



Between the Cracks: Homeless Youth in Vancouver



The McCreary Centre Society

Between the Cracks: Homeless Youth in Vancouver

© The McCreary Centre Society, 2002
ISBN 1-895438-51-9

401 N. Esmond Avenue
Burnaby, BC V5C 1S4
Tel: (604) 291-1996
Fax: (604) 291-7308
E-mail: mccreary@mcs.bc.ca
www.mcs.bc.ca

Project Team

McCreary Staff

Aileen Murphy
Managing Director
Aviva Laye
Research Associate
Alison Liebel
Communications Coordinator

Research Assistants

Zachary Campbell
Kuldip Chahal
Jolene Irons
Michelle Kayne
Pixie-Ann Mathura
Amy Salmon
Melissa Weigel

Consultants

Dodie Katzenstein
*Communications
Consultant*
Sheila Martineau
*Qualitative
Methodologist*

The photographs of Vancouver street scenes are by Alison Liebel and Pixie-Ann Mathura. (Note: No one appearing in the photos is associated in any way with the research.)

Between the Cracks: Homeless Youth in Vancouver is a project of The McCreary Centre Society, a non-governmental, non-profit agency committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, education and community-based participation projects.

Many thanks to the following individuals and agencies that provided the research team with advice, assistance and support.

Broadway Youth Resource Centre
Sandy Cooke and Yvonne Andrews
Covenant House, Vancouver
Rae Edney
Vancouver Community Mental Health Services
Michelle Fortin
Watari Research Association
Deena Franks
Family Services of Greater Vancouver
The Gathering Place
Jenn Horgos and Romi Chandra
GAB, the Centre

Options
Melanie Mark
Save the Children
BC Centre for Disease Control - Street Nurse Program
Moe Townsly
Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society
R.J. Evans
Ministry of Children and Family Development
Walden Safe House
Brian Williams
Dusk to Dawn

Funding for this project has been provided through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative under the National Homelessness Initiative of the



The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the Government of Canada.

Related McCreary reports on issues of homelessness among BC's youth include:
Homeless Youth: An Annotated Bibliography (2002)
No Place to Call Home: A profile of street youth in British Columbia (2001)
Time Out: A profile of BC youth in custody (2001)

The McCreary Centre Society acknowledges the support of Health Canada, Population and Public Health Branch, BC/ Yukon Region for the 2000 survey of street youth in six BC communities; and Justice Services, Ministry of Children and Family Development for the survey of BC youth in custody. McCreary also acknowledges support for the AHS II survey from the Province of British Columbia, Ministry for Children and Families, Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors, and Ministry of Women's Equality; Population Health Fund, Health Canada; Vancouver Foundation; project Advisory Committee, Inter-Ministry Advisory Committee, students and staff of participating school districts, and the Province's public health nurses.

Table of Contents

Faces of Homelessness	6
Summary and Recommendations	13
Between The Cracks: Youth Homelessness in Vancouver	15
Some Background Information	
Defining Youth Homelessness	
About This Report	
Research Methods	
Life On The Streets	21
Survival Tactics	
Perceptions Of Street Life	
Leaving Home	33
Patterns of Disconnection	
Family	
School	
Explaining Homelessness	
Self-Portraits: Identity, Strengths, and Resources	47
Voices of Homeless Youth: Recommendations for Change	53
Profiles of Homeless Youth	57
Statistics on Homeless Youth in Vancouver	62
McCreary Publications	68

*“I just wanted to find a place where I
could really be home... actually I’m
still looking for it, you know.”*

Tye

Faces Of Homelessness



Rail, originally from Quebec, is new to the English language. During his past three months in Vancouver, he has been sleeping on the streets of the Downtown South, making money by doing “squeegee” work. Now 18, he became street-involved at 14 after incidents in which he was both kicked out of and ran away from his family home. He says “...I don’t talk to my father any more.... I would like a relation with him so I can call him, but I am not brave enough.” He spent nearly two years in “juvie” in Quebec. Although he was able to complete his high-school education while in the facility, Rail cautions about the bad influence of the custody

environment: “Don’t put [street youth] in jail. It’s the way I learned many shit. Like steal stuff and shit. I learned it [there]. It’s the worst thing to do to help someone.” He recalls being repeatedly expelled from schools and says, “I was like a black sheep. Me and my friends were like tagged. ‘They’re bad kids,’ they would say, ‘don’t hang out with those guys.’” Still, education is important to Rail: “I want to go back to school. I want to do something with my life. [But] I’m not in a rush. I’ll take my time.”





Alisha, 18, is a sex trade worker who has been on the streets for six years. For the past two months, she has been living in a hotel on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. She says she has learning disabilities resulting from FAE (fetal alcohol effects) and from being born addicted to cocaine. Her early years were characterized by numerous moves in and out of her family home and what she calls "orphanages" in the United States. She reluctantly moved to Vancouver at age 11 and was reunited with her mother and brother. By age 12, she was again living in foster care and subsequently became street-involved. She dropped out of school after Grade 6, when she was expelled from elementary school for fighting. On the day she was interviewed for this research project, she appeared to be in poor health, with a bad cough and a painful limp. During the interview, Alisha refers to both heroin and crack use. She became a regular crack user at age 14. Of her life on the Downtown

Eastside, Alisha states, “I’m not here just for the drugs. I like it down here.... When I’m not here, I don’t feel right. I was in jail before and, as soon as I got out, I came down here. Anywhere else, I feel like I don’t belong. I feel weird. And that scares me a little.”

Nina is 15 years old, Aboriginal, and three months pregnant. She is a sex trade worker who has been street-involved since age 10, when she dropped out of school after Grade six. She recently stopped using heroin but continues to smoke crack. The interview process appeared difficult for Nina; although she remained either in tears or on the verge of crying throughout the interview, she wanted to continue. She grew up in the government care system and ran away from her foster family. Originally from Alberta, Nina came to Vancouver for drug treatment about a year ago. At the time of the interview, she was staying at a safe house, but she usually sleeps on the

streets in the Downtown Eastside. Nina found many of the interview questions painful to answer. She says if she had the chance to say something to other young people about the street, she would tell them, “Don’t do drugs. Stay home. Stay away. It might be fun at first, but soon it gets pretty nasty.”



Tye is 17, Aboriginal, and gay. Tye lived on the street for a few months in his hometown in British Columbia's interior but is a newcomer to Vancouver's Downtown South area. As a permanent government ward, Tye

has spent his life in and out of various foster homes. He often ran away: "I just wanted to find a place where I could really be home... actually I'm still looking for it, you know." Tye cites his reasons for coming to the streets as, "depression, homophobia, anger, denial, life in general." Before moving to Vancouver, he was living with his boyfriend. That relationship didn't work out, and he is still hurting from the break-up. As a young gay male in a small town, he says, "you can only be so gay." He envisioned Vancouver as a gay-friendly city and therefore a good place to start over. He dropped out of school after Grade 11 but would like to enroll in correspondence courses as soon as he gets things settled. He has plans to get a job and find a roommate. Tye is very lonely and wants desperately to meet "friends that won't try to use me.... I wish I could find someone honest and sincere. Just a friend. You know, good and loyal."



Tobacco, 18, had been living on the street for only a week at the time of the interview but had spent time in the city's Downtown South area for about a year. Previously, he lived with his mother in the BC interior, but a "harsh disagreement" led him to run away twice at 16. Although he has reconciled with his mother, he's been street-involved ever since. Tobacco expresses strong opinions on the state of the society around him. "Society is full of followers... it leads up to eventually corporate rule," he says. He completed Grade 10 and then for a brief time tried an alternate program. "I never felt that I belonged in school." Tobacco offers advice for adults: "Listen to [street] kids. We're not just a statistic or a number.... Everyone's different. Everyone needs to be listened to and also needs to be questioned as well as listened to. Because if you don't question people, people don't find the answers for themselves."



At 17, **Louise**, became homeless about a year ago when her mother moved to Montreal and did not take her along. This was not the first time she'd been left behind. However, on previous occasions, Louise had stayed with relatives who treated her poorly but had helped her reunite with her mother. She describes her mother as "harsh into drugs and dealing." She has been staying in a hotel and on the streets in the Downtown South area and, most recently, at a safe house. Her childhood was full of instability: "...all my life I've moved across Canada. I've lived in so many

places... I've always been moving all around." Despite her situation, Louise currently attends school and is in Grade 11. She intends to finish high-school and already has some plans for a future career. She enjoys learning new skills and is teaching herself how to play the piano, using pianos at area hotels. She is wary about other people and feels that animals are more trustworthy than the people she meets on the street: "[Dogs are] the only one that's truly loyal to you, like they don't disrespect [you] in any way, they're like pure loyalty. ...[On] the streets you can't trust nobody..."

Twenty-nine young people shared their stories for this research project through personal interviews. Despite common stereotypes about street and homeless youth, these young people do not form a homogeneous group. Rather, they come from different backgrounds and have varied experiences, interests, and personalities. This report attempts both to highlight general themes that emerge from the youths' stories and to emphasize their individuality. Although each story is unique, many common threads run through them, providing insight into the harsh realities of youth homelessness. In addition to the profiles on pages 4-10, brief biographical sketches of the other youth who participated in the project appear on page 55.

Throughout this report, youth are identified by pseudonyms chosen by them during their interviews with the study team.

Summary And Recommendations

This report draws from a variety of data sources to tell the stories of homeless youth in Vancouver. While homeless youth can be found in many Canadian communities, Vancouver —with an active drug trade and high rates of HIV infection — can be a particularly dangerous place for a troubled young person. The individuals who participated in this study are a diverse group, with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Yet certain patterns emerge in their stories about the path towards street life. Most of these youth describe a childhood marked by chaotic family life, frequent moves and instability. They speak of neglect or abuse, rejection or failure in school, and problems with drugs. A disproportionate number of Vancouver street youth are Aboriginal.

For Vancouver's homeless youth, life is a daily struggle for survival. They use both legal and illegal sources of income to

support basic needs, yet often they lack clothing, food and shelter. Many of these young people have learning difficulties and physical or emotional health problems. Most are involved with drugs; some work in the sex trade. Not surprisingly, youth who become involved in street life at an early age tend to have more serious problems and less support than those who become homeless as older adolescents. Beneath an often tough exterior, nearly all reveal an underlying loneliness and search for connection.

The complex issue of youth homelessness has no simple solution. However, this study identifies some potential strategies both to meet the needs of young people who are already on the street and to prevent other distressed youth from becoming homeless. Above all, these youth need and deserve an approach which builds on their individual strengths and capacities, rather than focusing only

on their problems. Such strategies include:

Prevention

Youth who are at risk of becoming homeless need:

Support during early adolescence.

The ages of 12-14 years appear to be critical years for initial engagement in street life. Prevention efforts should

ensure that youth who are at risk have opportunities to connect to supportive adults, develop skills, and learn to cope with challenges.

Help to stay in school.

Some homeless youth continue to attend school even after becoming involved with street life. Efforts should be made to identify these youth and to help them to maintain a connection with school despite unstable family circumstances.

Support for vulnerable populations.

Aboriginal youth, youth from the government care system and gay youth are at increased risk of homelessness. Targeted initiatives are required to address the specific issues of these population groups.

Intervention

Youth who are already homeless or street-involved need:

- health and social services that are confidential, respectful and non-judgmental;
- help with issues related to drug and alcohol use;
- safe and affordable housing;
- tailored programs to complete their education and to acquire employment skills;
- opportunities to develop their talents and interests and to engage in meaningful activities.



Between The Cracks: Youth Homelessness In Vancouver

Some Background Information

This report tells the stories of homeless youth living on the streets of Vancouver. Young people who are involved in risky street lifestyles can be found in many Canadian communities and throughout BC— in urban centers, suburbs and small towns. Vancouver’s street life attracts youth from throughout BC and from other provinces. Vancouver can be a particularly dangerous place for a troubled young person; despite its scenic environment and mild climate, the city is renowned for its flourishing drug trade and high rates of HIV infection. Street-involved youth in suburban and smaller centres tend to be young teens who spend at least part of the time at home and in school. Those youth living on the streets in Vancouver, however, are likely to be older adolescents who have few connections to family, school, or community.

Life is not easy for these youth, and their personal histories are compelling and often disturbing.

It is hoped that these stories will contribute to increased understanding of the issue of homelessness among Canada’s youth. Using qualitative and quantitative data, the research conducted for this report explores a number of important questions: Who are these young people who have left home and school at an early age? Why have they become engaged in a risky lifestyle in downtown Vancouver? What does it mean for a young person to be homeless? How do they feel about it? What are these young peoples’ strengths and talents, and what can be done to build on this potential? How could youth homelessness be prevented? What do youth themselves recommend?

Every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development.
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Defining Youth Homelessness

There is no standard definition of a “homeless youth.” Those definitions found in the research literature include youth who lack adult supervision or care because they have run away or been kicked out of home, youth who have no permanent home and are living in a shelter or temporary housing, as well as those literally living on the streets. The terms “homeless youth” and “street youth” often describe the same population of young people. The definition of “youth” also varies. Some research defines a youth as under 18 or 19 years, while other studies or programs include young people up to the age of 25 or even 30.

The McCreary Centre Society has chosen to define “homelessness” broadly. Thus, the youth who participated in this research project are young people who are involved in a street lifestyle which, in addition to uncertain housing arrangements, may include panhandling, involvement in the sex trade, selling or using drugs, or engaging in criminal activities. This inclusive approach enabled the project to capture a wide range of perspectives from young people whose involvement in Vancouver’s street life increases their risk of failing to make a healthy transition to adulthood. In this report, the terms “homeless youth,”

“street youth,” and “street-involved youth” are used interchangeably.

About This Report

This report weaves together stories and statistics about young people who are living on the streets of Vancouver. Overall, the words and statistics paint a grim picture of street life, marked by high rates of drug use and addiction, violence and victimization, and physical and emotional health problems. The individuals portrayed here are vulnerable young people. Most are growing up on the margins of society without the caring and nurturing of parents or school, struggling to survive day-to-day. The optimistic outlook presented by some youth in the interviews may seem to contradict the gritty reality of street life. The interview questions encouraged the youth to identify their skills and to voice their recommendations, rather than to focus solely on problems. The ability to find positive aspects of an otherwise harsh lifestyle may also reflect the efforts of these young people to remain strong in the face of adversity. Though the language in this report is sometimes raw, the authors chose to let the youths’ words speak for themselves. Instead of interpreting their statements or judging their choices, the report attempts to allow the voices of these youth to be heard. The McCreary

Centre Society hopes that readers of the report will use this information to build on the potential of young people, helping those now on the streets to find a better life and helping other vulnerable youth to avoid joining the ranks of those who are growing up without a home.

Research Methods

The report is based on multiple data sources, which together represent a rich source of information about homelessness among Vancouver's youth. The one important question that this data cannot address is how many homeless youth there are in this city. Estimates reported in the research literature on the size of the homeless population in Canada, or in a specific city such as Toronto, vary widely depending on the definition used and the method used for counting. No comprehensive count of Vancouver's homeless youth population has been conducted.

The report draws on both qualitative and quantitative research studies conducted by The McCreary Centre Society. The qualitative research, based on face-to-face interviews with youth, provides information from the youths' perspective. The results of the qualitative research are presented in the main text of this report. The quantitative data, based on self-complete questionnaires from several

studies, provides statistics on youths' health and behaviours. The quantitative data is presented in figures and tables throughout the report and on pages 60-65.

Qualitative Research

In the Fall 2001, McCreary interviewed 29 homeless youth in downtown Vancouver. The interviews consisted of 17 questions, along with a one-page fact sheet of demographic questions. The interview questions explored the early processes of becoming street involved. It also included questions about how youth feel about and cope with street life, their individual strengths and interests, and their recommendations for change. The interviews took an average of 45 minutes to complete. Each interview was conducted by a team of two research assistants—one with street experience who asked the questions, and the other a graduate student who recorded and transcribed the interviews. Each experiential research assistant was familiar with a specific area of the city—Downtown Eastside, Downtown South, and “Boystown.” The research teams were assigned to one of these areas to conduct ten interviews.

Youth were invited to participate in an interview if they were street-involved and under the age of 19. The research teams

were encouraged to interview younger youth (16 years or under); however, all three teams encountered a greater number of youth over the age of 16. Youth were approached on the street or in community agencies. They were paid an honorarium, and, if the interview took place in a restaurant, they were provided with a snack or meal. All youth approached by the research teams who fit the age criteria agreed to the interview. The 29 youth were between the ages of 15 and 20. A disproportionate number of the youth interviewed for this study are Aboriginal. Thirteen of the 29 youth, and six of the seven youth involved in the sex trade, identified themselves as being Aboriginal. Several French-speaking youth who were under 19 years were not able to participate due to their limited English language skills. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym, which is used in the interview transcripts and in this report.

While each person's story is unique, the interviews were analyzed to identify common themes that create an overall picture of the progression from becoming street-involved to homelessness in downtown Vancouver. These themes form the basis of this report.

Describing the Areas

Downtown South is used to describe a large area of Vancouver's downtown district. This area encompasses commercial, office, and residential space. Recent efforts to centralize the downtown nightlife have designated Granville Street an "entertainment row." Granville Street, referred to as the Granville Mall area, is a main downtown hub; however, it is also the main strip for homeless youth. Many social services for youth are located in this area, some dedicated specifically to working with street-involved and homeless youth.

"*Boystown*" is the name used to describe a specific area within Yaletown, a Downtown South neighbourhood. Yaletown, formerly an industrial and commercial area, has undergone gentrification over the last decade. The area has become home to young urban professionals, living in its many new highrise buildings. Heritage warehouses have been converted into loft-style residences and upscale businesses. Yaletown is also home to Vancouver's male sex trade workers. The changing neighbourhood demographic has led to friction between the sex trade workers and the new residents and, at times, has forced the former to relocate to nearby streets.

The *Downtown Eastside*, one of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods, has been described as the poorest postal code in Canada. The median household income is far below that of Vancouver as a whole. It is a community rich in history and cultural diversity; however, it is also home to high crime rates, an active sex trade, rampant HIV infection, homelessness, and a thriving drug trade. Much of the population resides in low income housing, often single occupancy rooms in area hotels.

Quantitative Research

This report also draws on results from four separate quantitative studies conducted by The McCreary Centre Society: the 1998 BC Adolescent Health Survey (AHS II) of youth in school; a survey of street youth under the age of 19 conducted in six BC communities in 2000; a survey of Vancouver street youth aged 19 to 24 years conducted in 2001; and a 2000 survey of youth in BC's youth custody centres. The self-complete questionnaires used in each of these surveys are different; however, they share some common questions, which allows for comparisons to be made among the groups.

Adolescent Health Survey

McCreary conducted province-wide Adolescent Health Surveys in BC schools in 1992 and 1998. A total of over 42,000 students in Grades 7-12 participated in the two surveys. The AHS questionnaire asks about health status and health problems, practices that promote good health, and involvement in risky behaviours, such as use of drugs and tobacco, unprotected sexual activity, or drinking and driving. Results of the surveys have been published in a number of provincial, regional, and special interest reports and fact sheets (see page 66). Some data from the 1998 AHS II are included in this report as they provide a useful point of comparison between the health and behaviours of "mainstream" youth in school to those of homeless youth (see page 65).

Younger Street Youth

In 2000, McCreary administered a Youth Health Survey to street-involved youth under the age of 19 in six BC communities. *No Place to Call Home* provides results of the study. A total of 145 youth in downtown Vancouver participated in the survey. The questionnaire used in the street youth survey includes many of the same questions as in the school-based AHS II. In consultation with the project's advisory committee, some new questions were added pertaining to the young

Interview Notes:

We met Maria on Hastings Street as she was walking on her way to go to work [in the sex trade]. As we conducted the interview, Maria sat at the table putting on makeup and painting her finger nails. Maria also ate a piece of apple pie and drank an orange soda while we talked. Toward the end of the interview, she began to appear anxious that the interview was going to be over. After the interview, Maria told Amy that having the money from the honorarium meant that she didn't have to go out and work that night, which she was happy about.

person's current living situation and reasons for leaving home. Additional questions solicit the youth's views about access to social, health, and educational services. Youth were accessed in youth-serving agencies in downtown Vancouver. The self-complete questionnaire was anonymous and confidential. To overcome potential literacy problems, the questionnaire was read aloud by trained research assistants. A movie or grocery store coupon served as an honorarium. (Note: On their questionnaires, 29 of the Vancouver youth indicated that they were 19 years or older. Responses of these older youth did not differ from those of youth who were under 19. Therefore, responses of the older youth were left in the sample.)

Older Street Youth

The majority of homeless youth in Vancouver are aged 19 to 24 years. In the Fall 2001, McCreary administered a Youth Health Survey to 180 street-involved youth in this age group in downtown Vancouver. The questionnaire was very similar to that used for the survey of street youth under the age of 19, except for questions relating to youths' transition to adulthood, which were either modified or

added. Youth were accessed through agencies in downtown Vancouver and were provided with an honorarium. (Note: On their questionnaires, 6 youth indicated that they were under the age of 19 and 1 youth was over the age of 24. These youths' responses are included in the sample of youth aged 19-24 years.)

The 325 youth who participated in the two Vancouver street youth surveys (under 19 years and 19-24 years) represent a convenience sample. That is, they were selected for participation as a result of their connection with a community agency or service and are not a random sample. Thus, the sample may not include the highest-risk youth who did not participate in the survey because they were not connected to or receiving assistance from youth-serving agencies.

Youth In Custody

In 2000, McCreary modified the AHS II questionnaire to explore the health and behaviours of 243 youth being held in BC's nine youth custody centres due to their involvement in criminal activity. *Time Out* provides results of this study. A few questions on this survey related to involvement in a street lifestyle and experiences of homelessness. Some of this data is included in this report (see page 65).

Life On The Streets

What is it like to be young and homeless in Vancouver? How do homeless youth survive on the street? For many homeless youth, the day and often the night is spent trying to secure shelter, food, and drugs. Relatively few homeless youth hold legal jobs. Street jobs range from relatively safe to extremely dangerous; youth panhandle, squeegee, deal or run drugs, and sell sex. Although many youth have left their family or care situation behind and are alone on the street, they cultivate their own social networks in which they provide help and support for other members of their “street family.” However, while some youth are trusting of their street peers, others are more wary and suspicious. Youth express various feelings and perspectives about their lives. They describe the loneliness, confusion and depression that sometimes threaten to engulf them. They also convey a range of perceptions about their street-involvement — outlooks that include the street as a necessary adaptation, as freedom and independence, as a place of shame and stigma, as a hostile place or, conversely, a place of belonging. When asked to re-

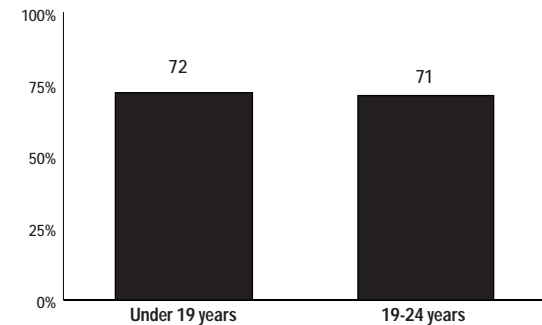
flect, these youth tend to regret running away from home, dropping out of school, and becoming addicted to drugs. But realizing that they cannot alter the past, many continue to express hope for change in the future.

Survival Tactics

Housing

Meeting basic needs for shelter is a primary concern for homeless youth. When asked where they are living or sleeping at the present time, several youth described living “all over” or “anywhere... everywhere.” Some of the youth couch-surf, while others described specific places they sleep on the streets of Vancouver. Stacey sleeps outside on Davie Street, Tobacco sleeps on the porch of an abandoned house in east Vancouver, Brent is sleeping in a parkade, and Happy described a specific alley off Granville Street where he sleeps behind a restaurant. Jeana is currently sleeping at the beach, a place other youth referred to sleeping in the

Youth Who Currently Live in a Hotel, Shelter, Safe House, All Over, Or On The Street



Note

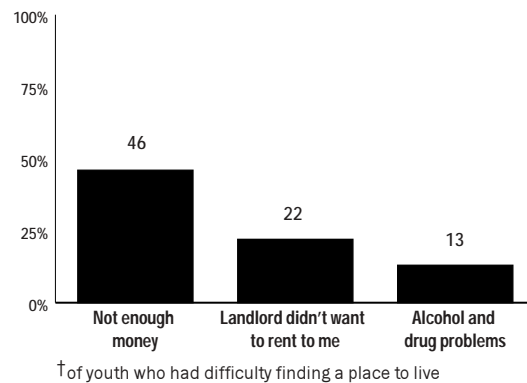
Data presented in the figures and tables throughout this report are derived from the quantitative surveys described on page 17 and are not based on the personal interviews conducted specifically for this report.

“You’re going to be cold. You have to accept that.”

Bob

Reasons Youth Had Difficulty Finding a Place To Live in Vancouver†

(Of youth 19-24 years)



past. Christy, Kelly, Kristina, and Alisha live in hotel rooms in the Downtown Eastside; all four of these young people are involved in the sex trade. Kase905 and Neptune said they don't sleep, but rather are spending the nights at a youth drop-in. Maria returns home to her group home when she is really tired, since when she is on the streets she doesn't sleep. Julian has an apartment in a youth facility, part of a transitional program for exiting the streets. Five of the youth interviewed were temporarily staying in a safe house. (A safe house provides a refuge for street-involved youth while helping to connect them with resources.)

For these homeless teenagers, a good night's sleep, a shower and a meal are luxuries. Bob warns that if you are on the streets “you’re going to be cold. You have to accept that unless you do what I did. Sleep in the banks – curl up until some guy kicks me out.” Neptune describes the feeling of being homeless – “It’s cold and I just want to go to bed and I can’t.” The

interviewers noted that Steve looked very tired and dirty. He sleeps on the streets and says he is constantly being woken up. He hasn't been able to take a shower in “a long time” because he is banned from the youth facility. Louise has been in a safe house for a week. She says that since her mother left her “it’s been really hard for me to find a place to like sleep.” Happy says that “it is all the amenities that I miss... that everyone takes for granted. Like I see people washing a road, man, and I say why, that is a waste of water.” Alisha repeatedly thanked the interviewers for taking her to get something to eat as she hadn't eaten in a few days. Kase905 also hadn't eaten “for a couple of days.”

Income

Strategies for generating income on the street include both legal and illegal activities, such as panhandling, squeegeeing, sex trade work, scamming (i.e., deal-making, trying to get free things, cheating), working odd jobs, and drug dealing. For Bob, learning how to deal drugs on the street was an essential part of learning how to live on the streets. When Happy panhandles, he kills a few hours and makes a few bucks. Tobacco plays his guitar for money. Nina is attempting to sell her jacket outside on the sidewalk the day her interviewers meet up with her; she also works in the sex trade.

Their financial status, like their lives, is very much based in the present. These youth have no “rainy day fund.” Basic needs are generally met on a day-to-day basis, and income varies widely and depends on many different factors. Rick describes both the pro’s and the con’s of making money on the street by scamming: “I’ve been hustling every day, finding jobs on the street.... The possibility [exists] of making quick money, more money than you could make from a regular job.... It wasn’t what I expected. I’m surprised how people turn on each other and hustle each other for their own benefit, without thinking about the other people they’re hustling.”

Most street jobs are not without hazard. Brent describes the difficulties inherent in squeegee work: “Everything goes wrong. The squeegees, right, like the cops can come and take six squeegees from me and then some asshole gets out of his car and tries to pick a fight with me and whatever, right, and everything you possibly can think of can go wrong.” Stacey must deal with inquiring passersbys while panhandling: “People will sit down and start talking to you.... And it seems to be like everybody’s business to people. You can’t go anywhere to avoid them.”

Several youth mention feeling harassed or discriminated against by the police.

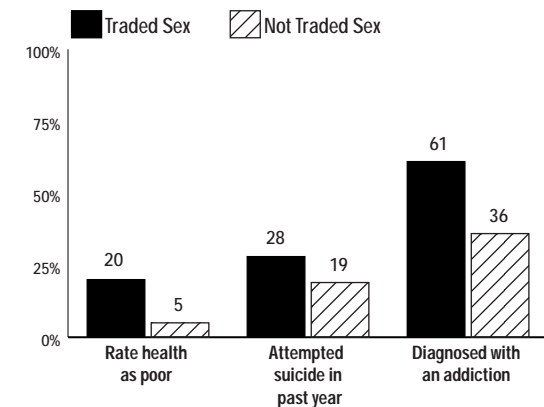
Happy describes his regular contact with the police. “I swear, five days, and I have been checked seven times for my ID, had five cop cruisers down, ID units down. They don’t believe who I am. They don’t believe that I don’t have any warrants, they don’t believe that I don’t have any records, they don’t believe that I am not criminally involved. They can’t believe it. I try to tell them, but they are like, no, you are a criminal, and I am like, no, I am not, man, and the cop said I have a warrant.... I am going to take you in.”

Sexual Exploitation

Some youth survive by trading sexual favours. Jayson and Kelly work in the sex trade in Vancouver’s Boystown area. Jayson left his foster home and came to

**Youth Who Ever Traded Sex/
Youth Who Never Traded Sex**

(Of youth under 25 years)



“I’m surprised how people turn on each other and hustle each other for their own benefit, without thinking about the other people they’re hustling.”

Rick

Vancouver to find his younger brother who was addicted to heroin and working in the sex trade. Jayson, too, soon ended up on the streets. Kelly, also a sex trade worker in Boystown, likes the freedom he feels his work affords him. “I don’t have to answer to anyone... and the money is easy.” Prior to being street-involved in Vancouver, Kelly lived with a “sugar daddy” who paid his way to the city.

Several young women interviewed for this project described the climate of fear that accompanies working in the sex trade in the Downtown Eastside. Kristina, who was watched from across the street by her pimp during the interview, spoke of being bossed around. Alisha vividly relates her work-related fears: “Sometimes it’s really scary. There are cars I’m scared to go in. The duffle bag thing scares me. I was staying at the Astoria, and they pulled a body out of the dumpster in the parking lot. Not a body – pieces. That day, passing the dumpster, it felt really scary. I was sick to my stomach.” The body in the dumpster was a friend of Christy’s, another sex trade worker. Christy, who says she “used to be promiscuous” and now calls herself a “working girl,” tells her interviewers about having regular “bad dates who rape and beat” her. Alisha recounts past brushes with danger and lessons learned. “I wouldn’t have worn a scarf to work, and I wouldn’t



[have worked] when I was really high on heroin.... I can always tell when something is going to go bad. One time, this guy tried to suffocate me. He was drunk. This junkie punched him and chased him down the street. He saved my life.” Apart from the safety issues inherent in the job, Alisha explains yet another way that work has interfered with life, impairing her ability to have healthy relationships with men: “Working’s fucked me up with guys.”

Substance Use

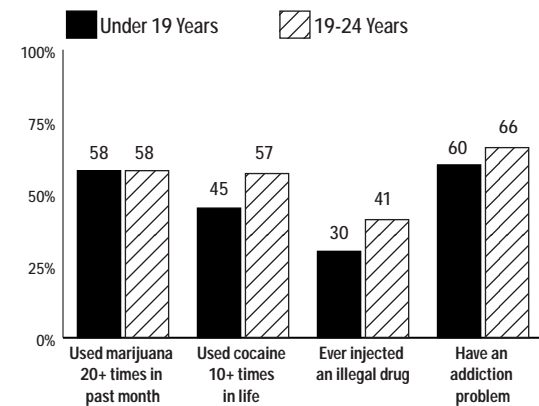
Drugs play a major role in street culture. Substance use often contributes to a youth’s initial attraction to the street and also keeps young people involved in street life. Almost all of the youth interviewed spoke about their relationship with drugs, and several acknowledge the strong influence of drugs in their lives.

Bob went from stealing cigarettes to acid-tripping to dealing drugs. Happy started drinking at an early age, stealing alcohol from his parents. Maria liked to get high on dope, Kase905 started selling drugs at school, and Christy became a heroin addict like her parents. Tye describes his recent initiation into street life: “I got high the other night. Got high, so high, so fucking high. I mean I’ve never smoked coke before. And I got so high

that I just forgot. And I woke up needing or wanting more and I said, I can’t live like this.... Wake up in some strange man’s bed, feeding me coke. It’s pretty scary.” Christy expresses the powerlessness she feels: “My drugs make my choices. I live in a three-block radius. It’s just me and my drugs.”

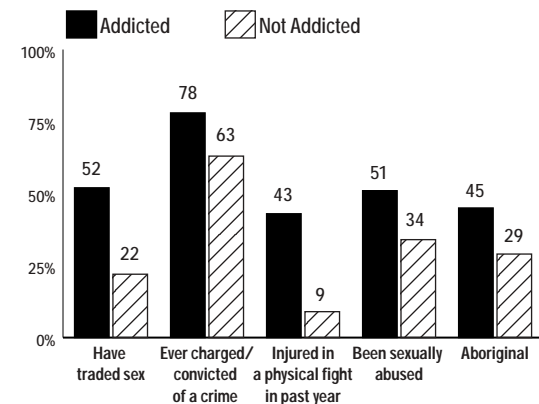
Decisions about drugs are ongoing, and some youth who use drugs do try to maintain a level of control. Rail uses drugs, but doesn’t use needles, while Tye likes to smoke but doesn’t shoot. Nina is pregnant and trying to quit using heroin, but not crack. Bear says she could stay off drugs if she wanted to. Tobacco explains that drugs are a “will thing” but concedes that, although he himself doesn’t get hooked, drugs can “just take control.” A few youth have made conscious decisions to stop using drugs or to significantly change their drug habits. Jayson says, “I don’t do drugs because I have seen what it does.” Kitten used to both use and deal, but now claims that “it’s not worth it.” Krystal feels healthier since she stopped using her favourite drug: “I don’t want to do it anymore. It changed me. Now I don’t hang out with the same people. I don’t hang out on the same streets anymore.”

Substance Use



Youth Who Think They Are Addicted/ Youth Who Do Not Think They Are Addicted

(Of youth under 25 years)



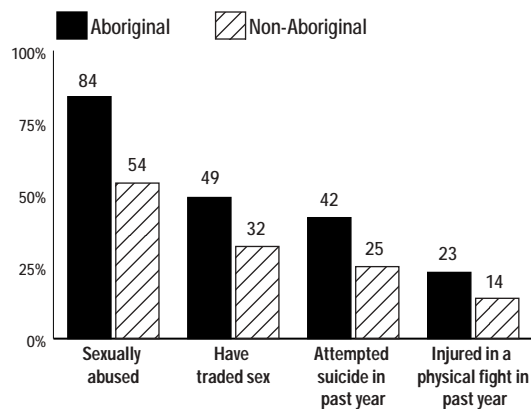
Homeless Youth Who Are Aboriginal

(Of youth under 25 years)

Males	32%
Females	42%

Aboriginal Girls/Non-Aboriginal Girls

(Of females under 25 years)



Friends

Despite the presence of a competitive lifestyle which rewards “survival of the fittest,” street youth find many ways to support each other. Often, this help is related to basic needs such as procuring food, companionship, or sleeping arrangements. Sara brings food to friends who are too old to access certain age-restricted youth services, and Neptune shares her interview food with friends waiting for her outside the restaurant. Finding a safe location to sleep can be especially difficult. Bob says, “...lot of times I sleep on the corner with my friends so they’re not alone. I’ll crash with them.” Louise tells a similar story of how she and three friends would sleep together on the beach and pool resources to help each other out. Offering available space is another way to show support; Jay-Loyd has been staying with a friend for the past month. Other youth refer to helping street peers remain safe when using drugs by providing clean needles and giving advice on how to use them. Brent explains how he helps others: “Some days I make a lot of money handling and whatever. And then I will give some money to some of the other street kids.” Sara helps a younger friend by taking her to a doctor for treatment of an abscess.

Helping also extends beyond tangible actions; support can include telling jokes

or helping friends to relieve stress. An interviewer overheard one street youth planning a birthday party for a street friend. Brent reports, “I help my friend. It makes me feel better when I help her. To see her smile, right.” Kelly reports being a good listener and giving advice to friends. Happy aids his peers in a variety of ways. “My interests are just helping out people, just making sure that everybody is all right. And listening to people. Listen to their problems, and it doesn’t matter if they cry, scream, call me names. I don’t care, but whatever ways you have to get it out. That is basically the kind of guy I am. I just like helping people out...” Helping others offers a way to feel good, to contribute, to cope, and to strengthen friendship bonds.

Street friends are identified by the youth as an important source — and in some cases the only source — of emotional support. When Krystal needs help, she goes to her friends; so does Jeana. For many youth who have left family behind, friends become new family. Liz says “I have lots of friends.... My friends are like my family. Like one friend, she just bought me muffins. Sometimes she lets us stay with her, but right now she doesn’t have a place.” This same friend also helps Liz with her laundry.

Some youth feel that, stripped of material possessions and social conventions, they

are able to meet more genuine people on the street. Happy says, “I can choose the right people, I can choose to meet decent and wholesome people here on the street... [compared to] when I have money. It is really weird. I wish I [could] meet those people when I have money, but it is hard to.” Bob has never been “stabbed in the back” by his street companions and considers them his best friends. Other youth are more cautious about their street friends. Sara warns, “You have to watch out here who you trust.” Kim’s “crew” just broke up due to infighting. Kitten felt disrespected by friends whom he trusted but who “turned” on him after he followed their advice. He responded by moving to Vancouver, “cause up here at least I know people who respect me for who I am.”

Pets

Given the lack of connection and loneliness that can be part of life on the street, it is not surprising that pets and animals in general are so important to some street youth. Together with her boyfriend, Krystal has two dogs. Dogs are also a responsibility, and Krystal sometimes feels overwhelmed by having to carry around large quantities of dog food in addition to all her possessions. Louise, who doesn’t have a pet, carefully explains, “The only reason why homeless [people] have pets is



like their pet is like the only one that's truly loyal to you.... Especially dogs." Although most shelters don't allow pets, Louise says, "[On] the streets you can't trust nobody. Dog's the only person they trust, so they're not going to give up the dog just to go in some place for a bed."

Perceptions of Street Life

Perspectives

Five different perspectives on street life emerged from the interviews with the youth. These views can be summed up as:

- acceptance and adaptation
- freedom and independence
- shame, degradation and fear
- the street as a last resort
- the street as a safer place

Some youth identify with one perspective, while others express several views. Acceptance and adaptation is characterized by a resigned "whatever" attitude as a forced adjustment to circumstance. Bob simply goes along "with the whims and ways of the street." For Krystal, "It's my life.... I've just kind of adapted to it." Liz says, "it just feels normal," and Rick calls it "a minor glitch in my life" that has required him to learn how to fight.

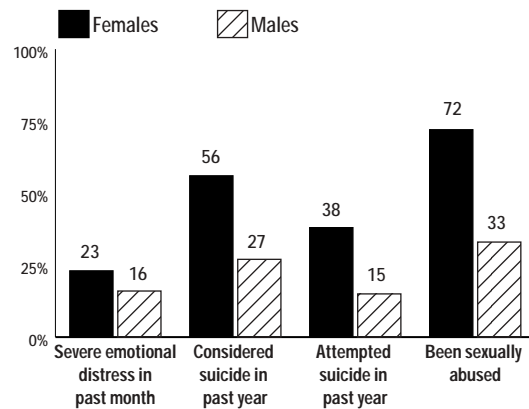
Other youth view the streets as freedom and independence from responsibility.

For some, life on the streets is seen as primarily "fun;" others have the agenda of rejection of authority or of mainstream society. For Rail, being on the street means not paying rent and only needing money for drugs. He is "sick of authority" and likes the freedom to do whatever he wants. To Kase905, it means "...playing by someone else's rules until I can beat them at their game and start playing by mine." He adds, "I only make choices for myself now. You have to become more self-aware when you are on the street." Julian's street life represents freedom and is "an interesting part of my life that I wouldn't have if I had a boring 9-to-5 job." Some of the youth, such as Bob, identify themselves as anarchists. Tobacco feels "a lot more free, a lot more open to things.... I don't have to worry about a house with a car and stuff... I think a lot of material possessions can cloud things. Possessing things is like a drug, and your judgment is blurred." Happy was bored with social values that emphasize work and money: "I wanted to... see how it is to step outside of that."

Neptune exemplifies the youth who feel that the streets are a place of shame, degradation and fear. She is so sensitive to the stigma she feels as a "dirty street kid" that, during the interview in a downtown restaurant, she avoids touching a straw in order to pass it along to her

Emotional Health

(Of youth under 19 years)



interviewer. Kelly tells his interviewers, “At times it feels really degrading and it feels dirty.” Maria’s comment echoes this: “[life] feels really shitty on the street.” Kim has specific complaints, “No one wants to recommend a street kid for a job. Choices tend to be really restricted when you live on the streets.” Many of these youth often feel afraid. Nina says that street life “soon gets pretty nasty.” Rick cautions, “...no one cares about you on the street.” Kase905 is blunt: “[Street-life] is gonna kill you.”

For some of these youth, the streets are a last resort, and their life on the street is solely about survival. Being street-involved for Nina and Kim is not a voluntary option but an escape from an intolerable previous life. Louise and Brent, left behind by their mothers to fend for themselves, also say that living on the streets is not a choice but a means of survival.

However, youth who have come from negative experiences in foster homes or with family sometimes see the street as a safer place to live. Bob says he loves the street and the people on it. Alisha expresses a sense of belonging on the streets: “I like it down here. I feel safe here. When I’m not here, I don’t feel right. I was in jail before, and as soon as I got out, I came down here. Anywhere else, I feel like I don’t belong.”

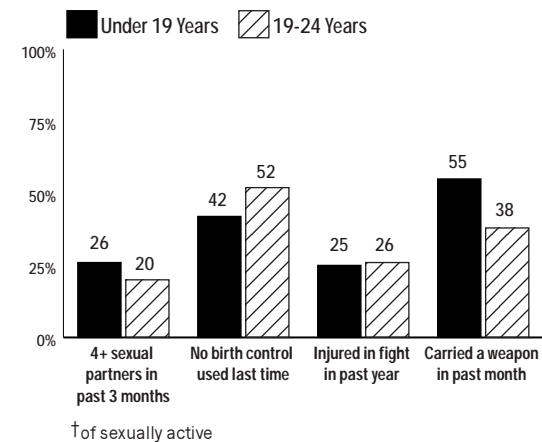
Sense of Time

Many homeless youth relate that they live in the moment or take life “day-by-day.” Says Jeana, “you never know what’s going to happen tomorrow.” Living on the street drastically alters the sense of time, according to these youth. Some lose awareness of time altogether: Liz no longer notices the days and months go by: “Sometimes it feels like it is all one big year.” Similarly, Tye says “Imagine being fifteen... and then just getting so fucked up that you wake up when you’re sixteen...”

Transience

For some youth, a transient lifestyle and a philosophy of living in the moment gives a sense of being flexible and free to move around. For these young people, lack of a permanent home is viewed as a liberating option, at least some of the time. When life becomes too difficult in one city,

Risky Behaviours



“I don’t have to worry about a house with a car and stuff. I think a lot of material possessions can cloud things.”

Tobacco

another city beckons. Kitten explains: “[When] it gets too hard, I’ll just disappear from that city and go to another one. Next off if I get pissed off at this city, I’m going to the States.” Often youth hitchhike from place to place. Happy even refers to himself as a “hitchhiker living on the streets.” Others, like Bob, describe less sanctioned modes of travel: “We’d just steal a car, drive around, then dump it. Then take a screwdriver and get another one. Went to a lot of places that way.” Numerous youth mention traveling as an activity; these “travellers” are floating from city to city depending on such things as season, work or income potential, brushes with the law, or opportunities with friends. Happy likes Kelowna in the summer, when it’s busy. He explains: “...I get people buying me drinks, taking me to clubs, taking me off the streets.” Jeana had plans to go to the Okanagan to pick fruit before traveling to the United States. Kim is thinking about going to California to visit a friend on a farm. Krystal sometimes leaves Vancouver to travel to the Island or to the interior with her boyfriend.

Coping

The youth report differing degrees of feeling overwhelmed by their lives. Neptune says: “Usually early in the morning or late at night. I just can’t take it anymore. It’s cold and I just want to go



to bed and I can't." To counter these feelings, she says, "I just walk around and I feel sorry for myself. Then I forget all about it and say I can go on and I go on. And drugs... help a lot." Jeana feels defeated "especially when it's raining." Rail says he feels overwhelmed daily. Louise is at a point in her life where it seems more difficult to get off the street than to stay on the street. Steve says that when he feels overwhelmed, "I always get drugged and then I feel better." Happy tries to stay positive: "People... pick on you because it makes them feel better to pick on street people. Sometimes I [feel overwhelmed] when people like that come across. It kind of brings down my day a bit, but you've got to look on the up and up side."

In the interviews, youth also conveyed confusion, frustration, depression and loneliness. Nina is in tears throughout the interview. Jay-Loyd says, "All you have to rely on is yourself. It gets really lonely. It is really lonely." Similarly, Brent admits, "I am kind of lonely." Tye, too, feels lonely and is desperate for companionship. "I want friends.... Friends that won't try to use me." Tobacco worries "when there is no money being made." Kim feels confused, "I want to go here then I want to go there. I can't choose.... But I also want to get a job. I can't really figure it out, so I am lost." In

*"All you have to rely on is yourself.
It gets really lonely. It is really lonely."
Jay-Loyd*

contrast, some youth, such as Kase905, claim to be disconnected from their emotions. "I don't own emotion. I sold those. Emotions don't apply to this lifestyle. They're just another weakness, for people to hunt and prey for. There are times when you can bring them back, though, like... times when you need them."

Regrets

Regrets expressed by homeless youth may be quite concrete (leaving home, dropping out of school, doing drugs), or fairly abstract (past decision making). Some youth did not express regrets; others were bitter, saying they wished they had not trusted other people or cared so much about others or about previous events or circumstances.

Many of the interviewed youth regret becoming addicted to drugs, running away, or leaving school. Jay-Loyd says he was "stupid" to slack off in school: "I

would have stayed in school. And I would have respected my parents more. I would have listened to them and, God, how I wish I had listened to them when they said to stay in school. I would have been done by now.” Kase905 regrets everything that led to him “being here right now. This is a lifestyle that no one should have to live.” Rail wishes he had talked more with his father, and Tobacco regrets a lack of communication with his mother. Maria blames herself, saying that if she had listened more, “I wouldn’t be on the street.” Nina would have stayed home, Sara regrets running away, and Stacey is in tears just thinking about lost options. Neptune tells her interviewers, “I wouldn’t be so naive and trusting. I would have come here more prepared.... I would have been more choosy with my drugs and who I did them with.”

Not all homeless youth feel regretful about their present situations. Happy adopts the perspective of fate: “I would do the exact same thing because I think it was meant to be.... There’s nothing at all that I would have done differently.” Julian is “happy now and that’s what matters.” Although he wishes he had asked for help in the past, Jayson now realizes he “can only go forward.”



Leaving Home

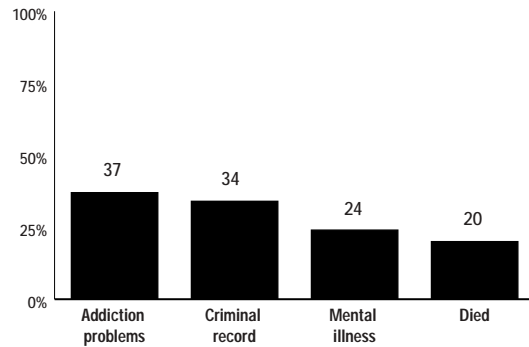
How does an adolescent end up homeless on the streets of downtown Vancouver? Why do young people live on the streets? Common themes that emerge from the youths' stories about their previous lives include chaos and conflict at home, not fitting in at school, constant movement between households and between communities, and an absence of connections with supportive adults. However, the progression from initial involvement with street life to living on the streets often occurs over a period of time. The distinction between life before the street and life on the street is blurred by multiple episodes of running away from, or being kicked out of, their family home or a care situation. For many, the transition to the street was aided by friendships with other troubled young people and by increasing substance use. Some youth clearly articulate how issues of sexual orientation or poverty contributed to their sense of alienation at school, at home, and in the community.

Patterns of Disconnection

Most homeless youth share the experience of a general pattern of life instability prior to moving to the streets. They report a great deal of movement from one living situation to another. Movement occurs with and without family, both inside and outside the government care system, and before and after becoming street involved. This mobility is indicated by Louise's statement, "...like all my life I've moved across Canada. I've lived in so many places. Like I've lived in many different places in Saskatchewan, many different places in Vancouver. I've always been moving all around." For others, instability comes not from physical transience but from a high level of unpredictability in their lives. Living with a family member who abuses drugs or alcohol, for example, often translates into compromised reliability and unmet expectations. Such instability helps to breed the disconnection experienced by many homeless youth.

One Or Both Parents Have...

(Of youth 19-24 years)



The sequence of disconnection noted in interviews with homeless youth most often began with an incident of running away or getting kicked out of their family or foster home. This pattern generally repeated itself, and the youth became increasingly street-involved. For some youth, leaving home left nowhere to go except for the streets. Many, as they spent time on the street, cultivated friendships with other street-involved youth. Some of these youth were still going to school even after they had stopped living at home. But with increased street involvement, maintaining a school lifestyle became more difficult to manage. As the mismatch between life on the street and life at school became more evident, most of the street youth left school.

Sequence of Disconnection



Family

Chaos and Conflict at Home

In recounting how they came to be living on the streets of Vancouver, all interviewed youth talked about their family. Many report feeling hurt by abandonment, neglect, and rejection by their parents. Some of the youth describe conflict with their parents as the main reason they left home. Many describe chaotic family life, and poverty, as well as parents and other family members struggling with substance abuse.

Abandonment

Louise has lived on the streets since her drug-addicted mother moved away ten months ago, but this is not her first experience of parental abandonment. When she was younger, Louise was left with relatives who were sometimes abusive. “My grandma gets drunk... all my uncles, when I was a little kid, they sexually harassed me.” Brent, too, was left behind at age 15, when his mother left him with a “weird aunt” in Ontario. Then, “for a whole bunch of reasons” that he didn’t want to discuss, he left and headed to the west coast. Jayson’s father died in 1994. For Sara, the early death of her parents led to homelessness: “I have lived on the street a lot of my life. I don’t have my parents. That’s really why and how I got here.”

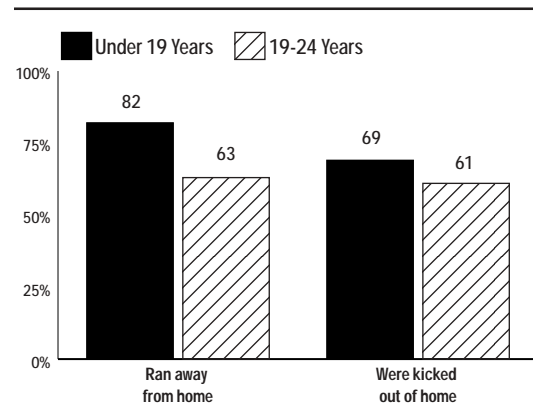
Rejection, Betrayal, and Abuse

Many youth describe rejection by one or both parents. Krystal and Jay-Loyd speak bitterly about being given one-way tickets by one parent to go and live with the other parent or to live with relatives. Jay-Loyd's mother and step-dad bought him the ticket because "my mom didn't want me anymore." Kim moved around in his childhood, living first with his parents, then with grandparents, then with his father and finally in a group home before ending up on the streets.

He describes feeling rejected in various ways. "My step-mom, she wasn't really into having kids. She didn't want us, she just wanted my dad. My step-mom didn't want me and my dad didn't want me and the group home didn't want me, so I had... to leave, but now society does not accept me." Rail expresses anger with his parents for allowing him to be put in a "juvie" (juvenile custody centre) where he lived for nearly two years. Bear says it felt like "no one ever really wanted me." Neptune "put up with a lot" at home; she describes a childhood of abuse, where "...lies were told" and she would "crawl down to the hospital" to seek treatment for abuse-related injuries. Kim and Happy also report experiencing abuse as children.



Youth Who Ever...



Neglect

Many of the homeless youth felt neglected by parents. Several describe parents' problems with substance abuse that resulted in inadequate childhood care. Stacey left home for the streets at age 14. She says she didn't see much point in staying at home because "my mom was not taking care of me properly. I was taking care of myself, so I went with my friends."

Conflict

Many young people spoke of conflict with family when describing their path to the street. For the most part, the youth mentioned conflict with biological parents, but some also reported difficulties with other relatives and with foster parents. These youth relate various sources of conflict—not getting along with family members, feeling that their rights were being infringed upon, or that family expectations for them were unjust.

Liz, who has a history of running away that started in kindergarten, says her parents "would just make it like where I just wouldn't stay." Jayson and Bear, in foster care their whole lives, didn't get along with their foster families. Bear says, "I got booted out because they couldn't handle me no more.... I didn't want to be around family no more. There were a lot of things I couldn't talk about to them."

Steve ran away because he got in "fights" with his family over rules and expectations. Snuffaluffagus didn't get along with her parents, so she went to live with her aunt and uncle, but she didn't get along with them either: "Too many restrictions. They just kind of invaded my space. We just argued a lot and then they just kicked me out." Rail described coming home to find his father rifling through his personal possessions in his room. Krystal says her relatives, with whom she lived, violated her privacy and demonstrated a lack of trust. "I was constantly being followed. I had a cell phone that they'd phone up to make sure I was there. They'd walk me to my classes, they'd walk me to my counseling sessions."

Growing Up in the 'System'

Many of these youth have been involved with the government care system at some point in their lives, either in foster care, a group home, or a custody centre. Surprisingly, few spoke about their foster families during the interviews. While several youth described the instability that characterized their childhood and adolescence as they moved from one family to the next, one group home to another, they rarely talked about the individuals involved in their care. In response to the question about why she was on the street, Christy explains, "Being in care, really. I

was moved around all the time and stuff. I had no stability.” Despite these circumstances, several youth clearly articulate the desire for a sense of home and permanence.

Mixed feelings were expressed about experiences within the care system. Some youth, such as Kim, describe negative influences: “I got involved [on the street] from a [group home].... Well, everybody who was living in [the group home] were people who came off the streets.” Kim also had difficulty with the group home rules, such as the 9 p.m. curfew imposed on residents. Kristina, who frequently ran away from home when she lived with her brother and mother, says that she never ran away from her foster home.

School

Experiences in School

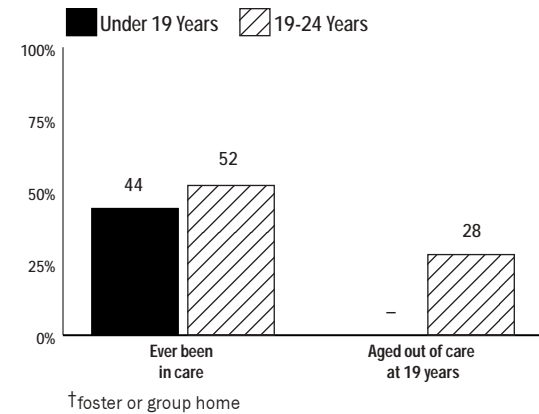
Questions about school elicited a range of responses with some common themes. Leaving school was neither simple nor straightforward. These are voices of anger, disappointment, defensiveness and, perhaps most of all, overriding confusion and ambivalence: “I liked school. I did really good.... I didn’t feel nothin’ about the teachers really. I went to school and I graduated. Head of my class.... I just stuck

to myself all the time. When I wanted to be, I was popular, but I mostly didn’t want to. I just did my drugs. They filled the void.” [Christy] Many youth feel let down by their schools and their teachers. Some present conflicting views of both succeeding and failing. Some see themselves as victims of circumstances while others express active resistance to authority figures. Issues of popularity, personality and peer pressure come into play and operate as influential factors both for and against school.

Even those youth who are generally positive about school express a range of mixed views. Jayson liked school but fought with his teachers. Similarly, Jeana liked school even though “the teachers sucked.” Julian thinks that school is great, but other students are mean. Maria liked school, but she just stopped going. Snuffaluffagus thought school was okay but was expelled for smoking, and Tye loved school but left “because of everything that happened.... I just gave up everything.”

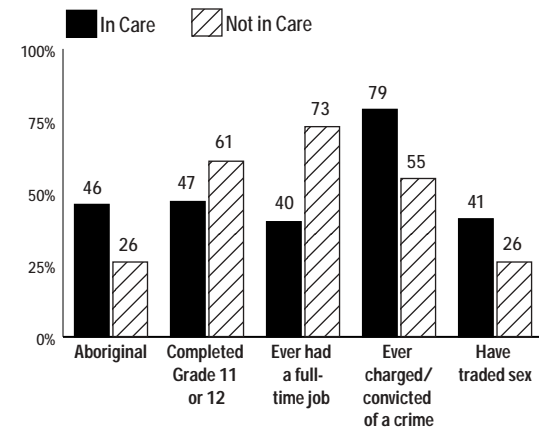
Almost all of the youth say they did not feel a sense of belonging or acceptance at school. Youth who identify themselves as gay say they didn’t feel welcome in school because of their sexual orientation. Other youth report being bullied for reasons such as coming from a poor family, hav-

Government Care†



Youth Who Have Been In Care/ Youth Who Have Never Been In Care

(Of youth under 25 years)





ing coloured hair, doing poorly academically, or just not being the type that fits in or is popular. Kim says he was a “geek” in school, rejected because his family was poor, and because he was diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder and put on Ritalin. Similarly, Rail describes his status as a “black sheep” in school, hanging around with the “bad crowd.” The youth describe feeling different from their peers and more like an outsider. Although Louise remains in school, she often feels uncomfortable there: “I feel that I matured at an early age all my life and I can’t really get along with people that are my age. They’re always, like, all about partying and stuff like that. Always like, they have family and that really bugs me. I always tell myself, ‘You guys are so damn lucky. You have your parents paying for everything for you and I have to work for it. You have a roof over your head.’ They take advantage and that really pisses me off.”

Leaving School

Leaving school occurs for a variety of reasons and in a number of ways. For Kristina, after starting a new school, “I’d get lost, so I just dropped out.” Kelly partied too much; Stacey was suspended “because I never went.” Leaving may be slow or sudden. Youth may drop out or be pushed out, suspended, or expelled. They

might move away and just stop going to school, or they might come and go for a while. Most of the youth acknowledge that they were using drugs during or after school, activities that likely had an impact on their attendance, perceptions and motivation.

Several youth are of the opinion that high school is not important or necessary. Tobacco says, “I felt that school was something you really only need up to Grade 6. Anything after that is just pushing and getting you ready for something which humans aren’t naturally made to do.... I’ve learned so much by not being in school. You can learn a lot of things just by thinking.”

The youth refer to difficulties in attending school after becoming street-involved. For Liz, school “just got too hard,” and she could no longer relate to school rules and lesson plans. She mentions that teachers would ask her for parental notes to explain absences or for other reasons; however, her circumstances made acquiring such notes impossible. Some youth were prevented from enrolling in school because they lacked a fixed address.

Among those youth who recall only negative school experiences, anger is almost palpable. Alisha was “beating up everybody” and was expelled from school

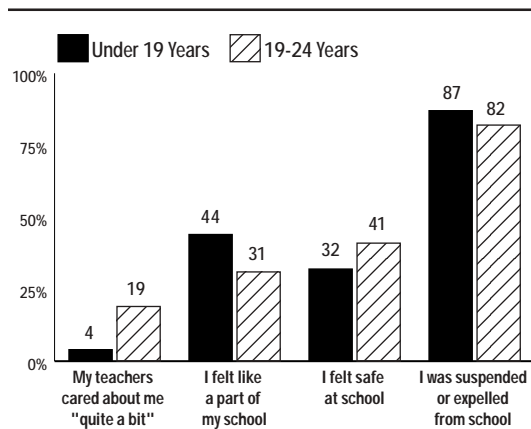
for her violent behaviour. When Kitten left school, he “just blew them off,” deciding that “school sucks” and teachers are “stupid bitches.” Jayson would fight with others at school, including with his teachers. Kristina dropped out in Grade 9 because she didn’t like school and “no-body liked me.” Stacey hated her teachers, counsellors, and coaches, calling them “a bunch of dickheads.” Sara didn’t get along with people and started skipping classes: “I’ll go next week, I’d tell myself, but I didn’t.” Neptune had “pretty bad” grades, was moved from one school to another, then left home and dropped out; she couldn’t learn easily and was tired of being ridiculed by students and teachers about her punk appearance.

The youth report differing experiences with teachers and counsellors. Some

“My mom was not taking care of me properly. I was taking care of myself, so I went with my friends.”

Stacey

Relationships at School



youth place blame on teachers; Kase905 says his teachers were “lazy.” Happy felt that his teachers didn’t care about him, and the counsellors “were just there to direct you to university and college. They didn’t really help you out.” Other youth, such as Kim, thought the counsellors “weren’t that great,” but the “teachers were cool. They helped me lots, they tried to get me into a lot of different things.” Louise’s experience with teachers and counsellors has been positive.

“Teachers and counsellors are great! They’re so like mature and they actually understand, you know?” Neptune says, “There were some nice ones.... Some I fought with.”

Very few of the street youth were ever involved in after-school activities. A connection to school through sports or other extra-curricular activities can be important for fostering self-esteem, for developing skills, and for maintaining an often non-academically based relationship with other youth and adults. Kelly, who was not involved in such activities (and who felt uncomfortable talking to teachers because he is gay), says, “Teachers could have gotten me back by involving me in after-school activities.” Kitten and Jeana mentioned school coaches as caring individuals who noticed when students were absent and tried to be encouraging.

Community

Many homeless youth come to Vancouver from other communities, but others venture no farther than the neighborhood they grew up in. Most disturbing is the legacy of drugs and family in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Youth who grow up on the Downtown Eastside with family members on the street often remain on those same streets. Christy is a heroin addict whose parents were both drug addicts. She has been street-involved her whole life: “My mom was down here all the time. My dad O.D.’ed here. I wondered what was so great about it, so I came to see for myself.” Maria also originates from the Downtown Eastside. “I grew up down here. I started doing dope early. My mom and dad were down here, so I’d come down to see them.” In contrast to some “travelling” youth who see street life as liberating, these Downtown Eastside youth have rarely, if ever, left Vancouver.

For those youth from elsewhere, reasons for migrating specifically to Vancouver are varied. Jeana came here to find a friend from her native Edmonton. Nina was escorted to Vancouver from Alberta by her social worker when she came here for drug treatment. Steve said that he came to Vancouver from the east coast, attracted by BC’s warmer climate. Kelly

and Julian both say that they just came to visit but ended up staying. Kelly likes Vancouver because it is a bigger city that he feels is more accepting of his sexual orientation. Tye also felt the effects of homophobia in his small town. “I thought [in Vancouver] you could just be gay and everyone would be friendly.”

Early Sources of Help

Most of the youth did not seek help for their problems prior to becoming street-involved. Many report having no one to turn to for help. Others had some support but ended up on the street despite those efforts. Neptune appreciates the professional help she received earlier in her life. “I went to counselors and.... I had four psychiatrists. I talked to social workers before I came here. I was on a youth agreement and they made me bargain with them. They gave me counseling.... I was dumb, really dumb. They were offering me great things and I said that I wanted to be a dirty street kid. They were really good to me.” Bob describes some early attempts by a psychiatrist to help him. “My family used to blow up together [in anger] so they helped me with that. After that, I started doing drugs and dealing and drinking. Then they just told me to go to detox.” Kim, who ended up following his friends from a group home onto the street, says that the group home staff were supposed to help him, but “that

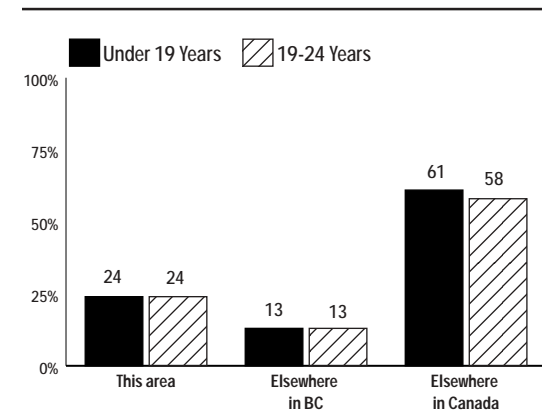
doesn’t always happen.” Christy recalls that she went to her social worker and a treatment centre prior to coming on to the streets but didn’t get the help she needed. “I guess if someone had listened and helped, maybe it would have been different.”

Explaining Homelessness

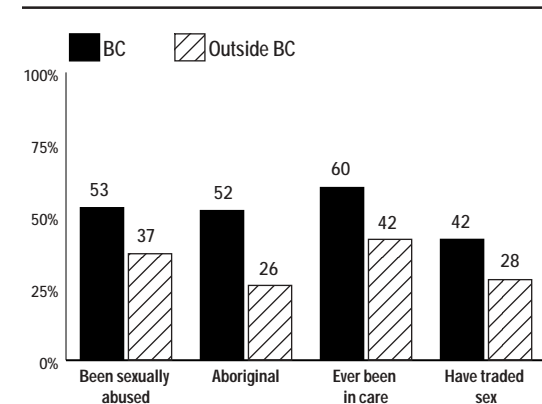
When asked to explain why they are homeless, these youth described multiple, cumulative factors that create severe stress and sometimes emotional trauma. Many state that stress is exacerbated by street involvement, while others claim that life on the street is easier than their previous situation. As previously discussed in this report, the path to homelessness often begins with family conflict, including rejection, neglect, or poor interpersonal relationships, as well as drug and alcohol misuse.

Kase905 says, “I didn’t have much of a choice. When a 6’3” father says get out, you get out. I’d have done the same thing to me. I wasn’t working.... I was really fuckin’ lazy. I partied all the time, and I discovered that I liked drinking a lot.” Neptune says that the streets were her only alternative, given the intolerable abuse she suffered at home. Bob, too, feels

Originally From...

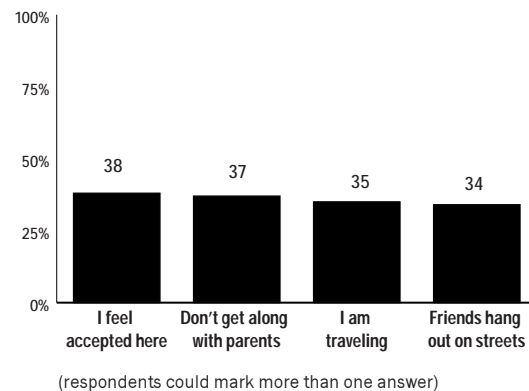


Youth Originally From BC/
Youth Originally From Elsewhere



Hang Out On The Streets Because...

(Of youth under 19 years)



he had no real option but to live on the street. “I chose to do drugs. I chose to deal. I chose to hang out with the friends I do. I chose to be an anarchist. Basically everything except being kicked out. So I never had the choice. I had no choice to be a street kid in the first place.”

Beyond family conflict, a common reason given for becoming street-involved is a desire for independence, resistance to authority, and freedom from rules and regulations. For these youth, rebellion against the power and control of others may also be an attempt to gain power and control over their own lives. Notions of freedom and independence are characterized by such statements as: “I want to do my own thing” [Bear], “I don’t have to answer to anyone” [Kelly], and “I like to be free to do what I want” [Rail]. Of coming to the street, Jeana says, “Sometimes enough is enough and you just [want] some freedom.... Can’t cage a bird forever, I guess.”

The tendency to idealize street life as rejection of ‘the system’ and freedom from financial responsibility, however, seems to be a rather thin veneer over deeper troubles. Even Happy, the self-proclaimed “hitchhiker living on the streets,” acknowledges, “I guess a whole amount of problems just built up, and I guess in a certain way I did explode, but I came on

to the streets because I couldn’t handle no more. I was sick of everybody telling me to go get help and stuff like that. I just wanted to be on my own.” For many of these youth, the lure of personal power and independence on the streets is undeniable, especially for those who feel powerless in their lives. The bid for independence, a normal developmental task of adolescence, can become desperate due to difficult life circumstances.

Substance Use and Peer Influence

In a climate of social rejection, it is easy to imagine the draw of drugs and the attraction of friends. Julian says, “I came to downtown Vancouver and I kind of found out how much I liked drugs so I stayed.” Kase905 arrived in Vancouver after hearing “glorious stories” about the “garbage bags of pot” on the streets. While the youth did not always identify drugs as the initial reason for coming to the street, the majority of the youth interviewed were involved with drugs. “It felt like I had all these choices of like what I wanted to do with my life and I had to decide right then and there: either go to the street [and] do drugs, [or] get off the street. Of course I chose to stay on the street and do drugs.” [Kitten]

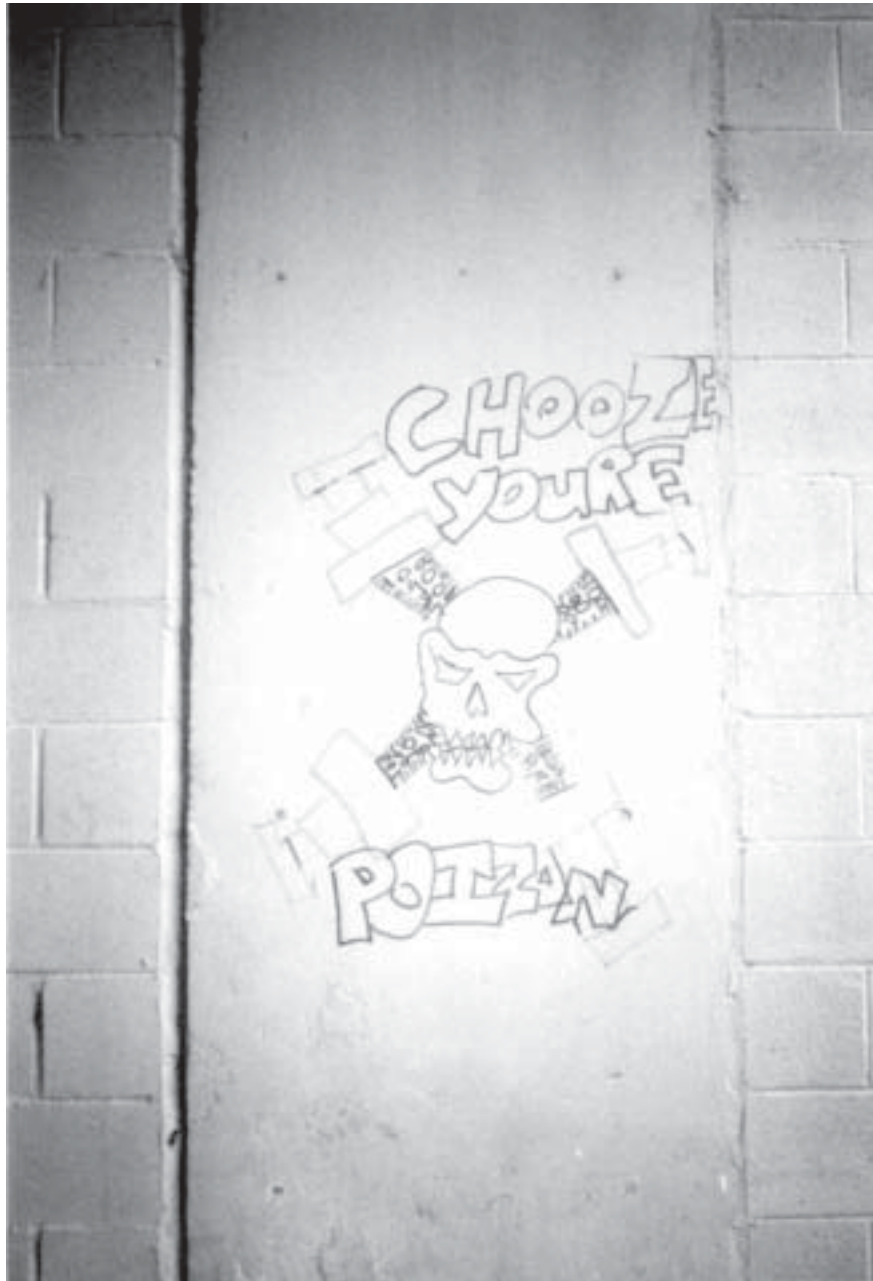
Family influence is clearly a determining factor for some street youth. Louise’s mother is a drug dealer; Alisha was born

addicted to cocaine; Jayson's brother is a heroin addict. Both of Christy's parents were addicted to drugs. Maria's grandmother was an alcoholic, as was Sara's; Kelly left home because "there was too much drinking going on." Alisha, Neptune, and Jayson have siblings on the street. Neptune traveled to Vancouver with a step-brother. Alisha has a twin brother who also lives on the Downtown Eastside streets, and Jayson's brother is homeless, addicted, and working in the sex trade.

Many youth told of staying with friends when they first started running away from home, but only Jeana described her friends as encouraging her to return home. "Well, I'd go back and then if [Mom] was just picking my scabs over and over and over again for the same things, then I'd just leave. 'Cause like my friends would convince me to go back and then I'd be like, okay, and then it'd just be pointless... [So I] kind of couch-surfed."

Several youth spoke of the influence of friends, particularly older friends, in introducing them to the streets. At age 13, an older friend introduced Bob to street life. "He gave me the lifestyle. I was 13 and he was about 17 or 18.... He said if you can survive on the street, you can survive everywhere. He taught me how to live, to deal [drugs], everything. How to walk on the edge without falling over."





Liz took “the path of least resistance” and joined her friends on the street when she was 13 years old. At age 12, Krystal’s new best friend was already street-involved. “People I wanted to meet on the street” influenced Bear to try street-life. Kelly came to Vancouver to visit friends. “I met up with my friends who were [living on the street] and they said to try [street-life] out. So, I did. My friends persuaded me to stay.” Alisha’s friend introduced her to the street and to drugs but “We’re not friends anymore. I always knew drugs would end our friendship. I don’t know what happened to her. Maybe she killed herself.” Faced with family and peer rejection and conflict, many of these youth are seeking friendship and a sense of community.

Friends also play an important role in helping to ease the transition to the street and in teaching survival skills. Kim explains: “I just went downtown and just hung out with all the street kids and like basically they taught me how to live.” Tobacco “learned a lot of survival tips from my street family.... I pick up things and learn the ways to not get killed. They showed me what to do, what not to do, how to find food, how to get food if there’s none around, how to keep yourself alive, how to keep the peace and unity, stay connected.”

Not all youth credit friends or external influences with bringing them to the street. Several, like Tye, claim to have made an independent decision. “Every part of myself encouraged me and every part of myself pushed me away. You know, because I knew I was better, but I didn’t want [that better part of] myself. And [I told myself] I had nowhere to go, but I really had somewhere to go. My mind was so lost within itself, just spinning around and around, just trying to comprehend what was going on with my life, that I think I was encouraging myself and pushing myself into it.... I mean, I’m not a dumb person, you know. And I thought I was strong. You know, the strongest people out there are... those kids out there on the street. They are so strong. I was so lonely...”

Early Street Involvement

In general, the pattern of running away or being kicked out of home began in early adolescence, with most youth becoming street-involved by about age 14. Clear patterns emerge in the life stories of youth with the earliest street involvement, distinguishing them from those who became involved with street life at a later age.

Females often started running away or were kicked out at an earlier age than males. As a result, females became street-

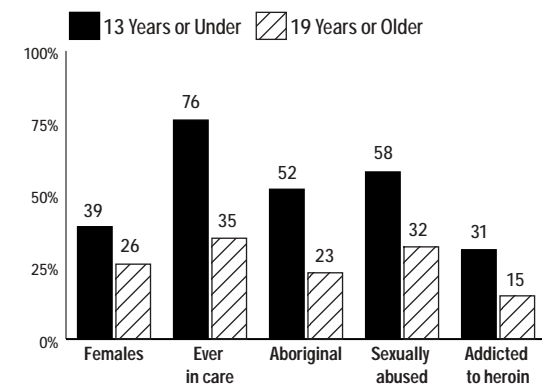
involved younger and left school earlier compared to males. Christy responds to a question about how long she’s been street-involved by saying, “all my life.” Nina and Maria both became street-involved at age 10. Alisha and Steve were 12 years old. All five youth spent time in the care system during their childhood. Maria, Christy, and Nina describe family substance abuse. The parents of both Christy and Maria lived on the Downtown Eastside streets. These five youth left school in their elementary years as they became street-involved, and heavy drug use has contributed to keeping them on the streets. Currently, all four of these young women engage in sex-trade work and live on the Downtown Eastside. Nina’s mother may have introduced her to prostitution. Although none of these young women received help prior to their street-involvement, all say that some form of support might have prevented them from ending up in their current situation.

Later Street Involvement

Other youth came to the streets later in adolescence. These youth tend to have completed more education, to have lived elsewhere in BC prior to becoming street-involved in Vancouver, and to currently live in the Downtown South area rather than on the Downtown Eastside. Rick

**Became Street Involved in Early Adolescence/
Became Street Involved in Late Adolescence**

(Of youth 19-24 years)





became homeless at 18 after coming to Vancouver from Prince Rupert to attend an electronics program at BCIT (British Columbia Institute of Technology). When he lost his job and had his identification stolen, Rick was tempted by the possibility of making “quick cash” and soon ended up on the street. Tye and Happy completed Grade 11 before becoming street-involved at age 17 and 16, respectively. Happy went back and forth between a friend’s apartment and his parents’ home before he “finally got the guts to finally leave.” While Tye recounts being shuffled “in and out of foster homes” in his earlier life, he only recently found himself homeless after a bitter separation from a boyfriend. Louise, Bear, Tobacco, and Neptune became street-involved at age 16. Neptune endured what she describes as years of abuse before she ran away “to start a new life.” Tobacco left home following a disagreement with his mother and met up with other youth on the street. Though Louise’s drug-involved mother abandoned her, Louise remains in school and is dedicated to creating a viable future for herself. These relatively older youth are more likely to report some positive connections with school and with supportive adults, compared with youth who became homeless at an earlier age.

Self-Portraits: Identity, Strengths, and Resources

Homeless youth may appear to share a common background involving family conflict and negative school experiences. However, as individuals, they exhibit a wide variety of personalities, strengths and resources. A portion of each interview was devoted to identifying unique personal characteristics. In response to specific questions, and in their interactions with the interviewers, the youth provided a glimpse into how they see themselves. Although some responded to these questions with self-recrimination, most were able to identify positive characteristics, abilities and skills. Some of these youth also spoke eloquently about their general outlook on life. Despite this group's emphasis on living in the present and taking life day-by-day, some youth identified plans and goals for the future.

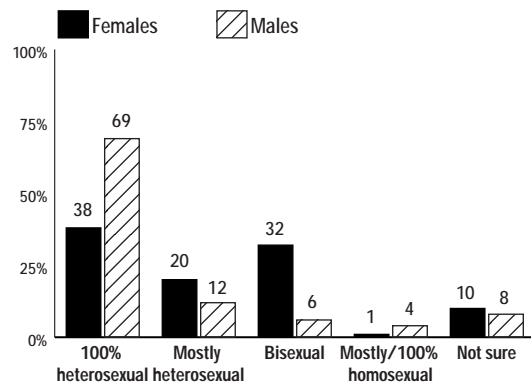
Self-Image

Youth were asked: How do you see yourself? What are you good at? Those youth that had graduated from high school or were attending school at the time of the interview express pride in this accom-

plishment. Bear and Julian returned to school recently. As well, "street smarts" and survival skills are a source of pride. Alisha is "a good manipulator." Kase905 "always gets things working to [his] advantage," and Bob knows "how to get away with anything." For Jay-Loyd, "[being on the street means being] strong and self-sufficient." Caring and helping others makes many youth feel good; Jeana is "good at solving other people's problems, just not mine." Tye thinks he has good social skills: "When I talk, people listen. I like that." Liz says, "I am like the best-dressed kid like three years in a row." Some of the youth have made very conscious changes to improve their lives. Jayson says he is "doing good, better than how I did when I first came out here," because "I decided to change my life and stay away from people that use heroin and crystal meth and cocaine and that. I want a better life." Happy is "...moving from the streets on to a real life. So... I am bettering myself and I am becoming a new person." Maria is "stronger than I was before."

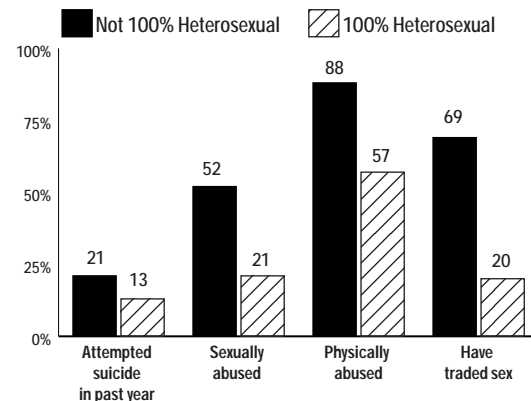
Sexual Orientation

(Of youth under 25 years)



Males Who Are Not 100% Heterosexual/ Males Who Are 100% Heterosexual

(Of youth under 25 years)



† Mostly heterosexual, bisexual, mostly homosexual, homosexual

Identity

These homeless youth are actively engaged in developing their sense of who they are, with many of them incorporating their lived street experience into their expressed identities. Some youth think of themselves in terms of defining labels related to their lifestyle, such as street kid, drug addict, junkie, rookie, panhandler, or squeegee kid. Others think of themselves in terms of their personal attributes. Despite telling her interviewers she thinks of herself as a heroin addict, Christy also says she is “a pretty girl who could go somewhere, if she wanted to.” Christy identifies herself as not capable of nurturing new life: “[The daughter I gave up for adoption] doesn’t have to fuck around with me or anything. I wasn’t ready to be her mother. I probably never will be.” Neptune first sees herself as a “dirty little street kid,” but in the same breath says “I see myself as a person who is not a dirty little street kid... who is a druggie, but not a drug fiend. I wouldn’t do [just] anything for drugs.” At another moment, Neptune refers to her pre-street self, saying, “I was a freak... that people like to punch and beat up. I am used to that.” Brent’s image of himself reveals his deep sense of isolation: “I feel like a black space with two little eyes looking around.” Drug identities are

common. Steve describes himself as a junkie and “that’s it.” Kitten is an “ex-drug addict,” and Alisha, addicted to crack, is “a mess.” Independence also is an important expression of identity for some. Jeana refers to herself as an “independent person,” Jay-Loyd sees himself as “strong and independent,” and Julian is “a struggling, independent person.”

Health or learning problems form part of the identity of several youth. Alisha was born addicted to cocaine and has fetal alcohol effects and related learning disabilities. Both Tobacco and Kim say they have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; however, they are skeptical of their diagnoses and the designated treatment. Kim explains, “I am ADHD so they were supposed to help me with this and they didn’t. They just gave me a whole whack of drugs and that didn’t help, that just made me feel worse. You can’t say that you are ADHD and just give them.... Ritalin and that’s it. It is stupid to put people on drugs.” Tobacco, too, feels that he was not given the help that he needed. “I was glad to get out of [school] because they were not helping me the way they were supposed to. I was basically put in there because I am ADHD [but]... they didn’t do all that much.”

Talents, Activities, and Interests

Generally, the youth tend to feel good about themselves in the context of activities and interests.

The youth mentioned various recreational pursuits, including sports, dance, reading, writing, language, drama, art, watching television, walking, hanging out, listening to and playing music, cooking, and auto mechanics. Drugs and alcohol also were named as common activities. Jeana says she loves to swim and was a member of the swim team at school. In fact, she says, "...one of the only things I have left from Edmonton is my swimming suit. I have it with me." When asked about special skills, some youth are very clear about what they're good at, while others are more vague. Brent says, "I can do lots of stuff" and Snuffaluffagus claims, "I've got a lot of different talents. I don't know. Just got to show me how to do something and I could probably do it." Liz says, "I like artistic like creative stuff. I like tactile stuff to do with my hands. I can make anything." In contrast, Sara's demeanour is tinged with hopelessness and resignation as she says, "I like to sketch. They don't go far. I just throw them away. Not much use out here for that."

Sara, Steve, and Maria portray the dissonance between life on the street and a life that nurtures talents and interests. Steve

*"I like to sketch. They don't go far. I just throw them away.
Not much use out here for that."
Sara*

draws well but does not feel that it is a special talent. With respect to other skills he might have, he says "I haven't used them in a while, so I don't know." Maria doesn't know what she is good at anymore but says she used to like Native dance. Many of the interviewed youth enjoyed creative activities such as drawing and making art objects. Louise is teaching herself music, practising on hotel pianos. Louise also writes her own songs. Some youth responded to questions about skills with remarks about special internal qualities such as a good sense of humour, sensitivity, maturity, and intelligence.

Spirituality

Some of the youth talked about a sense of spirituality. Brent feels a need to do good deeds, such as helping his friends: "I believe in Karma, like what goes around comes around. If I do something bad to somebody then I will always get screwed the next time, so I try to always try to help the rest of my own." Kim believes in fate — that nothing he might have done differently would have made any difference. Happy believes that living on the

streets is his “destiny.” Tye prays, Happy reads the bible, and Jeana says she has become more spiritual on the street. Liz tells her interviewers, “I am an outdoors person. I am a part of the planet. I am very natural. I like spiritual quests, most of my days are just really trippy like that where I see things happen in a certain order.”

Self-Care Strategies

When asked about how they take care of themselves, the youth provided a range of responses. They describe both health-promoting and health-compromising behaviours. Distraction, avoidance, seeking social support, problem-solving, escape — their responses encompass a gamut of possible strategies adopted in the face of stressful circumstances. Some coping strategies revolve around drugs and alcohol and are compromising to health. These are exemplified by Christy, who says she takes care of herself with: “More drugs, more drugs, more drugs.” Bob “smokes weed to mellow out,” and Steve goes to the alley or the arcade to “light some weed.”

Other youth describe coping with the help of healthier strategies including reading, relaxing, and meditating. When Sara is feeling stressed and overwhelmed, she says, “I go off by myself and try to calm down.” Snuffaluffagus finds a place



to just sit and think, where “you just kind of chill by yourself and just relax.” Julian reads “inspirational stuff.” Rail and Jay-Loyd each practice “mind over matter.” Jay-Loyd explains: “Just like, mainly mental stuff like keeping my mind off certain situations. I keep my mind occupied and try to stay busy. I just try not to think about it and try not to get depressed. It is like if you keep thinking about stuff then you depress yourself, so I just try to stay busy.” Tobacco and Happy meditate. Says Happy, who employs multiple mental distraction strategies, “I try not to look at all the bad stuff that happens.... I try to read, try to think of happier stuff, happier times, and I keep my mind off it and time goes by faster.”

Other coping strategies revolve around personal care and include cleaning, nurturing, feeding, clothing, and adorning. Youth mention the satisfaction of self care such as taking a shower, eating chocolate or getting new clothes. For some, caring for themselves primarily involves acquiring the basics: food, clothing, and shelter. Krystal and Alisha pride themselves on taking care of their health; Krystal visits the street nurses and Alisha is sure to take her medication. Tye, Bear, and Jeana mention the simple enjoyment of feeling clean following a hot shower. Adds Sara, “I go by myself. I go have a shower or go to sleep. I need to

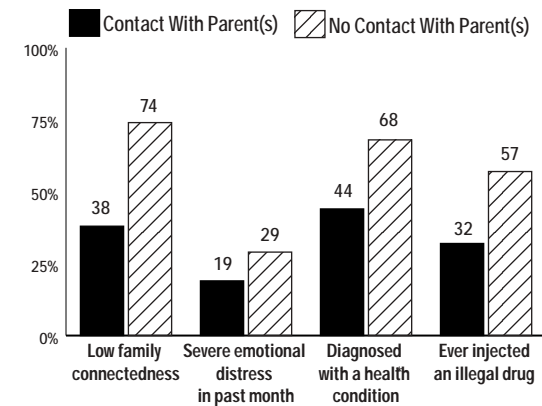
feel more clean.” Tye describes his ritual: “Cleaning. Be clean, you know.... I always take pride in myself and my body. I mean, maybe not the shape of my body, but at least being clean.” Kelly goes shopping for new clothes and Liz indulges her sweet tooth. Indeed, Liz, who lives on the street, takes her personal care seriously: “I like to have a makeover day... [Get] new clothes and get a haircut. I don’t know how it happens but I always find really cool clothes for free. So, things like that totally help.”

Physical activity can be a health-promoting coping strategy for some homeless youth. Such activity usually involves going somewhere: taking a walk, getting away from downtown, or going to a community centre. Tobacco likes to find a place to sit outside, Snuffaluffagus likes to “chill” with her dog, Steve goes to the arcade. Krystal has a specific routine, which she describes: “I [go] out to the parks as much as possible. And, like, get myself away from downtown when I can. Not much. I can watch little animals... at Stanley Park. The raccoons do tricks...”

Several youth said they help themselves by trying to create a sense of community. Bob sticks with his friends for self-preservation and self-protection – “I just stay with my crew” – and, in trying times, Louise “talk[s] to somebody in my life [who] cares about me.” Despite rocky

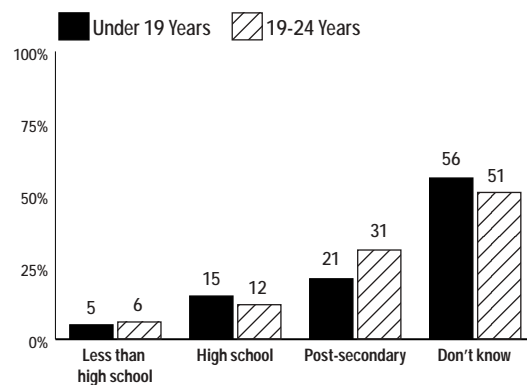
Youth Who Have Contact With Parents/ Youth Who Have No Contact With Parents

(Of youth 19-24 years)



† includes a learning disability, epilepsy, FAS/FAE, ADHD/ADD, schizophrenia, major depression or bipolar disorder, and chronic anxiety disorder or panic attacks

Level Of Education Youth Expect to Achieve



relationships with their families, some youth still look to family members for support. Jay-Loyd calls his sister when he can call collect. Jeana says of her relationship with her mom: “Like I love her and she loves me - we just can’t live together.” Julian feels he could go to his parents for help. Kristina says that her mother is the only person she can trust, and Maria says she feels better when she talks to her mom. Rail appreciates that his mother doesn’t judge him when he talks to her. Rick’s family has sent him a plane ticket to return to his native Prince Rupert. Tobacco, who had no contact with his mother for a year after he left home, has since reconciled with her and says, “I could probably just go to my Mom if I wanted to get back on my feet.” Kitten wants to be a good parent to his child that is on the way.

Envisioning the Future

Despite their transient lifestyles, some homeless youth maintain goals and objectives. Louise and Tye each describe fairly comprehensive plans for the near future. Louise thinks about making the right decisions, finishing her education, and finding legitimate work. She is currently in Grade 11 and expects to complete high school. She expresses a determination to create a better life for herself. “You could sell yourself on the streets or go get a job. But I’m making the

decision to get a job, which would be the right one.” She wants to be a graphic designer and is “doing the best that I [can] to [get] where I want to be in the future.”

Tye is not currently in school but intends to complete his last year of high school and go on to college. He says, “I’m going to be a counselor when I go to college. I want to counsel and I’m going to work on the streets.” And he has a plan for getting there: he’s going to get a job, then find a roommate, and then enroll in school to take correspondence courses. Tye believes that education is critical and that “no child should ever be denied it.”

Kim hopes to one day own a tattoo parlour, explaining that he’s already had practice designing a tattoo for someone. Other youth were more vague in describing their plans. Jay-Loyd is on the waiting list to attend an alternative school. Bob is trying to get back into school and says, “I want to do something with my life.” Rail hopes he can transition to college but isn’t in any rush. Jayson dreams of having a house. Happy describes his current situation as temporary: “I give myself a three-year period to live [here] and then I want to start my life all over again.... I see myself as... somebody who is moving from the streets on to a real life. On to what you call a job and moving into that better life that I wish I had. So, I am in a transitional phase...”

Voices Of Homeless Youth: Recommendations for Change

During the interviews, youth were invited to make suggestions about ways to help homeless young people. Although most of these youth did not seek or receive help prior to ending up on the street, many are presently interested in accessing support services. Others express opinions about specific services. Many of the youth offered recommendations for service providers who work with street-involved or homeless youth, as well as suggestions related to the expansion of available services. Youth were also given the opportunity to advise other youth who might be considering life on the street. Many of them adamantly cautioned other youth against coming to the streets, while some refrained from offering advice, suggesting that other youth must decide for themselves.

Opinions about Social Services

The youths' opinions were varied with respect to services, ranging from outright belligerence to distrust to gratitude. Many youth seem to be cynical and jaded about the system. Brent says, "Everybody is too wound up around the system when it comes to social workers, teachers, and counsellors. They are all greedy and they all want their money... and they will do anything to get that. And they are going to end up screwing your life, they don't care, right." Jeana agrees: "I never talked to [counsellors] and I never will. I figure if I'm going to talk to someone that needs to know something, I'll talk to my friends 'cause they know me. Like the time that it would take to get a counselor to know you and actually to be able to understand you, your friends could do it in three minutes." Voicing a more hopeful attitude, Sara says "Youth services you can trust. Except they push everything on you at once."

“Walk in our shoes. Live on the streets for a few days.”

Jeana

Recommendations: Services and Service Providers

The youth offered recommendations relating both to social services and to service providers. Some youth claimed that services are adequate and choose to be left alone by service providers; others suggested service expansion or changes in the attitudes and practices of service providers.

Recommendations for services include: more safe places for youth (especially sex trade workers) to go at night, more beds and shelters, additional services for very young and for older youth, more resource centres, and more needle sweeps. Alisha suggests, “There should be more places to sleep at nights; beds with mattresses and pillows. There should be a TV. [We] need services for working girls where they can chill. [We] need more donations of nice clothes. More places like YAC (Youth Action Centre) for youth at night.” Snuffaluffagus thinks free and accessible washrooms should be made available.

With respect to service providers, the youth made a variety of recommendations related to building and improving relationships with homeless youth. Many suggested that genuine caring, sincerity, and demonstrations of mutual respect are lacking. These youth want service providers who will listen and understand them, who will encourage them to succeed, and who are knowledgeable about resources. Alisha counsels, “Always remind [homeless youth] that they’re worth something. That if they try their best, they can be anything they want.” Young people need to be listened to and treated with respect, admonish Happy and Tobacco. Kim is wary of stereotypes and would like service providers to be less judgmental, recognizing that everyone is different. Rick also expresses the need for people who work with street youth to become more familiar with the available services in order to provide the best advice. Kase905 suggests, “Ask more questions instead of [just] giving advice. A lot of people, when they get advice, they feel like they’re being told [what to do]. And some people feel stupid through that.” Steve says, “Don’t put too much pressure on them and don’t ask too much.” Jeana offers practical advice: “Walk in our shoes; live on the streets for a few days.”

Services Youth Need “Very Much”†

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Low rent apartments	48%	58%
Dental services	40%	46%
Job training	26%	40%
Work experience	26%	37%
Recreation programs	+	33%

† wording of question not identical on both surveys
+ the response category was not included in the survey

Recommendations: Advising Other Youth

Youth were asked in the interviews what they would do or say to help other young people who are at risk of becoming street-involved or homeless. Rick's comment sums up the feelings of many other youth: "I'd say don't become street-involved. Take any route necessary to avoid coming to the streets." Stacey tells young kids to stay at home: "I would tell them don't be a fucking idiot. Stay at home if you can. A lot of kids have good homes and they come out here because they think it's fun, and it's not." Other youth recommend avoiding drugs or suggest staying in school. They emphasize that when there is a choice, kids should avoid street life. Kristina says, "It's not worth it, man. Out here, there's nothing. No home. No clean clothes. Nothing."

Some youth adopt a "live and let live" attitude on behalf of themselves and others, as Neptune explains: "I think everybody knows pretty much what they are going into, pretty much. I knew what I was going into. I didn't know the extreme but I knew what I was getting into and if someone told me not to because it is scary, I would have been, like 'fuck you, I am still going to go down there.'" Bear and Julian agree that "If a kid is gonna do something, they're gonna do it and you should accept that. You may know what's



*"It's not worth it, man. Out here, there's nothing. No home. No clean clothes. Nothing."
Kristina*

best but they don't, and so you can't really change that." [Julian]. Snuffaluffagus and Krystal advise against advising others, both saying that "it's really their own choice." Kim says, "I am not really going to change a person that wants to come out on the street... They learn a lot. They learn how it is to not have anything."

Several of the young people interviewed say that they try to discourage others from becoming involved with street life. Kim recounts:

"If I knew someone was going to come to the street and didn't listen to what I had to tell them ...which would be 'Don't come to the street or it'll ruin your life, look what happened to me!' ...Me and my friends scare the living crap out of them. Make sure they go home so they could go back to school and stuff like that.... We scared a person about six years ago and he used to hang out on Hastings like every single day.... We scared him off. He was trying to act all cool and stuff so we brought him in a back alley and we said like you better get the fuck outta here and never show your face here again. Go back to school and show those adults what you can do. So, he was like, okay, okay, and he ran off scared."

Brent also tries to prevent newcomers from ending up on the street:

"I would tell them not to, man. Like most of the kids I see down here, they are really young, right. I talk to them and I tell them to go home, most of them. Like they come down here and they think it is cool.... And then I take them and show them really dirty places where people stay... I show them that they don't want to do it, right. Most of them go home... most of them leave home [for trivial reasons], because they didn't want to make their bed, and their parents are bitching about something."

Tobacco advises others who might be drawn to the street: "[Don't] dive into something like that head-first.... There shouldn't be more kids really on the streets especially in the times now. They got their futures to look out for." Similarly, Tye recommends, "Think, listen, and learn. Think. Think about it big time. Think about ...what you have to gain and what you have to lose. Think about what you're going to do. How you're going to feel.... Will you be lonely, will you be scared, will you be happy? Where are you going to be twenty years down the road, five years down the road, ten years down the road? What's the future hold if you go out on the street?"

Profiles Of Homeless Youth

These 23 youth, along with the 6 youth described on pages 4-10, were interviewed for the qualitative portion of this study.

BEAR

Gender: Female

Ethnicity: Aboriginal

Currently lives: Downtown Eastside streets

From: Alberta

Age: between 18 and 20 years old

Street-involved: age 15

Experience in government care system: foster care whole life

Education: completed Grade 9, recently returned to school

Survival strategy: not known

Interests and talents: reading a good book, going for walks

Self-description: "I guess I made a little bit of a change because I'm going to school and doing better for myself. I guess I'm a little bit different than I was in Calgary. People change, I guess."

BOB

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: European mix

Currently lives: Downtown South streets, safe house at time of interview

From: Alberta

Age: 16 years old

Street-involved: age 13

Experience in government care system: Yes, details not known

Education: completed Grade 10

Survival strategy: not known, currently looking for housing

Interests and talents: music, skateboarding, playing drums

Self-description: "Young. Punk. Homeless. Don't know. Weird. I don't really describe myself much."

BRENT

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: Aboriginal and Scottish

Currently lives: Downtown South streets

From: Ontario

Age: 18 years old

Street-involved: age 13

Experience in government care system: None

Education: completed Grade 11

Survival strategy: squeegee

Interests and talents: drawing, cooking, fixing stuff, making glass pipes, pottery, welding, skateboarding

Self-description: "Me. I am kind of lonely. I feel like a black space with two little eyes looking around."

CHRISTY

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: Aboriginal
Currently lives: Downtown Eastside hotel
From: Victoria/Vancouver's Downtown Eastside
Age: 19 years old
Street-involved: "my whole life"
Experience in government care system: permanent ward whole life
Education: completed Grade 12
Survival strategy: sex trade work
Interests and talents: kickboxing, smart
Self-description: "I'm a heroin addict" also "A pretty girl who could go somewhere, if she wanted to."

HAPPY

Gender: Male
Ethnicity: European
Currently lives: Downtown South streets
From: Ontario
Age: 18 years old
Street-involved: age 16
Experience in government care system: None
Education: completed Grade 11
Survival strategy: panhandle, scamming
Interests and talents: helping people out and making sure they are all right
Self-description: "I see myself as a panhandler and somebody who is living on the streets. And someone who is in transition of... moving on to what you call a job and moving into that better life that I wish I had. I have more respect for myself and how I treat myself nowadays."

JAY-LOYD

Gender: Male
Ethnicity: German and Irish
Currently lives: couch-surfing with friends in Downtown South
From: Ontario
Age: 17 years old
Street-involved: age 14
Experience in government care system: 1 month in a group home (age 16)
Education: completed Grade 10
Survival strategy: panhandle
Interests and talents: rock climbing, martial arts, camping
Self-description: "I guess I see myself as strong and independent. That's it. That's all I could think of right now."

JAYSON

Gender: Male
Ethnicity: Aboriginal and Scandinavian
Currently lives: couch-surfing in Downtown South
From: United States
Age: 18 years old
Street-involved: age 15
Experience in government care system: foster care whole life
Education: completed Grade 9
Survival strategy: sex trade work in Boystown, currently looking for a job
Interests and talents: knows how to drive a truck, mechanics
Self-description: "Doing good, better than how I did when I first came out here."

JEANA

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: Danish
Currently lives: Downtown South streets
From: Alberta
Age: 17 years old
Street-involved: age 14
Experience in government care system: None
Education: completed Grade 10
Survival strategy: panhandle
Interests and talents: swimming, funny, helping others
Self-description: "I'm a rookie. And I'm starting to learn lots of stuff. I'm getting there."

JULIAN

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: British

Currently lives: shelter

From: Interior B.C.

Age: 17 years old

Street-involved: age 14

Experience in government care system: None

Education: currently in Grade 11

Interests and talents: writing, observing, thinking, reading, intelligent

Self-description: “A struggling, independent person, but a happy person nonetheless.”

KASE905

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: British

Currently lives: couch-surfing in Downtown Eastside

From: Ontario

Age: 17 years old

Street-involved: age 14

Experience in government care system: None

Education: completed Grade 10

Survival strategy: not known

Interests and talents: history, literature, artillery, excellent manipulator, tolerant, funny

Self-description: “An Aries. A mover and shaker. I’m an excellent manipulator. I always get things working to my advantage. I’m not as mean as I used to be. And I’m the best dressed homeless person around here.”

KELLY

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: Aboriginal

Currently lives: hotel

From: Manitoba

Age: 18 years old

Street-involved: age 14

Experience in government care system: None

Education: completed Grade 11

Survival strategy: sex trade work in Boystown

Interests and talents: reading, walking, rollerblading, writing poetry, listening and helping friends

Self-description: I felt uncomfortable about myself like my sexuality. I did not belong [in school] mainly because of my sexuality. [Being on the street] was just an easier way to deal with it. I guess not having to deal with people and not be in the public eye.”

KIM

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: Scottish and Irish

Currently lives: Downtown South streets

From: Interior B.C.

Age: 18 years old

Street-involved: age 15

Experience in government care system: 1 year in a group home (age 14)

Education: completed Grade 11

Survival strategy: not known, currently looking for a job

Interests and talents: cooking, really good artist, wants to own a tattoo parlour one day

Self-description: “A little lost. I want to go here then I want to go there. I can’t choose. I want to go to California because my friend lives there but I also want to get a job. I can’t really figure it out so I am lost.”

KITTEN

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: Aboriginal, African-American

Currently lives: Downtown Eastside streets, safe house at time of interview

From: United States

Age: 18 years old

Street-involved: age 13

Experience in government care system: whole life

Education: completed Grade 7

Survival strategy: not known, currently looking for a job to support his family (girlfriend is pregnant)

Interests and talents: wrestling, fighting, doing weird things

Self-description: “Ex drug addict with nowhere to go trying to get whatever he can get out of life.”

KRISTINA

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: Aboriginal
Currently lives: Downtown Eastside hotel
From: Vancouver
Age: 18 years old
Street-involved: age 14
Experience in government care system: foster care (from age 9)
Education: completed Grade 8
Survival strategy: sex trade work
Interests and talents: swimming, reading, writing
Self-description: "Describe a picture? I don't know."

KRYSTAL

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: Scottish and German
Currently lives: Downtown South streets
From: Saskatchewan
Age: 17 years old
Street-involved: age 14
Experience in government care system: None
Education: completed Grade 10
Survival strategy: not known, starting a job skills training program
Interests and talents: music, reading, good at being quiet, smart
Self-description: "I'm young. I have a whole life ahead of myself. I'm not sure what I want to do or what I want to be. I'm happy the way I am. I'd like to be a bit taller. I think of myself as a regular person."

LIZ

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: European
Currently lives: Downtown South streets
From: Burnaby, B.C.
Age: 18 years old
Street-involved: age 5
Experience in government care system: None
Education: completed Grade 9
Survival strategy: panhandle
Interests and talents: artistic and creative stuff
Self-description: "I am an outdoors person. I am part of the planet. I am very natural. I like spiritual quests, most of my days are just really trippy like that where I see things happen in a certain order."

MARIA

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: Aboriginal
Currently lives: Downtown Eastside streets and group home
From: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside
Age: 18 years old
Street-involved: age 10
Experience in government care system: group home (from age 15)
Education: completed Grade 6
Survival strategy: sex trade work
Interests and talents: going to the movies, drawing, Native dance
Self-description: "Stronger. Stronger than I was before."

NEPTUNE

Gender: Female
Ethnicity: Welsh and Scottish
Currently lives: Downtown South streets
From: Interior B.C.
Age: 18 years old
Street-involved: age 16
Experience in government care system: on youth agreement (age 15)
Education: completed Grade 10
Survival strategy: not known
Interests and talents: singing opera, art, algebra
Self-description: "A dirty little street kid."

RICK

*(actually chose the pseudonym Steve, but there was already a Steve, so he was renamed Rick)

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: Aboriginal

Currently lives: Downtown Eastside streets

From: Northern B.C.

Age: 18 years old

Street-involved: age 18

Experience in government care system: None

Education: graduated high school

Survival strategy: scamming

Interests and talents: stunt cyclist, electronics, smart

Self-description: “I’m highly intellectual. Witty and charming. I feel better about myself. I think everything’s going to be all right.”

SARA

Gender: Female

Ethnicity: Aboriginal

Currently lives: Downtown South streets, safe house at time of interview

From: Interior B.C.

Age: 16 years old

Street-involved: age 14

Experience in government care system: Yes, for a couple of years (from age 12)

Education: completed Grade 9

Survival strategy: panhandle

Interests and talents: drawing

Self-description: “A young street kid that shouldn’t be out here because she’s sixteen. That’s it.”

SNUFFALUFFAGUS

Gender: Female

Ethnicity: Don’t know

Currently lives: Downtown South streets

From: Alberta

Age: 18 years old

Street-involved: age 14

Experience in government care system: None

Education: completed Grade 11

Survival strategy: not known

Interests and talents: drawing, sewing, music, “I’ve got lots of different talents”

Self-description: “I’d describe myself as a normal human being. I don’t have any shame in myself, like I’m not all sad or anything like that. Just normal. I have my ups and downs.”

STACEY

Gender: Female

Ethnicity: Aboriginal

Currently lives: Downtown South streets

From: Manitoba

Age: 16 years old

Street-involved: age 14

Experience in government care system: 1 day (age 14)

Education: completed Grade 9

Survival strategy: squeegee, panhandle

Interests and talents: “I don’t know”

Self-description: “I don’t know. I don’t really have a picture of me right now.”

STEVE

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: French Canadian

Currently lives: Downtown South streets

From: Quebec

Age: 17 years old

Street-involved: age 12

Experience in government care system: group home

Education: completed Grade 7

Survival strategy: squeegee

Interests and talents: “I don’t know,” drawing

Self-description: “In one word, a junkie. There are no more words, that’s it.”

Statistics on Homeless Youth in Vancouver

The following pages provide statistics on homeless youth in Vancouver. The tables on pages 60-65 present data from two separate surveys of homeless youth in Vancouver – a survey of 145 youth under the age of 19 years conducted in 2000, and a survey of 180 youth aged 19 to 24 years conducted in 2001. Page 65 highlights the differences between homeless youth in Vancouver and their same-aged peers attending school in BC. It also provides data from a survey conducted with youth in BC's nine youth custody centers. For a further description of these four surveys, see pages 15-18. (Please note that selected data from these tables, along with correlation data not included on the tables, appear in the margins of pages 13 - 54.)

Key Statistical Findings:

- About one third of homeless youth are Aboriginal. Compared to non-Aboriginal homeless youth, Aboriginal youth tend to be involved in higher risk activities such as the sex trade.
- Almost half of the youth surveyed have been in government care. About a quarter of the older street youth were in care on their nineteenth birthday.
- The majority of homeless youth in Vancouver are from other provinces in Canada.
- Not surprisingly, most of these young people, especially youth under the age of 19 years, have low family connectedness. Connectedness was measured by a series of questions that asked youth how they feel about their relationships with their family.
- Almost all of these youth ran away or were kicked out of home at some time during their adolescent years.
- Many homeless youth have serious physical and emotional health problems. About two-thirds think that they have an addiction problem.
- About a quarter of these young people attempted suicide in the past year.
- Homeless youth have very high rates of risky behaviours, including drug use and unprotected sex. Risky behaviours often began at an early age.
- Most homeless youth, especially girls, have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse. About a third have been involved in the sex trade.
- Two-thirds of homeless youth have been charged or convicted of a crime, and over half have spent time in a custody centre.
- About a quarter of homeless youth are currently in school.
- Homeless youth identified top priorities for community services as including: affordable housing, job training and work experience, and dental services.

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Homeless Youth - Profile		
Males	57%	67%
Females	42%	32%
Age: 16 years and younger	16%	+
Aboriginal:	38%	35%
First Nations status (of Aboriginal youth)	51%	61%
Ever lived on reserve (of Aboriginal youth)	53%	56%
Lived on reserve most/all of life (of Aboriginal youth)	8%	10%
Originally from:		
This area	24%	24%
Elsewhere in BC	13%	13%
Elsewhere in Canada	61%	58%
Outside Canada	3%	6%
Family		
Mother did not finish high school	24%	+
Parent(s) has alcohol or drug addiction	+	37%
Parent(s) has criminal record	+	34%
Parent(s) has mental illness	+	24%
Parent(s) has died	+	20%
Adopted	11%	17%
Ever in government care	44%	52%
Aged out of government care	+	28%
Low score on family connectedness	97%	50%
Have regular contact with parent(s)	+	62%
Have no contact with any family members	+	14%
Have a child/children	14%	26%
Have a pet(s)	+	13%
Ever ran away from home:	82%	63%
Females	91%	72%
Males	74%	58%
Ran away from home 10 or more times in life	33%	26%
Ever kicked out of home:	69%	61%
Females	72%	60%
Males	68%	61%

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Home		
Currently live†:		
House or apartment	30%	29%
Hotel	7%	37%
Shelter or safe house	10%	11%
Living nowhere/all over	29%	10%
Squat	14%	10%
On the street	34%	20%
Live in:		
Permanent housing (house, apartment)	27%	24%
Temporary housing (street, shelter, safe house, squat, hotel, nowhere/all over)	70%	71%
Both permanent and temporary	4%	5%
Currently live with†:		
Alone/friends	81%	85%
Parents/adult relatives/foster care	15%	8%
During the past year lived†:		
Parent's/relative's home	35%	29%
Foster or group home	9%	6%
Apartment (alone or with friend)	42%	49%
Hotel	21%	34%
Shelter or safe house	23%	21%
Street or squat	56%	41%
Custody centre	14%	4%
Youth who have ever:		
Slept on the street	84%	87%
Stayed in a shelter/safe house	72%	81%
Lived all over/couch surfing	78%	78%
Slept in an abandoned building	76%	62%
Have had difficulty finding a place to live in Vancouver	+	66%
Why youth had difficulty finding a place to live in Vancouver (of those who have had difficulty)†:		
Not enough money	+	46%
Landlord won't rent to me	+	22%
Alcohol and drug problems	+	13%
Reasons for being on the street†:		
I feel accepted here	38%	30%
Don't get along with parents	37%	16%

Note: + indicates that the question was not included on the survey. † indicates could mark more than one answer in response to the question.

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
I am traveling	35%	34%
Friends are on the street	34%	28%
I can't find a job	24%	33%
Nowhere else to go	+	45%
First started hanging out on the street at:		
14 years and younger	+	42%
15 - 18 years	+	34%
19 years and older	+	24%
Would like to leave the streets	+	65%
School		
Currently in school:	23%	25%
Females	30%	32%
Males	16%	22%
Last grade completed:		
Grade 7 or less	+	7%
Grade 8 or 9	+	19%
Grade 10 or 11	+	46%
Grade 12	+	29%
Score on school connectedness:		
Low	49%	48%
Medium	50%	49%
Ever suspended or expelled from school	87%	82%
Level of education expect to achieve:		
Less than high school	5%	6%
High school	15%	12%
Post-secondary	21%	31%
Don't know	56%	51%
Work		
Never had a legal job:		
Females	+	17%
Males	+	23%
Ever had a full-time job	+	55%
Would like help getting a job	+	85%
Types of help youth would like to help them get a job [†] :		
Education	+	43%

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Work experience/job training	+	35%
Help with job search/resume writing	+	21%
Average weekly sources of money [†] :		
Legal job	34%	33%
Welfare/child welfare	42%	62%
Parents	24%	21%
Panhandling	50%	32%
Squeegee	22%	12%
Drug dealing	42%	40%
Theft	30%	23%
Prostitution	10%	18%
Weekly income from 1 or more illegal sources (theft, drugs or prostitution)	48%	51%
Hungry because you had no money to buy food:		
Once a month or more	59%	49%
Very few months/occasionally	18%	39%
Never	23%	12%
Physical Health		
Rate health as fair or poor	41%	31%
Injured in past year (required medical treatment)	50%	46%
Have a health condition or disability that limits activities	35%	29%
Told by a health professional that you have:		
Alcohol or drug addiction	47%	44%
Learning disability	31%	29%
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder	32%	29%
Major depression or bipolar disorder	23%	22%
Chronic anxiety disorder or panic attacks	12%	18%
Fetal alcohol syndrome	11%	12%
Schizophrenia	8%	5%
Epilepsy	6%	5%
Have been diagnosed with 1 or more health conditions (including addiction, learning disability, ADHD, depression or bipolar, anxiety disorder, FAS, schizophrenia or epilepsy)	63%	66%
Diagnosed with Hepatitis C:	+	17%
Females	+	26%
Males	+	12%
HIV Positive	5%	9%

Note: + indicates that the question was not included on the survey. † indicates could mark more than one answer in response to the question.

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Emotional Health		
Severe emotional distress in past month:		
Females	20%	22%
Males	23%	37%
Ever deliberately cut or harmed self	16%	16%
Deliberately cut or harmed self 10 or more times in life	+	46%
Considered suicide in past year:	+	11%
Females	40%	28%
Males	56%	33%
Attempted suicide in past year	27%	25%
Females	25%	22%
Males	38%	26%
Reasons for last suicide attempt (of those who attempted)†:	15%	20%
Lonely and depressed	51%	54%
Family problems	49%	44%
Broke up with boyfriend/girlfriend	32%	32%
Problems with drugs or alcohol	26%	32%
Death of family or friend	30%	20%
No place to live	23%	24%
After last attempt sought help from (of those who attempted)†:		
No one	63%	52%
Friend or relative	28%	30%
Professional	23%	26%
Substance Use		
Current smoker	85%	90%
Marijuana use in past month:		
0 times	14%	12%
1 - 9 times	19%	20%
10 - 39 times	19%	22%
40 or more times	48%	46%
Alcohol use in past month:		
0 days	28%	28%
1 - 5 days	32%	39%
6 - 19 days	26%	25%
20 or more days	14%	8%
Binge drank on 10 or more days in past month (5+ drinks in a couple of hours)	19%	10%

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Used the following illegal drugs 10 or more times in life:		
Hallucinogens	65%	59%
Mushrooms	58%	49%
Amphetamines	57%	43%
Cocaine	45%	57%
Prescription pills (without doctor's consent)	38%	28%
Heroin	28%	32%
Inhalants	24%	16%
Used the following illegal drugs 10 or more times in past month:		
Amphetamines	+	19%
Heroin	+	19%
Cocaine	+	18%
Used one or more illegal drugs (hard drugs) 10 or more times in the past month		
	+	44%
Injection drug use:		
Ever injected	30%	41%
Injected in past month	+	27%
Used a dirty needle in past month (of those who injected in past month)	+	30%
Think you are addicted to:		
Cigarettes	+	73%
Alcohol	21%	26%
Marijuana	47%	49%
Cocaine	20%	24%
Heroin	16%	21%
Addicted to 1 or more substances (not including tobacco)	60%	66%
Under 13 years when first tried:		
Tobacco	77%	65%
Alcohol	62%	56%
Marijuana	59%	54%
Sexual Behaviour		
Ever had sexual intercourse	94%	95%
First had sexual intercourse before age 13	36%	30%
Have had 6 or more sexual partners in life	70%	76%
Have had 4 or more sexual partners in past 3 months	26%	20%
Ever forced or coerced to have sex:		
Females	41%	32%
Males	60%	52%
	27%	22%

Note: + indicates that the question was not included on the survey. † indicates could mark more than one answer in response to the question.

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Used a condom last time (of those who have had sex)	59%	55%
Ever had an STD:	29%	28%
Females	34%	46%
Males	25%	20%
Used birth control last time (of those who have had sex with someone of opposite gender)	58%	48%
Ever been pregnant or caused a pregnancy:	33%	46%
Females	41%	61%
Males	27%	39%
Have had sex with a same-sex partner:	32%	38%
Females	52%	57%
Males	27%	31%
Sexual orientation:		
100% heterosexual	50%	64%
Mostly heterosexual	18%	12%
Bisexual	20%	13%
Mostly/100% homosexual	3%	3%
Not sure	10%	8%
Safety and Violence		
Felt safe where you were sleeping at night in the past month:		
Rarely/never	18%	14%
Always	44%	44%
Involved in 4 or more physical fights in past year:	26%	17%
Females	12%	11%
Males	37%	19%
Weapon carrying in past month:		
Didn't carry a weapon	45%	62%
Knife or razor	35%	18%
Club, stick or bat	13%	3%
Gun	11%	8%
Witnessed family member being abused	59%	54%
Physically abused:	71%	71%
Females	91%	78%
Males	54%	67%
Physically abused by:		
Adult (mother, father, step-parent, foster parent, relative)	53%	51%
Friend (friend, boyfriend, girlfriend)	38%	33%

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
Stranger	29%	28%
Trick, pimp, agency manager	9%	10%
Sexually abused:	50%	37%
Females	72%	59%
Males	33%	27%
Sexually abused by:		
Adult (mother, father, step-parent, foster parent, relative)	28%	15%
Friend (friend, boyfriend, girlfriend)	28%	15%
Stranger	21%	13%
Trick, pimp, agency manager	7%	7%
Ever charged or convicted of a crime:	68%	66%
Break and enter	32%	27%
Robbery	27%	21%
Breach or escape	32%	31%
Drugs	31%	32%
Weapons	23%	19%
Violence	26%	24%
Sex-related offense (sexual offence, solicitation)	9%	9%
Ever held in a custody centre (due to criminal involvement)	59%	55%
Sexual Exploitation		
Ever "spotted" for someone else	39%	37%
Ever traded sexual favours:	31%	38%
Females	24%	53%
Males	35%	30%
First traded sexual favours at age (of those who have traded sex):		
14 years and younger	32%	41%
15 - 16 years	46%	16%
17 years and older	21%	43%
When first traded sex, lived with (of those who have traded sex)†:		
Family	17%	10%
Foster or group home	14%	10%
Alone/friends	31%	34%
On the streets/all over	31%	39%
Traded sexual favours 11 or more times in past year	8%	15%

Note: + indicates that the question was not included on the survey. † indicates could mark more than one answer in response to the question.

	Under 19 Years	19-24 Years
In the last year traded sex for (of those who traded sex):		
Money	45%	69%
Drugs or alcohol	39%	47%
Shelter	30%	39%
In the last year traded sex (of those who traded sex):		
On the street	37%	51%
In escort agency	15%	22%
In a nightclub	+	29%
With a "trick" wear a condom (of those who traded sex):		
Always	+	58%
Never	+	13%
Social Supports		
Would go to no one if had a problem with ...		
Depression	19%	21%
Abuse	25%	26%
Alcohol and drugs	29%	20%
STD's	14%	15%
Have a BC Medical Services Plan Care Card	49%	53%
Ever received addiction treatment services (of youth who think they are addicted)	34%	51%
Ever been refused addiction treatment services (of youth who think they are addicted)	33%	30%
Interested in receiving addiction treatment services	18%	27%
Prefer services that are for "youth" only	+	41%
Services that youth said they personally very much need:		
Low rent apartments	48%	58%
Dental services	40%	46%
Job training	26%	40%
Work experience	26%	37%
Recreation programs	+	33%
School program	24%	31%
What would make your life better?		
Money	+	38%
Relationships (with family, with a boyfriend/girlfriend)	+	34%
A place to live	+	33%
Education	+	11%
No more addiction	+	14%

Homeless Youth Compared to Youth in School		
	Homeless Youth in Vancouver Under 19	BC Youth in School aged 17 and over ‡
Aboriginal	38%	6%
Ever in care system	44%	1%
100% heterosexual	50%	85%
Medium/high score on family connectedness	3%	81%
Hate/don't like school	59%	24%
Have a health condition or disability that limits activity	35%	13%
Attempted suicide in the past year	25%	6%
First tried cigarettes at age 10 or younger	49%	7%
Marijuana Use 40+ times in past month	48%	5%
Ever injected an illegal drug	30%	1%
First had sex at age 13 or younger	60%	6%
Have had 6+ sexual partners in life	70%	6%
Used a condom last time (of sexually active)	59%	53%
Females who have been sexually abused	72%	22%
Males involved in 4+ physical fights in past year	37%	8%
‡ Source: 1998 Adolescent Health Survey, The McCreary Centre Society		

Youth in Custody: Experiences of Homelessness	
Ran away from home	78%
Kicked out of home	59%
Slept on the street	36%
Stayed in a shelter or safe house	26%
Lived all over or couch-surfed	37%
Slept in an abandoned building	20%
Females who have traded sexual favours	54%
Males who have traded sexual favours	9%
Source: 2000 survey of youth in BC custody centres, The McCreary Centre Society	

Note: + indicates that the question was not included on the survey. † indicates could mark more than one answer in response to the question.

McCreary Publications

The McCreary Centre Society AHS Reports

Healthy Connections: Listening to BC Youth (1999). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Regional Reports for AHS II

Reports were released in 2000 for the following regions: Kootenays Region; Okanagan Region; Thompson/Cariboo Region; Upper Fraser Valley Region; South Fraser Region; Simon Fraser/Burnaby Region; Coast Garibaldi/North Shore Region; Central/Upper Island Region; North Region; Vancouver/Richmond Region; Capital Region; East Kootenay Region; Kootenay Boundary Region; North Okanagan Region; Okanagan Similkameen Region; Thompson Region; Cariboo Region; Coast Garibaldi Region; Central Vancouver Island Region; Upper Island/Central Coast Region; North West Region; and Peace Liard Region

Reports for AHS I

Adolescent Health Survey: Province of British Columbia (1993). Prepared by Larry Peters and Aileen Murphy. Investigators: Roger Tonkin, David Cox and Ruth Milner. Vancouver, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Adolescent Health Survey: Regional Reports for Greater Vancouver Region; Fraser Valley Region; Interior Region; Kootenay Region; Northeast Region; Northwest Region; Upper Island Region; and Capital Region (1993). Prepared by Larry Peters and Aileen Murphy. Investigators: Roger Tonkin, David Cox and Ruth Milner. Vancouver, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Special Group Surveys and Topic Reports

Violence in Adolescence: injury, suicide, and criminal violence in the lives of BC youth (2002). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Time Out: A Profile of BC Youth in Custody (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

The Girls' Report: The Health of Girls in BC (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

No Place to Call Home: A Profile of Street Youth in British Columbia (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Making Choices: Sex, Ethnicity, and BC Youth (2000). Prepared by Natalie Franz and Colleen Poon. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Raven's Children: Aboriginal Youth Health in BC (2000). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Lighting Up: Tobacco use among BC youth (2000). Prepared by Larry Peters, Ph. D. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Silk Road to Health: A Journey to Understanding Chinese Youth in BC (2000). Prepared by Colleen Poon and Natalie Franz. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Mirror Images: Weight Issues Among BC Youth (2000). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Being Out-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Youth in BC: An Adolescent Health Survey (1999). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Our Kids Too-Sexually Exploited Youth in British Columbia: An Adolescent Health Survey (1999). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Adolescent Health Survey: AIDS-Related Risk Behaviour in BC Youth - A Multicultural Perspective (1997). Prepared by Natalie Franz and Colleen Poon. Investigators: Roger Tonkin, Ruth Milner, and David Cox. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Adolescent Health Survey: Youth & AIDS in British Columbia (1994). Prepared by Larry Peters and Aileen Murphy. Investigators: Roger Tonkin, Ruth Milner, and David Cox. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Adolescent Health Survey: Chronic Illness & Disability Among Youth in BC (1994). Prepared by Larry Peters and Aileen Murphy. Investigators: Roger Tonkin, Ruth Milner, and David Cox. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Adolescent Health Survey: Street Youth in Vancouver (1994). Prepared by Larry Peters and Aileen Murphy. Investigator: Roger Tonkin. Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Topic Specific Fact Sheets

Safe & Sound: Injury Issues Among BC Youth

Keeping Fit: Physical Activity Among BC Youth

Marijuana: Use Among BC Youth

Healthy Connections: Connectedness and BC Youth

Mirror Images: Weight Issues Among BC Youth

Silk Road: Health of Chinese Youth in BC

Lighting Up: Tobacco Use Among BC Youth

Next Step Reports

Aboriginal Communities: Feedback from youth and leaders on solutions to youth-related issues (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

The Aboriginal Next Step: Results from Community Youth Health Workshops (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Our Communities – Our Health: Young People Discuss Solutions To Their Health Issues. The Next Step Report (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

Adolescent Health Survey: Next Step - Community Health Action By Youth. Results from 1994 Youth Health Seminars in British Columbia (1995). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.



The McCreary Centre Society

401 N. Esmond Avenue

Burnaby, BC V5C 1S4

www.mcs.bc.ca