



Chapter 3.4

Street Survival: A Gendered Analysis of Youth Homelessness in Toronto

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Research on homeless youth¹ in Canada has grown over the past two decades, resulting in some important findings that address central questions about the social characteristics and lifestyles of this economically and socially marginal group. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the heterogeneity of homeless people, and in particular the significance of gender (i.e., Carlen, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Novac et al., 2002; Wardhaugh, 1999). Yet, besides anecdotal and journalistic accounts, relatively little is systematically known about the varied subsistence strategies of homeless young men and women.

Most research on gender and employment, examining issues such as the earning ratio and occupational segregation, has used samples of formal labour market participants (for example, Davies et al., 1996; Hughes & Lowe, 1993; Kaufman, 2002). However, much of the “work” that homeless youth engage in falls outside the boundaries of (or

¹ For our purposes, homeless youth (also referred to as street youth) include: “... young people up to the age of 24 who are absolutely, periodically or temporarily without shelter, as well as those who are at substantial risk of being in the street in the immediate future” (Daly, 1996, p. 24).

minimally, on the margins of) the formal labour market. Previous research has indicated that, in order to survive, homeless youth must adopt flexible and diverse money-making strategies (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). This ranges from working at paid jobs in the formal economy (usually on a short-term basis), to engaging in informal economic activities associated with homelessness in Canada, such as begging and squeegee cleaning, sex trade work, and illegal or criminal activities (drug dealing, theft).

In this chapter, we explore how gender shapes the experiences of street youth in Toronto, and in particular how street youth make money. One cannot make sense of the distinctive lives of young homeless men and women without reference to the "streets"—the range of public and semi-public spaces that homeless people frequent—as a gendered space where notions of masculinity and femininity are shaped and reproduced. An examination of how the gendered experiences of young homeless men and women shape their subsistence strategies will enhance our understanding of how gender affects earning production for marginal groups in society, and will better inform policy-making.

The goals of this work are threefold. First, our findings show that income generation does vary on the basis of gender; young women typically report lower incomes and are, to some extent, involved in different economic activities. Second, these differences can be generally explained on the basis of the living conditions reported by young homeless men and women. Finally, we frame our analysis in terms of a broader discussion of how homelessness is gendered within the spaces and places that homeless youth inhabit.

Literature Review

The literature on gender and work has traditionally focused on how the participation and experiences of women in the labour force differs from those of men (for example, Marini, 1989). Despite gains in women's employment opportunities and rewards, work-related gender inequalities still exist, including the persistence of occupational gender segregation (Crompton, 1997), that is, the tendency of the majority of both men and women working in occupations that are largely defined in terms of "male" or "female" jobs.

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One of the major effects of such segregation concerns wages. In 2000, for example, the female-male earnings ratio for all full-time workers in Canada was 71.7 percent; the figure has not changed substantially over the past two decades. The situation for younger workers is somewhat less pronounced. For example, in 2001 in Ontario the weekly earnings ratio for male and women youth aged 15-24 who worked full time was 78 percent (Statistics Canada, 2002).

Scholars have generally relied upon four factors to account for employment segregation and women's lower earnings: skill deficits, worker preferences, economic and organizational structure, and sex stereotyping (Kaufman, 2002). The data used to test these explanations rely on the census or population surveys. Marginal groups, like the homeless, are therefore excluded from this research because of their tenuous links with the labour market and lack of stable housing. We do know that homeless youth are not entirely excluded from the labour market. Research has demonstrated that many homeless young people report a history of formal labour-market participation (Baron, 2001; Ennew & Milne, 1997; Gaetz et al., 1999). However, obtaining *and* maintaining what are mostly low-skilled, poorly paying, service-sector jobs on the margins of a labour market and competing with youth and adults with more settled backgrounds is an extremely challenging task.

Although these supply- and demand-side factors are important for understanding gendered employment differences in the formal economy, such an approach may not be adequate to explain the subsistence strategies of the homeless. Research on street youth and crime shows that one of the consequences of their disadvantaged backgrounds, stressful current life events, and labour-market marginality is the lure that is provided by money-making activities outside the formal economy (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Carlen, 1996; Greene et al., 1999; Hagan & McCarthy, 1991; Stephens, 2001).

For homeless youth, most work takes place in informal, unregulated economic spheres, and includes begging and squeegeeing, quasi-legal activities (in the sex trade, for instance), and criminal activities. For many years these behaviours have been regarded as a commonplace means of survival for the poor in developing countries (see Stephens, 2001), but

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they are only beginning to be fully explored within developed countries such as Canada (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

Since the subculture of the "streets" produces a context whereby the opportunities to earn money through activities such as drug dealing and prostitution are often transparent, many youths without a stable and reliable food source who lack safe shelter are open to participation in these deviant social networks (see Stephens, 2001). Such subsistence strategies—whether legal, quasi-legal or illegal—generate "cash in hand" each day, a benefit for those who must focus their efforts on meeting immediate needs (for food and shelter, among other things).

The challenge, then, is to explore the different dimensions of work (both in the formal and informal economy) to understand the dynamics involved in the gendered nature of subsistence among this population. We contend that the *culture of the streets* and the ways in which *masculinity* and *femininity* are organized in this marginal arena need to be considered to appreciate the broad range and flexible nature of the economic activity associated with being homelessness.

Space, Gender, and Making Money

Research on the use of space by young people in general focuses, first, on conflicts that emerge from the presence and visibility of young people in public spaces (Sibley, 1995; Valentine, 1996; White, 1994;), and second, on how such spaces are implicated in adolescent identity formation (Massey, 1998; Robinson, 2000). Urban spaces may be "colonized" by young people, who actively negotiate the meaning of such spaces among themselves, other members of the public, and authorities, while nurturing and exploring individual and group identities. Space, place, and identity thus are bound in a way distinct from more structured family, community, and institutional spaces under the greater control of adults.

For young homeless people, the relationship between space and identity is even more complex. In constituting identities as homeless persons, street youth are also engaged in negotiating space not only with members of the general public (passersby, other youth, customers) and agents of social control (the police, security guards), but also with other street youth. Here, much of the informal economic work that young people engage in—begging, squeegeeing, sex work, or dealing drugs—

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plays a role in helping homeless youth stake out urban space not only for economic activities, but also for recreation, eating, and sleeping. Such space is also used tactically in the negotiation of gender identities.

Ever since McRobbie and Garber's (1975) pioneering work, it has become necessary when examining youth cultural phenomenon to account for the way in which roles and options in the home, school, workplace, and on the streets (the site of much youth cultural activity) are structured, organized, and experienced on the basis of gender. More recently, urban geographers have focused on how institutional spaces (i.e., schools, religious institutions, the workplace, and the community) affect the process of creating gender identities in which definitions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are constructed (Hanson & Pratt, 1995). For adolescents, "the streets" constitute one such space, although one often defined more clearly in masculine terms. One consequence is that, until relatively recently, research on public youth cultures (and, indeed, much of the research on street youth) has rendered young women practically invisible. Female involvement in such spaces, however, should not be considered as marginal to that of men; rather, it is structurally different in terms of how young women exercise independence, nurture friendships and attachments, and explore youth cultural options and economic opportunities.

A central feature of the distinctiveness of homeless young women is that detachment from home and family situates women not only within a largely male-defined category of homelessness, but also outside more traditional environments for girls. The streets are a social and economic arena where men have more power and control than women. As Wardhaugh (1999) has argued, the streets are the quintessential male space; one where women, even those who are "streetwise," are never fully comfortable. These notions are in many ways in keeping with research on street gangs, and the gendered differences in criminal activity, where gender divergence is in part related to the social construction of gendered dominance and subordination (Messerschmidt, 1995).

Hatty (1996) suggests that young women who are homeless (or facing the prospect of homelessness) experience different opportunities and risks as a result of becoming physically and cognitively displaced into male spaces. She cites Gardner (1990) who, in writing on women, safety,

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and public places, suggests, “Women regularly are judged and discriminated against in such places; further, women fear physical and sexual assaults” (p. 417). Since the “streets” have traditionally been defined as male space, the money-making opportunities available to homeless youth are likely to be structured accordingly.

Talking to Homeless Youth

As Canada’s largest city, Toronto has the largest numbers of homeless youth in the country. The estimates on any given night vary, and although no accurate census data exist, we believe the number to be about 2,000 (City of Toronto, 1999). They may be temporarily living in hostels, staying with friends, living in squats, or actually on the streets, and invariably it is the chronic instability—defined in terms of housing, relationships, income, and health—that most clearly characterizes their lives.

Our study included a self-administered questionnaire and open-ended/semi-structured interviews. A total of 360 youths completed the questionnaire, and 20 also participated in tape-recorded interviews. The information collected from these interviews provided rich accounts about the challenges involved in surviving street life. All participants were given a \$10 honorarium.

Considering the nature of our population, selecting a statistically random sample was not possible. However, to capture a sample that we felt was representative of the Toronto homeless youth population, 360 surveys were purposively administered at six street youth serving agencies ($n = 178$) and eight youth shelters ($n = 145$) that were spread throughout the inner city of Toronto and in two suburbs. We also solicited young people for interviews on the streets to ensure that the views of those who are not connected to youth serving agencies were represented ($n = 37$).

We used a Participatory Action Research approach in our research, which involved including those who are intended as the subject of the research in the design and implementation of the project. In this case, six Peer Outreach workers, who were all street-involved and included a cross-section of the homeless youth in the community in terms of age, length of time on the streets, gender, sexual orientation, and primary economic activity, were hired and trained to assist in administering the

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surveys. They helped select research sites to administer questionnaires, locate youth who did not normally use service agencies, explain the project to young people, and assist them in filling out the survey if language or literacy were issues.

An overview of homeless youth

The body of research on homeless youth demonstrates clearly the degree to which background variables are implicated in the pathways to homelessness, and subsequently have an impact on the experiences of young people once on the streets. For instance, research suggests that a disproportionate number of street youth have experienced domestic physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Dematteo et al., 1999; Gaetz et al., 1999; Janus et al., 1987; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Whitbeck & Simons, 1993). Victims of sexual abuse are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours as adults, and to participate in the sex trade, for instance (Beitchman et al., 1992; Tyler et al., 2000; Whitbeck et al., 1997).

Although we found that men outnumber women by two to one, consistent with other literature on street youth in Canada (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), there no striking differences in our sample between men and women in terms of age (men = 21.3 years; women = 20.3 years), nationality (men = 83 percent Canadian; women = 79 percent Canadian), length of time on the street (men = 5.8; women = 5.3), the age when the respondent first left home (men = 15.3 years; women = 14.9 years) and levels of high school completion (men = 57 percent; women = 60 percent).

However, while most young people in the sample came from family backgrounds characterized by problematic relations with parents and caregivers, young women were more disadvantaged in a number of ways. They (50 percent) were more likely than men (40 percent) to report interventions by child welfare authorities, and to have spent time in foster care. In their reasons for leaving home, women were more likely to identify parental conflict (women = 71.1 percent; men = 62.4 percent), physical abuse (women = 45.3 percent; men = 27.1 percent), sexual abuse (women = 34.9 percent; men = 15.2 percent), and mental health issues (women = 26.4 percent; men = 13.1 percent) as significant, while men were more likely to identify independence-seeking variables such as

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“looking for work” (men = 35 percent; women = 24.4 percent) as well as trouble with the law (men = 30.4 percent; women = 21.3 percent).

Subsistence strategies

Homeless youth face challenges in entering the formal job market, largely because they lack the skills and education, their health is compromised, and their inadequate housing makes it difficult for them to succeed. However, contrary to popular perceptions that homeless youth do not want to work, our data suggest that an overwhelming majority of those youth are interested in finding paid employment (83.4 percent of men and 87.8 percent of women).

Despite the challenges homeless youth face in gaining employment, an examination of the incidence of labour-market economic activity engaged in by Toronto homeless youth (Table 1) suggests they are not completely excluded from the regular economy.

Table 1: Labour market activities by gender

	Men	Women
Currently employed	31 percent (<i>n</i> = 54)	27 percent (<i>n</i> = 24)
Number of jobs during past year	2.4 (<i>n</i> = 129)	2.1 (<i>n</i> = 72)
Modal weekly income	\$310 (<i>n</i> = 56)	\$201 (<i>n</i> = 26)
Employed	(<i>n</i> = 128)	(<i>n</i> = 71)
Full time	67 percent	48 percent
Part time	33 percent	52 percent
Paid cash in hand	33 percent (<i>n</i> = 51)	50 percent (<i>n</i> = 24)

Gender does not appear to be related to current employment status, as men are only slightly more likely to report being employed (31 percent) than women (27 percent). The mean number of jobs held over the previous year is also similar for both groups. However, men were more likely than women to report earning higher weekly wages and to have full-time jobs, indicating in relative terms greater labour market success.

Nevertheless, when exploring the work that street youth obtain in the formal economy, one must bear in mind that when they do get work, it tends to be at the margins of the formal economy, in jobs that are often

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informally organized (and therefore fall outside of regulated employment and safety standards), provided in many cases by unscrupulous employers, who may feel little if any commitment to the young person they hire. A substantial number report being paid “cash in hand,” a circumstance that is more likely to be reported by women than men. While this form of payment means that they do not pay taxes on income, it also means that they typically are paid at rates below minimum wage, and that they are otherwise vulnerable to abuse by employers.

I’ve had under-the-table [cash-in-hand] jobs. I was promised \$100 to clean some offices. I did the job, went back at the end of the week, and they gave me \$50. There’s a lot of bad under-the-table stuff. (Maria, age 18)

Many street youth find such jobs through temp agencies or labour exchanges. Sometimes, small business operators approach them directly on the streets and ask them to work for a day or two, for cash. In this economic context, exploitation is rife. Thus, while over one-quarter of our sample reported “having a job,” the *meaning* assigned to such employment should not be compared with what work means for workers who are housed and live in more stable and supportive environments.

Participation in the labour market is not the only way homeless youth generate income. Some received some form of state assistance, such as general welfare payments, disability benefits, or employment insurance. The percentage of homeless youth who rely on social assistance as their main source of income is quite low (15 percent), considering the high unemployment that characterizes this impoverished group. This reflects the barriers to obtaining—and maintaining—such benefits for people who are young, out of school and without shelter.²

While this percentage includes relatively equal numbers of men and women, one-half of the women who were claiming benefits were young mothers living with their dependent children. Pregnancy (and the risk of it) and young motherhood are of course salient features of life on the streets for young women (Greene & Ringwalt, 1998). The fact that homeless youth are more likely to engage in sex at a younger age, and with

2 In Toronto, young people under the age of 18 who are not “legally emancipated” are not eligible to receive welfare benefits unless they are enrolled in school full time and with the permission of their parents.

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more partners (in many cases for subsistence reasons), puts young women at greater risk (Kral et al., 1997).

Although only a minority of homeless youth earn regular income through continuous participation in the labour market or through social assistance, it cannot be said that they are idle or without a “job.” In fact, most homeless youth engage in flexible and diverse money-making strategies. In some cases, this includes legal activities that are part of the informal economy and are identified with homelessness in Canada (squeegeeing, panhandling); in other cases, this refers to activities that are quasi-legal (the sex trade) or illegal (theft of stolen goods and/or drug dealing). One advantage of such income-generating strategies for socially and economically marginal people is that they provide cash on a day-to-day basis, allowing young people to meet immediate needs.

I pan [beg] until I get what I need and then I get out of there ... [It] depends ... usually I'll come here for breakfast and then I'll go and pan for the day to get something to eat for dinner ... it's usually just for food or whatever ... if my friends are going out we'll pan to go out for a drink or whatever... (Dani, age 19)

Table 2 shows the prevalence of begging and squeegee cleaning reported by the sample. Squeegeeing (the unsolicited act of cleaning car windshields for a donation at intersections mainly in downtown Toronto³), was an activity engaged in by 40 percent of male and 36 percent of female respondents (“sometimes” or “daily”).

Panhandling (also called “panning” or “begging”) is the act of asking people for money in public environments, including busking, in which some sort of entertainment or service is exchanged for money. While the prevalence of panhandling, as with squeegeeing, is not greatly demarcated on the basis of gender, there are notable differences in incidence levels. More men (22 percent) reported squeegee cleaning on a daily basis, compared with women (13 percent). While a similar pattern emerges in the prevalence of panhandling—as approximately one-half of the overall sample reported to have panhandled at least once in the past

3 When data were collected for this project squeegee cleaning was legal in Ontario. As of 31 January 2000, the Ontario Safe Streets Act outlawed squeegee cleaning and “aggressive” panhandling.

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six months—women were more likely than men to regularly engage in this behaviour on a daily basis (women = 17 percent; men = 12 percent).

Table 2: Level of participation in panhandling and squeegee cleaning by sex in past six months (percentages)

	Never	Sometimes	Daily	<i>n</i>
Squeegeeing				
Men	60	18	22	187
Women	64	23	13	108
Panhandling				
Men	48	41	12	189
Women	52	31	17	108

According to our interview data, squeegeeing and panhandling are typically engaged in by small groups of two or three (squeegeers sometimes operate in larger groups). The proceeds of such economic activities are typically shared, and in many cases money is used to purchase goods that are collectively consumed (such as food). In mixed groups of panhandlers (although this is less likely to be the case with squeegeers), women play the more active role in soliciting. Many homeless youth articulate this as a strategy to engage what they believe to be the greater sympathy the public has to the plight of homeless women.

People offer more (to girls) than they do to guys ... I can make more money panhandling than any guy, because they say, "Oh, it's a girl" ... they don't think I can manage. (Mandy, age 18)

While female panhandlers may evoke more public sympathy than men who beg, the monetary rewards of such compassionate acts are not particularly lucrative, relative to other ways in which street youth make money. Also of importance here is the fact that it is men who are more likely than women to engage in these activities independently, in isolation from other homeless youth. This reflects the different risk factors that men and women on the streets face. Nevertheless, this also gives young men the advantage of retaining all the income from their work.

I know a lot of girls who will go off and pan by themselves, which is stupid. How easy is it for someone to say, "She's pretty ... she's gone" ...

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you hear about it every day. (Donna, age 19)

Involvement in the sex trade provides another avenue for income generation for homeless youth. The sex trade includes a broad range of activities, including street prostitution, working in strip clubs, escort services, or computer/telephone sex. Many homeless youth exchange sex for money or other goods, including food, shelter or drugs (Kral et al., 1997; Webber, 1991). In Table 3, the involvement of homeless youth in some aspects of the sex trade is explored.

Overall, similar percentages of men and women were involved in the sex trade, although some interesting differences emerge relating to specific types of sex work. For instance, women are more likely to work as exotic dancers in strip clubs, in part reflecting the structure of the sex trade economy that provides more employment opportunities for women in these areas.

Table 3: Sex work over the past six months (percentages)

	Never	Sometimes	Daily	<i>n</i>
Had sex with someone for money				
Men	75	20	5	177
Women	73	22	5	107
Escort service work				
Men	90	7	3	173
Women	88	8	4	104
Exotic dancing				
Men	87	12	1	175
Women	78	16	6	105

Male and female patterns of street prostitution are quite different. Typically women—unlike men—work under the control of a pimp, resulting in restrictions on their personal freedom and their ability to keep the money they earn. In fact, there are few opportunities in the sex trade where women are able to operate independently.

Our final category of money-making is criminal activity, which here refers to income generated largely through theft (breaking and entering, selling stolen goods) and drug dealing. Research (for example, Baron,

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2001; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997) has established that homeless youth are, as a whole, more criminally involved than are domiciled youth. It is useful to make a distinction between those who engage in criminal behaviour in order to survive, from those whom criminal activity is not driven by deprivation. Clearly, many homeless youth will report having stolen or hustled food, clothing or other items to meet immediate needs from time to time. However, there is a segment of the homeless youth population that relies on criminal activities for subsistence purposes. Table 4 presents rates of homeless youth participation in criminal activities.

Table 4: Crime over past six months (percentages)

	Never	Sometimes	Daily	<i>n</i>
Property crime (theft or break and enter)				
Men	55	40	5	181
Women	67	32	1	103
Selling drugs				
Men	44	41	15	186
Women	57	34	9	105

Two key statistics stand out. First, while crime and other forms of “deviant” activity are not uncommon, theft and drug dealing are by no means dominant money-making activities. Second, crime is clearly defined as a male activity, a finding that should not come as a surprise since, along with age, gender has long been recognized as a key correlate to street crime in criminology. Moreover, men are more likely to report that they have been arrested in the past than are women. Nevertheless, there is evidence that female homeless youth are in general more criminally involved than either male or female domiciled youth (Tanner & Wortley, 2002). In some cases, this means active involvement in drug dealing or other crime in a manner that is indistinguishable from young men. In other cases, women may adopt more narrowly defined “support” roles in such criminal activities, for instance as drug runners:

I help my friends who are drug dealers...I get them customers and instead of giving me drugs – “cause I don’t do them – they give me money in exchange ... (Michelle, age 18)

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Earnings

Overall, then, the data presented thus far reveal that, as with the formal labour market, the informal economy of homeless youth is characterized by a degree of gender-based, work-related segregation. We also found some evidence that there are different monetary awards associated with the various economic activities of homeless youth, whether legal, quasi-legal or illegal.⁴

As seen in Table 5, panhandlers and squeegeers (both legal at the time) earned considerably less than did youth engaged in the sex trade and crime. Men and women reported to earn identical amounts of money (\$27 a day) for panhandling. However, men outearned women as squeegeers; for every dollar earned by men, women earned 75 cents. In drug dealing, men also made more money than women. The only economic activity where women reported earning made more money than men was in sex work. However, as previously noted, many women in the sex trade work under the control of pimps, while men are more likely to work independently. This difference may inflate the earnings reported by women (gross as opposed to net). Ratios were also calculated for Theft and Break and Enter. Since only two women reported to have incomes in this category, it is not included in Table 5.⁵ For the 13 men who reported money from this category, the mean was \$262.00.

Table 5: Earnings for men and women from different activities

Activity	Mean daily income (\$)		
	Men	Women	Earnings ratio (percent)
Panhandling	27 (<i>n</i> = 31)	27 (<i>n</i> = 13)	100
Squeegee cleaning	75 (<i>n</i> = 26)	56 (<i>n</i> = 9)	75
Sex work	166 (<i>n</i> = 18)	233 (<i>n</i> = 20)	140
Selling drugs	407 (<i>n</i> = 21)	142 (<i>n</i> = 6)	34

4 These figures represent self-reported income and their accuracy cannot therefore be verified. It should also be noted that the number of respondents who answered this question was rather low.

5 The mean calculated for the two women was \$350.00.

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From these data we get the impression that, with the exception of the sex trade, the economic activities that offer the most lucrative rewards for homeless youth tend to be activities that are engaged in by men.

Disadvantage, Gender and Income Generation

The spaces that street youth occupy—to eat, sleep, “hang out,” and make money—are gendered. Gender disparity is manifest across the range of activities that street youth engage in to survive, and is reflected in terms of differences in earning power and, to some extent, work-related segregation. With perhaps the exception of some work related to the sex trade, male homeless youth appear to be engaged in the more financially lucrative sectors of the street economy, such as crime. Even when homeless youth report being engaged in similar money-making activities, gender segregation is often manifest in terms of differences in roles played (the drug trade), opportunities for independent activity (panhandling and the sex trade), and control over earnings.

How to account for such differences? While supply- and demand-side factors are commonly used to explain gender inequality in the formal labour market, a more useful starting point for accounting for economic inequality among homeless youth is to consider how gendered identities are negotiated in the streets. As space is negotiated with the public and other street youth, economic opportunities become structured in particular ways that reflect both the youth and general public’s understanding of gender and homelessness.

Street Youth Backgrounds

The background variables presented earlier suggest that women, as a group, are more disadvantaged than men, and that this has an impact on their experience of homelessness. For instance, consistent with other research (Novac et al., 2002), women in our sample were more likely to implicate experiences of physical and sexual abuse in their reasons for leaving home.

This may go some way towards explaining why there are typically one-half as many homeless young women as there are young men (Ha-

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gan & McCarthy, 1997). Because the streets have historically been colonized by (and defined as) “male” space, it may not be as obvious an option for some young girls experiencing family difficulties, or for those interested in seeking independence. As a result, many young women choose—or are forced—to endure family difficulties for longer, or to seek alternative living arrangements (moving in with relatives or partners, for instance). Those who cannot remain at home or find alternative arrangements (or who are in foster care and have no home to return to) invariably end up on the streets.

The Context of the Streets

Health has long been considered a factor that has an impact on employability. A range of factors associated with being homeless, including lack of sleep, poor nutrition, repeated injuries, and inability to maintain good hygiene, compromise one’s ability to keep healthy and to recover from illness or injury. Homeless youth are also vulnerable to debilitating illnesses, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and trauma (Dematteo et al., 1999; MacDonald et al., 1994; Wang et al., 1991), all of which can impair their ability to obtain and maintain stable employment.

There are also significant gendered differences in health status. Women were more likely to describe their current health status as “unhealthy” (women = 24.5 percent; men = 18.5 percent), to report being depressed once a week or more (women = 77 percent; men = 60 percent), and were also more likely than men to report having to go without food for a day one or more times per week (men = 37 percent; women = 51 percent). This may be a reflection of the fact that they were less likely to be in shelters (where food is provided) but, perhaps more so, that they were more impoverished or had less control over personal resources, including what they earned.

There is also evidence that women are more likely than men to use health services,⁶ which reflects not only differences in health status, but also the different issues young women face regarding reproductive

6 For instance, Shout Clinic (a community health centre for street youth in Toronto) reports consistently that over one-half of their visits are by young women, in spite of the fact that women make up only one-third of the street youth population.

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health. Pregnancy (and the risk of it) presents perhaps one of the greatest challenges homeless young women face and puts them in a position of considering shelter options, relationships (sexual and otherwise), independence, and safety in profoundly different ways from young men. Pregnancy also physically limits what young women can (or choose to) do to earn money, and adds additional risk to the act of making money.

The experience of criminal victimization, whether in terms of property crime, assault, or sexual assault, affects health and well-being. Consistent with lifestyle-exposure theory (Hindelang et al., 1978), many of the income-generating activities of homeless youth increase their risk of criminal victimization, as such activities routinely take place in unsafe spaces, involve physical risks, and expose young people to dangerous adults and peers. While research indicates that the rates of criminal victimization among homeless youth in Toronto (both male and female) is indeed much higher than among the general population (Gaetz, 2004; Tanner & Wortley, 2002), homeless women are more vulnerable to certain types of violent and sexual crimes than are adolescent men (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991). As a result, women both perceive and experience personal safety—whether on the streets or in terms of interpersonal violence—differently from the way men do. This affects their mobility, their choices of action, and their comfort levels in different environments and their choices regarding they generate income.

The gendered nature of the streets means that the various spaces that street youth colonize—to sleep, to occupy at night, to walk alone within, to eat, to meet friends, to drink or take drugs, to rest in or to otherwise exist within—carry different risks for men and women. These risks help shape the options and choices that street youth make about living arrangements, interactions with others, establishing significant relations, and independence. While our data showed that a similar percentage of men and women report being absolutely without shelter, men are much more likely to be shelter or hostel users, and women are more likely to report that they are staying in “their own place.” The difference in shelter usage reflects the fact that women are more likely to see shelters as having “too many rules” (women = 59 percent; men = 45 percent),

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and because they are less likely to see shelters as safe (women = 55 percent; men = 43 percent).⁷

The fact that women are more likely to report staying in their “own place” does not necessarily mean that they are living independently. One-third of this group were currently caring for their own children and therefore eligible for housing support. Slightly more than one-quarter were living with male partners.

This suggests the need to more closely examine the living arrangements of homeless youth, and the degree to which this may reflect gendered differences in personal independence. Smith and Gilford (1998) argue that relative or hidden homelessness is more common for women than absolute homelessness (compared with men),⁸ in large part due to the dangers they face (including sexual assault). Because young women face unique challenges—and risks—on the streets, they will often move quickly to secure shelter or establish partnering relationships that provide shelter, even if these relationships are problematic and regardless of whether the choice represents a safe or healthy decision. For instance, Maher, Dunlap, Johnson, and Hamid (1996) have demonstrated how impoverished, crack cocaine-using women who lack independent living arrangements often wind up living “in the household of an older male with a dependable income for a period of time” (p. 194). In exchange for shelter, women provide sex, companionship, domestic service, and drugs. They are not visibly homeless, but they sacrifice independence to boyfriends who exercise considerable control over their activities—including how they make money. Drug dealers, for example, use the labour power of their “girlfriends” in exchange for the provision of shelter.

Other research suggests that absolutely homeless women are more likely to experience violence by their partners than those who are housed (Browne & Basuk, 1997), and may in fact experience similar difficulties in exerting control over their choice of work, and income derived from it. “Many women find themselves in interpersonal relationships in which

7 At the time of this survey, there were 11 shelters for youth in Toronto. Two were exclusively for women, one for men, and the rest were co-ed.

8 By “absolute” homelessness, we mean sleeping in spaces that are unfit for human habitation (e.g., rooftops, doorways, parks, under bridges). “Relative” homelessness refers to environments such as short-term rentals and temporarily staying with friends.

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they are dependent on another persona or persons for their (and their children's) survival" (Tessler et al., 2001, p. 251).

Gender and Subsistence on the Streets

The factors that lead to homelessness, and the rigours of life on the streets—affecting health and well-being, personal safety, and social and living arrangements—have consequences for employment and money-making. Explanations of gender differences that rely on educational attainment and personal motivation as the primary predictors of employment status (as is often the case with human capital theory) overlook other important factors. For instance, young people who have suffered sexual and physical abuse and may be experiencing mental health stresses will find it difficult to compete economically. This argument is supported by recent research on youthful victimization where victimization during adolescence has been shown to have negative effects on occupational status and earnings in young adults (Macmillan, 2000).

While the economic activities in which homeless youth engage carry many risks, young women are more likely to experience stress, depression, and lower levels of work satisfaction. In our survey, young men were more likely to report that they are currently satisfied with their main way of making money than women (men = 72 percent; women = 52 percent). Men typically reported features of their work such as "being their own boss" as significant. Conversely, women were more likely to report the experience of abuse and humiliation as reasons for not liking their current work. Women were also more pessimistic about the possibility of finding better work in the future, with 20.8 percent reporting they were not very hopeful compared with 8 percent of men.

The experience of stress, fear, and depression may also influence young women's occupational choices. For instance, for safety reasons, young women will be more likely to engage in activities that take place in public spaces that are open, well-travelled and well-lit. In general, it appears that they are less likely to be drawn to criminal economic activities that rely on aggression, violence, or intimidation.

In addition, it is clear that decisions about economic activity are complex, and are not always made independently. Because the streets are a male space, young women are less likely to operate independently

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when working, and are also more likely to find themselves engaging in economic activities (sex trade, drug dealing) where they are forced to surrender independence—and earnings—to others (usually men).

Further research must be carried out on how interactions with (and the perceptions of) the general public shape the gendered nature of work on the streets. We do know, for instance, that street prostitution is organized spatially, so that specific urban areas become identified as “tracks” where particular groups (men, women, transgendered persons) operate. There are also some indications that street youth, in panhandling or squeegeeing, may think tactically about the relationship between gender and “giving.” The identities of homeless youth, as expressed and articulated through work, are not merely the product of street youth interactions and constructions, but also involve a broader negotiation of their identity with other segments of society.

Female homeless youth, then, occupy economic niches on the street not just because the work itself is gendered, but also because their experience of being young homeless women shapes what is possible. Homeless youth, unlike other youth, spend much time in the public realm. Their money-making activities are often conflated with social and leisure activities. In this public context, masculinities and femininities are produced and reproduced in various ways. This is consistent with research in Britain that suggests women are unable to claim a place on the streets in ways that men can, and thus their survival strategies differ. According to Wardhaugh (1999), “women must ‘disappear’ in order to survive, while men have the additional option of seeking safety in numbers, by claiming the city streets as their own” (p. 103).

Conclusion

The money-making activities of homeless youth are clearly gendered. The differences need to be understood in terms of the living arrangements and risks associated with being homeless. Since much of the “work” of homeless youth falls outside the formal labour market, demand-side factors associated with occupational segregation do not apply to the economic opportunities available to homeless youth. Much of the demand for female labour in this unregulated environment is on the ba-

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sis of a barter system—domestic labour, sex, or storing and running drugs in exchange for shelter.

Unlike women who are adequately housed and participate in the formal labour market, the private and public spheres of domestic work and paid employment for homeless women are not separate spaces. Future theorizing on the survival strategies of marginal women must go beyond dealing with gender-role socialization, the family division of labour, the operation of the formal labour market, and attitudes and behaviours of employers. Initiatives designed to improve the conditions of these youth—health services, housing, employment training and placement and support programs—must take into account the degree to which the experience of homelessness is gendered.

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