

POLICING STREET YOUTH IN TORONTO

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What do you need to know?

Many jurisdictions in Canada and the United States have responded to the growing visibility of homelessness with measures that have sought to restrict the rights of homeless people to occupy and inhabit public spaces such as street corners and parks, and prohibit behaviours such as sleeping in public or earning money through begging or squeegee cleaning. This serves as the basis for what has come to be known as the criminalization of homelessness, or the creation of laws and statutes that target people who are homeless such as the Ontario Safe Streets Act. One of the most controversial aspects of these laws is the authority it gives to police to issue tickets for behaviours mostly specific to homeless individuals, which can lead to long-term consequences such as mounting debt that youth cannot afford to pay, and criminal records, which pose barriers to moving off the streets. These kinds of practices must be understood in the context of broader, often political, social justice issues, such as a lack of preventative and transitional supports for youth experiencing homelessness.

What did the researchers do?

This chapter reports on findings from a larger study into the experiences of homeless youth in relation to legal and justice issues, conducted in partnership with Justice for Children and Youth in 2009. Researchers met with 244 young people between the ages of 16-24 from a variety of agencies serving youth in downtown Toronto and the surrounding suburbs, and asked them to complete both a written survey and semi-structured interview. Youth had to be homeless, (including staying in an emergency shelter)

or without shelter for at least one week during the previous month. Participants were asked to talk about any incidents in which they may have been involved with the Toronto Police Service. The questions focused on encounters over the past 12 months, but also included questions about their experiences more generally since becoming homeless. When possible, youth were asked to describe the details of these encounters, including a description of their own actions and those of the police officers.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This chapter looks at the frequent interactions young people who are homeless have with law enforcement officials from the perspective of the youth themselves. Three questions are asked in relation to these encounters. First, to what extent are youth participants involved in crime and delinquent acts? Second, is the increased police attention due to their involvement in crime, and if not, what other factors might account for their frequent encounters? Finally, what are the long-term consequences for these young people that result from these encounters with police? It is argued that the current response to homelessness that focuses on emergency services (i.e. shelters, drop-in centres, and food programs) does little to prevent and/or move people out of homelessness. While these services are necessary and helpful, they often have the unintended consequence of making homelessness – and homeless individuals – more visible to the general public and the police.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What did the researchers find?

Youth reported having frequent encounters with the police. While 25% considered the interactions to be supportive, the majority (78%) reported having at least one negative encounter in the past year. This research had two major findings. First, the strongest predictor of police contact was previous involvement in criminal activity and/or the use of illegal drugs within the past year. Marijuana usage was the most commonly reported deviant activity, followed by selling marijuana. A minority of youth were involved in violent crime, as 5% reported beating someone badly, and 20% reported using a weapon in committing a crime.

The findings also suggest that at least some of the criminal behaviour was a response to the challenges of living on the street, such as stealing food or clothes. Other survival strategies were quasi-legal and attracted the attention of the police including involvement in the sex trade and panhandling. One of the most common outcomes of encounters with the police was receiving a ticket. Thirty-three percent of participants received at least one ticket in the past year and 16% had been ticketed on multiple occasions in the past year and/or received more than one ticket at a time. Many of the offenses directly resulted from having a

lack of private space such as drinking in public (23%), hanging out with friends in a public place (21%), sitting in a park (14%), using drugs in public (13%), sitting on a sidewalk, or survival strategies such as sleeping in a public place (10%) and earning money through panhandling or squeegeeing (10%). The largest predictors of receiving tickets were being male, engaging in criminal activity, and being under the age of 20. Although race only weakly predicted the frequency of encounters with police in this sample, black or Aboriginal youth were more likely to receive tickets because of these encounters.

How can you use this research?

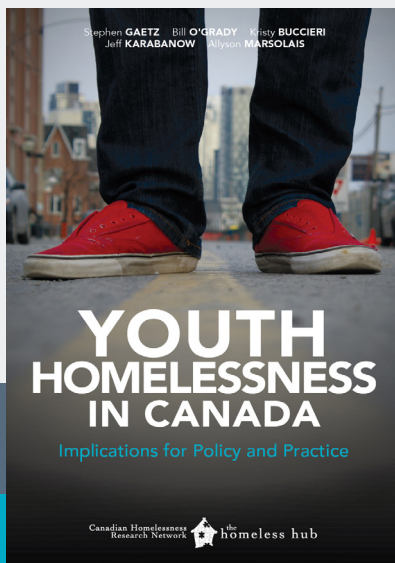
This research can be used to advocate for new ways to address the issue of homelessness, as well as a strategy that houses and supports people who are in poverty - as this would be more humane and affordable. It also offers practical recommendations to law enforcement officials. For instance, provincial and city prosecutors should work together to create policies and strategies that move people out of the justice system, including withdrawing charges to help people reduce or eliminate the debt that results from ticketing. Such a strategy should include rigorous pre-screening as well as discussions with local Police Services. Police need to develop and implement alternative approaches to dealing with young people who are homeless. Central to this effort should be an examination of existing practices, including use of the Ontario Safe Streets Act. Amnesty programs where people who are homeless could clear their records would be helpful, as the accumulation of minor charges is a barrier many youth face when trying to move off the street. Finally, this research points to the need for more public awareness of the barriers faced by homeless youth. A cultural shift is needed so that people, including police, see homeless people as "in need of housing" as opposed to having "no fixed address". Rather than being viewed as vulnerable young citizens in need of added protection, an attitude of control has been created where street youth are perceived as a threat. If the policing of street youth is understood within this context, it is clear that criminalizing homelessness is not the solution to the problem, but rather a costly mistake.

About the researchers

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KRISTY BUCCIERI is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her research has focused on the lived experiences of youth homelessness, including studies into substance use and harm reduction, violence and victimization, gender and sexuality, health and mental health services, and daily routines on the street.



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