

Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent decades, homelessness and housing issues have dotted the landscape of both popular media and academic writings. Pictures and stories from around the world expose us to the haunting realities that hundreds of thousands of people fall homeless due to the ravages of earthquakes, floods, tsunamis and civil wars. Within Canada, media coverage of homeless populations living on our cold winter streets, or surviving terribly traumatic and exploitative experiences, or falling prey to the depredation of economic recessions, has begun to carve out a space within our collective conscience. This book exposes the stories of one segment of our Canadian homeless population — street youth. Youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in Canada. While much of the literature concerning street youth has focused on the etiology of street culture, there have been few systematic analyses of strategies employed by this population to disengage from homelessness. This study investigates the various ways in which young people in six Canadian cities have successfully and unsuccessfully disengaged from street culture.

This book is based upon findings from in-depth qualitative interviews with 128 youth and fifty service providers in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver. It is written in a style that paints as foreground the voices of our distinct participants — young people living on the street, young people exiting street life, young people who have exited the street and those who courageously work on the front lines with these individuals. As such, the book can be seen as a collection of stories that delve into the complexities of being young and homeless. By shedding light upon these young people's travels into and out of homelessness, we are provided with a glimpse not only of street disengagement, but street youth culture in general.

Contextual Dimensions

Throughout this book, the heterogeneity of street youth is continually highlighted and supported. As with other subcultures, the culture of street life is diverse and complex. As such, those who make up street or homeless youth are equally diverse in terms of background, present experiences and future

aspirations. Labels such as “squeegee kids,” “punks,” “street-entrenched,” “group-home,” “in-and-outers,” “runaways” and “shelter youth” are used in the literature as an attempt to make sense of the diverse population and to organize analytical discussions (see for example, Kufeldt and Nimmo 1987; McCarthy 1990; Morrisette and McIntyre 1989; Shane 1989; and van der Ploeg 1989). This work has made every effort not to construct labels, in order to acknowledge the diversity of street youth populations. Not only are such monikers static and vague, but life on the streets is extremely ephemeral, so the meaning of these categories may be different depending on the circumstance in which the youth finds him or herself. Significantly, service providers emphasized the necessity of recognizing the diversity of street populations.

A lot of people only think of homeless kids, the punks with the spiked hair and maybe the prostitutes who go on the street who are drugged up. But we get straight kids who you wouldn't even think they'd live on the street... it's hard to even name because they don't even fall into groups most of the kids, they're just regular people you'd see on the street you'd never think of seeing in the first place. It doesn't mean they're homeless most of them either. It could be low income, not a lot of money, they could be living at home [and] just have problems with their parents and they come here. (service provider, Montreal)

This diversity within street youth populations is particularly important for the purposes of this book for if street youth come from distinct backgrounds and experience street life in different ways, then their exiting processes will also be unique. One Vancouver service provider explains:

I think it depends what your issues are. There's a difference between being homeless because you missed one cheque and being homeless because you are bipolar and addicted to crystal meth. You're going to have a different success rate with those two situations, right? But it kind of compounds itself; the longer you're on the street, the harder it is to get off because you get more entrenched in the culture and you have more of the problems that come with that. (service provider, Vancouver)

Interestingly, despite this heterogeneity among street-involved youth, major regional and gender differences in exiting patterns were not evident in this study. The few cases where there was some variance between these and other sub-groups are highlighted in the book, but otherwise it can be assumed that our data demonstrated commonalities between young men and women

and across the sites. However, it should be noted that the research took place in major urban centres (albeit of varying sizes), and therefore, there could be urban-rural distinctions that are unaccounted for in this study.

Homeless youth are characteristically a transient population, frequently moving between and within localities in search of supportive services, basic needs, adventure, community and better (real and perceived) opportunities (Auerswald and Eyre 2002; Karabanow 2004a; Visano 1990). Given these variables, youth homelessness is extremely nuanced. In addition to the diversity of the population, there are many challenges in defining, describing and understanding street etiology, street culture and most important, the individuals who make up the “street youth” label. This complexity is at the heart of the data and analytical framework. For example, it appears that very few youth successfully disengage from the street on their first attempt, for reasons that are examined at length throughout this book. There was a tendency for street youth to cycle between sleeping on the streets and in shelters, squats and low-quality housing several times before eventually maintaining housing for more extended periods of time. Interviews with service providers confirmed this reality.

In my experience it's [exiting] many attempts, definitely. It takes a lot of... finding a place or getting into a program and getting a job and that sort of falling apart and back on the street, back at the shelter. It takes a number of those cycles for someone to get to a point where it's okay, this needs to change for me and I need to figure out how to change this and really set their mind to making that change happen whether that's dealing with some sort of addiction or getting support around mental health or whatever that is. To me it's kind of like smoking, they say that it takes the average smoker eight attempts to actually quit. So it's definitely a process and for me recognizing that there's a cycle but every time in that cycle, hoping that the hoop of that cycle takes a bit of a move forward instead of spinning backwards. (service provider, Halifax)

Because of the complexity of the cyclical process, the labels of “ex” and “current” street youth overlap. It was noted, however, even when housing and meaningful employment were secured, “ex” street youth generally continue to be an extremely marginalized and vulnerable population. Months or even years after leaving the street a young person can suddenly find him or herself homeless once again. Another service provider likened this cyclical process to quitting an addiction.

Getting off the street is very similar to getting off of drugs and alcohol. Usually it takes more than just one kick at the can.

Sometimes they'll get an apartment and try to get clean and then screw it up and they're back on the street again and then you know, six or eight months later you hear that oh, they got an apartment again and they're working on getting their shit together and then they're back on the street again in a few months. So I think people are successful but it might take four or five tries. (service provider, Toronto)

It is also significant to acknowledge that street youth, as with youth culture in general, are at a time in their lives when they are continually seeking a sense of self and environment, shifting in terms of identity and outlook, and acquiring understanding and knowledge. The process of leaving street life must be examined from within this context, for as youth cycle on and off the streets they are continually learning about themselves and the world around them. Learning leads to the acquisition of particular bodies of knowledge and the process/experience of acquiring that knowledge as personal resources (Lindsey et al. 2000). In many ways, the development patterns of street youth reflect those of youth in mainstream society, albeit without the all-important safety net that is available to most young people. Therefore, it is significant that disengaging from street life was found to be a non-linear process undertaken by youth who are transitioning not only from the streets but also into the early stages of adulthood.

Another contextual dimension that should be addressed is that street life is in itself a cultural arena with a particular set of values, norms and social mores that continue to significantly impact youth when leaving the streets. A service provider likened this phenomenon to the culture shock commonly experienced by new immigrants upon arrival in Canada.

You look at people who might move to Canada from a different culture and there are things that are set up that work. So if someone comes in from a different culture there are community associations that are made up of people who totally associate with that culture and that people can kind of move into and not feel alone in a different culture and there's something that works about that. But that same thing isn't set up [for street youth] because I think street culture isn't really recognized; it seems recognized as deviance. In reality, there is a whole flow that happens on the street that's legitimate to people who are on the street and they have rules for everything. So if someone chooses to leave that culture, that's great but they need to have support from other people who have done it or else, it's complete isolation. I couldn't just move to India right now and be completely isolated and not have [such supports]. I probably wouldn't make it. I'd probably move back. (service provider, Calgary)

The perception of street culture as universally isolating, deviant or criminal and distinct from mainstream society presents significant challenges for young people as they attempt to re-integrate within civil society and regain a sense of citizenship.

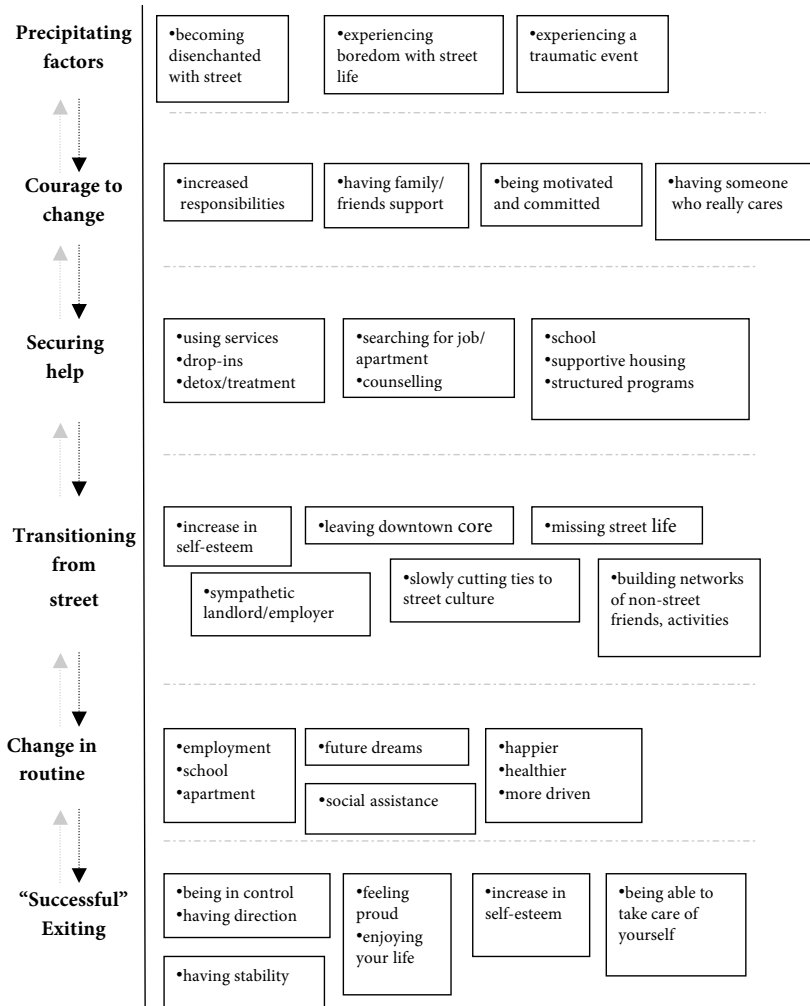
While this book explores youth homelessness primarily from the perspectives of the individual and street communities, it is imperative that we acknowledge the larger, more macro dimensions at play that help shape issues of poverty and homelessness. Putting aside psychosocial attributes, youth are homeless simply because there are not enough supportive, safe and/or affordable housing units available or meaningful and economically viable employment options. It is within this economic context that we must see youth surviving day-to-day on the streets.

A final contextual dimension of the research rests with the notion that this population should be understood first as young people — adolescents — who exhibit similar characteristics to their mainstream cohorts. Street youth can be at times spirited, adventurous and resilient. Like many youth they search for and need to carve out a space for themselves within their environments. Having said this, there is also a significant difference about these young people. Street youth comprise a traumatized group, who are spiritually, physically and emotionally unhealthy often as a direct result of having experienced unimaginable scenarios of exploitation, neglect, abuse, and suffering at the hands of both caregivers and civil society in general (Green 1998; Karabanow 2004a; Panter-Brick and Smith 2000; Weber 1991). Research concerning street exiting practices is important in order to support and advocate for this vulnerable and marginalized population.

Mapping of Analytical Elements

The findings of this study suggest the exiting process for the majority of street youth consists of layers or dimensions of various activities; layers that are by no means mutually exclusive, nor representative of a purely linear path. Instead, Figure 1 highlights significant stages/characteristics commonly experienced by those who have attempted to move out of homelessness. Layer one consists of precipitating factors that initiate thinking of street disengagement. In general, street youth re-assess their street careers in the face of traumatic street experiences, their disenchantment with street culture and/or grim boredom with street survival activities. Layer two involves their courage to change and tends to be heightened through increased responsibilities such as becoming pregnant or having an intimate partner, gaining support from family and friends, having an awareness that one is cared for, and building personal motivation and commitment towards changing one's circumstances. Layer three is highly infused by layer two and involves seeking support within

Figure 1 The Existing Process



the initial stages of “street disembarkment.” This layer tends to include using available services, searching for formal employment and stable housing, and some form of engagement with a formal institution, such as returning to school and/or entering supportive housing/structured program entities. Layer four addresses transitioning away from the street, which this study found to be a complex and difficult stage of street disengagement. Moving away from the street entails physically leaving the downtown core, reducing ties with street culture and street friends, and constructing (or reconstructing) relationships with mainstream society. Within this layer, young people

spoke of missing street culture, being able to locate understanding employers and landlords, and increased self esteem.

Layer five involves restructuring of their routine in terms of employment, education and housing, shifting in thinking about future aspirations and being able to acquire some form of social assistance to support their transitioning. During this stage, young people highlighted a renewed sense of health and wellness, self-confidence and personal motivation. The final stage has been termed “successful exiting” and primarily embodies young people’s emotional and spiritual sense of identity. “Successful exiting” was exemplified by a sense of “being in control” and “having direction” in their life. The majority of participants spoke of feeling proud of their movement out of street life, being able to finally enjoy life on their own terms, healthy self-esteem and self-confidence, being able to take care of themselves and feeling stable in terms of both housing security and wellness. The complexity within each layer is explored throughout the analysis.

A Final Word...

This book is about young people and surprisingly, about hope, rather needed in our current times of increasing and prevailing dismay and despair. Through intimate conversations with street youth across Canada, we share their stories of struggle, their need for acceptance, and finally their need for stability and care. This book is inevitably a story about two interrelated concepts. The first is social exclusion; As a marginalized and alienated population, street youth are unattached to mainstream culture and as such, outside the realm of public citizenship in terms of political involvement, economic engagement and social rapport. In fact, feeling (and being) excluded entails a disconnection from civil society and living as “other.” The second concept is social capital — a popular yet complex term. It is understood roughly as “goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and can be mobilized to facilitate action” (Adler and Kwon 2002: 17). In other words, social capital refers to notions of trust, reciprocity, social support and social ties embedded within networks.

What is interesting about this concept is its functionality — it is based upon one’s social connections and acts as a resource that can be drawn upon for support (Coleman 1988; Looker and Naylor In Press). Social capital tends to be understood within two diverse realms — that of bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital connects people who are similar to one another and tends to exist within homogenous closely knit communities or networks, while bridging refers to linkages with those external to, or outside of, a person’s community or environment. What our study found is that exiting street life meant a renewed or rebuilt sense of citizenship — a shift away from exclusion

towards inclusion. Street disengagement also meant social capital bonding needed to be broken; those exiting had to disentangle themselves from street friends and street culture and at the same time, bridge social capital with mainstream culture. In fact, street exiting entailed a reconfiguration of who these young people are — away from an identity of “homeless youth” or “street kid” and towards an identity of “student” (if they were returning to school), “tenant” (if they were renting an apartment) and/or “employee” (if engaged in formal employment). Once bridging is in process, it appears to lead to new albeit delicate attachments and requires the individual to begin to develop new bonds. This redevelopment of identity had much to do with becoming engaged in civil society, a bridging rather than bonding of social capital.

Outline of Book

The book is framed within a detailed investigation of the process of disengaging from street life. The discussion is divided into six broad sections. First, factors involved in deciding to get off the street are explored. Next, the discussion focuses on the motivations and support that frequently accompany the exiting process. Third, the barriers and successes related to personal issues, mental health, life skills, housing, employment and education are examined. Fourth, individual challenges and reasons for leaving street culture environments are highlighted. This is followed by an examination of the changes in routine most youth experience when leaving the streets and finally by a discussion of the elusive concept of “success” when disengaging from street life. In addition to the discussion of street disengagement, there is brief examination of services provided for street youth across Canada. The final chapter summarizes our findings.

