



Chapter 3.6

How Young People Get off the Street: Exploring Paths and Processes

JEFF KARABANOW

The vast majority of literature concerning homeless young people has focused on street engagement and street culture. Although this focus is vital to understanding etiology and street life experiences, there has been a surprising neglect on the part of the academic community to complete the analysis of street youth career patterns. The literature has provided an impressive grasp on the causes and consequences of street life – including family dysfunction, abuse and trauma, exploitation and alienation, poverty, addiction, and mental health and child welfare inadequacies – but little acknowledgment of how some of these young people complete the cycle and move away from street culture (Alleva, 1988; Edelbrock, 1980; Ensign, 1998; Karabanow, 2003; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Kurtz et al., 1991). This study highlights the paths and processes involved in “getting off the street,” told from the perspectives of young people and service providers.

Funded by a Canadian National Homelessness Initiative grant, this study involved in-depth, semistructured interviews with 128 young people (90 males, 38 females) and 50 service providers in six Canadian cities (Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, Calgary, Ottawa, and Vancouver). Whereas the majority of interviews were conducted as one-on-one dis-

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cussions, several interviews were carried out as mini-focus groups (made up of two or three participants). Interview questions probed participants' experiences prior to street life, street experiences, and ways in which they have attempted to "exit" this life. Service providers were asked about their experiences working with young people on the street and exiting street life.

Purposive sampling in each site allowed for enhanced diversity within the participant arena – young people in various stages of their street life career were chosen (approximately 20 participants per stage) as well as various service provider settings (such as drop-in clinics, emergency shelters, detoxification services, job training outlets, health centres, mobile crisis units, educational services, and supportive housing/second-stage offerings). Participants were recruited through advertisements placed in local newspapers, local hangout areas (such as parks and coffee shops), and social service agencies.

Two young people (in different phases of their street career) were hired as research assistants and conducted interviews alongside the research team. The involvement of these young assistants in the research was important in recruiting participants and building trust, especially with hardcore street youth. Regular discussions/informal interviews with the two research assistants shed light on the research process and analysis of data. Moreover, their own life experiences became important data sources for the research team.

Complementing this analysis were 15 brief case study portraits of a diverse set of organizational structures serving street youth across Canada. Data analysis involved content analysis and constructivist grounded theory foundations (Charmaz, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) through the implementation of open, axial, and selective coding schemas. The analysis involved locating common and dissimilar themes, building thematic narratives that surfaced from the construction, and linking core categories. This article is organized using the core themes or narratives that emerged from the data.¹ The research was conducted between May 2004 and August 2005.

1 The researchers used the qualitative software package Atlas-TI in organizing and making sense of the large data set.

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This article explores the complex pathways used by young people in their attempts at street disengagement and sheds light on the strategies and obstacles involved in moving away from street culture. The findings suggest several interrelated dimensions to the exiting process – including contemplation, motivation to change, securing help, transitioning from the street, changing daily routine, and redefining one’s sense of self. Throughout these dimensions, street youth organizational structures play significant roles in supporting young people’s disengagement from street culture.

Who Are Street Youth?

A primary finding from this research is that the street youth population is diverse, complex, and heterogeneous. Although this notion has been previously highlighted (e.g., Karabanow, 2004a), it is pivotal here in order to comprehend the myriad avenues young people take to disengage (or attempt to disengage) from street culture.

The generic term “street youth” is made up of a number of subcultures (by no means mutually exclusive) including hardcore street-entrenched young people, squatters, group home kids, child welfare kids, soft-core “twinkies,” “in-and-outers,” punks, runaways, throw-aways, refugees and immigrants, young single mothers, and those who are homeless because their entire family is homeless (Karabanow, 2003; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; McCarthy, 1990; Michaud, 1989; Morrissette & McIntyre, 1989). Within these makeshift categories are numerous descriptors that signal street activities such as gang bangers, prostitutes, drug dealers, drug users, panhandlers, and squeegeers.

Although these labels may denote some of the actions of young people on the street, for the purposes of this research, street youth are defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who do not have a permanent place to call home and who, instead, spend a significant amount of time and energy on the street (e.g., in alleyways, parks, storefronts, dumpsters, etc.); in squats (usually in abandoned buildings); at youth shelters and centres; and/or with friends (“couch surfers”). Such a broad description functions as a framework for the overall analysis that attempts to thread common themes and stories that emerge from the experiences of a diverse group of young people.

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Getting on the Street

Exploring street engagement provides important context to street disengagement. For the majority of the sample, family life prior to street entrance was characterized by physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; violence and substance abuse within the home; and family instability, including numerous transitions and moves (i.e., divorce, separation, introduction of stepparents and stepchildren, moving residences, changing cities, and shifting living arrangements). Family life was seen as chaotic, disruptive, and inconsistent, with a lack of love, care, interest, and support from caregivers.

For the most part, young people experienced loneliness, boredom, alienation, and neglect (in addition to such traumas as being witnesses or victims of violence, abuse, and substance misuse) within their family settings. Thus, it is hardly surprising that most of the young people interviewed viewed the street as a safer and more stable environment than home:

That was the whole reason I would never try to live back home: in the last day/night that I slept there, my dad grabbed me by my throat and put me up against the wall 'cause I was thinking about leaving. So that was his answer 'cause my dad's very short-tempered and high-fused . . . I would rather stay on the street than move back there. (Lisa, age 24, Halifax)

An equally important (and alarming) factor pushing young people to the street involves problematic child welfare placements. More than half of our sample came to the street after having lived in a group home or in foster care. These experiences were most often described as uncaring, exploitative, and unstable. Numerous moves from group home to group home (or foster care to foster care), coupled with feelings of being treated as “criminals,” “delinquents,” or “unwanted,” shaped young people’s transition to street life. Child welfare settings were described by participants as unresponsive to their needs and perceived as “prisons” rather than loving and home-like structures. Street life became an enticing option for young people who either experienced episodes of “running away” from or graduating from child welfare placements:

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I was a runaway and started to be on the street. I liked more being on the street than at a youth centre and get brainwashed or something. . . . It's [youth centre] like prison, it's like a jail. (Nick, age 17, Vancouver)

Many participants spoke of *choosing* street life. They did not describe themselves as passive actors or victims of circumstance; rather, they talked about their own involvement in the street engagement process. Some spoke about being equally responsible for problematic family or child welfare experiences, whereas others saw the street as the only option when home or child welfare settings became unbearable. Still others equated street life with a "time-out" period to reflect on their particular situation while experiencing camaraderie with other youth in similar situations. In the end, whatever the reasons for street engagement, young people are active participants in making transitions and building street identities (e.g., Green, 1998; Karabanow, 2004a).

The Process of Disengagement

The findings of this study suggest that the exiting process for the majority of street youth is made up of layers or dimensions of various activities (see Figure 1). These layers are by no means mutually exclusive, nor are they meant to portray a purely linear path. Rather, the vast majority of youth participants described repeated attempts (on average, about six tries) at street disengagement. This study highlights the significant elements and characteristics commonly experienced by those who have attempted to move out of homelessness.

Contemplation

Layer 1 includes precipitating factors that initiate thinking of street disengagement. In general, street youth reconTEMPLATE their street careers in the face of traumatic street experiences (such episodes included physical and sexual assault, drug and/or alcohol overdoses, involvement with the criminal justice system, and the witnessing of street violence); addressing their disenchantment with street culture; and/or experiencing grave boredom with street survival activities:

I was in Montreal and a lot of really bad stuff happened. . . . I went insane, like, my last 5 days in Montreal, I stayed at the Bunker [youth ser-

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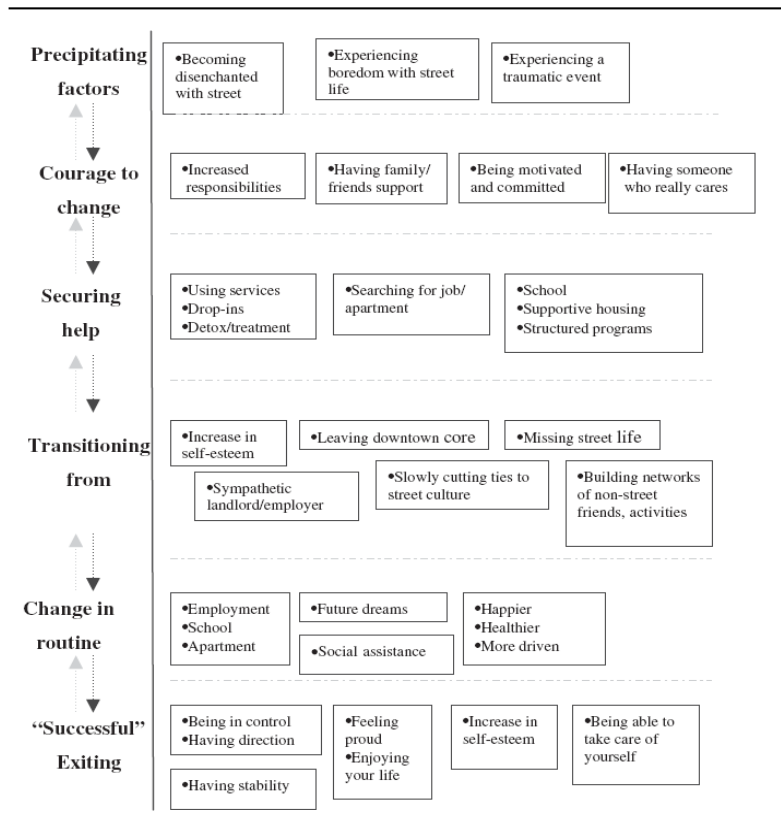
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vice], walked around, I didn't even do drugs. . . . It was either like, man, I'm going to let this guy take control . . . and go do smack and just die on Mount Royal [area in Montreal], or go home [to Halifax], and I went home and I think it's like the best decision I've ever made. (Heidi, age 19, Halifax)

Figure 1
The Exiting Process



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I looked at my life and realized, where am I going? I wasn't happy with how things were, so I decided to try and change it. . . . I was, like, I can't do this anymore. I can't just do nothing. I'm going to have to make a change. (William, age 20, Toronto)

The freedom that had initially attracted young people to the streets (or pulled them away from other problematic situations) grew into aimlessness and boredom, and the result was a desire for something more. Interwoven within this notion is the struggle young people face with day-to-day street survival – securing shelter, finding money, seeking food and clothing, and staying safe:

I mean, everything gets boring after a while. . . . Just really bored sitting on the street asking for money or trying to shine shoes or read poetry or whatever, you know, I'm just really tired of it, so it's like, I'm going to get a job and get off the streets for a while because it's boring. . . . I'm tired of this, you know? (Roger, age 21, Halifax)

For other youth, heavy drug and alcohol use combined with growing older wore them down both physically and mentally, to the point where they decided to make a change:

Now, I'm just trying to get the fuck out of this city because it's starting to, like, eat me alive and the drug thing is, like, too much. (Jordan, age 21, Vancouver)

Although the majority of youth cite boredom, fatigue, heavy drug and alcohol use, and growing older as impetuses to exiting the street, the following narrative describes how numerous young people arrived at a point at which they no longer perceived street life as viable, without any particular reason or explanation beyond “something clicking” in their heads or “enough was enough”:

I'm proud of myself. That was after a year and a half of using. I finally decided that enough was enough and I did a 28-day program [detoxification]. . . . One night, I said, “Enough is enough,” and I went into the rehab program. (Daniel, age 22, Calgary)

Supporting the claim that exiting the street is a complex process, numerous young people are unable to accurately detail or explain their particular exiting process. As such, it appears that street exiting involves

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tangible or perceptible paths as well as intangible or elusive dimensions. A service provider postulated that although it is virtually impossible to truly decipher the reason that these youth made such choices when they did, the simple explanation they usually provided is that they were “finally prepared”:

I have seen some kids, like, it amazes me, they’ll be in it for five years and then boom, one day [they’re off], and then I always ask them what made that difference and they’re just like, “I was ready.” It’s always a simple answer, I was ready. I was just ready. So, I think, a lot of times it has to come deep from within them about being at their breaking point or whatever it is for them then. But yeah, then some people just never hit that and then, like, why is it that there are people that never get to that place? I don’t know, that’s a question I always ask myself, what makes that difference? (service provider, Vancouver)

What becomes evident is that exiting street life is a challenging and non-linear process. The decision to disengage from the street is intricate and demands varying degrees of courage. The themes outlined above are presented as the most common avenues to youth deciding to get off the street and do not represent the sole reasons for street disengagement. Furthermore, even once the decision to disembark has been made, young people continue to face many barriers to becoming an “ex-street youth.”

Motivation to Change

Layer 2 involves mustering the courage to change, which tends to be heightened through increased responsibilities (such as becoming pregnant or having an intimate partner); gaining support through family and friends; having an awareness that someone cares for them; and building personal motivation and commitment toward changing one’s lifestyle.

With street culture commonly described by participants as “exploitative,” “uncaring,” “ruthless,” and “dangerous,” it is remarkable that some young people maintain a sense of hope for a better future, which can inspire motivation to change one’s lifestyle:

I think drive has a lot to do with it, seeing hope. Some people have been hurt so much that they don’t think anything good will ever come out of anything, so why try? (service provider, Toronto)

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Most young people spoke of needing a “desire” to exit street life or having “motivation” and “strong will power” to combat impressive obstacles such as drug addictions, personal trauma, lack of housing and employment, and few support mechanisms:

Mostly, the only resource that will get the person off the street is the person themselves. They have to [want] to get off, they have to be wanting something. They want to be able to grasp something. If they don't want to grasp anything or want to move on, they're not going to move on. They have to have the willpower to do it. (Randall, age 20, Toronto)

Findings suggest that young people who believed they had support from family or friends or that there was someone in their lives who truly cared for them were able to build motivation for street disengagement:

The way [I got off] is . . . since I had a job, my mom said that I could stay with her for a couple of weeks. Then when my boyfriend got out of jail, my mom let us stay with her for another couple of weeks. We were paying her rent and buying food and all that stuff. That's how we got off the street, I guess, with the help from my mom and working. (Heather, age 23, Calgary)

Just knowing that somebody cares and you have that extra support and they want to see you succeed. I think that's really important for kids to understand that there are people out there that care. Like, sometimes they don't have that support from their families but at least there's, like, resources that they can go to where they really can get help and whatnot. (Joanna, age 17, Toronto)

Within street culture, asking for and seeking help proved to be a struggle for the majority of participants, but, at the same time, an integral part of the disengagement process:

What didn't work was doing it on my own and relying on my friends that were in the same position because, I mean, it's a cycle and you just get dragged back into it again and again if you don't have outside help. (Ahmed, age 23, Vancouver)

Participants stressed the liberating quality associated with overcoming one's reluctance to ask for or accept help:

I kind of had a problem with my pride, where I didn't want help. I thought I should have to do things for myself because I thought that my

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situation was my fault. But I kind of had to take my pride and put it in my back pocket and take some help. . . . I'm paranoid that I'm always being a burden, so I just had to push that aside and actually take some help. And actually, it only took the one time for my buddy to say, "You know, why don't you stay here?" So I did. (Charles, age 20, Halifax)

In addition, for some young people, having a child or being in a serious romantic relationship was an important motivator for making changes in their lives. Recognizing that someone else was depending on them helped to increase their sense of self-worth:

Getting pregnant got me to think about it. It was someone else to be responsible for, so it increased my determination to get off. . . . To get off, you really have to want to change your life. (Lindsey, age 20, Toronto)

[My boyfriend] always felt kind of bad because he always sort of blamed himself for me [running away from home to live with him on the streets]. So he was always like, okay, I've got to get into shape, I've got to find an apartment so that she can be happy. (Rose, age 17, Toronto)

The motivation for youth to move away from the street inevitably rests on a multitude of internal and external factors. Youth participants often spoke of having to overcome personal barriers, such as lacking inner drive and motivation, a bruised sense of self, uncertainty about outside passions and interests, and an inability to ask for help.

At times, young people can overcome such obstacles on their own, but the majority suggest an urgent need for support and guidance. Often, it was enough to feel responsible for another person or to know that somebody believed in them and would be supportive even in failure. Youth with strong personal support systems tended to demonstrate fewer struggles with street disengagement. However, none of these dimensions is mutually exclusive, and they often intertwine and intersect with one another.

Young people with a strong desire to get off the street may be more willing to ask for help. Feeling responsible for a new baby might inspire a young mother to leave street life. These motivations and supports may change throughout a youth's exiting process, and the study's findings suggest that without continued forms of support, a return to homelessness is most probable. Furthermore, even with strong supports in place

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and keen motivation, youth face numerous hurdles in their move(s) away from the street.

Securing Help

Layer 3 involves seeking support for the initial stages of getting off the street. This layer tends to include the use of available services; searching for formal employment and stable housing; and some form of formal institutional involvement (such as returning to school or entering supportive housing or structured program entities). Within this layer, it became evident that service providers play a significant role in supporting young people to regain or rebuild a sense of self. Most participants described diverse service provisions as “surrogate families” and “brokers” between street culture and mainstream living.

Young people on the street struggle with numerous interrelated issues. Within a culture of personal and environmental trauma, street youth deal with daily survival; experience physical, mental, and spiritual health concerns; maintain a lack of life and employment skills; and have little in terms of what Jacqueline Wiseman (1970) termed “social margin.” Service providers such as shelters, drop-in centres, health clinics, second-stage independent living resources, mobile care units, and outreach programs not only provide basic needs (such as food, clothing, shower facilities, and shelter) and life and employment skills training (such as how to manage a budget, cook, search for employment, and carry out a job interview), but often forge community spaces where young people can regain confidence and self-esteem within a “culture of hope” (Karabanow, 2003, 2004b).

Service providers have been credited by participants for support in seeking employment possibilities, housing options, and educational opportunities within an environment of care, safety, and learning. Many organizational structures even succeed in carving out community environments where young people can regain a sense of self, begin to work out personal dilemmas, build a critical consciousness as to why they are on the street, join or initiate advocacy strategies to fight structural injustices that maintain their homeless status (such as a lack of affordable housing or meaningful employment opportunities for youth), and reinstall a sense of hope and a better future. For the majority of participants,

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not being judged for their homeless status and feeling as if someone understands and empathizes with their struggles are key ingredients to service delivery satisfaction and engagement.

Transitioning From the Street

Layer 4 deals with transitioning away from the street and, in the study, proved to be a complex and difficult stage of street disengagement. Moving away from the street entails physically leaving the downtown core, reducing ties with street culture and street friends, and constructing (or reconstructing) relationships with mainstream society. Cutting street ties meant leaving friends, surrogate families, and a culture associated with the downtown core.

For many young people, friends and surrogate families were forged as a result of, or during, very stressful survival situations. Survival is the paramount objective on the street, and many young people join or develop tight-knit community bonds with other street colleagues. The data elicited a strong positive relationship between the length of time on the street and the difficulty of leaving the downtown core/friends – the longer on the street, the deeper the relationships one would have to the street and the harder it would be to disconnect from street culture:

But it kind of compounds itself – the longer you're on the street, the harder it is to get off because you get more entrenched in the culture and you have more of the problems that come with that. (service provider, Calgary)

Participants spoke about the street lifestyle as more than a physical space and associated leaving the street with disconnecting from friends. Breaking ties with street-involved peers was different for each youth but was generally seen as a slow and gradual process. The majority of youth stressed how disconnecting from friends who they perceived as a bad influence was an essential part of the exiting process:

Most of them come by and ask me, "Could you help me for two days, like sleep at your house?" I don't have the choice [but] to say no, because if I help them, they'll come back and see me and they won't help themselves, and since I need to help myself first of all, I don't have a choice either. (Mohamad, age 23, Montreal)

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Breaking ties with friends and drugs was highly intertwined. Addictions were described as interwoven into the fabric of street culture and street families. Youth who had moved into a more stable living environment spoke about the difficulty of dealing with their drug addictions. Youth also expressed that ending drug or alcohol misuse was a significant step in getting off the street and helped to improve self-esteem

Yeah, it helped quite a bit and made me feel a lot better about myself. I think that was the biggest thing. It's all about really not using drugs. I think it's a lot about how you feel about yourself. If you feel good about yourself, then you don't really need the drugs. (Chester, age 24, Calgary)

Youth openly commented about the difficulties and challenges of leaving behind street friends, often exploring feelings of confusion, guilt, abandonment, disloyalty, resentment, and loneliness. For some young people, street friends and street families were communities where they experienced security, acceptance, and love, often for the first time in their young lives. Although the majority of participants agreed that breaking street ties was necessary to becoming more stable, it was undeniable that the process and the actions associated with breaking such ties were emotionally difficult:

I found my biggest [obstacle] was leaving the crowd that I was with, like my friends, the situation with my friends, because they were all like, "No, don't go, stay down here and hang with us, go do this and go do that," and that was probably my biggest crutch, was getting away from my friends because I'd been friends with them my whole life, and for me to just push them away and just say, "No, I'm getting away from this, I'm getting out of this." It was a big step for me. (Chris, age 21, Calgary)

Although participants were clear that breaking ties with street culture and friends was essential to the transitioning stage, it is also clear from the findings that a majority of young people re-enter street life to visit street friends and street communities, interact with street youth organizations (predominantly located in downtown areas), and supplement (primarily through panhandling and squeegeeing) their often meagre minimum-wage earnings from formal sector employment.

It is not surprising that young people leaving the street experienced mixed feelings; there were unmistakable feelings of pride, hope, and self-

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confidence coupled with deep emotions such as loneliness, guilt, and disloyalty. Such confusion was typically directed towards street culture and friends; nevertheless, there were also comments made about service providers, who were commonly perceived as surrogate parents. For some youth, moving away from street culture also entailed breaking ties with the services that had supported them:

Because if I have to go downtown even for a few minor services, it still puts me in that scene and makes me, like, face-to-face with a lot of stuff that I don't need to be involved with. (Jay, age 23, Vancouver)

Other young people continued to use services, however, in a more strategic manner (such as meeting staff when residents were sleeping or out of the establishment) or more focused manner (linking with services that maintain one's stability and distance from street culture).

Participants said that it was as difficult to leave street culture and street friends as it was to enter mainstream society and build new relationships. Despite the emotional strains of leaving relationships with people who had helped support them on the street, building new relationships outside street culture was highlighted as essential for a healthy transition. New friends and communities tended to be seen by participants as "good influences" in their day-to-day living:

I think it's having a network of people outside of street life. Because I mean, when you're on the street, your whole world, your whole family, everyone you spend time with, everyone that you see is pretty much out and about here. But once you're off the street, your friends have places to live, you know? (Barb, age 22, Ottawa)

Youth expressed that the transition period between leaving street friends and developing new relationships was difficult. They often spoke of feelings of loneliness and uncertainty:

I think it's really hard because I'm, like, in between right now because a lot of my friends still live street lives. They're all about partying and pan-ning and I'm just not. So I guess it's kind of a lonely time because you're figuring out yourself and what you want to do. (Heidi, age 19, Halifax)

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Changing Routine

Layer 5 involves restructuring of one's routine in terms of employment, education, and housing; a shift in thinking about future aspirations; and acquiring some form of social assistance to support one's transition. During this stage, young people highlighted a renewed sense of health and wellness, self-confidence, and personal motivation.

A sense of changing routine emerged for participants as they made the transition from living on the streets to mainstream society. Participants described both physical and psychological shifts occurring in their lives, such as sleeping better, feeling healthier, and experiencing increased self-esteem and self-confidence. Such changes tended to be linked to young people having more stability and consistency in their lives. Shifts in routine were commonly seen as interwoven with the notion of building new communities and tended to focus on replacing street activities with formal employment and returning to school. However, subtle day-to-day shifts in routine (such as waking up and making some coffee or coming home and watching television) were as celebrated as more tangible elements (such as living in one's own apartment or going to work each day).

According to young people, the most consequential change came with employment. More than simply providing for basic needs, work translated into a gradual shifting in general lifestyle. Such changes generally involved the way participants managed time (work and free time) and perceived their future:

I can just compare my old lifestyle, where I would wake up in the morning, if I found someone's house I could crash at, definitely take a shower if that was available, usually didn't have any clean clothes to put on, so I'd maybe try to rinse the ones I'd worn the day before out. Do my best to find something to get stoned on and go out into the world and bum change from people. Well, now... I work nights, so I don't wake up in the morning but I wake up, I have my shower, I get something to eat. I'm taken care of, I'm happy, I'm fed, and I go to work. It makes me feel meaningful about what I do with my day and so, I go out and I'm able to give to the world instead of just trying to take for myself, which is an amazingly positive feeling. And I can pursue the things that make me mentally healthy. The depression that goes with the street life isn't there, the feel-

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ing that I'm less than... My old idea of intellectual pursuit was dropping acid and talking about this and that. Now, I can read a novel and write a poem... I have all these options to me that I can go and take the time to do these things. Some of the differences I don't even notice because they're so... it seems so normal now. (Ahmed, age 23, Vancouver)

Reintegrating into mainstream culture introduced young people to a new way to live their lives, and much of their new structure came from work or school. Participants experienced routine changes in most aspects of their day-to-day lives, from sleep habits to eating arrangements and free-time pursuits. These transitions allowed many youth to reflect on their past experiences, and for the majority of participants, this meant perceiving the street as an unhealthy and destructive environment. Along with a healthier sense of self, young people were more ready to develop longer-term plans and envision some control in their futures:

Now, I wake up and I have something to live for – before, I didn't have anything to live for, really. . . But now, it's like, okay, I have a son to take care of and I have myself to take care of. My mornings are amazing because it's just like getting stuff together and going somewhere. Before, I didn't have anywhere to go, it was just like bouncing from mall to mall or shelter to shelter. Now it's just like, I get up, I go to baby-and-mom programs or we go to the library where they have the mom-and-baby reading sessions and it's just like a wonderful, wonderful thing for me now. (Cynthia, age 20, Toronto)

“Successful” Exiting

The final stage has been termed “successful” exiting, which embodies young people’s emotional and spiritual sense of identity. Successful exiting was exemplified by a sense of “being in control” and “having direction” in one’s life. The majority of participants spoke of feeling proud of their movements out of street life; being able to finally enjoy life on their own terms; healthy self-esteem and self-confidence; being able to take care of themselves; and feeling stable in terms of housing security and wellness.

Youth described a variety of concepts when discussing what it meant to successfully make transition away from street culture. Getting off the street translated into more than simply finding an apartment and

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physically removing oneself from a street lifestyle. Truly becoming an ex-street youth entailed emotional and spiritual shifts within the individual. Many young people described success as involving stability and being comfortable in their living environment. Youth spoke of feeling “self-sufficient,” “stable,” “being able to take care of themselves,” and “being in control” of their lives.

Often, success was equated with feelings of self-sufficiency. This translated into not having a need for street youth services or relying on social assistance benefits for support. For youth currently living on the street, they pondered what success would look like for them in the future, and many concurred that it would entail reducing perceived dependency on services:

Well, to be self-sustaining, you know, to at least be able to come up with my own food money, spend it on food and, you know, pay rent. (Danny, age 22, Calgary)

It is not surprising that youth often described obtaining housing, employment, and education as successful exiting:

Successfully getting off the streets is getting your own apartment, having a very successful job, avoiding street life like not panning, not having to fly a sign or go squeegeeing or anything like that. (Roger, age 21, Halifax)

Other young people expanded on these dimensions and suggested that rather than simply being housed and fed, they desired a sense of “home” and “stability”:

I have a home. I don’t have to worry about weather. I don’t have to worry about – I mean, I’m a woman – so I don’t have to worry about being assaulted or stuff like that. Like just things that people don’t even think of. Like I don’t have to worry about where my next meal is coming from or how I’m going to get heat or hot water or the embarrassment of going somewhere. (Patricia, age 21, Halifax)

Leaving dangerous street activities (such as drug abuse and sex trade work) was also noted as a measure of success and stability:

I’m not out doing drugs downtown. I’m not hanging with the street kids. I’m not stealing, keeping myself out of jail, not partying or pimping. (Chris, age 21, Calgary)

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Participants also cited positive feelings, emotions, and relationships when discussing the concept of success. For some youth, success was defined as a spiritual state of being – an emotion or feeling that provided a renewed sense of self:

I think success is a peace of mind. It's being able to sit down at the end of the day and feel satisfied with what I've done, with who I am and to live life to its fullest. Every minute is a success. That's where I want to be. I'm getting there. (Dana, age 18, Vancouver)

In all, successfully exiting street life incorporated various dimensions made up of both tangible and intangible constructs. For almost all participants, becoming an ex-street youth required stable housing, a return to employment and/or school, and a move away from street culture and activity. Other young people, especially those who had left the street, supplement these comments with notions of spiritual and emotional growth and stability.

Conclusion

Street youth exist within excluded realms. They are a traumatized population located outside the formal market economy. They describe experiences of marginalization and stigmatization within civil society, are continually kept under surveillance and harassed by social control agents and members of civil society. In their situation of “being homeless,” they are poor and isolated, have little social capital and social margin, appear “different” in looks and attire, have difficulty locating employment and shelter, and spend much of their existence in the public arena, concerned with basic survival needs such as shelter, food, clothing, and social support. As one young person suggested,

Like you don't feel right in your skin yet, like you're not really a successful member of society quite yet, but you're not panhandling on the corner, right? It would look bad if I went out and panhandled now, right? But on the other hand, you know, you don't have any money and what are you supposed to do? (Heather, age 23, Calgary)

Everything about being young and homeless inspires critical and often demeaning responses from others in mainstream society.

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Within each of the stages of exiting, young people spoke about social exclusion. For example, attempting to secure housing options and employment opportunities proved extremely difficult and often demeaning. As one young person noted:

Who wants to give me a job? I look like a homeless kid. I am a homeless kid. (John, age 20, Vancouver).

Each stage of exiting intersected with numerous challenges and obstacles, making successful exiting difficult and often including numerous trials. Re-entering mainstream culture proved the most difficult dimension, as young people were required to make the transition from “identities of exclusion” (i.e., being different, feeling stigmatized and marginalized) to one of “fitting in” to mainstream lifestyles.

But there are also signs of inclusionary dimensions within the street youth populations. The majority of street youth spoke of street life as a safer space than their previous environments, suggesting the traumatic or horrific experiences that led young people to the street. There is also evidence that street life can provide feelings of community and family for many inhabitants, a space where some do feel cared for, accepted, and even protected. Moreover, findings suggest that for the most part, street youth services act as surrogate families for homeless youth, providing needed basic amenities and safe and caring environments. It is precisely these characteristics of inclusion that make it difficult for most young people to move away from street culture.

When asked about their plans for the future, about dreams and hopes, most young people indicate a great desire to belong, have a family, find a loving partner, seek meaningful employment, accrue a safe place to live, and be part of civil society. And although their current lives are chaotic, unhealthy, and distressed, they hoped for a brighter future. This finding provides direction for how we as a society should construct meaningful approaches to build a culture of hope and inclusion.

There are important avenues that we should embark on immediately; the first two recommendations come directly from participants, and the others from reflections from the data in general:

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1. Invest in existing frontline (“in the trenches”) support – shelters, drop-ins, health clinics, and outreach services. They are the first supportive and healthy adult contacts that most young people experience when living on the street and offer creative and compassionate responses to basic needs. The majority of youth participants spoke eloquently and passionately about the significance of such resources throughout the street exiting process.
2. Forge thoughtful long-term structural development initiatives, including supportive and independent housing and meaningful employment opportunities. There are many examples throughout North America of innovative linkages between government, business, and non-profit sectors to build such initiatives (e.g., Montreal’s Dans La Rue, Toronto’s Covenant House and Eva’s Place, and Calgary’s Open Door). Young people in the sample were unequivocal about the need for safe and sustainable housing in order to seek out employment opportunities.
3. Enhance social action campaigns that speak to and on behalf of this marginalized group. Examples include fighting against legislation that targets young people as criminals (such as Safe Streets legislation); youth groups that provide consciousness-raising alternatives; attempts to increase per diem rates for service provision operations; and opposing police harassment and abuse (Karabanow, 2004a).
4. Initiate preventive structures that tap into the true reasons for youth homelessness: child welfare failures, poverty, family distress, abuse, neglect, and violence. We need thoughtful educational strategies (such as runaway prevention programs carried out by street youth organizations) to disentangle myths and stereotypes about why these young people enter street life, remain on the street, and suffer.
5. Build national and regional coalitions of street youth, policy makers, service providers, housing specialists, and academics that can share best practice approaches on service delivery, policy development, education, advocacy, and voice.

Such distinct yet interwoven dimensions will provide our young people with the proper support and a fighting chance to climb out of homelessness and, equally significant, provide opportunities for them to

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become citizens rather than clients, victims, criminals, or worse – invisible and insignificant bodies.

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