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**Issue Dedication:**

This issue of the JRCD is dedicated to Cheryl Williams who passed away suddenly in 2010. She was in the first semester of her PhD program in Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan at the time of her death. Her co-authored paper in this issue is based on her master's thesis research. Pammla Petrucka was Cheryl's advisor. It was Pammla's wish to publish this peer-reviewed article in honour of Cheryl's work and her family.

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# **From Place to Space: Exploring Youth Migration and Homelessness in Rural Nova Scotia**

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## **Abstract**

The study explored the issue of rural homelessness in Nova Scotia, and the trajectories that rural homeless youth take in their young lives, as they typically leave their rural home to move to an urban centre. While it is certainly true that a large proportion of homeless youth live in large urban centres, the consequence of this narrow focus is a lack of deep understanding about the experiences and trajectories of marginally housed and homeless youth in rural contexts.

Keywords: rurality, youth homelessness, rural-urban migration, space versus place

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Youth homelessness is a major social concern internationally, cutting across geographic, economic, and social contexts. In Canada, for example, a conservative estimate places their number at 150,000 (National Homelessness Initiative, 2006), a number that is proportionally consistent with other high income contexts. In recent decades a substantial body of work has emerged that documents the pervasive and severe challenges faced by these young people. Before becoming homeless this population experiences extremely high rates of abuse, neglect, mental illness, and other forms of adversity, and street contexts are characterized by victimization and rapidly declining health (Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow et al., 2007). The outcome of these pathways is readily observed in a rate of mortality many times that of the general youth population (Roy, Leclerc, Sochanski, Boudreau, & Boivin, 2004; Shaw & Dorling, 1998).

There are a number of shortcomings in the existing knowledge-base regarding youth homelessness. One of them, along with a generally poor understanding of how to effectively prevent and intervene, is the adoption of a generic understanding of youth homelessness and street involvement. This overlies highly diverse pre-street and

street experiences not to mention broad aspects of diversity such as ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. As others have noted (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010), often the same structural factors that contribute to urban homelessness lead to rural homelessness, including lack of affordable housing and inadequate income. However, one of the key differences between rural and urban homelessness is the capacity of service provision in rural areas. The present review and study takes up this general finding, echoed in our own research, but extends the analysis to include why and how rural youth tend to migrate to urban areas, particularly in relation to issues of service provision; an issue which continues to be poorly articulated in research and policy dialogues.

## **2.0 Literature Review – Rural Homelessness**

Most researchers agree on at least one fundamental characteristic of rural homelessness: it is largely invisible (Cloke, Widdowfield, & Milbourne, 2000; Fitch, 1992; Lawrence, 1995; Skott-Myhre, Raby, & Nikolaou, 2008). While the urban homeless live directly in the public eye, on streets, panhandling on sidewalks and in alleyways, rural homeless are far less conspicuous, hiding out in abandoned farmhouses, cars, cheap motels, tents and at the homes of friends and family (Fitch, 1992; Skott-Myhre et al., 2008). Unlike their urban counterparts, rural homeless are less likely to access services and shelters (Cloke et al., 2000; Farrin et al., 2005; Fitch, 1992; Skott-Myhre et al., 2008) and tend not to be literally ‘roofless’ for extended periods of time; rather they are often highly mobile, moving from one uncertain housing situation to another (Fitch, 1992).

While rural homelessness is not well documented, several studies in rural Australia (Farrin et al., 2005), England (Cloke et al., 2000), Canada (Skott-Myhre et al., 2008) and the United States (Drolen, 1991; Edwards et al., 2009; Fitch, 1992; Lawrence, 1995) have begun to document the characteristics and estimated frequency of rural homelessness. Homelessness is, by some accounts, nearly as prevalent in rural areas as in urban centres: Lawrence’s data, out-of-date but still relevant, shows that some rural areas in Iowa “experience proportionate incidences of homelessness as much as 10 times that experienced in New York City” (1995, p. 297). He reports that there are 16 000 homeless people living in Iowa (1992); similarly, Drolen attests to there being 17 000 homeless youth in Alabama (1991). Skott-Myhre reports of a 2002 questionnaire circulated in rural Lanark, Ontario in which nearly one third of the youths surveyed admitted to having left home at least once (2008). The seemingly un-reported or unacknowledged nature of homelessness has led some theorists to contend that homelessness has been largely ignored in rural communities due to a willful invisibility, both on the part of the homeless and the community at large; later in this paper, our findings take up this claim, exploring rural homelessness as being a largely invisible phenomenon in rural places.

Within rural studies generally, theorists often invoke and take up what they term nostalgic notions of rurality. Cloke et al. (2000) argue that the rural is constructed as an “idyllic” place, clean, safe and privileged. Small towns typically endorse a Protestant work ethic, a respect for privacy, a penchant for gossip, and an innate conservatism; these elements are seen to contribute to willfully ignoring a homelessness problem. This small town ethic affects not only the community at large, but also the rural homeless themselves. Edwards et al. (2009) reports that most of the rural homeless youth interviewed were deeply reluctant to seek aid and wished to remain invisible due to a desire to preserve their reputations.

Regardless of the causes, rural homelessness is clearly less visible than its urban counterpart, and categorically less studied. Unfortunately, this dearth of research materials necessitates rural service providers to rely on data and theories based on urban homeless populations despite the fact that these methods may not be as relevant to the problem of rural homelessness (Skott-Myhre, 2008); the same is true in other contexts such as education, where Corbett (2007; 2010) argues forcefully that rural students face particular sets of placed based tensions that are unique to rural youth (see also Looker & Naylor, 2009). There is a need then for research based on local rural homeless communities in order to develop strategies that cater to the specific causes and challenges of rural homelessness; something this paper contributes to, however modestly.

The first necessary step in any such research is an expanded definition of homelessness. While urban homelessness is most often defined as a literal rooflessness (people who live on the streets or in shelters), numerous critics have affirmed that studies of rural homelessness, if they are to be of any use, must account for those who live in “near-homeless” conditions as well (Fitchen, 1992; Lawrence, 1995). Fitchen (1992) recommends that the definition of the rural homeless include “low-income people [who] have housing that is so inadequate in quality, so insecure in tenure, and so temporary in duration that keeping a roof over their heads is a preoccupying and precarious accomplishment” (p. 173). The findings in this study point to a similar need to identify and potentially broaden a definition of homelessness that more adequately captures the experiences of homelessness for rural youth, since it clearly does not necessarily lend itself to urban centric connotations of the term either informally or formally.

That said, while rural homelessness is different than urban homelessness, it is also clear that rural and urban youth homelessness exhibit many similar causes. Indeed, a substantial number of urban homeless youth migrated to cities from rural contexts. Consistent with studies of urban homeless youth, most rural youth become homeless due to problems at home. In their interviews in Lanark, Ontario, Skott-Myhre et al. (2008) report that over half the respondents reported diverse (i.e. non-nuclear) family structures and, notably, many had lost a parent through either death or abandonment. Similar to findings on urban homeless youth (Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Yoder, 2006), this report found that many youths left home due to conflict with family, abuse and substance abuse (either their parents’ or their own).

While both urban and rural youth homelessness stems from a reaction to familial strife, it is estimated that rural homelessness – for youth, adult and family populations<sup>1</sup> – is *exacerbated by uniquely rural factors*. Farrin et al. (2005) reports that “there is a higher incidence of male youth suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, chronic disease, and educational and socioeconomic disadvantage in rural than in urban Australia” (p. 32). In addition, rural homeless are affected by comparably high levels of poverty in rural communities. Fitchen (1992) describes three intersecting problems that are afflicting rural communities: (1) the decrease in rural employment and earnings, (2) the increase in single-parent families, and (3) the migration of low-income urban people to rural areas. These three issues cause lowered income and more difficult access to affordable housing –

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<sup>1</sup> Note that according to Fitchen (1992), families with children – specifically single-parent families – make up the majority of the rural homeless population.

two factors that contribute to rural poverty and homelessness. In the rural literature generally, there are those who also argue that with new communication technologies, rural people may maintain a sort of “place elasticity,” maintaining close ties to their community, but without the need for a physical connection (Barcus & Brunn 2010), meaning rural populations generally are seeing people leave; distressing rural communities and impacting those are homeless in possibly more significant ways than previously (vis-à-vis the decline of family and kin networks).

While there is some data about the rural homeless youth population, theorists are also not all in agreement as to particular characteristics of this particular sub-group. Thrane et al. (2006) posits that when faced with situations of physical abuse, rural youth wait one year longer than their urban counterparts before leaving the familial home; this is likely due to a lack of local services and options. Thrane’s results also suggest that physical abuse is more prevalent in rural than in urban areas (Thrane et al., 2006). Fitchen (1992) demonstrates that rural homelessness is not highly associated with mental health problems and “debilitating personal problems” (Fitchen, 1992, p. 176). Also, Thrane et al. (2006) assert that rural adolescents who experienced high levels of physical abuse rely “more heavily on deviant subsistence strategies...than their similarly situated urban counterparts” (Thrane et al., 2006, p. 1117). Such subsistence habits, according to Thrane et al., increase the likelihood of street victimization. Skott-Myhre et al. (2008), however, state that their results contradict such findings: they found that in rural Ontario fewer were involved in criminal activities compared to homeless youth in urban areas. More conclusive evidence is required to assess the particular characteristics of the rural homeless youth population, something the present study takes up. It is also likely that there are local variations at the community level. Hilton and DeJong (2010) argue that there are 5 general coping patterns of (adult) rural homeless populations that include shelter users; campers; couch hoppers; mixed users; and circumstantial homelessness. Again, however, not all communities may share these commonalities, so it is difficult to extend generalizations across both studied and communities, let alone extend these patterns to homeless youth populations.

As mentioned, few of the rural homeless have access to—or choose to access—shelters or services. This access to shelters and services is largely affected by the lack of public transportation options in rural communities (Farrin et al., 2005; Skott-Myhre et al., 2008). The rural Ontario community interviewed by Skott-Myhre et al. (2008) explained that while there were services available in Niagara Falls, there was no reliable way to get there. Youth either hitchhiked, or went without. Homeless youth are affected by rural-specific challenges to accessing services and aid; again, a finding echoed by the data and analysis in this paper.

### ***2.1 Rural Homelessness in Nova Scotia***

In Nova Scotia, the issues of rural homelessness and rural youth homelessness are relevant and yet understudied in the Province. While there is a growing body of support organizations and relevant research regarding homelessness in the Halifax Regional Municipality, there is a lack of such initiatives in the outlying rural areas. The evidence in rural Nova Scotia correlates with much of the research presented in this brief overview. For example, in a 2001 study of King’s County, a rural area of Nova Scotia, Crosby-Fraser states that the majority of resources and services are centered in the small towns of Kentville and New Minas. Homeless or near-homeless residents of King’s County have difficulty accessing such services and Crosby-Fraser recommends the development of a drop-in centre, a short-term shelter, and

affordable transportation. Consistent with the expanded definition of rural homelessness, Crosby-Fraser asserts that the majority of the homeless population of King's County resides in over-crowded, substandard conditions or in campers or cars; and that they struggle with the lack of employment options in the County.

Crosby-Fraser's report on King's County is but one small example of rural poverty and homelessness in Nova Scotia. Although Nova Scotia does have the Maritimes' largest urban population, it is still one of the most rural provinces in Canada; in 2006, 44.5% of Nova Scotians lived in rural areas (Saulnier, 2009). In these rural communities, many subsist on low income. In 2006, the highest rates of low income were in Yarmouth (27%), Amherst (19.4%) and Cape Breton (18.4%) (Saulnier, 2009). These poverty rates can be construed as a result of the shift from a resource-based to a service-based economy that has been taking place in Nova Scotia over the past thirty years. Since 2000, six thousand jobs have been lost in the manufacturing sector, most in rural areas (Saulnier, 2009). Also, Nova Scotia reports the second-lowest average weekly income rate in Canada, at \$659.02 per week (Saulnier, 2009). As the economy has changed in rural Nova Scotia, the situation has been further exacerbated by a move to urban centres and, increasingly, other provinces, in search of work. This contributes to an aging population, as well as a simultaneous labour shortage and high unemployment rate (Saulnier, 2009).

Rural Nova Scotians are less educated than their urban counterparts, and more likely to live in older and poorly maintained homes (Saulnier, 2009). All of these factors contribute to high poverty and homeless rates in rural Nova Scotia; in fact, unlike most of the rest of Canada, poverty rates in Nova Scotia are higher in rural areas than in urban centres (Saulnier, 2009). Two-thirds (66%) of income assistance clients live in rural regions. From 1980 to 2000, the average income gap between rural and urban areas was \$5,242 in Nova Scotia – "one of the largest gaps in the country" (Saulnier, 2009, p. 5). Saulnier also points out that there are regional differences among rural communities: those closer to small towns or urban centres tend to be better off than those that are more remote. Differences among rural centres are also a result of the ethnic and racial populations therein: Aboriginal and Black Nova Scotians suffer from discrimination, illiteracy, disease, poverty, and high unemployment rates (Saulnier, 2009).

Clearly, there is substantial need in rural Nova Scotia; however, there are comparably few services in place to cope with these issues. The wait list for affordable housing in the province is two thousand names long and the average wait time to be placed in such housing is two and a half years (Saulnier, 2009). Although in rural Nova Scotia, as in the other locations under study, homelessness tends to be invisible, community leaders are becoming increasingly aware that rural homelessness, in particular youth homelessness, is an issue that cannot be ignored.

A tangential but relevant literature for the present study is also the area of 'risk' literature, typically associated with theorists such as Beck (1998), Giddens (1991; 1998) and Bauman (1992), among others. According to theorists of the 'risk society', pathways for youth have become more fraught with risk because of the globalizing features of modern society, coupled with more intense considerations of education, employment and, ultimately, achievement. "People have to take a more active and risk-infused orientation to their relationships and involvements," notes Giddens (1998, p. 28). In this vein of thought, Kelly (2001) argues that the risk society of late modernity require new considerations for youth, as the risk society "visit[s] new forms of responsibility and individualization on young people and their families to

prudently manage individual ‘reflexive biographical projects’ in increasingly uncertain settings.” (p. 24) With respect to rural youth and life-course transitions, and in a study of rural Nova Scotia youth, Looker and Naylor (2009) argue that rural youth’s experiences are “broadly subsumed under an encompassing discourse that assumes rural youth will react accordingly to the structural features of the risk society brought to bear on their individual life courses.” (p. 43) In this way, their analysis found that rural youth often frame their rurality and their choice to live in their home community as a failure, and argue generally that risks for rural youth remain differentiated and under accounted for regarding rural youth in comparison to urban youth; an issue the present study takes up further.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The study used a qualitative methods approach to study rural homeless youth experiences and their transitions to urban centres. The study used a semi-structured interview guide to inform its data collection activities with youth, focusing on youth who experienced homelessness in rural settings and migrated to urban areas. The focus rested on life experiences prior to homelessness, places of work residence and shelter in rural and urban places, key social supports and decision points regarding moves and services accessed in urban and rural places. Youth were recruited through partnered stakeholder organizations in Halifax, who work with similar but different sub-populations of homeless youth. Previously, these organizations indicated that many of their clients were, increasingly, youth with rural backgrounds. Through snowball recruitment, eleven youth were referred to the research team by service providers and were interviewed.

Prior to the interview youth were asked about the time they spent homeless in rural and urban places to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. Original inclusion criteria required youth to have been homeless in rural areas for several months however, after speaking with youth; it became clear that it was rare for them to stay in a rural place for an extended period of time once they no longer had access to housing. Therefore, consistent with Fitchen’s (1992) definition, participants who expressed low quality, insecure or temporary housing, or short periods of homelessness in rural areas were included in the study. Age criteria required participants to be between the ages of 16 and 24.

Additionally, through snowball recruitment, six service providers from both rural and urban areas were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews in order to enrich and substantiate data from youth interviews. Interviews with service providers focused on their understanding of issues pertaining to rural homelessness and the trajectories of youth from rural settings.

A grounded theory design was used to analysis the data. Qualitative data analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding techniques of all interviews, which encompassed fracturing the data into conceptually specific themes and categories. The data was then rebuilt in new ways by linking primary categories and tangential themes into a path analysis, and constructing a theoretical narrative shaped by data integration and category construction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The youth and service provider transcripts were analyzed separately in the beginning, then merged and contrasted with literature to develop a narrative presentation of rural homeless youths’ realities. The team felt confident that data saturation was reached among the sample, as common and duplicate categories emerged which were common among all of the participants.

## 4.0 Findings & Discussion

### 4.1 *Bored in Paradise?*

At the most general level, our findings reveal several interesting disjunctures or contradictions inherent in how our participants understand their rural to urban trajectories. One of the fundamental objectives of our work has been identifying the deep tensions that exist between how our youth participants perceived rural living vis-à-vis their (current) urban existence. The majority of youth perceived their rural upbringing as idyllic/nostalgic. “I’d loved to go back on a clear night because there is this really tall hill and it is logging roads so it has been all logged out there are no trees so you can see for miles of stars,” comments one youth. On the one hand, they speak to the romantic qualities of a “tranquil” and “peaceful” geographical place(s) where one has deep connections and where “everyone knows your name and your business.” Simultaneously, the youth also frame their rural experiences as oppressive and discriminating. Embedded within this romantic vision of rurality then comes authentic expressions from youth participants of feeling “lonely,” “bored” and more often than not, “isolated”. “If we wanted to hang out we would all have to hang out in the same place together or else we couldn’t... the closest town was 50 [min]to an hour walk just to get the closest town” (Rural Participant). And yet youth also felt very connected to their home community and their place within it. “I’m always connected because I’m so-and-so’s daughter. Like from this, raised this way. And if I came, if I ran into someone on the street and they knew my name...I think it will always, like, anchor me to that, to a place” (Rural Participant).

Service providers also mirrored this contradiction by attributing both characteristics of safe haven and risk to rural settings. The social dynamics inherent of rural places offered both positive and negative realities when being homeless in a small town. Both service providers and youth in our modest sample spoke of social information pathways such as the spread of negative rumors in small populations as well as the supportive nature of those pathways to find shelter, food and necessities. Landscape and distance in rural places fostered perils of isolation and loneliness. These were common descriptors from both youth and service provider as to why these young people left rural life and sought out urban centers.

I would say the biggest risk would be isolation [...] and not a lot of access to resources in smaller communities. And systemic poverty, right? So, you know, you combine all of that together and, you know, youth may have a tough time of it, from a really early age. So they may not be well socially integrated. They may not have a lot of friends. Their family network may be really strained, or, ah, you know, adversarial almost? (service provider)

Again, in a study of rural youth and mobility, Looker and Naylor (2009) found that rural youth who “stayed rural” often portrayed rural life as a sort of “failure”, often articulated against the well known markers of modernity, such as mobility, educational success, post-secondary educational attendance, and simply put “moving on.” In this way, our sample of youth articulated similarly critical perspectives of rural living, primarily based upon their gaining “urban perspectives.” As such, much of how they currently frame rurality comes as an extension of their urban grounding.



## **4.2 *You're Not Homeless If We Know You***

The dichotomy of urban/rural living is amplified in terms of “being homeless.” In rural settings, youth felt homelessness took on an invisible nature, a reality echoed by the service providers. The homeless status was primarily described as “couch surfing” or living in the woods, for example. The finding suggests that, in rural places, a youth is never truly seen or understood as homeless by peers or others because, simply put, they are well known in the community; part of a peer group, a kinship network, a family, and a community. While we should caution about extrapolating too broadly given our sample size, our samples suggests that the experience of homelessness often goes unarticulated. As one youth notes:

It wasn't a reality. Like it was just me. And, like, I think that's why I, like I called everyone that I knew from, like, that area, to see like, who could help me that night. And everybody was, like, like f--k off. Like its ten o'clock at night; what are you doing? Like...like, and they just, like, they don't understand cause it's never really been a reality for them, you know?

Additionally, service providers offered that there is no one “true” definition of homelessness but rather homelessness is naturally heterogeneous with a distinction between rural and urban.

...it doesn't look like it does in urban centres. It's not on the street. It's not in the public, public domain spaces. It is more hidden. So that's why for the public a lot of people don't believe it is, as it exists? Or if they do it, you know it doesn't exist very, ah, a lot of it. Uhm, what it looks like mostly is youth couch surfing. Leaving their homes and going to their friends' homes. Like as, and, and, ah, going from couch to couch. Or all coming together in, in one spot. Uhm, like I say, it's very underground. (service provider).

The social connectedness of rural communities such as “knowing everyone in town” can be seen as helpful when one is searching for support, and many of our young participants did stay with extended family and or friends when they were faced with the inability to stay at their home. However, attempting to deal with personal and most often sensitive issues in a confidential and anonymous manner appears almost impossible within tight-knit rural communities.

## **4.3 *Moving from Place to Space: Becoming “Homeless”***

One of the key and underlying rationales for moving to urban centers in our sample was to maintain/gain some form of anonymity as one deals with being homeless. Further still, the move from their home (“place based”) community to a more disconnected urbanized (“space based”) community in many ways can be seen to formalize their identity as “homeless”—a powerful marker of both how one comes to define themselves as “homeless”, and also how a system can then formally ‘count’ an individual as homeless. Below, a participant nicely captures the move from familial and informal support mechanisms of what youth homelessness looks like

for a rural youth, transitioning eventually to an urban and more formalized experience of becoming homeless:

When I really became homeless: the first time I became really homeless I got kicked out, she kicked me out again, cuz every time I questioned anything she does I'm automatically kicked out. The answer to everything was just to kick me out... I ended up at my friends house but my friend screwed me over there and I got kicked out of his house and I was sleeping on the bleachers on the baseball field of Shubenacadie and the cops came and said I can't be sleeping in the bleachers like that and my mom came and picked me up in the morning and she drove me to the Salvation Army on Gottingen street.

Helping us unravel these paradoxical dynamics of change and movement broadly, social theorists of modernity and mobility often take up the notion of 'place' versus 'space', differentiating between the two, and theorizing that among these differences exist opportunities to better understand how and why youth move. For instance, risk theorists such as Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992) argue that within modern consumer society's mobility and life course trajectories have become far more risk infused within a globalizing socio-political context, where former traditional structures of community and state have begun to fade.

In these terms, the rural homeless youth in our study move from place to space; they dis-embed themselves from the network of familial and community ties to a more space based sense of being and survival. Just as Corbett (2006; 2007; 2010) has found that those rural youth who wish to become 'successful' and educated leave their home communities, the youth in our sample are exercising a similarly (systematic) rationale for exiting their rural home community; in simple terms, to become "homeless" and often to then access the appropriate state infrastructure vis-à-vis their homelessness. In this way, the seemingly mundane move from rural Nova Scotia to Halifax marks a much more nuanced and deeper travel, which is from a place to a space, and within that new space, the identity of "homelessness" then gets picked up, attended to, and enacted upon.

Indeed, as many contemporary theorists contend, the central feature of late modernity is lifting oneself out of the social relations of particular locales; in this respect, our rural youth are simply following a well worn path of mobility, where new identities can become manifest, and new possibilities realized. If you want to pursue post-secondary education you move; if you are forced to be homeless, you move too; since neither possibility is formally possible at the localized level in one's home community.

For example, being homeless necessarily (also) entails an array of survival mechanisms that stem from informal economic activities (such as squeegeeing, panning, flying sign, or busking) (Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson, 2010)—entrepreneurial mechanisms that cannot be (similarly) achieved within rural places. Just as "homelessness" struggles to formally exist in rural places, so do the attendant homeless activities that are integral parts of street and youth homelessness culture and practice (Karabanow et al., 2010).

Again, urban landscapes offers such options, because they also offer the necessary ‘cover’ to be flexible in one’s identity, one’s community, and one’s actions. As such, being “homeless” in rural environments lends itself to a specific skill set/identify—utilizing existing informal resources that can provide immediate supports in time of need; namely, a room to stay in for a few days, a teacher to talk to about personal issues, and/or an extended family member to offer short-term shelter. Rural life offers informal support mechanisms, but those supports are embedded in a particular place; as Corbett (2010) notes, “In the context of rural communities, (this) movement away from place and into larger space involves a geographic trajectory away from kinship networks, villages and small towns.” (p. 226)

However, what became very apparent from all participants is that rural environments lack formal supports—emergency shelter, supportive housing, mental health clinics, drop in centres, health outreach, and needle exchange, for example. These services, which we know are essential to supporting the complex heterogeneous needs of homeless youth populations, coupled with the desire to remain anonymous and keep one’s issues confidential, simply make urban spaces a more inviting environment for youth struggling with issues around homelessness. Through primarily word of mouth from a trusting adult, the trajectory/pathway from rural to urban begins; and from place to space move youth. As several participants so succinctly note, staying homeless is in a rural place is almost impossible:

Oh, if you wanna stay there for a bit. Uhm? If you wanna stay in a rural spot for a while? Uhm? Honestly I don’t know any way to like do it really long term because after, ah, after about a week in a small town everybody recognizes you and the money kinda dries up. (youth)

Yeah it, I mean if, if you’re a homeless youth in a rural community there are no skill sets you can learn to survive. Because you couldn’t survive. You, you just couldn’t. [...]Right. I mean we don’t have any of the resources.” (service provider)

#### ***4.4 Moving on Down the Road: Navigating the Unfamiliar***

While some of our participants moved to urban settings with their families—a new start for the entire family unit; in keeping with our findings, others came as a way to ‘escape’ their families and their rural (place based) experiences. How youth actually got to the city was often simply getting a drive from an adult (mother, grandmother, etc.), and others talked about how long it would take them to walk to the city. For most youth, initial feelings of the “city as dangerous” coupled with a sense of being “alone” and “lost” soon eclipsed into a sense of comfort and support. While rural environments offered a landscape of informal support, urban spaces provided a varied network of more structured and formal supports, already calibrated to a ‘client’ base of often temporary and fluid engagement of services—primarily in terms of service resources for young people experiencing homelessness.

Despite the knowledge of the formal supports available in urban spaces, service providers often expressed concern for rural kids going to urban centers, based on the notion that they could not possibly have the survival skills to stay safe and/or access services and improve their lives in the city.

Number one, the big city can be quite, ah, daunting. There are differences for sure. And again, ah, you know, not knowing big areas sometimes you can wind up in environments that are just gonna dig a bigger hole for you.(service provider)

I think that young folks coming from a rural setting there is a segment of that group who are kids who they don't have addiction issues or mental health they are just they have had barriers whether it was learning disabilities or whatever that have, means that it didn't work out at school or there were things at home but there were always a segment of the community that supported that youth and when they get to the city thinking there is more opportunity they don't have that. They are vulnerable in the sense that there was always someone in their home community looking out for them that isn't necessarily true when you move to an urban setting.  
(service provider)

However, what service providers may be missing is the complexity of the survival mechanism(s) of rural kids that is shrouded by the idealic nostalgic visions of rural life. As some participants noted feeling “scared” and not knowing anyone in the city and unaware of resources to support them, most of them quickly navigated their way to needed formal supports by finding other young people living on the street and being told where to go and not go. As noted in the literature, seasoned street youth can provide important socialization for neophytes—guiding them through the rules and structures of street living, almost as “apprentices” (Karabanow, 2006).

One participant explains the fears he had about moving to an urban space after living his youth in a small predictable rural town:

I was terrified. Did you know that anyone who is not from Bedford, Dartmouth Halifax area...any small town anything like that living in Nova Scotia all think that everyone is going to shoot each other in Halifax. Everyone just goes around stabbing and shooting and raping each other. Like now-a-days I'm like that is just stupid but then, coming from X I thought that ...I was like oh god I'm going to get stabbed I'm going to get shot. It is going to be terrible. People are going to stick me with needles it is going to be horrible.

Interviewer: And was that your experience?

Youth Participant: No. Not at all.

From our discussions with youth participants, we would suggest that the youth themselves understand their trajectories as a binary between rural existence and urban survival. What we know from the risk literature, young people “at risk” or “not at risk” are leaving rural places – rurality cannot offer any longer the same opportunities as urban cultures in terms of employment, housing, education and social activity. In fact, increasing numbers of rural populations of all ages are migrating towards urban centres, with 81% of all Canadians living in urban areas (HRSDC, 2012).

In regards to the choice of youth to leave rural and navigate towards urban opportunities, service providers struggle with how to conceptualize the fact that many youth, not just homeless youth, have left for the city to pursue both opportunities and resources. Ironically, despite the acknowledgement of benefits in urban spaces, service providers express preference in youth staying in their home communities. That said, as one service provider notes, “They burn out their support structure in a small community or the support structure is pretty limited”. And so with limited formal opportunities, our youth participants are in fact making quite rational choices in their migration – after depleting their informal supports, there is little keeping them in their rural environments – and the urban center can not only provide more supports, but also a sense of respect and care that is not meted out in their current locales.

I say that because rural communities are increasingly drained of resources. Like human resources. So people aren't staying here, in rural communities. So I think that's a, a big struggle. And I think that's contributing to youth, not feeling able to stay here. I, I think it's commonly understood that the migration is happening with, you know, educated youth who are supported. And there's a fear about that. So, you know, it's only natural to expect that the same thing is happening if not worse for youth at risk.” (service provider)

#### ***4.5 Informal Communities of Care***

As the data speaks to, one larger narrative emerging from our study is what we can call a shifting of youth's “communities of care”—from extended family and friends in rural places to service providers and other street youth in urban landscapes/spaces. As one rural youth comments, “if you were having problems with your parents you could always go to like, for me I was running across the street to my aunt's house because I'd just go over there cause my grandmother lived there.” In urban spaces, this gets articulated as: “you can usually ask any of the other, like, anybody that looks like they're either poor or a traveler or anything just ask them (for help)” (youth). This community of care is most definitely shaped geographically—rural life can only provide one layer of support—an initial foundation of care that tends to be highly personal and informal—it is then the formal service supports that take over to provide for them in a less personal and more anonymous manner. Interestingly, while service providers in our sample spoke of the need/desire for building such supports in rural environment so that youth can stay there, all evidence points to the trend to migrate out into urban spaces so that the options are appropriately more fluid, varied, and nuanced, and the supports less personal:

Interviewer: In terms of when they get here what should they do?

Youth Participant: I don't know; talk to people. Just, don't just talk to one person. Talk to a bunch. Because maybe some people will direct you in the wrong way. Some people will give you better direction. And don't be so closed minded because some people that come from the country are so closed minded. Like, oh, I'm, like no one's gonna touch me, no-one's gonna hurt me and... It's not how it works.

The transfer of youth support systems from friends and family in rural to an urban street community was also observed by service providers. Data suggests a misconception of survival methods in the city based on a belief that one peer group was "good" versus another peer group that was "bad" creating a tension on the service providers' perspective of the influence this support mechanism had on rural youth.

Discussions with service providers also drew attention to their perspectives surrounding "community of care". They shared optimism for offering formal services to encourage youth to stay in their rural communities but faced difficulties primarily related to the physical environment of remote communities. There were complexities to develop centralized or coordinated responses to homelessness for youth due to the distances and populations involved. This increased the service providers' and the youths' reliance on rural informal support systems, which were eventually exhausted. Despite these realities and the availability of formalized care in urban areas, service providers still felt it was important for youth to stay in their communities (reasoning they are needed to sustain rural communities). Indicative comments from service providers arguing for an increased role of service provision activities for rural homeless youth included:

Depending on circumstances but I feel like there is opportunities here for them. And I would love to see them stay, find out what those resources are that can help them find those opportunities that help them better themselves. And reconnect with their community? Because I think rural communities can offer a lot.

I mean for what it would cost, you know, to have the ability to have this house open twenty four/seven... in comparison to what it's gonna cost, you know...Kinda recover these, these youth or, or, you know, follow them throughout their, their lives, if, you know, different services that they're gonna have to somehow, get along the way. I mean it's, it's comparable, you know? ...Oh, absolutely. We'd love to be able to be, you know, twenty four/seven, three hundred and sixty five days a year.

I'd really like to see something in this area that would help us deal with the issue locally. And make a difference in the lives of, ah, ah, youth and,

ah, you know, we, ah, we as small rural areas, like we can't afford to lose a lot of individuals.

## 5.0 Conclusions

It is clear that some aspects of the trajectories of rural homeless youth mirror the commentary that can be found in generic literature, such as pre-street adversity in the home and the end result of urban homelessness with its attendant risks. There are, however, some major points of divergence. Urban homeless youth experience the urban paradox of an intensive public visibility and exposure to the institutions therein (police, service agencies etc.). Rural homeless youth, in contrast, are largely invisible in the public and institutional sense. Indeed, the lack of recognition in some respects barely allows for one to adopt the label 'homeless' in rural contexts. Yet, they also feel themselves to be under the intense social scrutiny that can characterize rural contexts. Urban contexts are relatively rich in services that can assist youth in maintaining themselves more independently in homeless situations. Rural youth are forced to rely on local social networks to survive, but which are inadequate for those youth who explicitly need to cope with their homelessness for extended periods of time.

This identity construction surrounding rural homeless youth and their contexts of origin extended to the narratives of service providers. They regarded youth leaving such contexts as a missed opportunity for preventing a 'worse' version of homelessness—the urban one. Indeed, this extended to a belief that rural youth are at a greater risk of victimization in urban settings—a belief that would seem overly generalized given no evidence that rural settings cannot be brutal nor urban or suburban settings as breeding naiveté.

Moreover, the move, from rural places to urban spaces is an important marker in the trajectory of youth's lives in our sample, and their experiences of being homeless, both for themselves (informally) and for the social welfare system (formally). Once that threshold is met (i.e. the move), then the youth tacitly authorize a range of government and not-for-profit mechanisms to engage them *vis-à-vis* their homelessness. This engagement, while always fraught with risk, is often a welcomed development for rural homeless youth, who have come to the city specifically for formal assistance. While we know that returning to one's home or family can be an end goal for homeless youth, since being homeless *does* entail physical and emotional hardships and deterioration in one's well being, the youth in our sample have made a determined effort to dis-embed themselves from their localized, rural, home communities. An obvious limitation of the study is of course that we do not know if or when the youth in our sample might return to their home community, or when they will, or if they will, reconnect with their families. However, what we do know is that the youth all see this transition out of their rural locale as a necessary step personally, and therefore this step needs to be adequately acknowledged, recognized and attended to by the formal system of service providers in Nova Scotia. The tendency currently, at least as our study suggests, is to dismiss the agency of youth and suggest what is really needed is better local (structural) supports (i.e. then they would not *choose* to leave). While better local support may certainly have a role to play in preventing homelessness, we suggest that what rural homeless youth require, more immediately, are solutions which can be tailored to the unique needs of this increasingly visible homeless population in urban centres.

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