

# 21

## Why Street Youth Become Involved in Crime

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### Introduction

Research on homeless street youth in Canada suggests that these young people are heavily “at risk” of becoming involved in criminal activities (Baron, 1995; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). The factors that contribute to why and how street youth come to engage in illegal activities are many and often complex. In the following chapter I summarize my research over the past two decades, as well as draw on the work of other Canadian researchers, to explore a range of factors that explain why street youth become involved in property crime, drug dealing, and violence. I begin with a short overview of the extent of street youth’s participation in crime and then move to outlining the background factors in these young people’s lives that affect the way they behave on the street. I then explore how homelessness and unemployment influence participation in a range of crimes. The key here is understanding not only how severe poverty can lead to offending, but also how individual perceptions of poverty can shape these youth’s responses to their difficult situations. The chapter also details how street peers, street culture, and street lifestyles sway youth’s decisions to engage in illegal behaviour. Further, I explore the social-psychological factors that develop in response to adverse circumstances and which contribute to youth’s criminal behaviours, as well as youth’s responses to potential criminal punishments and their influence on criminal choices. I end by reviewing the potential policy implications of the findings.

## To What Extent Are Street Youth Involved in Crime?

Research shows that compared to their housed peers, street youth are more likely to be involved in a range of criminal activities (Baron, 1995; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; O'Grady et al., 2011; Tanner & Wortley, 2002). For example, I found that male youth living on the street in Edmonton committed almost 1,700 offenses each on average in a year (Baron, 1995). While these numbers are large, it is important to acknowledge that street youth are involved in criminal behaviour to different degrees. Research reveals that a large minority of youth on the street engage in relatively little or no criminal activity (Baron, 1995; Gaetz, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; O'Grady et al., 2011). To illustrate, Gaetz (2004) found that 37 percent of street youth in his sample had not engaged in any criminal activity. There are, however, youth who engage in high rates of crime. My work in Edmonton showed that 20 percent of the youth sampled were very high rate offenders committing over 2,000 offenses in the prior year (Baron, 1995).

The types of offenses these youth are involved in vary. For example, in my 1995 study, 20 percent of the total number of offenses committed were property crimes. O'Grady et al., (2011) show that 19 percent of the youth they interviewed in Toronto had stolen something from a person, 22 percent had stolen food, and 20 percent had stolen clothes or shoes. I found youth also stole from cars, broke into houses and buildings, and took motor vehicles.

Most youth who engage in property crimes do so for utilitarian purposes. Gaetz (2004) outlines that 53 percent of the street youth in his study had shoplifted for their own use and 38 percent had stolen something for the purposes of reselling. Generally, youth resort to theft for survival or to help cope with being on the street (Baron, 1995; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; O'Grady et al., 2011). Research shows that youth use money gained by theft to buy food or clothes, to secure shelter, or to purchase drugs and alcohol.

The distribution or selling of drugs also contributes to street youth's high number of offenses (Baron, 1995; Gaetz, 2004; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991; O'Grady et al., 2011). In my Edmonton work (1995) selling drugs was the largest contributor to offense rates; the average youth indicated participating in 1,200 transactions (i.e. drug deals) in the past year. Of the 56 percent of youth in the study who reported selling drugs, over a quarter had sold drugs more than 2,000 times. More recent research finds similar patterns. Gaetz (2004) found that 50 percent of his Toronto sample had sold drugs. O'Grady et al., (2011) reported that 36 percent of their sample sold marijuana, 17 percent sold crack cocaine, and 20 percent sold other drugs. Like property offending, youth report they are involved in the drug trade to earn money for survival and

to support their own substance use (Baron, 1995; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

Finally, street youth are involved in a great deal of violent crime. Youth in my (1995) research reported committing an average of 82 violent crimes per year. Over 58 percent of these violent offenses involved robbery where the youth took money, jewellery and other valuable items from people by force or the threat of force. Violent crimes also include assaults of varying degrees of seriousness, as well as physical altercations (fights) between groups of youth. Gaetz (2004) found that 42 percent of the street youth in his Toronto study had been involved in an assault for reasons other than self-defense in the prior 12 months; and O'Grady et al., (2011) showed that 20 percent of respondents used a weapon while committing a crime.

To summarize, a minority of the street youth population is heavily involved in a range of criminal activities. At the same time many youth on the streets have chosen not to engage in these activities. What does the research tell us about why certain youth are more at risk of offending?

## Background Factors and Crime on the Street

Research consistently reveals that the path to the street often begins with negative family backgrounds. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) show that adverse economic circumstances foster psychological and economic stress in homes. This stress hampers parents' ability to care for children and increases the likelihood that inconsistent and coercive methods of discipline will be utilized. Studies show that youth on the streets have often suffered high rates of abuse (Forde et al., 2012; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Street youth have often experienced physical neglect, including food insecurity (situations in which their homes lack food for regular meals), a lack of clean clothing, and a lack of medical attention (Forde et al., 2012). Their parents often had alcohol and/or drug problems that undermined their ability to care and provide for their children (Forde et al., 2012; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Street youth also frequently encountered emotional neglect where support and affection from family members was absent (Forde et al., 2012; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Many street youth also report having experienced emotional abuse from members of their family; incidences which involved being regularly insulted and hurt over comments directed at them (Forde et al., 2012). Further, many street youth describe high rates of physical abuse, often so serious that victims were left physically damaged (Forde et al., 2012; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Finally, some youth have encountered sexual abuse (Forde et al., 2012; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999).

Criminologists suggest these experiences leave one at greater risk for criminal be-

haviour (Baron, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Childhood abuse can jeopardize a child's needs, values and/or identity, and is seen as unjust by those who experience it (Agnew, 2006; Baron, 2004). Abuse also serves to weaken youth's emotional attachments to caregivers and undermines the influence of parents and other adults. This lack of attachment means less concern for the wishes and opinions of others leaving one free to commit crime (Baron, 2003a; 2004; Baron et al., 2001). Youth who experience emotional abuse come to view the world as a coercive, hostile environment, leading them to become hostile and aggressive in their interactions with others (Baron, 2003a; 2004; Baron et al., 2001). Children who experience more physically violent forms of abuse often see aggression as the way to solve problems and adopt values and attitudes that support the use of violence (Baron, 2003a; 2004; Baron et al., 2001). Physical abuse also undermines one's ability to cope with future negative experiences and stresses, and harms the development of compassion and empathy, increasing the likelihood one will victimize others (Baron, 2003a; 2004; Baron et al., 2001). Physical abuse also leads youth to seek out and create violent situations including joining peers who use, support, and encourage violence (Baron, 2003a; 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998). Sexual abuse can result in feelings of betrayal, hostility, and anger, as well as lead to a sense of powerlessness that damages coping abilities. Feelings of guilt, shame and stigmatization leave victims more likely to be drawn to others who are stigmatized, including criminally involved peers (Baron, 2003a; 2004).

Research outlines that certain experiences of abuse tend to be associated with certain forms of offending. In particular, street youth who have suffered physical abuse are at an increased risk of engaging in higher rates of criminal activity when compared to those who have not had these experiences (Baron, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). There is a strong link between the experience of physical abuse and violent offending (Baron, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), particularly robberies and more serious forms of violence where victims suffer significant injuries (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998). It is unclear if there is a direct link between sexual abuse and the offenses being looked at in this chapter since research has produced support both for and against this link (see Chen et al., 2007; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Tyler & Johnson, 2006; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). While the role of its direct relationship to crime is in dispute, sexual abuse has been found to lead to crime when accompanied by certain other factors. My research shows that youth who have histories of sexual abuse are more involved in violence if they have also acquired and developed values that support the use of violence or associate with peers who support and use violence (Baron, 2004). As I will show later, the street is an arena where there is support for the use of violence.

Levels of self-esteem also appear to influence how street youth channel their

abusive experiences. I (2004) discovered that physical abuse was more likely to lead to violence amongst street youth who, despite the abuse, had higher levels of self-esteem than their street peers. Similarly, youth who had experienced emotional abuse were more likely to be involved in property offenses when they had higher levels of self-esteem. I have argued elsewhere (2004) that self-esteem may allow one to adopt a criminal route to combat repression and assist in bringing a sense of balance back into one's life (see Tittle, 1995). Alternatively, crime may be a method of reaffirming self-esteem that is diminished during the experiences of abuse (see Baumeister et al., 1996).

## Homelessness and Crime

Youth who flee their homes for the streets enter an environment that promotes participation in crime. Youth find themselves in need of food, money, and shelter (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Criminologists recognize that the experience of homelessness can have a powerful impact on individuals and note its potentially strong link to criminal activities. Becoming homeless is felt to be unjust by those who experience it and threatens an individual's needs, values, goals and/or identities (Agnew, 2006; Baron, 2004). Homelessness also reduces one's contact with the people and institutions of regular society and breaks previous social ties. With no relationships to maintain and little stake in social institutions, people who become homeless have little to lose if convicted of a crime; in sociological terms, social control has little power over them (Agnew, 2006; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Homelessness also provides opportunities for crime. Youth who lack shelter are often forced to spend a significant amount of time in public locations. This public lifestyle brings individuals into contact with tempting property and human targets for victimization (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997).

Homelessness also provides an environment where crime can be learned (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy, 1996). On the street, youth encounter other young people involved in criminal activities. These other offenders are criminal models for those new to the streets and provide training and encouragement for criminal activities (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; 1998; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). These peers can facilitate criminal activities that require accomplices and can offer approval for their friends' criminal behaviour. Further, homelessness exposes youth to an alternative culture that values many forms of offending, including property offending, drug dealing, and violence (Baron, 2009a; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Many street youth are drawn to this street culture because it reflects and extends some of the lessons learned from abusive backgrounds (Baron, 2009a; Colvin, 2000). Together, youth on the street develop new standards and expectations for behaviour. In this environment the morals and expectations of the broader society are rejected and new ones substituted that allow street youth to more effectively

cope with their life situations (Baron, 2006; 2009a; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Included in this culture is support for the use of criminal means to overcome financial struggles (Baron, 2006; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Street youth are directly educated in this culture through social rewards for criminal behaviour, and social punishments for reluctance to participate, as well as through their observation of other street youth's behaviours (Baron, 2011b; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). My research consistently reveals that both having values that support criminal behaviour *and* having criminally involved peers leads to criminal activity on the street (Baron, 2004; 2006; 2008; 2009a). Hagan and McCarthy (1997) show how homelessness increases the chances that youth will become involved in "coaching" relationships where they are taught to engage in theft and drug dealing, offered protection, and helped to sell stolen property and drugs (see also McCarthy et al., 1998). Through these coaching relationships, street youth undertake more criminal activities than those not engaged in these relationships (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

Research reveals that the longer one stays on the streets, the more likely one is to engage in various forms of crime (Baron, 2003b; 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991), including property offenses (Baron, 2004; 2006; 2008; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991), violent offenses (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991) and drug dealing (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991). The likelihood that homelessness will lead to offending generally, and property offending in particular, is also greater when street youth have few moral barriers to breaking the law and/or when they have a low sense of self-efficacy or competence (Baron, 2004). In other words, youth who feel that they do not have the capacity to cope with their homelessness by legal means are more likely to resort to crime when they are homeless (Baron, 2004). Finally, "situational adversity" – situations of desperate need – can have a direct impact on offending. Research shows that hunger is directly associated with the theft of food and serious theft, while the need for shelter increases the likelihood of participation in more serious property crimes (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

## Street Youth Unemployment and Crime

Most youth on the street are unemployed. Street youth are often unable to find work because of incomplete education and a lack of qualifications (Baron, 2001). These backgrounds exclude them from consideration for most jobs and from forms of employment that might offer opportunity for growth and advancement (Baron, 2001). Unemployment has been found to increase the probability that street youth will become involved in criminal activities (Baron, 2001; 2006; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). With no employment to be lost by criminal conduct, and work made irrelevant by its absence, street

youth become more likely to engage in crime. Unemployment can also reduce an individual's commitment to societal norms and rules, leading street youth to the conclusion that breaking the law is acceptable (Baron, 2008; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Unemployment may also contribute to feelings of boredom and frustration for some, who may view crime as one way to relieve these feelings (Baron, 2001; 2008; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Finally, unemployed youth are in need of money, which crime can provide. Beyond this direct impact, my research shows that unemployment is even more likely to lead to crime when youth have adopted values that support criminal activities (Baron, 2004).

Unemployment also produces a great deal of anger. Youth who want legitimate employment and are willing to work hard are understandably angry when they cannot find work. Homeless youth may feel they are unfairly deprived compared to others, blame others for their unemployment, be unhappy with their lack of money, and have peers involved in crime. This anger increases participation in violent offending and drug dealing (Baron, 2008; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997).

Street youth's experiences of frustration when trying to find work also leave them more likely to reject the idea that those who are willing to work hard will be able to achieve their economic goals. This disillusionment increases the likelihood that unemployment will lead to violent offending and drug distribution (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Further, perceiving their unemployment as unfair can lead to crime when youth have criminal peers and attitudes that support engaging in crime (Baron & Hartnagel, 2002).

Another key economic factor in street youth crime is relative deprivation. Relative deprivation occurs when people judge themselves to be worse off financially than other people or groups they know (Baron, 2004; 2006; 2008). My research reveals that relative deprivation increases participation in a range of offenses and is more likely to lead to crime when homelessness is long-term and the youth associates with criminally involved peers (Baron, 2006). Furthermore, being dissatisfied with their lack of money compels street youth to engage in criminal activities particularly as the length of their homelessness and unemployment increases (Baron, 2004; 2006; 2008).

Finally, the goal of financial success also leads directly to general crime and drug dealing in the street youth population (Baron, 2006; McCarthy & Hagan, 2001). Wanting financial success and seeing no legal way to achieve it makes crime an attractive alternative (Baron, 2006). This is often the case when youth have experienced long-term homelessness and unemployment (Baron, 2006), and have values that encourage crime (Baron, 2011a).

## Street Victimization and Crime

The experience of homelessness puts street youth at increased risk for victimization (Baron, 1997; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Spending a great deal of time in high crime areas increases youth's vulnerability to property loss and damage, as well as risk of violent victimization (Baron, 1997; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Further, homelessness may bring youth into contact with peers involved in crime who may victimize them (Baron, 1997; 2003a). Peers may steal from them, assault them, or encourage them to engage in conflicts where participants can end up as victims. Finally, the street subculture that encourages violence makes conflicts between youth more likely to turn violent (Baron, 1997; 2003a).

Many street youth are also regular users of drugs and alcohol, which increase their risk of victimization (Baron, 1997; 2003a; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). First, these substances are often consumed in dangerous areas. Second, the biochemical and psychological impact of these substances can make youth less careful about their own safety, increasing the likelihood of theft or violent attack (Baron, 1997; 2003a). Users may also become more aggressive or provocative while using these substances, increasing the possibility of violent altercations (Baron, 1997; 2003a). At the same time, youth may be physically less able to defend themselves when intoxicated (Baron, 1997; 2003a).

Engaging in crime can also lead to victimization (Baron, 1997; 2003a; Gaetz, 2004). Illegal means of survival including drug dealing, robbery and theft have been found to be associated with violent victimization (Baron, 2003a). There is also a relationship between violent offending and victimization (Baron, 1997, 2003a; Baron, Forde, & Kennedy, 2007). Drug dealing or selling stolen property are high-risk activities, and street youth who engage in them become easy targets since they are unlikely to report their victimization to the police. Finally, violent offenders are continually at risk for retaliation from others who wish to settle scores (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998).

Experiences of victimization on the street often lead to criminal responses (Baron, 2009b; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998). First, people who experience victimization often feel unjustly harmed and learn from their victimization experiences that physical aggression may be necessary to ensure the safety of their property and themselves (Baron et al., 2001). Further, involvement in street peer groups, the public nature of the victimization, and subcultural expectations that encourage and reward retaliation against the offender, together increase the potential for retaliatory criminal responses in an effort to "get even" (Baron, 2009b; Baron, et al., 2001). I found that street youth who experience violent forms of victimization are more likely to engage in violent offences including



group altercations (fights), minor and serious assaults, and robberies (Baron, 2004, 2009b; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998). Furthermore, being a victim of violence leads to violent crime when street youth also have values that support the use of violence and have high levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem. These characteristics appear to contribute to youth responding to their victimization with violence (Baron, 2004). Violent victimization is also more likely to lead to a violent response when youth have low self-control (Baron, 2009b). The experience of being robbed also provokes violent responses, and again those who have higher levels of self-esteem are able to draw on this resource to more successfully address their victimization. Property victimization is also more likely to be met with violence when youth consider this a justified response (Baron, 2004).

Beyond direct victimization in terms of theft, robbery and physical attacks, the dangerous street environment also exposes street youth to “vicarious” victimization and the development of “anticipated” victimization (Baron, 2009b). Youth on the street frequently see or hear about others being victimized. Street youth come to expect that they will be victimized unless they take some form of defensive or pre-emptive action (Baron, 2009b). I found that (2009b) street youth exposed to vicarious victimization often undertook violent actions to prevent future harm to themselves and those around them, as well as for revenge against those deemed accountable for the harm. Exposure to the victimization of peers was more likely to evoke a violent response from street youth with low self-control. Similarly, expecting violent victimization was more likely to lead to a violent response from such youth (Baron, 2009b).

## The Overall Experience of Coercion & the Link with Crime

My research shows that street youth’s experience with formal state supervision through welfare or imprisonment can also lead to crime, in part because these systems are viewed as coercive. That is, people view them as negative experiences where they are forced or intimidated to act a certain way (Baron, 2009a; Colvin, 2000). State officials with the power to withdraw financial support (such as welfare), and inflict or threaten to impose punishment can coerce street youth (Baron, 2009a). There is evidence that youth who encounter more of these forms of coercion, along with other negative experiences, engage in more violent crime. I found (2009a) that the total combination of experiencing childhood abuse, street victimization, homelessness, receiving welfare, as well as imprisonment leads to a higher rate of violent offending. Further, youth who have this combination of experiences also tend to develop lower levels of self-control, higher levels of anger, greater association with violent peers, and stronger values supportive of violence, when compared to those street youth who do not have these experiences. These factors, in turn, lead to higher levels of violence.

## Drug and Alcohol Use and Crime

Another important contributor to street youth crime is drug and alcohol use. Studies suggest that offenders spend much of the money earned through criminal activity on drugs and alcohol (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Hartnagel and I (1997) found that drug and alcohol use were related to increased participation in property offending, and drug use was associated with drug dealing. While drug and alcohol use can be seen as a coping strategy to manage the negative emotions arising from traumatic backgrounds and difficult living situations in the present (Baron, 2004; 2010; Gallupe & Baron, 2009), these substances are also used as a form of enjoyment and recreation (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). For some street youth, substance use provides an identity and social status among their peers (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; 1998). Participation in crime as well as substance use may both be requirements for one to be accepted in the “street lifestyle” subculture, in order to take advantage of the social rewards it has to offer (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; 1998). Over time, social contacts become increasingly limited to others involved in this lifestyle (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; 1998). For participants, crime finances substance use, and substance use fuels the need for profitable crime to sustain an ever-increasing pattern of use (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; 1998). Drug and alcohol use can also be important in facilitating criminal activities in another way. The use of these substances can make risky or difficult offenses psychologically easier to commit (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; 1998). This type of influence may be important in understanding the link between drug and alcohol use and violent crime (Baron, 1997b; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Baron et al., 2007).

There is also some research to suggest that alcohol might be linked to lower violence (Baron et al., 2007). I argue along with Kennedy (1993) that there are subcultural rules on the street about substance use and violence. In some instances, street youth may be expected to ingest substances and act aggressively. In other settings, street youth may be encouraged to become intoxicated and socialize and relax with peers. In sum, different situations and settings may provide different rules regarding substance use and behaviours (Baron, 2003a; Baron et al., 2007; Kennedy & Baron, 1993).

## Low Self-Control, Perceptions of Control, and Crime

Criminologists have observed that some street youth have low self-control and this trait, or aspects of it, appear to have a direct influence on street youth's involvement in crime (Baron, 2003b; 2009a; 2009b; McCarthy & Hagan, 1998; Kort-Butler et al., 2011). People who lack self-control tend to be insensitive, impulsive, short-sighted, bad tempered risk-takers who have a low tolerance for frustration

(Agnew, 2006; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). For some, these characteristics seem to arise in childhood, and once established persist for life (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hay & Forrest, 2006; Vaske et al., 2012). Parents or guardians who do not consistently supervise their children, recognize uncontrolled behaviours, and correct these behaviours allow this trait to become firmly established (Hay & Forrest, 2006; Vaske et al., 2012). Recall that Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that economic and psychological strains in the families of street youth often led to inconsistent disciplining. It is also possible, however, that this negative trait can be influenced by other environmental factors including those experienced later in life (Agnew, 2006). There is evidence that physical abuse experienced at an early age (Kort-Butler et al., 2011), poverty, and street culture can contribute to the creation and/or strengthening of this trait (Baron, 2009a; 2009b). The constant exposure to stress and aggressive environments can foster low self-control, as can social environments where this trait can be observed and learned (Baron, 2009a; 2009b).

Beyond its direct association with crime, low self-control also impacts a range of other behaviours and life outcomes (see Baron, 2003b). Research shows that low self-control leads individuals to spend more time on the street, increases their likelihood of unemployment, participation in criminal peer groups and the adoption of values supportive of criminal behaviour (Baron, 2003b; Baron et al., 2007; Kort-Butler et al., 2011). Each of these factors also leads to street youth offending. Low self-control also increases the likelihood of victimization (Baron et al., 2007; Forde & Kennedy, 1997; Schreck et al., 2004). People who are impulsive are less likely to recognize the consequences of risky behaviours. Those with low empathy may be unable to assess the actions of others that might undermine their safety. Individuals with low frustration tolerance may be more aggressive and become involved in altercations. Those who are short-sighted may not take sufficient precautions to reduce opportunities for victimization. Finally, risk-takers can be drawn to exciting activities that have the potential for dangerous outcomes (see Baron et al., 2007; Forde & Kennedy, 1997; Schreck, et al., 2004). Thus, the negative experiences that generate low self-control put street youth at increased risk for victimization and as discussed, victimization is also important in understanding offending (Baron et al., 2007; Forde & Kennedy, 1997; Schreck et al., 2004).

Street youth crime can also be related to attempts by youth to gain a sense of control over certain areas of their lives (Baron& Forde, 2007). My work with Forde (2007) exploring street youth's perceptions of control over their homelessness, unemployment, health, cleanliness, nutrition, and comfort shows that assaults or serious thefts are attempts to further a sense of control. This research also shows that attempts to further a sense of control through crime are even more likely when street youth have peers who are also involved in crime (Baron & Forde, 2007).

## Deterrence

My research also explores whether threats of legal sanctions influence street youth's decisions to engage in crime (Baron, 2011b; Baron & Kennedy, 1998). This work investigates whether the certainty of arrest and punishment for an offense, as well as the potential severity of the punishment, influences a street youth's decision to offend. The research shows that youth who think property offenses and drug dealing are more likely to result in arrest and severe punishment are less likely to engage in those crimes (Baron, 2008; Baron & Forde, 2007; Baron & Kennedy, 1998). My research also shows, however, that morals, peer support, and substance use can affect street youth's expectations regarding potential punishment, often reducing, but sometimes increasing, perceptions of the certainty and severity of consequences (Baron & Kennedy, 1998).

The link between the threat of legal punishment and the reduction of violent behaviour, in contrast, has received only minimal support (Baron, 2008; 2011b). It often appears that the threat of punishment has no direct impact on violent offending (Baron, 2011b; Baron & Forde, 2007; Baron & Kennedy, 1998). In fact, there is some evidence that potential punishment for violent offending actually increases the likelihood of youth engaging in violent crime under certain conditions. My research has found that street peer groups often reward individuals when they engage in violence and violence may increase an individual's acceptance and standing within a group (Baron, 2011b). Street youth risk ridicule, physical attacks from peers, and exclusion from the group for avoiding participation in violent crime (Baron, 2011b). Expressing fear of being caught and punished by legal authorities is unacceptable within some street groups.

Moreover, there are sometimes street codes among peers that provide guidelines for using violence to gain respect and protect one's reputation (Anderson, 1999; Baron, 2009b; 2011b; Stewart & Simons, 2006). Anderson (1999) argues that on the street, unreliable law enforcement and negative experiences with the police leads individuals to conclude that they need to take care of themselves. This requires that people on the street display to others the readiness and inclination to use violence. The main aspects of the street code surround respect and the protection of reputations. The need to protect one's reputation on the street requires promptly engaging in violence in response to slights, to show loyalty to others, and to gain revenge. This process of protecting one's reputation entails showing others in violent altercations that one is prepared to use violence regardless of potential legal consequences (Baron, 2011b). Using violence in situations where there is a high certainty of severe legal consequences shows opponents that one is prepared to suffer considerable costs to maintain one's reputation. The fact that status is given to those who receive serious punishment further increases the

likelihood that one will engage in violence in the face of legal penalties. Individuals on the street who fail to seek revenge for prior victimization or insults risk damaged reputations, lowered respect, negative labels, and future victimization. Ultimately, the threat of being caught and punished for violent offenses can encourage rather than discourage crime (Baron, 2011b).

My research (Baron, 2011b) found that high certainty of being arrested and charged for violence increased violent offending when youth had violent peers, held values supportive of violence and had spent more time homeless. Similarly, the severity of the potential legal punishment for violent offending increased violent reactions among youths with greater exposure to the street code through long-term homelessness (Baron, 2011b).

There is also evidence that the experience of legal punishment can increase street youth criminal behaviour. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that legal punishments led to an increase in criminal activity among street youth who had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of their fathers, and physical abuse at the hands of their mothers. The shame and rejection that evolves from these backgrounds combines with feelings of anger and “foolishness” over being punished and creates a situation where youth express defiance in the face of punishment and an escalation in criminal activities.

## Policy and Street Youth Crime

Findings on street youth crime in Canada point to a number of important policy implications. First, research suggests that childhood abuse is important in understanding why street youth engage in crime. These problems often emerged in environments of economic and psychological strain. These childhood experiences in turn both influence criminal behaviour directly, and sway youth to take to the street, where a host of other causal factors take over. It is clear that prevention of the various forms of abuse that street youth suffer at home is required. Key here is the need for various economic and social support programs for families. One potential avenue is through easier access to resources, such as social workers who can assist families, combined generally with the promotion of support service utilization in a way that decreases the stigmatization of those seeking help. Creative social policies including government subsidies for parents to enter drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs may go far in decreasing stigma and promoting positive assistance. In addition, schools should be provided with social workers or counsellors who are trained to look for signs of abuse and neglect. These individuals could then work with the youth in the school and connect with their families to provide assistance.

The literature reviewed also suggests a strong link between homelessness, street

victimization, street culture and various forms of crime. This highlights the need for more street outreach workers, shelters, safe houses, and drop-in centres to allow opportunities for early intervention. Street youth need protection from victimization, and stable, safe living environments that provide for basic survival. These facilities should offer access to assessment, assistance and treatment for the range of issues, including abuse, substance use, and unemployment, that are associated with street youth offending. First, it is apparent that youth need help to cope with past experiences of abuse. Programs and treatment need to be accessible and individually tailored to focus on youth's various histories. This is important not only for addressing issues surrounding crime, but also for broader mental health issues that often emerge. Second, in light of the link between substance use and crime on the street, programs should address substance use and provide intervention and follow-up to assist in recovery (Baron, 2003a).

Third, research on unemployment, perceptions of poverty, and crime suggests that youth need work and training opportunities that pay liveable wages and provide possibilities for advancement and skill acquisition. Youth should be trained in areas of employment that avoid repetitive, boring tasks that will only alienate them further. The work should provide a sense of progress and accomplishment. These types of experiences may help youth get off the street, separate them from influences found there, and provide them with the resources to support themselves. Consequently, this could lead to a reduction of feelings of anger and perceptions of deprivation, which have been shown to increase participation in crime among street involved youth (Baron, 2003a). Hagan and McCarthy's work (1997) shows that the time commitment required by employment, the connections to people not involved in a criminal lifestyle, and the job skills and employment histories that can be established, create positive experiences for street youth that go against their street and illegal activities. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that youth who were able to secure even marginal employment in the service sector and other unskilled occupations spent less time with street friends, using drugs, and engaging in crime. Employment, then, can serve as a "turning point" to steer these youth towards a life off of the street.

It must be recognized that many street youth lack the social skills needed for employment. They need help developing basic life skills including work habits, literacy and communication skills, time management skills, responsibility, skills for working with authority, and the self-esteem and confidence that will encourage coping skills in the work place and other environments. Further, skills and resources for finding work are important. Street youth tend to lack the finances and appropriate clothing to conduct job searches. They need help with job search skills and tasks such as filling out forms and conducting interviews. These types of life skills will promote success across a range of environments and

enable youth to meet their needs without resorting to crime (Baron, 2003a).

In sum, a combination of prevention and accessible targeted programming is required to help youth avoid or get off the street and combat the various negative influences that generate criminal behaviour.

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