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BOOK REVIEW

Jeff Karabanow, Sean Kidd, Tyler Frederick and Jean Hughes.

Homeless Youth and the Search for Stability.

Waterloo, On: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.

150 pages

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This book by Jeff Karabanow, Sean Kidd, Tyler Frederick and Jean Hughes addresses a major gap in research on youth homelessness in Canada by attempting answer the question: what happens after youth have transitioned out of homelessness? The book summarizes the findings and processes used in completing a multi-year longitudinal study that with 51 youth aged 16 -25 in Halifax and Toronto who had recently transitioned into housing from experiences of homelessness. Throughout the chapters of this book, the authors present the complex mixed methods findings pairing quantitative results while still highlighting the importance of participant narratives to illuminate youth journeys out of homelessness, with an attention to representing the lived experience of youth. Ultimately the authors conclude that previous assumptions that youth would experience drastic improvements once they had exited homelessness were in fact not accurate. Instead youth continued to experience instability after transitioning out of homelessness.

The seven-chapter book chronicle the study and knowledge mobilization processes that took place in Toronto and Halifax. In chapter one the authors introduce the central findings and context relating the book to ideas of resiliency, identity and discuss the limitations of extant body of work related to interventions that facilitate the process of exiting homelessness. Chapter two describes a framework developed through the research to describe the trajectories of the journeys of exiting youth homelessness. The framework is broken down into four stages of change: 1) turning point, 2) housing, 3) acceptance and 4) achievement. The framework also includes several factors that shape youth experiences including; consistent support, feelings of belonging, life and social skills, being ready, goal setting and routine, self-control, coping and hope. The chapter notes that participants experienced challenges; mediating journeys to adulthood with their past trauma, and with the instability of their housing and service experiences. Chapter three further grounds the analysis of chapter 2 in four qualitative case studies and outlined four pathways that were repeated in both jurisdictions that the authors titled: struggling to get stable, stable but stuck, beginning to meet goals and young mothers. Chapter four speaks to the knowledge mobilization process used by the study with specific attention to arts-based knowledge mobilization methods. The knowledge mobilization process involved arts through a creative event that included spoken word and music modelled after an art show. Chapter five speaks of the process of the second knowledge mobilization process, the development of a 21-page comic book that describes the narrative one fictional youth transitioning out of homelessness, the comic book itself is included amongst the pages. The inclusion of a comic book speaks to the authors desire to go outside of the status quo and use wider tools for sharing and creating knowledge. Chapter six provides insight into the research process and the ethical challenges that can arise in longer-term research relationships. The authors speak of having to moderate their relationships with participants, and ultimately the project had to incorporate some flexibility around boundaries between therapeutic

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and research relationships. Chapter seven concludes the book and offers three overarching recommendations: 1) enhancements of ongoing supports for youth transitioning out of homelessness, 2) youth should have access to caseworker support without age cut offs, and 3) interventions need to directly address barriers created by homelessness.

The research study used a two-stage sampling process. Starting with service provider referrals the sample snowballed through the recommendations of participants. The 51 participants each met four times throughout a one-year period and completed a survey followed by a qualitative interview. The surveys contained several standardized measures including: the self-concept clarity scale, community integration scale, the brief World Health Organization Quality of Life Scale, the Mental Health Continuum – Short Form and Snyder’s cognitive measure of hope. While some youth in the study improved in some areas throughout the year, it was more common for the participants to show little improvement, or even setbacks within the period. The findings point to a more tumultuous transition from homelessness than has been previously considered.

The comic book can also be considered the output of an art-based research methodology, it was co-created with researchers, several youth participants and an artist. The 21 page comic-book entitled “A long way to go” is a creative way of telling the story of this difficult transition through the perspective of one youth mediating loss, relationships and myriad barriers as he attempts to find stability. This section is worth the attention, not just for its novelty, but with attention to other ways that knowledge can be processed and shared.

There are two limitations that stood out in this book. The first was stated by the authors, which is that there was a paucity of specific analysis of systemic interactions or a major focus on structural challenges that this population faces in their transitions out of homelessness. Secondly, the knowledge mobilization chapter was limited to a discussion of their innovative process, where it would have been beneficial to also hear more about the impact that the process had. This final point may have been more related to timing and scope of the research project.

This book is well suited for researchers, students who are interested in research, or a research methodology class. The authors speak clearly to the different components of a large and complex research project, and their knowledge mobilization process. Policymakers, program evaluators and service providers will also find different elements of the book helpful, such as the framework outlined in chapter 2, as well as the narrative examples demonstrated through the case studies and comic book. Overall, this book is a powerful contribution to the literature on youth homelessness in Canada, and a great resource for researchers looking to do research with vulnerable populations.

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