

BC YOUTH WHO EXPERIENCE BOTH HOMELESSNESS AND PARENTAL MENTAL ILLNESS

The 2014 Homeless and Street Involved Youth Survey was conducted by the McCreary Centre Society in partnership with community agencies and homeless youth in 13 diverse communities across British Columbia between October 2014 and January 2015. A total of 689 youth (aged 12–19 years) participated, from which we collected 681 usable surveys. For further details about the methodology visit <http://mcs.bc.ca/ourcommunitiesouryouth.pdf>.

All statistics which are reported are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Introduction

Using data from McCreary Centre Society's 2014 Homeless and Street Involved Youth Survey, this fact sheet looks at the health of homeless youth (aged 12-19) who identified that either one or both of their parents had a mental illness.

The study found that female youth were more likely than males to report that their parent(s) had a mental illness. Seven percent of youth reported that their father had a mental illness, 15% indicated their mother had a mental illness, and 15% indicated both their parents were mentally ill.

Reasons for becoming homeless

Youth whose parent(s) had a mental illness were more likely to report becoming homeless because they:

- Ran away (45% vs. 36% who did not have a parent with a mental illness)
- Got kicked out (50% vs. 38%)
- Didn't get along with their parents (52% vs. 39%,)
- Experienced conflict at home due to their sexual orientation (8% vs. 4%)
- Experienced or witnessed violence or abuse at home (33% vs. 18%)
- Had friends who spent time on the streets (23% vs. 16%).

Housing

Homeless youth who experienced parental mental illness were more likely to have been in a foster home, group home, or an alternative to government care (a Youth Agreement), compared to their peers who did not have these family challenges.

Youth with a parent who had a mental illness were also less likely to have stayed at the same location for more than a year, or to always feel safe where they slept. They were more likely to have lived in the most precarious housing situations, such as a squat or abandoned building.

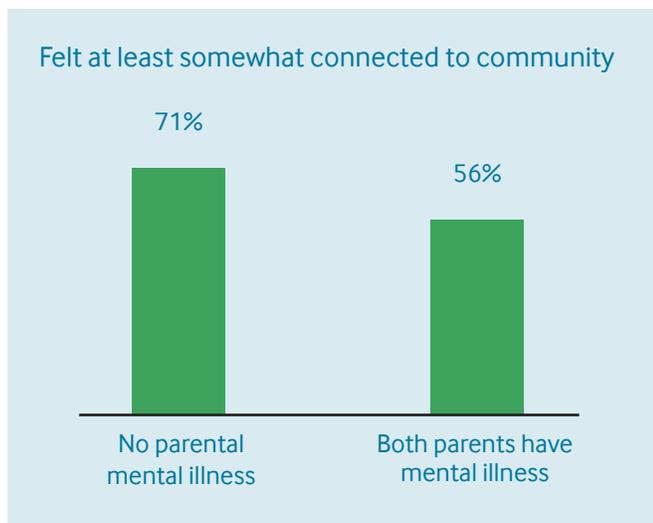
Where youth had ever lived



Relationships

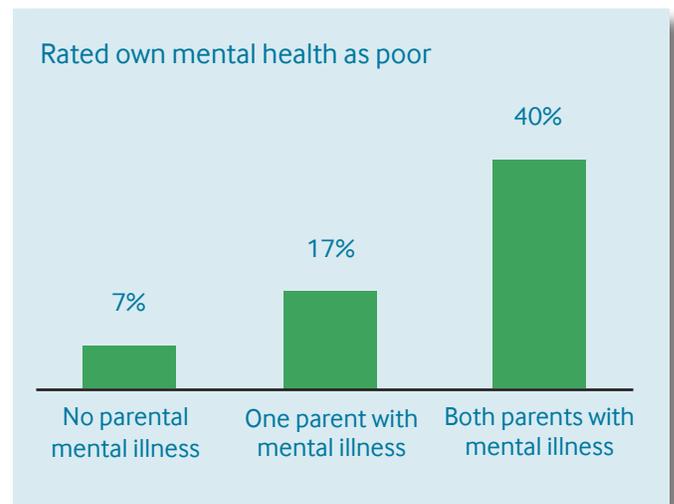
Having both parents living with a mental illness affected homeless youth's relationships with their families, as these youth were the least likely to report they had fun with their families, their families understood them, or their families paid attention to them. Youth whose parent(s) had a mental illness were also less likely to have an adult in their family they could talk to if they were having a serious problem, compared to peers who did not have a parent with a mental illness.

Parental mental illness did not impact relationships with non-street involved friends but did increase the likelihood that youth would have at least three friends who were street involved. It also appeared to affect youth's feelings of community connectedness.

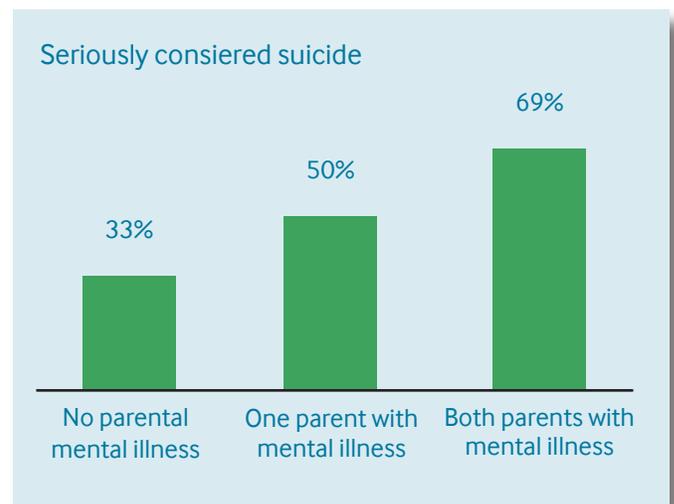


Health

Homeless youth with at least one parent who had a mental illness were less likely to report positive overall health or mental health. For example, 34% of those with parent(s) who had a mental illness reported experiencing extreme stress in the past month, compared to 13% of those who did not have a parent with a mental illness.



Parental mental illness was also associated with self-harm and suicidal ideation, with the highest rates among those who had two parents with a mental illness.





Homeless youth who had experienced parental mental illness were also more likely than their homeless peers without this experience to have witnessed abuse within their family. Furthermore, those who had two parents with a mental illness were the most likely to have personally been physically or sexually abused.

Homeless youth with a parent(s) who was mentally ill may have been using substances as a coping mechanism. For example, 92% of youth who had parent(s) with a mental illness had used alcohol, compared to 78% with no parental mental illness. Rates of marijuana use and injection substance use were also higher among those who had parent(s) with mental illness.

Protective factors and strengths

Despite the additional challenges that homeless youth with parents with mental illness may face, these youth were equally as likely as their peers to be currently attending school. More than 7 out of 10 (71%) expected to finish high school and over half (55%) expected to continue on to post-secondary education.

Homeless youth with mentally ill parents were less likely to report feeling satisfied with their current life circumstances. However, they were equally as optimistic about their future as other youth who had not experienced parental mental illness, including where they would be in five years and their future school plans. For example, among youth whose parent(s) had a mental illness 53% planned to be employed in five years and only 4% expected to be on the streets.

Supporting homeless youth who have parents with mental illness

Homeless youth were asked what resources and supports they needed in their community. Those who had one or both parents with a mental illness were more likely to report needing:

- Safe and affordable housing (62% vs. 46% who did not have a parent with mental illness)
- Transition/safe houses, shelters (52% vs. 41%)
- Youth clinics (46% vs. 31%)
- Mental health services (44% vs. 28%)
- Food banks (42% vs. 31%)
- Soup kitchens (34% vs. 19%)
- Street nurses (29% vs. 21%)
- Dental services (29% vs. 20%)

This study highlights some of the challenges and additional barriers that homeless youth can face if they have a parent who has a mental illness, and illustrates how these challenges can be compounded for youth if both their parents have a mental illness. However, the data also shows the resilience of these young people, many of whom continue to attend school, work towards their goals, and are hopeful for the future.

The findings suggest there is a need for greater support of families struggling with mental illness to prevent young people becoming homeless, and a need for services to recognize and address the additional challenges faced by children of parents who are struggling with mental illness.

This fact sheet was prepared by Tess Raithby as part of a thesis project completed for a Master of Social Work at the University of British Columbia.