
TOWARDS RESILIENCY

For Vulnerable Youth

Transitioning from adolescence into adulthood is a critical period in youth development. It is a time when young people are investing in their future economic, social and physical well-being through the pursuit of opportunities related to education, employment and personal development. The ability of vulnerable youth to secure the resources and opportunities that will support movement out of poverty now and in the years to come is however often limited.

While virtually all young people experience transitions to adulthood that are increasingly prolonged and complex compared to previous generations, vulnerable youth are at particular risk during this period as they often have additional challenges to overcome and fewer resources and supports to draw upon. Yet we also know that if vulnerable youth can access the supports and resources they need during the transition to adulthood, they are better able to tackle these barriers and pursue critical opportunities that support them to change trajectories and invest in their futures over the long term.

Over the course of several months in 2010, United Way undertook research to better understand the lived experiences of vulnerable youth, including the challenges and opportunities they face, as they transition to adulthood. Vulnerable youth were considered to be youth aged 15 to 24 who face significant barriers to achieving or maintaining well being. The research design incorporated several components, including: reviews of existing literature and data, focus group discussions with 70 vulnerable youth connected with youth-serving agencies and a survey of over 400 vulnerable youth from across low-income neighbourhoods in Calgary.

The complete report can be found online at
www.calgaryunitedway.org/vulnerableyouth



VULNERABLE
YOUTH

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

APRIL, 2011

KEY FINDINGS

Many vulnerable youth are exhibiting significant resiliency and real coping abilities despite the risk factors and additional challenges they face. Despite demonstrating high levels of resourcefulness and initiative, many of these youth are also coming up against multiple and inter-connected barriers. For instance, a job is needed for regular income but to secure the job the individual must first be able to afford transportation, pay for relevant certifications, purchase required uniforms or equipment and potentially secure child care. Youth described frustration with such 'catch-22' situations, noting it was often the very challenges they struggle to overcome which further limit their ability to secure opportunities necessary to moving beyond their position of vulnerability.

The primary challenges faced by vulnerable youth during the transition period tend to centre around: a lack of family supports, difficulties with staying engaged in educational institutions, lack of employment opportunities, chronic stress, limited community integration, poverty or combinations of these and other issues. Vast amounts of physical and emotional energy are spent trying to cope with and overcome these barriers, often limiting their ability to focus on and invest in other areas of life, such as academic achievement or personal development.

Several key areas related to the transition to adulthood were highlighted:

Education: Vulnerable youth value education but face significant barriers in staying connected to school.

Employment: Vulnerable youth are struggling to secure employment with growing frustration.

Basic Needs: Too many vulnerable youth struggle with basic needs

Social Protection: High levels of stress and trauma are affecting youth transitions.

Social Supports: Vulnerable youth demonstrate real strengths in their close peer networks but have limited access to relationships that provide different perspectives and new opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a range of responses and actions that as a community we can undertake to lessen these struggles and work towards the vision that all youth in Calgary grow up great. Vulnerable youth need the power of our collective attention, effort and voice to ensure that their transition to adulthood is also a transition from poverty to possibility.

Recommendation #1: More comprehensive and coordinated responses are required to address the complex issues faced by vulnerable youth and support them throughout their transition to adulthood.

Provincial Government:

- Review relevant legislation and policies and provide access to services beyond existing age-based eligibility criteria.
- Extension of critical supports available to youth receiving assistance through Alberta Children and Youth Services to other vulnerable youth in our community who are without adequate family and financial supports.
- Coordinated, cross-ministry responses from implicated government systems in the form of a designated 'Youth Opportunities Secretariat'.

All Levels of Government:

- Develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy at the municipal, provincial and federal levels, which takes into account the experiences of vulnerable youth.

United Way:

- Launch a Youth Transitions to Adulthood Strategy to guide United Way investments and leadership in support of vulnerable youth who are disconnected from work and school.
- Conduct research through systems mapping to better understand existing government mandates, funding and services in relation to vulnerable youth as well as existing gaps in support.
- Continue to champion issues affecting vulnerable youth in Calgary and work with key partners in order to implement collaborative, impactful responses

Recommendation #2: Vulnerable youth must be supported to (re)engage in education, with the entire community mobilized to realize this aim.

Provincial Government:

- Extend the age cap for publicly-funded high school from 19 to 24 years old and raise the age of mandatory school attendance from 16 to 17 years old.

Community:

- Identify shared goals aimed at increasing high school completion rates over the next 5-10 years by all systems and stakeholders.
- Include cultural awareness and appreciation as regular components of teaching practice to counter racism and the disengagement of Aboriginal children and youth.

United Way:

- Develop shared actions and measurement aimed at improving school completion rates for all children and youth in Calgary.
- Support community-led work through the Full Circle initiative, which is focused on leveraging existing community services in assisting Aboriginal youth to complete high school.

Recommendation #3: Vulnerable youth need improved opportunities to access meaningful training and employment opportunities.

Provincial Government:

- Develop a focussed Youth Employment Strategy responsive to the particular needs of vulnerable youth.

United Way:

- Support the strategic initiative facilitated by The City of Calgary's Youth Employment Centre, to provide pregnant and young mothers with coaching supports and opportunities for skills training, personal development and practical work experience.
- Engage with employers in creating intentional strategies to provide vulnerable youth with training, mentoring and employment opportunities.

Recommendation #4: Improved access to basic needs for vulnerable youth will enable movement from crisis to stability.

Municipal Government:

- Develop a more streamlined and accessible application process for low-income discounts across municipal services.
- Strengthen access to affordable transit for vulnerable youth by eliminating school enrollment requirements for the Youth Transit Pass and by standardizing age-based discounts for youth across city services at a minimum of 50 percent.

All Levels of Government:

- Support affordable housing stock through relevant policy changes, such as liberalized secondary suites regulations.
- Provide more robust resources for the many vulnerable youth who are precariously housed.
- Collaborate to adapt eligibility criteria for, and increase levels of, income assistance so that they are more reflective of vulnerable youth's lived experiences and needs.

United Way:

- Support the Calgary Homeless Foundation and other key partners in developing and implementing the 10 Year Plan to End Youth Homelessness.
- Support access to basic needs for vulnerable youth through enhanced funding for youth bursary programs for high school completion as well as support for training programs and post-secondary education.

Recommendation #5: Vulnerable youth are confronting barriers in accessing comprehensive mental health supports.

Provincial Government:

- Ensure seamless mental health supports for youth aged 15-24 years old, rather than requiring them to switch from the diagnostic and treatment services available for children to those available for adults at the age of 18.

United Way:

- Engage in further research and consultation, including mapping relevant government systems and gaps.

Recommendation #6: Vulnerable youth must have access to a range of diverse formal and informal networks and relationships in their communities.

All Levels of Government:

- Provide comprehensive wrap-around supports that provide not only a range of services but also assistance in navigating systems, connecting with positive role models and pursuing opportunities for personal development.

United Way:

- Implement a Vulnerable Youth Transitions to Adulthood Strategy which intentionally focuses on the importance of social supports, both formal and informal, for youth as they transition to adulthood
- Fund collaborative and innovative community initiatives that strengthen positive peer and family relationships as part of existing service delivery.

