

**Youth Homelessness: An Exploration into the Desire for Family  
Reunification**

by

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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## THESIS EXAMINATION INFORMATION

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An oral defense of this thesis took place on August 6, 2021, in front of the following examining committee:

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The above committee determined that the thesis is acceptable in form and content and that a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by the thesis was demonstrated by the candidate during an oral examination. A signed copy of the Certificate of Approval is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

## **ABSTRACT**

With family conflict serving as the predominant underlying factor that leads to youth homelessness, family has often been framed as “the problem.” As such, many youth services have ignored the role of family as potential solutions to youth homelessness, despite a growing body of literature suggesting family connectedness holds strong currency for youth. In a sample of 34 youth experiencing homelessness, interviews were conducted to explore the extent to which youth have desire for family reunification, and to examine how differences in length of homelessness impact youth’s family-life trajectories. The results indicate that most youth desire to reconnect with their families, and that youth who have experienced homelessness for a comparatively short time (under 1 year) have more supportive familial relations than do youth who have experienced a moderate (1-2 years) or long (over 2 years) time homeless. Optimism for family reunification tends to wane the longer one experiences homelessness.

**Keywords:** youth homelessness; family; reunification; reconnection; trajectory

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

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Riley R. Therrien

## **STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication. I have used standard referencing practices to acknowledge ideas, research techniques, or other materials that belong to others. Furthermore, I hereby certify that I am the sole source of the creative works and/or inventive knowledge described in this thesis.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

BTT	Betrayal trauma theory
HB	High betrayal
LHC	Life History Calendar

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

It is generally acknowledged that having positive relationships with family members can enhance one's emotional, physical and financial well-being. The importance of family cannot be overstated; our relations with family members are significant for well-being across the life course, serving as one of the richest resources to help us cope with stress, engage in healthy behaviors, increase self-esteem and improve overall quality of life through love and unconditional support (Thomas et al., 2017; Merz et al., 2009; Umberson et al., 2010). For a substantial percentage of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada however, family conflict serves as the predominant underlying factor that leads to homelessness, with many youth suffering from high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Winland, 2013). In fact, it is estimated that 60 to 70 percent of young people flee their family household due to incidents of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from family members (Karabanow, 2004; Tyler et al., 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2009; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Van den Bree et al., 2009; Andres-Lemay et al., 2005). As such, for many youth experiencing homelessness, not only must they navigate a myriad of issues related to unstable housing, but they may be deprived of the numerous benefits of supportive, healthy familial relationships.

Complicating the matter, youth programming, interventions, and services often ignore the role of family in working towards solutions to youth homelessness (Winland, 2013). In fact, many services operate on the assumption that youth need protection and isolation from their families, as they are not resources that youth experiencing homelessness should draw on as they move forward (Winland, 2013).

To an extent, this response is understandable, as many homeless young people are fleeing family violence. It is an unfortunate reality that a significant percentage of youth are in a state of distress when they enter the shelter system, often as a result of their family-life. Thus, the thought of reconnecting with family does not seem realistic, desirable, or advisable (Winland, 2013). With such an emphasis placed on the idea of family as the “problem,” it has perpetuated the common myth that when young people leave home, they sever relations with family members and no longer desire or pursue contact (Gaetz et al., 2016; Winland, 2013). In actuality, Winland (2013) finds that many young people experiencing homelessness continue to exist in a web of close parental and extended family relations; while many may be characterized as or considered problematic, we cannot discount those which are not. In what is excellently and succinctly put by Winland (2013), our understanding of youth homelessness, and how we respond to it, is profoundly limited if family is seen only in terms of dysfunction and if we assume that youth must simply move on from broken family relations.

Due to the emphasis placed on “family as the problem” in the past, it is only recently that researchers and service providers working alongside homeless youth have begun to emphasize the value in aiding youth reunite with family (Gaetz et al., 2016). Recent research from Parker and Mayock (2019) has found that family connectedness holds strong currency and meaning for youth experiencing homelessness, even amongst youth with backgrounds of conflictual family relations. The process of rebuilding relationships with family members, even where such relations were/or remain strained, has shown numerous benefits, such as: enhanced ability to cope with new challenges, increased practical and emotional support, and greater opportunities to secure stable

housing (Mayock et al., 2011). Mending relations can also serve as a significant motivating factor for youth to re-enroll in school, or to undergo drug treatment (Mayock et al., 2011). While it may not be feasible for all youth, the research has, as aforementioned, shown that the family can certainly play an instrumental role in aiding youth exit homelessness.

Despite what we know, the family relationships of youth experiencing homelessness are undoubtedly complex and in need of greater explorative research (Parker & Mayock, 2019). This thesis contends that there is a significant gap in the literature regarding youth's connections to and relations with family while experiencing homelessness; something that is duly noted by Winland (2013). This thesis is particularly interested in recent findings, albeit limited in number, that suggest that many youth express a desire to re-engage and participate in family relationships, even in circumstances where conflict, abuse, or violence were present (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010; Mayock, Corr, & O'Sullivan, 2011; Mayock & Parker, 2017; Mayock, Parker, & Murphy, 2014). In consideration of the fact that youth who are reunited with their families tend to achieve more positive outcomes than youth who remain estranged (Winland, 2013), the importance of further explorative research into the desire for family reconnection is particularly significant.

### **Thesis Objectives**

This thesis has two primary objectives: firstly, to explore the extent to which youth experiencing homelessness have desire for family reunification in a sample of 34 youth from the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario, Canada; secondly, to examine how differences in length of homelessness impact youth's family-life trajectories and

subsequent desire for reunification. As such, this thesis will aim to provide new insights into the issue of family reunification, with attention to desire for reconnect from the perspective of youth experiencing homelessness.

Having provided an introduction to the issue of family reunification, chapter two will expand upon the introductory discussion, reviewing the existing literature in a more expansive and detailed manner. Family relationships for youth prior to leaving the home will be examined, as will the impacts of family breakdown for youth. Next, family relationships for youth while actively experiencing homelessness will be explored, demonstrating how relationships evolve once actually separated from family. Following this, research pertaining to family reunification will be covered, from youth's interest in reconnection, factors that influence reconnection, and lastly, how youth achieve successful reconnection. Finally, theoretical frameworks will be reviewed that attempt to address youth reconnecting with family.

Chapter three will review the methodology of the project by re-stating the research questions and explaining the methodological approach. Methods of data collection used will be described, including the interview processes, sample of participants, and site selection. Lastly, the methods of analysis will be documented, from the use of descriptive statistics, coding, and thematic analysis.

Chapter four will provide the results of our main research objectives; to what extent is there desire for family reunification amongst the entire sample? Significant observed differences of desire-level between subgroups based on gender, mental health status, and one's current living situation will also be revealed. Following, will be the findings from how length of homelessness impacts one's desire for family reunification,

with an exploration into the different family-life trajectories of youth who have spent a comparatively short, moderate, and long-time homeless.

Chapter five will commence with a discussion of the aforementioned results, offering how the findings fit with existing knowledge, what new insights they contribute, and what consequences they have for theory. In this chapter, limitations of the thesis will also be noted. Following this, chapter six will conclude the thesis with a summarization of findings, policy implications, and recommendations for future research.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Our understanding of youth homelessness is heavily rooted in the idea of the family as ‘the problem’, whereby conflict and abusive family relations are at the core of why young people leave home and become homeless (Winland 2013). With increasing attention over the past number of decades on the processes that lead youth to the street, the literature has consistently identified conflictual and abusive family situations as being the predominant underlying factor leading to youth homelessness (Karabanow and Naylor 2013; Winland 2013). As aforementioned in the introduction, it is estimated that 60 to 70 percent of young people flee their family household in situations where they have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse (Karabanow, 2004; Tyler et al., 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; O’Grady & Gaetz, 2009; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Van den Bree et al., 2009; Andres-Lemay et al., 2005). As such, Winland (2013) reports the identification of problems within families as a key cause of youth homelessness has led to increased attention to the detrimental impacts of family conflict, dysfunction, and abusive homes. Karabanow and Naylor (2013) similarly find that the majority of studies on homeless youth have focused primarily on pathways into homelessness, emphasizing the causes and consequences of conflictual family life, trauma, abuse, poverty, and involvement in the child welfare system.

With the predominant focus amongst researchers being pathways into homelessness, family is often considered to be part of the past, with the goal of emergency services, shelters, and transitional housing facilities being to increase young people’s self-sufficiency and independence from the family (Winland et al., 2011). However, this perspective leaves details of relationships between family and youth

experiencing homelessness incomplete and limits the opportunity for effective reunification for youth where reparations with family are possible (Winland et al., 2011). This oversight is particularly noteworthy given numerous studies have shown youth feel as though family is important in their lives while experiencing homelessness (Mayock et al., 2011, Falci et al., 2011, Milburn et al., 2006). Many continue to remain in contact with their families after leaving home, and desire relationships despite the tendency for past tensions to resurface (Mayock et al., 2011, Falci et al., 2011, Milburn et al., 2006, Wenzel et al., 2012, Falci et al., 2011, Gaetz et al., 2016). With so much emphasis on the family as part of the problem, it is also important to remember that many, if not most, young people do continue to exist in a web of close and/or extended family relations, and while some are problematic, others may not (Winland, 2013).

In what is succinctly put by Karabanow and Naylor (2013) we have reached a point in youth homelessness research where there is a great deal known about pathways onto the streets for young people, however very little about the ways in which they exit homelessness and re-enter mainstream society. All things considered, there is a significant gap in youth homelessness literature on connections to family after homelessness has begun, and how the family-life trajectory changes over time (Milburn et al., 2005). Further, there is little understanding of how youth manage to transition off the street and build or rebuild an identity that does not include “homeless” or “street engaged,” but rather one that includes family and social inclusion (Karabanow et al., 2005; Mayock et al., 2011). By continuing to frame family as the problem (Winland et al., 2011), they are frequently dismissed as potential partners in finding solutions to youth homelessness (Winland, 2013).

In consideration of the continued dismissal of the family within the literature, despite their significance in many youths' lives, this thesis aims to explore family relationships and the desire for family reunification amongst young people experiencing homelessness, with attention to how desire for reconnect changes during the trajectory of homelessness. This literature review will first briefly overview the importance of family and consequences of family breakdown, and then explore the extent to which the relationships between family and youth experiencing homelessness have been explored with respect to family-youth relationships prior to leaving the home, during homelessness, and during attempts at family reunification.

### **Importance of Family and Impact of Family Breakdown**

Any discussion regarding family reunification should first highlight the significance of family, and the implications for when family is fractured. Positive relationships with family members, it is generally known, can enhance one's emotional, physical and financial well-being, while providing us with the love and support to feel valued in life. Our relations with family members help us cope with stress, engage in healthy behaviors, and improve overall quality of life through a host of beneficial ways (Thomas et al., 2017; Merz, Consedine, et al., 2009; Umberson, Pudrovska, et al., 2010). When family relations are fractured or absent however, there are extensive negative consequences for youth. For youth who go on to experience homelessness, this includes the fallout of direct inciting events leading them to leave home, as well as a myriad of consequences which influence them throughout their life trajectory. These young people are forced to navigate unstable housing, while simultaneously being deprived of the numerous benefits of supportive, healthy familial relationships. Of particular interest to

this thesis, are the known negative impacts of family breakdown on stable support systems and nurturing bonds (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Roman & Wolfe, 1997).

Tyler and Schmitz (2013) report that decreased social support and bonds with families heavily impact the timing of events that youth experience (leaving home, kicked out, removal by state), which in turn, triggers a course of instability and multiple transitions that hampers their prosocial integration into society. Multiple transitions and instability as a result of premature independence from the family, Tyler and Schmitz (2013) argue, may severely complicate youth's ability to acquire a stable support system or procure nurturing bonds elsewhere. Kennedy et al. (2010) similarly find that the combination of family instability, multiple transitions, and lack of supportive relationships that often arises from removal from a stable residence, is likely to make any kind of effective transition to adulthood particularly difficult. In fact, those who experience multiple transitions while they are young are more likely to have problematic social support networks (Collins, 2001) and thus are at greater risk of entering adulthood without family resources (Osgood et al., 2010). Thus, quite alarmingly, in the absence of nurturing bonds and social support from caregivers, youth who are homeless (with such family backgrounds) are at risk of finding themselves entrenched in a cycle of long-term homelessness (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002); highlighting the importance of the family's role in any discussion of homelessness prevention.

### **Family Relationships Prior to Leaving Home**

While research on relationships between family and youth experiencing homelessness is limited, youths' relations with family as they enter the initial phase of homelessness is well documented (Winland 2013, Gaetz et al., 2016, Tyler and Schmitz,

2013). From the 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey in Canada, 77.5% of youth had reported conflictual relationships with family and an inability to “get along” with parents at the time of becoming homeless (Gaetz et al., 2016). These strained, conflictual relations often stem from family homes with high occurrences of parental neglect, intimate partner violence, as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Gaetz, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009).

In one of the most recent analyses of family relationships prior to leaving home, Tyler and Schmitz (2013) confirm earlier research on the prevalence of maltreatment and conflict and document the main reasons for home leaving. Tyler and Schmitz (2013) find child maltreatment characterized the vast majority of relationships with family, with 77.5% of participants experiencing physical abuse, and a further 32.5% experiencing sexual abuse. For those with conflictual relationships significantly marked by physical abuse, youth gave examples of being thrown down flights of stairs, beaten with pool sticks and two by fours, as well as many incidents of being beaten by their parent’s hands and fists (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). For youth who noted victimization of sexual abuse as a key marking of their relations with family, participants blamed not only the attacker, but in multiple cases, their mothers for failing to provide a protective environment and pinning the blame on youth themselves for lying about the incident (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). In such cases of physical and sexual abuse, participants noted the betrayal of trust in their relations with family, particularly parents, as the cause for leaving home (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013).

In addition to incidents of abuse, participants identified domestic violence between their parents as a key reason for leaving the family home, rupturing their relationships with family (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). Their finding that witnessing parental violence increased violence between parents and youth is understandable, as children who are exposed to and surrounded by violence in the family home not only learn the techniques of being violent, but more importantly, the justification for doing so (Mahoney, 2003; Gelles, 1997).

Strains between youth and their family are also often reported to stem from parents experiencing mental illness, as well as parental alcohol or drug use (Mallet et al., 2005, Andres- Lemay et al., 2005). While the mental health of youth experiencing homelessness has been extensively covered in the literature, demonstrating high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide in comparison to the national average, less attention has been paid to the direct effect of family members (Winland, 2013). In many cases, parental psychiatric disorders have been shown to be a factor leading to youth seeking departure from home (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005). Interestingly, parental substance abuse has been shown to predict not only youth substance abuse, but also youth's entry into homelessness (McMorris et al., 2002). The inability of parents to adequately cope with mental health and substance use is thus impactful on youth leaving home as well as their future homelessness trajectory (Winland, 2013).

The final prominent reason given for damaged parental relationships was related to youth's intentional disregard for family rules and/or codes of conduct. In contrast to the aforementioned causes of fractured relationships between parents and youth stemming from parents, 1 in 5 participants noted that they had knowingly

misbehaved and caused trouble for their parents, failing to abide by family rules, resulting in their removal from the home (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). As such, the cause of fractured relationships between parents and youth in this beginning stage of homelessness is not one-sided.

In summary, what is clear in the literature, is that when youth are in the process of leaving the home, relationships with family have consistently been found to be both conflictual and abuse ridden. While Canadian research has been effective in aiding our understanding of pathways into homelessness for youth, caution must be taken not to generalize family conflict and parental abuse as the singular cause of youth homelessness (Winland, 2013). If we are to continue emphasizing family conflict and abusive homes in youth homelessness research, there is a risk we will continue to make assumptions about the tensions between family members and homeless past the initial point of homelessness (Winland, 2013).

### **Family Relationships while Experiencing Homelessness**

For youth experiencing homelessness, while the relationships they have with their parents are often negatively characterized at the time they leave home, there is less known about the types of relationships they have with their parents after they leave (Milburn et al., 2005).

The 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey reports that across the entire sample of homeless youth from their national study in Canada, 63.5% deemed family as important, with over two-thirds (71.6%) of participants in regular contact with family (contact with any family member at minimum once per month) at the time of the survey (Gaetz et al., 2016). Even amongst those who do not have contact with family, 35.2%

agreed it is important. This finding underscores that while available evidence is limited, contact with family continues to play a role and hold relevance in the lives of youth while experiencing homelessness.

A primary approach to further exploring family-youth relationships involves examining youth's social networks while actively experiencing homelessness. Notably, one study examining youth's social networks found that amongst youth living on the streets, family comprised the second largest category of individuals in their social networks (after street-based ties) (Wenzel et al., 2012). However, there appears to be a sizable gap between friends and family. For example, Johnson et al. (2005) finds that over 70% of youth experiencing homelessness indicate friends amongst their social network. Conversely, Tyler (2008) reports that only 12% of youth indicate family amongst their network. That is to say, even though family may comprise the second largest category of individuals in youth's social networks, it is still quite small, and sizably smaller than friends and/or street-ties.

Falci and colleagues (2011), on the other hand, explored differences in social networks with regards to how much time youth had spent homeless. In their sample of youth experiencing homelessness, 33% reported having a parent within their core emotional network, and 15% reported a parent in their instrumental network shortly after becoming homeless (Falci et al., 2011). Interestingly, over time, youth increased their propensity of reporting a parent in their instrumental networks; after being homeless for 2 years, 22% of homeless youth report receiving instrumental support from a parent, and after 5 years, 36% of homeless youth report so (Falci et al., 2011).



## **Reconnecting and Reuniting with Family**

### **Desire for Reconnection**

Given that youth experiencing homelessness often continue to have contact with their families, and consider family important, it follows that the issue of family reconnection and reconciliation is an important one to consider. As has been already discussed, our understanding of youth homelessness is largely based on the designation of family as the ‘problem,’ wherein family conflict and abuse is at the core of youths’ experience of homelessness (Winland, 2013). Despite this conflict, numerous studies (Mayock et al., 2011, Falci et al., 2011, Milburn et al., 2006) have shown youth re-establish relationships, desire relationships, and/or feel as though family is important in their lives while experiencing homelessness. This supports Winland’s (2013) contention that we must be careful how we generalize the literature’s largely negative focus on the family and apply it to practice. With an awareness that family is often important in the lives of homeless youth, this thesis is particularly interested in youth’s reported desire for family reunification.

While research is quite limited on the issue, the 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey inquired youth about their interest in improving family relations, with over three quarters of the sample (77.3%) responding yes (Gaetz et al., 2016). Further, 49% of the sample had claimed they were in the process of working on improving relations, while 28.3% responded that they wanted to but are not right now (Gaetz et al., 2016). Among participants, 22% indicated they had no interest in improving family relations (Gaetz et al., 2016). Over two-thirds (71.6%) of participants claimed they

were already in regular contact with family (contact with any family member at minimum once per month) at the time of the survey (Gaetz et al., 2016).

### **Attempts at Reunification**

Despite available evidence pointing to a general desire for family reconnect amongst youth experiencing homelessness, there is variability in outcomes when reunification is attempted. A discrepancy in interest in improving relationships and success when reunification is attempted suggests that desire for reconnect is not enough to manifest in reconciled relationships.

A 2011 study focusing on rebuilding familial relationships among a sample of 376 youth, aged 16–24, in Toronto, Ontario, found only 14.5% reconciled a damaged relationship with a family member and 17% moved back home after individual and family counseling (Winland et al., 2011). However, in a study by Milburn and colleagues, in a sample of 201 youth from Los Angeles County, they found that approximately 65% of newly homeless young people return to live at the family home, typically with a parent or parents, within the first year (Milburn et al., 2006); considerably higher than what was seen in the Toronto study. This may be a result of variation in participants included in studies, or differences across geographical regions. Although, it is also important to note that in Milburn’s study, there was a significant degree of variability in the family bonds reported one year later (Milburn et al., 2006). While some youth had reported high rates of feeling cared for, loved, and valued by their families; similar numbers had reported the opposite (Milburn et al., 2006). Evidently, the nature and quality of familial bonds can vary significantly among homeless youth (Milburn et al., 2006; Milburn et al., 2009) and are likely to change and fluctuate over time (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010;

Mayock & Corr, 2013; Monfort, 2009). The variability in the reports of family bonds one year later indicates the importance of further exploring these family dynamics in hope of understanding the complicated re-negotiation of relationships in the periods after youth have left home.

In one of the few in-depth examinations of youth's relations with family while experiencing homelessness, Mayock and colleagues (Mayock et al., 2011), found that despite interest in communicating with family common amongst the sample, many young people struggled to find a comfortable balance of power and control when re-engaging with family; particularly in cases where the family has been a source of distress or disappointment. The task of rebuilding relations and communicating with family also involved setbacks of various kinds, with one participant describing the process of re-communication as tension-filled and a source of stress, albeit deeming contact with family members as still important (Mayock et al., 2011). According to Mayock et al. (2011), one of the most common themes in efforts to renew communication with parents, is the tendency for past difficulties to resurface and/or the creation of new problems. In many accounts, the strain from past events was unmistakably apparent. For example, in what encapsulates the experience of many homeless young adults, one young woman from the study had returned home in hopes of improving communication and relations with family, however strongly felt that this decision was not going to yield positive results:

It's not my home. It's just a place where I sleep . . . Ma doesn't give a fuck about how I feel or, if I try and tell her anything like that, she just doesn't understand it. We just don't see eye to eye, and we just don't get along (Mayock et al., 2011).

All youth who moved to transitional housing in this study indicated that they preferred living apart from their parents and family, feeling that while they valued and wanted to keep in touch with them, their relationship would not endure the strain of dealing with past tensions on a regular basis (Mayock et al., 2011). The narratives of these youth often revealed continued strain but also interestingly revealed that youth placed value on their connection and contact with home (Mayock et al., 2011). As a matter of fact, the majority expressed a desire to remain connected to their families, believing that even if strained, familial relationships occupy an important part of their lives (Mayock et al., 2011).

Taken together, factors affecting attempts at reunification are multi-faceted. Not only do differences between studies exist, information is lacking in individual differences of youth, which may have played a role in desire for reconnection, and ultimately success of reunification. As evidenced by Mayock and colleagues (2011) the realities of attempting reunification with a conflict-ridden past is more complicated than merely placing value in family relationships. In some cases, reuniting with family is not possible nor is it appropriate (or advisable) for youth burdened with leaving home prematurely (Fitzpatrick 2000; Milburn et al. 2009).

### **Factors Shaping the Possibility of Reunification**

Before describing how youth are able to successfully reconcile with family, this thesis must note that numerous individual and trajectory factors have been proposed to be predictive of relationships having either positive or negative outcomes (McMorris et al., 2002; Milburn et al., 2005). Looking at individual factors positively contributing to relationships, female youth have been shown to consistently report closer ties to their

families than male counterparts (Lee et al., 2002), and involvement in religious practices has been shown to be a predictive factor in having closer ties to family (Snarey & Dollahite, 2001). From a trajectory standpoint, Milburn et al. (2005) found that the higher the degree of emotional and financial support in one's family network at the beginning phase of homelessness, the more likely youth will report heightened levels of familial bonds one year later. Beyond this, the simple belief that youth had family support and someone in their life who cared for them, increased motivation to get off the street and build positive relationships with family and friends (Karabanow & Naylor, 2013).

Factors that negatively predict family contact for individuals include youth exiting single-parent households, who report higher rates of conflict with family than do youth in two-parent families (Baer, 1999). Another potential predictor is the duration of homelessness. During the trajectory of homelessness, youth who are out of home for a prolonged period of time, entrapped in chronic homelessness, have been found to be more likely to participate in behaviour that further separate them from family (McMorris et al., 2002). Additionally, the higher number of housing transitions that youth undergo throughout homelessness, the more unlikely it is that they will form close bonds with family members, and thus face heightened risk of losing family support (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). As such, we have a general understanding that duration of homelessness and transitions are impacting relations negatively, however there is little information to suggest exactly to what degree (for example, do relations become markedly weakened after one year, two years, or substantially longer?). An overview of trajectory research reveals that the impact of length of homelessness on one's relations has not been explored thoroughly, and thus, there remains a lack of insight as to the degree by which time spent

homeless has an impact. Additional information is needed to explore how factors, such as length of homelessness, shape the desire for reconnection and family relations.

### **Successful Family Reconciliation**

As for how youth are able to successfully reconcile relationships with family, Mayock and colleagues (Mayock et. al, 2011) found that improved trust and communication, as well as taking responsibility for past wrongdoings was critical to the process. Renewed trust and communication was actually the strongest theme to emerge from the narratives of youth who had effectively returned to their family households, as relationship issues between youth and their parent(s) had to be directly addressed and resolved (Mayock et al., 2011). This involved a commitment to more open negotiation and dialogue, even if it required a considerable length of time to achieve (Mayock et al., 2011). However, even in cases where it spanned a longer amount of time, the process of keeping in regular contact with parents was critical in enabling a move back home, as was having the ability and willingness to resolve prior issues and difficulties (Mayock et al., 2011). Also deemed necessary for successful reunification, was the act of taking responsibility for past misbehaviour, problematic associations, and engagement in illicit activity or drugs (Mayock et al., 2011). Ending ties with troublesome street peers was often an expectation made clear by parents, and for those in situations where drug use was an issue, a commitment to enrolling in treatment was a condition set out in the agreement between youth and their parents (Mayock et al., 2011).

Regardless of the pathway out of homelessness, the process of restoring and repairing relationships with parents and family members was beneficial and of value to youth (Mayock et al., 2011). Reconnecting with family aided youth to initiate positive

change in their lives and also better prepared them to cope with new challenges. With relations restored, or at least improved, youth were able to access and benefit from increased practical and emotional support and, even in conflictual relationships, the majority of youth valued their connections with family members (Mayock et al., 2011). This particular finding that most youth were motivated to resolve difficulties with parents is significant, as it is indicative that youth, even with a history of family breakdown, do express a desire to reconnect with family (Schmied & Walsh 2010).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

While there is an established theoretical base for understanding the causes and nature of homelessness (Anderson, 2003), a review of existing literature finds very little in the form of theoretical frameworks applicable to young people's family relations and desire for reunification while experiencing homelessness. Notably, even the 2013 Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice report (Gaetz et al., 2013), which is a collection of Canada's best research and policy analysis in the field, offers no more than five paragraphs of social capital discussion. This comprehensive 510-page document covers everything from pathways in and out of homelessness, to family reconnection, to homelessness solutions through family reconciliation. The glaring lack of applicable theory in this document is reflective of a gap in knowledge in this field of research. Instead, several other prominent studies that examine the nature of familial relations and/or matters regarding reconnection with family do so primarily through a grounded approach (Parker & Mayock, 2019; Roche & Barker, 2017; Winland et al., 2011; Mayock et al., 2011; Milburn et al., 2005), offering no tangible integration or discussion with established theories. Of the limited studies that do incorporate theory

with an exploration of homeless young people's family relationships, the predominant theoretical frameworks used tend to be social capital theory and life course theory; although neither target the essence of the process of family reconnection, as will be discussed.

Social capital theory postulates that social networks and group affiliations have positive benefits that result in the acquisition of social capital (Tierney & Hallett, 2012). In this sense, social capital enables or disables individuals (or in this case, youth experiencing homelessness) to accomplish particular goals through network development (Tierney & Hallett, 2012). Within youth homelessness literature, social capital theory proposes that a principal factor contributing to young people's homelessness is through the lack of family as a source of social capital (Barker, 2012). More specifically, it is utilized as a framework to show that the families of youth who are experiencing homelessness fail in providing a source of social capital, ultimately leading youth to explore alternative means of support, which reinforces and extends their homelessness (Barker, 2012). For example, Gaetz and O'Grady (2013) contend that young people generally grow up relying on an extensive range of social supports to help them navigate their way from childhood to adulthood, starting with family, but also extending to friends, teachers, and neighbors. These relationships ideally provide models of adult behaviour, enabling youth to learn valued skills for daily living, with the assurance of continued guidance, encouragement, and love provided along the way (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013). When youth are removed or leave home for the streets however, their connections with family, community, and school are typically weakened, and their social support networks are diminished by which they are forced to rely more heavily on street-involved peers



(Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013). While it is often true that the street-involved peers can provide youth with resources (subsistence strategies) to survive independently living on the streets (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013), their social capital value for aiding them advance with their lives is limited, offering little help in employment (job searches, resume building, interview preparation, work connections), acquiring stable housing, enrolling in education, or support in reconnecting youth with their families.

While social capital evidently considers the value of relationships, it is primarily focused on the consequences of a lack of family support, which does not effectively provide an understanding of why youth (with little social capital or ties with family) may desire to reconnect with family. Perhaps it is upon reflection of their lack of social capital and desire to enhance one's capital that they desire such reconnection, however this has not been directly explored within the literature, nor does it appear to be the most plausible explanation as the theory supports diminishment of ties to family over time, in favour of support from street peers.

In addition to social capital theory, life course theory, as introduced by Elder (1998), has been utilized as a framework for evaluating the circumstances and events that influence young people's life trajectories, such as experiencing homelessness. The effects of such circumstances or events (turning points), Elder (1998) posits, impact and shape young people's outcomes throughout their life course. According to life course theory (Elder, 1998), it is postulated that early patterns of family interaction create a model for later life. As such, given that many youth experiencing homelessness are burdened with family histories of conflict and abuse, they are likely to learn and adopt interaction styles from their family members that are often controlling and coercive (Tyler, 2006).

Therefore, these interaction styles from early life become reinforcing and lead youth to navigate towards and create environments that are consistent with previously learned interaction styles (Caspi et al., 1987). In addition, the family backgrounds of youth experiencing homelessness are connected with the timing of events (such as being kicked out, entering into foster care, running away), which in turn, shapes the types and kinds of trajectories that youth experience (Tyler, 2006; Kennedy et al., 2010; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Some youth may experience a small number of transitions, and in some cases, may in fact attempt and succeed in reconciling with family. The life course theory posits effective reunification would then alter youth's trajectory, increasing the likelihood of solidifying family bonds, which subsequently decreases likelihood of future homelessness and its associated impacts (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Others, however, will face pathways that are disruptive, experiencing a trajectory consisting of a far greater number of transitions and overall instability, which Tyler (2006) argues, will have lifelong repercussions as they transition from childhood and adolescence to young adulthood (Tyler, 2006).

It is understandable why the life course perspective is utilized as a theoretical framework for this area of research. Youths' family backgrounds and critical transition points (such as cases of parental child abuse, family violence, caregiver rejection) can subjugate youth towards unstable developmental trajectories and a premature exit from the family home (Tyler, 2006; Kennedy et al., 2010). After all, it is these occurrences in the formative years of childhood and adolescence that often shapes one's pathway into homelessness, subsequently setting in motion one's adult life trajectory (Lee et al., 2010; Tyler, 2006). So, while it is clear that the life course perspective provides an

understanding as to why youth may have entered homelessness (due to family relationships) and a model for future pathways, the life course perspective does not provide an ideal framework for understanding or explaining the process of reconnecting with family when the trajectory is particularly disruptive. It focuses heavily on outcomes, rather than detailing or explaining why it is that youth desire reunification.

All things considered, though there is an established theoretical base for understanding the nature and causes of homelessness (Anderson, 2003), a strong theoretical explanation for continued family relationships during youth homelessness and desire for reunification has not been identified. The essence of this project is to understand whether youth desire reconnection with family, despite many having suffered from conflictual, abusive upbringings. Further work is needed to identify a new, or perhaps underutilized theoretical framework that can better explain the complex nature of desire for family reconnection. An improved theoretical perspective should aim to address the interaction between youth and family while experiencing homelessness, the complicated negotiation of weighing the value of family versus the likelihood of conflict, and the process of reconciliation, that life course, as well as social capital, do not provide a fully effective framework for understanding.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the literature review has demonstrated that the focus of youth homelessness research frames family as the problem (Winland, 2013), details the harmful impacts of family breakdown, and showcases limited, albeit significant findings regarding the complicated nature of family relationships and reconciliation for youth. Limited literature exists addressing youth relationships with family after entry into

homelessness, confirming Winland's (2013) contention that despite all we know there remains significant gaps in the literature regarding connections to and relations with family.

In order to move forward from viewing family as a problem, or solely in the past, this thesis is particularly interested in youth's perceptions of relationships with family and their desire for reconnect while experiencing homelessness. Regarding desire for reunification, while there is information from the National Youth Homelessness Survey from Gaetz and colleagues (Gaetz et al., 2016) indicating the majority of youth want improved family relations, there is minimal consideration of differences among youth according to factors such as gender, mental health status, current living situation, and length of time spent homeless. Further analysis of this phenomenon can increase the verifiability of studies examining interest, desire, and intent to reconcile with the family after leaving home. This thesis aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of desire for reunification and the individual factors underlying that desire (or lack thereof) which is missing from current literature. This is the first research objective.

Further, with respect to relations between family and homeless youth, there has been little attention paid to the exact nature of the relationships, or the changing family-life trajectories as they move throughout their experience of homelessness. Previous studies suggest family bonds change with time spent homeless (Milburn et al., 2006), and that youth entrapped in chronic homelessness engage in behaviours which further separate them from family (McMorris et al., 2002). However, there is considerable room for further research examining trajectories for youth experiencing homelessness, including their feelings, status, and family connections. As such, the relationship between

time spent homeless and changing desire for reconnect is of particular interest to this project. This is the second research objective.

Finally, theoretical frameworks are available to explain family relationships in regard to entry into homelessness, but not to explain why youth continue to engage with family afterward. New theoretical frameworks should be applied in an attempt to understand youths' desire for family reconnect, as well as how family relationships evolve during the complicated process of reunification.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

This thesis has two aims: 1) to examine the desire for family reunification amongst homeless youth, and subsequently, 2) to examine how differences in length of homelessness impact youth's family-life trajectories and subsequent desire for reunification. As identified in the literature review, there is limited information regarding the desire for family reunification amongst youth experiencing homelessness. Substantial gaps also exist pertaining to how different timelines of homelessness affect the process of reconnection. This thesis has noted the aforementioned gaps in the literature, and as a result, addresses both research questions by providing personal accounts and perspectives from participants, as well as detailed statistics that examine the research phenomenon in a way that has not been done previously.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

#### **Site Selection**

All interview sites selected were currently operating youth shelters and transitional housing facilities in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario, Canada. Toronto, Ontario served as the primary location for interviews due to its large service sector and subsequent diverse cross-section of young people. In the city of Toronto, two youth emergency shelters were included, as were three transitional housing facilities. The cities of Oshawa, Ontario and Ajax, Ontario, which provide a similarly diverse sample of homeless youth, were also selected. Specifically, one emergency shelter in the city of Oshawa, and one transitional housing facility in Ajax, Ontario were included. Each

facility was initially contacted by either telephone or by email and approved for visitation only after the details and objectives of the study had been thoroughly explained.

### **Sample and Participant Selection**

The study sample consisted of 34 young people with a history of homelessness. Given the exploratory nature of the project, this sample size was sufficient to identify key themes, patterns, and subgroups within the population. Participants aged 16 to 25 who had experienced at least 6 months of non-consecutive homelessness in the 12 months prior to the interview were considered eligible. All participants had recent experiences of homelessness; recently housed young people trying to transition away from homelessness were also included. Homelessness was defined as per the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012), as a period in which the young person was without a caregiver, not in institutional care (hospital, prison) and did not have customary access to adequate, non-temporary housing (safe and meeting minimal health standards). This includes individuals sleeping outdoors or in a location not normally used for housing, staying in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program, and staying temporarily with friends or family (“couch surfing”) (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012). Diversity along key dimensions such as housing status, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality was ensured using a purposeful sampling strategy.

Participant recruitment was conducted by front-line service staff at the aforementioned youth shelters and transitional housing facilities in the Greater Toronto Area. Eligible youth were made aware of the study by advertisement of interview opportunities in the form of sign-up sheets. When youth would register for available interviews, shelter staff and administration would contact via email to schedule and

confirm the interview times. Due to the fact that sign-up sheets were posted in open areas at shelters and transitional houses, whereby youth were easily able to read the research advertisement in passing, it is not known to what extent there were eligible youth who declined to participate, or the reasons they opted not to.

### **Interview Process**

In January of 2019, prior to the start of interviewing, the full interview and research protocol was approved by the Ontario Tech Research Ethics Board. Interviews were conducted between February of 2019 and February of 2020, each of which were one-on-one and designed to last approximately 1-2 hours. Interviews were conducted in spaces provided by chosen shelter and transitional housing centres or in public spaces. Public spaces utilized offered privacy but were sufficiently public to ensure both respondents and interviewer felt safe. Once seated with youth before the interview, all participants were given a consent form, which included a description of the study (reminding participants that they would be questioned about their familial relationships throughout the entirety of their time experiencing homelessness), assurance of confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. After participants read the form, in addition to being given a verbal description of the form, participants signed to provide consent. Each interview was audio recorded with the consent of the participating youth. At the conclusion of the interview, youth were reminded that in their consent form (that they were encouraged to keep), was a contact list of mental health, addiction, and counselling services that youth could access if they required help. Participants were debriefed of the study's intent and reminded of their ability to contact the Research Ethics Board if they



had any questions concerning their rights as a participant. Lastly, before exiting, participants were paid a \$40 honorarium for their involvement.

The interview consisted of three parts. First, participants were given a questionnaire to gather relevant background information, including age, gender, sexuality, mental health status, current living situation, and total time spent homeless. This information was later used to cross-compare desire for family reunification across subgroups of youth based on individual factors of interest. After background information had been collected, the next phase of the interview was use of a qualitative, semi-structured Life History Calendar (LHC) (Harris and Parisi, 2007; Nelson 2010) which accounted for the majority of the interview time. To outline how their familial relationships had changed while experiencing homelessness within the framework of the LHC, participants were guided to create a timeline from the initial point of homelessness to the present day, identifying changes in housing and transition points in between. The semi-structured format allowed youth to provide open-ended and detailed accounts of family dynamics and relationships, allowing for extensive examination of their lived experiences. Upon completion of the LHC, the discussion concluded with youth indicating their desire for family reunification and feelings regarding it.

By all accounts, this method of interviewing was effective and was well received by participants. While participants were typically shy at the beginning of the interview, the process of introducing myself and gaining background information first, followed by more open-ended discussion appeared to relax participants by the time they were ready to begin speaking of their family relations and experiences. In fact, many of the participants quite enjoyed the process of building the Life History Calendar, finding it interesting to

visualize and see all of the places and transition points they had experienced. The open-ended nature of the calendar, as well as the ability to chat freely about their relations and experiences throughout the timeline allowed for a great deal of openness and honesty from participants, who expressed in many cases, appreciation for the ability to tell their story. Even discussing very sensitive issues of parental abuse, rejection, and criminal activity, many participants appeared comfortable to share, knowing disclosing such information would not be leaked or told anywhere that could be identifiable. There certainly were emotional moments, with some participants electing not to go into detail of family dynamics that were too personal, or expressing palpable anger regarding a family member. However, for the most part, the overall demeanour of participants in such instances was that of openness, to the point where some participants were grateful for the ability to vent. The vast majority, if not all, of participants were respectful, and considerate towards myself, finding this particular research project interesting and worthwhile.

### **Methodological Approach and Analysis**

The thesis is grounded in both qualitative and quantitative methods including the use of open-ended questioning, descriptive statistics, axial coding, thematic analysis, and the creation of an LHC-influenced Family Trajectory Map spreadsheet. For the first objective (extent to which youth desire reunification), the use of open-ended qualitative questioning, as well as descriptive statistics were used (to analyze the data drawn from the background questionnaire). For the second objective (examining family relations and desire for reunification during the trajectory of homelessness), methods of analysis

included coding, thematic analysis and use of the family trajectory map spreadsheet to analyze data from the LHC.

### **Research Question 1**

To determine whether youth had a desire to reconnect with their family at the time of interview, and to identify individual factors influencing desire for reconnect, both open-ended qualitative questioning and a quantitative survey were utilized. Qualitative questioning was used to ask youth their thoughts and interest in reconnecting, while the quantitative survey allowed for a cross-comparison of subgroups of youth were conducted to evaluate if the desire for reunification differs across gender, mental health, current living situation, and of course, total time spent homeless.

#### **Qualitative Questioning**

When participants were asked as to whether or not they felt desire to reconnect with family, participants were encouraged to answer as freely and openly as possible, allowing them to express why they did or did not desire to reunite with family. For this, questions such as “do you desire to reconnect with your family? Why or why not?” and “what are your long-term goals or hopes with respect to your relations with family?” were used. All participants provided a clear answer to the question as to whether they did want to reconnect with family or not.

#### **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics for overall desire for reconnect amongst the entire sample were also analyzed using SPSS software. All participants, as aforementioned were asked, “do you desire to be reconnected with your family?” with the acknowledgment that reconnection is defined by Gaetz et al (2016) as regular (minimum once per month)

contact. Participants' responses, while open-ended and qualitative in nature, were then categorized into "yes," "no," or "indecisive" based on their answer to the question, for the sake of easier quantitative comparison. For the purpose of cross-comparing the desire for reunification across the subgroups of youth, descriptive statistics were also utilized for gender, mental health, current living situation, and total time spent homeless. For gender, participants were able to self-identify as "male," "female," "transgender," "non-binary," "two-spirited," or "in your own words" with the ability to identify however they choose to. For mental health, participants were asked, "do you have ongoing or persistent mental health challenges that interfere with your daily life?" with the option of selecting "yes" (with the option to provide detail) or "no." For their current living situation, participants were asked, "how would you currently describe your housing situation?" with the options of selecting "currently homeless" or "in transitional housing or housed for less than 3 years." For total time spent homeless, participants were asked to recall the specific amount of months spent homeless, while also categorizing themselves into "under 12 months," "12 months to 24 months," or "over 24 months."

## **Research Question 2**

The primary methodological approach to examine how differences in length of homelessness impact youth's family-life trajectories and subsequent desire for reunification was use of a qualitative Life History Calendar (LHC) (Harris and Parisi 2007; Nelson 2010). The calendar design helps to support accurate recall and has been shown to be a valid and reliable tool for gathering retrospective information (Caspi et al. 1996). It is particularly valuable in that it is possible to gather data about changes over time for populations that are highly mobile and difficult to follow with a traditional

longitudinal survey. Respondents completed a LHC divided into months for the period beginning with the first episode of homelessness up until the time of the research interview. I worked alongside respondents to construct a timeline-based diary that captured changes in personal familial relationships using key events such as transition points (whereby housing status changed) to support recall.

Recall of past events was consistently strong among this population, likely due to the fact that youth experiencing homelessness are often well-practised in retelling their history during various service intakes. As is the case with the LHC, respondents were prompted to identify significant changes across a number of important domains: changes in relationships; housing status; education and work status; service use; and mental health status. Respondents were prompted to expand on how changes in status related to their familial relationships at the time using qualitative probes. As it is the objective of the thesis to understand the relationships of youth with family, and how their attitudes towards potential reunification change over time, the LHC serves as an effective tool to encapsulate the entire trajectory of homelessness from beginning to present, with family relationship status updates at every significant transition point.

### **Open and Axial Coding**

To examine how youths' relations with family changed throughout their trajectory, open and axial coding was performed. It must first be noted that the collected data was analyzed through a grounded theory approach; (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whereby data was collected and analyzed, with theoretical development following this process. Themes arose from the interviews as they presented themselves, rather than being applied beforehand to the data. Additionally, in the grounded theory approach,

transcripts were analyzed and coded on an ongoing basis so that initial themes were incorporated into later interviews following the method described by Charmaz (2012), whereby early discovered themes (such as parental rejection at the first point of attempted reconnection), were targeted areas of questioning in later interviews.

With the theoretical framework defined, two levels of coding and thematic analysis were utilized as the first means of analyzing the data. In this process, once transcripts were transcribed, they were entered into the qualitative research tool, Nvivo, as well as saved as Microsoft Word documents. In Nvivo and Microsoft Word, open coding was used to examine the entirety of each transcript, categorizing textual data into major themes such as “family relationships,” “leaving home,” “returning home,” “parental conflict,” “family conflict,” “family support,” and “future outlook.” With the open coding process complete, axial coding (Wicks, 2009) was performed, whereby core codes were analyzed in relation to each other, with connections and relationships between such codes resulting in the creation of broader core categories such as “desire for family reunification,” “experiences attempting family reunification,” and “family relations.”

### **Thematic Analysis in the Trajectory Map**

In consideration of the research questions of this thesis, thematic analysis was utilized to identify different types of family relationship pathways and common trajectories. Thematic analysis was conducted within the framework of a Trajectory Map using Microsoft Excel. The Trajectory Map was created to chart the pathways of youth in regard to their familial relationships at distinct stages of their time while homeless. All participants were listed corresponding to their ID numbers (1-34), for each individual, their experiences of homelessness were then categorized into three stages: the beginning,

middle, and present stage of their trajectory. For example, if a participant had experienced 12 months of homelessness, the beginning, middle, and present stages would each comprise 4 months. For each participant, at each stage (beginning, middle, present), family relationships were categorized as either “supportive,” “conflictual,” “mixed,” “distant,” or “absent,” based on their report of how relations with family were at that stage, with inclusion of the reasons why youth had felt such a way. By doing so, it was possible to view how someone’s relations with family had shifted over time. For example, a participant might characterize their relations as “conflictual” in the beginning stage, shifting to “mixed” in the middle stage, and lastly, to “supportive” in the final stage. Another may describe their relations as moving from “conflictual” to “conflictual” to “absent.” This made cross comparing the nature of family relations between youth at each stage of their trajectory possible in a clear and easily identifiable way. After gaining a clear image of the arc of familial relations for the entire sample, participants were then further divided into groups by time homeless (under 12 months, 12-24 months, over 24 months) to evaluate if trajectories differed based on the length of homelessness.

### **Positionality**

Before presenting the results of this thesis, I must first acknowledge my positionality relative to my research participants (youth experiencing homelessness). Positionality and reflexivity are accepted as qualitative methods that researchers should use to more effectively represent and legitimize the findings (Pillow, 2003). Engaging with positionality as a means of becoming more critically conscious of my self-location (across race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class) and position, is important in understanding how my position as an outsider influences all stages of the research

process (Hertz, 1997). I am a white, straight, cisgender male, from a middle to upper-middle class family, in rural Ontario. I recognize the privilege inherent in that statement and was keenly aware of the fact that many of the participants in this project would not come from such backgrounds.

Upon meeting participants, I made a considerable effort to build rapport with them prior to the interview by means of discussing myself, pop culture, social media, sports, and general youth interests that would highlight common and shared interests between us. I believe engaging in such practice not only allowed participants to feel more comfortable with me, but also may have helped shed presuppositions (even if just to a small extent) of me being unable to relate to them. Once interviewing youth, I believe my aforementioned background (and coming from a supportive household, free of any conflictual familial relations) did shape my analysis. I am aware that what I consider as supportive or conflictual family relations may meet different thresholds than that of my participants. Being mindful of this, I made a concerted effort in my analysis, to categorize family relations in a way that was reflective and considerate of how participants expressed viewing their familial relationships, as opposed to relying on my own perceptions and requirements for what is needed to fulfill supportive or conflictual relationships.



## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Research Q1: Desire for Family Reunification?**

As noted in the review of existing literature, there is limited information regarding the desire for youth to reconnect with their families while experiencing homelessness. The results of this study address this issue broadly, while also detailing the differences between subgroups of youth participants. First, this study will provide findings concerning the overall desire for family reunification amongst the sample of youth experiencing homelessness. Next, the desire for reunification will be compared between subgroups of youth, based on a variety of significant background factors, such as gender, mental health, and current housing situation, to examine if differences between groups exist. As such, these findings address the lack of youth perspectives in homelessness literature regarding the desire for family reunification, and thus provide new insight into factors that may influence desire.

#### **Desire for Family Reunification: Entire Sample**

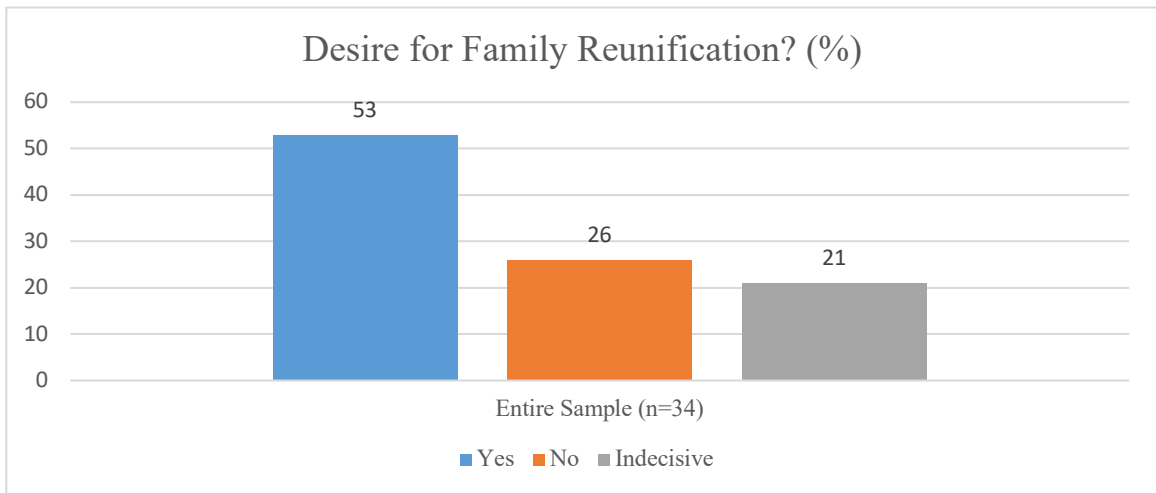
All participants, following an extensive discussion of their familial relationships while experiencing homelessness, were asked at the conclusion of the interview as to whether or not they desired reconnection with their family at the present time. While all participants were allowed and encouraged to respond to the question in an open-ended manner, each participant's response was categorized into "yes", "no", or "indecisive". All participants of the study responded to the question, with the answer choice reflecting their feelings at the time of the interview.

When the sample of 34 homeless youth were posed with the question of whether or not they had felt desire to reconnect with their family, 18 (53%) responded "yes," 9

(26%) responded “no,” and 7 (21%) responded “indecisive.” Evidently, the results demonstrate that a majority of youth experiencing homelessness do express a desire to reconnect with their family, while there are slightly more youth that express no desire to contact family than are those who are indecisive and hesitant to reconnect. Notably however, while the majority of respondents expressed desire to either maintain or strengthen relationships with family (53%), the combination of youth who express no desire and those who are indecisive citing the potential for conflict (47%), indicates that nearly half of the youth felt noncommittal to reconnecting with family. The results can be visualized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Desire for Family Reunification – Entire Sample*



Among youth who expressed a desire for reunification with family, common reasons given consisted of the motivation to make their family proud, with many youth using language such as (ID9) “I have to make money, throw away my bad habits and get to my family. I want to show them that I’m a man, trying to show them that I can make them proud, too, you know.” Also among the most predominant themes for youth with

desire to reconnect, regarded the importance of obtaining housing first and foremost as a foundation to re-building familial relations. For example, (ID32) “I’m probably going to talk to my family once I have a house or a crib. So they can actually be like “Oh, he’s doing good for himself” you know?” and (ID17) “I’d like my own place [so] my dad can come down from Hamilton whenever and spend time with him and have a place to stay if he wanted to sleepover, [so that] we’re connected you know, just close the divides, close the riffs.” Yet another theme observed within the group of youth with desire to reconnect, was the focus on earning income to help mend relations. For instance, (ID25) “I want to reconnect in the future, yes. I want to make a lot of money so I can help them out. It’s going to take a while, but you know – working towards it.” Between making parents proud, searching for stable housing, and becoming more financially independent, youth with desire to reconnect often placed the burden on themselves to initiate and attempt reconnection.

Among youth who expressed no desire for reunification with family, nearly all participants cited the inevitability of conflict and abuse as the primary reason as to why they wish to remain separated. The occurrence and continued threat of abuse and neglect was viewed as too dangerous. Take for example, (ID20) “Honestly if I came back home and I said, “I’m gay” they wouldn’t accept me so I don’t want any kind of relationship with them at all. They’re very homophobic, I don’t fuck with that.” Others, having reported victimization of abuse from parents, even went as far to say, (ID23) “I want a restraining order from my mom -- and I want to change my name so I never have to hear from them again. They won't be able to find me.”

For youth who discussed reasons other than conflict and abuse contributing to their desire to separate from family contact, participants cited the creation of a “new” family (birth of child or adoption of street family) as supplanting or replacing the need for contact with parents, siblings, or extended family. For example, (ID30) was content with distancing himself from family, to solely focus on raising his daughter, as she is “the best [thing] that I have in my life, you know, the biggest support I’ve ever had in my life, you know, so [I’m happy].”

Among youth who expressed that they were indecisive towards reconnecting with family, a sizable number claimed that a drastic imbalance in their parental relations (wherein they have a positive or neutral relationship with one parent but a negative or conflictual relationship with the other parent) was problematic in determining their feelings about reconnecting. Take for example, (ID31) who said, “my mom has six more months in her sentence. I think I’ll maybe re-look at that [reconnecting] when she comes out. [For anyone else], as of right now, no. Everybody else doesn’t matter.” Of this group of youth, many indicated that beyond the parental issues aforementioned, they needed to work on personal issues, such as gaining employment, finding stable housing, and stabilizing mental health before engaging in the process of attempting to reconnect with family.

### **Desire for Family Reunification: Subgroups**

The finding that the majority of youth desire reunification with family is significant, however it leaves additional questions that have been largely unanswered in existing homelessness literature. Attempts by previous studies to address the desire for reunification (Mallett et al., 2010; Mayock et al., 2011; Mayock & Parker, 2017; Mayock,

et al., 2014) have focused solely on whether or not youth wanted to reconnect with family without directly cross-comparing factors such as gender, mental health, or current living situation to evaluate the extent to which differences exist between groups. As such, there is no currently available data to inform the literature of the role gender, mental health, or current living situation plays in influencing one's desire to reconnect with family. This thesis recognizes this gap in the literature and presents the following findings for analysis as there were notable differences in each subgroup.

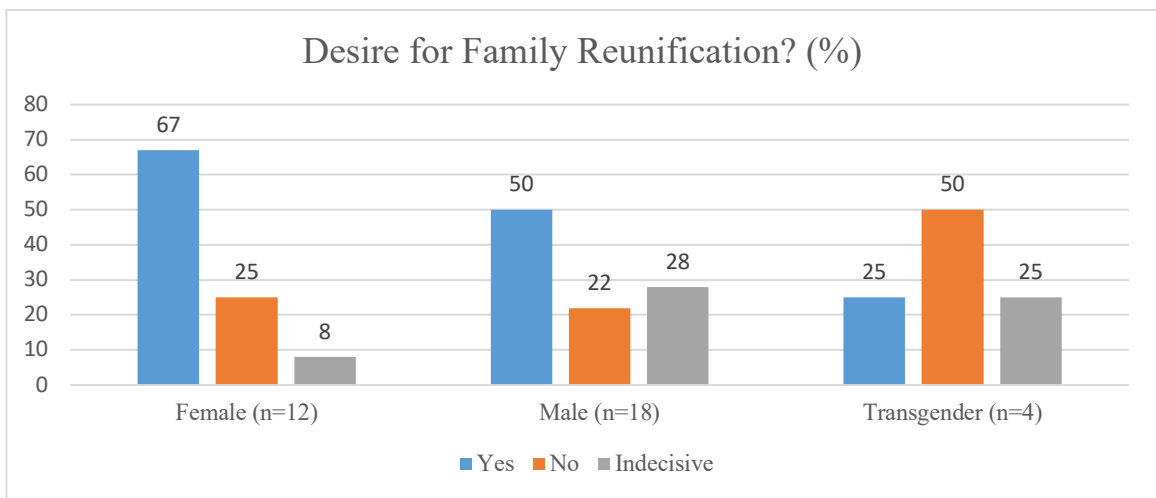
### **Desire for Reunification: Gender**

Of the sample of 34 homeless youth, 12 identified as female, 18 identified as male, and 4 identified as transgender. Of the 12 females, a sizable majority (67%) responded "yes," as to whether or not they wanted to reconnect with family. Only 25% of the female sample responded "no," and just one (8%) responded that they were "indecisive" towards the question of whether or not they desired reunification with family while experiencing homelessness. Of the 18 males, the responses were more diverse. Half of the males (50%) responded "yes," while the other half was split fairly closely between "no," (22%) and "indecisive" (28%) towards reunification with family. Albeit a small sample of 4 participants identifying as transgender, only 1 (25%) expressed desire to reconnect, meanwhile 2 (50%) responded "no," and 1 (25%) responded "indecisive." The results of this cross-comparison are notable in that they reveal amongst a sample of homeless youth, females were notably more likely (67%) to desire reunification with family and express far less indecision than are those identifying as male or transgender. While 50% of males expressed desire for reconnection, the combination of males who expressed no desire and those who are indecisive citing the potential for a conflictual

return (50%), indicates that half of all male participants are noncommittal to the thought of reconnecting with family. For participants identifying as transgender, while the sample size is comparatively small, the fact that only one (25%) participant had desire for reconnection could signify that transgender youth face additional difficulties in reuniting with family, such as participant admissions of parental unacceptance towards their gender transition. We must be careful not to overly generalize however, as perhaps partially due to small sample size, results of a Chi-Square test reveal the differences are statistically insignificant ( $p = .496$ ). The differences between genders are visualized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Desire for Family Reunification – Gender*



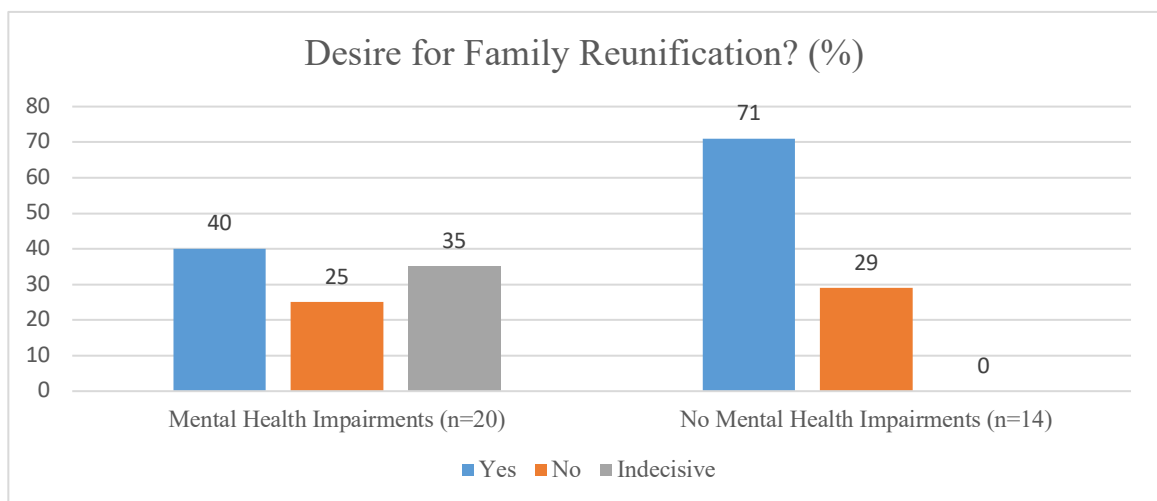
**Desire for Reunification: Mental Health**

Of the sample of 34 homeless youth, 20 identified as suffering from daily mental health challenges while 14 had expressed no such mental health issues. Of the 20 self-identifying with mental health impairments, less than half, 40%, responded “yes,” to the question of whether or not they wanted to reconnect with family. 25% responded “no,” to the question. In what was almost as highly prevalent as those who said “yes,” 35%

responded that they were “indecisive” towards reunification with family. Of the 14 participants indicating an absence of mental health difficulties, the large majority (71%) responded “yes,” while only 29% responded “no.” No participant in this group responded that they were “indecisive” towards reconnecting with family. The results of this cross-comparison indicate that youth with mental health impairments display far more variability in their desire for family reunification, than do those with no such mental health challenges. While the vast majority of youth without daily mental health impairments desire reunification with family, 60% of the youth with self-identified mental health impairments were either against or noncommittal to reconnecting with family. As such, the interaction between parenting and family dynamics and youth’s mental health challenges cannot be overlooked, with results indicating it may influence youths’ desire for reconnection. Despite a small sample, a Chi-Square test revealed the differences were statistically significant ( $p = .039$ ). Differences are visualized in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Desire for Family Reunification – Mental Health*



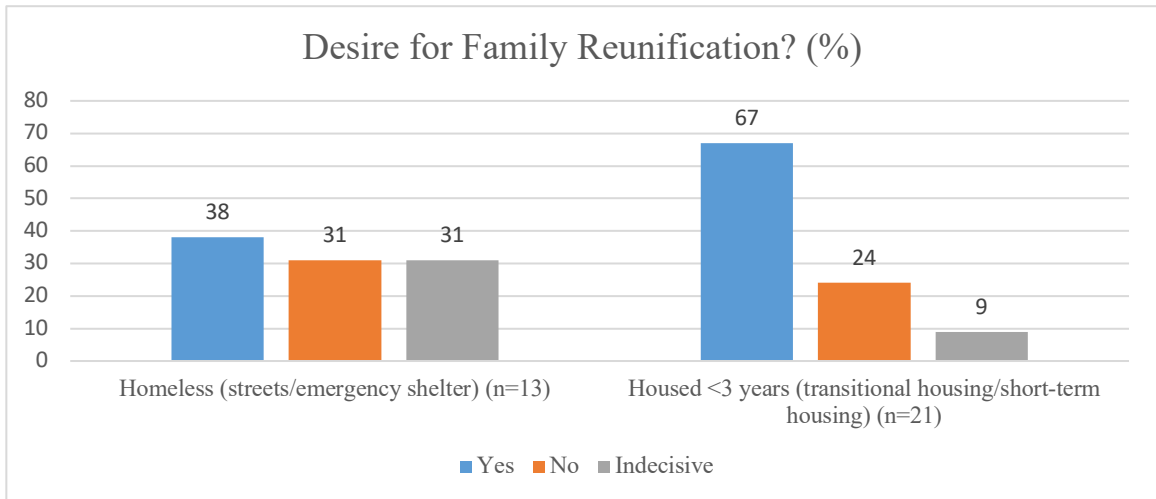
### **Desire for Reunification: Current Living Situation**

Of the sample of 34 homeless youth, 13 indicated that they were currently homeless (living on the streets or in temporary/emergency shelter), while 21 indicated that they were in transitional housing or were housed for a relatively short-term (more than 1 year but less than 3 years). Of the 13 youth currently homeless without any kind of housing, there was remarkable diversity in the responses. In what was almost even across the board, 38% responded “yes,” 31% responded “no,” and 31% responded that they were “indecisive” towards reunification with their family. In contrast, for youth in housing under 3 years, there were considerable differences. Of the 21 participants categorized in relatively short-term housing, the majority (67%) responded “yes,” to whether or not they desire reconnection. A much smaller percentage (24%) responded “no,” and even fewer (9%) responded that they were “indecisive” towards reconnecting with family. Being cautious to generalize however, perhaps due to the relatively small sample size, results of a Chi-Square test found that the differences were statistically insignificant ( $p = .188$ ), despite the observed raw differences. Within the context of the study’s findings though, the desire for reunification was substantially higher amongst youth who are currently living in short-term housing than are those currently on the streets or in emergency shelters. For future programming or targeted policy at reconnecting homeless youth with family, these findings may suggest that finding stable or short-term housing for youth is helpful in the process of directing youth towards familial reunification. The differences in desire for family reunification based on living situation is visualized in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4**

*Desire for Family Reunification – Current Living Situation*



**Research Q2: Length of Homelessness Impact on Trajectories and Reunification?**

This thesis recognizes that the findings of the initial research question are notable; youth predominantly still desire reunification with their families while experiencing homelessness, with differences existing between subgroups based on gender, mental health, and current living situation. However, a general response from the entire sample of youth is not able to capture the complexity of, or offer insight into, the possibly dynamic nature of the family-life trajectory over time spent homeless. For example, is it that youth who desire reunification with family are simply those who have spent comparatively little time homeless, or is the desire for reunification common amongst participants who have spent multiple years homeless? As such, this thesis' second research objective is to further explore the arc/trajectory of youth's family relationships during time spent homeless. This is achieved by accounting for differences in length of homelessness (under 1 year, 1-2 years, or over 2 years) when examining the desire for family reunification, and presenting the general attitudes of each group. In doing so, this

thesis will expand upon the general findings of how length of homelessness impacts desire for reunification, by exploring how the nature of familial relationships changes over the course of homelessness, and how the trajectory for youth who have spent comparatively little time homeless differs from those with substantially more time away from home.

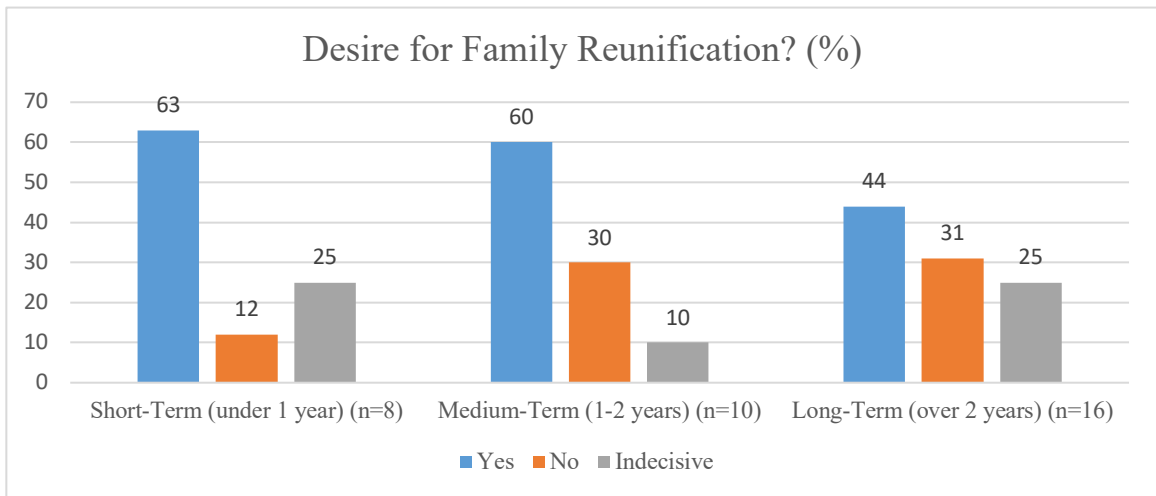
### **Desire for Reunification: Length of Homelessness**

Of the sample of 34 homeless youth, 8 indicated that they had experienced less than one year of homelessness (short-term homelessness), 10 had experienced between one to two years of homelessness (medium/moderate-term homelessness), and 16 had experienced greater than two years of homelessness (long-term homelessness). Of the 8 youth who have experienced less than 12 months of homelessness, the majority (63%) had expressed desire to reconnect with family. Only one participant (12%) amongst the group having experienced a comparatively short amount of time homeless responded that they would be unwelcome to family reconnection, while two (25%) were indecisive, but not dismissive of the possibility to reconnect. Of the 10 youth who had experienced between one to two years of homelessness, the results were more varied, however the majority (60%) were still hopeful for reunification. A slight uptick in participants who felt apprehensive towards reunification was noted, with 30% of participants unwilling to consider it, while just one individual (10%) from this group felt indecisive. Lastly, of the 16 youth who had experienced over two years of homelessness in their lifetime, the results are increasingly varied, however noteworthy for the modal response. Between the available options to respond “yes,” “no,” or “indecisive,” towards desire for family reunification, the modal response was “yes,” with 7 participants (44%) indicating as such.

Comparatively, 5 (31%) responded “no,” and 4 (25%) responded that they were “indecisive”; so, while each category had fewer individual responses, the sum of those who felt either no desire to reconnect, or at least hesitant, outnumbered the group with desire to reconnect for the first time. See Figure 5 below for a visualization of results.

**Figure 5**

*Desire for Family Reunification – Length of Homelessness*



While this thesis is mindful that it is a relatively small sample size of 34 youth, the findings are significant in that a pattern appears recognizable; regardless of time spent homeless, the modal response for each group was “yes” towards the desire to reconnect with family. However, for youth who have spent a comparatively short time homeless (less than one year total), or comparatively moderate time (one to two years), there is a noticeably greater consensus of youth who still have desire for family reunification. For youth who have spent a comparatively lengthy amount of time homeless (over two years), the consensus is much more varied, with the majority expressing a lesser degree of desire for family reconnection, with the sum of those who are indecisive and expressing no desire, outnumbering those who do want to reconnect with family.

## **Family Relations of Short-Term Homeless**

To further explore the arc of youth's family relationships, the trajectory of time spent homeless for participants was split into an initial, middle and current stage. Family relations were then overviewed by participants at each stage. To reiterate, youth categorized as short-term homeless are those who have experienced less than 12 months (one year) of homelessness in total. As discussed previously, of the sample of 34 youth in the project, 8 participants are considered homeless for a comparatively short-term. At each stage of homelessness (initial, middle, and current), the state of relations was classified as either supportive, conflictual, mixed, distant, or absent. The result is an understanding of how youth's family relationships have changed over time throughout the experience of homelessness. Therefore, this makes it possible to view how varying lengths of homelessness impacts such family relationships, and if there are distinct differences between those experiencing short-term, medium, and long-term homelessness. As such, the following results will describe the nature and cyclical flow of familial relations from the start of homelessness to the current stage, for youth having spent less than one year of homelessness.

For youth having spent less than one year of homelessness, the primary characterization of familial relationships at the initial stage of homelessness was mixed relations. Dissimilar to the literature review's finding that family relations are predominantly conflictual at the time of leaving the house, the majority of accounts from this group of participants generally included some level of support. Take for example, (ID17), who stated, "They were okay with it, like it's your choice, you can -- like you are 18 or just about. You can make your own decisions. Like your 18 turning 19, you're old

enough to make your own choices. You can do what you want.” Within this short-term group, some participants had identified themselves as refugees, who despite moving across continents, still were supported in their decision to leave home, mainly due to the risk staying in their homeland posed. (ID11) explained that, “Of course it’s not so easy [to maintain a close relationship with parents], but I had to come here because if I stayed in my country I would die. I would die [and they understood that].” Also common was the prevalence of divorce leading to the first experience of homelessness, however it was noted that one parental relationship would remain supportive. (ID18’s) situation was exemplary of this continual theme, stating that:

Me and my dad we never really got along, it’s like you know a lot of people their fathers leave at young ages and stuff like that, it’s like my father might as well have. It’s like he was there – the worst part was he was there all the time, but I still couldn’t see [him], you know. [On the other hand], me and my mom were great. I love my mom, she taught me everything.

Within this short-term group, the mixed familial relations at the initial stage of homeless appear to improve as youth move towards the middle and current stage of homelessness, with the majority indicating they have supportive family relationships at the present time. The vast majority indicated that they had some form of regular contact with family and were making a concerted effort to make their family proud. (ID17) for example, indicated that:

I’d like to reconnect with my family and have my own place. Be able to have my sister to -- give my sister the ability to like bring my niece and nephew over so they can come and see where their uncle lives, you know. So that they have the

ability to ask, “Mommy can we go and see uncle [Jeff] today?” where you know, now it’s just like “Yeah we can let’s just go to the local corner. Let’s go find him.” It’s like oh I don’t want that. I’d rather have a place where I’m living and can live long-term and be like, “Yeah you guys want to come over? I’m always around, if I’m not I’m at work” or something, you know.

Considering the aforementioned sentiment was common amongst this group, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of short-term homeless youth had expressed desire to reconnect with family. Amongst this group, the trajectory of their family relationships appears to shift from mixed to primarily supportive relationships, where many expressed hope to build and expand relations with family.

Interestingly, however, the rate of attempted physical reconnection with family (as in revisiting the family home) was quite low, with many either having never returned home, or at most less than three times in the under one-year long span of homelessness. Many youth in this group, having been experiencing homelessness for a short time, consistently used language encompassing the need to figure life out on their own, away from family (even if not conflictual), and to build independence. Despite seldom returning home, the majority of participants indicated that they had at least kept a monthly rate of contact with family over telephone, email, or social media. The only participant amongst this group with no desire to reconnect with family is one whose familial relations were conflictual from childhood and who are now absent from their life. Overall, feelings towards family were fairly positive amongst this group, despite a continual theme of physically distancing themselves from family.

## **Family Relations of Medium/Moderate-Term Homeless**

Youth categorized as medium/moderate-term homeless are those who have experienced between one to two years of homelessness in total. As discussed previously, in the sample of 34 youth in the project, 10 participants are classified as homeless for a comparatively medium-term. The following results will describe the nature and arc of familial relations from the start of homelessness to the current stage, for youth having spent one to two years of homelessness.

In what is a marked change from youth who have experienced homelessness for a comparatively short-term, youth that have reached one to two years of homelessness almost unanimously characterize their family relations at the initial stage of their trajectory as conflictual. To a much greater extent than reported by participants from the short-term group, continuous fighting with parental figures at the initial stage of homelessness was highly prevalent, as was the issue of parents attempting to exert, in youth's minds, an unreasonable degree of control. Accounts such as that from (ID27) were common, who recalled that his relationship with family was contentious and controlling:

They couldn't understand me at most times, they couldn't understand the type of stuff that I was into, they would judge me and make it difficult for me to live there. I'd find myself leaving to go off on my own little world to hang out with my friends. At that moment, I would either get high, drunk, and just hang out and chill out with them. I'd find myself losing track of time and at the end of it, after going back to go see my family, I'd come home [late] and I'd get in trouble, scolded, told what I shouldn't and should be doing, being judged and controlled.

Moving towards the middle and latter stages of their experience of homelessness however, there appears to be a shift towards more varied, less conflictual relations with family, albeit no youth reported that their relations with family could be classified as entirely supportive. Following the one-to-two-year period of homelessness, there was a nearly even distribution of youth whose familial relations that could be classified as absent, distant, or a mix of supportive and unsupportive in the most recent stage. For many of the youth who had contended that their early relations with family were marked by continuous fighting and/or issues with parental control, there was oftentimes an extended period of months in which youth cut contact with family members altogether, leading to a sizeable increase in the percentage of youth whose relations became either absent or distant, rather than stuck in a pattern of continual fighting.

Interestingly however, even for youth such as (ID21), who shared that even though, “my mom [was] trying to talk to [me]”, they stated that, “I couldn’t do it. I’m still the same person, I haven’t bettered myself [so] I haven’t seen my mom or brother in over a year, I haven’t seen any of my family in over a year, [there’s no more fighting]”. The result of distancing relations with family did not correlate with decreased desire to reunite or reconnection with family in the future. Just as was the case with the majority of youth from the short-term homeless group, the majority of youth who have experienced one to two years of homelessness still noted a desire to reconnect with family. Whereas short-term youth had largely been motivated to reconnect due to improved and supportive relationships already in place, youth from the medium/moderate group consistently used language such as “I just want them to see me as independent, strong woman, more able to carry herself,” (ID12); “I want to get better for my mom and dad; I don’t have a job, I’m



not making money. I'm trying to get to the average so I can be great you see," (ID21), and; "I want to make my whole entire family proud of me. I want to show them that I can be the adult that they want me to be, the one that's going to make the best decisions, that's going to [lead a better life]" (ID27). As a whole, despite increased characterizations of family relations being distant, absent, or mixed in the current stage of their trajectory, many youth were able to separate themselves from continual conflictual relations, with the majority indicating hope for eventual reunification.

### **Family Relations of Long-Term Homeless**

Youth categorized as long-term homeless are those who have experienced over two years of homelessness in total. As discussed previously, in the sample of 34 youth in the project, 16 participants are considered homeless for a comparatively long-term. The following results will describe the nature and flow of familial relations from the start of homelessness to the current stage, for youth having spent over two years of homelessness.

The primary characterization of family relations during the initial stage of homelessness was conflictual for youth having spent over two years of homelessness, similar to that of those having spent a comparatively medium/moderate amount of time homeless. However, the degree to which familial relations were conflictual for the long-term homeless group tended to be more severe, with abuse, particularly physical, a more prominent theme. Take for instance, (ID14), who described a particularly alarming relationship with his father during the initial stage of homelessness:

Dad, he just didn't like me, he's a crabby motherfucker. I [tried coming back home] to live in the basement [while he was upstairs]. The washroom was upstairs. And so he said don't wake him up [as he would sleep upstairs]. So, I had

to pee. I peed in a bottle [rather than going upstairs to risk waking him]. I closed it and everything. Hid it off, in behind where I was sleeping, which was on a couch, and then he wakes up, just furious, comes downstairs, flips over the couch on top of me, sees the bottle of piss, dumps it all over me, calls me a worthless piece of shit, kicks me out right then and there. Says never come back, don't want to see your face again.

Many youth echoed this kind of experience, sharing similar stories of unstable, abusive home environments, where family members were short-tempered and volatile for any perceived wrongdoing.

Perhaps as a result of heightened levels of abuse and maltreatment amongst this group, language used by long-term homeless youth regarding feelings towards family at this stage was markedly more contentious. Numerous participants had indicated they felt anger towards their family and that they were unwilling to forgive their parents. (ID31) for example, shared; “I hated my mom. I hated her with everything. I hated her for kicking me out, I hated her for not explaining things to me, I felt very abandoned, I felt betrayed.” When asked of the reasoning for being kicked out, (ID31) responded, “no reason. She just told me to go. She’s evil.” (ID9) expressed that their father was “a bully father,” and that regardless of what happens, “I can’t forget that.” In what was the most aggressive display towards family, (ID30) felt that, “[my father] should call me man, I’d be like, you a pussy, I come to you to give you a slap. That man is a bitch,” after having experienced physical abuse and neglect as a young man first navigating homelessness.

As long-term homeless youth move towards the middle and latter stages of their homelessness trajectory, the status of familial relationships become significantly varied

and diverse however. Similar to that of the medium/moderate-term group, there appears to be a shift from nearly unanimous conflictual relations at the onset of homelessness to an even distribution of mixed, conflictual, and absent relations as time progresses to the most recent stage. A small minority of participants now even characterize their familial relationships as supportive, which was not examined amongst the medium/moderate-term group, despite having conflictual beginnings.

Despite the overall similarities in trajectory trends between the medium/moderate-term group and that of the long-term group, there was decreased desire to reconnect with family amongst the long-term group. While the modal response was still “yes” to the question of whether or not youth desired to reconnect with family (7 yes / 5 no / 4 mixed), for the first time amongst the three groups, there was a greater percentage of youth who had either no desire to reconnect or were noncommittal towards the possibility of reunification, than did those with desire. One possible explanation for this, is that while relationships tended to become less conflictual over time, it did not equate with relationships necessarily improving. The majority of youth with no desire to reconnect, for example, expressed that their relationships with family shifted from conflictual to absent over the two-plus years of homelessness. For youth with desire to reconnect, as a group, they were collectively more hesitant regarding its feasibility, using language such as (ID19), “if I were to reconnect - I'd like to say in a year I want to - I want them to work on their own problems,” or (ID29), “at some point I would love to reconnect with my father, but at this point right now I’m still getting all of the anger and animosity out of my system towards him before I have any conversation with him.” Overall, there appears to be a greater likelihood of absent or mixed relations with family for the long-term

homeless group, as compared to youth having spent a comparatively short or medium-term homeless. Even amongst the group of youth still with desire to reconnect, there is an increased level of hesitancy and a focus on the parents and/or family needing to make a change, rather than welcoming reconnection with open arms.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This thesis had two primary objectives; firstly, to explore the extent to which youth experiencing homelessness have desire for family reunification, and secondly, to examine how differences in length of homelessness impact youth's family-life trajectories and subsequent desire for reunification.

The results indicate that the majority of youth do express desire to reconnect with their families, with slightly over half of the participants indicating that they either had hopes of reunification, begun rebuilding relations, or had supportive familial relationships already in place. As for how length of homelessness impacted youth's family-life trajectories and desire for reunification, the results suggest that youth who have experienced homelessness for a comparatively short-term (under 1 year) tend to have more supportive familial relations and optimism for reunification than do youth who have spent a comparatively medium/moderate (1-2 years) or long (over 2 years) amount of time homeless. It appears as though arriving at supportive family relations becomes rarer the longer youth have experienced homelessness, with the majority of medium-term and long-term youth expressing conflictual, absent, or mixed relationships with family throughout their time homeless. While the majority of youth from all three groups express desire to reconnect with family, the extent to which there is desire appears to wane the longer youth experience homelessness.

### **Desire for Reunification**

The finding that the majority of youth expressed desire to reconcile and reconnect with their families was expected, aligning with previous studies evaluating reconnection. As had been discussed in the review of the literature, the 2016 National Youth

Homelessness Survey revealed that over three quarters of youth (77.3%) expressed interest in improving family relations, with only 22% indicating that they had no interest in improving family relations (Gaetz et al., 2016). Winland (2013) similarly found that in her examination of pathways out of homelessness, youth often wanted to establish or re-establish some kind of connection with some or all of their family members. Whether it was increasing contact, reuniting with family and moving back home, or simply coming to terms with why they left and moving forward with their lives, it appeared to have been of interest to the majority of youth (Winland, 2013). As such, it was not unexpected that this thesis found that the majority (53%) of youth expressed desire to reconnect with their families, however it was notably down from the large majority of youth (77%) who had expressed interest in improved relations in the Gaetz et al. (2016) survey of 1,103 youth. This may be due to multiple factors; the first being the considerably smaller sample size. Relatedly, differences in sample design and structure could be accountable, with Gaetz et al, (2016) reporting that 31% of their sample consisted of chronically homeless youth (one year consecutively homeless), with 21% episodically homeless over the last 3 years. Comparatively, 16 of the 34 youth in this project's sample (47%) have been experiencing homelessness for over 2 years; indicating that the decreased level of desire for family reconnection could be a result of a sample skewing to youth having spent a comparatively longer time homeless; which as noted in the results, correlates with less desire to reconnect, and heightened cases of conflictual, absent, or mixed relations.

The results regarding gender differences in level of desire for family reconnection build on existing evidence that family relationships for homeless youth vary by young people's gender, with female adolescents closer to their families than male adolescents

are (Milburn et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2002). With a large majority (67%) of female participants expressing desire to reconcile and reunite with their families, compared to an even split amongst the males (50%), the findings support and reinforce the case that females tend to view family, or at least the act of reconciling, as more important than do their male counterparts.

As for how desire to reconnect with family intersects with mental health, the findings matched expectations that youth suffering from mental health challenges would express less desire for reunification than youth without such challenges. Only 8 of 20 (40%) of youth with mental health challenges expressed desire for family reconnect, compared to 71% of youth without mental health challenges, indicating that poor mental health, particularly mental health challenges that interfere with daily life, appears to correlate with decreased desire to reconnect with family. This may be due to the role of family in shaping youth's mental health via high rates of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and parental conflict at home. Cases of childhood physical and sexual abuse amongst homeless youth are profoundly higher than that of the general public, as are histories and instances of neglect and emotional abuse (Karabanow, 2004; Kidd, 2006; MacLean et al., 1999; Molnar et al., 1998; Ringwalt et al., 1998). Further, the majority of those who identify as having mental illness on the streets describe it as having begun prior to exiting the family home (Craig & Hodson, 1998).

Continuing a discussion of notable findings, the results indicating that desire for family reunification is higher amongst youth in short-term housing (either transitional housing or housed for less than 3 years) as compared to youth currently homeless (streets or emergency shelter) is interesting in that it points to a relationship that exists between

obtaining housing and healthier familial relationships. Tyler and Schmitz (2013) found that when youth are unable to find stable housing, they often undergo multiple transitions, which creates unstable life trajectories as youth navigate through a number of different living arrangements over relatively short periods of time. As a result, Tyler and Schmitz (2013) contend that the ability to form bonds with family members is diminished during this unstable time, and therefore youth may not have people they can rely on for social support in the future. On the other hand, all young people in Mayock et al.'s, (2011) study who found more stable housing via transitional housing expressed a preference for remaining connected to family, despite living away from their parent(s). While these transitional-housed youth felt their relationship would not withstand having to confront past tensions on a regular basis, having a residence of their own allowed youth to remain connected to their families at a respectable distance, believing familial relationships, even if strained, were important to maintain. (Mayock et al., 2011). This aligns with the findings of this thesis when comparing the level of desire for family reunification, as youth in transitional housing or short-term housing express far greater interest (67%) in reconnecting, as opposed to those currently without any kind of housing (38%).

For future programming or targeted policy at reconnecting homeless youth with family, these findings may provide evidence that finding stable or short-term housing for youth is positively connected to the process of eventual familial reunification. An alternative explanation is that there could be some form of selection bias, where young people with more conflictual life histories ultimately remain homeless for longer, thus more likely to appear in the long-term homeless group. Comparatively, young people whose histories contain comparatively less trauma/conflict may have more support, less



obstacles, and are thus more likely to find housing sooner, resulting in such youth more likely to appear in the short-term homeless group.

### **Length of Homelessness and Family-Life Trajectories**

This thesis was also particularly interested in observing the family-life trajectories of youth, by exploring the impact that length of homelessness has on one's desire for family reunification. It is known from prior research that the quality and nature of familial bonds can vary significantly among youth who experience homelessness (Milburn et al., 2009) and are likely to fluctuate and change over time (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010; Mayock & Corr, 2013; Monfort, 2009). The findings of this thesis build on such evidence that relationships with family do fluctuate over time, however provide new insight into just how much the nature of familial bonds and relations can vary with respect to the amount of time youth are separated from family. The following discussion will explore the notable findings.

For youth who have experienced a comparatively short amount of time homeless (under 1 year), it was surprising to see that the majority of youth primarily characterized their familial relations as mixed (more supportive than unsupportive) as opposed to conflictual at the beginning stage of homelessness, especially considering that research on situations that produce youth homelessness consistently identifies difficult family situations and conflict as being the predominant underlying factor (Winland, 2013). With young people often coming from homes with high levels of domestic violence, neglect, and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; (Gaetz, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009) it was expected that youth, having only been experiencing homelessness for a relatively recent, short time,

would report conflictual relations and low levels of desire to reconnect. However, many of the participants from this short-term group reported that they relied on family for varying levels of financial, practical, and emotional support as they began navigating life on the streets. That is, they tended to have more supportive relations to begin with. This is notable, as Milburn and colleagues (Milburn et al., 2005) found that the higher the degree of financial and emotional support in one's familial network when initially exiting home, the more likely youth are to report higher levels of family bonds one year later, which may explain why the group as a whole had the highest degree of supportive relations in the most recent stage of homelessness as well. A possible explanation for the unexpected findings is that the short-term homelessness group is distinct from the others in that a number of youth (3) from the short-term group were displaced from their families as refugees, who left their countries not due to family conflict but due to danger, threats, and the culture within their homeland. As such, their pathways into homelessness differed from traditional routes, which are often marked by parental conflict.

For youth from the short-term homelessness group, it was also interesting that the rate of attempted physical reconnection with family (as in revisiting the family home) was quite low, with many either having never returned home, or at most, less than three times in the under one-year long span of homelessness. Milburn and colleagues (Milburn et al, 2006) found that there was great variability in re-visiting home within the first year of homelessness, noting that 65% of newly homeless young people in Los Angeles County returned to live at home within the first year; whereas only 25% of young people returned home in Melbourne in a similar time period. As such, it was difficult to predict the level of re-visitation for this short-term group prior to the study. The finding that the

majority of youth did not re-visit home raises questions as to why youth were choosing to stay distanced from home; and the results interestingly showed that many youth in this group stressed the need to figure life out on their own, away from family (even if not conflictual), and to build independence. The act of being physically distanced, but keeping open dialogue with parents from afar, appeared to have a positive connection to family relationships. Despite seldom returning home, the majority of participants indicated that they had at least kept a monthly rate of contact with family over telephone, email, or social media, which helped relations. These findings are notable in that when youth experience homelessness for the first and/or relatively short time, there are youth who rely on family support while navigating the volatility that comes with first experiencing homelessness. Cultivating supportive relationships with family in under one year of homelessness could potentially expedite their way out of homelessness, so that they do not face similar trajectories as those in the moderate/long-term groups, where supportive relationships tend to become rare. However, it must also be considered that the short-term group may have qualities that make it a distinct from the moderate and long-term groups (for example, the refugee status of some participants, and many starting off with more supportive relations at onset of homelessness). In this case, the supportive relations we are seeing cannot be entirely attributed to simply catching them at an earlier stage in their trajectory.

There appears to be significant implications for the family relations of youth who reach the point of having spent over one year of homelessness. The results show that for the youth who experience over one year of homelessness, familial relations are characterized as considerably more conflictual at the beginning and shift over time

towards relations that were either still conflictual, distant, absent, or mixed (not entirely supportive or unsupportive). A visual overview of the differences, featuring the primary characterization of relations of each stage, can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Trajectory Overview*

	Beginning	Middle	Current
Short-Term (under 1 year)	Mixed	Supportive	Supportive
Medium-Term (1-2 years)	Conflictual	Conflictual	Mixed
Long-Term (over 2 years)	Conflictual	Conflictual / Absent	Conflictual / Absent / Mixed

The lack of youth who could characterize their relations as primarily supportive in the most recent stage was notable, yet not unexpected, as previous research (McMorris et al., 2002) shows that homeless youth who are out of home for a prolonged period of time are more likely to engage in behaviours that further separates them from family.

Additionally, the higher number of housing transitions that youth undergo throughout homelessness, (which was considerably higher amongst the medium-term and long-term groups), the more unlikely they are to form bonds with family members, and thus face heightened risk of losing family support (Tyler & Schmitz, 2013).

Even so, it is still quite noteworthy that of the 26 youth who have spent over one year of homelessness in the sample (10 between one to two years, 16 over two years),

only 2 reported relations with family that could be characterized as primarily supportive in the most recent stage. There are two thoughts that come to mind when taking note of such a trend; firstly, that perhaps length of homelessness does significantly impact one's relationships with family as it reaches past the point of over one year, whereby an extended period of time away from family weakens familial bonds to the point where arriving at supportive relationships is rare and unexpected. However, we cannot forget that the vast majority of youth who have experienced such a length of time homeless, all started with deeply conflictual relations with family. Perhaps it is the impact of starting with such relationships that makes it more likely that one will experience homelessness for a greater length of time, as they are more prone to experiencing homelessness with higher incidences of conflict, negatively impacting the likelihood of restoring relationships with family over time. Both factors appear to be impacting the family-life trajectories for youth and are very likely intertwined.

Despite the lack of supportive relationships in the most recent stage for the moderate and long-term homeless groups, it is remarkable that a sizable percentage still desire family reconnection. While only 2 of the 26 participants who had spent over one year of homelessness could characterize their relations as supportive, 50% still expressed intent and hope to reunite with family; posing a number of interesting questions as to the importance of family, even for youth who still have not been able to mend relations over one or multiple years. Clearly, the results indicate that family is of importance, not only to youth who are newly homeless, but to those who have been separated for an extended period of time as well.

## **Revisiting Theory**

More targeted research in the future is still required however, namely, to understand the desire for youth to reconnect or revisit relationships that, over the course of their trajectory, have continually been conflictual and/or a source of abuse. This thesis has discussed the predominant theoretical frameworks used in youth homelessness literature; that being social capital theory and the life course perspective, however perhaps new or rarely utilized theoretical frameworks in the field, such as betrayal trauma theory (BTT) could better approach the complex nature of desire for family reconnection. Betrayal trauma theory was found following a grounded approach to the findings.

As for social capital, it was evident when examining the experiences and family-life trajectories of youth, families of homeless youth commonly fail in providing a source of social capital. Routinely missing from the lives of participants was unconditional love, support, guidance, and models of adult behaviour that enable youth to learn the skills necessary for daily living; which as theory would argue, leads to youth exploring other options of support that lead to and reinforce their homelessness (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013; Barker, 2012). However, as it was discussed within the literature review, it does not effectively provide an understanding of why youth (with little social capital or ties with family) express desire to reconnect with family. It was hypothesized that perhaps it was upon reflection of their lack of social capital and desire to enhance one's capital that they desire such reconnection, however the results gave no such indication. Of the many reasons given for wanting to reconnect with family as discussed in the results, there was no indication that youth wanted to reconnect to increase social capital via social support, increased networking opportunities, career help, practical aid, or economic gain.

As for the applicability of the life course perspective, early family conflict was the primary cause of homelessness. As such, there was no doubt that the family backgrounds of these young people were associated with the timing of events (such as being kicked out of home or running away), in turn influencing the types of trajectories (often disruptive) that these youth went on to experience. The life course contends that disruptive pathways set in motion a trajectory of multiple transitions and instability that have lifelong repercussions for these youth (Tyler, 2006). This may explain how early experiences can result in the potential for entrenchment in homelessness, and hence be particularly relevant to the group of long-term homeless participants in our study. Alternatively, individuals with more supportive early experiences would theoretically experience different arcs of events (that of which have more positive outcomes), and perhaps less time of homelessness overall. Despite these insights, this perspective does not directly engage with desire to reconnect with family, or account for why many youth who come from disruptive trajectories continue to desire reunification.

In light of the results of this project and minimal theorizing around family reconnection for youth experiencing homelessness, this thesis forwards a tentative theoretical perspective for further exploration and development; one utilizing the tenets of betrayal trauma theory as a framework that may provide a deeper understanding of the complicated nature of why youth still have desire for family reunification, despite conflictual backgrounds.

The observation that youth who experience conflictual, abusive, and/or traumatic relationships with family (namely parents) still for the most part desire family reconnection may be explained in a number of ways through partial insights from

betrayal trauma theory (BTT). Defined, BTT posits that when trauma is committed by a close other, particularly parents, it is processed differently than if such violations were committed by people who do not occupy such a close relationship (Gobin & Freyd, 2009). A violation committed by someone considered significant to the individual is classified as a trauma high in betrayal and is actually remembered less than trauma low in betrayal (Freyd, DePrince, & Zurbriggen, 2001). This is due to the fact that the child forms a kind of adaptive blindness to such betrayal, which in turn, allows the child to further trust and rely on the source of abuse (parent/caretaker) (Freyd, 1997). As such, youth may find it beneficial to remain emotionally and interpersonally connected to the perpetrator, despite prior violations (Freyd, 2003).

Zurbriggen and Freyd (2004) argue that exposure to traumas high in betrayal, such as that committed by parents, negatively impacts youth's cognitive mechanisms, by which their ability to make self-protective decisions later in life is reduced. For instance, a survivor of HB traumas faces additional challenges in recognizing unhealthy relationships and, as a result, are less likely to remove themselves from the relationship, or from situations that could lead to further victimization (Mackelprang et al., 2013). Victims of such trauma also may assess their experience in such a way that emphasizes the role of the self in the abuse, as opposed to the abuser; thereby minimizing focus on the actions and wrongdoings of the perpetrator (Gagnon et al., 2017). This mechanism may help to explain the number of youth, who despite highly conflictual and/or abusive familial relations, still desire reconnection. There were numerous participants who despite parental abuse and/or conflict, put the onus on themselves to reconnect with family; with no evidence that their family had changed. Many youth even went as far as



to say in order for reconnection to occur, they must first gain employment or housing to show family how much they had improved, despite the presence of abuse, conflict, and a lack of support from such family members. However, it must also be noted that among the youth expressing desire for reconnect a number did so in a tentative or cautious way. Indicative that while they may be shifting blame away from their family as a perpetrator to a degree, they are not completely blinded to the abuse and/or conflict they endured.

While this thesis forwards a tentative theoretical model utilizing the tenets of betrayal trauma theory as a framework that may provide a deeper understanding of the complicated nature of why youth still have desire for family reunification, it is important to note that only partial insights may come from it. It does not represent or attempt to understand youth who were fortunate enough to have supportive familial relations and who maintained such relations across their entire trajectory. It also does not attempt to address youth who left home for reasons other than conflict and abuse. It provides a framework for potentially better understanding the complex nature of desiring family reunification in instances where the family has been a source of conflict and/or abuse, which unfortunately, is common.

### **Limitations**

Despite the important insights of this work, there are some limitations of the project to note. Several components of the study are retrospective, requiring participants to recall memories from when they were younger, and it is possible that some may have remembered incorrectly while others could have forgotten specific details (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Participants' reports were also not corroborated by family members' perspectives, which potentially could counteract the validity of the results if accounts of

past events did not coincide. Further, since some participants experienced a significant number of transitions, they may have, unintentionally, given an inaccurate account of the duration and ordering of each event (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). There was a notable amount of sensitive questions (pertaining to issues such as parental child abuse, criminal activity, victimization) that also may have led to biased reporting if participants felt influenced to give socially desirable responses (Neuman, 2011). Finally, this study is not representative of all homeless young adults and therefore should not be generalized to other subgroups in different locales. This is especially important to note, with a sample size of 34 youth, which is a relatively small number of participants. Of the 34 youth, there was an unequal distribution of youth experiencing homelessness for a comparatively short, moderate, and long amount of time. That is to say, there were far less participants who had spent under one year (8) than there were those who had spent over two years (16), for example. One must also consider a non-response bias in the results, as while this thesis detailed the attitudes and experiences of 34 youth, it is a relatively small number and the possibility that non-responders' experiences meaningfully differ from those willing to participate, must be noted. Increased awareness and acknowledgement of these limitations will ensure that the results, while insightful and important, are not overly generalized.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Due to the limited scope of research that addresses youth perspectives and perceptions of reconnecting with family, as well as research that explores how one's experience and length of time spent as a homeless young person impacts family-life trajectories and relationships, this thesis commenced with two objectives. Firstly, it was to explore the extent to which youth experiencing homelessness express desire for family reunification. Secondly, it was to examine how differences in length of homelessness impact youth's family-life trajectories and subsequent desire for reunification.

The results indicate that the majority of youth do express desire to reconnect with their families, with slightly over half of the participants indicating that they either had hopes of reunification, begun rebuilding relations, or had supportive familial relationships already in place. Noting that there was a lack of insight as to how significant background factors such as gender, mental health status, and current living situation impacted one's desire for reconnection, each was addressed in the findings. The results found that females were more likely than males to desire family reunification, with two-thirds expressing desire, as compared to only half of the males. As for the impact of mental health, those who suffer from mental health challenges are far less likely to express desire for reunification, with less than half (40%) indicating so. Compare that to the sample of youth without mental health challenges, where over 70% expressed desire for reconnection. Lastly among the notable findings, was youths' current living situation. Only one-third of youth who were living on the streets or in emergency shelters expressed desire for reunification, as opposed to two-thirds of youth who were considered short-term housed (in transitional housing or housed for less than 3 years). The

aforementioned findings provide a degree of insight into the desire for family reunification not yet present in homelessness research.

As for how length of homelessness impacted youth's family-life trajectories and desire for reunification, the results suggest that youth who have experienced homelessness for a comparatively short-term (under 1 year) tend to have more supportive familial relations and optimism for reunification than do youth who have spent a comparatively medium/moderate (1-2 years) or long (over 2 years) amount of time homeless. It appears as though arriving at supportive family relations becomes rare the longer youth have experienced homelessness, with the majority of moderate-term and long-term youth expressing conflictual, absent, or mixed relationships with family throughout their history of homelessness. Notably, only 2 of 26 participants from these groupings (moderate and long-term) could characterize their relations as supportive in the most recent stage of their trajectory. While the majority of youth from all three groups express desire to reconnect with family, the extent to which there is desire appears to wane the longer youth experience homelessness. Increased hesitancy and doubts of reconnection were more common amongst youth having experienced a comparatively longer amount of time homeless.

The findings of this thesis can inform policy in a number of ways, particularly through how intervention strategies and family reconnection programs are conceptualized and delivered. As was discussed previously, youth programming, interventions, and services have often ignored the role of family in working towards solutions to youth homelessness, and rather have operated on the assumption that youth need protection and isolation from their families, as they are not seen as beneficial resources to draw on

(Winland, 2013). Our finding that the majority of youth desire family reunification, regardless of time spent homeless, lends support and adds to the growing literature (Winland, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2016) that contends we must shatter the idea of “family as the problem” that has been framing how youth homelessness services, interventions, and programs operate. It is a disservice to youth currently experiencing homelessness to minimize the role of family when family is evidently still of importance to the majority of them.

As for how the findings of this thesis can inform policy via the operation of family reconnection programming, there are many valuable insights to consider. One particular finding that could inform reconnection programming is that a large number of youth (50%) who have spent a comparatively moderate/long-time experiencing homelessness express desire for family reconnection, despite the fact that at the onset of homelessness, nearly all characterized their relations as deeply conflictual. While it is quite likely that at their initial interaction with family reconnection programming, these youth might express hesitancy or a lack of interest, the findings show that familial relations, in many cases, do tend to improve over time, shifting from conflictual to more mixed relations. This has important policy implications, because it indicates that even if youth are steadfast against reconnection at initial attempts or offers of family reconnection, we must continue to follow up with youth and continually engage them with the prospect of reconnection as time passes, as it may be likely that they desire it in the future. We must not cast away the prospect of successful family reunification for youth, who at the time, may express deeply conflictual relations, as the results do show

that in many cases, family still holds importance, and over time, youth do express desire to reengage in such relationships.

Another important consideration for the operation of family reconnection programming, is how to effectively explore the feasibility of reunification for youth who are indecisive due to an imbalance in their familial relations. That is, this thesis found that a number of participants claimed that a drastic imbalance in their parental relations (wherein they have a positive or neutral relationship with one parent but a negative or conflictual relationship with the other parent) was problematic in determining their feelings about reconnecting. As such, we must recognize that for such youth, there is the potential for successful reunification, however programming and services must be sensitive to the parental imbalance and perhaps offer targeted intervention or therapy to the specific parental relationship that is conflictual. Or if the possibility permits, reunification programming efforts can begin with the relationship that is supportive and used to bridge youth closer to other family members, who can be brought in after time. Either way, while indecisive about reunification, the fact that these youth have not discounted the prospect of family reconnection, is important in that we must continue to explore ways in which reconnection may be achievable.

As for how effective family reconnection programming can expand, such as Eva's Family Reconnect Program in Toronto, a valuable insight from this study was the finding that the substantial majority of youth who were in short-term housing (such as transitional housing) had high levels of desire for family reunification. Whereas Eva's Family Reconnect Program operates within an emergency shelter (Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth, 2019), an expansion of the program (or creation of similar programs)

into transitional housing facilities could reach a greater proportion of youth who not only desire reunification with family, but who, as this project found, are even more likely to be interested in such a program. The expansion of reconnect programs into transitional houses, with potentially high levels of interest, could facilitate a large number of youth out of homelessness altogether, who already have the benefit of more stable housing.

The importance of further explorative research into family relationships, family reconnection, and family trajectories of youth experiencing homelessness cannot be overstated. We know that family relationships of such youth are complex and in need of greater understanding (Parker & Mayock, 2019), and that there are significant gaps in the literature regarding youth's connections to or relations with family while experiencing homelessness (Winland, 2013). That is precisely why the findings of this thesis are important and insightful; however, more work needs to be done. The lack of theorizing in understanding the complexities of family relationships as one experiences homelessness is a notable area for future research. While this thesis discussed and forwarded a tentative model, future research could test the validity and/or propose new frameworks that effectively understand the processes of youth attempting to reconnect with their families. Additionally, while subgroups such as gender, mental health, and living situation were explored in this project, future research should consider including race/ethnicity as a key subgroup to evaluate. By exploring the interconnectedness of race, family reunification, and trajectories throughout homelessness, there could be valuable insights into the unique experiences of racial and ethnic backgrounds. As such, future studies could utilize the basic framework of this project, but with distinct categories for classifying youth by race, with targeted questions throughout the Life History Calendar pertaining to how their race

or ethnicity may have impacted relations with family or experiences at various transition points. Regarding youth who do have desire for family reunification, but who are at continual conflict with family; future research ought to explore the feasibility and possibility of reuniting both parties, as we cannot ignore the importance of family in the lives of these young people.

While it is not realistic to assume all relationships can be restored, research has shown the process of rebuilding relationships with family members, even where such relations were/or remain strained, has shown numerous benefits, such as: enhanced ability to cope with new challenges, increased practical and emotional support, and greater opportunities to secure stable housing (Mayock et al., 2011). Family can be instrumental in aiding youth exit homelessness, and as such, it is profoundly important to understand youth's desire for family reunification and family-life trajectories. This thesis hopes future research will continue efforts to understand the family relationships of youth experiencing homelessness, informing policy and practice to encourage reuniting youth with family where achievable.



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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

Date \_\_\_\_\_

ID # \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Section 1: Demographics**

##### *Demographic Questions*

1. How old are you right now \_\_\_\_\_?
2. How would you currently describe your housing situation?
  - a. Currently experiencing homelessness
  - b. In transitional housing or housed for less than 1 year
  - c. Housed for more than 1 year but less than 3
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. How much time in your past have you experienced homelessness (ex. emergency shelters, couch surfing, sleeping outside)---this does not include time you might have experienced homelessness with a parent or caregiver \_\_\_\_\_?
4. How do you identify your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Transgender
  - d. Non-binary
  - e. Two-spirited
  - f. In your own words \_\_\_\_\_
5. How you do identify your sexuality?
  - a. Bisexual
  - b. Gay/lesbian
  - c. Heterosexual
  - d. Queer
  - e. In your own words \_\_\_\_\_
6. Is there a cultural, ethnic, Indigenous, or racial background that you identify with?  
\_\_\_\_\_

##### *Housing Questions*

7. Please identify where you have stayed in the past week (check all that apply)
  - a. Transitional housing program (1 year or less)
  - b. Rent a place---alone
  - c. Rent a place---roommates
  - d. Family member (permanent)
  - a. Family member (temporary)

- b. Staying with friends (temporary)
  - c. Emergency shelter
  - d. Other accommodation \_\_\_\_\_
8. How long have you been living in your current arrangement? \_\_\_\_\_
9. How much rent do you pay to stay where you are right now? \_\_\_\_\_

*Health Questions*

10. Do you have any ongoing or persistent physical, cognitive, or mental health challenges that interfere with your daily life?
- a. Yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. No (skip to 13)
11. If yes, have these ongoing issues been formally diagnosed?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Partially, explain: \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. N/A
12. Are you currently receiving any treatment or support for these problems or issues?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. N/A

*Education and Employment Questions*

13. What is your highest level of education?
- a. Less than HS
  - b. HS
  - c. Some college/university
  - d. Completed degree/college diploma
  - e. Other training certificate or program
14. Are you in any kind of education right now?
- a. HS or HS equivalency
  - b. College/university diploma or degree program
  - c. Certificate program
  - d. Other kind of training/certificate/program \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Not in any education right now
15. Main sources of money right now---check all that apply
- a. OW
  - b. ODSP
  - c. Full time employment (circle: formal or under the table)
  - d. Part time employment (circle: formal or under the table)
  - e. Contract employment (circle: formal or under the table)
  - f. Seasonal work (circle: formal or under the table)
  - g. Cash work/odd jobs
  - h. Program stipend

- i. Family
  - j. OSAP
  - k. Illegal income (circle: supplemental or main source of income) (no details necessary)
  - l. Asking the Public/Panhandling
  - m. Other \_\_\_\_\_
16. If you aren't working right now have you looked for work in the past month (dropping off resumes, applying online, etc.)
- a. yes
  - b. no

## **2. Life History Calendar**

In this section we are going to fill in some timelines focusing on things like your housing, your relationships, and how you were feeling. You can make these as creative and artistic as you want so I have some things here like stickers and markers, but no pressure.

### **Housing Timeline**

The first timeline I want to start with is a housing timeline---we are organizing this roughly in terms of months.

The first point we want to make is when you first experienced homelessness—year and month? How did that happen?

[We are defining homelessness as the first time you stayed in an emergency shelter, couch surfed for a week or more, or slept outside—not including any periods of homelessness with your family]

Now I want to ask about your living situation the 1 month before and who you were living with, where you were living?

Now I want to ask you about your living situation right now?

Now let's fill in the middle, I want to ask about your living situation since that first experience of homelessness up until today. Let's start with any big changes in your housing and when those were?

[If there is a long and complicated housing history or trouble remembering we will focus on the most recent 2 years]

[Were the last 2 years similar to the time that came before or different? How so?]

Where you lived? Who you lived with?

[interviewer, once complete: roughly divide timeline into thirds, ask about confidence level out of 4 for each third (1-very hazy, 2-somewhat hazy, 3-somewhat clear, 4-very clear—also ask about reasons for these ratings)]

## **Family Timeline**

The next timeline I want to ask about is about your relationship with your family [we are defining family as caregivers, siblings, and extended family---any chosen or intentional families we can discuss in the next section]

Who are the main people in your family? [list those on the LHC]

For each person I am wondering if you can tell me about your relationship with them over this time and changes and transition points (happy times, big conflicts)

I am also interested to understand what types of support you were getting from each of these people and how that changed across this timeline: emotional support, life advice, practical help, financial help

How did you spend time with these people and connect with them (phone calls, hanging out)?

How did you stay in touch/connected?

## **Friends, romantic partners, and other relationships**

The next timeline I want to ask about are your friends, romantic partners, and other relationships that had an impact but that might be hard to put a label on?

In the month prior to homelessness who were your main friends? Romantic relationships? Other? [list these on the LHC]

What about now, who are you spending time with these days?

Now, let's look at the middle, what about in the time after you first experienced homelessness until now?

For each person I am wondering if you can tell me about your relationship with them over this time and changes and transition points (happy times, big conflicts)

I am also interested to understand what types of support you were getting from each of these people and how that changed across this timeline: emotional support, life advice, practical help, financial help

I am also wondering how people looked at you and treated you over this timeline and if there were any big changes in that?

Can you tell me about how you made these friends?

How did you spend time with these people and connect with them (phone calls, hanging out)?

How did you stay in touch/connected?

### **Activities/Interests**

Now I am interested in creating a timeline of the kinds of activities you were interested in prior to this first experience of homelessness: music? Internet stuff? What did you do with your friends?

What about today, what kind of stuff are you interested in these days?

What about after the first experience of homelessness, what kind of stuff were you into doing?

Did this change? What about at other points along the timeline?

How social/outgoing would you describe yourself along this period?

### **Identity**

Now I am interested in any changes in your identity---for example, the kind of person you thought you were or wanted to be?

What about prior to homelessness? How would you describe yourself as a person? Feelings? Outlook on life?

What about at other points along the timeline?

### **Health/Mental Health/Trauma**

Any big changes in your mental or physical health over this time period?

Any big changes in drinking or substance use?

Any victimization or trauma?

What about feelings of self-esteem and confidence?

Were there things that helped you to stay mentally healthy and resilient over this time period? (coping techniques/communities/spirituality) Did those things shift or change?

### **Services/Contact with helping professions**

Did you have any contact with service providers/service agencies and people like doctors, psychiatrists over this time?

### **Education/Employment/Making Money**

Interested in hearing about changes in your schooling?

Your employment, work experience?

What about any changes in other ways of making money? Any issues with the law and the justice system, but you don't need to give me any specifics just if you were involved or not and when it started and stopped?

### **3. Desire for Family Reunification**

Are you interested in reconnecting/reuniting with family? Why or why not?

Do you desire family reunification? What would need to happen in order to reconnect?

What are your long-term goals with respect to your relations with family?