

SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH: THE NEED FOR A HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

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What do we need to know?

Street-involved and homeless youth experience more health problems than non-homeless youth, and particularly high rates of addiction and mental health problems.

Despite this, use of available substance use and mental health services tends to be low among street-involved youth. This lack of service access may worsen already poor health and contribute to chronic homelessness. There is currently little understanding on the implications of co-occurring mental health and substance use issues for the service needs of homeless youth, as well as how this may vary by gender.



What did the researchers do?

The Youth Pathways Project sought to examine and compare pathways to either independent living or continued unstable housing situations among high-risk young women and men over time. It also explored the links between physical and mental health, drug use, victimization, criminal activity, pregnancy, and service

use and housing status among vulnerable youth. Longitudinal research, or four interviews over 12 months, was conducted with youth aged 16-21 currently accessing services for street-involved youth in Toronto. This chapter reports on findings from the first-wave of interviews with 150 youth, split evenly by gender.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This chapter examines the health of street-involved youth in the Youth Pathways Project, an interdisciplinary project that brings together researchers from the University of Toronto, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. This research looks at the health and social profile of homeless youth in Toronto, specifically prevalence (frequency within the population) and contributing factors to co-use of multiple substances and co-occurring mental health problems. The chapter then discusses use of various services among the youth, explores the implications of findings on the current health service system, and discusses the need to expand harm reduction alternatives for this vulnerable population.

ARTICLE SOURCE

Kirst, M., & Erickson, P. (2013). Substance Use and Mental Health Problems among Street-involved Youth: The Need for a Harm Reduction Approach. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (185-198). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

What did the researchers find?

A high rate of substance use was observed among the youth (N=150), particularly with regards to alcohol and cannabis. This was particularly true for males (80%) as opposed to females (60%). Rates for other drugs (hallucinogens, amphetamines, cocaine, crack and heroin) were much lower, involving no more than one-third of the sample, and use was similar for males and females. Participants also reported a very high rate of tobacco use (91%). The strongest predictor of multiple

substance use for females was living with friends and having been involved in drug dealing in the past 12 months. For males, having fair or poor health and involvement in drug dealing in the last 12 months were moderate predictors of multiple substance use. Different factors associated with multiple drug use for the young men and women suggested the need for gender-specific approaches to addiction service delivery. One quarter of the youth interviewed were found to have

concurrent or simultaneous mental health and substance use problems. These youth were more transient, and more likely to have a history of abuse and arrest than those without concurrent problems. These youth were nearly four times more likely to have been victimized in the past 12 months, and demonstrated high rates of suicidal contemplation (27%) compared to youth without concurrent problems. This rate was even higher for females with concurrent problems compared to males.

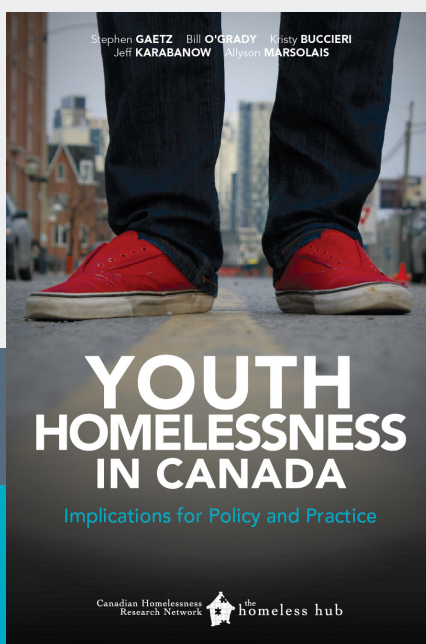
How can you use this research?

This research can be used to advocate for harm reduction services for street youth, particularly those with poorer health and who experience co-occurring mental health and addiction issues. Harm reduction is an important service approach to addressing the health issues of street-involved youth that cannot only reduce the harm associated with substance use, but also open the door to service use at a later time. As street-youth might be reluctant to seek out support, there is a need for greater availability of 'user-friendly' services geared specifically to their complex needs in order to prevent worsening of health conditions and continued homelessness. This research also points to the need for a new wave of targeted interventions that address the complex needs of homeless youth, including gender-specific, integrated mental health and addictions services. Finally, more research and policy is needed to address the lack of long-term housing solutions for youth in order to prevent the path into adult homelessness, addiction and poor social functioning.

About the researchers

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