

Background Report:

Homeless and Street-Involved Youth in HRM

Summary of Local Research Findings

Youth Homelessness: A Growing Trend in HRM and across Canada

Youth under 24 years of age are said to be the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in Canada¹. Indeed, an increase in youth homelessness was one of the most significant trends that emerged from HRM's *Portrait of Streets and Shelters* where 34% of those surveyed were less than 24 years of age².

A Heterogeneous Group

Canadian research into causes of youth homelessness, the nature of street culture, and pathways out of homelessness reveal that “contrary to existing stereotypes, so-called street youth are not a homogeneous youth. Instead they come from a variety of backgrounds with a range of personal qualities, needs, and experiences”³. This research indicates there is no one cause for youth homelessness and therefore no one solution, arguing against a “one size fits all” approach. These researchers advocate for an integrated and intersectoral continuum of supports that address the complex root causes of youth homelessness.

Causes of youth homelessness

While their reasons for living on the streets are complex and multi-layered, the majority (as many as 80%) of homeless youth tend to share histories of family conflict, violence or abuse.⁴ Fifty percent of the participants in another local study reported previous involvement with child welfare⁵. Other reasons for homelessness include family breakdown; lack of income and increasing poverty; lack of job opportunities/employment skills; lack of access to affordable housing; mental illness and drug misuse.⁶ One local study found homeless youth tended to exhibit the following characteristics: disrupted or seriously dysfunctional family settings; witnessing domestic violence; high rates of substance abuse among parents / guardians; psychological, physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect; families often on social assistance, often single-parent households, and not being accepted for sexual orientation.⁷ Faced with such traumatic circumstances and limited alternatives at home, many youth “choose” to take to the streets.

“According to street youth, street culture often offends the general public who feel threatened and angry when they encounter a group of homeless youth. It is easy to make assumptions about youth who have a non-conformist lifestyle. Many of these youth have experienced hardship and abuse in their family. Some have come through the child welfare system, and many are struggling with health problems related to street life. Street youth face far more risks to their own safety than they pose to the public’s safety. Their past traumatic experiences affect their attitudes and approach to authority, and often lead to self-destructive behaviour. Public hostility and police harassment are unlikely to help these youth find a place in society.” (Karabanow, 2004: 89)

¹ Karabanow, 2005; Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force, 1999; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2001

² HRM, 2005

³ Caputo et al, 1997

⁴ Gaetz, 2004; Karabanow, 2004

⁵ HRM and ARK Outreach, 2005

⁶ Karabanow, 2004; 2005

⁷ Karabanow, 2004

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Prepared by Rebecca Koeller, Research Coordinator, HRM, 490-4023, koeller@halifax.ca

The Nature of Street Life / Survival

Once on the streets, this clearly vulnerable group of youth face numerous challenges to daily survival. Many confront barriers to accessing basic needs and services due to their age, appearance, homeless or runaway status, and lack of income, as well as struggles with drug dependence, low self-esteem, and emotional, psychological and mental health issues. The precarious and potentially traumatic nature of street life was evident in the findings of all of the studies and the youth's experiences related to income, housing, homelessness, safety and education. Much of youth's time is spent just trying to survive day to day on the street. Safe housing and support services are crucial to any kind of stability for youth. Basic stability is necessary for positive action around education, employment, addictions or mental health.

- **Economic survival strategies.** Youth on the street tend to survive economically through a variety of means, including panhandling, government assistance, squeegeeing, legal work or mainstream employment, theft/petty crime, drug dealing and sex trade work. One local study indicates women and girls are experiencing high levels of violence through these survival attempts, particularly through sexual exploitation.⁸ Research also reveals youth experience many barriers to securing and maintaining mainstream employment, including a lack of training and experience, barriers due to their age, appearance and homeless status. Youth describe the “catch 22” of homelessness – the difficulty of finding and maintaining a job or education program without the stability of safe and affordable housing; on the other hand you need an income and education to be able to afford shelter.
- **Housing and shelter strategies.** Youth's strategies for securing shelter are as varied as their economic survival strategies and typically consist of a variety of situations. Youth are more likely than other homeless populations to sleep rough⁹ or in squats.¹⁰ Some sleep in youth or adult shelters, some couch surf with friends or family, and some have access to rooms in apartments / rooming houses for periods of time. Youth are not always comfortable accessing adult shelters where some have indicated they are concerned for their safety and find staff are not always trained to understand their unique needs/circumstances. Some youth are homeless or street-involved relatively briefly (e.g. a few months) and others have been on the streets for most of their young lives, since they were 12, 13 or 15 years of age.
- **Safety.** Street youth are at high risk for criminal victimization from other youth and adults – many youth report having been robbed and/or assaulted.¹¹ Another cross-country Canadian study on youth and criminal victimization found that in Canada, homeless youth are five times as likely to be victims of assault than domiciled youth, five times more likely to be victims of theft, ten times more likely to be robbed by force, and ten times more likely to be victims of sexual assault.¹² Several of the studies indicate that the most street-entrenched youth are more likely to have negative relations with police or have a perception that police treat homeless youth badly and consequently street-involved youth tend not to go to police for help in terms of their own safety concerns.¹³

⁸ Dhillon, 2005

⁹ Sleeping rough refers to when someone sleeps outside (e.g. in parks, cemeteries, on the street, in alleys), or in places not specifically designed for human habitation, such as the landing of an unlocked apartment building or the entrance to an instant-teller bank machine. To squat is to occupy an unoccupied or abandoned space or building that the individual does not own, rent, or otherwise have permission to use.

¹⁰ HRM, 2005

¹¹ Karabanow, 2004

¹² Gaetz, 2004

¹³ Karabanow, 2004

- **Health and well-being.** The lifestyle of homeless youth places their health at risk and the longer a person is homeless, the worse his or her health becomes. Street youth interviewed in Halifax in Karabanow's (2004) study stated that they usually had multiple health problems exacerbated by cold, hunger, poor housing, poor diets, and the high-risk behaviours they engage in to survive. All of the local studies reviewed also highlighted youth's experiences of mental illness – many report problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and feelings of uncontrollable anger. Many youth report experiencing suicidal tendencies at one point or another as well as low self-esteem and self-confidence. Substance misuse and addiction are major problems for some street youth; drug use is a significant risk factor for homelessness and subsequent barrier to getting off the street. One study done in collaboration with ARK Outreach and street/drug-involved youth in Halifax reveals the devastating health effects of drug use and a lack of appropriate services to prevent drug use or assist youth to use drugs more safely and / or overcome their addictions.
- **Education.** Homeless youth experience multiple barriers to accessing education and maintaining a school schedule / remaining focused on studies while being homeless, including trouble concentrating, lack of access due to their homeless status (no address, lack of transcripts, etc), no stability in order to do homework, attendance policies, and not “fitting in” or responding to teaching strategies after years being independent on the streets. Local research indicates most youth have a strong desire to return to and complete their schooling¹⁴. One study reveals multiple barriers to accessing education for homeless young women and girls in particular, including social and economic constraints, racism, sexism/discomfort in school with male peers and teachers due to their history of sexual assault / street trauma, and lack of school choice (i.e. all girls schools or alternative education programs). Another study points out it is also important to remember that homeless youth are adolescents and experience all the emotional turmoil, identity and self esteem struggles, and desire to experiment and belong as other youth.¹⁵
- **Goals, dreams and aspirations.** While homeless youth represent a heterogeneous population and with diverse backgrounds, goals and interests, Karabanow (2004) found that “surprisingly, most youth craved a conventional family and a similarly conventional lifestyle. They spoke of their dreams, with notable consistency. The vast majority expressed a desire to return to school, pursue a trade or obtain stable employment, find a place of their own to live and, hopefully, get married and have a family.”¹⁶
- **Trust.** There is also often a profound lack of trust amongst youth of the service system, rooted in dysfunctional family backgrounds, negative experiences with service provision systems such as Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice¹⁷, and overly restrictive conditions attached to receiving certain services.¹⁸ Many of these youth have been living on the streets and outside “mainstream” society for many years, some since age 12 or 13. Some of these youth may not succeed in supervised living arrangements or overly structured programming.
- **Public perceptions.** Youth tend to have the perceptions that the general public views them negatively, seeing them as all criminals/delinquents. One Halifax study surveyed members of

¹⁴ Karabanow, 2004; Dhillon, 2005; HRM and ARK Outreach, 2005

¹⁵ Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force, Toronto. (1999).

¹⁶ Karabanow, 2004 (p. 88)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ HRM, 2005

the public and found that in general, public perceptions of homeless youth are more sympathetic and understanding than youth tend to believe. For example, almost three-quarters of the public surveyed supported the building of more shelters and drop-ins to help homeless youth and would be willing to have a shelter situated in their neighbourhood.¹⁹

Gaps in Service

In HRM there seem to be simply too few services for the number of youth who require them. The only youth emergency shelter, Phoenix Shelter for Youth, consistently has a waiting list and youth are often reluctant to access adult shelters where they don't feel welcome or safe or other mainstream services where staff and programming is not tailored to youth needs/experiences. Many youth choose not to access services for a number of reasons, such as not wanting to be discovered as a runaway, negative experiences of services, or too many restrictions attached to receiving services (rules such as no pets or couples in shelters; overly structured programming). **In general, research reveals a need for a continuum of youth targeted service (employment, health, shelter, education, addictions) that includes both structured and less "programmed" options. Not all approaches will work for all youth. Youth-driven, flexible, and varied services are key.**

Specific gaps in service include:

- Lack of youth-targeted health / mental health and addictions services (there need for a harm-reduction facility in HRM is well documented)
- Lack of affordable housing for youth (including supportive housing options that offer services and support in the process of transitioning to independent living)
- Lack of access to education
- Obstacles in Nova Scotia for homeless and street-involved youth to access income assistance such as ineligibility for youth aged 16-19 and those without an address or identification
- Lack of employment skills and training
- Lack of employment opportunities (especially those that pay more than minimum wage)
- Lack of trust in / use of law enforcement services based on past negatives experiences and perceptions

NOTE: Much of the research cited in this summary was conducted with some participatory component and researchers working with street youth, and inherently marginalized group, often discuss the importance of working WITH youth, in empowering youth to engage in research and development of the policy and programming that is meant to benefit them. Youth themselves are uniquely positioned to comment on the causes and effects of youth homelessness and therefore are crucial partners in the development of solutions.

Barriers to getting off the street

Barriers to exiting street life mirror many of those reasons for ending up homeless in the first place, including lack of income / job opportunities, lack of access to affordable and safe housing, discrimination, addictions, poor health/well-being/self-image, and a lack of appropriate/responsive continuum of services to assist the heterogeneous homeless youth populations overcome these barriers. Youth living on the streets often rely on their peers in their survival strategies and come to see other street youth as a surrogate family, often more supportive / accepting / safe than the family circumstances from where they are coming. Another barrier to getting off the streets is overcoming the extreme social isolation that comes along with street life and finding personal support off the streets and building personal motivations and self-confidence to change one's situation.

¹⁹ Karabanow, 2004

Paths out of homelessness and strategies for exiting

A recent look at the patterns of exiting street life experienced by 128 street youth across Canada²⁰ reveals that the process is neither linear nor simple. A principle finding of the study was that successful services for one youth might not translate the same way for another. The diversity and heterogeneity within the Canadian street youth population is served by a continuum of organizations each with different characteristics and philosophies. This study highlights significant stages/characteristics that are commonly experienced by those who have attempted to move out of homelessness. These stages are not linear/mutually exclusive and are understood as layers or dimensions of various activities.

1. **Precipitating factors** (i.e. traumatic event, boredom, disenchantment with street culture) that **initiate youth thinking about getting off the street.**
2. **Developing the courage to change** that is often heightened through: increased responsibilities; gaining support through family and friends; having an awareness that someone cares for them; building personal motivations.
3. **Seeking support** through initial stages, including use of available services, searching for formal employment and stable housing and some formal institutional involvement (i.e. returning to school or entering a supportive housing situation).
4. **Transitioning away from the street**, which in this study seemed to be a complex and difficult stage of street disengagement, includes physically leaving the downtown core, reducing tied with street culture and friends, and constructing relationships with mainstream society. Within this layer, young people spoke of missing street culture; being able to locate understanding landlords and employers; and increased self-esteem.
5. **Restructuring of one's routines** in terms of employment, education and housing; shifting in thinking about future aspirations; and being able to acquire some social assistance to support one's transitioning. During this stage, young people highlighted renewed sense of health/wellness, self-confidence and personal motivation.
6. **This final stage, termed "successful exiting"**, is exemplified by a sense of "being in control", and "having direction" in one's life – participants spoke of feeling proud of their movements out of street life; being finally able to enjoy their life on their own terms; and feeling stable in terms of both housing/security and wellness. (Karabanow, 2005)

Conclusions and Recommendations from the Research

1. **Develop more youth-targeted service.** Studies show a dearth of resources in Halifax that specifically target the circumstances of homeless youth, including health, education, employment, addictions, housing, and other social services. The participants in one study felt there are not enough shelter beds and drop-in centres available for them to meet basic needs. Another also identified a lack of training in youth needs within health and emergency services, law enforcement, and housing and shelter services.
2. **Develop longer-term supportive settings** so youth can become stabilized and work on particular aspects of their lives (i.e. housing, employment, education, family issues). Youth organizations like **Phoenix Youth Services** in Halifax and **Eva's Initiatives** and **Covenant House** in Toronto provide second-stage / transitional supportive housing that can serve as a model. **Eva's Initiatives in Toronto has combined supportive housing with an employment training and mentorship model that has been very successful in seeing youth make the transition to independent living.** All studies indicate a great need for more

²⁰ Karabanow, 2005

safe and affordable rental housing to address homelessness in HRM. In Karabanow's (2004) study it was found that in Halifax, more than in Montreal and Toronto, young people have the hardest time just finding food and shelter on a daily basis.

3. **Recognize the need for a continuum of services for youth**, including more and less "structured" programming. The most street-entrenched youth (those that have been homeless the longest) experience multiple barriers to accessing mainstream services. Youth dealing with addictions have almost nowhere to turn, with the exception of **ARK Youth Outreach**, an organization that operates from a harm reduction approach, providing meals, clothing, and a safe and warm place to rest and sleep. They avoid "programming" in favour of a flexible model of support driven by where youth are at when they come to them.
4. **Address barriers homeless youth experience to accessing education**. One local study focused on the fundamental importance of providing accessible alternatives to homeless youth that address the barriers they experience to accessing education. This study argues that education is a human right for all young people, homeless and domiciled, and that more resources need to be focused on their education (over employment training, for example) if youth are truly going to be provided with enhanced opportunities in the future.
5. **Provide opportunities for education and communication between the public, homeless youth and service delivery systems concerned with homeless youth**. While one study found that the general public often has less negative perceptions about homeless youth than youth actually perceive, it also found that the public tends to over-estimate the occurrence of youth fleeing their home of their own volition. This indicates a need for public education on the root causes of youth homelessness and street life conditions which could lead to more public acceptance and advocacy for homeless youth and a growth of youth service delivery systems.²¹
6. **Address the root causes of homelessness and explore the social determinants of health**, including vulnerable families and history of trauma and conflict at home; lack of income and job opportunities/training; lack of affordable and safe housing; barriers to accessing education; barriers to accessing income assistance; mental health issues, addictions and drug misuse problems, public perception and support, and social isolation.

Learning from Innovative Approaches and Best Practices

Please refer to the following organizations and / or resources to learn more about innovative approaches and best practices to addressing some of the complex issues and gaps in service identified in this background document.

Employment – Mentorship – Supportive Housing model

- Eva's Initiatives, Toronto <http://www.evasinitiatives.com/>

Peer-to-peer outreach and training

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth Project, Halifax <http://www.youthproject.ns.ca/>

²¹ Karabanow, 2004

- Crystal Clear Peer Support Training in Vancouver
<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/fourpillars/newsletter/Feb05/Methamphetamineprojectreliesoneers.htm>
- AIDS Committee of Toronto Peer Outreach Project
<http://www.actoronto.org/website/home.nsf/pages/pop>

Social enterprise models combining employment training/other social goals with business initiatives

- Eva's Initiatives, Toronto <http://www.evasinitiatives.com/>
- Canadian Social Entrepreneurs Network <http://www.csen.ca/>

For more detailed information, please refer to the sources consulted in this review of recent local research:

1. ***Homelessness in HRM: A Portrait of Streets and Shelters***, HRM, March 2005
2. ***Exploring Salient Issues of Youth Homelessness in Halifax, Nova Scotia***, February 2004, Dr. Jeff Karabanow, Maritime School of Social Work
3. ***Getting off the Street: Exploring Strategies Used by Canadian Youth to Exit Street Life***, July 2005, Dr. Jeff Karabanow, Maritime School of Social Work
4. ***The drugs are here. What are you going to do about it? An assessment of crystal meth and other drug use among street-involved youth in Halifax***, November 2005, HRM and ARK Outreach
5. ***Struggles for Access: Examining the Educational Experiences of Homeless Young Women and Girls in Canada***, November 2005, Jaskiran Dhillon and Justice for Girls

Additional resources cited:

Caputo et al. (1997). The Street Lifestyle Study. Ottawa: Office of Alcohol, Drugs and Dependency Issues, Health Canada.

Gaetz, Stephen. (2004). "Safe Streets for Whom? Homeless Youth, Social Exclusion and Criminal Victimization". Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice. 46; 4, 423-455.

Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force. (1999). Taking Responsibility for Homelessness: An Action Plan for Toronto. Toronto: City of Toronto.