

A New Perspective on Crime, Victimization and Young Homeless People

"The conventional wisdom is that street kids are criminals or are involved in crime," says Dr. William O'Grady of the University of Guelph—but an extensive 2009 study of Toronto street youth, led by Dr. O'Grady and Dr. Stephen Gaetz of York University, shows that people who leave their homes at an early age are much more likely to be the victims of crime.

The research team conducted interviews with 244 homeless young people in Toronto, locating participants through shelters and drop-in centres that provide services to them. The team first distributed a self-administered survey, and followed up with face-to-face, tape-recorded interviews that went into detail about the participants' life on the streets, and especially their experiences of victimization.

The findings paint a stark picture: more than 76 per cent reported at least one instance of criminal victimization over the previous 12 months, with 63.6 per cent reporting a violent crime. "A lot of these people had been victimized, and traumatized—and some were very open, about the lack of support, that they were angry at the police," says Dr. O'Grady. More disturbingly, he adds, "some mentioned not bothering to contact police if they were victimized, because they might get in more trouble."

The team also investigated several gender aspects of youth homelessness and violence. "The prevalence of partner violence that young women experienced was much higher compared to young women who are housed," says Dr. Gaetz. "Also, young women in general were more likely to experience violence on the streets than young men—whereas in the general population males are more likely than females to experience violence." He notes that young women would also seek out partners for companionship and as a kind of defence against the street life but, in some cases, these relationships too involved abuse.

One of the most significant findings of the study is a strong correlation between levels of victimization and the age at which a young person becomes homeless. "This is an effect that persists through their street 'career'," says Dr. O'Grady.

"They may build up experience on the street, but they have no protection, and they're much more likely to be entrenched in street life: drugs, crime, the rougher side of the street."

The report directs several recommendations. Of these, Dr. Gaetz emphasizes that "the need for a strategic response for homelessness is paramount. If we want to make them safer, we need to do what we can to make sure they don't remain homeless." Dr. O'Grady concurs, noting that "in the homeless-service network, organizations tend to work on their own. So, some services are replicated while others are absent; some could easily refer clients to others if they knew of their existence.

It's basically an emergency response to homelessness we have now, and there's not enough effort to make these services better organized."

Dr. Gaetz also emphasizes the need for more resources targeted to young women, both preventive and in the emergency sector. "Most street services are now co-gender, but young women on the street have often already faced abuse," he says, "so being in a co-gendered environment is not always helpful."



The single most cost-effective change, Dr. O'Grady suggests, would be to keep shelters open on a 24-hour basis: "That's not as expensive as you'd expect. It's been done in the States and it didn't lead to a big change in expenses, because the resources were already there." He also notes that young people often had interactions with police while waiting to get into a shelter. "Letting them in is much less expensive than police intervention," he says. The team expects to continue working with the data they have to produce another report that explores the factors that predict interactions between street youth and the police. ■

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