15 Why Don't You Just Get a Job? Homeless Youth, Social Exclusion and Employment Training

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When I was an outreach worker with a health clinic for street youth, I often encountered young people sitting on the sidewalk while panhandling[1]. One of the things that struck me most was how passers-by – people who essentially looked like me – felt perfectly free to direct negative and disparaging comments at these youth. It was not unusual for people to say: "Why don't you get a job?" Often the comments were much worse.

When people pose such questions today, I usually ask them to reflect on what it takes for any young person to get a job, and then show up day in, day out. Of course, having an education is an obvious factor, followed by talent and motivation. But one needs to go a bit deeper. While acknowledging that across Canada there are great differences in terms of privilege and opportunity (where wealth, education, discrimination and regional difference play a role), it is safe to say that people who are stably housed experience distinct and significant advantages when moving into the labour force.

Having a home means that many of your basic needs are met: it is a place where one can eat, rest, sleep and recover from illness or injury. More than

1. Author Stephen Gaetz worked at Shout Clinic, a community health centre for homeless youth in Toronto, between 1993 and 1999.

merely a physical space, a home means having an address and a telephone, all of which help when looking for work, and at a minimal level, makes a young person more attractive to employers.

Perhaps more importantly, many, if not most teenagers can also count on a broad and diverse range of social supports – including parents and family, friends, neighbours, teachers and counsellors, etc. – to nurture and mentor, to provide emotional support and encouragement AND in some cases, the connections needed to get work.

Being healthy, having adequate shelter, food, and transportation, all make holding down a job easier by providing structure, security and the ability to rest and recover so that one can get up and go to work day in, and day out. Given all of this, it is *still* not easy for many young people to get a job, and it may take years – and a long history of work experience – before they are able to move out on their own, live independently and support themselves. We also know that in recent years, this transition period has grown longer (Côté & Byner, 2008).

For young people who are homeless, the challenges of obtaining and maintaining employment are that much greater. We know that young people who are homeless are likely to have left school at a younger age compared to most housed youth. We know that homeless youth lack key resources – such as income, housing, and food – that enable most people to work. Some homeless youth suffer additional challenges associated with mental health problems and/or addictions. These factors are important to understand if we want to help move youth off the streets in a safe and sustainable way.

In this chapter, we ask a key question: What is the role of employment training programs in helping young people move off the streets? More and more communities struggle with how to enhance the employability of homeless youth, often knowing that traditional employment training programs and supports have not always successfully engaged the most marginal of youth populations.

Our understanding of youth homelessness and employment is drawn from what we have learned from three major research studies (1999, 2002, 2009)[2], as well as other research on street youth and employment (Karabanow, Hughes, et al., 2010; Gwadz et al., 2009; Robinson & Baron, 2007). It is our contention that if

2. The following analysis draws from our research on street youth conducted in 1999, 2002 and 2009 (Gaetz, O'Grady & Vaillancourt, 1999; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri, 2010; O'Grady, Gaetz, & Buccieri, 2011). In each case a large cohort of street involved youth were surveyed and interviewed about a broad range of issues relating to their background, current situation, income generating activities and employability. This article synthesizes our learnings from each of these studies.

employment really *does* have the potential to help end youth homelessness, then we really need to understand what factors enhance the success of such efforts. We argue that this challenge begins with a clearer understanding of the factors in lives of street youth that make it so difficult to obtain and maintain work. Drawing on what has been learned from innovative programming in Canada, we conclude by presenting a clear and robust framework for developing effective employment and training supports for homeless youth. Here we outline key components that should be considered when developing programs and focus on social *inclusion* rather than the exclusionary factors that limit the prospects for street youth.

Thinking About Homeless Youth and Social Exclusion

A homeless youth staying in a shelter or living in an abandoned building may not be visible to the average person. If they are working at a regular job, it may not even occur to anyone that they are homeless. Even a homeless person sitting on a sidewalk or on a park bench may not draw our attention. But when a young person is panhandling or squeegeeing they become difficult to ignore, as our engagement with them – indeed, our engagement with homelessness – becomes direct, personal, visceral and to the chagrin of many, unavoidable. When someone extends their hand, stands in front of us, speaks directly to us, looks us in the eye, homelessness is no longer invisible – it becomes something we are forced to deal with.

These experiences may lead us to question how and why young people become homeless in the first place, and why are they not in school or working? To some, the sight of a panhandling youth is interpreted as evidence that the young person is lazy or unwilling to work. While not exactly new, perspectives that seek to explain poverty in terms of individual choices, motivation and morality have been gaining traction in recent years. Neoliberal theories[3] have entered popular culture and have provided a popular, if problematic, narrative for explaining why some people succeed and others do not, and underlie a belief that social issues such as poverty, unemployment, addictions and mental health are personal, individual and private issues, best addressed by individuals and families, rather than government or the broader society (Navarro, 1998; Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002; Kus, 2006).

The underlying thesis of neoliberal theorists is that at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy exists a group of people – people different from you

3. Neoliberalism is an ideological orientation that has had a huge influence on social policy over the past several decades. Neoliberalism supports a radical notion of individualism, arguing that shared social and economic resources and supports should be reduced, state services should become privatized, and that there should be a greater reliance on the 'marketplace' to distribute goods and services. Informed by the neo-liberal critique of Beck (1992) and Foucault (1991), the neo-liberal citizen is the 'manager' of his or her own risk; one who contributes to the economy while at the same time caring for his or her family.

and me – who have willingly opted out of a range of mainstream social institutions (Murray, 1994; 2012; Herrstein & Murray, 1996). 'They' are not interested in getting jobs or going to school. 'They' flout laws and disrespect authority. 'They' readily take advantage of handouts. Moreover, there is an implied contagion effect: that by grouping such people together, there is the potential for the destructive ideas and values that underlie poverty to spread not only outwardly, but between generations, as well.

Additionally, neoliberal critiques suggest that government interventions, such as social programs and income supports, are an ineffective and counter-productive response to the bad and immoral choices that individuals make, and may actually contribute to the problem by encouraging laziness, immoral conduct and urban decay. That is, people will avoid getting a job if they are able to 'take advantage' of benefits, and people would rather be on welfare than work. Following this logic, a key remedy to unemployment is to make employment more attractive than living off 'the taxpayer,' and cutting back or eliminating state support is seen as the solution to the underclass problem. This logic suggests that homeless people should pull themselves up by the bootstraps. It is also the logic that frames some people as 'deserving' of support, and others as the 'undeserving poor'.

Lest we imagine that such theorizing is somehow disconnected from the 'real world', it is worth looking at the results of a poll taken by the Salvation Army in 2011. The report, "The Dignity Project", found that many Canadians "hold opinions that perpetuate the idea that "the poor are the problem" and that "their decisions and choices led them to a life of poverty"" (Salvation Army, 2011). Some of the results indicate:

- Nearly half of all respondents agree with the notion that if poor people really want to work, they can always find a job.
- 43 percent agree that "a good work ethic is all you need to escape poverty."
- 41 percent believe that the poor would "take advantage" of any assistance given and "do nothing."
- 28 percent believe the poor have lower moral values than average.
- Nearly a quarter believe that "people are poor because they are lazy."

Homeless Youth and Work

So, what do we know about homeless youth and employment? There is considerable literature that attests to the challenges that homeless youth experience in obtaining and maintaining employment (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; O'Grady et al., 1998; Karabanow, Hughes, et al., 2010; Baron &

Hartnagel, 2002; Keenan et al., 2006; Robinson & Baron, 2007). In our recent report, "Surviving Crime and Violence", 77% of our sample were unemployed (the rest having part-time or full-time jobs), and few were engaged in school, with over 65% having failed to complete high school (Gaetz et al., 2010).

A lack of traditional jobs does not necessarily mean that homeless youth are not *working*. Because homeless youth face considerable barriers to employment, many of those we surveyed engaged in what are referred to as "informal" economic activities outside of the formal labour market, some of which were technically legal, for example 'under the table' jobs, or 'binning' (collecting bottles for refunds). Others engaged in more risky illegal or quasi-legal activities, including the sex trade, panhandling (begging), squeegeeing (cleaning car windshields), and criminal acts such as theft and drug dealing (O'Grady et al., 1998; Gaetz et al., 1999; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2003).

A defining feature of such informal money making strategies is that they are socially patterned. That is, certain social characteristics (background factors such as age one left home, history of abuse, and education level, or situational factors such as addictions or mental health) have a direct impact on what is possible, and what moneymaking strategies one engages in. Young people who come from the worst backgrounds – who suffered physical, sexual and emotional abuse at home, who left home at an early age and dropped out of school, and who have addictions challenges – are less likely to get regular jobs. This group is the most likely to rely on illegal and quasi-legal forms of making money, including prostitution. Those who stayed in school for longer periods, left home at a later age and have fewer addictions or mental health issues, are more likely to report having a job currently or sometime in the past. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of homeless youth are thus important when considering employment as a pathway off the streets. For some homeless youth, this pathway is shorter, straighter and less littered with obstacles than it is for others (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

Another feature of informal work is that it is highly flexible, and may in fact be key to economic survival on the streets. The young people in our studies were able to point out some advantages of this kind of work – you make your own hours, you select your colleagues and there is companionship (in some cases). In terms of contributing to the development of labour market skills, it has been pointed out by several researchers that many of the skills and routines learned through this work – including teamwork and collaboration, strategic thinking and a consideration for 'consumer satisfaction' – are transferable to work in the formal economy (Hurtubise et al., 2003; Karabanow, Hughes, et al., 2010). The most obvious reason, however, for engaging in such work is that it produces income – cash in hand – on a day in, day out basis. For people leading chaotic lives, who are hungry, have no

savings and who live in extreme poverty, this latter point is particularly important.

While there are positive benefits to such work, it is important to note that street youth also recognize the downside, including risk of criminal victimization (theft, sexual assault), trouble with the police, humiliation when recognized by friends, and abuse by passers-by:

> *"I find panhandling degrading. Here I am panhandling and the next day I go for a job interview and the guy who's interviewing you I asked for money the day before, or I meet the parents of my old friend from public school, people you don't want to know and they know you and see you and treat you like a sympathy case, to want to take you for food."* (Seamus, 19)[4]

There is ample research that suggests that homeless youth are much more likely than housed youth to be victims of crime including assault and robbery (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Generating income in highly visible settings, lacking access to safe places to retreat to after work, and strained relationships with police (O'Grady et al., 2011) – meaning they are unlikely to report crimes – means they make attractive targets for other criminals.

So why do homeless youth engage in these activities instead of just getting a regular job? A common assumption is that rather than get a real job, street youth panhandle or squeegee just for kicks or because it is easier than real work. This interpretation of 'lazy' and/or 'delinquent' street youth is quite enduring, and is often the underlying theme of scornful comments by the media, politicians and police. Indeed, Gordon (2004; 2006) has argued that panhandling and squeegeeing are typically framed not as a strategy for those living in poverty to earn money, but rather as a reflection of the character of a homeless population presumed to be lazy, uninterested in waged labour and lacking self-discipline.

Can we really consider street youth's money making practices as simply a 'choice', or is something else going on? Is this more about circumstance and meeting subsistence needs in the face of poverty? Our past research (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002) has addressed this question, exploring whether youth preferred panhandling, squeegeeing or illegal work (drug dealing) over having a regular job. Approximately 80% of males and females indicated that they do not like to be squeegeeing, stripping, selling drugs, etc., on a steady basis. When asked, "Are you interested in finding paid employment?" an overwhelming 83.4% of males and 87.8% of females said "yes". Street youth do not appear to be a group that is avoiding work.

4. Quotes from young people who are homeless are reproduced from Gaetz et al., 1999.

> *"I like having the ability to bring in my own money and not be depending on welfare. I want to be off welfare. Every time I've gotten a job I've cut myself off welfare, I haven't screwed the system. I hate not working. I deal with an employment counselor twice a week trying to find work."* (Brian, 22)

Other researchers, such as Gwadz et al., (2009) identify the degree to which informal work is considered demeaning and humiliating to many youth. These young people, rather than 'aspiring' to such work or opting out of the formal economy, as some theorists would have it, typically have very conventional aspirations and dreams regarding employment, obtaining a career and financial independence.

There is no clear evidence, then, that homeless youth lack motivation and/or are opposed to, or are actively avoiding mainstream employment. Rather, most homeless youth *do* have records of employment, and have had more than one job, though their employment histories are precarious. When they do get jobs, it is usually low-wage, part-time, dead end work at the margins of the economy (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Robinson & Baron, 2007): employment that rarely provides a living wage, or an opportunity for future upward mobility (Côté & Bynner, 2008; Standing, 2011). In fact, because of the marginal nature of the jobs street youth are able to obtain, many report unfair treatment by employers, including racism, sexual harassment, and in some cases, not being paid for work done (this is more often the case when payment is under the table) (Gaetz, 2002). For many, then, the experience of mainstream employment is not necessarily a positive one.

> *"What skills did you learn at these jobs? It depends on what point of view you have. At my last job I think I learned that people really don't have any morals and the world truly sucks. I was starting to be optimistic for a while but that whole experience taught me otherwise."* (Johnny, 22)

Clearly, informal money making strategies such as panhandling, binning, squeegeeing and prostitution are not the primary employment choices of street youth, and neither are dead end jobs. The question then becomes what keeps street youth from obtaining and maintaining suitable employment that would allow them to sustain themselves and move off the streets?

Is Employment Training the Solution?

The ability to obtain work in a competitive labour market is linked to 'human capital', which entails, "the abilities, skills, and knowledge acquired by an individual through various channels such as inheritance, education and/or training. Human capital is the currency people bring to invest in their jobs" (Robinson & Baron,

2007:38). It is this lack of human capital experienced by some marginalized populations (such as homeless youth) that provides the 'logic' for employment training.

There are three main approaches to enhancing the employability of youth that are generally embraced in Canada. The first is the informal learning that comes from family and community. On a material level, families provide shelter, income and resources (including food) while young people stay in school and/or acquire their first jobs. It is also within the home that young people gradually learn how to look for work, what to say during an interview, the importance of punctuality, how to deal with the challenges of work life (difficult bosses and colleagues), and budgeting. Wealth and privilege provide many additional advantages to young people, including access to better schools, supports and resources for achievement or, conversely, support when young people face challenges.

The second approach to enhancing youth employability is related to education, and key here is the desire to get young people to stay in school as long as possible, and obtain education and training that meets the needs of the labour market. Statistics Canada describes education as a 'gateway' to higher earnings (Statistics Canada, 2008). The evidence that the higher one's level of education is, the better one's employment outcomes will be, is so overwhelming that it is hardly worth reviewing (Low, 2006). Minimally, a high school diploma increases one's chances of work, and expands one's opportunities. Moving on to college or university only enhances these opportunities, and the rise in 'credentialism' only increases the need for more post-secondary education (Côté & Bynner, 2008).

Finally, there are employment training programs, designed to enhance the employability of the long-term unemployed, social assistance recipients and other marginalized populations that face challenges integrating into the labour market (Greene, 2003; Lafer, 2002; Robinson & Baron, 2007). These programs have as their goal to improve the 'human capital' of such persons by providing them with the necessary skills to prepare them to successfully compete for and keep jobs; in a sense, to "work their way out of poverty" (Lafer, 2002:94). Such training usually involves a combination of "hard skills" – technical skills for jobs, such as computer training, trades etc., – and "soft skills" – that focus on work readiness including job search and interview strategies, or how to manage conflict with other employees or managers.

The best employment training programs are effective in that they meet their objective of improving the employability of marginalized youth by providing them with the supports necessary to transition into the world of work. Such programs move beyond a narrow neoliberal orientation (focusing on skills development and 'motivation') and incorporate strategies to overcome many of

the challenges faced by young people who experience social exclusion. Special efforts are made to recruit and support sympathetic employers who are willing to hire marginalized youth who are perceived (correctly or incorrectly) to be a 'risk'. There are many excellent job shadowing, coaching and/or mentoring supports designed to help young people keep their jobs and deal with the challenges that work can bring, including, ironically, the successes.

When such programs target street youth, there is a larger goal. That is, employment training becomes framed as a *response* to homelessness, in that assisting young people to obtain and sustain employment represents a pathway off the streets. This goal recognizes that traditional approaches to youth employment training may not work with street youth, and that few homeless youth actually successfully participate in such training. To understand why homeless youth do not succeed in such programs, one needs to consider from an institutional perspective the ways in which most employment training programs are organized, and how this may clash with the lived experience of young people who are homeless. A highly structured program with a set number of required hours of attendance on consecutive days or weeks might work for young people with shelter, food and supports, but not necessarily for street youth. Lack of money for transportation, food and necessities, combined with the inherent instability and unexpected crises of their day-to-day lives may make participating in such programs particularly difficult for street youth. Unfortunately, for those delivering employment training, there is not necessarily much room for flexibility, as the terms and conditions of programs are often dictated by funders.

All of this raises an important question: ***Do employment training programs offer a solution to street youth unemployment?*** As will be seen, our argument is that employment training must be integrated into a broader web of supports – the kind of supports that many or most housed youth have access to. Stand-alone employment training that is divorced from other necessary supports including safe and appropriate housing, income, nutrition, social and health supports will generally not meet the needs of most homeless youth.

An Alternative Perspective on Poverty: Social Exclusion

To truly understand why a person – or group of people – faces challenges in obtaining work, we need to look at the multiple factors that have an impact on employability beyond skills and 'motivation' levels. The concept of social exclusion provides an effective means for understanding the range of factors that reduce people's access to opportunities and shape what is possible for them. Social exclusion describes the circumstances and experiences of persons who are shut out, fully or partially, from the social, economic, political and cultural institutions of

society (Byrne, 1999; Mandianapour, 1998). Such an account begins with the recognition that it is not unusual for marginalized groups and individuals to be socially, economically *and* spatially separated from the people and places that other citizens have access to within advanced industrial societies (Sibley, 1995).

Social exclusion allows us to make sense of the degree to which individual experiences and histories overlap with certain social, political and economic conditions (including poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, racism, sexism and homophobia) that restrict young people's access to spaces, institutions and practices that increase opportunities and reduce risk. The link between such structural factors and personal histories shapes and limits people's participation and engagement in society, and thus impacts the choices individuals make, by narrowing the choices that are available. Finally, social exclusion reveals the degree to which popular societal myths – things such as equality of opportunity, education as an equalizer, equal access to health care, safety and justice – are just that: myths that paper over the degree to which opportunity, access and rights are unevenly distributed.

Much of the literature on social exclusion has focused on the predicament of marginalized youth. Key researchers such as MacDonald (1998; 2004; 2008), Jones (2002) and Blackman (1998) have written extensively on social exclusion (or inclusion) and how it shapes transitions to adulthood, in the areas of education, employment, crime and substance use, for instance. Social exclusion gives us insight into the employability of young people and the role that employment training might play (Macdonald, 1998; 2004; 2008; Hammer, 2003). Key institutions such as family, schools, the labour market, the education system and the legal system influence this process, and can help (or hinder) young people's navigation towards adulthood and the world of work. A measure of social inclusion is the degree to which such institutions support young people's transitions and enable them to obtain and maintain employment, or on the other hand, whether the absence of such institutions creates unique challenges and/or barriers to opportunity.

This makes sense in the context of youth homelessness, where social inclusionary factors that most of us take for granted – having a home, address, adult support and time to grow into adulthood, as well as access to income, food, recreation and transportation – are shortened or largely absent. To truly understand the limited employability of young people who are homeless – and the challenges for employment training – it is necessary to consider the degree to which they experience social exclusion in complex ways across a number of related areas, in a way that is cumulative in nature. In the following section we explore the key dimensions of social exclusion faced by homeless youth, including inadequate housing and shelter; lack of income; educational disengagement; compromised health; weak social capital; chaotic lives; and finally, an

interrupted adolescence. These are the barriers to employability that homeless youth experience: factors that must be taken into account when employment, and in particular employment training, is considered as a pathway off the street.

Housing and Shelter

Perhaps the most obvious example of the social exclusion faced by homeless youth is their inability to secure housing, because of their young age, inexperience and most importantly, their poverty. Street youth spend much of their time moving between shelters, friends' places, squats and the streets. When they do obtain rental housing, it is often temporary (in low rent motels or boarding houses) and/or at the margins of the housing market, where accommodations are poorly regulated and dishonest landlords are waiting to take advantage (Gaetz, 2002).

Being without secure shelter has a profound impact on people's ability to exert greater control over their lives, as shelter in fact underpins any person's efforts to work. It is at home where one rests and recovers so that one can work the next day, where one creates stability and organizes one's world, maintains hygiene, eats and stores food (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, Carson, et al., 2010). Lacking secure and stable housing means having no address to put on a resume (which is not exactly a confidence builder for potential employers), and a limited ability to present a nice, clean appearance for job interviews and to maintain interview clothes. Perhaps more importantly, inadequate housing has an impact on one's ability to keep a job once one is secured.

> *"My housing situation has never been stable. I'd be there (at work), sometimes with no place to go at night, then I'd be exhausted at work. I didn't think it was cool to tell the boss I had nowhere to live. A lot of times I would just not be able to go back to work."* (Angus, 23)

The importance of being able to 'disappear' behind a secure door cannot be underestimated. When young people are homeless, they are much more likely to be victims of crime (Gaetz et al., 2010; Gaetz, 2004). Safety is compromised when one does not have a secure home to retreat to (though it is acknowledged that not all homes are safe). Likewise, having the ability to recover from illness, injury, fatigue or from the influence of alcohol or drugs is more difficult without a safe and secure place. The alternative is either over-crowded social service environments where health and safety are endangered, or public and semi-public spaces, where control and security are nearly impossible.

As a reflection of social inclusion, most people rely on their housing to enable them to work. This is something few street youth can count on.

Income

It may sound strange to talk about income as a necessary condition for employment, or even training. However, for all of us, it is key. Adequate income allows us to pay for our housing. It means we can purchase the clothing and hygiene products necessary to be presentable for a job and interview, but also for specific types of work (the need for work-boots, dress clothes, etc.). Money is necessary for transportation to and from work. It also pays for food, ideally three meals a day. If one gets a job or enrolls in a training program, income is needed to ensure all of these things are in place before their first pay cheque arrives, which for many people may be two weeks or even a month away. One cannot work for weeks without food, for instance. Thus, not having an income contributes to the exclusion of young people who are homeless from the workforce.

Education

At a time when youth unemployment rates in Canada are particularly high (17.2% in the summer of 2011[5]), young people and adults alike generally recognize the link between a good education and the ability to compete in the job market. People have become increasingly aware that shifts in the economy require a more educated workforce, and the rise of 'credentialism' has resulted in a steady decline in dropout rates in Canada, reaching a low of 8.5% in 2009-2010[6].

It is well known that the dropout rates for young people who are homeless are extremely high. In two studies we conducted, the dropout rate ranged from 57% to 65%, with an even higher rate among those who engage in prostitution, squeegeeing or panhandling (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz et al., 2010). Low rates of high school completion are typically due to a combination of factors, including (often undiagnosed) learning disabilities and mental health problems, trauma, and addictions issues (either their own, or family members') that may have resulted in poor school performance and disengagement before becoming homeless. However, this is not the case for all young people, and for many it is the *experience* of homelessness that leads to dropping out. Becoming homeless means not only the loss of home, family and friends, but disengagement from school and the adult supports that go with it.

Unfortunately, while there are programs across Canada that support young people who are homeless in their efforts to pursue their education, these are the exception rather than the rule. Most emergency services focus on meeting basic

5. http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/story/2011/09/27/pol-finley-g20-youth-jobs.html
6. Statistics Canada: http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=32

needs, and supports for independent living more often focus on skills development, rather than on education. That ongoing participation in education is obviously difficult for homeless youth and is not a top priority for service providers, is one of the clearest manifestations of social exclusion of homeless youth.

Compromised Health

Life on the streets is incredibly challenging and research overwhelmingly suggests it has a negative impact on health and well-being. This includes greater incidences of illness and injury (including upper respiratory tract infections such as colds, laryngitis, and sinusitis), higher rates of sexually transmitted infections, higher mortality, as well as an increased future risk of diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and muscle and joint problems (Kulik et al., 2011; Frankish et al., 2005; Boivin et al., 2005). The inability to maintain personal hygiene can result in lice, scabies, fungal infections, sores and dental and gum disease (Kulik et al., 2011). Being homeless also makes recovery from illness a challenge, since while most people who are sick like to recover at home, this is generally not an option for people living on the streets or even those staying in emergency shelters. The inability to take steps to prevent and recover from illness is a reflection of social exclusion.

Compromised health can have an impact on one's ability to obtain and maintain work, even for a person who is young. For young people with growing bodies, inadequate nutrition becomes a problem. In spite of charitable food provision (shelters and soup kitchens) in many Canadian cities, there is strong evidence that young people who are homeless suffer from food deprivation and malnutrition (Tarasuk et al., 2005; 2009). Not only that, the inability to store food and a lack of income mean that even if one has a job, one may not have access to food on a daily basis necessary to allow one to continue working.

It is well established that homeless populations in general suffer from higher incidences of mental illnesses including post-traumatic stress disorder, psychiatric disorders (such as schizophrenia) and mood disorders (such as depression and bipolar) (Kulik et al., 2011; McKay, 2009; Kidd, 2004). In this volume, both Elizabeth McKay and Sean Kidd report that street youth exhibit very high levels of depression, anxiety (obsessive/compulsive and phobic), hostility, paranoia, psychotic symptoms and suicidal thoughts. While teen years are difficult for many young people – whether housed or not – the degree to which many homeless youth suffer from mental illness, disorders and depression is a key factor that will impair their ability to work (Lenz-Rashid, 2006).

Addictions, like mental illness, can be both a cause and a consequence of homelessness, with street youth populations showing higher rates of sub-

stance use and addictions than housed youth (Adlaf & Zdnowicz, 1999; Haley et al., 2004; Roy et al., 2009; Dematteo et al., 1999). The health consequences of increased drug use and addictions are well known, and include higher incidences of HIV, Hepatitis A and C, and other diseases.

Substance use becomes a problem for anyone when it impairs one's ability to carry out daily tasks, maintain relationships and obtain and retain a job. For homeless youth, higher rates of substance use and addictions can be traced to their response to the challenges of life on the streets – having to deal with depression, trauma, violence, unresolved issues from their past, and in many cases, emerging mental illness – which leads many to greater risk-taking behaviours and the tendency to self-medicate with illicit drugs. For some, substance use is the outcome of the struggle to survive:

> *"(Prostitution is) incredibly degrading - I became a serious alcoholic and drug addict because of it. Because it was so degrading it was my only way of dealing with it and that's why I don't do it anymore, both jobs, stripping and escorting. I was always incredibly high or incredibly drunk or both and ended up in the detox. I wouldn't do it again, it was a bad time in my life and I didn't care about myself or anybody else. I figured I was going to end up dead."* (Monica, 21)

The health consequences of homelessness present considerable barriers to someone's ability to move forward with their life. This is particularly true for young people with acute mental health and/or addictions challenges (not to mention learning disabilities) and for whom finding work will be extremely difficult without ongoing support. Research suggests that having housing can play a big role in reducing the most negative effects of mental illness (Forchuk et al., 2011).

Chaotic Lifestyle

The ability to think ahead and exert some measure of control over one's daily life is a measure of inclusion; one that we rarely think about, but one that is so central to our ability to work. Those who are gainfully employed must have some structure in their lives. Days are organized around work, transportation, eating, recreation and sleep. Obtaining work or employment requires the ability to think forward, to plan and prepare, and understand the consequences of erratic behavior or unexpected events. Unfortunately for young people who are homeless, chaos and instability are in many ways the defining features of their lives.

One of the consequences of the chaotic lifestyle of street youth is that long-term thinking and planning become almost a luxury, as attention is focused on

meeting immediate needs. Maintaining a job becomes difficult, and money-making is often focused around meeting immediate needs. Keeping track of time (both during a given day, but also week to week) is challenging without clocks and calendars. Food security and the ability to plan and control one's diet is difficult without a refrigerator and storage areas. Creating regularity in one's day – in terms of controlling when one eats, sleeps, has visitors (or not) – becomes a challenge, and what we would normally consider routine activities become very unpredictable. The immediate priorities of food, shelter and security, for instance, loom much larger than is typically the case for mainstream teenagers, who are generally more able to focus on longer-term goals (education, career) because they have more adequate supports.

This short term thinking, accentuated by the chaos and instability of life on the streets, means youth do not have the luxury of considering the longer-term consequences of their behaviours (for example, engaging in unprotected sex, drug use, involvement in criminal acts). It also means that they may make compromises that are not in their best interests, or give up advocating for their own rights, if there is no obvious short-term benefit. All of this undermines the efforts of homeless youth to look for work, to consistently attend employment training, or to keep a job.

Weak Social Capital

The concept of having an effective and responsive support system is highlighted in the theory of social capital, which considers the *value of relationships.* Social capital refers to those important and valuable social resources (knowledge, abilities, connections, etc.) that family, friends, and others can draw on to support one's life chances and challenges (Portes, 1998; Shier et al., 2010). Social capital theory allows us to understand the different human resources that people draw on and the degree to which some individuals and groups are disadvantaged in this regard.

Many young people grow up relying on a broad range of social supports to help them move into adulthood, beginning with family, but also including friends, neighbours, teachers and counsellors. These relationships ideally provide support in the form of love, guidance, encouragement and models of adult behaviour. In the best case scenario, these supports enable young people to learn the skills for day-to-day living, and to nurture dreams of adult life that include family and occupation. These supports also are key to helping many youth find and maintain work.

The scope and nature of homeless youth's social capital is profoundly limited. Once on the streets, their connections with extended family, school and communities of origin are weakened, and their network of social supports is diminished to the point that they may come to rely more and more on their circle of street

youth friends. This network, often described by street youth as their "street family", may provide them with precious knowledge ('street smarts') and resources for surviving on the streets, (money, food, clothing, etc.). Such networks may also provide some degree of safety – particularly important for young women.

While the social capital of street friends may give youth resources to survive the harsh life of the streets, its value for helping them move forward with their lives is much more limited. In terms of employment, street youth networks do not effectively prepare youth for a job search (help with resumes or interview preparation), or commonly provide the useful "connections" that so many young people rely on to get work. Finally, the demands of street relationships – which are rooted in an unstructured and chaotic lifestyle – may invariably undermine one's ability to keep a job once it is obtained.

Adolescence Interrupted

It is the loss of adolescence (or at best, its early end) that perhaps most clearly defines the social exclusion of homeless youth. Theories of adolescent development often describe the transition from childhood to adulthood as one that can be challenging and potentially problematic, even in an environment that is relatively stable. The developmental tasks[7] associated with "becoming" an adult are many, and are distributed across a range of social, psychological and biological domains, including for instance, the growth of adult bodies, as well as the assumption of legal rights and responsibilities, as defined by the state.

From the early teen years on, young people develop new capabilities and take on new responsibilities bit by bit, over an extended period of time, in the areas of education, income, housing, social relations, health and mobility. All of this is typically accomplished with lots of adult supervision and support both within and outside the home, with a commitment to education as a central institutional support. And in recent years, the period of adolescence has lengthened, as shifts in the job market and housing affordability, as well as pressures to continue with education, make living independently more and more difficult for teens.

Unfortunately, the experience of homelessness typically means that young people are shut out of the normal process of adolescent development that so many of us consider essential for a healthy transition to adulthood. Rather than being granted the opportunity of adjusting to adulthood and its responsibilities and challenges over an extended period of time, street youth experience an adolescence interrupted, where the process of moving into adulthood is accelerated.

7. Developmental tasks are achievements considered necessary for a successful transition to the next stage of life (e.g., finding a job as a sign of becoming an adult).

In spite of the trauma resulting from becoming homeless and the inevitable instability produced by profound poverty, these young people simultaneously are charged with the task of effectively managing a diverse and complex set of tasks and risks. In some ways, they are thrust into adult roles and responsibilities almost immediately – having to obtain shelter and run their own household, generate income (and manage money both effectively and responsibly) and take care of their nutritional needs. They must navigate their institutional relationships (school, health care, government benefits, and employment) with minimal support, and often without basic identification documents. They are also exposed to early sexual activity, personal safety concerns and substance use challenges in a much shorter time frame than is typical. All of these challenges may be faced rapidly, within the first several months – or even weeks – of becoming homeless, at a time when young people are still suffering from the trauma of leaving their homes, families and communities.

All of this suggests that for young people who become homeless, the challenge of moving from childhood to adulthood is qualitatively different than for most teenagers. Young people in this situation are typically denied access to the resources, support, and perhaps most significantly, the time that we allow for a successful transition to adulthood. They are therefore excluded from the process of gradually increasing independence that is widely held to be crucial to human development.

How Does All This Help Us Think About Employment and Training?

In Canada, employment training programs are designed to provide support for those facing barriers to employment. Through the development of soft skills (job readiness) and hard skills (marketable skills), they expand people's human capital and make them more competitive in the labour market. While we are not suggesting there is no need for skills development within the street youth population, at its worst this "technical" approach to employment training can be seen as treating street youth merely as empty vessels into which hard skills and soft skills are poured, with the expectation that they will have greater knowledge and motivation to enter the competitive job market. One must be wary of a neoliberal perspective that champions training programs as a simple and straightforward solution to homeless youth unemployment. The failure of street youth to participate in, and stick it out in these programs may unfortunately reinforce the neoliberal focus on their individual failings and inadequacies, and the inaccurate perception that they are lazy or simply "lack motivation".

This raises a fundamental question: can employment training help street youth move off the streets, and into gainful employment? Surprisingly, there is not a

lot of research on the effectiveness of employment training programs. Much of the research is inconclusive as to whether such programs do increase employment rates of participants, whether housed or not (Lerman, 2000), or have a real impact on post-program earnings (Lafer, 2000; Orr et al., 1996).

One of the only studies on street youth and employment programs shows mixed results (Robinson & Baron, 2007). In their study, the young people who participated in employment training spoke positively about the skills they learned and developed, improved confidence and the opportunity to gain experience. They also identified key characteristics of staff that were important:

> *"Staff should be understanding, open, non-judgmental and try to engage with the youth on a somewhat personal level in order to assist them. Even if youth are not actively seeking employment, they may attend such programs for the social support and understanding that is offered, accessing "conventional" forms of support."* (Ibid., 47)

From an experiential perspective, these programs were clearly important to the young people who participated. Whether such programs actually improved the employability – and employment outcomes – of participants is not so evident. Many left the program and did not find work. The hard skills learned were not always in demand, or did not adequately open doors to employment. Overall, they conclude that such training experiences did not appear "to add much in the way of human capital to actually invest in employment. They appear to try and provide an avenue for youth to exploit what limited human capital they have" (Robinson & Baron, 2007:43).

So, while employment training is certainly important and may contribute to the development of skills for young people who are homeless, it must be considered in a broader context: one that responds to the social exclusionary factors that undermine their ability not only to participate in training programs, but more generally in the labour market. The failure to look beyond the stereotypes of street youth and the challenges they face undermines the effectiveness of employment training as a solution to youth homelessness.

Obtaining and maintaining a job is about much more than motivation, skills, hustle and opportunity. The social exclusionary framework we have explored here helps us not only understand the lived circumstances of homeless youth, but how an approach to youth homelessness that includes employment training can be most effective. For young people who become homeless, social exclusion is experienced across several related domains, with the degree of exclusion growing the longer one remains homeless. Solutions to youth homelessness

that emphasize one dimension of social exclusion (job training, or treatment, for instance) may work for some people, but for most, such an approach is likely to be of limited value. In fact, it is the complex interaction between the different dimensions of social exclusion that points to the need for a broader and more comprehensive intervention in order to truly achieve long lasting success.

Starting with *Social Inclusion*: A Framework for Training and Employment

There is a role for employment training in strategies to address youth homelessness. We argue that employment training is most effective when integrated into a broader system of supports – supports that address social exclusionary factors. It is when we enable the social inclusion of marginalized young people that employment training can have a sustainable impact. Two examples of 'promising practices' presented in this volume ("BladeRunners", and "Train for Trades") demonstrate ways of designing employment training experiences for marginalized young people that are effective, and produce desired and long lasting outcomes.

Drawing from these examples, and from our analysis of the social exclusionary factors that present barriers to street youth employment, we provide a framework for employment training. Here we identify key factors related to program design that contribute to the social inclusion of homeless youth. This framework supports effective outcomes that will not only help young people obtain and maintain work, but will reduce the chances that they remain in poverty or become homeless again. Key elements include:

1) Program Philosophy

An employment training program for homeless youth must demonstrate fidelity to three principles: a) activities must be designed to support the needs of the developing adolescent; b) programming must address socially exclusionary factors that make participation in employment and employment training a challenge; and c) young people need to leave the program with access to better jobs (and higher wages) than they would have if they did not participate in the program. Other key features of a successful program include:

- The development of a mission, goals and objectives that are clear, attainable and broadly agreed upon by diverse stakeholders.
- A willingness to support the most marginalized of street youth, as they will have the most difficulty in participating in mainstream employment training.

- Adoption of a 'harm reduction' philosophy and approach that accepts substance users as they are, while at the same time promoting healthier lifestyles.
- Adoption of inclusive, anti-discriminatory philosophy, policies and practices that are sensitive and relevant to youth of different social and cultural backgrounds, and address the needs of young people additionally marginalized by racism, sexism and/or homophobia.

2) Structural Supports

Stand-alone employment training is not likely to work for young people who are homeless. Homeless youth are in the end *adolescents*, and their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development is occurring in a context of social exclusion where they lack traditional supports to navigate these changes. Without key structural supports, many young people will be unable to participate, complete and succeed in such programs.

- **Stable housing** – This is perhaps the key component. If young people are absolutely homeless (on the street or in shelters), their chance of obtaining work or successfully completing employment training is greatly restricted, and this is even more so for those with mental health problems or addictions. Longer-term transitional housing or independent living is ideal, as this gives people more flexibility, stability, privacy and personal control over their circumstances. Staying in emergency shelters likely increases challenges for those engaged in training, especially if young people are not safe, are not getting adequate food (including food to take to work), have restrictive curfew policies (making work outside of 9-to-5 problematic), or lack privacy and the ability to store clothes and other resources.
- **Income** – No youth can work, or even successfully participate in training, unless they have income or financial support. This allows them to purchase necessary clothing and equipment as well as personal hygiene products. It enables them to purchase food so they can eat every day, and pay for transportation. In addition, many young people will benefit from financial literacy training, as well as assistance in setting up a bank account. For young people who are not used to having money (and especially those who are also dealing with addictions issues) necessary supports also include ensuring that the good fortune of 'payday' does not become a disaster.
- **Access to appropriate health care and social supports** – Being healthy is important for anyone who wants to work. Proper nutrition,

sleep and a reduction in stress are key to ensuring health, making the adequacy of housing and income supports health issues. Some young people face additional health challenges relating to mental health problems and/or addictions. They can succeed in employment training and/or obtaining work if they have proper supports in place.

3) Program Components

In addition to enhancing soft skills and hard skills, those establishing training programs for homeless youth should include the following program components:

- **A focus on the development of real, marketable skills** – Employment training is not considered to be effective if the skills learned merely enable young people to better compete for low-wage, dead end jobs. Training should focus on developing marketable skills, and ideally be based on an analysis of labour market trends. Both Train for Trades and BladeRunners train young people in skilled trades, and open doors for higher paying, and in some cases unionized, jobs.
- **Client driven case management** – An individualized case management approach is important to ensure that the needs of young participants are addressed, and that young people are assisted in navigating the challenges, opportunities and crises that go with the experience of training, getting a job and earning money. Key here is ensuring that good staff are hired, have proper training and values that align with the program goals, and can therefore ensure program fidelity.
- **Targeting and supporting special needs** – Not all street youth will experience the same challenges – there will be differences in health and mental health status, for instance. Some young people will be dealing with the challenges of addictions, while others will not. The key point is that the more likely an individual is to experience any or all of these barriers, the more complex their transition to adulthood, and their transition from the instability of homelessness to the stability of housing, adequate income, good health and healthy relationships.
- **Mentoring and job shadowing** – For marginalized youth whose social capital is weak and who lack strong relationships with adults, coaching is key. Job coaching helps young people stay in the program, or stay on the job, in the face of emerging challenges and crises. Coaching provides support in cases where there is conflict on the job, where participants lose confidence, or when incidents

outside of the work/training experience interfere, including occasional 'binges', problems with friends, uncontrolled payday spending, etc. The best job coaches are on call 24 hours.

Mentoring provides young people with an opportunity to learn from people with experience. Mentors can be volunteers with work experience – program graduates often are the best mentors, because as 'peers' they have a deep understanding of the challenges that young people face.

- **Opportunities for educational advancement** – A focus on employment training without also paying attention to educational needs may lead to a lifetime of low-paying, dead end jobs, in a highly competitive job market. Given the rise of credentialism and the recognized importance of education, efforts should be made to integrate opportunities to re-engage with school, and as a minimum, to complete high school. A focus on education builds a training program on principles of social inclusion.

4) Institutional Components

For a program to achieve its goals and objectives, key institutional components must be in place, including:

- **Ongoing core funding** – Effective training programs of the sort described here cannot be delivered without appropriate financial investment. Many community agencies working with people who are homeless struggle to obtain necessary funding to deliver their programs. At the same time, government funding for employment training is often structured on the assumption that participants have housing, food and money for transportation. Operating an employment training program for homeless youth according to the framework we are describing requires what some might consider to be a significant investment of resources (for instance, "Train for Trades" estimates its cost per participant is around $10,000 annually). However, this is an intelligent investment that arguably saves much more money in the long run, if it reduces the risk that participants will remain homeless, end up in the correctional system, or have health conditions that worsen. Moreover, it is an investment in the economy.
- **Strategic partnerships** – Successful employment training programs – especially ones using the framework outlined here – nec-

essarily require strategic partnerships with service providers, the public and the private sector in order to meet the needs of the program and the participants. These partnerships will involve services outside of the homeless sector where necessary, in order to put in place housing, education, addictions and mental health supports. Training support may include colleges, as well as contractors and trades people, who have the skills to work with young people from difficult backgrounds. Creative and strategic partnerships are the hallmark of an effective program. Both BladeRunners and Train for Trades worked effectively with local trade unions to enable their participants to learn on the job, and to gain credentials that would eventually allow them to become union members.

- **Commitment to ongoing program evaluation** – In order to assess whether the program is actually creating real and sustainable changes, the program must incorporate evaluation, following up with participants to assess the impact of the program in their lives. We need to know what works and for whom.
- **Strong corporate engagement** – One of the key challenges of employment training for marginalized youth is finding employers willing to take a chance on youth they may – rightly or wrongly – perceive to be problematic. Establishing effective relations with employers, understanding their concerns and needs, and providing the right kind of support for young people based on this understanding, can lead to positive experiences for young people and for employers as well. The article by Noble and Oseni in this volume outlines effective corporate engagement strategies as part of a project by Raising the Roof.

Conclusion

Young people who are homeless experience considerable barriers in obtaining and maintaining regular jobs that provide sufficient wages and hours to allow them to move off the streets. Lack of access to the labour market leads many young people to engage in unconventional – and sometimes illegal – money making activities in order to support themselves.

Employment training programs have long been promoted as an effective solution to the challenges marginalized youth face in getting good jobs. However, traditional approaches to employment training programs are generally not suited to the life circumstances of homeless youth, and not surprisingly, participation by homeless youth is low.

We have argued that the barriers to employment are best understood through an analysis of the social exclusion of street youth that impacts on labour market participation. It is not simply a lack of skills or motivation that keeps street youth out of the formal labour market. A lack of housing, income and education, combined with potential health challenges (including mental health problems and addictions), a chaotic lifestyle associated with homelessness, weak social networks and a shortened adolescence all shape the context in which homeless youth try to earn a living.

Understanding the different dimensions of social exclusion requires that we look at not only the circumstances of being young and homeless, but also (and importantly) at how our response to homelessness may in fact increase social exclusion, and create additional barriers to finding work, moving off the streets and long-term stability.

Employment training programs can provide support for homeless youth, but only if they are designed to move beyond the development of hard and soft skills. It is beyond the scope and mandate of employment training to address youth homelessness when underlying social exclusionary factors such as lack of shelter, income, food, etc., become the real barriers to participation. We have proposed a social inclusionary framework for effective employment training for street youth that is designed to address their developmental needs, and that recognizes the degree to which social exclusion can block access to the labour market.

There are solutions to youth homelessness, and employment training can play a role when integrated into a program that addresses other basic needs of the young people involved. The problem is not that homeless youth are lazy or simply "lack motivation", but rather that, as for any adolescent, the best outcomes are achieved when a social inclusionary environment supports their engagement in learning and helps them move forward with their lives.

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