Making the Prevention Shift in Québec: Prévention Itinérance Jeunesse (PIJ)

A Youth-Led Approach to Building a Provincial Prevention Agenda

Sue-Ann MacDonald

What is this research about?

Québec faces a unique sociocultural and policy landscape that differs significantly from other provinces. Yet, prevention-focused research on youth homelessness in Québec has remained limited. The Prévention Itinérance Jeunesse (PIJ) project addressed that gap by developing a provincial youth homelessness prevention agenda grounded in lived experience, community expertise, and collaborative knowledge-building. The project explored a central question: What do we know, and what do we still need to know, to prevent youth homelessness in Québec?

Using a youth-driven, bottom-up approach, the PIJ team mapped early intervention practices, reviewed relevant policies, and explored structural and relational pathways into homelessness. A key strength of the project was its Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) method, which positioned youth as researchers and co-leaders throughout the process. The research ultimately aimed to build a shared foundation for long-term systems change rooted in the realities and priorities of Québec's youth.

What did the researchers do?

The PIJ team adopted a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach that engaged youth as equal partners throughout the four-year project. A youth committee was formed at the outset, with youth co-researchers participating in biweekly meetings and actively shaping every stage of the work, from designing research tools to analyzing data and co-producing knowledge mobilization outputs. This approach helped build trust, shared ownership, and meaningful leadership opportunities for youth with lived experience.

The research process combined several methods, including: mapping early intervention practices and policies across Québec, conducting focus groups with practitioners, interviewing youth and stakeholders, and applying arts-based engagement methods such as podcasting and visual storytelling. One of the project's standout initiatives was co-creating *Écouter et se faire entendre* ("Listen and Be Heard"), an audio-visual exhibit inspired by youth reflections and experiences. The team also hosted two major provincial forums and launched multiple knowledge-sharing projects, including a web dossier and a forthcoming white paper led by the Coalition Jeunes+.

What did the researchers find?

The study revealed three interconnected issues which the team refered to as "Triple C" of youth homelessness prevention:

1. **Crisis of Connection**: Youth felt disconnected from their communities, families, and broader systems. Many lacked spaces where they felt seen, safe, or understood.
2. **Crisis of Citizenship**: The project exposed how young people are routinely excluded from decision-making and denied fundamental rights, especially in housing, healthcare, and education.
3. **Climate Crisis:** Youth reported a loss of hope in future possibilities, echoing fears tied to environmental, economic, and social uncertainty. These feelings of "No-Future-Youth" signalled the need for prevention models beyond service delivery and speak to deeper structural injustices.

These findings challenge traditional public health and housing-first paradigms by emphasizing youth homelessness's emotional, relational, and systemic dimensions.

How can you use this research?

This research offers an actionable model for centring youth voices in homelessness prevention. Service providers can adopt YPAR and arts-based methods to create more inclusive and empowering spaces. Program planners and agency leaders can use the findings to develop interventions that address the material and emotional dimensions of homelessness, particularly connection, safety, and belonging.

Policymakers and funders can use PIJ's work to support youth-led policy design, invest in prevention models grounded in rights and equity, and create cross-sector alliances that build long-term impact. Educators and researchers can also use the PIJ team's integration of experiential knowledge and grassroots engagement as a foundation for structural change.

More about the authors

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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.

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