# **Understanding Young Women and Gender-Diverse Youth's Experiences** of Loneliness and Isolation During COVID-19 and Beyond

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## What is this research about?

Youth face significant hurdles when they transition from homelessness to housing, including discrimination, a lack of safety, poverty, and significant disconnection from others. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified and intensified these issues. While many people felt isolated during the pandemic, this was especially exacerbated for young women and gender-diverse youth, who were already the loneliest demographic.

Social integration is crucial for people being able to maintain housing long-term. Social integration and belonging differ for different youth, and there is little research on what creating a sense of connection looks like specifically for young women and gender-diverse people.

Thus, this study aims to understand how to support young women and gender-diverse people to feel connected once housed and ensure that a sense of belonging is prioritized to maintain housing stability.

## What did the researchers do?

Researchers collected data in three phases. First, the researchers interviewed 22 young women and gender-diverse youth about their transitions to housing and their experiences of loneliness.

Second, 20 of those participants kept a journal for a week. Participants logged moments of isolation, connection, loneliness, and belonging during that time. Another interview was then conducted with participants reflecting on the journal.

Third, the lived expert research team members developed and led a series of eight virtual workshops with young women and gender-diverse youth. These were solution-oriented workshops looking to make sense of the research findings and what to do about them.

The researchers also interviewed 12 support people – both formal service providers and informal support people – about the challenges and opportunities of providing service and support to young women and gender-diverse youth during the pandemic.

## What did the researchers find?

### SIX MAJOR THEMES WERE DISCOVERED:

1. **Loneliness is widespread among many young women and gender-diverse youth transitioning into housing, which negatively affects their well-being and housing stability.** Loneliness was not often experienced as being alone, but as lacking strong connections and the ability to talk to people who understood them.
2. **Once housed, most young women and gender-diverse youth felt unsafe in their homes, buildings, and/or neighbourhoods.** This lack of safety compelled many to further isolate themselves, making housing more precarious.
3. **Newcomers face unique and intense feelings of loneliness and isolation.** They experience intense barriers to accessing support that often severely limit their ability to attend school, work, etc. Moreover, they access spaces that often lack people who look like them, nor do they feel understood.
4. **Housing on its own does not always lead to a sense of stability.** Most of their housing situations are uncertain or precarious, relying on roommates (sometimes strangers) or a partner to keep a roof over their heads. Retaining housing is difficult, time-consuming, and youth are left alone to figure it out.
5. **Young parents face increased loneliness and isolation when caring for their children.** There are few spaces where they feel like their children are welcome. Also, without access to affordable childcare, many young parents cannot work, attend school, and/or must try to balance these responsibilities while their children are with them.
6. **COVID-19 worsened experiences of loneliness and isolation.** While some young women and gender-diverse youth appreciated the time for reflection, most lost access to services and found it difficult to connect with others. There were serious long-term effects for some young people, including housing loss, job loss, and significant school disruption, with many feeling like they were starting from the beginning.

## How can you use this research?

The researchers hope that young women and gender-diverse people with lived experiences of homelessness see their experiences reflected in this research and know that they are not alone in their feelings.

Audiences may see how unique these issues are for young women and gender-diverse youth who face specific barriers and who need targeted solutions to improve their sense of connection and belonging. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are not unique to the pandemic –young women and gender-diverse people are already experiencing this kind of isolation and will continue to unless there is a pointed effort to address it.

Service providers can learn from this research to be mindful and look out for loneliness among the youth they work with. In doing so, service providers can provide support in building connections, social networks, and a sense of belonging among youth.

Finally, decision makers should understand that it is worthwhile to invest in supports that increase belonging and connection. The money, resources, and time spent supporting young women and gender-diverse to obtain housing people needs to be ongoing for them to remain stably housed.

## More about the author

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## About the research summary series

This research summary series was created to highlight the research findings of Making the Shift funded projects and to build stronger links between research and practice, towards improving program processes and outcomes in preventing youth homelessness.

**To view more summaries in the series,** visit makingtheshiftinc.ca/resources. Making the Shift is co-led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada.

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