the fACTivist

Foreword: Youth At-Risk

By Susan Morrissey, Executive Director, Edmonton Social Planning Council

Welcome to our Winter *FACTivist* in which focuses on youth at-risk. We chose this particular topic for a number of reasons. In the recent Edmonton Homeless Count, "there were 698 individuals counted aged 30 or younger, equating to approximately 32% of the total counted and 258 individuals were independent youth between the aged ages of 14 and 24," (Homeward Trust, 2012, p. ii). During the summer of 2012, we held a focus group specifically asking Edmonton at-risk youth to provide their input to the Social Policy Framework. Repeatedly, these individuals stressed the lack of resources available to them to turn their lives around. One fellow even went so far to say that he was avoiding certain parts of the city, knowing full well that he could access services from agencies because of his fear of being drawn back into drugs and prostitution.

At the best of times, growing up during your teenage years can be stressful - you are not an adult, but you are also not a young child anymore. Peer pressure, the demand from our society to wear the 'right clothes', be skinny and 'fit in' can take a toll on youth who are sheltered and supported by family and friends. Add to this precarious housing, drugs, alcohol and mental illness and it's no wonder youth at risk are struggling.

This edition of the *FACTivist* includes a range of interesting articles, which touch on theoretical considerations, best practices in other Canadian cities, and the experiences of local agencies and individuals in Edmonton who work to assist this vulnerable group.

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Unpacking At-Risk

By Kayla Atkey and Anna Kessler,
Volunteer Writers

Societal actors such as the media, non-profit organizations and government frequently use the term 'at-risk' to describe youth deemed more likely than others to experience adverse outcomes in life. Many social organizations in the Edmonton area, for example, consider their target population for intervention to be youth-at-risk. Yet, while the concept of 'at-risk' has a certain intuitive meaning (Moore, 2006), it can be difficult to pinpoint what is actually meant by this term. This is particularly true when one acknowledges that all youth are, in fact, at risk of some level of adversity in life. Considering this, the aim of this article is to unpack the term 'at-risk' and provide a brief snapshot of what it means to be an 'at-risk' youth in Canadian society.

Definitions of the term 'at-risk' vary depending on the field of inquiry and the issue under examination. In the education field, for example, the term typically refers to students who are struggling to obtain the skills needed to graduate and who are more likely to drop out of school. The employment field, however, focuses on an individual's ability to acquire skills necessary for meaningful work opportunities (De Luca, Hutchinson, Versnel & Chin, 2012). Further, from a criminal justice perspective, the term tends to describe youth who have a higher likelihood of engaging in offending behavior and interacting with the criminal justice system (Public Safety Canada, 2012). Yet, considering that potential for such issues to intersect and overlap, a broad definition is valuable. Here, the World Bank provides a productive way forward, defining at-risk youth as individuals aged 12 to 24 who face "environmental, social, and family

conditions that hinder their personal development and their successful integration into society as productive citizens" (Cunningham, Cohan, Naudeau & McGinnis, 2008).

The use of the term 'at-risk' to describe youth is not a new concept. While it is difficult to determine the exact origins of the term, Schonert-Reichl (2000) suggests its roots can be found in the medical and education literature. In medicine, the risk concept can be seen as emerging alongside epidemiology research aimed at determining the causes of illness and disease. From an educational perspective, the term has been linked to urban school reform in New York City almost 200 years ago (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Closely tied to the issue of poverty, children were considered at-risk when they came from impoverished families whose financial instability posed a risk to wider society. Indeed, key to both of these early understandings of 'at-risk' was locating risk within the individual or family, rather than society or culture (Schonert-Reichl, 2000).

In line with the multiple definitions of the term at risk, several means of measuring the degree to which an individual is at risk exist and are used in Canada today. Different programs assess risk using different indicators chosen based on program goals (Moore, 2006). Further, the multidimensional and interactive nature of risk factors increases the complexity of measuring risk. Therefore, risk is frequently considered along a continuum that may take into account any combination of factors that may involve individual family, peer, school, social/community, and socio/cultural aspects (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). In general, youth exposed to the following factors are considered to be at- risk:

- Factors revolving around home life, such as the experience of homelessness, unstable or poor living conditions, single parenthood, unemployed or underemployed parents, abusive or violent environments, and physical and emotional neglect (Centre for Research on Youth at Risk, 2012; Noble, 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2000).
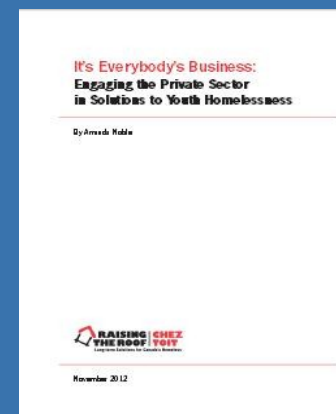
- School and education related risk issues, such as poor attendance and performance as well as inadequately supportive school environments (Centre for Research on Youth at Risk, 2012; Moore, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2000).
- Health related concerns, including mental health issues, lack of access to health care, sexual activity, and alcohol and drug abuse (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2010; Moore, 2006; Noble, 2012).
- Incidents of trauma (Moore, 2006).

Ultimately, when measuring risk, both the existence and severity of these factors should be taken into account (Moore, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2000). While youth facing the factors above are likely to be considered at-risk overall, the experience of risk is different for each individual in her/his unique context. Furthermore, it is worth noting that several of these challenges are both contributing factors to increased risk and situations that youth may be at risk of facing.

From a statistical standpoint, it is challenging to capture a direct, holistic picture of youth-at-risk in Canada. That being said, Statistics Canada does compile comprehensive risk-related information about children and youth up to 20 years of age. Related to home life, 14% of youth live in single-parent homes and between 11 and 15% of youth live in families with low income. With regards to health concerns, it is noted that 10 to 20% of youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder; however, only 1 in 5 youth in need of mental health services receives them. It is estimated that 71.5% of youth, aged 15 and above, use alcohol, while 25% and 7% of youth use cannabis and illicit drugs, respectively. Related to school and education it has been found that only 44% of children in foster care graduate from high school, while the graduation is 81% amongst their peers. Additionally, Statistics Canada states that in 2008 1,111 per 100,000 children and youth in Canada were victims of violent crime, with youth aged 15 to 17 experiencing the highest rates of victimization. Importantly, Statistics Canada also notes that the percentages of

Crerar, C. (2006). A survey of homeless youth in Edmonton: a report prepared for Boyle Street Community Services. Retrieved from http://www.homewardtrust.ca/images/resources/2012-03-14-22-32research_homeless_youth_survey_2006.pdf

"The purpose of the youth homelessness survey was to discover how many youth are absolutely homeless and what type of housing they prefer...This research is not about gathering academic evidence that supports theory on youth homelessness. Rather, the data gathered is used for the purpose of acting as a voice for both the youth and the youth agencies to advocate for change in the youth housing facilities."

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Aboriginal youth impacted by these factors is higher than the Canadian average (Statistics Canada, 2012). While these statistics do not encompass all of the possible risk factors they may shine some light on the current number of youth at risk in Canada. However, a profile of an average youth at risk is not available, perhaps due to the complicated nature of risk factor as described above.

It is evident that definitions of 'at risk' are complex, difficult to measure, and used by programs in a variety of targeted ways. This complexity may contribute to the existence of debates surrounding the use of the term. Additionally, a significant critique of the youth-at-risk concept is that attaching such a label to an individual may limit their agency and potential to overcome adversity in life. Moreover, the concept arguably takes attention away from wider societal forces that put individuals at-risk in the first place, such as growing levels of inequality in a society. For this reason, many groups are advocating for a broader view of the term 'at-risk', arguing for a perspective that labels communities and environments as 'at-risk', as opposed to individuals or families (Moore, 2006).

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At-Risk Should Be Spelled Out With a 'Why'

By Nicole Hill, Volunteer Writer

The term 'at-risk' describes populations which are susceptible to one or more negative outcomes. Focusing on youth, some have the potential to overcome these adverse situations - such as criminal surroundings, attempted suicides, or susceptibility to homelessness - but statistical research tells us that some youth groups are at a heightened risk of exposure. The simple qualifier of 'at-risk' and the factors associated with this finding are not as transparent as they might seem. The factors we use to identify at risk populations are often related to larger systemic inequalities that manifest themselves in the negative outcomes of members of discriminated populations. In examining studies analyzing the at-risk nature of various groups, it is important to ask why? Why are some, but not all, youth groups exposed to heightened risk? Why are some youth able to avoid the negative outcomes and not others?

Why are certain populations at-risk?

The negative outcomes that youth are at risk of experiencing are often not the result of individual failings, but of discrimination, disadvantage, and systemic inequality that interfere with the ability of certain youths to succeed in life. Smye, Browne, Varcoe, and Joseweski (2011) discuss the role of stigma and stereotype in relation to Aboriginal identity, drug abuse, and treatment programs. They utilize "the dynamics of the intersections between problematic substance use, other aspects of social identity, and different forms of oppression associated with social and structural contexts" as a guide to understanding inequalities, multiple stigmas, and associated drug use (p. 18). Historical and structural inequities are described in their study as factors contributing to the heightened risk of Aboriginal individuals for drug abuse. Residential Schools in particular are described as "devastating... [and] the most often cited cause of the mental health

concerns of Aboriginal people in Canada" (p. 21-22). Wang, Hsu, Lin, Cheng, and Lee (2010) discuss the broad and relative risk factor of "life stress" (p. 315-16). Among many other things, poor academic performance may be stressful, living in poverty can be traumatic, and being a discriminated against minority due to race or sexual orientation is a cause for distress. When we look at stigmas, discrimination, and life stress as factors for risk, it becomes clear that the qualification of 'at-risk' is even more complicated than it appears on the surface. There are no definitive answers on what causes negative outcomes, but it is undoubtedly more involved than a list of risk factors implies.

Why are some youth able to overcome the risk?

There are large portions of youth populations that are deemed at risk but do not live out the predictive negative outcomes. These youths are somehow able to overcome what appears to be insurmountable risk. Werner (2005) describes a shift in the way research on at-risk youth is approached. In the 1950s, studies focused on "casualties" through retrospective analysis, mapping the histories of individuals living negative outcomes. This gave the impression that these outcomes were inevitable results of the risk factors (p. 3). During the 1980s and 1990s, the approach involved prospective longitudinal models focusing on "survivors" and found that many individuals experiencing the same risk factors did not live out the negative outcomes they seemed destined to experience (p. 3-4). The research on the success of these youths points to the presence of protective factors and the resiliency of some youth over others who fall victim to the negative outcomes.

Wang et al. (2010) describe protective factors as positive traits or influences that can buffer the negative influences

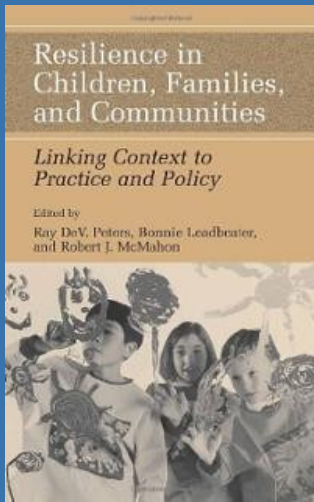associated with risk factors. These factors may be individual (based within the individual, such as self-efficacy) or environmental (external to the individual, such as the presence of positive non-parental peer role models) (p. 314). Resilience is defined as a dynamic process resulting in positive outcomes in spite of heightened risk (Werner, 2005, p. 4). Protective factors, like risk factors, often co-occur, protective factors, however, have been found to have a more significant impact than specific risk factors and importantly these buffers transcend ethnicity, social class, and geographical locations (Werner, 2005, p. 5). Werner (2005) describes a "common core" of protective factors that contribute to resilience which were found in a variety of studies that examined different risk factors; it includes: good health, an easy-going and engaging temperament, intellectual and scholastic competence, an internal locus of control, a positive self-concept, the ability to plan ahead, a strong religious faith or sense of coherence, a competent and responsive mother role model, affectionate bonds with alternate caregivers, and an external support system (such as in the school, church, etc.) that rewards competence (p. 5). Table 1 by Benzies and Mychasiuk (2009) lists multiple internal and external protective factors by their location (p. 105).

Conclusion: Why Is This Important?

We need to work harder at increasing the resiliency and protective factors of youth deemed at-risk. As mentioned, there is no one path to becoming at-risk and there are many youth in our society who can be qualified as at a heightened risk for specific (and often for many) negative outcomes. Based on the idea that protective factors are more significant for youth than risk factors

we need to bolster these youth and their environments to better promote the success and happiness of youth, and the future of our society. Programs which target at-risk youth should aim to promote the growth and maintenance of protective factors in their design. We cannot change a youth's gender or ethnic background, we cannot force adults to stay in two parent-families, and we cannot undo childhood traumas. However, we can help youths to develop and enhance the dynamic protective factors that have been found to help youth already experiencing negative outcomes help themselves. Identifying risk is important in targeting youth in need of support but so too is identifying protective factors and taking action to promote resiliency.

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Table 1: Organization of Protective Factors According to Ecological Model

Individual	Family	Community
• Internal locus of control	• Family structure	• Involvement in the community
• Emotional regulation	• Intimate partner relationship stability	• Peer acceptance
• Belief systems	• Family cohesion	• Supportive mentors
• Self-efficacy	• Supportive parent-child interaction	• Safe neighbourhoods
• Effective coping skills	• Stimulating environment	• Access to quality schools, child care
• Increased education, skills and training	• Social support	• Access to quality health care
• Health	• Family of origin influences	
• Temperament	• Stable and adequate income	
• Gender	• Adequate housing	

At-Risk Youth: What are the Factors?

By Dan Scratch and Alyssa Lamouche, Volunteer Writers

The term at-risk youth is a common phrase that can sometimes be misunderstood or confused amongst other similar terms. According to Cunningham, Cohan, Naudeau, and McGinnis (2008), "youth at risk can be defined as individuals between the ages of 12 and 24 who face "environmental, social, and family conditions that hinder their personal development and their successful integration into society as productive citizens." (p. 9, As cited in Cunningham and Correia, 2003). The barriers that confront at-risk youth are detrimental to their full development as human beings. Because of these barriers, many youth revolt against the context in which they find themselves by partaking in devious or delinquent behaviours such as substance abuse, school absenteeism, risky sexual encounters, violence, and gang activity (Cunningham, Cohan, Naudeau, and McGinnis, 2008, 9). However, what should be noted by those from the outside looking in is that although these youth do participate in dangerous behaviours, they are first and foremost survivors. Many at-risk youth live in dangerous and violent conditions in which they have to navigate for survival. Many do not have their basic human rights met and therefore are backed into a corner and forced to participate in dangerous behaviours and groups. The question we must ask ourselves is: what are the current factors in Edmonton that marginalize certain youth to become at-risk?

The socio-economic conditions of a society are a major factor that causes youth to become at-risk. Many of these youth in Edmonton are currently living in poverty with unstable housing conditions. Evidence of this can be found in the city's latest homeless count. During the homeless count, volunteers counted 698 individuals who were either 30 years of age or younger (including dependent children (Homeward Trust Edmonton, 2013) indicated that, "there were 698 individuals counted aged 30 or younger (including dependent children). Although this report is able to give

us a possible indicator of youth who are facing homelessness and poverty, the actual numbers could be much larger. Youth living in poverty are born into an environment in which they face social abandonment and political neglect, which can leave them feeling disenfranchised and ostracized from the larger community in which they live in.

Many youth living in poverty will aspire for the material comforts of the middle and upper class. As they become aware that their economic conditions will limit these aspirations, they may build feelings of frustration and aggression towards the dominant society (Sharma, 2012, 30). This frustration for many at-risk youth can be unleashed at dominant authority figures in society such as teachers, police officers, and even social workers. At-risk youth can then feel that the education system, among other societal institutions, is not working in their favour. Without understanding or seeing the value of formal education, chances at finding meaningful employment can be slim. Without employment to provide income, how will youth or their families be able to afford the necessities of life? Some turn to social aids such as welfare. However, others find different means to get what they need to survive. Without money, many youth may resort to stealing or crime to get basic necessities. In 2010, 68% of "street-involved-youth" had been incarcerated at least once.(Alberta Health Services, 2011, iii) This high rate of exposure with the criminal justice system will only further the alienation of youth towards the dominant society and increase their chances of living a more at-risk lifestyle.

Although youth at risk are not confined to one socio-economic or ethnic group, there are important indicators that we must be aware of. In a report conducted by Alberta Health Services about the activities of "Street-Involved-Youth" in Edmonton, several demographic indicators are of interest. Although most of the youth reported being born in Canada, over half
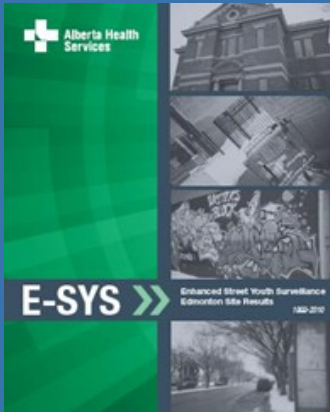
Additional Resource
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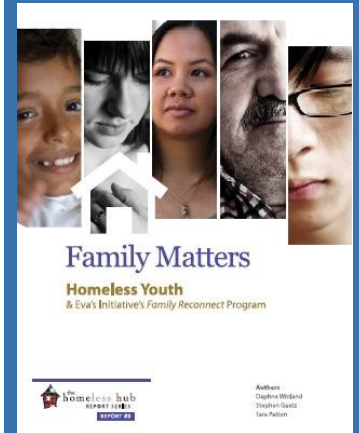
Winland, D., Gaetz, S. & Patton, T. (2011). Family matters: **Homeless youth & Eva's Initiative's family reconnect program**. Retrieved from http://www.homelesshub.ca/ResourceFiles/FamilyMatters_April2011.pdf

In the report, Family Matters, this program is examined to evaluate how reconnecting with family may help some young people avoid long term homelessness. In doing this review, the authors raise some important questions about the Canadian response to youth homelessness. They argue for a rather radical transformation of this response, one that reconsiders the role of strengthened family (and community) relations in preventing and responding to youth homelessness.

(59.4%) of "street-involved-youth" identified as Aboriginal (Alberta Health Services, 2011, p. iii). This statistic is a major indication that some minority groups in Edmonton face unfair barriers or challenges that other groups do not. Unfortunately, discrimination faced by Aboriginal youth can be a major factor in leading a youth toward an at-risk lifestyle. Within Canada, the federal government has taken on a paternalistic and discriminatory view of Aboriginal affairs over the course of our history. This paternalistic and racist thought-process led to residential schools that devastated Aboriginal communities across Canada, as many faced verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Sharma, 2012, p. 29). As Sharma (2012) reports, "these experiences not only contributed to depression, substance abuse, and social exclusion for the survivors of the abuse but also for their children. Suffering from these social ailments can cause social exclusion that can eliminate participating in our formal economy and a way out of an at-risk lifestyle.

Sadly, substance abuse has been seen as another major factor that pushes youth into becoming at-risk. A majority of at-risk youth have either battled alcohol or drug addiction at one point, or have been involved heavily in the life of someone who has. For Edmonton street-involved-youth, 80.4% of youth have abused alcohol and 14.5 % have abused injection drugs (Alberta Health Services, 2011, p. iii). An alarming number of youth have reported being abused or witnessing violence while they were living on the streets or within an institution (Alberta Health Services, 2011, p. iii). This level of abuse can push youth to turn to drugs and alcohol. They wish to numb the pain of the abuse, sadness, or anxiety. In order to do this they medicate themselves to let go, even if it is just for a little while. According to Goldstein, Amiri, Vilhena, Wekerle, Thornton, Tonmyr, (2007) "while findings vary across studies, reported rates of concurrent mental health symptoms and substance use are as high as 93% among youth who are homeless and diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder". Although substance abuse can be understood as a disorder or coping mechanism to deal with the difficulties that at-risk youth face, it is also a major factor that initiates many youth into an at-risk lifestyle.

There are many factors that can contribute to youth living an at-risk lifestyle. However, socio-economic status, discrimination, and substance abuse can be found at the core that either encourage or force youth to be at risk. As a society, we must come to the realization that most at-risk youth do not have their basic human rights met when they are unable to have proper housing, food, and feel the safety that is necessary to reach their potential. In the spirit of justice, we must focus our attention to reduce and eliminate the factors that youth face in becoming at-risk if we are to create a fair and equal Edmonton.

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The Impact of Social Capital on Youth

By Natty Klimo, Volunteer Writer

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Research has shown that the underdevelopment of social capital is a potential factor that can cause youth to be at-risk. As part of this research, emphasis has been placed on the critical role that the family plays in the development of an individual's social capital, leading to the healthy development of individuals and society. Social capital is defined as the outcome of social relationships that individuals find within their family, school and community groups, and where trust, loyalty, security, self-confidence and well-being are developed (Bassani, 2007). Research indicates that higher levels of social capital encourages resilience among adolescents, and that the lack thereof can lead to negative outcomes, such as delinquency, substance abuse and depression (Laser & Leibowitz, 2009). When evaluating how social capital affects youth's well-being it is important to consider the existence of various forms of capital and how these forms of capital can be transformed into mobilizing resources (Bassani, 2007).

Two forms of capital that are essential in the acquisition of social capital are financial capital and human capital. While financial capital refers to wealth, human capital is made up of an individual's skills (Coleman, 1988). In the context of the family, financial capital is demonstrated by the financial resources made available to its members, and human capital is measured by a parent's education, which aids in providing a learning environment for youth (Coleman,

1988). While a parent's human capital is important for the youth's development, it becomes irrelevant if a parent is not physically present and emotionally engaged with the youth. A parent can be physically present, but if a strong relationship does not exist and the youth is neglected, there will be a lack of social capital (Coleman, 1988).
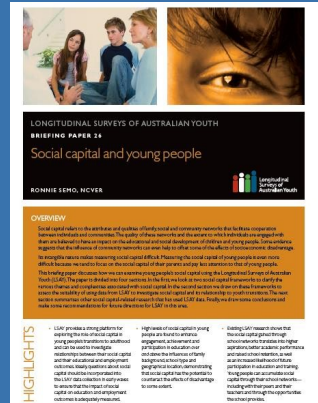
In many regards, the time invested and the social relationship between youth and their parents is far more important for development than the skills that a parent possesses. An example of this was illustrated in a public school in the United States, where various immigrant families of Asian descent purchased two of each of the required textbooks for their children, so that the mother could study and help her children with their homework (Coleman, 1988). In this case the mother's human capital was low, but the amount of social capital that enabled a learning environment for the children was high, demonstrating that ultimately the level of social capital determines whether or not a child will benefit from the parent's human capital, regardless of the amount possessed by a parent (Coleman, 1988).

The resources provided to youth by their parents are not automatically turned into capital; rather they need to be mobilized (Bassani, 2007). When a youth has a positive relationship with his or her parent, only then will the parent's income, education and values be turned into resources that are mobilized into social capital (Bassani, 2007). The mobilization of resources depends on structural social resources and functional social resources, and whether efficiencies and deficiencies are present (Bassani, 2007).

Structural social resources refer to the number of members that make up the family, while functional social resources refer to the social relationships and interactions that take place between members of the family (Bassani, 2007). If there are too many children in the family a deficiency may exist, as there are too few
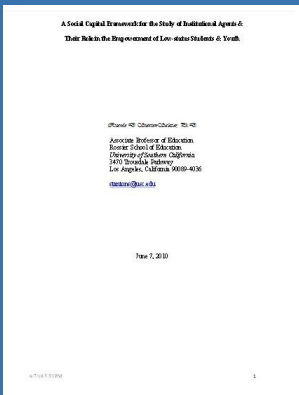
"This article builds on a sociological account of working-class minority youth development and differential access to social capital—defined in terms of key resources and support provided by institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2004). The article elaborates on the concept of institutional agents—specifically, high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support. "

Photo by David Ip

adults to interact with the children in order to meet their needs (Bassani, 2007). While siblings can enrich family relations, and help in meeting each other's needs, if too much attention needs to be devoted to a particular sibling, the youth's resources become depleted at a faster rate, leading to decreased functional social resources (Bassani, 2007).

Functional social resources are based on interactions between the youth and family members, and depend largely on structural social resources, as social interaction is hindered if there are not enough members in the family to interact with (Bassani, 2007). In addition, social capital is weak when common values are not shared and when positive communication is non-existent between the youth and family members, as differing values can lead to a less intimate relationship and less time spent with each other (Bassani, 2007). While deficiencies in structural social resources can lead to functional social resource deficiencies, the latter can lead to deficiencies in structural social resources, demonstrating the dynamic relationship between the number of family members and the interactions that exist among them in the development of social capital (Bassani, 2007).

Youth can develop social capital through secondary groups that are then bridged to the family. A youth can acquire membership in secondary groups through a parent's social networks, as well as those of their teachers (Bassani, 2007). Each youth in the secondary group brings their own family capital into the group and these resources can then be mobilized by other youth within the secondary group, creating social capital (Bassani, 2007). The effects of bridging

depends on the capital that is made available within the primary and secondary groups, and can be categorized as having a booster effect, double jeopardy effect, or a compensating effect (Bassani, 2007). The booster effects refer to youth having high social capital in both groups and it is expected that these youth will have better health, behaviour and academic achievement (Bassani, 2007). The jeopardy effect occurs when youth have low social capital in both groups and experience lower health, behavior and academic achievement. The compensating effect occurs when high social capital found in a group compensates for low social capital found in the other groups (Bassani, 2007).

The first forms of socialization take place within the family; therefore, family structure and relationships can have a very significant impact on the life of individuals. Although there are many factors that can cause youth to be at-risk, the quality and quantity of those interactions with family members are deemed to be very important in developing social capital that enhances a youth's sense of well-being and self-esteem. The resources made available to youth by their parents and other social networks aids them in the development of resilience and life skills, thus making youth less likely to find themselves at-risk.

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Gendered Experience of Youth Homelessness

By Catherine Fan, Volunteer Writer

"Defining homelessness as a housing issue exclusively neglects the experiences of "home" for women. For women, homelessness is not resolved by simply having a roof over her head unless it is accompanied by a sense of safety and security" (Lenon, 2007).

In recent years, there has been important progress in de-homogenizing the face of the homeless population in order to better address the needs of particular subgroups for which inadequate housing is both a symptom and a cause of larger issues. In particular, research into the cases of homeless young women is an emerging field, shedding light on a complex subset of the homeless population whose needs intersect with various age and gender-related issues.

While all street-involved youth face difficulties negotiating the adult environment of the streets as adolescents, young women are particularly vulnerable on the streets from both a developmental and gendered standpoint. Unlike adult homelessness, youth homelessness is often due to breakdowns in traditional support networks like families or child welfare systems that leave youth with inadequate resources to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood (Taylor-Butts, 2007). Yet the services available from governments and the non-profit sector are sometimes inadequate to compensate; having aged out of government childcare, youth even in their early 20s sometimes require additional support that is unavailable in adult programs (AuCoin, 2005). For young women, this dynamic takes on an important gendered element. More likely to be sexually and physically abused in their homes, and more likely to report abuse as a cause of their homelessness, young women are increasingly turning to battered women's shelters to cope with both homelessness and traumatic family histories (Statistics

Photo by Adypants (Flickr)

Canada, 2005, 2011). While the services available in women's shelters - divided between child and adult programming - are sometimes unable to meet the full range of young women's developmental needs, many youth shelters equally struggle to provide adequate counselling services to meet young women's mental health needs, making it difficult for them to easily access services in one central location (Statistics Canada, 2005, 2007).

Compounding the challenges of meeting the needs of the population of homeless young women, much of recent academic literature on gendered experiences of homelessness indicates that women experience a hidden form of homelessness that is inaccessible to service providers. Vestiges of traditional gender norms continue to define the spaces available to women, such that men are able to "[assert] ownership" over the streets, "a quintessential male space" in ways that women cannot (Wardhaugh, 1999). More vulnerable in public spaces, 43.3% of homeless women surveyed in Toronto, for instance, were victims of "unwanted sexual advances" while living on the streets, as opposed to 14.1% of homeless men (Lenon, 2000). This vulnerability – perceived and experienced – in turn, comes to define young women's experiences of life on the streets.

Though young women are outnumbered by young men in counts of street youth and youth shelter users, the academic literature does not seem to infer that real homelessness rates among both groups differ substantially. Rather, studies explain that issues like the lack of privacy and

"Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population in North America. This review brings together the literature on the topic of LGBTQ youth homelessness and provides a comprehensive overview of the unique needs of this population, as well as gaps and barriers to support. The review culminates in recommendations for support services and further research on this topic. This review should be particularly useful for youth shelter and service providers, and policy makers to respond to the needs of this population and to enhance knowledge in this area more broadly."
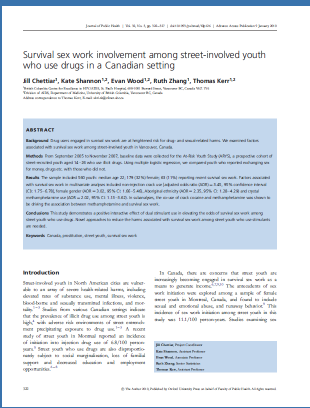
Chettiar, J., Shannon, K., Wood E., Zhang R., & Kerr T. (2010). Survival sex work involvement among street-involved youth who use drugs in a Canadian setting. *Journal of Public Health Vol. 32 (3).* P. 322-327. Retrieved from http://jpubhealth.oxfordjournals.org/content/32/3/322.full.pdf+html

"Drug users engaged in survival sex work are at heightened risk for drug- and sexual-related harms. We examined factors associated with survival sex work among street-involved youth in Vancouver, Canada."

Photo from Weeve.it

security (14% of youth shelter users were identified as instigators of abuse by shelter workers nationwide) are primary factors that push young women to depend on private networks of friends, street families, or relationships with older men to cope with homelessness instead (Taylor-Butts, 2007). Ironically, however, this fear of the streets makes them more vulnerable by compelling them to seek out and rely on "deviant social networks" that "increase the likelihood of severe victimization…assault and exploitation. Since re-victimization and coercive relationships reinforce what they learned in their families, this process is very hard to reverse" (Novac et al., 2002). While less visible, such patterns of homelessness are no less harmful than the more overt homeless experienced by young men, as formal living arrangements (whether squats or shared apartments) do not guarantee independence from the fear of future homelessness. Rather, limited economic opportunities and reliance on deviant social networks are mutually reinforcing. Because of their vulnerability, young women are more restricted than young men to income-generating activities like panhandling or prostitution that occurs in groups or under the supervision of older male pimps – activities trade labour, sex or freedom for security (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004). Receiving diminished proceeds of income generated thus creates an additional relationship of economic dependency on such groups. Diminished economic prospects and chronic insecurity combined produce additional mental health pressures on young women "more likely [than young men] to experience stress, depression, and lower levels of work satisfaction," citing "the experience of abuse and humiliation as reasons for not liking their current work" (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004).

Policy implications

Given the different ways youth experience homelessness, there is a clear need for more nuanced approaches to service provision. Yet homeless young women are not only invisible to the public – they are noticeably missing from the dialogue in the academic and non-profit community as well. Homeless counts, surveys and interviews of homeless youth, for instance, are frequently conducted at shelters or in the street and thus likely underestimate the number of young women with problems securing adequate housing. Part of the problem is structural. Shelters are the primary location to track and distribute services to the homeless population, and it is difficult to engage with a type of homelessness that is, by definition, largely hidden. But there are areas for improvement on gender issues that have arisen from the existing literature. At the most basic level of tracking system users, the 2006 Youth Shelter Pilot Survey (YSPS) found that a small number of shelters had difficulty breaking down shelter usage data by sex despite important differences in the profiles of male and female youth (Taylor-Butts, 2007). On the level of service provision, the YSPS additionally found significant funding challenges towards implementing services disproportionately required by young women. 40% of shelters surveyed identified a need for increased funding to implement new programs and services. 54% of youth shelters surveyed identified security as a main priority for the future needs of shelter residents; 28% specifically identified mental health services as an additional need for its residents, with a total of 64% of shelters reporting having to refer residents requiring mental health counselling to other agencies (Statistics Canada, 2007). Certainly, increasing the range of services immediately available at youth shelters is good practice regardless; the importance of such reforms, however, is increased when one considers that young women are disproportionately affected by their absence.

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At-Risk Youth Programs in Vancouver

By Hayley Orton, Volunteer Writer

Photo by Directions Youth Services Centre

Vancouver is facing a number of challenges when it comes to youth crime prevention and rehabilitation. It is the centre of gang activity in Canada with over 102 youth gangs in the Vancouver region (Justice Education Society, 2011, p. 1). Youth violent crime rates are lower in Metropolitan Vancouver than in either Toronto or Montreal. However, the recent statistics indicate that the rates in the latter cities are in decline. From 2004-2009, violent crime rates dropped 5.4% in Toronto and 16.5% in Montreal. These trends are in contrast to Vancouver, where rates increase by 6.5 % in the same time period (Vancouver Foundation, 2010, p. 13). So what programs and practices are in place in Vancouver to reverse this negative trend? The following article will give an overview of some of the best practices that the city of Vancouver has available in service delivery to at-risk youth.

The Collaborative Community Health Research Centre (2002, p. 3) reviewed the best practices in the provision of youth services. They found that it was essential to facilitate the learning of appropriate cognitive, interpersonal, social and physical skills, which will allow youth at risk to reach their full potential. Vancouver has a number of such targeted programs that reach-out to youth through partnerships between school, family, and community.

One such partnership is supported by the Vancouver School Board. A gang lifestyle may be attractive to an immigrant youth struggling to develop a Canadian identity and/or maintaining their ethnic/cultural identity (Justice Education Society, 2011, p. 1). The Engaged Immigrant Youth program offered through the Vancouver School Board supports vulnerable immigrant youth with overcoming the challenges of

"The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of service providers and youth advocates working with lesbian and gay communities in order to increase understanding of bullying of lesbian and gay youth."

Photo by Brett Beadle, Globe and Mail

integrating into a new culture, school, and community. The participating youth are often at risk of not completing high school and not reaching potential educational goals because of low attendance and disengagement. The program looks to support the students with small class sizes, leadership and community-based activities, all under the guidance of and support from youth workers. This program has produced impressive results in 2011 with over 155 vulnerable youth completed or in process of completing an individualized work-plan (Vancouver School Board, 2012b, p. 1).

The second initiative supported by the Vancouver Public School board offers support to immigrant children and their families through Multicultural Liaison Workers. The workers act as linguistic and cultural bridges between parents, students, schools, and community helping with the transition to Canadian society. For instance, they represent families by being their 'voice' in communication with school and staff (Vancouver School Board, 2012c). This program helps children of any school age and their families.

Take a Hike is another effective program offered through the Vancouver Public School Board and the Take a Hike Youth at Risk Foundation that caters to at-risk youth who have dropped out of school or are at a threat of doing so. It aims to develop the positive behaviors and attributes that the students need to become healthy, productive citizens. The program uses two approaches: (1) through outdoor activities to improve academic and (2) problem solving skills and counseling to learn new coping skills (Vancouver School Board, 2012d). In 2011, 86% of participants finished the program and all of the students reported a feeling of improvement in social

and communication skills, self-esteem, and connection to school (Take a Hike Youth at Risk Foundation, 2012, p. 7).

To provide outreach to at-risk youth who may be not showing outward signs of needing support, British Columbia has set up a YouthinBC.com website. This resource offers online crisis chat services for youth. Staffed by trained volunteers, this portal acts as a way to provide online support for youth under the age of 25 who are facing a crisis situation. In 2004, after noticing a decline in the number of calls it was receiving, the organization in charge of the website added an online chat component to its service and have seen the number of youth using that service increase tremendously (Findlay, 2009). As of 2008, about 14,540 youth visited YouthInBC.com and 1,428 accessed the instant online chat service. (Findlay, 2009). In addition to this, the website provides easily accessible youth-related resources on violence, drugs, alcohol, addictions, mental and sexual health and safe houses in the Vancouver area. It provides links to and information about local organizations that deal with the above-listed issues. For instance, if a youth is having trouble at home and needs a safe place to stay, the website offers information on several safe houses in Vancouver area.

An alternative program was created by the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) called the Youth Services Unit. Its goal is to divert youth who have committed petty crimes such as vandalism, property theft, simple assaults, and mischief from the courts and traditional punishment. Under this program, the five VPD Youth Referral Coordinators deal with cases of repeat youth offenders and find alternative methods of sentencing while ensuring accountability. The coordinator works closely with the youth regarding sentencing and outcomes. The coordinator also engages the family to determine why the youth is committing crimes, and organizes a support system to help the youth complete his/her sentence (North Shore Family Court & Youth Justice Committee, 2007, p. 2). The youth is referred to a partner community organization who is then in charge of establishing the youth in a variety of

community-based activities, offering an apology to the victim, or pairing them up with a mentor and/or counseling (Vancouver Police Department, 2013). During eight months of one Youth Referral Coordinator's work, only two files were not completed successfully (North Shore Family Court & Youth Justice Committee, 2007, p. 2).

Vancouver has a number of progressive initiatives that facilitate the learning of essential skills to allow at-risk youth to succeed in life. Through such initiatives as Take a Hike, YouthinBC.com, and the VPD Youth Referral Unit, the Vancouver youth has access to psychological and informational support, opportunities to learn important coping skills, and crisis counseling. While there are several challenges with the above programs, such as across-agency collaboration, funding, and capacity, they could serve as a powerful guide for Edmonton in responding to challenges of at-risk youth.

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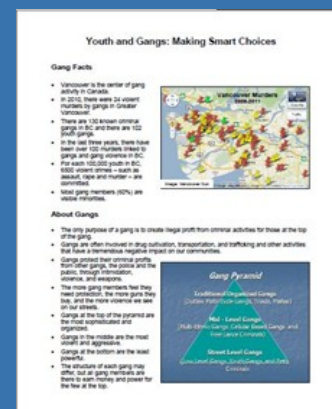
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Additional Resource

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Quick Facts

- In Canada, 33,000 people are homeless on any given day, youth comprise 11,000 of them.
- In the City of Toronto, in one year, it is estimated that as many as 10,000 youth find themselves homeless at some point.
- As many as 1,500 to 2,000 Toronto youth are homeless in one night .

Taken from:

Covenant House. (2012). Facts and stats on youth homelessness. Retrieved from http://www.covenanthouse.ca/Public/Facts-and-Stats

Youth Homelessness in Toronto: Strategies to Deal With and Prevent Youth Homelessness

By Michelle Harkness, Volunteer Writer

Photo by Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

For many, Toronto is an attractive destination to live. It is a highly culturally diverse city. In 2012, 85,000 international immigrants were projected to reside in Toronto and 8 out 10 immigrant families were classified as a minority (Toronto Community Foundation, 2012). The social scene is just as diverse as its population. Watching the Maple Leafs play at the Air Canada Centre, shopping at Toronto Eaton Centre and sightseeing at the CN Tower are just the start of a multitude of activities one can do in the city of Toronto. Toronto is also economically strong. Last year, Toronto had the highest economic momentum then it has had in the past 10 years as well as the city ranked number one on the Canadian Metropolitan Economic Activity Index (Toronto Community Foundation, 2012).

While on the surface Toronto is a city that has a lot going for it, there are facts that cannot be ignored. Upwards of 10,000 youth find themselves homeless at some point in a year. Worse yet, up to 2,000 youth find themselves homeless each night (Covenant House, 2012).

Fortunately, the City of Toronto has recognized the severity of this issue, and has worked towards finding solutions. One of the ways they have addressed youth homelessness is through social programs and by supporting community based agencies that provide outreach services for homeless youth. The following are some programs that have been put in place to aid youth living on the streets.

Street to Homes Youth Program
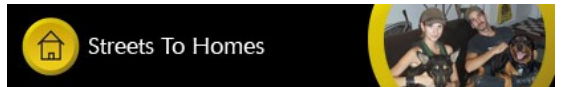
'Street to Homes' is a 24 hour 7 days a week program endorsed by Toronto's municipal government, a part of their strategy to end homelessness (City of Toronto, 2013a). The goal of this program is to ensure that youth who are homeless gain access to housing. Street outreach counsellors interact with street youth and work with them to obtain permanent housing. Additionally, they also address the various physical, emotional, and social barriers that prevent youth from being fully integrated and successful in the community. These barriers can include physical and mental health issues, addictions, and a lack of education and employment opportunities. 'Streets to Homes' also link youth to other social agencies that deal with youth homeless as part of a broader network of homeless support.

Youth Link Inner City

 An extension of the Streets to Homes Program is 'Youth Link Inner City' (YouthLink, 2013). Youth Link provides safe and affordable co-op housing for youth between the ages of 16 and 21. In addition to housing, youth are mentored and work with a counsellor to plan, set, and achieve personal goals such as education and employment success.

Youth Shelters

The City of Toronto financially supports a variety of youth shelters through the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division. In 2008, there

were 14 Youth Shelters in existence with approximately 525 beds per shelter (City of Toronto, 2008, p. 2). Shelters such as Covenant House and Eva's Place provide basic needs (food, shelter, and clothing) as well as offer comprehensive counselling and access to health care, employment and education options. These services put youth on a path towards success so they can access affordable housing and successfully integrate into society.

Other City Funded Initiatives: Housing and Homeless Supports Initiative (HHSI)

Photo by Light Patrol

Toronto's Housing and Homelessness Supports Initiative created the 'Rent Bank' as a way to address housing emergency situations (City of Toronto, 2013b). The 'Rent Bank' ensures at-risk youth avoid eviction by providing short term financial assistance through loans to cover rent shortages or unpredictable utility costs. The initiative also assists agencies to provide adequate street outreach to youth homeless. Light Patrol (2013) and The Canadian Red Cross (2013) are two agencies that provide year round outreach. Both agencies provide food, warm clothing and blankets by mobilizing a motor vehicle - usually a large van or motor home.

Overall, the City of Toronto has used a variety of policy tools and initiatives to address youth homelessness. Homelessness is a complex issue. However, by addressing the needs of those vulnerable and providing solutions, there is hope that if a large metropolitan city like Toronto can reduce its homeless youth population, then other cities can find best practices and tailor to the needs of its at-risk youth.

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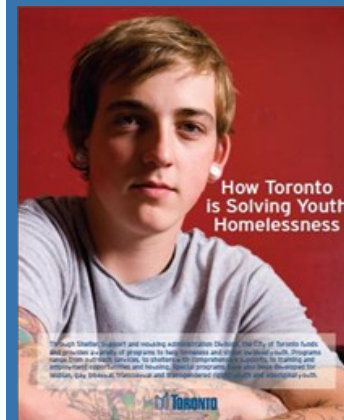
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You are invited to attend our Annual General Mixer!

Our AGM will be held during the evening of Wednesday, May 8th in the Centennial Room at the Stanley Milner Library in Downtown Edmonton.

The time of the event and our guest speaker will be announced on our website in the near future.

Ngo, H. V. (2010). Unravelling identities and belonging: Criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families. Retrieved from https://www.threesource.ca/documents/June2011/unravelling_identities.pdf

"This research sought to answer (1) why and how some youth from immigrant families have become involved in criminal gang activity, and (2) what strategies can be used to effectively support high risk and gang involved youth from immigrant families. "

Ottawa's Youth Gang Prevention Initiative: A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Gangs

By Chris Rudge, Volunteer Writer

Photo by Tony Caldwell, QMI Agency

Urbanization and Youth Gangs in Canada

While many view Canada as a vast wilderness whose citizens are intrinsically connected with untamed nature on a daily bases, the reality is we are an overwhelmingly urban society. As of the 2006 national census, four out of every five Canadians (80%) lived in areas classified as urban and 68% lived in one of the nation's 33 Census Metropolitan Areas (population greater than 100,000). Canada's six largest cities (Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary and Edmonton) alone is where almost half (45%) of Canadians call home. These numbers are rapidly growing as more and more Canadians find themselves in the midst of urban centres for a variety of economic and social reasons. Edmonton's growth is forefront to this trend, with its urban population increasing 10% from 2001 to 2006 (Statistics Canada 2008).

With such an urbanized population come the problems - and opportunities - of an urban society, and Canada is not insular to this reality. One such issue, youth gangs, has become increasingly prominent over the past two decades. In a nation-wide study of youth gangs, Public Safety Canada (2007) found 434 known youth gangs with a total membership of approximately 7,000. Not surprisingly, this same study found that youth experiencing "inequality and social disadvantage" were the most at-risk of aligning themselves with gangs (Public Safety Canada 2007).

Youth gangs in Canada are overwhelmingly male, with African Canadians, First Nations and Caucasians comprising the bulk of their membership (Public Safety Canada 2007). Distribution of youth gangs in Canada is not even; Winnipeg alone has an estimated 2,000 youth gang members (RCMP 2006) and highlights the need to address urban issues to ensure membership doesn't grow to these proportions in other urban centres.

Ottawa and the Youth Gang Prevention Initiative

Ottawa, like Canada's five other major urban centres, experiences youth criminal gang activity. While some news outlets have reported that the City is plagued by youth gangs, gang membership and activity are relatively low compared to other Canadian cities, with approximately 600 youth gang members in the City (Chettleburgh 2008). Despite these low numbers, a disturbing trend of very young involvement has emerged, with children as young as eight being associated with gangs, and 10 to 12 year olds involved in the transportation and selling of drugs, including crack-cocaine. Another finding by Chettlebursg (2008) was that youth gang membership includes growing numbers from the City's suburbs and bedroom communities (i.e. Kanata and Orleans), dispelling the notion that these are strictly "inner city" issues. This report went on to note that the successful engagement of at-risk youth and the reduction of youth gang activity would require firm commitments

from the City and the establishment of a multi-stakeholder program. The findings and recommendations from Chettleburgh's report were used a as basis for the development of the Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) by Crime Prevention Ottawa, a City funded community organization.

The Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) is a multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at developing a comprehensive response to existing youth gangs and the prevention of their proliferation throughout the City. The program's development involved over thirty local groups including the United Way, RCMP, Boys and Girls Club of Canada and numerous other government and non-profit organizations. In consultation with these groups, Crime Prevention Ottawa developed the OYGPI, which focuses on four key components aimed at addressing youth gangs: Healthy neighbourhood cohesion, prevention, intervention and suppression. These four components were designed to create a web of cohesion among communities, families and social services aimed at at-risk youth (Kelly 2009). Table 1 below provides a brief summary of these four strategies, examples of actions and outcomes for each.

It was also understood throughout OYGPI's development that all four of these components must be integrated and that responding to a single component - in isolation - would be ineffective (OYGPI 2009). This strategy reflects findings by Public Safety Canada in their report Addressing Youth Gang Problems (2008) noting ineffective responses to youth gangs were ones that included a singular focus on suppression, incarcerations, "in-the-field" gang workers and generic, gang awareness education programs. Simply put by Crime Prevention Ottawa (2012), "this is not a problem we can arrest our way out if".

Next Steps and Lessons Learned

While results of the OYGPI have yet to be published, the comprehensive nature of the program, the large number of community-based organizations engaged and a general understanding that the issue of youth gangs is complex and multi-faceted, bode well for the program. Since Chettleburgh's 2008 and Kelly's 2009 reports, Crime Prevention Ottawa has developed and supported the development of several documents as part of the OYGPI including a report on improving access to recreation for at-risk
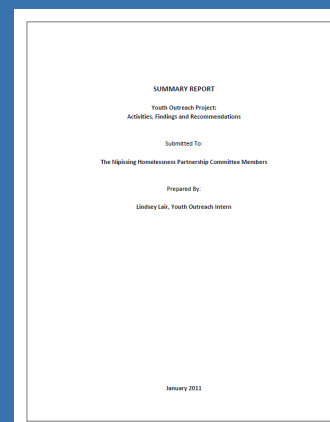
Table 1. OYGPI Four Key Components

Component	Actions	Outcomes
Healthy Neighbourhood Cohesion	• Community celebrations • Neighbourhood Watch programs • Community clean-up events	• Develop community capacity • Reduce fear • Positive social interactions in community
Prevention	• After school programs • Increased recreation • Outreach and mental health support • Employment programs • Parenting programs	• Youth have positive interactions with community, school, and family • Reduce attraction of gang life
Intervention	• Intensive employment programs • Gang exit programs • Programs for suspended and expelled youth	• Positively engage youth currently involved in gang activity or associating with gangs
Suppression	• Targeted law enforcement • Highly visible policing • Targeted evictions	• Reducing criminal gang activity

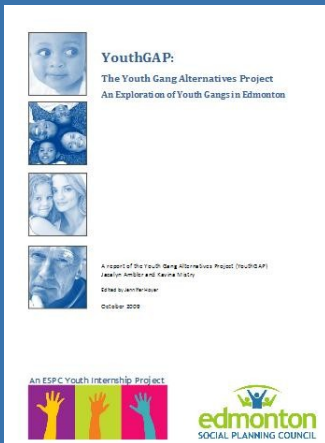*Table developed from information presented in Kelly (2009)

YouthGAP:
The Youth Gang Alternatives Project
An Exploration of Youth Gangs in Edmonton

A report of the Youth Gang Alternatives Project (YouthGAP)
Jocelyn Ambler and Kavina Mistry

Edited by Jennifer Kavur

October 2009

An ESPC Youth Internship Project

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Ambler, J. & Mistry, K. (2009) YouthGAP : The youth gangs alternative project : an exploration of youth gangs in Edmonton. Retrieved online from https://www.threesource.ca/documents/ESPCarchives/2000s/2009_youthgap.pdf

The objective of YouthGAP is to detail the current trends of Edmonton gangs and to use that information to support appropriate and effective programs, services and policies. This study draws on existing resources about youth gangs in Canada as well as interviews with representatives of Edmonton service providers working actively with at-risk and gang affiliated youth.

Photo from cgtextures.com

youth, needs assessment and service awareness study for youth in priority neighbourhoods, an analysis of the life courses of youth gang members and a report on exit strategies and programs with the University of Ottawa. These studies have the potential to provide excellent, locally relevant, research-based justifications for greater, targeted investment in youth gang prevention in Ottawa. Ultimately, it is up to the City of Ottawa and other levels of government to carry through and provide the necessary resources to make these valuable initiatives a reality.

While recent efforts by the City of Ottawa have yet to produce data or best-practices for other cities to consider, the key lesson garnered from the development of the OYGIP may be equally important. Simplified, single-focus campaigns against youth gangs and other so-call "tough on crime" approaches are unlikely to result in any meaningful betterment of society, or at-risk youth; buy-in, and active participation, from local organizations experienced with at-risk youth is essential for an effective, holistic program; and any city that truly wishes to address this issue must understand and support a comprehensive system of programs designed to enhance

social cohesion and fully support community programs and engagement.

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Trend Analysis in Young People's Homelessness

By Anne Stevenson, Volunteer Writer

The near doubling of homeless children in Edmonton between the 2010 and 2012 Homelessness Counts caught the attention and concern of many. Given the overall decrease in other subpopulations of homeless, this finding raised important questions about current trends and the unique conditions that give rise to child homelessness.

This article will consider patterns of homelessness in both dependent children (those accompanied by a caregiver) and independent youth (those without a caregiver) in the City of Edmonton, drawing on the Homeward Trust Point in Time Homeless Counts from 1999 to 2012 as well as insights gained from other jurisdictions.

Dependent Children

Dependent children represented 223 out of 2174 homeless individuals counted in 2012, or 10% of the total. This represents a considerable increase in both the proportion (5%) and absolute number (123) of homeless dependent children compared to what was observed in 2010. This marks a distinct shift from trends in recent years, which showed both the absolute number and the proportion of accompanied children steadily declining from 2006 to 2010 (Figure 1).

Any increase in the number of homeless children is unwelcome, but some potential explanations accounting for the significance of the shift suggest that the situation is not as dire as appears.

An initial explanation may lie in the use of a new method used to count dependent children. In 2012, children up to the age of 17 in the company of caregivers were included in the dependent child count, whereas previously only those up to the age of 16 were included. Homeward Trust also began asking individuals their age directly in 2012, as opposed to earlier counts where volunteers estimated people's age by observation. This change may have led to older looking teenagers being reclassified as dependent children rather than young adults.

Another factor to consider is the higher ratio of children per caretaker seen in 2012. In 2010, there was an average of 1.3 children per caretaker, whereas in 2012, there was an average of 1.9. If a ratio similar to 2010 was applied to the 119 caretakers in 2012, a smaller increase to 155 dependent children, as opposed to 223, would have been observed. Although the absolute increase in homeless dependents is

"The objective of this study was to examine the transferability of Safe in the City (SITC), based in London, England to the Canadian context. SITC was set up in 1998 by the Peabody Trust and Centrepoint, a charity working with homeless and socially excluded youth. The goals of SITC were to help young people stay safely at home; find alternative options for young people who cannot remain safely at home; and develop the life skills and employability of young people to enable them to make a smooth transition to independent lifestyles. SITC was of particular interest for a number of reasons - the project was undertaken by a non-governmental organization (NGO)."

Figure 1: Dependent Children as % of Total Count

Dependent children as % of total count

unwelcome, the count suggests that the magnitude of increase is more a result of more children per caretaker, rather than an acute crisis for families.

This still leaves an important question as to why the number of caregivers - homeless adults with dependent children - increased by 25% between 2010 and 2012 when the homeless population as a whole decreased by 10% in the same period. When looking at past trends, it can be seen that changes in the number of homeless children and their caregivers has not consistently reflected changing trends within the broader homeless population. For example, the number of caregivers and dependent children decreased between 2004 and 2006 when the rest of the homeless population was steadily increasing (Figure 2). One explanation for this dissonance could be that other factors such as family breakdown play a more important role in the rates of homeless children and their caregivers. This possibility is supported by observations in the Red Deer Point-in-Time homeless count, which found that 62% of homeless caretakers reported family breakdown and conflict as a barrier to being housed, compared to 24% of the total population count.
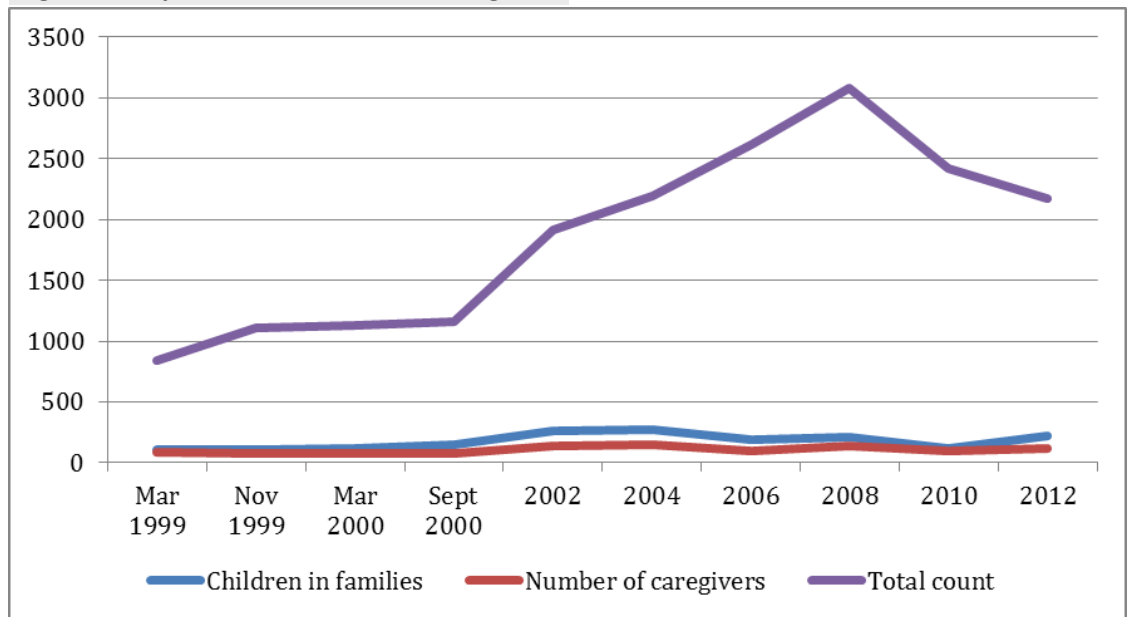
The absolute number of homeless dependent children and their caregivers tends to fluctuate dramatically, both increasing and decreasing at a more extreme rate than the rest of the homeless population from year to year (Figure 3). These fluctuations could speak to the more tenuous position of vulnerable families, and equally to the effectiveness of intervention with caregivers and their dependent children. The data makes a strong case that families are responsive to targeted initiatives (or the lack thereof) and underscores the importance and value of these programs.

A particularly encouraging trend can be observed in the proportion of sheltered versus non-sheltered dependent children. From 1999 to 2004, more homeless children were unsheltered than sheltered, peaking at 79% of all homeless dependent children being unsheltered in 2004. This ratio was consistently higher than among the broader homeless population (Figure 4).
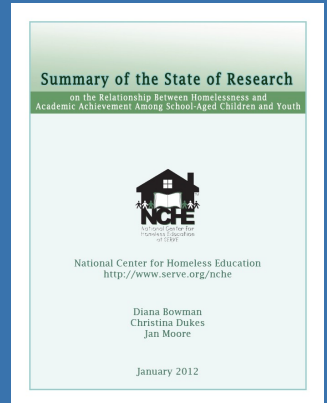
In 2006, there was a significant reversal of this trend, with the percentage of unsheltered dependent children shifting to 47% in 2006 and dropping further to 42% in 2008. This is likely related to the net gain of 83 shelter beds in Edmonton between 2004 and 2006 (Edmonton Homeless Count 2006, page 8). In the last two counts, the proportion of unsheltered children has regained a slight majority, shifting from 50% in 2010 to 52% in 2012. While it is clear significant gains have been made in providing temporary shelter for homeless dependent children, attention is needed to ensure this trend does not reverse.

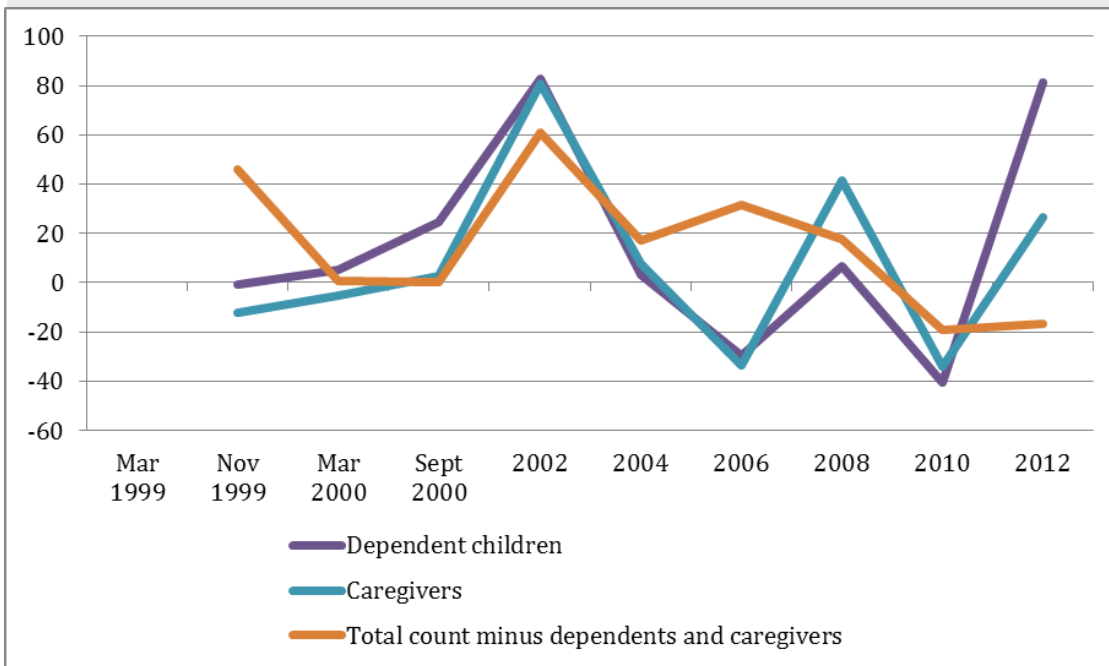**Figure 2: Dependent Children and Caregivers**

Figure 3: Annual Rates of Change (%)

Legend:
- Dependent children
- Caregivers
- Total count minus dependents and caregivers

Bowman, D., Dukes, C., Moore J. (2012). Summary of the state of research on the relationship between homelessness and academic achievement among school-aged children and youth. Retrieved from http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/nche_research_pub.pdf

"The purpose of this publication is to provide an overview of research that studies the relationship between homelessness and academic achievement among school-aged children and youth in the United States."

Independent Youth

Tracking trends in independent youth homelessness over time in Edmonton is challenging due to a number of limitations in the data available. As noted earlier, until 2012, age was observed by volunteers rather than asked of survey participants. This approach introduces a degree of uncertainty that is difficult to account for in trend analysis.

Another challenge is shifting age categories used in reporting survey results. The five homeless counts conducted from 1999 to 2004 included categories for children in families (16 and under), youth (ages 15-18) and an undifferentiated adult category from ages 19-54. The more recently completed surveys from 2004-2010 included results for children in families, independent children (0-16), and refined the adult classification into two brackets - 17-30 and 31-54. In the latest 2012 count, age was reported in much finer grain, including children in families, independent children (14-17), youth (18-24), young adults (25-30) and two additional adult age categories (31-44 and 45-54).

The shifting age brackets complicates trend analysis but with these limitations noted, some insights can still be drawn that
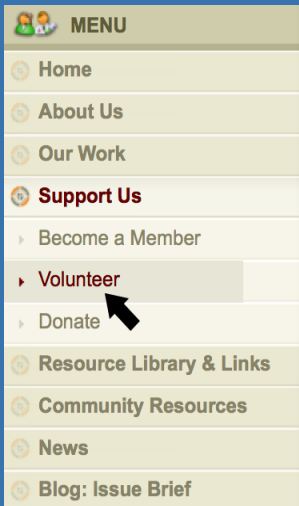
Figure 4: % Unsheltered
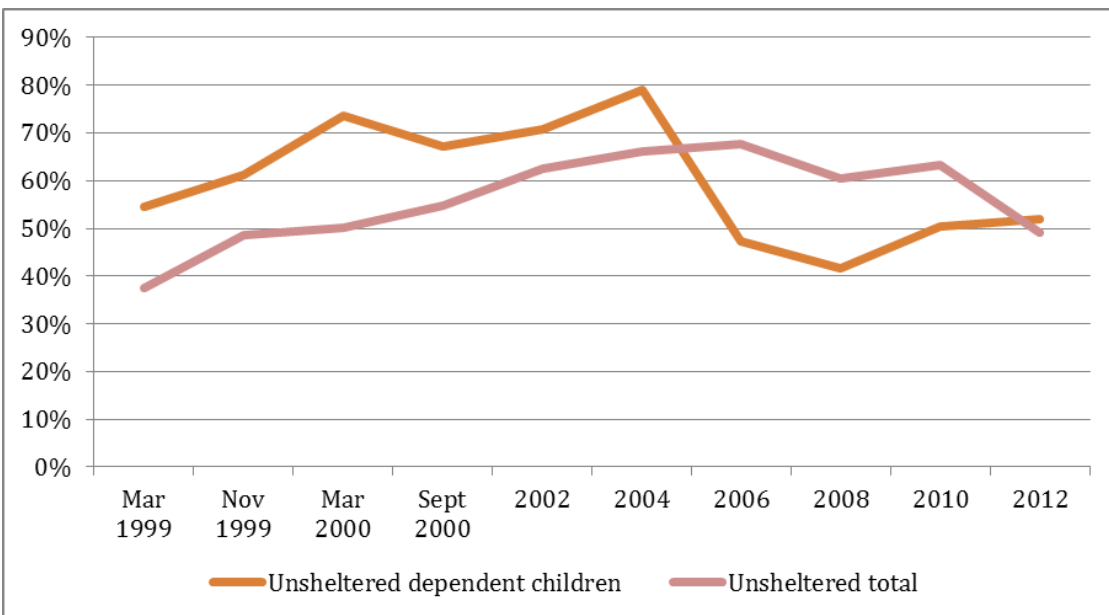
Legend:
- Unsheltered dependent children
- Unsheltered total

Figure 5: Trends in Youth Homelessness
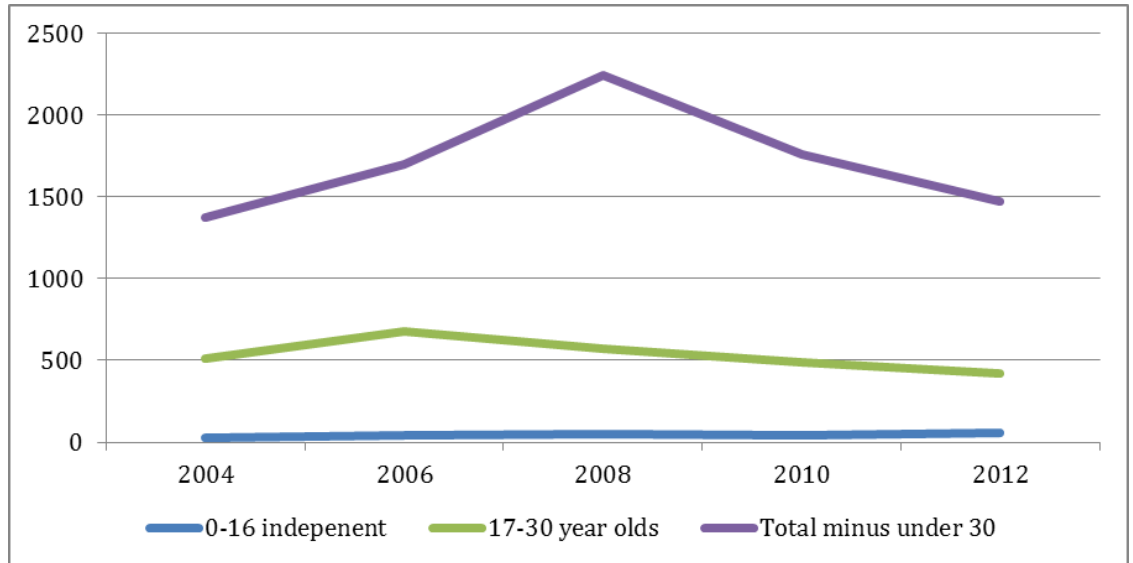
resonate with other research on youth homelessness in other jurisdictions. For the purpose of this analysis, the 2012 findings for 14-17 year olds will be compared to the 0-16 year olds in the years from 2004-2010, and the 18-24 and 25-30 year old brackets from 2012 will be combined to compare to the 17-30 year old brackets from these earlier counts.

The counts show that the number of 17-30 year olds has been reducing at a faster rate than the rest of the homeless population, in particular avoiding the significant spike recorded in 2008 (Figure 5). By contrast, the number of those under 16 has stayed fairly constant, with a slight increase in 2012 that may be a result of more accurate age counts. In future years as it becomes possible to review the youth category in greater detail, it will be interesting to see if the declines are more pronounced among youth (14-24) or the young adults (25-30).

The unique pattern of homelessness in the younger subpopulation speaks to specific causes for youth homeless. Family breakdown is often seen as a major factor for independent youth. Again, the Red Deer Point-in-Time count noted that independent youth were more likely to state family breakdown as a barrier to housing, reported by 44% of youth, compared to 15% of the rest of the adult population.

The 2012 Homeless Count provides an additional important insight for both dependent and independent children. The count found that nearly a quarter of caregivers were themselves youth - 29 of the 119 total caregivers were under the age of 25. This finding clearly speaks to the presence of a high need group of young caregivers and their children.

Conclusion

The initial trends observed in the 2012 count will need to be confirmed in future years to ensure they are genuine trends rather than impacts of the new methodology. Yet despite the challenges posed by the switch, the new methodology offers an excellent opportunity to more fully understand the dynamics of both dependent and independent children, ultimately helping governments and agencies to more effectively address the specific needs of the young homeless population.

Helping Our Youth: Featuring YESS

By Darlene Paranque, Volunteer Writer

Youth under the age of 20 represent almost one in four people in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2012). Many of these youth will face life challenges that make them vulnerable to being at-risk of depression, drugs and alcohol, criminal activity, homelessness, and more. This problem has been recognized in the City of Edmonton, with over 40 organizations that assist youth with accommodation, basic needs, addictions, crisis, education, employment, life skills, health, advocacy, sexual health and community supports (The Support Network, 2008).

These organizations have become fundamental to the daily lives of many Edmonton youth, providing the necessary supports that will help them live a safe, normal life and a chance to a brighter future.

Youth Empowerment and Support Services (YESS) is one of these organizations that have a strong presence in Edmonton, offering our youth a variety of services from immediate emergency shelter to ongoing support programs. YESS was initially started up in 1982, when a group of people noticed a gap in social services and resources for youth between the ages of 16 and 18 (YESS, 2013). In the last 30 years, YESS has grown and changed as they learn more about youth and their needs. Today, YESS is comprised of approximately 65 staff and 200 volunteers and looks after about 1,000 youth per year between the ages of 15 and 25 (Cautley and Damani, 2013).

YESS not only focuses on the short-term safety and stability of its youth, but more importantly strives to foster long-term success of these individuals (Cautley and Damani, 2013). YESS' Armoury Youth Centre provides youth with daytime support and resources where youth can work toward self-reliance, while reducing incidences of criminal activity and preventing youth from becoming entrenched in street life during the day. Services range from doctor services to housing search assistance and evening cooking classes. Another successful program is SkY where YESS encourages and supports youth to attend school and/or work. YESS staff support these individuals to work through their issues, stick to their commitments and assist in developing life skills. Further to these programs, YESS also initiated the StART program (Stability, Assessment, Referral and Transition). This program provides a home for 10 youth that have shown progress and dedication to developing their life skills and becoming independent. Here, they are responsible for housekeeping and meal planning, and are encouraged to save for their own place (YESS, 2013; Cautley and Damani, 2013).

Among the many challenges that YESS faces is funding and staff retention. Earlier in the year, YESS had a funding shortfall which led to staff cuts and ultimately affected their ability to help vulnerable youth on the street (Global News, 2013). Last year, only 23% of YESS' budget is received through sustainable funding which is provided by the provincial government and United Way. The rest of the budget is received through successful grant applications, donations, third party events, general sponsorships, and most significantly, through YESS hosted events (Cautley and Damani, 2013).

YESS hosts a variety of events throughout the year, with four major annual events: Poker Party, Homeless for a Night, Golf Classic, and Cornflake Breakfast. This year, YESS hosted the Jokers Wild Poker Party on March 9, 2013 at the River Cree Casino. An after-poker gala was also held, featuring an evening of food, fun and entertainment. Homeless for a Night is another great event hosted by YESS where they aim to raise awareness to the public while also raising money for the organization. This event provides participants with a very small taste of what one evening without the comforts of home might be like. While the experience for participants comes nowhere close to the reality of actually being on the streets, the event encourages people to move beyond their comfort zone and imagine a life where

Currie, C. L. & LaBoucane-Benson, P.(2011) Impacts of a peer support program for street-involved youth. Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health 9(1)

"The Links program began in 2005 as a three-year project bringing street-involved youth and university students together to increase understanding, foster supportive relationships, and enhance the knowledge and skills of each group. Emphasis was placed on recruiting Aboriginal youth to the program. As a result 50% of street-involved youth who took part identified as Aboriginal. Findings suggest the program created intense bonds between students and youth. Stereotypes were identified and broken down and youth were empowered to broaden their perspectives on what they could achieve. Both groups gained knowledge they can use to build a better future for themselves and their communities."

certain comforts such as beds, shelter, privacy and electricity are not available. The event offers live entertainment, a speech from a former client, fire pits after dark, food, refreshments and more. More information on the events can be found at http://www.yess.org/events/ (YESS, 2013).

YESS' commitment to growth and innovation was evident earlier this month, during "Amplify YESS," an event that brought together donors, community leaders, local youth and YESS staff and board members in a common forum to discuss and voice out any issues, challenges, ideas and solutions to remove barriers to success. The purpose of this event was to close the gap between different stakeholders and to better understand and support youth-at-risk (Cautley and Damani, 2013).

YESS continually strives to become a world leader in social services for at-risk youth. Underway is YESS' 1000 day project which encompasses many action oriented initiatives including research and implementation of best practices in the world, trust based relational intervention, practices to deal with youth trauma, new staff coaching approach, and more (Cautley and Damani, 2013).

Youth-at-risk is an important challenge that needs to be recognized and addressed on a local and national scale. Organizations such as YESS provide the necessary social supports to keep at-risk youth from self-harm and criminal activity. Our support for these social organizations and advocacy on these issues become the driving factors of change to make a difference in the lives of our youth and ultimately the future of our city.

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Interview with the Inner City Youth Housing Project

By Carling Anderson, Volunteer Writer
Interview with Renee Strong and Melanie Kenzie, Inner City Youth Housing Project

Inner City Youth Housing Project

In May 1993, the Inner City Youth Housing Project (ICYHP) was established as a joint venture partnership between Boyle Street Community Services, Bissell Centre, Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation (now known as E4C) and the Youth Emergency Shelter Society as the City of Edmonton continued to have a shortfall on beds available to their homeless youth.

Specializing in youth ages to 14 to 17 who may or may not have Children's Service status and have no viable options for living situations, the diversity of the youth that arrive at ICYHP's doorstep is vast, including street involved youth, to youth suffering from mental health or substance abuse concerns, to youth who are victims of sexual exploitation, poverty, and family violence. Perhaps these youth are from marginalized aboriginal, immigrant, refugee or LGBTQ populations. It's no wonder that ICHYP approaches its 20th anniversary with a great deal of experience under their belts. Combined with a newly launched pilot project for their clients and a fresh attitude and perspective concerning the approach and effectiveness of their continued work in youth homelessness, I felt compelled to pursue an interview.

I met Renee Strong, ICYHP's Program Manager and Melanie Kenzie, Program Supervisor, two happy women in an old room in the historic building of Alex Taylor School that is now the office of E4C. Waiting for our interview, I reminisced about sitting in a similar spot as a troubled youth, waiting with dread to see the school principal. But there was no sense of foreboding here, luckily, as ICHYP philosophy revolves around working with youth where they are at and helping them follow their dreams. Said


Photo by Ren Reyes

Renee, "We are dedicated and focused on the youth we serve. We are wholly driven by a client centred practice and that means that we work in a collaborative process with what the youth need and want." "So they're not punished or judged?" I wonder. But before I have a chance to ask, Renee begins to tell me success stories from kids that have transitioned from street life into functioning members of society as adults, and how even after they transition they still occasionally call or drop by to be reminded of the love and support that were so integral to them in their former years. "They are often misunderstood" says Renee, in that "people often think they can never be successful. The troubled youth of today may not be the homeless population of tomorrow." Melanie nods her head back and forth fervently, as if physically shaking off those harmless stereotypes. "Yes", she says. "Homelessness is a moment in a person's life."

In fact, homelessness or any form of serious hardship can spark tenacity in a person's character that could be of serious benefit to society if nurtured. "We have a girl who [enrolled in the social work diploma program] at Grant MacEwan University this year and her life experiences are really going to help other people" says Melanie. I 100% agree. I shudder to think about alternative fates that might have befallen such an obviously intelligent and capable girl because she had some disadvantages in her childhood.

Additional Resource
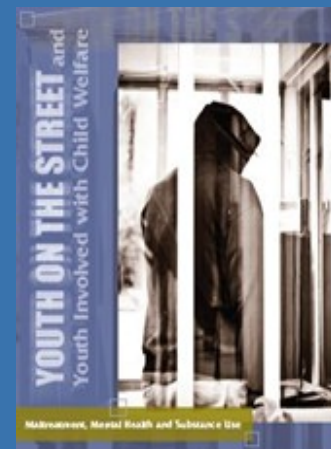
Goldstein, A.L. et al. (2011). **Youth on the street and youth involved with child welfare: Maltreatment, mental health and substance abuse.** Retrieved from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/publications/nfnts-urb/pdf/nfnts-urb-eng.pdf

"This study examines the relationships between childhood maltreatment, involvement with the child welfare system, mental health issues, and substance use as they relate to youth homelessness and housing instability. The sample population for this study contained three groups; youth involved with the child welfare system, youth who are homeless and have had experience with the child welfare system, and homeless youth that have no experience in the child welfare system."
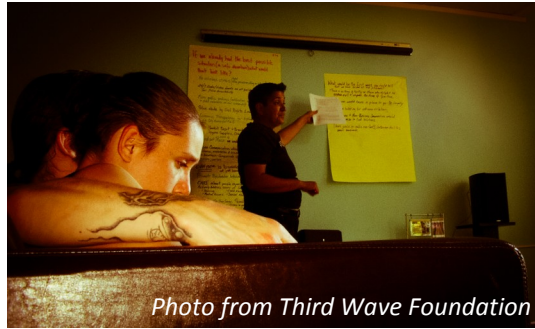
Photo from Third Wave Foundation

I asked Renee, in turn, what challenges ICYHP faced in achieving the goal of similar success stories for all transitioning homeless youth. "We are always facing funding and staff shortages, which is a sector wide challenge and [in terms of the youth] we are seeing an increase in younger children that come in who are engaging in high risk behaviours. It's hard to know what to do when a 13 year old is running around on the street at 3:00a.m."

Now I want to know how we can help. "Just by spreading the word", says Renee. "Any form of support is always welcome. We're always willing to work with different people, or organizations, and answer any questions that people may have."

"If people heard of Inner City Youth Housing Project 20 years ago, it may be time to check back again", says Melanie. "A lot has changed in the past 20 years", and from what I can tell ICYHP, like a good wine, continues to refine and improve with age."

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Research Review: "Live, Learn, Grow."

By Leah Read, Volunteer Writer

Although Edmonton's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness has seen success in recent years (Edmonton Homeless Commission, 2012), the issue of youth homelessness is reaching a crucial point now as Edmonton's Youth Empowerment & Support Services (YESS) is experiencing a funding shortfall (Callsen, 2013). A recent report recommends the Foyer housing model, adapted in Australia, the UK, and the USA to address the needs of homeless youth or those at risk of homelessness in Edmonton (Gaetz and Scott, 2013). This article will explore what the Foyer model is, and how it can be integrated with the Housing First strategy to assist marginalized youth in Edmonton to make a successful transition into adulthood.

What is the Foyer model?

Although displaying diverse physical layouts, there are three essential principles that define Foyer housing: First, it assists youth at risk to transition from a position of dependence to independence. This often involves a longer term stay (2+ years) than is traditionally the case with transitional housing strategies. Second, Foyers are holistic and integrated into a "system of care" within the community (Gaetz & Scott, 2013, 26). Third, there is some type of formal agreement between the participating youth and the housing provider, sometimes involving a program fee which is often repaid upon successful completion of the program.

Other common features are intense case management and the provision of positive role models, social opportunities, and aftercare support. The goal is to support youth to develop personally by providing a safe and stable environment, a place where they are allowed to make mistakes and are given second chances.

Advocates of the Foyer model describe the challenges facing youth at risk of homelessness as unique from the challenges facing the general homeless population and argue that youth should be treated as a discrete category. The transition into adulthood can be challenging and turbulent at the best of times, and for young people transitioning out of care or dealing with violence or other issues, these challenges are exacerbated. Lacking financial resources and experience maintaining a household, many youth lack the necessary skills to successfully run a home.
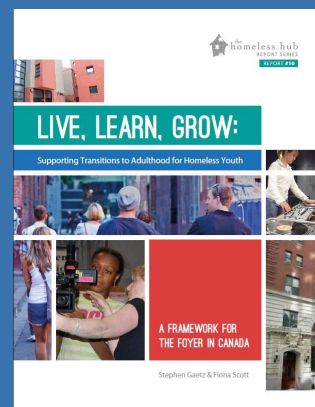
It is the recognition that the transition into adulthood takes time, support and the need to learn, grow, and make mistakes that the Foyer model holds at its core. Providing adaptable transitional housing to support youth to develop the skills they need to grow into successful adults has shown success in several locations including the Chelsea Foyer in New York, which has assisted youth to break "a multi-generational cycle of dependence on public assistance" (Gaetz and Scott, 2013, 23).

The physical layout for a Foyer is extremely versatile and can be adapted to suit the specific needs of the youth involved. Some have dispersed housing units, usually more suitable for older youth with a greater degree of independence and some models have a dedicated centralized layout that offers more communal space and social areas for younger people with more need for structured programming. Also possible is a blended model, where youth can move from a centralized hub to a private unit when they are ready for more independence. To continue the transition into full independence, some Foyers are integrated into the private housing market and use a convertible lease structure that allows youth to transfer it into their own name when they are ready.

In the past, transitional housing have been criticized by some advocates of the Housing First movement who believe that people don't need supports to "get ready" for housing. Instead, housing should be provided first, enabling people to deal with other issues from a position of greater stability (Gaetz and Scott, 2013, 12). In contrast to the Continuum of Care

approach, where treatment for addiction or mental health issues is offered before housing is provided, Housing First aims to provide independent tenancy first with support available to the newly housed (Atherson, 2007).

The 2012 year 3 update of Edmonton's 10 year plan to end homelessness reports that 85% of people housed through the program have retained their housing, demonstrating that the Housing First approach has seen success in the city. However, its success has not been explored within sub-populations like youth. Gaetz and Scott argue that a transitional (Foyer) housing model is more appropriate to address the unique needs of homeless youth and that the Housing First approach may favor the hastening of youth into independence to the detriment of longer term benefits like education and personal development. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive however, and the flexibility and adaptability of the Foyer model allows for its integration with the Housing First strategy in Edmonton.

In order to do this, Gaetz and Scott draw on the evaluative research of previous Foyers in the US, UK, and Australia, and recommend that Foyers in Edmonton be integrated with mental health supports and external social agencies, provide a comfortable living space, a "home, not a shelter" and create a nurturing environment distinct from the rules and stipulations typical of a group home (Gaetz and Scott, 2013, 34). Opportunities for personal enrichment through art or music and personal development including life skills training should be provided, instead of a focus solely on education and job skills development. Also key is the importance of a long-term connection with youth. Not only should their tenancy in transitional housing be limited to no less than 2 years (ideally there would be no limitation), it is extremely beneficial for staff to keep in touch with youth even after they move on from the Foyer.

Since youth face different challenges than the general homeless population, it is essential to work with models that address their unique needs. Edmonton's homeless and at-risk youth would benefit from transitional, supportive housing that is integrated with other supportive agencies and that aims to keep youth housed while they develop into adulthood.

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Thanks Joseph!

For the last two and a half years, Joseph Ahorro was our Research and Communications Assistant and editor of the fACTivist. He has since moved on to another position with the Government of Alberta. The Edmonton Social Planning Council wishes Joseph all the best as he begins this new chapter in his career.
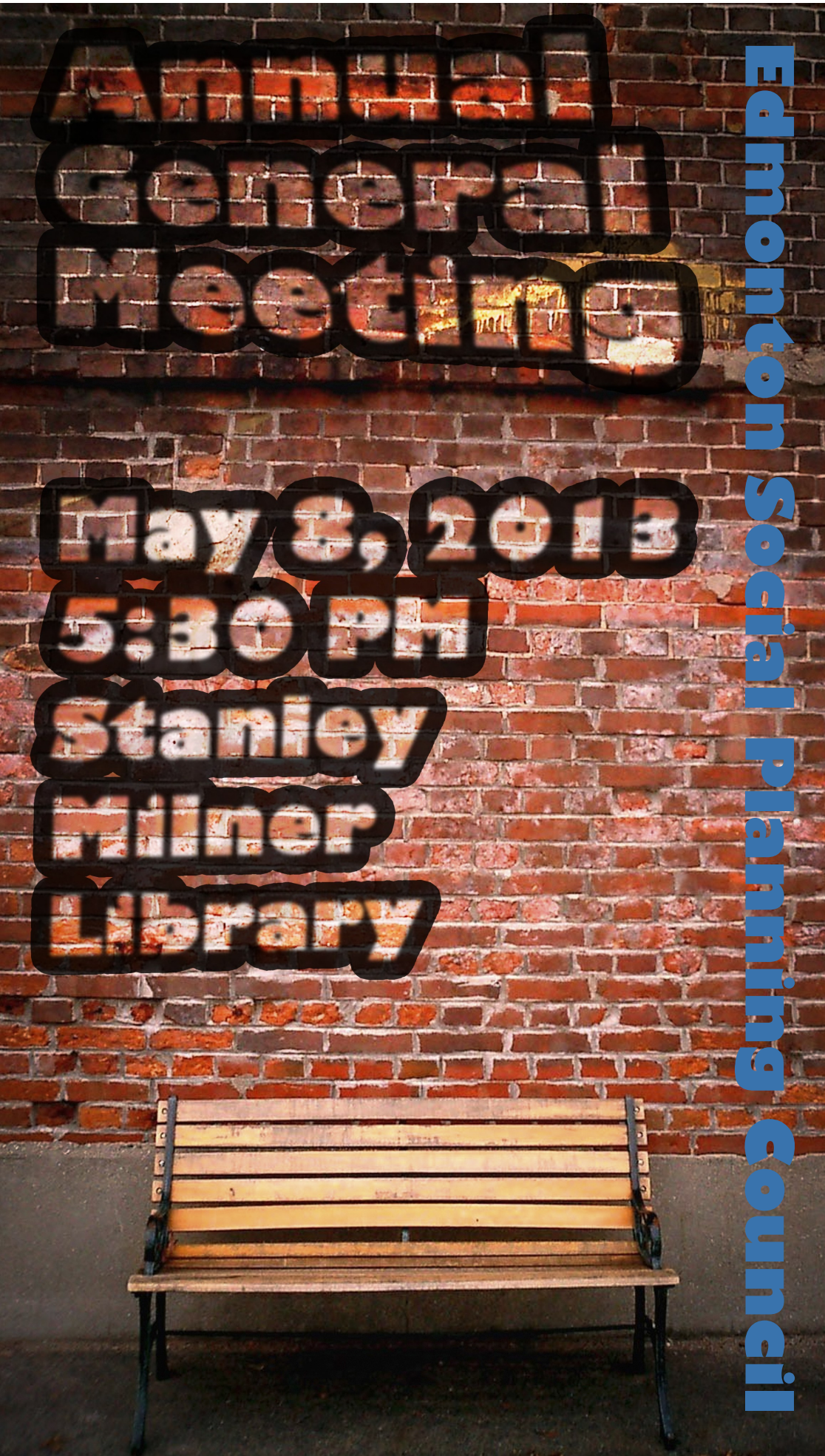
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May 8, 2013
5:30 PM
Stanley Milner Library

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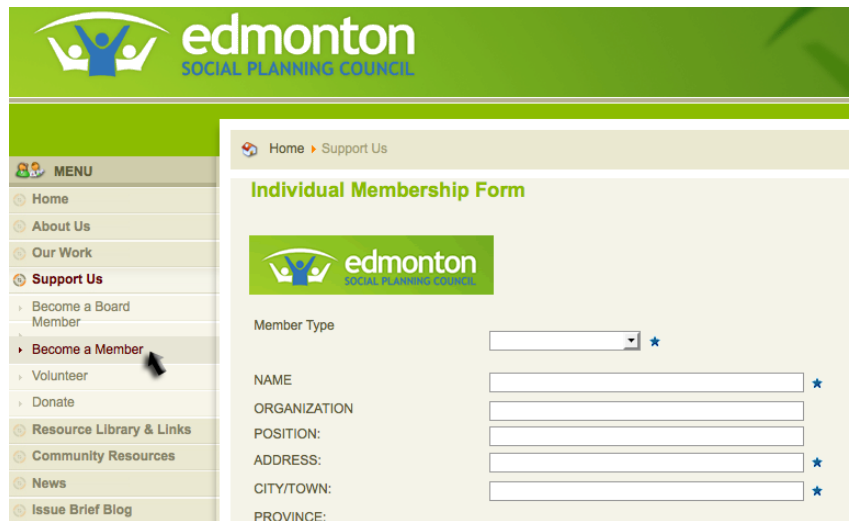A healthy, just and inclusive community.

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