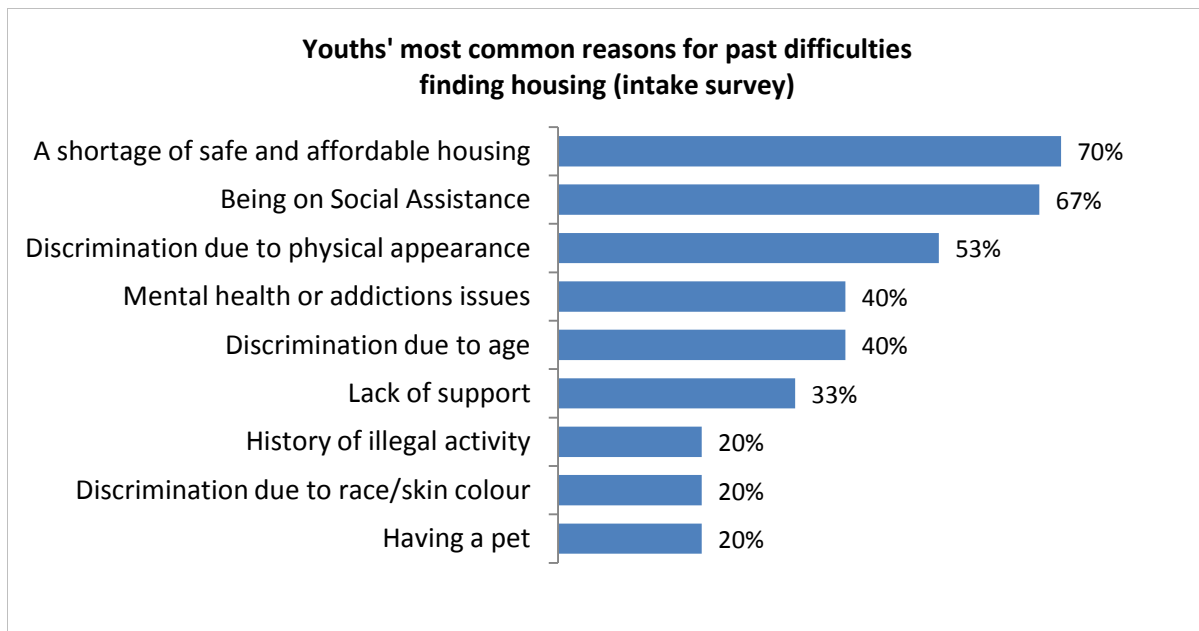
Additionally, in the first staff focus group, it was proposed that more SRO's be available to youth. However, in the second staff focus group the sentiment seemed to be that it was relatively easy to house youth in SRO's but that youth living in these accommodations should be considered homeless due to the unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

Youth highlighted the importance of landlords gaining a better understanding of how Income Assistance rent subsidies work so they would be reassured about receiving young people's rent

cheques. A suggestion was for the welfare office to create an official information sheet pertaining to rent subsidies which youth could give to landlords.

Youth's Time 1 (baseline) survey responses reflected a number of reasons for past difficulties finding housing. The most common were being on Social Assistance and that there was a shortage of safe and affordable housing. Directions staff also most commonly pointed to a shortage of safe and affordable housing (97%) and youth being on Social Assistance (84%) as the reasons for youths' difficulties finding housing.

On the intake (baseline) survey, 100% of youth indicated having had trouble finding housing at some point. These rates were lower on the interim and final surveys when asked about difficulties finding housing in the past six months.



### *Maintaining housing*

#### *“It’s easier to get housing than to keep housing” – youth participant*

The youth explained that once they find a place to live, they often experience challenges maintaining their housing. Some struggle with the transition from entrenched street living to living indoors, and may continue sleeping on the floor, have difficulty keeping their place clean, or not know how to cook a meal as a result. It took some youth over a year to “feel at home” because of this transition, and others felt that their place would never feel like home without parents or other family present. Staff added that the young people may struggle with turning their unit into a home because they lack money to buy furniture, cleaning products, groceries, and appliances (e.g., television). They therefore become bored and lonely because they are faced with only the “four white walls,” and often want to leave as a result. Staff said that they try to contribute whenever possible by providing youth with items they no longer need, including posters to hang on the walls.

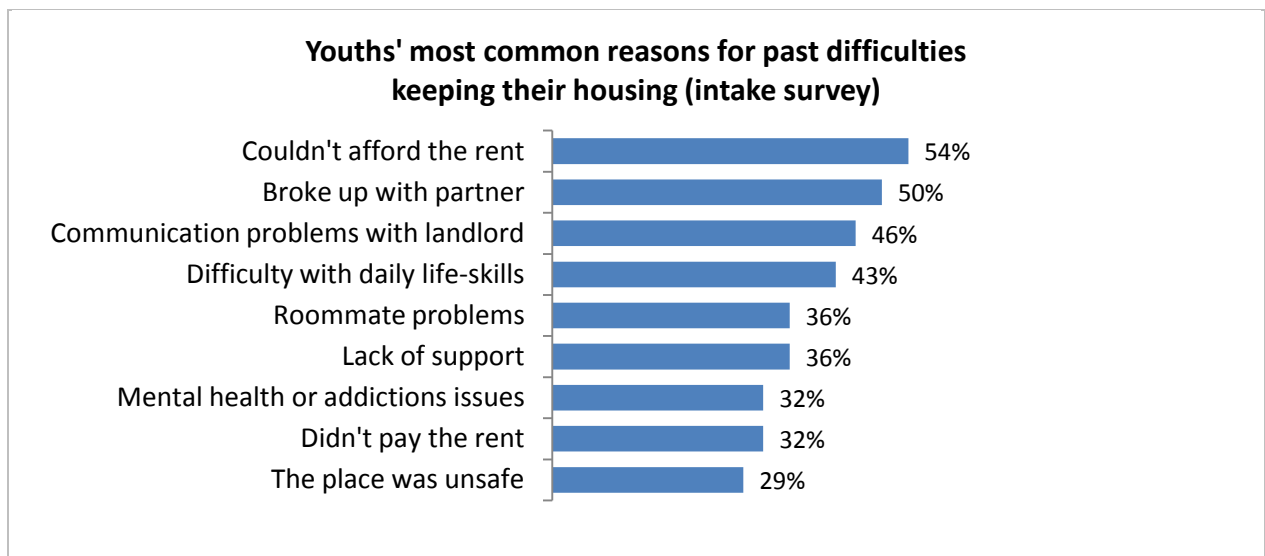
Youth identified paying their rent as another key challenge for maintaining housing. They remarked that the maximum Income Assistance rent subsidy of \$375 a month is below what

they need to survive. Although one youth was able to receive \$450 a month, most youth have not been successful at receiving extra funds.

Staff listed unsafe and unsanitary living conditions as another challenge that youth face in maintaining housing, such as rat infestations that drive young people out of their units. Also, landlords may evict young people due to excessive noise or partying in their units.

Staff said that for youth to maintain their housing they require many of the same supports needed to find housing, including supports and resources geared toward young people ages 19 to 24. They also highlighted that connecting with a one-on-one transition worker is key to successfully maintaining housing.

On the baseline survey, youths' most frequently identified reasons for problems maintaining housing included being unable to afford the rent or breaking up with their romantic partner. Directions staff identified youths' inability to afford the rent (68%), lack of support (54%), mental health issues or addictions (54%), and difficulties with life-skills (46%) as the most common reasons.



As was the case with difficulties finding housing, 100% of youth indicated on the intake survey having had trouble maintaining housing at some point. These rates were lower on the interim and final surveys when asked about difficulties maintaining housing in the past six months.

Youth were asked an open-ended question on the surveys about what would help them keep their housing. Common responses included having or maintaining a job, having more money, the availability of more affordable housing, and receiving ongoing support to assist with life-skills.

On the baseline survey, most youth (82%) indicated having had trouble paying their rent at some point. The most common reasons included insufficient Income Assistance (57%), problems finding a job (54%), losing a job (43%), being unable to afford the rent after a roommate or partner left (36%), and problems managing money (32%). A smaller percentage of youth reported difficulties paying rent on their interim and final surveys than on their intake surveys, however this decrease was not statistically significant.

### Living Situation

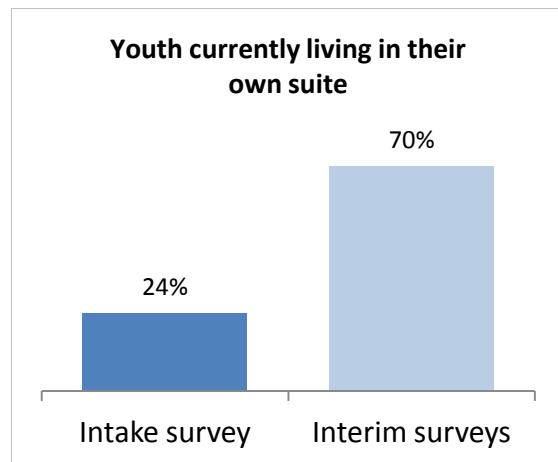
*“Directions saved my life!! I’d be on the street again if Directions wasn’t here!!”  
– youth participant*

As illustrated in the table below, all the youth indicated on their intake surveys that they had lived on the street and had couch surfed at some point in their lives. The vast majority had also stayed in a shelter. Most participants (63%) had lived in government care (i.e., foster home or group home), and five youth (17%) had been on a Youth Agreement in the past (but none in the last year).

Lived here at some point (intake survey)	
Street	100%
Living nowhere / all over (couch surfing)	100%
Safe house/ shelter	93%
Parent’s home	93%
Own house or apartment	83%
Tent	82%
Abandoned house or building (squatting)	71%
Hotel	69%
Other relative’s home	62%
Group home	56%
Foster home	48%
Car	30%
Transition house	29%

At the time they completed the intake survey, youth most commonly reported currently living on the street (35%), their own place (24%), a shelter (18%), or couch surfing (17%).

Youth were more likely to indicate living in their own place on the interim surveys than on the intake survey. This rate was also higher on the final surveys, compared to intake surveys, but was not statistically significant due to a small sample size.

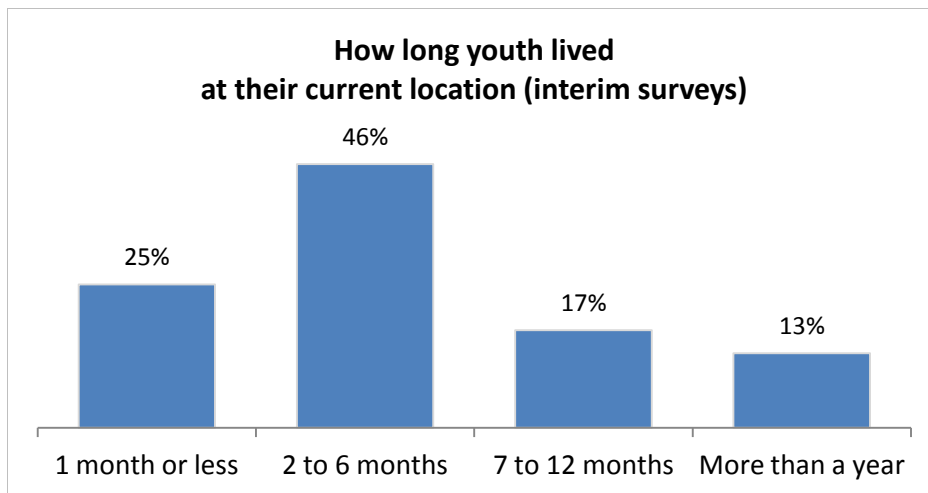


In the focus groups, most youth reported that they were currently living in a unit that the Directions housing worker had helped them find. Those who had found the unit on their own received other assistance from the housing worker, such as help with moving.

Further, on the interim and final surveys, the majority of youth reported currently receiving a housing subsidy and/or additional financial support when they moved into their current location (e.g., start-up kit). In contrast, most youth reported on the intake survey not receiving such support.

### *Moving*

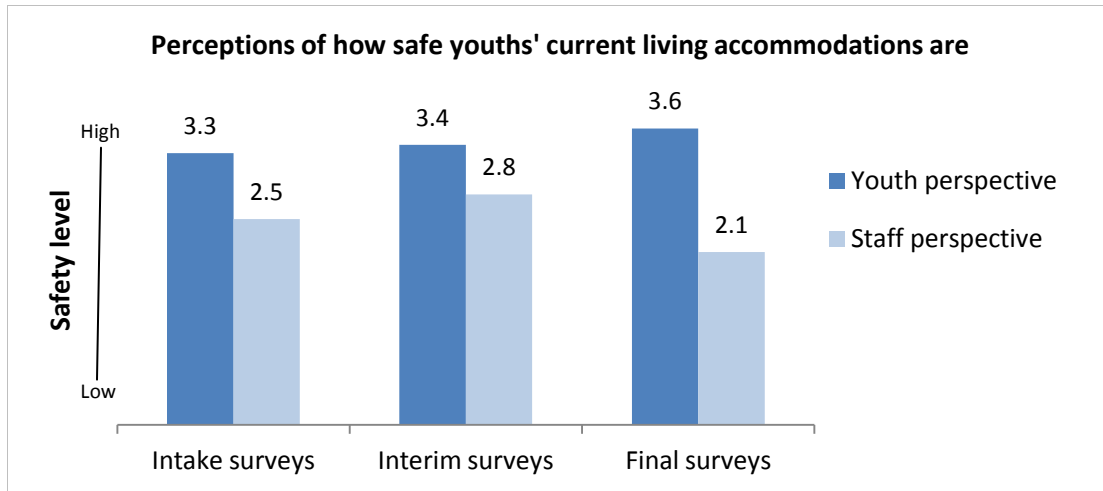
Youth moved fewer times while taking part in the Directions housing program than in the six months before starting the program (from 4.0 average moves at intake to 1.4 average moves on the interim surveys). A trend also suggested that youth stayed in their accommodations for longer while taking part in the housing program. On the intake survey, they most commonly reported living at their current location for one month or less, whereas on the interim and final surveys they most commonly indicated living at their current location for 2 to 6 months.



On the intake survey, most participants (73%) indicated that they would want to move if they had more money. Reasons included wanting their own place either because they were sharing space with others or were currently living on the street, or wanting to move to a place with fewer restrictions. On the interim surveys, around half the youth reported that they would move if they had more money, which suggests that youth were more satisfied with their living accommodations at the time they completed the interim surveys than when they completed the intake survey.

### *Perceptions of safety*

At all time-points, the majority of youth reported feeling safe where they were currently living. Youths' perceptions of their own safety were higher than staff's perceptions of youths' safety on the intake and final surveys; on the interim surveys, staff's and youths' perceptions were comparable. Perceptions of safety did not differ significantly across time-points for either youth or staff.



Notes: On the interim surveys, staff's and youths' perceptions of safety were not significantly different. The changes across time-points were not significantly different, for both youth and staff. Scores ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived safety.

Staff explained in their second focus group that youth might not pick up on unsafe cues in the environment and may compromise their safety in order to find a place to live. According to staff, some youth had the misperception that if they were housed, they were safe. Staff felt that youth sleeping in groups outside would be safer than living in some of the notoriously unsafe SRO's.

Staff also explained that a subset of street-involved youth did not feel safe living indoors because of past trauma and abuse in their home. These youth might be unable to sleep on a mattress or might use drugs in an attempt to cope.

### Discrimination and Victimization

Discrimination was a reality for many of the youth, with the majority (93%) indicating on the intake survey that they had experienced at least one form of discrimination in the past year. They most commonly reported been discriminated against due to their physical appearance (62% of youth), substance use or mental health difficulties (41%), their race or skin colour (31%), or their sexual orientation (21%).

Youth in the second focus group discussed that in addition to experiencing discrimination for looking street-involved, there was a risk of not being accepted into some shelters if they looked "too put together."

Additionally, youth said that many LGBTQ young people were discriminated against and bullied by their same-age peers. Some youth stated that this discrimination took place at Directions, which led to LGBTQ youth feeling unsafe.

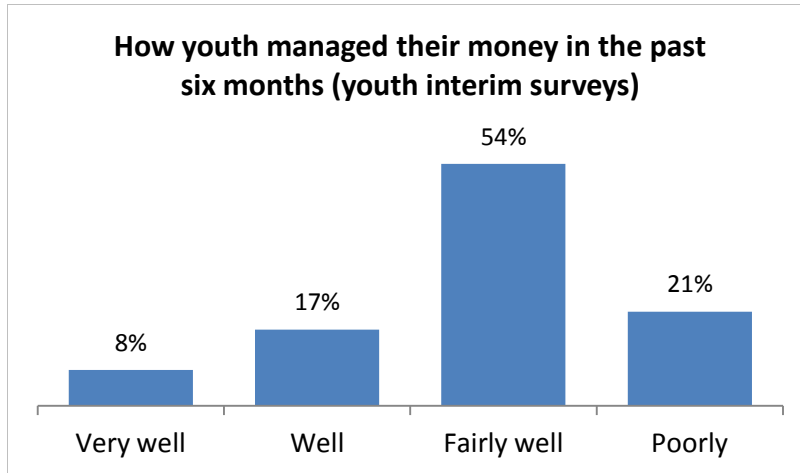
Youth also discussed discrimination due to age, and specifically that younger street-involved youth tended to experience discrimination by older youth. Focus group participants acknowledged that younger youth "get picked on more" because of an assumption that they chose to enter homelessness because they saw it as a more favourable and alternative lifestyle. Younger street-involved youth were also blamed for attracting police attention.



Staff stated that street-involved youth with cognitive impairments, including FASD and Aspergers, were likely targets of discrimination and victimization by other youth. Also, youth perceived as coming from wealthy families were targets because more marginalized youth felt that the former had “no right to be down here.”

### Money Management

The majority of youth reported difficulty managing their money at all time-points, in that most indicated managing their money ‘fairly well’ or ‘poorly’ (as opposed to ‘well’ or ‘very well’). Their perceptions did not differ significantly from those of Directions staff.



Youth in the first focus group explained that when they received money, their first priority was paying their bills (phone, power, etc.), which came before buying food. Other priorities were buying marijuana and cigarettes, buying household cleaning products, purchasing clothes, and accessing dental services.

Staff in the first focus group listed buying drugs and paying off drug debts as youths’ top priority. Other priorities, according to staff, included buying items to later sell, buying nice clothes in order to fit in, purchasing food, and saving money. Staff said that the youth, particularly those with disabilities, were often extorted by their peers and family when they had money.

### Technology

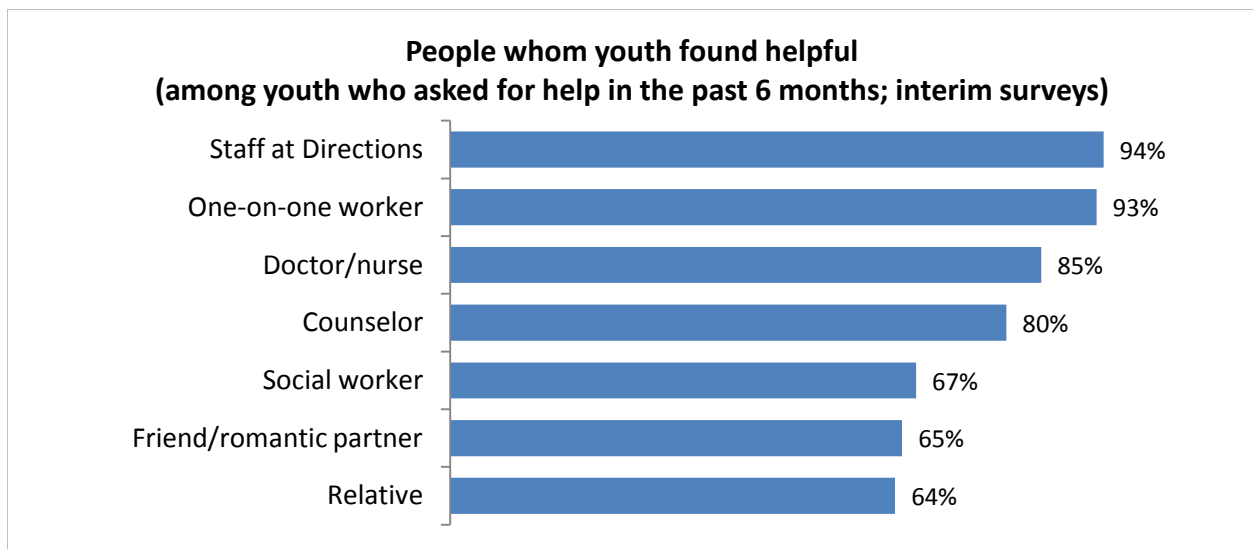
Most of the youth reported having a cell phone, and they identified buying a cell phone as one of their priorities. However, youth and staff explained that young people often sell their cell phones shortly after buying them to get money to spend on other items, and then buy another phone when they have enough money again.

Staff regarded the young people as “internet savvy,” and youth stated that technology is very important in their lives. One youth had maintained a university email address which she was paying for monthly because she felt that it garnered her respect and that it could help her to find housing when corresponding with landlords.

## Supports and Services

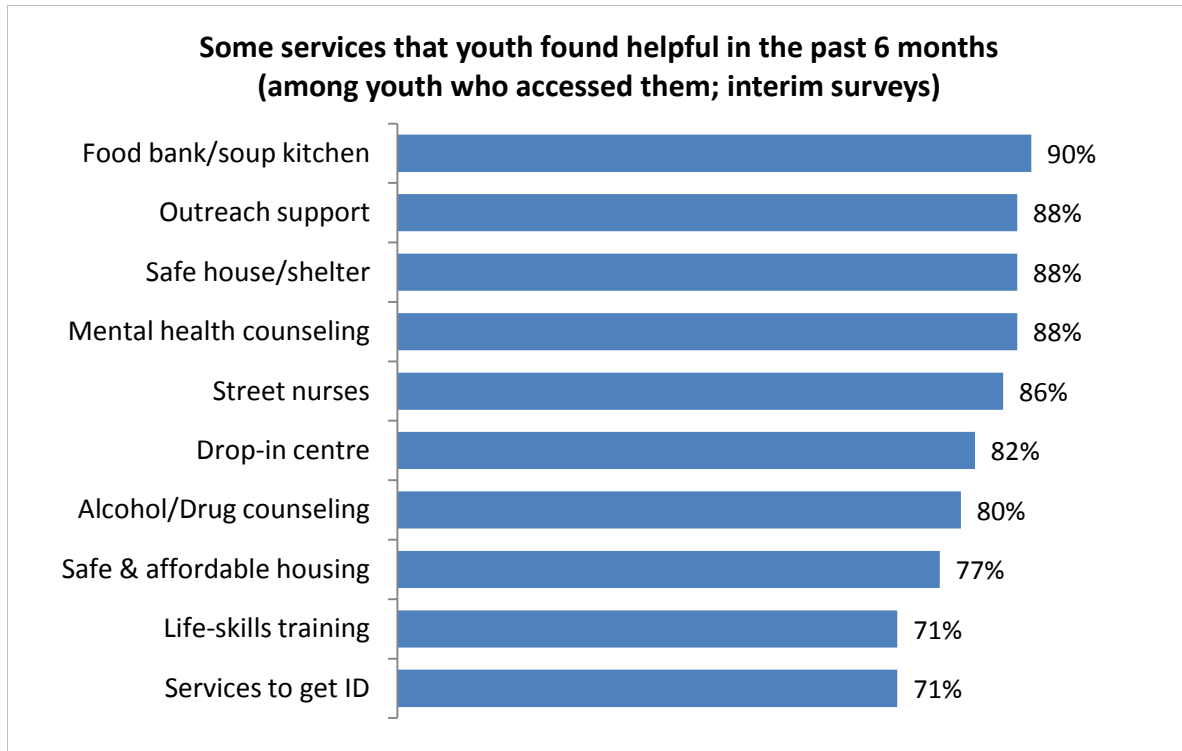
At intake, most youth (87%) reported that there was an adult in their lives they would feel comfortable talking to when faced with a problem. The most common were staff at Directions (77%), relatives (40%), support workers (23%), counselors (17%), and/or doctors (17%). Also, 27% indicated that they would feel comfortable confiding in an adult who was not included in the list provided, with the majority specifying a friend or partner. These rates were comparable across time-points.

Further, youth reported actually seeking help from a number of people in the past six months, with comparable rates across time-points. The most common were staff at Directions (75%), friends or romantic partners (74%), relatives (58%), one-on-one workers (58%), and counselors (42%; interim survey rates). Young people who sought support generally found it helpful, and ratings of helpfulness were similar across time-points.



Youth reported accessing a number of services in the past six months. A non-significant trend ( $p = .07$ ) suggested that rates of accessing shelters decreased from the intake to interim surveys (68% vs. 35%).

On the interim surveys, the most commonly accessed services were drop-in centres (74%), outreach support (70%), safe and affordable housing (57%), medical services (50%), and food banks/soup kitchens (44%). Among youth who accessed services in the past six months, most found them helpful.



The majority of youth (67%) reported on the final surveys that Directions helped them to access needed services in their community, including those listed above as well as specific programs such as Covenant House and Street Youth Job Action (SYJA). Most youth indicated that there were no other services they would want Directions to help them access. However, some stated that assistance with accessing services in communities outside Vancouver, such as Burnaby or Surrey, would be helpful.

Staff and youth were asked in the second round of focus groups about supports or services that youth needed now that the Directions housing program had ended. Youth stated that they would benefit from more life-skills training, including “how to keep [their] house clean.” Staff said that in addition to continued help with life-skills, mental health services were needed. Staff explained that mental health support was critical to help prevent youth from experiencing a “downward spiral” and “self-destructive” behaviour after they found housing and felt pressure to keep their lives on track. However, staff stated that appropriate mental health services were unavailable for the group of youth they served. They felt that the available services were not the right fit for this group of youth either because the youth were deemed “too high functioning” or because the services required rigid compliance which created an obstacle for youth who experienced challenges attending regular appointments.

Staff also said that youth would benefit from being connected to community centres which would allow them to engage in healthy activities and stave off boredom.

## Effects of the 2010 Olympics

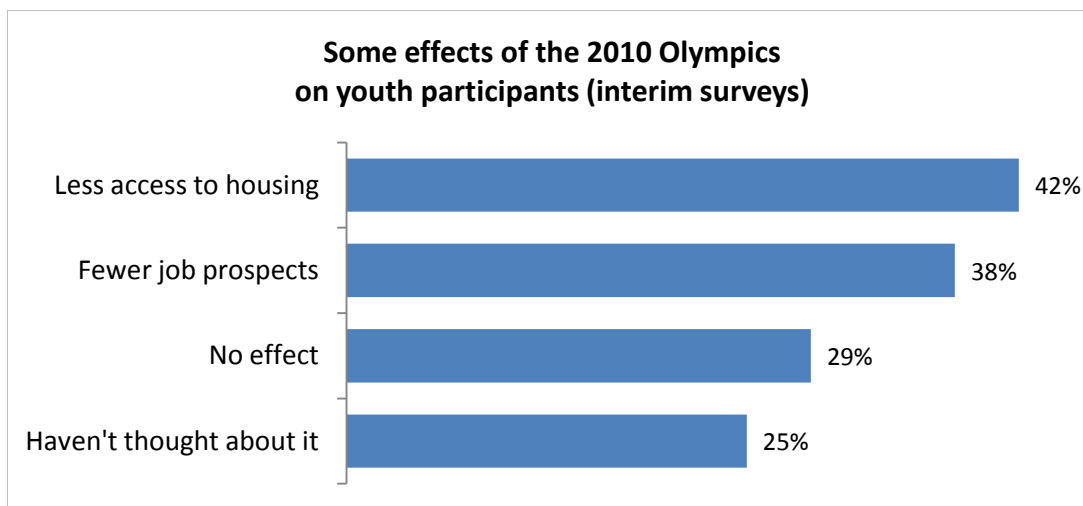
### *“The Olympics definitely impacted housing” – youth participant*

Youth and staff were asked about their views on the 2010 Olympics. Before the games, some youth had expected an increase in violence whereas others expected it to remain peaceful. Youth had also anticipated rent increases in Vancouver and fewer places to live. As recounted by youth in their first focus group, their actual experience during the games was that they were encouraged to get off the street but it was more difficult to find affordable long-term housing although easier to get into SRO's. It was also more challenging to use transit, their money did not last as long due to higher prices, and they could not find a job. Some stayed home or in shelters the entire time because they feared they would be arrested if they were on the streets.

In the second focus group, youth said that it was currently easier to find affordable housing than around the time of the Olympics, yet more difficult to get into an SRO.

Staff had anticipated increased police brutality and other difficulties for youth during the games. Directions had strategized ahead of time with other agencies as to how best to support youth. However, they explained that many young people who would otherwise have been on the streets and accessing Directions support had been apprehended and sent to detention centres days before the Olympics started, and court dates were held until the start of the games. Youth also had been told they would be arrested if they left their shelter during the games. As a result, many did not venture outdoors because of fear. Significantly fewer youth were therefore on the streets and at Directions during the games, and staff reported a surplus of supplies at Directions due to fewer youth accessing them.

On the self-report surveys, youth identified the effects the Olympics had on them. On the intake and interim surveys, they most commonly reported less access to housing and fewer job prospects as a result of the Olympics. On the final surveys, youth most commonly reported that the Olympics had no effect or that they had not thought about it.

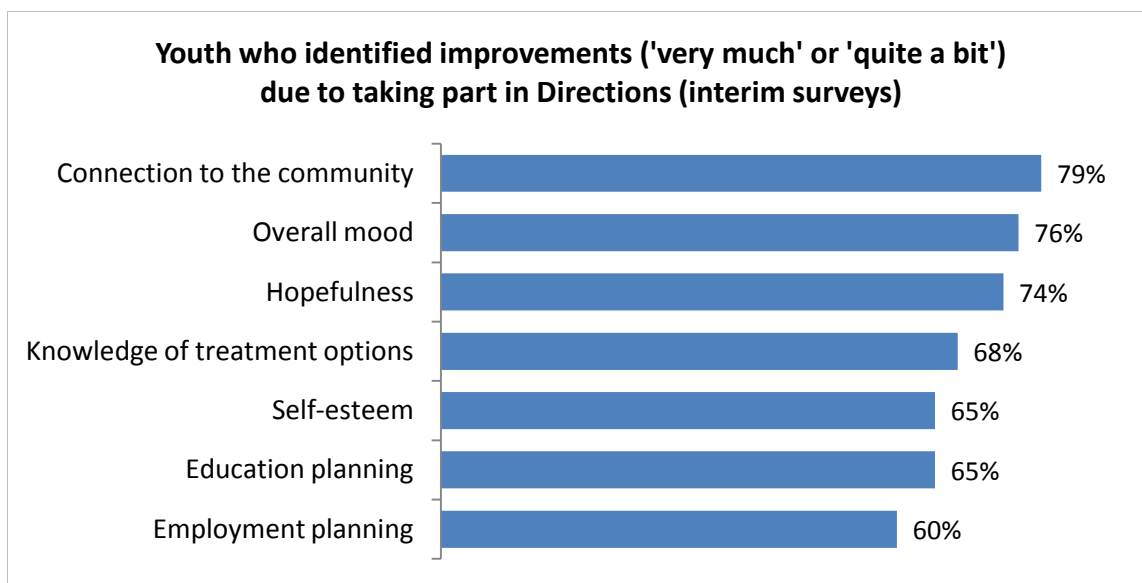


## Feedback about the Directions Housing Program

In addition to describing the Directions housing program and sharing information on important issues that impacted youths' lives, youth and staff provided direct feedback about the housing program.

Most of the youth focus group participants reported feeling satisfied with the Directions housing program, and appreciated the support and motivation they received from the housing support worker. Survey responses also indicated that youth appreciated having their basic needs met, being given a job through SYJA, and outreach services.

The majority of youth who completed interim surveys reported marked improvements in their emotional functioning, ability to plan for their future, and connection to the community. They attributed these positive changes to their involvement in the Directions housing program.



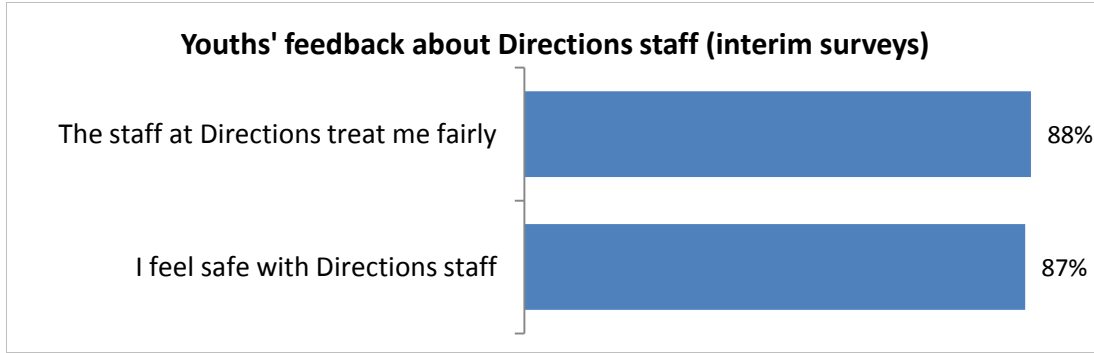
Many youth also reported marked decreases in their substance use (57%), suicidal ideation (56%), and criminal behaviour (57%) as a result of taking part in the Directions housing program.

### *Housing worker and other staff*

*“The staff actually listen and try to help” – youth participant*

Staff felt that the greatest success of the program was the availability of the housing worker and flexibility of the position to meet youths' needs. Similarly, youth said that the program was as successful as it was because of the housing worker, and that the housing worker adapted to their changing needs throughout the course of their involvement at Directions.

The majority of youth indicated on their surveys that they were treated fairly by Directions staff and felt safe with them.



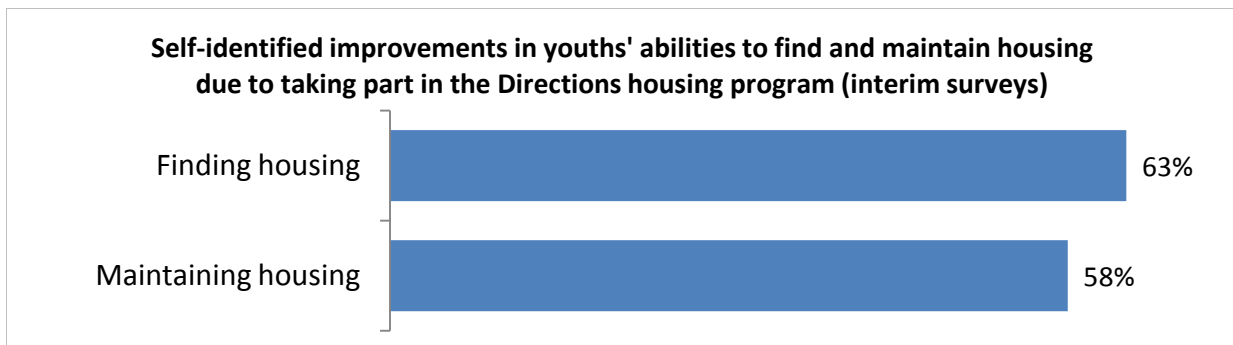
*Help with finding housing*

In both youth focus groups, participants reported that the Directions housing program helped them to find housing, and realistically considered their budget, where they wanted to live, and other factors when assisting them in finding accommodations.

Youth explained that staff helped them find housing by directing them to resources and websites, assisting with housing applications, providing bus tickets or other transportation to view suites, accompanying youth when signing a lease, physically helping with the move-in process, helping to stock the suite with needed supplies and utensils, and/or linking youth to other agencies.

Youth in the second focus group also commented that the Directions housing program helped to shorten the gap from the time they lost one accommodation and found another. They felt that the housing worker was helpful in this regard because she approached them to ask how they were doing, rather than waiting for youth to approach her. They said that taking part in the housing program provided motivation for them to find housing. Staff added that providing youth with gift cards was a good incentive, in that they were motivated to complete the evaluation survey to receive a gift card, and would connect with the housing worker at the same time.

Youths' perspective in the first focus group was that the Directions housing program placed more emphasis on helping young people find housing rather than keep their housing. However, from the staffs' perspective the housing worker would have been willing to visit the youth in their units to provide support but the young people tended to connect much less frequently with the housing worker once they were housed. Regardless, the youth felt they could turn to the program for needed resources and could count on the housing worker to provide them with as much housing support as possible, including assistance if they needed to go to court to keep their housing.



*Help with accessing services**“All the services I need already exist at Directions” – youth participant*

Staff said that the program helped to empower youth by teaching them how to access available resources and support, and by conveying that asking for help was not shameful. Youth were able to access a wide range of support through Directions, beyond help with finding housing. One youth commented that Directions had helped her to receive a \$5000 scholarship to pursue her career path at a local college.

Staff felt that having the housing program in a youth centre made it easier for young people to connect to a wide range of supports and services at Directions. In fact, they said that youth typically connected with the housing program through other programs at Directions.

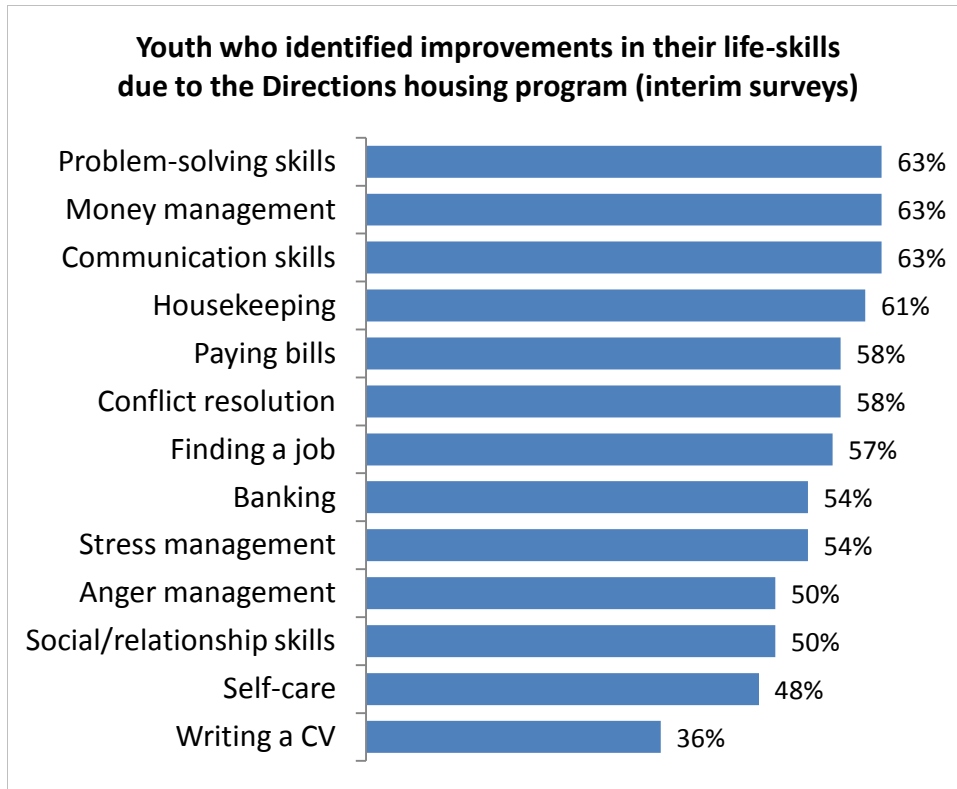
Staff also mentioned that youth in the housing program accessed outside supports including start-up kits from Broadway Youth Resource Centre

*Assistance with life-skills**“Directions has really helped me develop as a person and learn life-skills, confidence, stress management and overall practically saved my life.” – youth participant*

After several months in the program, most youth (83% on the interim surveys) ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they were gaining important skills or knowledge through Directions.

Youth focus group participants explained that the housing worker helped them with life-skills on an individual basis, including how to communicate effectively with landlords to help them find and maintain housing, and how to communicate with neighbours once they were housed. Some youth reported learning budgeting skills from the housing worker. Youth also said that the housing worker explained the Landlord Tenancy Act and their rights as a tenant, which was very helpful. Additionally, youth were informed of upcoming events or workshops but were not obligated to go. Some youth expressed a desire for more life-skills training, including a focus on budgeting and housekeeping.

Youth and staff reported on the surveys that youths’ skills in various domains improved because of their involvement in the Directions housing program.



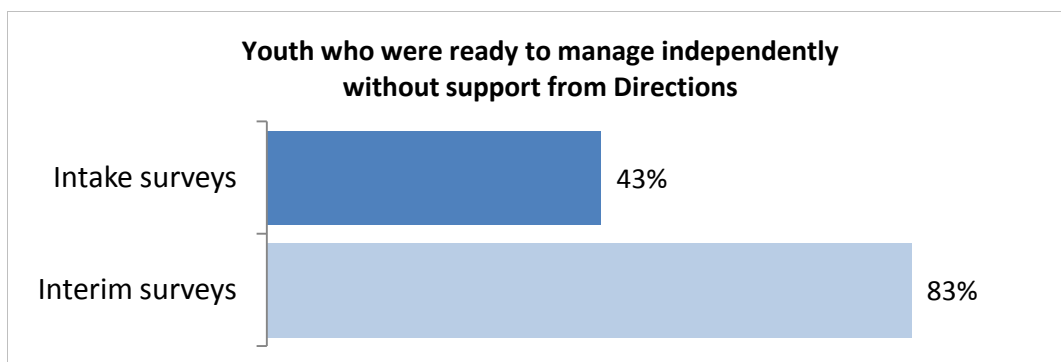
Survey responses also indicated that 76% of youth (interim surveys) felt that their knowledge of rental rights and responsibilities improved ‘very much’ or ‘quite a bit’ because they took part in the Directions program.

*Living independently*

*“I have been able to live independently and return to school” – youth participant*

Some participants in the first youth focus group felt ready to live independently without support from Directions, whereas others did not yet feel ready but were in the process of arriving at this stage. In the second focus group, all the youth participants said they were ready to live independently and that they rarely accessed support from Directions anymore.

Similarly, survey data indicated an increase from intake to later time-points in the percentage of youth who were ready to manage independently without support from Directions.





What youth found helpful in the support they received from Directions (survey responses):

“The staff here are very good to talk to, they give me a lot of the emotional support that I need and giving me the opportunity to volunteer/cook”

“They are kind and give me confidence to do things. And they help me access resources.”

“A good comfy couch and the knowledge that I can take the initiative to get off it and go to work for a guaranteed income”

“I find all the support from Directions that I receive very helpful”

“The staff at Directions have helped me a lot through the years with everything from addictions to housing to food”

“All aspects of help from the staff at Directions is amazing”

“Their one-on-one. For me it has been their approach with me - slow as well as firm, not giving up as well as relating with me, not treating me like a child. An understanding environment”

Other comments about Directions (youth surveys):

“Directions has helped me reach my goals so much and get through hard times. The staff is like family...Thank you!”

“Directions is the only family I have ever had. I am so thankful for this service. It basically saved my life”

“Without all the services [at Directions] I truly believe I would be dead”

“Thank you all for the amazing help. One day I aspire to work here”

“The staff here are very good to talk to, they give me a lot of the emotional support that I need”

“There's always someone here willing to listen”

“Friendly support and helpful advice in a non-judgmental atmosphere”

“Pretty much what I can't do on my own, they help me with”

“I love Directions. They have helped me out so much”

“This centre is the only one I feel comfortable at”

## Youth's and Staff's Suggestions

*“Directions is amazing! More funds should come here” – youth participant*

Staff explained that the housing program worked the best it could without being able to provide young people with housing units, but this incapacity to offer housing was frustrating to them and contributed to a sense of futility and “burn out.” However, staff appreciated the challenge of trying to meet the needs of a diverse group of young people, and recognized that the majority of their work entailed offering counseling and teaching basic life-skills to equip youth to find and maintain housing.

Staff stated that if the housing program were to receive more funding, the emphasis from the outset would be on the development of life-skills, with less of a focus on maintaining housing, given the reality of the housing situation and the group of youth that Directions serves. They explained that they would set achievable goals from the beginning, with clear definitions and standards of success (e.g., successful housing may be defined as finding market housing as opposed to SRO's).

Almost all the youth in the first focus group said they would recommend the Directions housing program to other young people. Some youth remarked that the program provided them with everything they needed, and had no suggestions for how the program could change. Others offered suggestions but acknowledged that the program did the best it could with the funding it had.

Youth's and staff's suggestions for the program, if future funding were secured, included the following:

- The consensus in all focus groups was that a large moving van would help youth with moving into their suites, and would allow them to get more furniture. Youth said that smaller vehicles were shared among four other Directions programs so were not always available to those in the housing program.
- Youth said that having a computer at the back of Directions, in addition to the two in the front, would be helpful. They explained that youth in the housing program were sometimes stigmatized and teased by those not in the program, and accused of not accepting the homelessness lifestyle and culture. A computer placed in a less conspicuous location would make youth feel more at ease when doing online housing searches.
- Youth felt that it would be beneficial for the housing worker to have her own office so that youth participants would have more privacy.
- Youth said that although staff at Directions were understanding and supportive of LGBTQ youth, many young people at the centre were not. For this reason, a suggestion was to have LGBTQ workshops at Directions to provide education and awareness.
- Youth in both focus groups requested more access to bus tickets to facilitate viewing units.
- Youth suggested that Directions could hold classes/workshops on housing searches (e.g., what websites to use) and ways to find housing.
- Youth and staff agreed that teaching young people housekeeping skills (e.g., cleaning, maintenance, cooking) would be useful.

- Youth said that supports and life-skills training for living with certain illnesses or disabilities would be helpful.
- Staff felt that more program staff would allow for more flex-time for each worker and more one-on-one time with youth. Youth also felt that having another housing worker available on weekends would be beneficial, particularly because some landlords are only available to meet on weekends.
- Staff stated that sleeping accommodations at Directions would be beneficial for youth but acknowledged that the organization could not currently support this (e.g., insurance, staff training issues).
- Staff and youth said that more funding would help the program to better serve young people. For example, it would allow the program to offer rent subsidies so that youth could afford safe accommodations.
- Staff also felt that funding that extended beyond two years would be desirable because it took two years for the program to gain momentum and stability, and to build a trusting relationship with youth participants. Longer-term funding would allow for greater program success.

## Feedback about the Evaluation

*“[The surveys] are fun and easy. It’s nice finishing something.” – youth participant*

### *Focus groups*

Staff said that the focus groups were useful for collecting information about the program. They also remarked that the focus groups were a good outlet for them to talk with other staff about challenges and frustrations relating to their work.

It seemed that some youth participants appreciated expressing their views in the focus groups whereas others did not feel comfortable or safe sharing their views in this way because of the other youth in the group. Some stayed afterwards to speak one-on-one with the focus group facilitators to have their voices heard.

### *Surveys*

Some staff thought the surveys may yield “weird” results because youth might not have answered accurately due to their literacy level, not reading the questions, or their current mood which may have affected their responses. For example, if youth were frustrated with housing or with other challenges the day they completed the survey, their responses may have been a reflection of this frustration. Some staff also felt that forced-choice options on a survey yielding quantitative data may not capture the complexity of individuals’ lives.

Youth participants stated that they were motivated to complete the surveys because of the gift card they received for completing them. Youth felt that they would have “gotten more out of” answering more open-ended questions, as opposed to forced-choice options. However, their comments on the surveys suggested that they appreciated completing them because it allowed them to reflect on their experiences and was an effective way of providing input and helping to improve services at Directions. Youth who completed surveys indicated that nothing was missed or captured improperly on the surveys.

There seemed to be confusion from youth about the purpose of the surveys, in that some thought that the surveys, and incentives for completing them, were a key component of the housing program rather than part of the evaluation. Staff acknowledged that the gift card incentives were instrumental and “priceless” for motivating youth to return to Directions to meet with the housing worker.

### Youths’ comments about the evaluation surveys (survey responses):

“They help me reflect”

“I think they are great for finding out how the youth feel about the program”

“I feel like my opinion matters”

“They’re good at helping me give input about Directions”

“They’re good for improving services at Directions”

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation results indicated that the Directions housing program targeted the intended population of street-involved youth. All youth who completed an intake survey had lived on the street and couch surfed at some point, and the majority had stayed in a shelter and had been in government care. Many had also experienced discrimination as well as past challenges finding and maintaining housing due to discrimination and other obstacles.

Rates of precarious housing decreased from intake to follow-up. On the interim surveys, youth were more likely to report currently living in their own unit (70% vs. 20% on the intake survey). They also reported moving fewer times while taking part in the program than in the six months before starting the program. Results also suggested that most youth were able to maintain their accommodations for two to six months while receiving support from the Directions housing program, whereas they had more difficulty doing so before starting the program. Youth in the second focus group also reported that their involvement in the housing program helped to shorten the gap from the time they lost one accommodation and found another.

According to information provided by Directions, all the youth who completed an intake survey got housed at some point during their involvement in the Directions housing program. Twenty of these youth were able to maintain housing and were currently housed as of September, 2011, but these accommodations were not necessarily their original housing units.

Staff highlighted the importance of youth learning life-skills, which would ultimately increase youths' success at finding and maintaining housing. They stated that if the housing program were to receive more funding, the emphasis from the outset would be more on the development of life-skills and less on finding and maintaining housing, given the reality of the housing situation and the group of youth that Directions serves. In fact, as had been recommended in the interim evaluation report, there seemed to be a shift after the first year of the program from focusing on meeting youths' basic needs and helping them find accommodations, to focusing on the development of life-skills.

Youth and staff reported improvements in youths' life-skills and knowledge of rental rights and responsibilities as a result of taking part in the program. Most youth also reported improvements in their social-emotional functioning, including hopefulness and community connectedness, as well as increased knowledge of their treatment options and a better ability to engage in education and employment planning. Further, youth were more likely to feel ready to live independently toward the end of the program as opposed to when they first started.

The majority of youth felt safe with Directions staff, and the vast majority who asked staff for help found the assistance helpful. Both youth and staff felt that the greatest success of the housing program was the role of the housing worker.

In terms of the evaluation methodology, the mixed-methods approach of surveys and focus groups was useful for collecting both quantitative and qualitative information. Additionally, youth who may not have felt comfortable sharing their thoughts in a focus group, and conversely those with reading and writing difficulties, had an opportunity to have their voices heard in a way that worked best for them.

However, findings from this evaluation should be interpreted with caution. Youth who completed evaluation surveys and participated in focus groups may not have been representative of all youth who had intakes into the housing program. For example, youth who did not wish to have

repeat contact with the program were not asked to complete an intake evaluation survey. Another limitation was the small number of youth who completed final surveys.

As staff pointed out, if the housing program were to receive more funding it would be paramount to set achievable goals from the outset, with well-defined expected outcomes and specific means to achieve the outcomes.

Nonetheless, many youth felt that the program provided them with invaluable support and assistance, and helped to meet their needs and teach them important life-skills. Youth and staff also provided suggestions for how the program could improve if it received additional funding (see the subsection entitled Youth's and Staff's Suggestions).

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