

WHY STREET YOUTH BECOME INVOLVED IN CRIME

Stephen BARON

What do you need to know?

Research on street youth in Canada suggests these young people are heavily 'at-risk' of becoming involved in criminal activities. Street youth, however, become involved in criminal activities to different degrees, ranging from not at all to high rates of participation. The types of offenses they engage in also vary, and can include property crimes, distribution of drugs, and violent crimes such as robbery and physical altercations. Research has demonstrated that the road to the street often begins with adversity in the home including abuse, neglect, food insecurity, and parental substance use, which leaves one at greater risk for criminal behaviour. This may be the result of weakened emotional attachments to guardians or from viewing the world as a coercive, hostile environment. There is a strong link between some types of abuse and crime, such as physical abuse and violent offending. Those who experience particularly hostile abuse often see aggression as the way to solve problems and adopt values and attitudes that support the use of violence. Once leaving home many youth must also resort to crime as a means of survival, or to help cope with life on the streets.



WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This chapter draws on the author's research over the past two decades, as well as the work of other Canadian researchers. It explores the multiple factors that influence street youth in Canada to become involved in illegal activities, as well as the extent of their involvement. Several factors that may influence a youth's vulnerability to criminal activity are explored including background factors such as physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as well as how homelessness and street life itself contribute to criminal conduct. The role of poverty and unemployment are examined, as well as how street youth's perceptions of these occurrences drive criminal activity. The potential role of peers and street culture are outlined, as well as youth's responses to potential criminal punishments and their influence on criminal choices. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of these findings.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What did the researcher find?

The author's research consistently reveals that having both the values that support criminal activities and criminally involved peers leads to criminal activity on the street, and that the longer one stays on the streets, the more likely one is to engage in various forms of crime. Those who feel they do not have the capacity to cope with their homelessness by legal means are more likely to resort to crime, and "situational adversity", or situations of desperate need (such as hunger) can also have a direct impact on offending. Unemployed youth are more likely to engage in crime due to boredom, frustration, and the need for money. This is particularly true when street youth judge

themselves to be worse off financially than other people they know (relative deprivation), or for youth who have experienced long-term homelessness and unemployment, as they are likely to desire financial success but see no legal ways of achieving this. In general, youth who encounter more forms of coercion, along with other negative experiences, are more likely to engage in violent crime. For example, the combination of experiencing childhood abuse, street victimization, homelessness, receiving welfare and imprisonment (as these systems are viewed as coercive) leads to a higher rate of violent offending. Youth who have this combination also tend to develop lower

levels of self-control, higher levels of anger, greater association with violent peers, and stronger values supportive of violence when compared to street youth who do not have these experiences. Finally, youth who think property offenses and drug dealing are more likely to result in arrest and severe punishments are less likely to engage in those crimes. Morals, peer support and substance use, however, can affect street youth's expectations regarding potential punishment, often reducing, but sometimes increasing perceptions of the certainty and severity of consequences, which in turn influence their decisions to engage in crime.

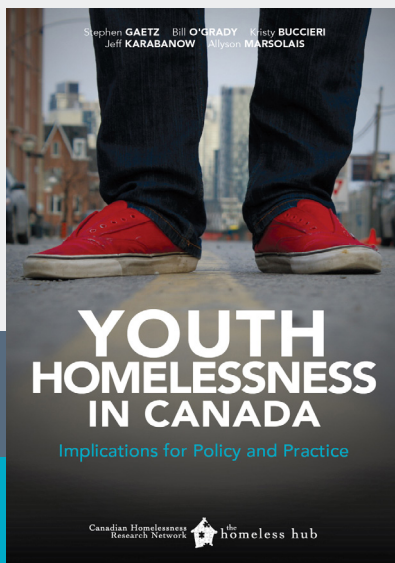
How can you use this research?

Findings from the research on street youth crime in Canada point to a number of important policy implications. First, the research suggests that childhood abuse is important in understanding why street youth engage in crime. Hence, prevention of the various forms of abuse that street youth suffer at home is required, particularly various economic and social supports. Schools should also be provided with social workers or counsellors who are trained to look for signs of abuse and neglect and connect with families to provide assistance. Second, research demonstrates a strong link between homelessness, street victimization, street culture and various forms of crime. This highlights the need for more street outreach workers, shelters, safe houses, and drop-in centres to allow for early intervention. Facilities should offer access to assessment, assistance and treatment for the range of issues including abuse, substance use, and unemployment that are associated with youth offending. Finally, research on unemployment, perceptions of poverty, and crime suggest that youth need work and training opportunities that pay liveable wages and provide possibilities for advancement and skill acquisition. Many homeless youth lack social skills and need help developing basic life and employment-related skills. These policies in combination promote success across a range of environments and enable youth to meet their needs without resorting to crime.

About the researcher



STEPHEN BARON is a professor in the department of sociology at Queen's University. His research focuses on homeless street youth and crime and substance abuse. His work has appeared in *Criminology*, *Justice Quarterly*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Deviant Behavior*.



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