

WHICH COMES FIRST:

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OR OTHER RISK EXPOSURES AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH?

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What do we need to know?

Canadian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child define sexual exploitation as the exchange of any sexual activities by someone 18 years of age or younger for money, drugs, food, shelter or other goods and services. Giving a young person money or other things in exchange for sex is a form of sexual abuse and a violation of their right to freedom from sexual coercion. Homeless youth are at serious risk of sexual exploitation. Approximately 1 in 3 homeless youth report being exploited, and Indigenous, refugee and immigrant, and LGBTQ youth are at an even greater risk. Despite these risks, there is little research that has looked at those under the age of 19, even though many homeless youth are subjected to multiple risks in adolescence or earlier.



What did the researchers do?

In 2006, the McCreary Centre Society conducted a Street Youth Survey in 9 communities (both rural and urban) across British Columbia. Participatory research methods were adopted in this study, including working with leaders in youth serving agencies, outreach workers and hiring street-involved youth as community co-researchers for every step of the research process. The survey included over 150 questions

about the life experiences, health issues, and sexual exploitation faced by the youth participants. Positive questions were also included in the survey to determine the strengths of the youth. Participants were asked at what age particular events occurred in order to examine the timing of these factors in relation to street involvement and sexual exploitation. A total of 762 youth participated in the study.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This chapter draws on findings from the 2006 British Columbia Street Youth Survey (BCSYS) with street-involved and marginalized teens aged 12-18 in 9 communities in BC. The research sought to understand potential risk factors that may be linked to sexual exploitation for boys and girls in order to develop steps toward prevention. It uses the BCSYS as well as existing literature to discuss pathways into homelessness and sexual exploitation, and considers the timing of both. In other words, what comes first, risk factors (such as homelessness and substance use) or sexual exploitation? The chapter concludes by discussing two approaches to early intervention that have been put in place around the world, including the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution laws in Alberta, and Focusing on Young Runaways in Minnesota and Scotland.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What did the researchers find?

A total of 209 youth (27% of females, 34% of males) reported trading sex for money, drugs or other goods. The results clearly demonstrated that young people were significantly more at risk of being exploited after they left home or were forced to leave their homes. Hence young people who left their homes because of trauma such as abuse, family conflict or substance use are vulnerable to exploitation and further trauma on the streets. The majority of

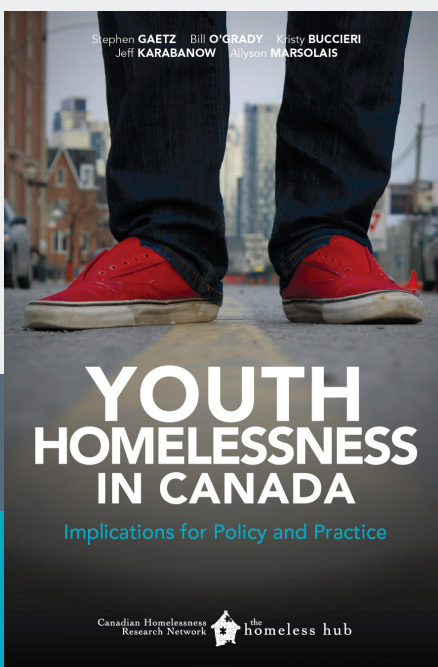
youth reported that they had first tried substances before experiencing exploitation. On average, youth who experienced exploitation became street-involved quite young, with a mean age of 12.4 years. These results suggest that interventions to address sexual exploitation might be more effective when they target early risks, focusing on younger adolescents who are just beginning to run away or use substances, or families who are dealing with conflict.

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How can you use this research?

This research has clear implications for both policy and practice. Strategies must be put into place to prevent and reduce the trauma experienced by street youth who have been exploited. While it is important to address the needs of youth who have been traumatized and/or are street-involved, this research demonstrates that preventing youth from becoming street-involved needs to be a key strategy for preventing a good deal of exploitation of young people. This chapter provides examples of services being offered in Minnesota and Scotland that can be adapted in Canada where youth who run away or are kicked out are contacted and screened by either social workers or police as part of a referral service for addressing issues before youth become persistently homeless or street-involved.

About the researcher



ELIZABETH M. SAEWYC PhD, RN, FSAHM, is a Professor in nursing and adolescent medicine at the University of British Columbia, where she leads the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre (SARAVYC) in the School of Nursing. Dr. Saewyc holds one of the 15 national Applied Public Health Research Chairs from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, hers focused on youth health. She is also Research Director for the McCreary Centre Society, and in 2009, was named a Fellow in the international Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine.

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