
**SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR YOUNG COUPLES IN TORONTO:
IT DOES NOT EXIST. SHOULD IT?**

Main Author:

Yvette Roberts, BSW
Coordinator
Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA)

Contributing Author:

Barbara Chyzy, RN, BN, MN
PhD Student
Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing
University of Toronto

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Young Parents No Fixed Address
c/o Oolagen Community Services
65 Wellesley St E. Ste 500
Toronto, Ontario Canada M4Y 1G7
www.ypnfa.ca

Acknowledgements

The **Young Parents No Fixed Address** network (YPNFA) was convened in 1997 to examine the increasing numbers of pregnant young women being seen by agencies dealing with homeless youth in Toronto and following the death of a 5 week old baby while in the care of his homeless teen mother.

Young Parents No Fixed Address (YPNFA) is a network of agencies and organizations dedicated to building strong community partnerships and innovative solutions to address the issues of young street involved / homeless pregnant and parenting youth and their children. During the last 15 years our network has developed several innovative and responsive solutions to the issues faced by this population. We continue to explore ways we can enhance the well-being of young families through collaboration and cooperation with various stakeholders. The YPNFA network is also exploring and working on responses to the mental health and sexual health needs of young parents as well as the trauma, grief and loss they often face.

Current network partners include: City of Toronto Central Intake and shelters (Birkdale Residence, Family Residence, Robertson House), Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Catholic Children's Aid Society, Central Intake, Central Toronto Youth Services, Covenant House, East Metro Youth Services, Evergreen Centre/Yonge St. Mission, Hospital for Sick Children - Young Families Program, Humewood House, Jean Tweed Centre / Pathways to Healthy Families, Jessie's –the June Callwood Centre for Young Women, LAMP Community Health Centre, Literature for Life, Macaulay Child Development Centre, Massey Centre for Women, Mothercraft / Breaking the Cycle, Oolagen Community Services, Parkdale CHC, Planned Parenthood of Toronto, Queen West CHC, Regent Park CHC, Rosalie Hall, Rouge Valley Health System, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto Public Health, Women's Habitat of Etobicoke, Woodgreen Community Services-Homeward Bound, YMCA –YSAP, Yorktown Child & Family Centre and Youth Unlimited, Time Out for Young Moms, University of Toronto.

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Background

According to the 2007 Toronto Street Health Report, 13% of surveyed homeless women had, at some point in their life, delivered a baby while homeless or while staying at a shelter (Khandor & Mason, 2007). Other reports estimate that as many as 50% of homeless female youth experience pregnancy within the first year of becoming homeless (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation [CMHC], 2001).

It is estimated that between 289 to 300 Homeless Women under the age of 25 give birth in the city of Toronto every year (Bernstein, 2013).

In 2012, members of the YPNFA network identified and began to discuss the lack of supportive housing for young homeless couples in the city of Toronto. There are 4 Young Parent Resource Centres in the city with 3 of them offering prenatal and short term postnatal housing for young women who are homeless and under 21 years of age. Fathers of the baby can visit but cannot reside at these facilities.

When a young homeless pregnant youth chooses to reside in a young parent residential program she is often most concerned about being able to maintain contact with and access to her supports including her partner, friends and family. Often curfews and set visiting hours hinder this as does the perception some youth have that these residential programs are not “male friendly.” In St. John’s, Newfoundland, a planning session for a Young Parents Supportive Housing & Resource Centre program conducted a housing needs assessment of young parents in focus groups with 9 mothers and 3 fathers (White, 2010). Findings from this focus group indicated that some young parents would like to have housing for both mothers and fathers of their babies. For example, one young parent expressed the need for “a separate place to live for dads (with moms and children) who want to live there so moms don’t leave just to be with the dads.” (White, 2010, p.19).

In Toronto, there are residential programs for single mothers that offer up to 4 years of supportive and subsidized housing but these are only for single mothers and do not allow men or couples. The city of Toronto’s Family Residence located in Scarborough offers shelter and supports for homeless couples of any age through their Pregnancy Support Program once the woman is in her third trimester. But as will be noted later, you need to prove that you are in a long term relationship.

Youth have identified that being placed together as a couple is often a challenge as Central Intake can ask for verification that they have been in a relationship for a certain period of time (usually 6 months or more) to qualify for placement together as a couple. How do transient and homeless youth prove this? To obtain welfare assistance as a couple is equally complicated as you cannot prove you have resided together for a certain amount of time when you have been homeless and transient.

Front line staff have also identified that young couples wishing to stay together are choosing to stay on the streets or use “Out of The Cold” type programs (ie: emergency shelter) when

available during winter months. Remaining on the streets poses numerous challenges not only to the young couple but also to the service providers who are trying to stay connected to them and support them and their unborn baby. Lack of appropriate and nutritious meals, poor hygiene, increased risk of assault, infections and lack of medical care and observation are major concerns (Hwang, 2001).

We know that many pregnant and homeless youth do not seek prenatal care or connect with support services for fear of being reported to child welfare authorities. Many of these same youth have histories themselves with child welfare due to one or both parents having been in care or having had other children previously apprehended.

“Over one-half of street-involved youth in Canada are former children in care. Lacking in family, social supports, financial resources, job skills, and education, and bearing the scars of childhood abuse, street-involved youth are vulnerable to survival strategies that place them at high risk for further rights violations” (Covell, 2010)

A transient lifestyle makes it a challenge for youth to remember their appointments, to get to those appointments and to keep their ID including health cards on their person. Young pregnant and homeless women have a tendency to lack in prenatal care and monitoring and give birth to preterm and low birth weight babies who have often been exposed to alcohol and/or drugs prenatally (Little, Shah, Vermeulen, Gorman, Dzendoletas, & Ray, 2005). The Young Parents No Fixed Address network is proud of its involvement in the development of the “My Baby & Me Passport Program” through St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto which was designed to address and meet the many barriers faced by homeless and at risk street involved prenatal young women. Studies of this innovative program have shown that between 2005 and 2007, 100 young mothers used the program and 94% delivered full-term infants and 90% of the babies were in a healthy weight range meaning they weighed over 2500 grams (Moravac, Little, Gorman, Nisenbaum, Dzendoletas & Fortin, 2009).

It is the belief of the YPNFA network that offering young homeless couples an opportunity to live and parent together in a supportive housing environment would reduce many of the risk factors noted above.

Defining Supportive Housing:

The YPNFA network envisions supportive housing designed for young couples as safe, affordable and long term housing that offers on site or daily access to professional supports and services including case managers and early childhood specialists. Informative and supportive groups related to life skills including stress management, parenting, budgeting and addictions would be included. Education and employment assistance and childcare supports are also crucial.

With its 15 year history of collaborative and innovative program development and advocacy on behalf of the homeless young parent population in Toronto we feel that the above supports would be easily and readily available through our membership of 35 partnering agencies should this form of housing be developed.

Defining “affordable housing” presents a challenge as currently a young couple in Toronto with one child could expect to receive approximately \$1140 per month from welfare services. And from that amount a couple with one child is only provided \$697.00 for shelter costs. And yet the average cost of a one bedroom apartment in Toronto is \$1003.00 and a 2 bedroom averages \$1170.00 or more (CMHC, 2012). Using the Ontario government definition of affordable housing “*a unit for which the rent does not exceed 30 percent of gross annual household income for low and moderate income households,*” we would still be faced with one bedroom units renting for around \$800.00 a month and 2 bedrooms for \$936.00 or higher for a young family on social assistance (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005)

According to Statistics Canada, the poverty rate of young families with children increased by 56% between 1981 and 2001. In 2001, 38.1% of all young families with children in Toronto lived in poverty, up from 33.5% in 1991 (Family Service Association of Toronto & Community Social Planning Council, 2004). A 23% cut to monthly social assistance rates by the Conservative government some years back and decreasing rental availability in the city leading to higher rents along with the ever increasing cost of living are a major factor in these negative changes.

Defining long term housing also poses challenges as a review of existing supportive housing programs for many disadvantaged people in Toronto show tenancy terms or agreements ranging from 6 months to 4 years to a life time. Young mothers in attendance at a YPNFA focus group suggested 4 to 6 years as a suitable term.

The Research

Identifying a lack of supports and services for young homeless couples led to an investigation into whether or not this was actually a needed resource in the city. Throughout 2013, the YPNFA network coordinator collected surveys from young parenting men and women across the city with the help of many of the network members. We also engaged in an investigation of the research available on this topic and sought to find similar supports which already existed.

An attempt was made to gather research and data on Supportive Housing for Young Couples and the results were that there was little investigation of this need or issue. Even when reports stated they were about young parents or young families, the majority actually focussed on the young mother and her children only. Very few of these studies took place in Canada.

Through our investigations we have only been able to identify three existing housing programs in North America designed to allow young couples to reside together. One of these programs is Hope Terrace through the Terra Centre in Edmonton. Hope Terrace is a safe and affordable supportive housing program located in North East Edmonton (Terra Center, 2014). It is a 13-suite apartment building that offers transitional housing (up to 3 years) to teen parents and their children. A full time Family Housing Worker is on site at Hope Terrace to provide tenants with one-on-one support, focused goal planning, group programming and access to community resources. A second program run by Our Family Services in Tucson Arizona established a

program where young parents could live together with their children (Our Family Services, 2014). The program offers intensive case management, counseling, life skills and parenting education for up to eight families: 16 young adult clients, ages 18 to 21, and their children. Thirdly, there is a Supportive Housing Program established by the Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska (CAPWN) (CAPWH, 2014). There appears to be a good number of young parent housing options available across the UK.

We know that there is a good deal of research that shows us just how valuable and influential a father's involvement can be to his children's social and emotional development. Reports have shown that children with involved and supportive fathers tend to have better outcomes with academic achievements, are more capable of developing trusting and healthy peer and intimate relationships, develop better coping skills and improved mental health with lesser degrees of depression, increased tolerance and more positive moral behaviours including less involvement with substance use and criminal activity (Allen & Daly, 2007). Also of significance to this report is the fact that youth with involved and supportive fathers are 75% less likely to become teen parents and that being an involved father also had positive correlations for fathers in their overall health and sense of well-being (Allen & Daly, 2007). Another study found that a higher level of paternal support predicted a lower likelihood of harsh parenting (Lee, 2013, p.110).

The presence of a child's father in their life also has the potential to increase a child's long-term mental, emotional, educational and social outcomes (Howard, Burke Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006). Fathers benefit not only the child but the larger society as well since service needs and costs for that child may be greatly reduced during its life span and family cycles of poverty and teen parenthood may be greatly reduced (Howard et al., 2006). However, the majority of biological fathers of infants born to young mothers generally do not form lasting partnerships with the mother (Howard et al., 2006). One study found that only 6% of infants born to young mothers received any type of support from a father or male figure (Whitman, Borkowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001). This finding is consistent with other studies which confirm a trajectory of short term relationships between young mothers and the biological fathers of their children (Nelson, Morrison-Beedy, Kearney, & Dozier, 2012). Nevertheless, young mothers express a strong desire for biological fathers of their baby to be involved in their life (Fagan & Lee, 2010) but require supports and resources (including housing) to provide the young family with the stability, resources and options they require to succeed (Howard et al., 2006). This evidence speaks to why the option of supportive housing for young couples is so important.

“Teen fathers may experience many of the same adverse outcomes as teen mothers... if the state wants positive outcomes for the children of teen parents, it must also focus on teen fathers. There must be outreach that engages teen fathers, makes them a part of the birth experience, facilitates their continued education, assist's them with employment and child support, and counsels them on relationships and parenting” (Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, 2008, p. 4).

And yet, with the knowledge of the important roles fathers of any age can play in the overall well-being and long term development of their children, we are also faced with some other realities which speak to the concerns raised by YPNFA network members as well as some of the

youth we consulted. A major concern is domestic violence and its prevalence in adolescent and young parent relationships. A Canadian study that outlined causes of physical abuse identified “social instability” (e.g. low age, unmarried, lower level of education, and unemployment) as a trigger for violence and used unplanned pregnancies as an example (Stewart & Ceccutti, 1993). Adolescents are especially at risk and teenage pregnancy is correlated with increased rates of domestic violence. Approximately 80 percent of teenage mothers are abused by their boyfriends and that once the abuse starts it usually becomes more frequent as well as more violent (Leiderman & Almo, 2001, p. 10).

Screening for domestic violence or risk factors would be crucial when considering the development of a supportive housing program for young couples. One housing program in England (*Blackburn with Darwen, Teenage Parent Supported Housing Pilot*) has developed a tenancy-skills training course known as the “Passport to Housing”. The pilot reports that young people who successfully complete this training are helped to secure independent housing, since landlords are more likely to be convinced that they will make responsible tenants if they have completed the course (Johnsen & Quilgars, 2010).

Numerous studies also show an increased risk of experiencing abuse, both physical and sexual, against children living in a single parent household. An analysis of child abuse cases in a nationally representative sample of 42 counties found that children from single parent families are more likely to be victims of physical and sexual abuse than children who live with both biological parents (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003). The rate of child abuse in single parent households was 27.3 children per 1,000, which was nearly twice the rate of child abuse in two parent households (15.5 children per 1,000 (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003). The most recent National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect Report determined that children of single parents were at four times greater risk of all forms of maltreatment compared to children who resided with two married biological parents (Sedlak, Mettenburg, Basena, Petta, McPherson, Greene, & Li, 2010).

Our Findings

The Young Parents No Fixed Address network developed a 10 question survey for young parents under the age of 25 to complete and obtained approximately 114 responses mostly from young mothers. The majority of respondents were 17 to 22 years of age and 31 identified their child’s other parent as being over 25 years of age. The majority of the evaluations were completed by women residing in young parent residential programs.

Regarding their current relationship status with their child’s other parent, 29% of survey respondents identified the child’s other parent as not being involved at all with their child, 29 % were co-parenting but not together as a couple, 21% were together but not living together and 21% were living together as a family (Figure 1).

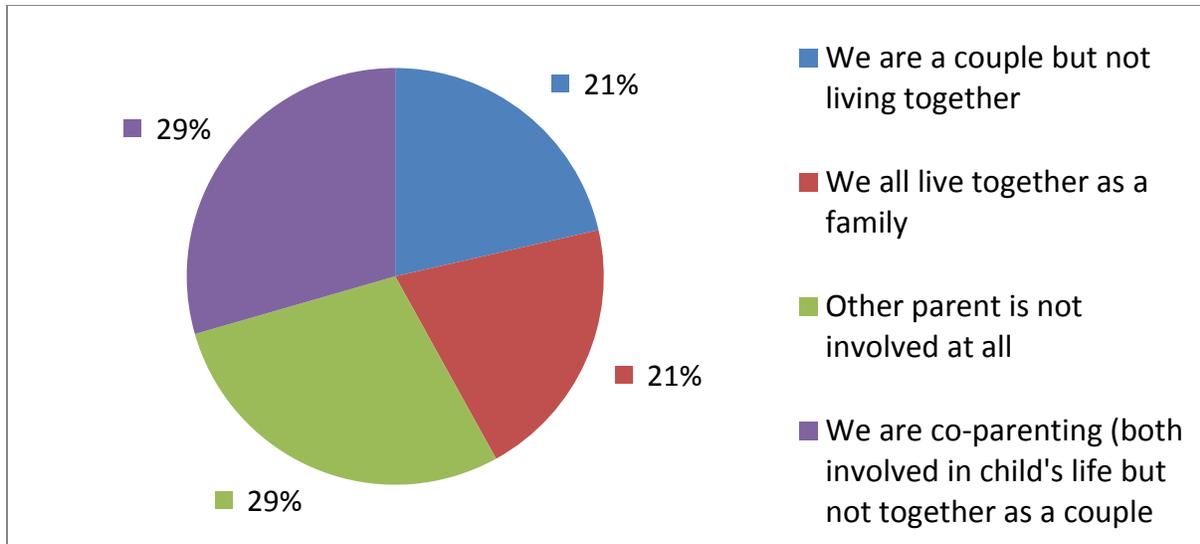


Figure 1: What is your current relationship with your child’s other parent?

Over one third of the respondents stated that their current housing arrangement interfered with the ability of their child’s other parent to be involved in the day to day upbringing (Figure 2).

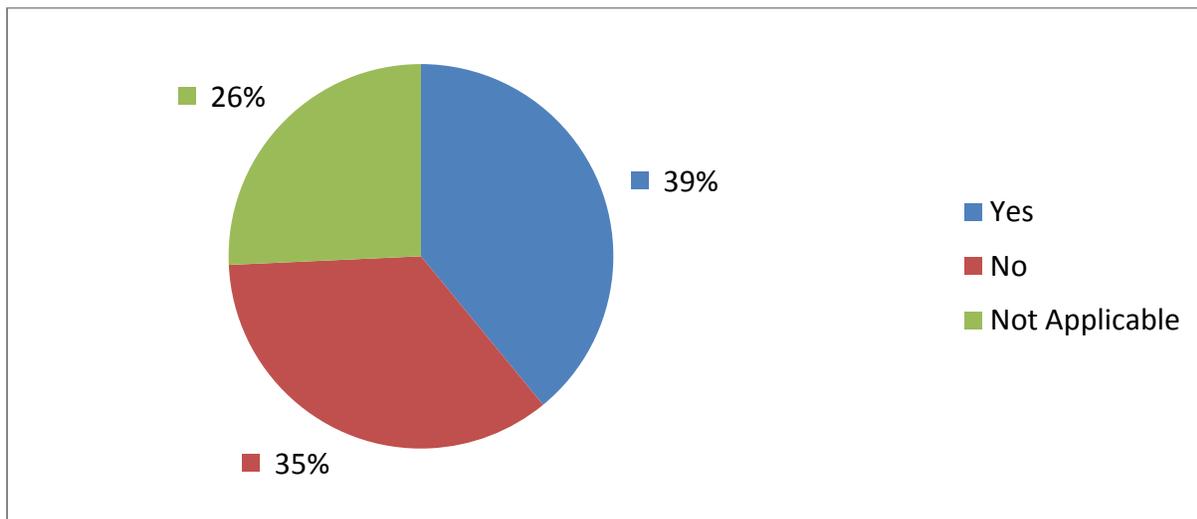


Figure 2: Has your housing situation affected the ability of your child’s other parent to be involved in their day to day life?

Other finding indicated that almost half of the respondents would like to live with their child’s other parent (Figure 3).

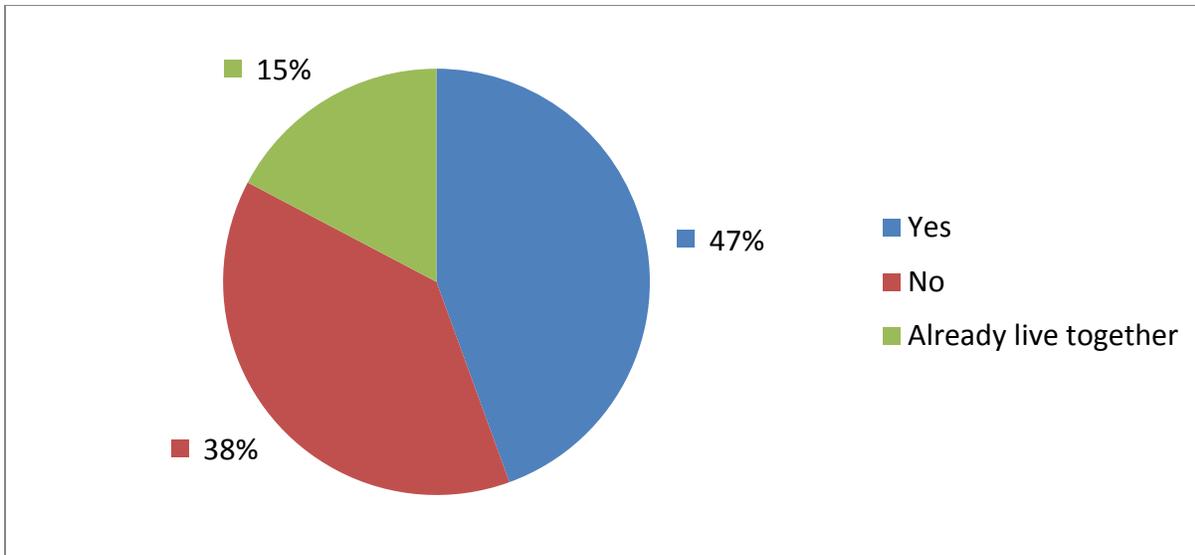


Figure 3: Would you like to live with your partner?

Yet when asked the question “If there was a supportive housing program available for young couples would you and your partner be interested?”, 68% replied ‘yes’ (Figure 4). During face to face discussions some noted that was not possible as the other parent was in another relationship or had another family.

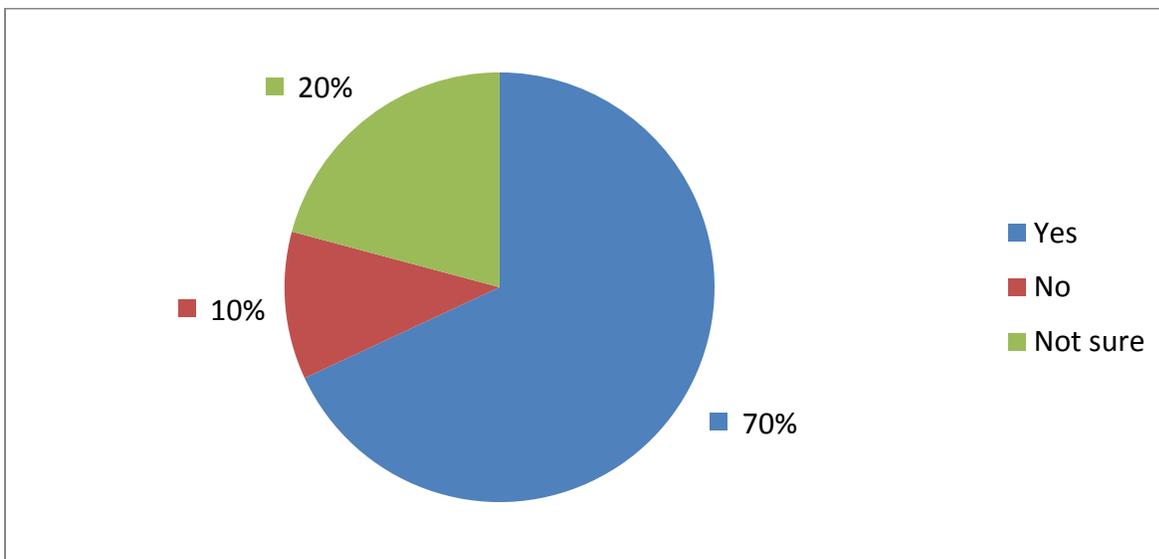


Figure 4: If there was a supportive housing program for young couples, would you and your partner be interested?

Regarding what they would like to see available in a supportive housing program the following chart exhibits their preferences (Figure 5).

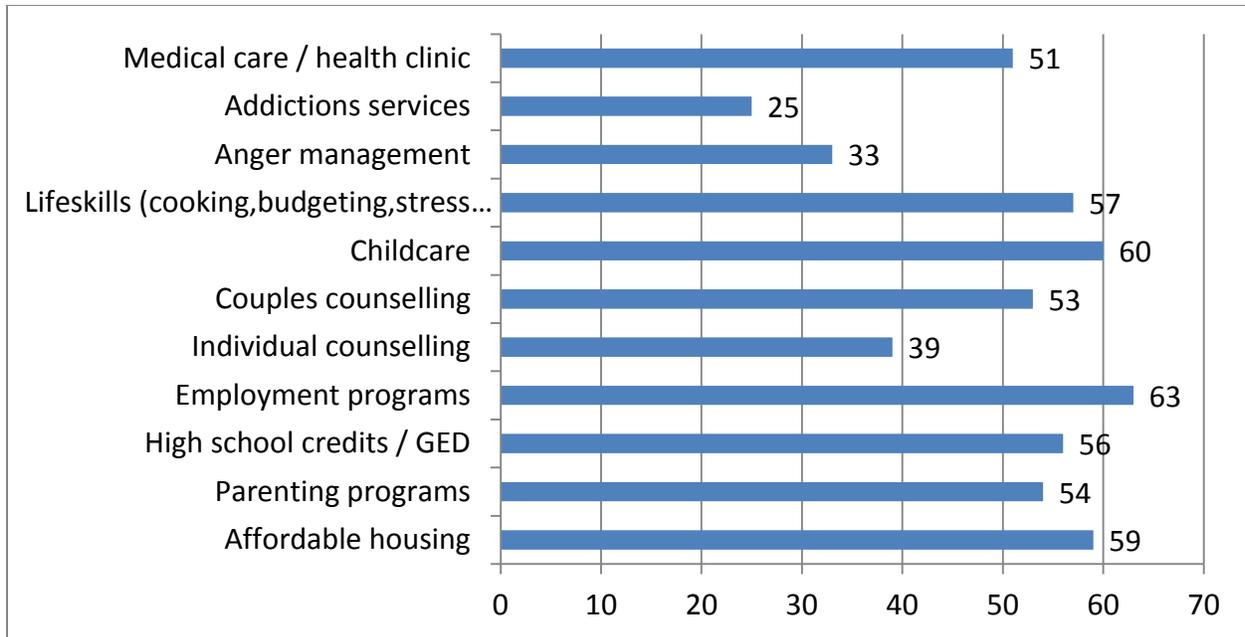


Figure 5: If a supportive housing program existed for young couples, which supports/services would you like it to offer?

From these surveys and the face to face discussions that occurred throughout early 2013 we have determined that young parents do recognize a need for housing that includes both young mothers and fathers but they also have some concerns which are often shared by front line staff.

Young mothers have identified a concern that if residing with their partner they would potentially have less income and may also face barriers to things like childcare subsidy if their partner is not working or in school. They also questioned what would happen if there was a domestic dispute, or if they chose to separate. Who would stay in the unit and who would have to leave? More than one young mother stated she would like her partner to be allowed to reside with her and her children but she did not want his name on the lease.

Another concern that was illustrated in the survey is that approximately 25% of the responding young parents had a partner who was over 25 years of age. We are faced with the question as to how old is too old to be deemed a young parent and what factors might arise in having very young parents (youth) residing with those who are older (adults). One male partner was noted to be 34 years of age.

Conclusion:

This report is not conclusive nor are our findings deemed to be statistically reliable. Still, it is our hope, as many other identified special needs and at risk groups seek to obtain safe and affordable housing as a primary starting point to successful development, that the voices and needs of young parents and those who advocate for them are included.

Perhaps a supportive housing program for young couples could be made possible simply by collaborating with private landlords and/or city run housing services such as the Toronto Community Housing Corporation offering to rent units to young couples conditional on them first agreeing to connect with and work with a selected number of services and supports. Such a support could also be developed and offered to all young women leaving young parent postnatal residential programs especially if they are planning to reside with their partner. As well as those young couples who are already residing together in family shelters.

It is the hope of the Young Parents No Fixed Address network that this be the beginning of an ongoing exploration and perhaps the creation of such supports that would greatly benefit the hundreds of vulnerable young families in our community.

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