

# Homelessness through the lens of local youth

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Jon Thompson

Photo Voice is a 17-image gallery taken by homeless and at-risk youth to raise awareness about youth homelessness.

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THUNDER BAY -- Youth are among the least visible homeless population, but looking through their eyes puts a lens on the city that deserves a bigger frame.

Photo Voice was unveiled at city hall on Wednesday along with a broader campaign to raise awareness of and address the issue of homeless youth.

The 17-image display shows still and sometimes hauntingly lonely landscapes around Thunder Bay.

Braden Trimboli has bounced between group homes and foster homes for most of his young life. He turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with the insecurity that comes from not having space.

"I went from home to home. I was confused. I didn't know where to go. I still don't know where to go," Trimboli said.

A packed foyer of 60 people clapped when Amber Towedo from Aroland First Nation announced she has been sober for two months, thanks to time she spent at the Sister Margaret Smith Centre. Her difficult family life led to addiction and she said she has had to carry herself.

"I grew up lost, confused, depressed and I don't know how to explain it. It's just awful. I'm constantly putting myself down and eventually I got to using drugs and alcohol. I thought I was solving my problems doing that," she said.

"I learned how to cope. I learned how to be myself. I learned how to love myself. I learned a lot of things. I'm thankful for where I am now."

Thunder Bay Crime Prevention Council coordinator Lee-Ann Chevrette pitched the project to Leadership Thunder Bay last summer to coordinate the photography release with the arrival of [Push For Change](#), the story of homeless man-turned-business success story Joe Roberts, who is pushing a shopping cart across the country to raise awareness and put an end to youth homelessness.

Photographers with Roberts' project taught the youth the basics of photography but Chevrette said young people came up with their own ideas. She believes the only way to develop the kinds of supports youth need is to welcome their voices into the conversation.

"What we'd like to see is that homeless youth not be criminalized for being homeless," Chevrette said. "The reason youth are homeless is because they're not getting the supports they need to succeed in our community. There may be family breakdown. There may be addictions or mental health reasons, there may be a whole range of reasons why the youth may find themselves at risk of being homeless or actually homeless.

"I think it's really important to draw attention to those risk factors in our community and divert youth from the path of criminality and victimization because that's not where they're going to get the help they need."

The Thunder Bay Shelter House is the only homeless shelter for youth aged 16 to 24, where they make up 25 per cent of the residential clientele. Shelter House executive director Gary Mack said his staff connects those young people to programs and services but it's a difficult time to be out on one's own.

"Those are really formative years when you still need support," Mack said. "We sometimes feel like we're adults at that age but we're not, so not to have the support of family and community would be very challenging at that age."