Routes to Homes: A Transit and Social Support Intervention

for Homeless Youth

Principle Investigator

Miriam Stewart, PhD (Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta)

Co- Principal Investigators

Joshua Evans, PhD (Social Geography, Athabasca University), and

Cheryl Currie, PhD (Public Health, University of Lethbridge)

Sharon Anderson, MSc, MEd, Human Ecology, University of Alberta

Amanda Almond, BSW, Social Support Research Program, University of Alberta

Catherine Broomfield, Executive Director, iHuman Youth Society

Karen Drynan, Executive Director, Old Stathcona Youth Society

Abstract

Background: Homeless youth face significant barriers in the public transportation system that can limit access to safe and supportive places putting them at risk (Carlson et al., 2006). These barriers can include lack of transit tickets and/or passes, accumulated transit fines, and court orders barring individuals from certain sites in the transit system. Community-based research undertaken in Edmonton revealed that high risk youth depend upon Light Rail Transit and bus service to find safe places in the city (Old Strathcona Collaborative Planning Committee, 2012). This study also confirmed that many youth have their first criminal encounter with Transit Peace Officers and Fare Checkers as the youth seek services, employment, and relief from cold in winter. To date, past research has focused on assessments of the risks of youth homelessness and the needs of homeless youth. Intervention research evaluating effectiveness of service structures in reducing transportation barriers has been recommended (Kidd, 2012).

Objective: The aim of this pilot intervention study was to explore how a transit-focused support intervention might help to alleviate transportation barriers among homeless youth and promote social inclusion.

Research Questions:

1. What is the impact of public transportation assistance (i.e., bus tickets; bus passes) and a pilot social skills training–support intervention with homeless youth in terms of: (a) interactions with transit authorities, (b) personal safety (c) social exclusion, and (e) access to social support, supportive services, and housing?
2. What are the implications for improved practice, programs, and policies?

Methods: Youth (n=40) without regular and adequate housing were recruited through four Edmonton agencies serving homeless youth. They were randomly assigned to receive either: 1) a monthly bus pass (n=20) or 2) bi-weekly bus tickets (n=20) for 3 months (January - March). Pre- and post-intervention, participating youth: completed a demographic questionnaire (age, sex, education, cultural background); responded to questions on previous housing and services, and involvement with transit and city police; and, completed a short exploratory survey of perceived support (2 questions), support seeking (6 questions), community belonging (4 questions), and safety (3 questions).

Results: The impact of receiving public transit tickets was overwhelmingly positive for these youth. This pilot intervention reduced negative interactions with transit authorities, made them "feel normal", increased safety in some situations, and enabled them to access services and supports beyond their normal walking range. During the three-month intervention, there was an increase in employment and stable housing for youth.

Introduction

The Old Strathcona Mapping and Planning Committee (OSMPC), a coalition of provincial and local government policy makers, agencies serving homeless youth, and a provincial facilitator conducted a survey of homeless youth about their geographic movement around the city and their perceptions of safety. In these qualitative group interviews, youth explained that they were often in unsafe and stressful situations. Youth used public transit for safety—to avoid streets at night, to escape from predators, and in winter for respite from the cold. They contended that transit authorities were intolerant of them and even discriminatory.   The OSMPC discovered that for many youth, their first criminal charges were for riding the public transportation without paying fare. Charges result in a court appearance and a $250 fine. Youth cannot pay so the result is usually community service and a criminal record. In investigating this, the Old Strathcona Mapping and Planning Committee found that the costs to the court system may be as high as $3500. They decided more research about safety was needed and approached the Social Support Research Program at the University of Alberta. The committee and research team met to determine priorities for research then collaborated in designing the research and collecting and interpreting the data.

Background

Homeless youth are extremely vulnerable to physical and mental health risks (Boivin, Roy, Haley, & du Fort, 2005; Gaetz, 2004; Kidd & Shahar, 2008). Social exclusion is crucial for understanding this vulnerability (Gaetz, 2004; Currie & LaBourcane-Benson, 2011). Social exclusion from safe housing, permanent employment, health services, and public spaces expose youth to greater risks including physical and sexual assault (Gaetz, 2005; Stewart et al., 2010) and suicide (Kidd & Shahar, 2008). While previous research has examined social exclusion in relation to housing and employment, access to transportation has attracted less attention (Jocoy & Del Casino, 2010). Safe, reliable, and accessible transportation systems are indispensable for maintaining stable housing, paid employment and social networks, and are hence integral to the promotion of social inclusion among homeless youth (Jocoy & Del Casino, 2010; Carlson et al., 2006).

Unfortunately homeless youth face significant barriers in the public transportation system that can limit access to safe and supportive places putting them at greater risk (Carlson et al., 2006). These barriers can include lack of transit tickets and/or passes, accumulated transit fines, and court orders barring individuals from using the transit system. Community-based research conducted in Edmonton revealed high-risk youth depend upon LRT and bus service to find safe places in the city (Old Strathcona Collaborative Planning Committee, 2012). This community exploratory study also confirmed that youth may have their first criminal encounter with Transit Peace Officers and Fare Checkers as youth seek services, employment, and relief from cold in winter. To date, past research has focused on assessments (needs, risk). Intervention research evaluating which service structures are effective in reducing transportation barriers has been recommended (Kidd, 2012). The aim of this intervention

research was to explore how alleviating transportation barriers in a transit-focused support intervention might help to promote social inclusion among homeless youth.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of public transportation assistance (i.e., bus tickets; bus passes) and a pilot social skills training–support intervention with homeless youth in terms of: (a) interactions with transit authorities, (b) personal safety (c) social exclusion, and (e) access to social support, supportive services, and housing?
2. What are the implications for improved practice, programs, and policies?

Methods

This intervention research was based on an assessment of homeless youth's perception of safety on the routes they traveled regularly, conducted by a multi-agency planning committee in a medium-size city in Western Canada. An anticipated finding was that while many homeless youth used transit for safety, for some youth their first encounter with the criminal justice system was limited to non-payment of fines resulting from accessing transit without fare payment. In this second phase, we employed a multi-method participatory research design (Stewart et al., 2008) to test the impact of transportation on interactions with transit authorities and access to services, including housing.   A Community Advisory Committee comprised of program, practice, and policy stakeholders from agencies serving homeless youth guided the research design and implementation, interpretation of results, and communication of the findings. Youth (n=40) without regular and adequate housing were recruited through four Edmonton agencies (iHuman Youth Society, Old Strathcona Youth Society, and Youth Empowerment & Support Services, Inner City Youth Housing Project) serving homeless youth. They were randomly assigned to receive either: 1) a monthly bus pass (n=20) or 2) bi-weekly bus tickets (n=20) for 3 months (January - March). As recommended by the community advisory committee, all youth received social skills and transportation etiquette training to avoid negative encounters with the transit authorities. This consisted of discussions of encounters with authorities, youth responses, and role modelling of possible scenarios.   Youth were offered supports and counselling at the four participating agencies.   The agencies provided a number of resources and services to youth, including individual counseling, educational programs, food, clothing, and access to basic medical care.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the university research ethics board. Because these homeless youth were not residing with parents, they were considered to be emancipated or mature minors. Hence, we did not obtain consent from parents. Youth received a synopsis of the study from agency staff and were then asked whether they were willing to participate. Agency staff presented them with an information letter and consent form written in plain language, along with contact information of the principal investigator and research staff for any questions about the consent process or study. Youth could read and complete the form

themselves or if they could not read staff read the form with them. Youth provided written consent.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data: Pre- and post-intervention, participating youth completed: a demographic questionnaire (age, sex, education, cultural background); a questionnaire on previous housing and services and involvement with transit and city police; and, a short exploratory survey of social support (2 questions), support seeking (6 questions), community belongingness (4 questions), and safety (3 questions). Survey questions were assembled from previous studies with homeless youth (Stewart et al., 2010), valid scales (Multidimensional Sense of Community Scale for Local Communities, Prezza et al., 2009; Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1998), and feedback from the Community Advisory Committee. A 7-point Likert-type scale was used, with higher scores indicating more support and social inclusion. Youth were also asked to estimate how many times they felt unsafe using 7-point Likert-type scales (never, rarely, more than once a week, once a day, several times a day, most of the time, all of the time), higher scores indicating they felt more unsafe (see questions in Table 3). Questionnaires were tested with four youth at two agencies. Minor changes were made to increase clarity and understanding. Internal consistency estimates (coefficient alphas) calculated for this study were: Time 1 0.79 Support Seeking; 0.71 Community belonging; Time 2 0.83 Support Seeking; 0.70 Community Belonging.

Qualitative Data: After the intervention, group interviews were conducted with group facilitators (n=4) and youth (n= 20). These group interviews focused on perceived impacts of the intervention (e.g., use of community services, strategies to seek housing security), factors influencing its impacts, satisfaction with the intervention, and recommended changes. Informed consent and the first survey took approximately 20 min to complete. The second survey required about 10 minutes to finish and the group interviews lasted 50 to 80 minutes. Youth received a $20 honoraria each time they completed the surveys.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to determine between group changes. Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare pre and post-intervention scores. All qualitative data were audio-taped and analyzed. A thematic analysis was used to elucidate the perceived impacts, satisfaction with intervention and recommended changes. Research questions were used to develop an analysis framework. Content themes, subthemes, and substantive categories were identified in the data. The categories were inclusive (i.e., reflecting a range of content in data), useful (i.e., meaningfully connected to data and applicable to the intervention), mutually exclusive (i.e., separate and independent), and clear and specific (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Rigor was achieved through data saturation, an audit trail, and multiple data sources (field notes, interviews, quantitative data) (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

Twenty-five males and 15 females aged 15 to 22 years of age (mean = 17.7) consented to participate in this transit support intervention pilot study. Ten were parents of young children (infants to 3 years). Self-reported ethnicity was: First Nations (n=15), Metis Nations (n=6), Urban Aboriginal (n=2), Caucasian (n=16), and Biracial (n=1) (see Figure 1). Twelve identified themselves as partnered, 26 as single, and two did not answer this question. One had a college degree, but most frequently the last grade at school was grade ten (range = 8 -12; mean= 10.44). Eight indicated they were still in school. In the six months prior to the intervention, participants indicated they lived in an average of 3.23 places. The most frequently listed were temporary shelter (n=27),   shared with family or friends (n=27), homeless (n=21), outdoors (n= 21) and somebody's couch (n=18). Other accommodation included motel, Remand Centre, and drug/alcohol treatment facilities (see Figure 2). Youth indicated they used 2.49 services (such as education, skills training, foodbank, pre-natal/parenting classes, temporary shelter, transitional housing), in addition to the services of the four recruiting agencies. There were no significant demographic differences (age, education, gender) between the groups receiving tickets and passes.

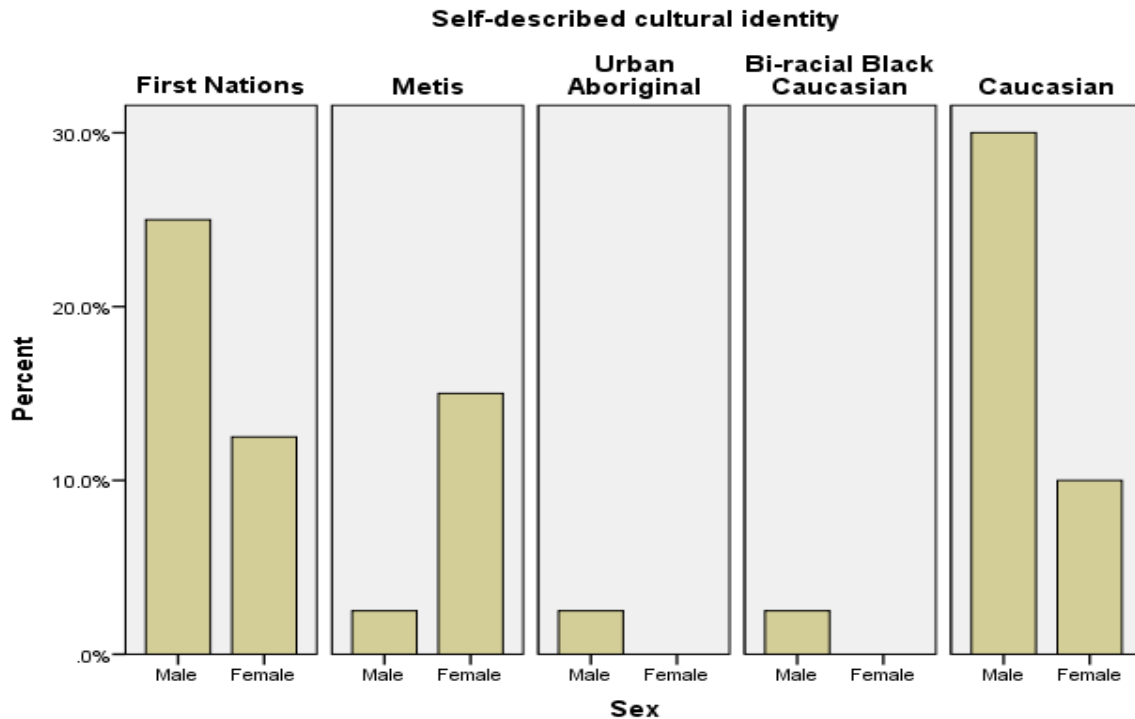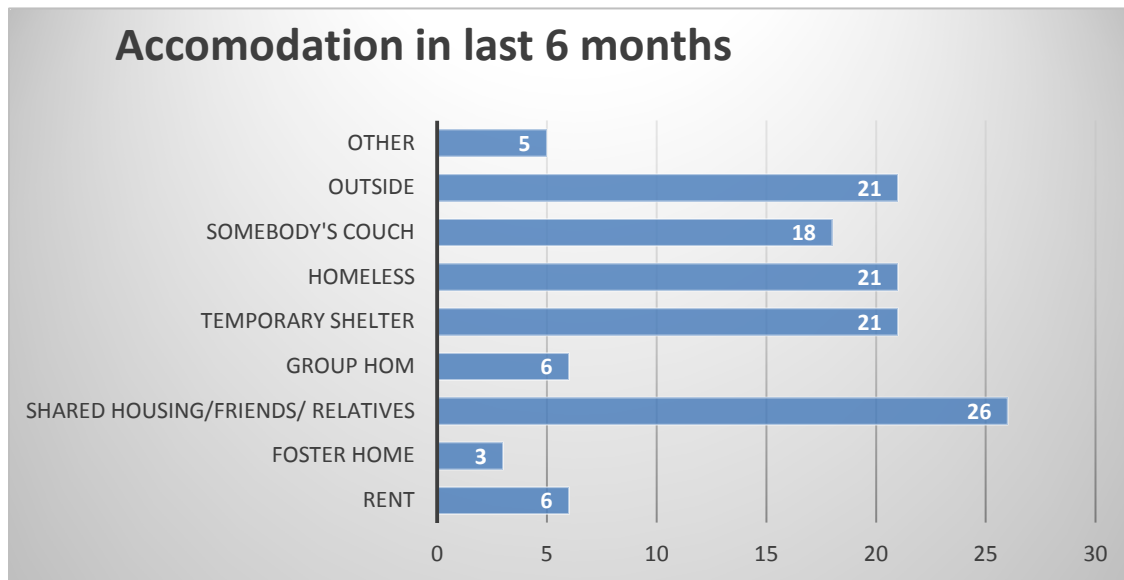Figure 1: Self-described ethnicity of participants

Figure 2. Participants' accommodation

Accomodation in last 6 months

Category	Value
OTHER	5
OUTSIDE	21
SOMEBODY'S COUCH	18
HOMELESS	21
TEMPORARY SHELTER	21
GROUP HOM	6
SHARED HOUSING/FRIENDS/ RELATIVES	26
FOSTER HOME	3
RENT	6

Results

Research Question 1: What is the impact of receiving public transportation assistance (bus tickets; bus passes) and pilot testing a social skills training–support intervention with homeless youth in terms of: (a) interactions with transit authorities, (b) personal safety (c) social exclusion, and (e) access to social support, supportive services, and housing?

The impact of receiving public transit tickets was overwhelmingly positive for these youth. It reduced negative interactions with transit authorities, made them "feel normal", increased personal safety in some situations, and enabled them to access services and supports beyond their normal walking range. During the three-month intervention, there was an increase in the number of youth who were employed and in more stable housing.

Interactions with transit authorities and city police

In responding to the post-intervention questionnaire, youth self-reported that they had fewer encounters with transit police (p=.002) and city police (p>.001) when they had access to monthly transit passes and tickets than before. In the post-intervention group interviews, most youth believed encounters with transit authorities decreased after the first month. While encounters decreased, participating youth did report having their tickets or passes closely scrutinized by authorities and being asked where they got their tickets and passes. In the first two weeks, one youth reported his tickets confiscated (by whom he thought was a peace officer) as they suspected he stole them. Youth reported being singled out to be asked for their proof of fare purchase, or given loitering tickets for sleeping on the LRT, which they believed

was due to their appearance. They thought they were profiled because of their ethnicity or because they looked homeless.
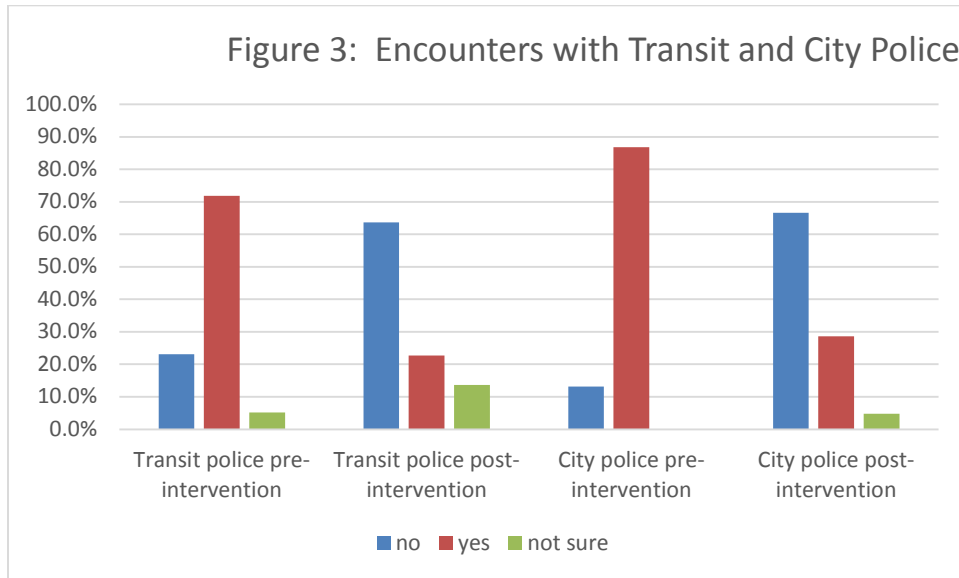

Figure 3: Encounters with Transit and City Police

Table 1: Contacts with transit and city police

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
				Lower			
Transit Police Time 1 - Time 2	-.458	.658	.134	-.736	-3.412	23	.002*
City Police Time 1 - Time 2	-.708	.624	.127	-.972	-5.560	23	.000*

Differences between passes and tickets

It would appear youth encounters with transit (p=.027) and city police (p >.000) were slightly lower for youth with passes (transit police p=.027; city police p>.000) than tickets (transit police p=.053; city police p=.025) (see Figure 4 and 5).

Figure 4: Comparison of Groups with Passes and Tickets-- Encounters with Transit Police
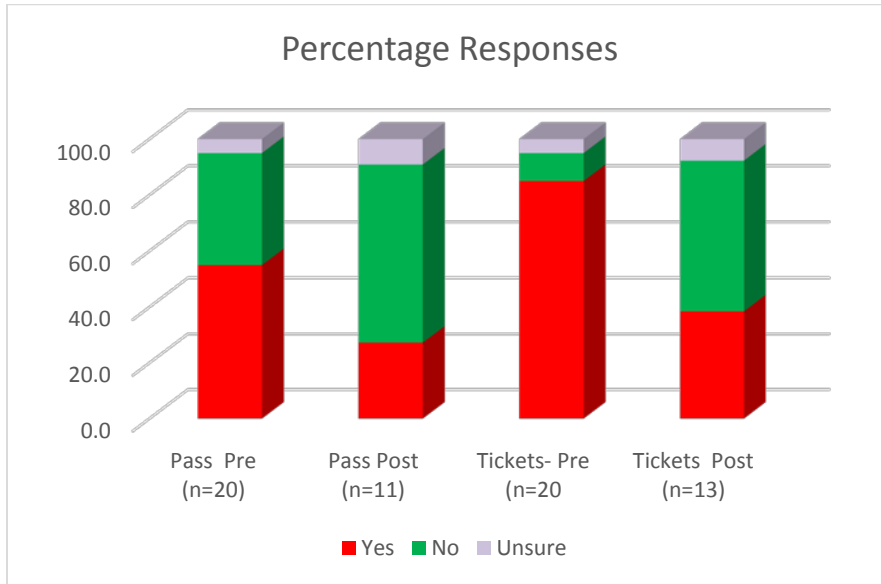

Figure 5: Comparison of Groups with Passes and Tickets-- Encounters with City Police
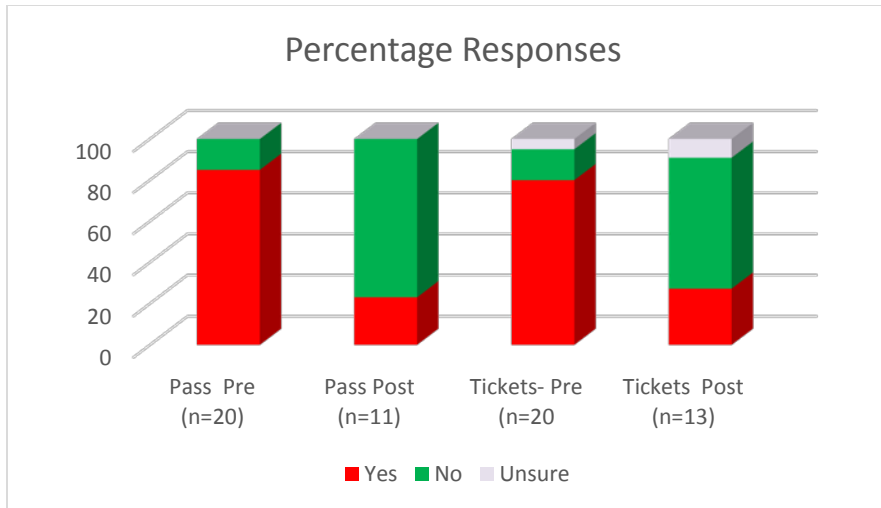
Table 2: Comparison Effect of Transit Passes or Bus Tickets on Encounters with Transit and City Police.

			Paired Samples Statistics					Paired Samples Test[a]		
Transport Type			Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean	Paired Differences 95% Confidence Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tickets	Transit Police	Time 1	1.15	13	.376	.104	.007	-2.193	10	.053*
		Time 2	1.62	13	.506	.140				
	City Police	Time 1	1.00	13	.000	.000	-.084	-2.631	10	.025*
		Time 2	1.77	13	.439	.122				
Pass	Transit Police	Time 1	1.27	11	.467	.141	-.063	-2.521	12	.027*
		Time 2	1.73	11	.467	.141				
	City Police	Time 1	1.18	11	.405	.122	-.504	-6.325	12	.000*
		Time 2	1.73	11	.467	.141				

In the interviews, youth and staff preferred transit passes. All group interview participants pointed out that an average of three tickets per day did not offer the same transportation options and flexibility as a transit pass. Youth and staff noted that youth often needed to go to two or three different places a day.

> *It was the best feeling in the world, like liberation, being able to go where you can or need to go. It got me to my school. I did temporary jobs, it got me to my workplace in the morning. It is like the difference between being normal and homeless.*

> *I like the bus pass because there is no time limit. You only have two hours to get it done with your flipping transfer. If you are 2 minutes or 15 minutes, they ask you for another ticket.*

Staff and youth thought passes were more efficient and likely to be used as intended by youth.   About a quarter of the youth felt obligated to share tickets with friends, so these youth did not feel they benefitted as much as they would have with monthly passes. Youth were hassled by other youth to share tickets, but not for passes. Staff believed a culture of sharing made it difficult for those with tickets not to share with friends. In addition, it was easier to trade tickets for cigarettes or small favors. One staff member suggested that tickets were more easily seen as "freebies".

> *I just automatically shared tickets with friends, but you can't share a bus pass. If you are with friends and take the bus you have to share your tickets or be a dick and have them walk while I take the bus.*

Downside to tickets is they are easy to sell for cigarettes. I bought a book of 10 and they only lasted for three days.

Friends would ask me, and if I keep them to myself, that does cause friction.

Two youth did report lending their bus passes. A sister and a friend borrowed their passes to get to work. However in the interviews all youth cautioned against lending out bus passes unless they really trusted the person. One participant lost his pass the first month, but then admitted to being more careful. Staff thought that knowing that they were not going to get replacement pass made youth aware of the value.

I lent it to my friend for full-time work. He uses tickets but had five more days to payday. When he buys tickets friends want them. You have to know them and trust them. He is a solid guy.

If you give it to the wrong person, you don't get it back.

Discrimination by transit authorities

Just over half of participating youth (52.5%) believed transit authorities targeted them because they were homeless. As one youth explained, he was required to show his ticket, but "I was the last one off the train and he asked me." His assessment, "It seems like racial profiling to me. "

 Program staff thought that some youth were targeted because their clothing was old and they looked homeless. He gave an example of one youth with "blue eyes who is really pretty and well dressed" who never got a ticket, but went on to explain that "if you are stressed by getting caught because you don't have a ticket, it is going to show in your behaviour."

Personal Safety

As reported by youth in the qualitative assessment upon which this intervention is based, safety remains a significant issue for street-involved youth. Generally speaking, participating youth felt they were safer on the transit system and during the day while receiving transit assistance. The mean scores for safety on the transit system (2.71 to 2.08) and day safety (2.54 to 2.38) decreased, but they were not statistically significant. Almost a third (time one-- 12/40 and time 2-- 6/24) indicated they felt unsafe on the transit system once a day or more. Before the intervention, almost half (18/40) perceived they were unsafe once a day or more and after the transit intervention a similar proportion (9/24) indicated they felt unsafe more than once a day.

Generally speaking, participating youth felt they were unsafe at night.   Mean scores for safety at night increased (2.67 to 2.83) but not significantly. Before receiving transit assistance,

slightly over half (23/40) indicated they felt unsafe more than once a night and just over half (13/24) felt unsafe at night when receiving transit assistance.

In the interviews, youth pointed out that safety is a complex problem. They reported that risks of being homeless included being taken advantage of (manipulated, used) by adults and other youth, survival sex, prostitution, and drug addiction. Having tickets or passes let them escape from unsafe circumstances as they could get on a bus and leave, but some youth noted that transit itself is not always safe, as they were sometimes the target of violence on transit. Youth contended that the downtown area in which homeless shelters are located was unsafe. They gave suggestions on how to travel safely if they were walking in unsafe areas, for example 'mind your own business,' 'keep your head down,' and 'travel with friends.' Some youth noted that it was better to use transit at night, because you could be assaulted or harassed by police while walking.

> *If you need to get out of the area, you can get on a bus and leave and you aren't going to want to hear this, but if you are on something and cold you can get on a bus. Not freezing to death is a god things.*

> *Transit is not the only answer for safety, yes you can hop on a bus to get away from a bad situation, but where we are isn't safe.*

> *Went to Mosaic Centre, here; places where I can stay out of trouble, safer, well safer than most places.*

> *Drug wise and people wise, it's [the area we live in] not safe. I almost got stabbed because I had a cigarette. If you want to walk on the street at night, like you have to make sure you have a friend with you.*

> *It's safe, you just have to keep to yourself, keep your head down.*

Staff reported that many of the youth were anxious and that feeling unsafe increased their anxiety. They explained that without tickets and passes, youth had a limited travel range and less access to positive role models. Without transportation access, participating youth tended to associate with the same people, within walking distance of agencies serving homeless youth. Both the area and associating with higher-risk youth increased their perceptions of risk.

> *If they are stuck in the same place with the same people that get involved in bad activities, then they get stuck with the same crowd. Then logically they get into trouble in that area, but when they had transit, they were doing more positive things.*

> *If they have tickets or a pass they are going somewhere, they aren't just
> hanging out at the transit station to keep warm. If they have nowhere to go in
> winter, they do hang out there, but if they could access transit, I think there
> would be a lot less personal robberies. If they stay out of trouble it makes it a
> lot easier for them to go home or stay housed.*

Social Exclusion

People feel included when they experience care and support, trust in others, community belonging, and safety. Youth-serving environments and programs are essential in providing conditions that support positive development (Catalano et al., 2002; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kidd, 2012) and most youth participants indicated that these four agencies were very successful in this endeavor. In the pre-intervention survey, three quarters of youth (31/40) felt respected where they hang out and that there was support in Edmonton. All 24 of those completing surveys at Time 2 agreed to strongly agreed that they were respected where they hang out and most (21/24) indicated that many people would give help if needed. However only half (20/40) felt they belonged in Edmonton and agreed (22/40) that people in Edmonton respected them. Access to transit did not significantly change these ratings.

In the group interviews, youth believed exclusion was a root cause of their stressful situation. They talked about how they ended up on the street and how entrenchment happens. Several intimated that things "weren't good at home" or there was "little for them at home." Youth thought they were on the streets because they did not fit in and conversely that they do not fit in because they are on the streets. They explained how they had problems fitting in at school and then in society and how being surrounded by like-minded people ("who are like, 'jobs are for losers'") made it harder to get off the streets. Most believed they were discriminated by their ethnicity and appearance including clothing.

> *When I have enough money to dress like I used to people will smile at you, but
> you look a little homeless and people start staring at you more. People wonder
> why homeless people don't get jobs. They don't understand that being
> homeless and trying to get out of homelessness is full time job. There are lots
> of people that get kicked out of home or their parents are crack addicts and
> they can't take it anymore.*

However, both before and after the majority of these youth believed they were respected in the places where they spend time and that people in Edmonton are supportive.

Table 3: Belongingness and Community Inclusion: Questions and Statistics

Statistics							Paired Samples Correlations	
Questions	Mean	# agree to strongly agree	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig.
9_Respect--People respect me where I hang out most often	5.75	31/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.482	.302	.731	23	.472
Time 2	5.50	24/24 agree to strongly agree	24	.511	.104			
10_Respect--People in the City of Edmonton Respect Me	4.96	22/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.398	.285	.477	23	.638
Time 2	4.79	16/24 agree to strongly agree	24	1.560	.318			
11_Belonginess--I feel Like I belong in Edmonton	4.79	20/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.911	.390	-.522	23	.607
Time 2	5.00	15/24 agree to strongly agree	24	1.719	.351			
12_Community Support Many people in this community are available to give help if somebody needs it	5.75	30/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.700	.347	.121	23	.904
Time 2	5.71	21/24 agree to strongly agree	24	1.681	.343			

Social Support

Before the intervention, three quarters (31/40) agree that they have others who listen when they need to talk about problems and had friends to talk to when they were lonely (30/40). Similarly, three quarters agree to strongly agree that they knew where to obtain food, a place to sleep, and help finding a job. Knowing where to go for help if they had no money increased significantly (p=.007) following the intervention, but having someone to talk to if there was a crisis significantly decreased at time 2 (p= .027). See Table 3.

Table 4: Support and Support Seeking: Questions and Statistics

Statistics						Paired Samples Correlations		
Questions	Mean	# agree to strongly agree	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig.
1_Listen_I have others who will listen when I need to talk about problems me	5.92	30/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.018	.208	.908	23	.373
Time 2	6.21	19/24 Agree to strongly agree	24	1.141	.233			
2_Friends_When I am lonely, there are friends I can talk to Time 1	5.67	30/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.274	.260	.161	23	.873
Time 2	5.71	17/24 Agree to strongly agree	24	1.301	.266			
3_Sleep_I would know where to go if I needed a place to sleep	5.83	31/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.435	.293	752	23	.459
Time 2	5.54	15/24 agree to strongly agree	24	1.615	.330			
4_Food_I would know where to go if I need food	6.06	37/40 Agree to strongly agree.	16	1.569	.392	.593	15	.132
Time 2	5.25	20/24 agree to strongly agree	16	1.483	.371			
5_Money_I would know where to go for help if I had no money	4.42	17/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.863	.380	2.960	23	.007
Time 2	5.88	11/24 agree to strongly agree	24	1.329	.271			
6_Crisis_If there is a crisis, I have others to talk to	5.29	27/40 Agree to strongly agree.	24	1.334	.272	2.366	23	.027
Time 2	4.08	20/24 agree to strongly agree	24	2.083	.425			
7_Job_If I need help finding a job, I know where to go for help.	6.00	36/40 Agree to strongly agree.	23	1.414	.295	-.143	22	.888
Time 2	6.04	18/24 agree to strongly agree	23	1.065	.222			

Support Services and Housing

Employment and housing changes accompanied the intervention. The survey data indicated that four participants, one on social assistance and three without an income, had income from wages following the intervention. Three who had been in rental housing, remained in rental housing and three moved into rented homes. Employment and housing gains were confirmed in the post-intervention interviews with youth and staff. In the group interviews, youth reported that transit tickets and passes facilitated their ability to acquire identification, drop off resumes for employment, and look for accommodation. They believed

they accessed more resources and were involved in more productive activities. They said that having access to transit allowed them to attend education programs, skills training, and search for employment. Moreover, they used public transit to get to shelters, medical appointments, find respite from the cold, and visit their children, family, and probation officers.. Youth indicated that they were more committed to attending training and meeting obligations during the intervention. Transit access enhanced choice, and flexibility and reduced their stress and anxiety. They stated that temporary employment or part-time work didn't make enough to cover all their basic needs, and paying up front for a bus pass was beyond their limited means.

> *It's pretty good. I visited my kids. I went to part-time work, sometimes I go downtown or the west side. I got around pretty well. A bus pass is better, but we can't afford it.*
>
> *I used the bus pass for transportation to Armoury [youth services] from the Hope [temporary shelter] in the morning. The alternative is to walk 10 blocks in freezing temperature or illegally catch a train and run the risk of getting a $250 ticket I cannot pay! Attended many meetings involving acquiring ID and handed out resumes in MANY different areas.*
>
> *Helped me to get around to my meetings. Made my life easier and not always trying to find money/bus tickets helping me to find a place to live and not be homeless. Gives me a warm place when I have nowhere else to go. All round amazing!*

Most importantly, regular transit helped homeless youth feel more self-reliant and gave them hope and self-confidence. They could make decisions about where they wanted to go without having to ask for transit tickets.

> *Streetkids didn't learn the lessons at home that they needed to learn, so they have to learn them on the streets. Streets are a terrible place to learn these things. You get into these institutional rings that keep you in these institutional traps because you can't find hope. If you are homeless, you get into drugs and being a slut because you have no choice. You are young and you get taken advantage of. Trying to save $90 for a bus pass is hard so to hop transit and get a fine--easy. Where are we going to get $250? It's a lot easier to keep going down than to dig yourself out. I don't know why you had to do a study to find out that giving them a bus pass will give them hope. Young woman.*

Some described the transit pass as the difference between addictions and violence, criminal activity, and entrenched homelessness and the hope towards making life changes.

The bus pass was such a morale booster, like you can do something with your life because it really help when you stay at a place like the Hope Mission [temp shelter]. You have to mentally prepare yourself for the morning trek through the ghetto, the morning negotiation of despair. Psychologically it was really good just knowing you have the freedom to get out of where you are because sometimes you feel like you are stuck in the little track between Armoury, Coop, and the street. It was great. Young man

Staff directly attributed enhanced access to transportation with youths' increased attendance at education, skills training, job searches, and new employment. They agreed with youth that youth used time and transportation more productively with transit access. Transportation resources made it easier for youth to accomplish daily activities. They believed that youth confidence and self-agency was increased with choice over their own transportation.

Most don't have access to the Internet so it is only by moving around that they learn what is available.

It gave them the confidence of being able to take the bus and not being harassed. It gives them that boost. They feel more confident in other areas. That inherent confidence that if I am able to do this, I can do that, then I can do the next thing whatever it is.

Staff explained that there were strict regulations for providing free transit tickets. They could provide only limited transit tickets for specific uses like medical appointments or job searches. They understood that giving youth two tickets per day did not enable youth to drop off resumes or search for rental accommodations. Staff also believed that the transportation intervention helped youth to make choices, delay gratification, and practice control. Staff concurred with youth reports that in the first month, several youth used the majority of their tickets in the first week. In subsequent months, they were more careful to ration tickets.

Research Question 2: What are the implications for improved practice, programs, and policies?

Both youth and staff believe the public need more education about homelessness and the causes of homelessness. Both recommended that public transit be provided for youth in programs and as they transition from the street to work and homes.

Youth contended that as they remained homeless, with their range limited to walking distance, and restricted to areas of high crime and violence, they were likely moving on a path to adult homelessness and crime. They suggested that "fast track" comprehensive interventions, that included transportation, should be available. They were aware of one such program, but said strict rules made it unavailable to many youth.

You can't get anywhere without a pass. There needs to be a fast-track program with instantaneous housing. There is the "Upstairs Program" but the rules are too strict. One week handing out resumes, next week call back, and third week job. You need transportation through it all.

Program staff believed that ticketing homeless youth for using transit without paying fares, then sending them through the court system for unpaid fines was a waste of court time and resources. They suggested that these resources could be used more effectively to provide transit passes to youth to attend training and look for work or housing. In their view, youth with a criminal record experienced more difficulty finding employment and homes. They reported that encounters with transit authorities and charges for using transit without a fare were sometimes the first encounter youth had with the justice system. They argued that when youth are initially frightened when they first become homeless, and as they become involved in petty crime to survive. With a criminal record it becomes more difficult to resolve their problems and homelessness and they become entrenched in street life. They recommended transit passes as one tool towards helping youth exit street life.

$90 is a great investment rather than $250 fine. You will see bundles of savings through avoiding contact with the justice system, courts, probation officers, and jail because they don't get the tickets that create a glut of people in the court.

You are talking about the time in the courts and the remands but it also takes time for the police to arrest them, and it takes time here because we have to supervise their community service. It takes a lot of money in the court system and time for us.

We need education--to see the type of kids we work with. Education for transit or sensitivity training so they can use some discretion. Some bus drivers, but not all are more discretionary that the transit security.

<u>Discussion</u>

In this small exploratory pilot study, access to transportation for homeless youth decreased chances of negative involvement with transit and city police, and may have increased chances of working for wages and attaining stable housing. Youth and staff believed the supportive intervention increased youth self-confidence and engagement in positive activities. These results indicate that transportation is a critical component of an integrated program to move street youth towards homes and employment. These results also illustrate how transportation access is implicated in the promotion of social inclusion among street-involved and homeless youth.

Although adult homelessness has significantly decreased in this mid-sized Canadian city in the last year, the number of youth and young adults who are homeless or in unstable housing has increased (see Sorensen 2010, 2012). Access to stable housing and positive adult role models increases expectations for pro-social behavior among youth, which in turn, facilitates relationship building, skill development, and positive identity (Kidd, 2012; Scales & Benson, 2004; Theokas et al., 2006). Youth and staff both reported that transit assistance helped homeless youth move out of their limited walking territory, attend to productive activities, and be exposed to positive role models. Their self-confidence increased and they were more able to take care of themselves. They were more likely to get identification and seek supportive programs, work, or stable housing.

When it comes to the entrenchment of youth homelessness, one of the most prominent theories is the acculturation theory which suggests that being homelessness becomes a 'way of life'. Homeless youth learn survival strategies (including substance use) and develop a sense of belonging with other homeless individuals (Auerswald & Eyre 2002). Criminal activity and substance use begins primarily as a form of initiation into the homeless subculture, but also drug use and criminal activity is an adaptive response to unpredictable and stressful environments. Youth using homeless shelters and services become acculturated to these rules and practices. Homeless services structure their interactions with others and youth services become places where 'a broad confluence of sub-cultural activity flows' (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008, p. 571). In the view of Johnson & Chamberlain (2008), acculturation theory overstates the extent to which homeless youth accept homelessness as a normal way of life. They argue that an acculturation thesis does not fit because most homeless youth try to leave the streets.   The return to homelessness after periodic exits is triggered by breakdown in income, employment, or housing stress. They suggest that youth can 'get out' and 'stay out' of homelessness with appropriate material and emotional support.

In our group interviews, homeless youth indicated that they wanted off the street. Our findings are aligned with the latter perspective, that social exclusion and limited supports directed at basic survival needs are barriers to resolving homelessness (Dworsky, & Piliavin, I., 2000; Mayock, O'Sullivan, & Corr, 2011; Morell-Belai et al. 2000). These studies find that exclusion from mainstream community and lack of systemic support for affordable independent housing, transportation, and/or employment assistance are more important factors in homelessness than individual choice. Youth try to get off the streets, but adequate resources are needed to be successful.

Clearly, many youth in this pilot study were motivated to get off the street, but they did not have the individual support resources to navigate disparate services. Agencies serving homeless youth have to enforce restrictive policies for providing transit tickets. These limits meet basic needs, allow youth to get to specific appointments, but do not support youth independence. These travel limits seem to be structured on notions of personal responsibility. Youth and program staff both explained that lack of access to affordable transportation can entrap homeless youth.

There are several limitations in this exploratory pilot research. This is a very small study conducted with limited funds, most of which were dedicated to purchasing transit passes and tickets. Only 60% of the participants completed the post-intervention surveys and group interviews. The retention rate for this vulnerable population is high, but the youth who completed the study might be those who were more successful. In the limited data collected, those who completed the study and those who withdrew are similar.   Researchers and the Community Advisory Committee chose user-friendly brief measurements for the youth, but did want to elaborate on safety and exclusion findings from the research on which this study is based. Access to the transit system did increase perception of safety for some youth. Safety is complex and troubling issue that should be explored. According to the narratives of these youth, exclusion at school, in families or foster homes, and discrimination in the community were common experiences. It would have been informative to determine implications for program and policy development by also surveying the perspectives of transit authorities.

Conclusion

Edmonton's success with the Housing First program demonstrates the benefits of systemic supports. The results of this study suggest that affordable access to public transportation is one tool in a program of supports to empower youth who are homeless or at risk for homelessness to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness.

Recommendations

1) Through community and/or government referral, youth, who would otherwise not have access to a bus pass or bus tickets, be given a pass similar to a university "One Card" that would also act as identification. This can help facilitate a sense of inclusion, increase safety, reduce involvement with transit police, and help access school and professional services for emotional and physical health. It can also foster a sense of "self-reliance, hope and self-confidence" while helping avoid being taken advantage and/or being sexually exploited. If youth are able to get to such services and jobs (in which youth may then be able to take on the cost of a bus pass) they are more likely to follow through accessing help and support, get housing, and increase the level of stability in their lives. This could also serve to reduce the costs of policing, court, lawyers, keeping a youth in custody, and, potentially, the amount of services required.

2) Regular meetings (two to four times per year) between ETS representatives, other authorities relevant to public transit and transit spaces, and youth representatives to help educate, to build positive relationships, and to collaborate on solving problems as they arise. The youth could be selected through the community agencies.

3) Training to be offered to ETS personnel (and other authorities and personnel relevant to public transit and transit spaces) with respect to understanding and interacting with street-involved, homeless, and socially excluded youth. The goal would be to improve positive

communication, increase understanding, and eliminate profiling. The current "disability navigator" would be included in the training, with the aim of expanding the mandate to include assisting those struggling with FASD, addictions, and trauma.

4) Address the systemic issue that some youth face in having probation orders stating they must attend school and professional services (such as counselling, addictions treatment, life skills or anger management programs, etc.) while also being banned from public transit, which can be their only means of getting to such places. This can place the youth in the predicament of either getting a significant fine, or breaching their probation order. Youth who are court ordered to attend school and professional appointments, could be referred by the court/probation officer for a "One Card".

5) Research to be conducted to explore the court orders being made and the cognitive/circumstantial ability to actually carry out the conditions. Are some court orders setting the youth up for inevitable failure meaning further entrenchment in the justice system, and a continuing sense of exclusion, instability and lack of services including housing?

6) If the first recommendation is adopted, a broad and thorough evaluation be completed to ensure that a "One Card" concept is effective for youth, that results parallel those of this study with respect to the benefits to youth, the transit system and the community, and that overall, there is a social return on investment.

7) Homeward Trust Edmonton continue to support community-based research, and continue to engage community agencies in their efforts to build programs to end homelessness.

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Table 5: Services Status Time 1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	PGO	5	12.5	12.5	12.5
	TGO	3	7.5	7.5	20.0
	Assess	6	15.0	15.0	35.0
	Non-status	2	5.0	5.0	40.0
	Closed	8	20.0	20.0	60.0
	N/A	11	27.5	27.5	87.5
	Not answered	5	12.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	40	100.0	100.0	