

Sub-employment and street youths: an analysis of the impact of squeegee cleaning on homeless youths

Bill O'Grady*, Robert Bright, Eric Cohen

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, Canada N1G 2W1

Abstract

This paper reports the impact of squeegee cleaning among homeless youths in Toronto, Ontario. We show that homeless youths engaged in squeegee cleaning report higher levels of psychological well-being than a group of street youths not involved in this activity, and who had no access to regular income. Analysis of our survey and interview data indicates that squeegee work is also associated with a reduction in criminal activity, and improved housing tenure. The paper then considers the potential for squeegee work as a source of social capital necessary for youths to leave the street. Finally, in terms of social policy, we discuss the impact that demands to legally censure this activity would have on the lives of street youths. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ireland Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The city of Toronto has recently been exposed to a group of youths known as 'squeegee kids'. Small groups of homeless youths can be found working at many major intersections across the city, with buckets and squeegees in hand, ready to wash the windshields of motorists for spare change. These unconventionally clad entrepreneurs (scruffy clothing, multi-coloured hair, visible body piercing, Mohawk style haircuts, etc.) have aroused much public controversy. Criticisms generally stem from motorists who object to being approached in their vehicles at intersections by squeegee cleaners. Complaints have ranged from perceptions that 'squeegee kids' are tarnishing the image of the city, or more seriously, that these youths are responsible for elevating levels of violence in the urban core. The local tabloid press, *The Toronto Sun* (The Toronto Sun, 1996), has depicted these youths as herds of 'locusts' who have made it 'almost impossible

for ordinary taxpayers to drive downtown without having their cars descended upon' (*Toronto Sun*, 19 August 1996). Specific accusations that squeegee cleaners cause traffic congestion, harass motorists, engage in territorial fights over street corner locations led to 150 monthly summonses issued to 'squeegee kids' during the summer months of 1996. Metro Chief of police, David Boothby, remarked that the problem is 'not going to be tolerated' and that legal action is required to combat the problem (*Toronto Sun*, 20 July 1996). Additional anxiety about the issue has also been voiced by local politicians. Liberal Member of Provincial Parliament, Michael Cole, who was reported as having one of his wiper blades damaged by a squeegee kid, was quoted as saying that he would like to 'wipe out street corner squeegee squads in Toronto' (*Toronto Sun*, 21 June 1996). Public anxiety over the activity led the Premier of Ontario, Mike Harris, as well as the mayor of Toronto, Mel Lastman, to consider formally criminalising the act.

Despite concerted efforts to rid the streets of these 'undesirables', many youths remain actively involved in squeegee cleaning today. Even though squeegee

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 519 8244120; fax: +1 519 837 9561.

cleaning has yet to be formally censured, informal efforts have been made to deal with these youths. For instance, a local entrepreneur has produced, and is attempting to market, two dollar window stickers which state 'No Squeegeers Please' to motorists who do not wish to be approached by these youths. Concurrently, the City of Toronto, as a result of this attention — not to mention public pressure — invested \$28 000 in a pilot project designed to find 'proper' jobs for a small number of local squeegee cleaners, in an effort to provide 'legitimate' employment for homeless youths. More recently, in the July 1998, Toronto City Council Committee recommended that the city spend \$500 000 to develop diversion options for squeegee kids including job training and to finance street businesses (shoe shining and selling T-shirts) (Star, 17 July 1998).

While there is no shortage of attention directed towards the activities of squeegee youths, notwithstanding anecdotal evidence, little is systematically known about this segment of the street population. While attention has been directed at the Canadian street youth problem (e.g. Baron, 1994; Webber, 1991; Hagan and McCarthy, 1997), research has not focused on the *informal* economic activity of squeegee cleaning youths. The broad based goal of this paper is to address this concern. We will do so by examining the impact of squeegee cleaning on the general quality of life among street youths. More specifically, we will focus upon two groups of street youths — those involved in squeegee cleaning and those who are not — in an effort to assess the effect of squeegee cleaning on levels of self-reported delinquency; opportunities for more stable housing and levels of psychological well-being.

1.1. Research on street youths

Until recently, in efforts to understand why youths take to the streets, much of the social scientific research on street youths has focused on the family backgrounds of these youths. It is now well documented that street youths, relative to non-street youths, experience higher levels of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Badgely, 1984; Visano, 1987; Rossi, 1989; Webber, 1991; WHO, 1993; Crawford-Thompson, 1994). Having limited options, these youths take to the street in order to escape their unbearable environments (Garbarino et al., 1986; Baum and Burnes, 1993). Once on the streets, however, their problems do not disappear. It has been estimated that over 80% of street youths in Toronto, for example, have been judged by professional psychologists to be so sad and desolate as to be considered 'clinically depressed' (Covenant House Toronto, 1986, p. 4). Moreover, while the 1984 Badgely Report discovered

that one in two girls, and one in three boys, in Canada had been victims of sexual offenses, a comparison of sexual abuse for street youths done by Covenant House in Toronto showed 38% of males and 73% of females were victims of sexual abuse (Webber, 1991, pp. 48–49). Webber further notes that 73% of a Toronto youth hostile sample had also been physically abused. In general, research has indicated that street youths display prominent characteristics of social disintegration, systemic dependence, and purposelessness because they are generally unemployed, homeless, uninvolved with educational institutions, and are frequently in trouble with legal authorities. In fact, street youths have been described as one of the most marginalised and socially isolated populations of modern urban societies (WHO, 1993).

Given these harrowing conditions, it is not surprising that the incidence of substance use and abuse among street youths is much greater than that of the general population. In fact, studies done in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal indicate that Canadian street youth's use of drugs and alcohol is considered to be universal. That is, virtually 100% of street youths in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver use drugs and/or alcohol (WHO, 1993). Similar findings have also been reported in the United States (cf. Wright, 1991).

Besides studies depicting the plight, and documenting the disadvantaged backgrounds of this urban street population, there have also been efforts to examine the variables which predict how youths behave once they find themselves on the street. McCarthy and Hagan (1992) suggest that several adverse conditions created by street life lead to crime. What the authors identify as 'situational factors' (e.g. hunger, unemployment and homelessness) were related to variations in street youths' incidence in levels of property crime and prostitution, as there was noted to be clear links between economic motivation and street crime.

Further research on street youths in Canada by Baron (1994), cited in Tanner (1996), examined the experience of unemployment and crime among street youths in Edmonton. Besides showing how widespread crime was among the street youths population (200 respondents reported 334, 636 offenses in the previous year), Baron also suggests that the more street youths become involved in criminal activity, the more they become detached from conventional society, as deviant lifestyles are engaged in with increasingly regularity as it becomes apparent that legitimate labour market opportunities are not open to these youths.

For those youths who do manage to make their way off the streets, holding a job is seen to be the key

source for raising levels of social capital.¹ According to Hagan and McCarthy (1997), an important study which will be drawn upon extensively in this paper, considerable attention was credited to the impact of *legitimate* employment (low-wage service sector employment) for making it possible for street youths to withdraw from the street. Street youths in Toronto and Vancouver reported that it was all but impossible to withdraw from street life without a stable income (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997 p. 210).

As useful as this research is in terms of illustrating the salience of background and situational factors associated with youth homelessness, as well as the important role of a job for exiting the street, it does not address the question about the impact of 'illegitimate', or unconventional employment (squeegee cleaning), on youths street society. Indeed, most literature examining the impact of employment/unemployment on youthful deviance, has tended to focus on legitimate/conventional labour market activity (e.g. Farrington et al., 1986; Hagan, 1993), thus neglecting the growing importance of work in the *informal* sector (cf. Pahl, 1984).

While evidence linking employment and crime reduction has been mixed, explanations offered by opportunity and social control theories generally argue that labour market experience increases attachments, controls, and reduces opportunity, all of which would reduce criminality. For instance, research by Hartnagel (1989) on the impact of unemployment and labour market conditions on delinquent behaviour among another group of marginal youths, high school drop-outs, showed that cumulative unemployment, which increased depression and lowered self-esteem, increased the likelihood of substance abuse (Hartnagel, 1989). Other forms of criminality were also increased, and were found to be associated more with boredom, free time (latent functions of employment) than a shortage of money (manifest function of work).

This is not to suggest, however, that there is a clear relationship between work and deviance among youths. A study by Tanner and Krahn (1991) raises an interesting issue concerning the association between part-time work and delinquency. With a focus on a sample of part-time youthful employees, they found that, rather than decreasing delinquency, there was an increase, particularly with substance abuse. Youth-

ful employees were actually mimicking their adult co-workers. By aspiring to the status of their peers, these youths behaved likewise — drinking, smoking, and taking drugs (Tanner and Krahn, 1991).

Given scope of existing research, it remains an empirical question as to the impact of illegitimate self-employment (squeegee cleaning) on the life-styles of street youths. As the findings on youths and psychological well-being attest (Gleitman, 1986; Miller, 1994), if street youths can access sources of social capital (even marginally), then they will use this source to enhance their lives and improve their overall well being. However, given the troubled backgrounds of many of these youths — scared by poverty, physical and sexual abuse — their predicaments may be simply too daunting to overcome merely through the attainment of social capital. It is possible, therefore, that we may find that either squeegee cleaning provides the necessary means of improving squeegee cleaners lives, or that their background characteristics are too bleak to be overcome by this quasi-form of self-employment. Moreover, in relation to the classical tenants of labelling theory (e.g. Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1972), given the stigma, and negative social reaction that has been associated with homelessness in general, and squeegee cleaning in particular, it is possible that such involvement may further distance youths from conventional society.

2. Research questions and design

To explore the impact of self-employment (squeegee cleaning) on the lives of street youths, we gathered data through a systematic collection of observations, self-report data, and in-depth interviews obtained from two groups of street youths. The first is drawn from a sample of squeegee cleaning youths working in downtown Toronto. The second sample is comprised of street youths 'not' engaged in squeegee cleaning. We explore whether commitment to the traditional routine of 'working-for-a-living' impacts other aspects of street youths' marginal existence. Are squeegee workers involved in fewer illegal activities than street youths who do not participate in this endeavour? And will they exhibit higher levels of psychological well-being than non-squeegee cleaning youths? Finally, will their new form of income create opportunities for more secure housing? That is, will they become less dependent on shelters, hostels and various other care givers and live more independent lifestyles; an important step for leaving the street?

2.1. Sampling procedure

Two distinct samples were drawn for the study. The first consists of 52 street youths who were contacted

¹We use the term 'social capital' to refer to a process whereby people acquire knowledge and skills throughout their life course in efforts to attain cultural goals. According to Hagan and McCarthy (1997), social capital originates in relations between individuals, in families, neighbourhoods, churches, schools and so on. These relations support social action by generating a sense of obligation, trustworthiness, information channels, norms and sanctions (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997, pp. 228–229).

during the fall and winter months of 1995–1996. Requirements for participation for the first sample necessitated that the youths be under the age of 25, not attending school, were without stable housing, and were not to have engaged in squeegee cleaning or any other form of systematic self-employment. The second group of subjects consists of 55 youths who under the age of 25, and were presently earning income through squeegee cleaning. They were contacted during the summer of 1997. The squeegee sample was drawn from the geographical grid of downtown Toronto covering all of the main, well-populated corners where squeegee cleaners can be found. All of the sample of non-squeegee street youths were located within these same boundaries. While both samples are not purely random in a statistical sense, efforts were made to select youths from as many different locations within the city as possible.

Data were collected using a self-report questionnaire which was monitored at the time it was administered. Recognizing the problem of literacy within this population, the youths were offered assistance with both the protocol and consent instruments. The researchers explained to the youths that they were interested in understanding more about their backgrounds and current situation. The respondents were told that all of the questions they were going to be asked were confidential and that this research would not in any way divulge their identities. Respondents were also informed that they were not obliged to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable, and were told that they could retract from the interview at any time.

The interviews contained a mix of open and closed ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 20 min, and all interviews took place in downtown Toronto in either coffee shops/fast food restaurants, youth drop-in centres or on street corners. No problems were encountered during any of the interviews. Although the total sample drawn for this study is not large enough to establish causal processes resulting from squeegee cleaning, we believe it to be sufficient in size to identify common patterns and tentative explanations.

In both surveys respondents were asked questions measuring their: age, gender, highest level of education, experiences while attending school, past employment history, and perceived level of familial financial hardship while they lived at home. Both groups were also asked questions about their current housing situation, and whether or not they were collecting state benefits (employment insurance or social assistance). Squeegee cleaners were asked additional questions about how long they had been engaged in squeegee cleaning, their weekly hours, and daily average incomes from this activity.

To determine whether the effect of squeegee cleaning has an impact on our dependent variables, in Table 1 we begin our analysis by presenting a comparison of the backgrounds of our two samples.

3. Results and discussion

Table 1 displays summaries of differences between each sample in relation to our background measures. From the table we see little variation between the two groups, with the exception of education. Little differences were noted in terms of *gender*, *age*, *years on street*, and *age first left home*. However, there is a difference between our two samples in terms of their level of education, as 53% of squeegee cleaners completed high school (grade 12) while only 23% of non-squeegee cleaners had a high school diploma. Both groups of youths, however, shared similar viewpoints relating to their experiences while in school. Similar to the broader street youth population, squeegee workers reported feeling stifled and 'shoved into a mould' while they were in school. Moreover, both groups experienced similar negative experiences while they lived at home. In the words of four different squeegee cleaners:

'I left home basically because of the abuse. I couldn't handle getting beat on anymore...' — 25-year-old male, left home at 17.

'I left home when I was 16 because my father was a low-life, booze-dependent asshole who liked to take his anger at life out on his kids...' — 20-year-old male who has been on the streets for 1.5 years.

'I left home the first time when I was 6 and lived in foster homes and group homes. I tried going back to live with my mom, but there was never really any chance it was going to work out... My mother is *very* physically abusive...' — 20-year-old female, on the streets for 3.5 years.

'When I was 18 months old Children's Aid took me away. They said I was a 'fail-to-thrive baby', that my parents didn't know how to care for me. Basically I was majorly neglected — left all day in shitty diapers, locked up in a

Table 1
Sample characteristics

	Squeegee cleaners	Non-squeegee cleaners
Age (mean)	20.9	20.8
Years on street (mean)	3.9	4.0
Age when left home (mean)	14.1	14.3
Sex		
Males	56%	65%
Females	44%	35%
Education		
< grade 12	47%	77%
> grade 12	53%	23%
<i>n</i>	55	52

room all day, not being fed properly or enough — that kinda thing... My parents either didn't know how to take care of me, or didn't give a shit. When I was 16 I left Children's Aid... — 21-year-old male, on the streets for 4 years and 9 months.

This evidence shows that both squeegee workers and non-squeegee workers essentially share the experience of growing up in abusive and dysfunctional families. They left home at about the same age and for the same reasons. Based on these similar backgrounds, we conclude that squeegee workers are a sub-population of the broader subculture of homeless youths.

The next step in our analysis is to determine whether or not squeegee work has an impact on levels of criminal activity and drug use. To begin, we proceed with the data contained in Table 2 which summarizes the frequency with which squeegee and non-squeegee youths reported engaging in specific criminal activity during the past year. Our results display a pattern where squeegee workers, while by no means being immune from self-reported criminality, consistently report lower levels of criminality than non-squeegee working street youths. The greatest differences in levels of offending recorded between the two groups concerned theft, as 75% of non-squeegee workers reported to have taken something less than \$50 during the past year. Less than one-quarter (24%) of squeegee workers admitted to have committed this infraction. In fact, for all types of self-reported crimi-

Table 2
Percentages admitting crime in the past year

	Squeegee worker (%)	Non-squeegee worker (%)
Sold marijuana or other drugs	44	66
Broken into a car or building	34	61
Taken something < \$50	24	75
Taken something > \$50	19	59
Damaged or destroyed property	30	60
Used physical force to get money	39	59
Gotten into a fight just for fun	24	51

nal acts, squeegee cleaners were less involved than non-squeegee cleaners.

We also asked our sample to report their level of drug and alcohol use. As can be seen in Table 3, there are much greater differences in levels of self-reported alcohol use than there are in amounts marijuana use. Squeegee workers (23%), for instance, reported that they refrained from drinking alcohol, while 100% of non-squeegee youths reported to drink alcohol at least on one occasion per month. Specifically, the mean number of occasions squeegee workers reported to drink per month was seven, whereas non-squeegee youths reported to drink, on average, 14 times per month, or approximately every other day. Interestingly, we find no substantial differences between the two groups in terms of marijuana use — 42% of squeegee workers and 46% of non-squeegee

Table 3
Frequency of alcohol and drug-use squeegee vs. non-squeegee workers

Frequency	Squeegee workers		Non-squeegee workers	
	(%)	N	(%)	N
Drink alcohol (beer, liquor or wine)				
Daily	15	8	29	15
Several times/week	9	5	21	9
2–3 times/week	31	17	17	9
Once per week	15	8	21	11
< Once per month	7	4	12	6
Never	23	13	0	0
Use of cannabis daily (marijuana or hash/oil)				
Daily	42	23	46	24
Several times/week	23	12	12	6
2–3 times/week	9	5	9	5
Once per week	4	2	8	4
< Once per month	7	4	10	5
Never	16	9	15	8
Use of LSD				
Daily	4	2	6	3
Several times/week	13	7	12	6
2–3 times/week	15	8	29	15
Once per week				
< Once per month	18	10	11	6
Never	50	27	40	21

Table 4
Self-reported psychological well-being squeegee vs. non-squeegee workers

Frequency	Squeegee workers		Non-squeegee workers	
	(%)	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>N</i>
Felt depressed				
Never/rarely	36	20	10	5
Sometimes	36	20	32	17
Often/always	28	15	58	30
Felt suicidal				
Never/rarely	78	42	48	25
Sometimes	10	5	19	10
Often/always	12	7	33	17
Felt like doing nothing at all				
Never/rarely	23	13	10	5
Sometimes	42	23	21	11
Often/always	35	19	69	36

workers reported smoking cannabis on a daily basis. Prevalence levels of LSD use between the two groups indicate that the non-squeegee sample was more likely to use hallucinogens. However, these differences were not as dramatic as were differences in alcohol use.

The relationship between squeegee status and three measures of psychological well-being are presented in Table 4. Overall, a pattern emerges indicating that squeegee workers were much less likely to report that they felt 'depressed', 'suicidal' or 'like doing nothing at all' than non-squeegee cleaning youths. More specifically, 33% of the non-squeegee cleaning youths reported to us that they felt suicidal 'often/always'. At the same time, 12% of our group of squeegee cleaners reported this high level of despondency.

Finally, in Table 5, we compare the living arrangements of both groups of youths. Here we find that a surprisingly high number of both squeegee and non-squeegee cleaning youths reported to live in their 'own place' (33 and 23%, respectively). For both groups of youths, this typically meant that they were staying, short-term, in a rooming house — usually on a week-to-week basis. Squeegee youths, however, were more likely to report these housing arrangements. Also worth noting in Table 5 are differences between

the two groups in terms of the proportions who lived in 'shelters or hostels'. Of the non-squeegee working youths, 36% lived in shelters, compared to none of the squeegee workers. An alternative residence for squeegee workers appears to be that of living in a squat (abandoned buildings). Interviews with street youths provided consistent views that living in a squat (or better still having one's own place) provided a much greater sense of control over one's life than living in a shelter or with friends. For example, 'Jennifer', a 20-year-old veteran of the street for four years revealed to us the following:

'I think most people prefer squats to hostels just because of all the rules they make you follow. They tell you when to eat, when to get up, when to go to bed, what time you have to be in — all that crap. I mean, who needs that? I'm 20 years old for chrissake, why would I want someone telling me when to go to bed? And a lot of the staff are just assholes and treat you like crap. Not all hostel workers are like that, but there's enough who just get off on the power trip, you know? I don't need that shit'.

Evidence that greater psychological distress, crime and alcohol use is associated with the non-squeegee sample may not mean that squeegee work actually

Table 5
Current housing situation squeegee vs. non-squeegee workers

Frequency	Squeegee workers		Non-squeegee workers	
	(%)	<i>N</i>	(%)	<i>N</i>
On streets	29	16	23	17
Shelter/hostel	0	0	36	19
Squat	31	17	2	1
Friend's place	7	4	8	4
Own place	33	18	23	12
Other	0	0	8	4

reduces all of these problems. It is quite conceivable that the more positive feelings of psychological well-being expressed by squeegee cleaners, for example, pre-dated their sub-employment activity. In other words, instead of being a consequence of squeegee work, suicidal feelings, and alcohol use, for example, may actually decrease the likelihood that a young person would take up squeegee cleaning.

Because our cross-sectional research design examined the relationship between squeegee status and these factors at one point in time, it is unable to provide definitive answers about cause and effect patterns. However, the squeegee workers themselves had little difficulty in identifying squeegee cleaning as the source of their improved living conditions. Consider, for instance, these words by a 21-year-old male squeegee cleaner when he was asked about his drinking:

'I'm doing a lot better now with my drinking, that's for sure — a lot better than 2 months ago! Shit, I was drunk all the time back then. Now I try to keep a limit on it. Before I started squeegeeing I was drinking hard liquor practically every day... now it's like once in a blue moon. I just stick to my beer now, and even that's less than it used to be'.

During the course of our field work, we met one group of four squeegee cleaners on a Friday evening. They were sharing a dozen beer and a small quantity of marijuana. They seemed somewhat taken aback by the fact that we hopped upon them while they were drinking and smoking.

'I hope that you guys don't think that we do this every day — this is our weekend, you know. It's Friday night and we've been looking forward to this all week. We're just like most people, you know, work all week and party on the weekends. You just happened to catch us in the act. We normally don't drink on the job'.

While our questionnaire data indicated that squeegee cleaners were less involved than non-squeegee workers in criminal activity, survey data alone do not disclose the reason why involvement with this informal economic activity would have these effect. Consider the words of 'Odie', who left home at 18, explained how squeegee cleaning followed a conscious decision to stay out of jail:

'I was like in and out of jail all the time... it got to be so I was inside more than out, and I just figured that this was a complete waste of my life. So instead of rippin' stuff off all the time I started panning for change. However, that really sucked — people looking down on you, saying shit all the time, or completely ignoring you. Then one day this squeegeeier said he was leaving town for a job and he gave me his squeegee. I figured, what the hell, I'd better check it out. I made a lot better money squeegeeing and you get

a hell of a lot less abuse from people. So I've been doing it ever since. I don't have to rip stuff off, and I don't have to feel like shit begging for money'.

According to another squeegee worker, Candy, who reported to still shoplift (three times per week) stated: 'before I started squeegeeing I was shoplifting a couple of times a day, basically whenever I needed something I'd steal it. What else could I do?'

Since squeegee cleaning was associated with heightened psychological well being, a reduction in criminal activity and improvements in housing tenure, the activity may be interpreted as an intermediary step in accumulating social capital, ultimately paving the way to a movement away from the street. The benefits associated with squeegee cleaning — income and a structured routine — could be considered to be similar to the experiences gained from working in a low wage service sector job. The material and social benefits related to this informal work may entice youths to value and invest in conventional means to achieve cultural goals. Interpreted in this way, squeegee cleaning, like other conventional/legitimate low wage employment, is an activity which may have the potential to help youths leave the street. In order to test the validity of this interpretation, we asked youths in our squeegee sample if washing car windshields was an activity associated with exiting the street. After reviewing our interview transcripts, the general consensus among our squeegee working sample was that squeegee cleaning was, at least in the short-term, not regarded as way to 'beat the street'. Consider these remarks, when asked if squeegee cleaning was a solution to homelessness:

'No, squeegeeing is not a solution to getting off the streets, but it makes life on the streets a little easier to take. Like, I'm sure some people use it as a stepping stone to getting their own place, or whatever, but most people are just trying to cope and get by' (22-year-old male squeegee worker).

'It's not a solution for being homeless, it just makes being homeless a little easier. I can get by on \$30 or \$40 bucks a day — for smokes, food, stuff like that. And you feel better when you have those basic needs, you know? Like I don't have to steal, go to hostels, or soup kitchens, bum smokes... that sort of thing, you know? I can at least make enough money for my basic needs' (21-year-old female squeegee worker).

Based on these and other similar responses, we suggest that squeegee work simply offers the street youth population an source of immediate income required to survive. Squeegee work was regarded as a viable alternative to both pan handling and crime (stealing, drug dealing and prostitution).

The financial value of squeegee work is evident in the self-reported income earned by our respondents.

The mean incomes reported by our sample of squeegee cleaners was \$50 per day — with several reporting to have made up to \$150 on a 'good day'. Not only is this activity a preferred option to crime and begging, but it was also considered to be more preferable to most 'legitimate', low wage employment — such as working for minimum wage in a fast food restaurant. Indeed, several of the street youths interviewed for this study mentioned that they much preferred working as squeegee cleaners than the 'suckers' who work for minimum wage. Moreover, cleaning car windshields does not require its participants to adopt their clothing and general appearance to conform to the dictates of the conventional work world. To work as a squeegee cleaner not only provides these young entrepreneurs with an income, but it offers them the opportunity to maintain their sub-cultural identities. In this way working on the streets is **not** a form of 'rehabilitation' but can be regarded as a form a **resistance** to low wage employment. According to our sample, more freedom was associated with working in a squeegee setting than in just about all other lines of employment available to youths with little or no 'legitimate' employment experience. As such, these youths are participants in a labour process of relative control, autonomy, and in some instances co-operation and sharing.

One squad of squeegee cleaners who were interviewed for our study, for example, evenly shared their earnings with each other at the end of the day. In fact, one young woman who was ill with the stomach flu was observed curled up on a blanket at the side of the road while her group worked. She explained to us how the group 'watched out' for her, and continued to share their earnings while she was 'temporarily out of commission'.

'I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have these guys. Look at me... I'm totally useless right now. However, I know that they're going to give me a cut at the end of the day. I know that I'm not going to go hungry or anything'.

There is some indication then that the benefits surrounding squeegee cleaning extend beyond the financial realm. The social support we observed taking place among these youths surely is another attraction to the work.

While it would be a mistake to view squeegee cleaning — at least in the short-term — as an activity associated with exiting street, our data do indicate that squeegee cleaning does offer marginal youths a lifestyle and opportunity for survival where there is less reliance on crime and other forms of deviant activity.

In terms of public policy, our findings may be instructive for those who wish to criminalise this

activity. Should this occur, it would represent a shift in policy away from a 'social welfare' approach for dealing with homelessness, to a model more characteristic of 'crime control' (see Hagan and McCarthy, 1997). Adopting such a policy has the potential to further marginalise an already powerless group, which could lead to more street crime. This view is informed by recent research that has compared street youths in Toronto with street youths from Vancouver. For Hagan and McCarthy, the street youth culture in Vancouver is characterised by greater problems surrounding street crime and drug use than is the case in Toronto. Reasons for these differences are argued to stem from the fact that in Vancouver the police have traditionally played an important role in attempts to control street youths (vigilant surveillance and charging practices). On the other hand, the responsibility of dealing with street youths in Toronto has fallen under the responsibility of the social service delivery system (counseling, drop-in centres, etc.). Consequently street life in Toronto is less criminogenic than it is in Vancouver. There is little to suggest, then, that legal controls, such as criminalizing squeegee cleaning, are effective methods for dealing with the street youth problem.

4. Conclusion

Our findings suggest that, contrary to the fears of many urban motorists and some politicians, squeegee cleaning among street youths yields a positive return in terms of reducing depression, criminal activity and facilitating more independent living conditions — an indication that these youths may be on their way off the street. While we recognize that squeegee work itself is by no means a panacea for those affected by unemployment and homelessness, our research does indicate that this work places youths at an advantage — at least compared to street youths uninvolved in such activity. Without tracking these youths over time, however, we are unable to determine if this work actually has an impact in terms of taking youths off the street — a question that warrants future research.

While the samples drawn for this study are admittedly small, and not representative in a statistical sense, our results should nevertheless draw attention from both researchers and policy makers involved with the plight of homeless youths. Taken as an initial step of analysing the effects of non-conventional employment on street youths, we are confident that squeegee cleaning, at least in the short-term, does improve the quality of life for this impoverished population. Future research on the topic, however, is required to determine the longer term consequences of this activity.

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