



Voices from the Margins: Experiences of Street-Involved Youth In Winnipeg



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Executive Summary

In this study we sought to hear the voices of street-involved youth. We wanted to give them a forum through which to tell their stories. We wanted to know: 1) How they came to be involved with the street? 2) What their lives were like at that point in time? 3) What things made life on the street easier or harder? 4) What might facilitate their transition off the street and keep them off?

This project was undertaken collaboratively between researchers at the University of Manitoba and the former Executive Director of Operation Go Home (OGH) with funding from the Winnipeg Inner-city Research Alliance (WIRA), which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).

A key feature of this study is that it was conducted from the perspective of street experienced youth. We interviewed twelve young people who had been involved with the street at some point in their lives. Their stories highlight their personal struggles to survive and transcend the harsh realities of the street. The data for this study come from their narratives about their experiences. In addition, four former street youth served as research interns who assisted in the development of the research project and with interviewing.

Overall, what we learned from our interviews with street youth is consistent with the findings of other researchers who have examined the issue of youth homelessness. Homelessness is not a choice that they make freely or easily. Many youth perceive that they have no other alternative to leaving home. Youth become homeless because of the failure of multiple systems, including family, school, community, child protection agencies, and youth corrections systems. They become alienated from these systems that normally keep youth anchored

in mainstream society. Serious gaps in services or problems with how services are provided allow many youth to fall through the cracks of the social safety net. Once on the street, their focus becomes solely on the present – make money, get food, find shelter. The longer they remain on the street, the harder it is for them to leave. The street has a gravity of its own. Yet, the youth we interviewed had a strong desire to reach the milestones of adulthood sanctioned by society. They dreamed of having meaningful employment, education, homes, cars, and families. What these youth needed was supports and guidance to help them make those dreams a reality. It was evident that no progress toward larger goals was possible while they were locked in a daily battle for survival on the street. The youth in our study stressed that they wanted to leave the street on their own terms. They wanted control over their own lives and destinies. Their successes and failures give us a blueprint to restructure the ways in which we address the issue of youth homelessness.

What emerges from our interviews is an understanding that society has failed these kids. The systems meant to offer support, such as family, school, community, and child protection agencies, failed to identify them as high-risk youth and provide adequate supports. In many cases, the child protection system did not adequately intervene when these kids were experiencing family conflict, neglect, or abuse. They quickly learned that the only people on whom they could rely were themselves. We believe that youth should not be placed in this precarious position. These systems have to change in order to address the needs of youth at risk. Thus, we believe that the problem of youth homelessness is one that can be resolved.

It is our hope that this information can be used on many different levels. At the community level, an understanding of the plight of street youth can help residents make connections with street kids; thereby strengthening their social ties and fostering community cohesion. Service providers can use this information to develop youth-oriented services that more effectively reach out-of-the-

mainstream youth and address their needs. Policy makers can use the recommendations generated from this study to develop policies to prevent youth homelessness, provide support to those on the street, facilitate the process of getting off the street, and ensure that youth do not return to the street. Our goal is to bring the voices and experiences of street youth to key decision makers in order to ignite social change to improve their lives.

Part One

1.1 Introduction

Street youth have often been viewed as a problematic group in society. Many people see street kids as lazy and rebellious young people unwilling to take responsibility for their situation. It is this view that allows them to be pushed to the margins. Yet, what we need to do is listen and hear their stories in order to better understand who they really are.

In this study, we sought to hear the voices of street-involved youth. We wanted to give them a forum through which to tell their stories. We wanted to know: 1) How they came to be involved with the street? 2) What their lives were like at that point in time? 3) What things made life on the street easier or harder? 4) What might facilitate their transition off the street and keep them off?

This project was undertaken collaboratively between researchers at the University of Manitoba and the former Executive Director of Operation Go Home (OGH) with funding from the Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance (WIRA). OGH has operated in Winnipeg since 1994 with the mandate to assist youth who are not living in a safe and stable environment. The organization is involved in counselling, advocacy, outreach, agency referrals, and housing assistance. In 2000, OGH handled 1,500 walk-in clients and opened 465 new cases.

A key feature of this study is that it was conducted from the perspective of street experienced youth. We interviewed twelve young people who had been involved with the street at some point in their lives. Their stories highlight their personal struggles to survive and transcend the harsh realities of the street. The data for

this study come from their narratives about their experiences. In addition, four former street youth served as research interns who assisted in the development of the research project and with interviewing. These youth were actively involved in developing research questions, interview questions, participant recruitment strategies, and scheduling and conducting interviews. Their input was invaluable for understanding the challenges of reaching members of a transient population who are often apprehensive about outsiders.

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Overall, what we learned from our interviews with street youth is consistent with the findings of many other researchers who have examined the issue of youth homelessness. Homelessness is not a choice that they make freely or easily. Many youth perceive that they have no other alternative to leaving home. Youth become homeless because of the failure of multiple systems, including family, school, community, child protection agencies, and youth corrections systems. They become alienated from these systems that normally keep youth anchored in mainstream society. Serious gaps in services or problems with how services are provided allow many youth to fall through the cracks of the social safety net. Once on the street, their focus becomes solely on the present – make money, get food, find shelter. The longer they remain on the street, the harder it is for

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The report proceeds as follows: Part One begins by outlining the overall purpose of our research. Next, we describe the mutual engagement model of participatory research that guided this study. We then lay out our methodology in two phases, planning and implementation. In Part Two we examine the themes emerging from our data in relation to existing literature. In Part Three, we draw conclusions and make recommendations that follow from our findings.

1.2 Research Purpose

There were two main purposes in this study: 1) to develop a meaningful collaboration between academic researchers, students, service providers, and at-risk youth; and 2) to gather information and make recommendations based on the experiences, needs, and strengths of street-involved youth from their perspectives.

The objectives of this project were:

- a) To build a working partnership with academic researchers, students, service-providers, and youth at risk.
- b) To develop an effective methodology for collaborative research.
- c) To generate research data that will assist in the understanding of the causes and consequences of youth street involvement in order to inform policy and program planning in this area.

1.3 Orienting Framework

We used the principles of participatory research in developing this study. Most academics who study marginalized groups are not, themselves, members of the population. “Participatory research attempts to generate knowledge about social relations and social change more democratically by fostering dialogue and equality between researcher and researched” (Petras & Porpora, 1993, p. 109). Participatory research has two main goals: 1) to include people within a population or community as experts in the area; and 2) to give them a voice through which to convey their experiences (Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992). Specifically, we used an approach, called the mutual engagement model, in which academics collaborate with community members to carry out social research that generates results that can be used to improve the plight of the community (Petras & Porpora, 1993).

A fundamental requirement of the funding agency for this research was the pairing of university researchers with a community organization. Our partnering agency for this study was OGH. The research team consisted of two university researchers, two staff members from OGH, a graduate and undergraduate student as research assistants, and four street-experienced youth interns. In phase one, we wanted to build relationships between team members in order to develop an effective research team. We hoped this environment would allow for collaborative discussions of methodology and foster shared learning.

Since we were operating under the principles of participatory research, we wanted to remove hierarchal statuses and learn from one another. The university group hoped to learn about the experience of living on the street and the challenges of providing services to this group. The OGH team wanted to develop a research study that would generate findings they could use to help them better serve their clients. The youth interns were eager to learn about research. In particular, they wanted experience doing research. Interviewing participants was particularly appealing to them. They also saw their involvement as an opportunity to develop their résumé and earn some money.

Even though we wanted to make everyone equal, reality was that we were a diverse group. We ranged from seasoned veterans in the field of research to complete novices. We wanted all of the team members to be actively involved in each phase of the research process. Those who had more experience in research were in a natural position to provide leadership. We envisioned a mentorship system in which the less experienced researchers would learn from the more experienced ones. Our plan was to have the university researchers mentor the graduate student who would, in turn, mentor the undergraduate student who would mentor the youth interns. We wanted to expose the youth interns to the university environment by bringing them to our research room on campus. It was our hope that it would make university seem less foreign and more accessible to them. We discovered along the way that some of our

expectations were unrealistic. In section 1.4, we discuss the challenges we encountered in the participatory process and make recommendations for researchers planning this type of project.

In phase two, we interviewed twelve youth with street experience. In line with our original goal, we wanted our findings to retain their voices and stories. We chose to write a profile for each participant incorporating information about him or her and details of his or her experience. We believe these personal accounts convey the heterogeneity of individuals and experiences. The other part of our analysis involved examining the common threads that ran through our interviews. Despite the diversity of the people we interviewed, there were many commonalities in their experiences. These threads give us clues about the underlying causes and consequences of street involvement. They give us a point from which to start generating solutions to this growing social problem. Based on our findings, we have generated recommendations that we believe can improve the lives of at-risk youth.

1.4 Phase One: Planning Phase

We held our meetings at Crossways in Common, which is a community organization offering services and programs to residents of West Broadway, an inner-city area of Winnipeg. This location was convenient for staff at OGH and the youth interns since they worked or resided in the area.

Our first meetings with the research team involved building rapport, giving the context for the study, and providing an overview of the process. We spent the beginning of our first few meetings getting to know one another personally. It was our belief that rapport was essential for creating an atmosphere of equality and fostering group dynamics. We gave details about our background, our likes and dislikes, interests and hobbies. Fun activities, such as reading each other's

horoscopes, were used to encourage group interactions. We also provided food and refreshments at our meetings since we often met around suppertime.

Once we had established the group, we began the process of developing the study by choosing a working title. The youth decided to call the study, “Street Voices: To be Heard, Not Just Seen.” This title reflects their primary reason for being involved in the project. Based on their experiences on the streets, they came to understand that while street youth are visible in society, they are not well understood. They face prejudice and discrimination because they do not fit in mainstream society. They hoped, as did we, that this study would make their voices heard and initiate positive changes in how society interacts with at-risk youth.

We started the planning process by brainstorming research questions and methods. A proposal developed by the university researchers and the former executive director of OGH served as our starting point. We had initially planned to examine health issues and service use among street youth. However, as Stoecker and Bonacich (1992) noted, “engaging people from oppressed communities in the research process means the following: They help determine the research question, they control or oversee the research process; they have full access to the research results, and they make sure that the research is used to help bring about needed change” (p. 7). In keeping with our participatory framework, we engaged the group in generating a list of important issues for street youth. Our initial focus on understanding health and well-being among street-involved youth expanded during our collaborative meetings to include a broader understanding of experiences on the street. We focused on four main areas: reasons for coming to the streets; street experiences; facilitators and barriers to leaving the streets, and plans for the future. During this phase, input from the OGH staff members and the youth interns was invaluable. Our naivety about life on the street became apparent as they informed us of the details of that life.

Developing a participant recruitment plan presented several challenges. Street youth are an elusive, transient population that exists outside of official records. Posters with a phone number were deemed ineffective because street youth may not have access to a phone. In addition, they may not have a telephone number or contact information to leave if someone was not immediately available to take their call. Based on the discussions at the meetings, a plan to recruit participants primarily through OGH was developed. We had originally proposed to use focus groups as our primary data collection technique. The youth interns informed us that one-on-one interviews would be better because the community of street youth in Winnipeg is small and the youth may not be comfortable sharing their personal stories in a group. Interview topics of interest to the group were developed through brainstorming sessions.

An additional component of the project introduced by the youth interns was the “Winnipeg Street Youth Survival Guide,” which would provide information of relevance to at-risk youth and referrals to services in Winnipeg. Similar guides are available in other cities and the youth found them helpful during their time on the street. The youth interns assisted in gathering pamphlets and other educational materials, taking photographs of street life, and developing the guide. A limited number of guides will be produced for distribution through outreach services for youth. It is hoped that a community agency will take over the ongoing production and distribution of the guide.

We encountered several problems with our participatory method during the planning phase. First, it was inconvenient for the youth to come to campus on a regular basis because they did not have transportation or had school or work commitments during the day. Arranging trips to do specific tasks, such as library work, was also ineffective. Following the cancellation of an on-campus work session, one of the OGH staff members who worked closely with the youth interns told us they felt shy about coming to campus. Upon reflection, we

understood that they might feel intimidated given that universities represent privilege, wealth, and higher education. Second, the process of planning every detail of the research as a group was time consuming and cumbersome. The youth interns were anxious to get into the field and start interviewing while we were still developing our participant recruitment plan and interview questions. They frequently asked us, “When is the work going to start?” From their perspective, meetings were not work; rather, work involved interviewing and similar tasks. Third, there was a high rate of turnover in team members due to maternity leave, work or school obligations, and restructuring at OGH. The discontinuity in team members meant that we spent a lot of time rebuilding rapport between the old and new team members. We also had to orient the new members to the project and inform them about our progress to date. Fourth, we were unrealistic about the skills of the youth interns. We expected them to be involved in every part of the research process. Yet, none had completed high school and some had learning difficulties, which prevented them from doing some of the more technical tasks. A task, such as transcribing interview cassettes, was of little interest and beyond the skill of some of the interns. We also had to be cognizant that our discussions and meeting notes were in plain, clear language so the interns could fully participate.

Based on our experiences, we believe that a modified, rather than pure, version of participatory research was more appropriate. In the end, we followed the principles of community research as empowerment (Ristock & Pennell, 1996), which fits with the participatory perspective, but does not require equal participation from team members on every component of the project. We learned that a better way of collaboratively planning research involves brainstorming ideas about the purposes of the study, the topics of interest, and gaining access to the population of interest as a group. Then, the university team members would draft a participant recruitment plan and an interview guide. The non-university team members would serve as consultants to review the plan and suggest changes. The time line for planning should be relatively short in order to

keep the process moving and prevent drop out due to boredom. We believe that these suggestions are of use to any researcher who plans to conduct participatory research with individuals who are not part of the academic community and have little interest in a research career.

1.5 Phase 2: Implementation

Following approval by the Joint Faculty Ethics Review Board at the University of Manitoba, interviews were conducted primarily at a facility operated by Operation Go Home. One of the research interns coordinated the scheduling of interviews. These interviews were conducted by one of the university researchers and a youth intern. Additional interviews were arranged through other community contacts. Each participant was read and given a copy of the consent form to which they gave verbal consent. Participants were invited to choose their own pseudonym in order to protect their identities. Most enjoyed the idea of selecting a new name. The interviews were audio taped. Each interviewee was given an honorarium of twenty dollars for his or her participation.

The audiocassettes from each interview were professionally transcribed. The university researchers and graduate student analyzed data. Upon completion of the data analysis, the youth interns were invited to review the findings and provide feedback.

Part Two

2.1 Describing the Street Youth Population

There is no universally accepted definition of the term street youth. A common umbrella definition for this population is persons between 12 and 24 years of age without shelter or with inadequate or insecure shelter (Peressini & McDonald, 2000). Thus, homelessness exists on a continuum from relative to absolute. People who experience relative homelessness have shelter, but it is poor quality, inadequate, or unstable. Absolute homelessness refers to the complete lack of long-term shelter. Homelessness can also be described in terms of its duration and recurrence. For some youth, homelessness is a one time, short-term experience. For others, it is a recurring or chronic condition from which they cannot escape.

There are many terms used to describe street youth: high-risk youth, homeless youth, out-of-the-mainstream youth, street-involved youth, runaways, throwaways, vulnerable youth and youth at risk (Backé, 1999). These terms are often used interchangeably. However, it is important to remember that street youth are not a homogeneous population.

Caputo, Weiler, and Anderson (1997) developed a model for categorizing street-involved youth that illustrates their diversity. They suggest that street involvement exists on a continuum. At one end are curbsiders who circulate between home and the street. These youth engage in the street lifestyle to a limited extent, but tend to engage in socially acceptable behaviour for the most part. At the other end are entrenched street youth who have no connection to home. They are

often involved in very dangerous aspects of street life. Compared to curbsiders, intervention is considerably more difficult with entrenched youth. Becoming enmeshed with the street lifestyle often means cutting ties with mainstream society. Involvement in illegal activities, such as crime, drugs, or prostitution, further alienates entrenched youth from society.

While youth in each of these categories are street-involved, they have different individual characteristics, histories, needs, skills, and resources that make some more resilient than others. Therefore, while it is important to understand the common threads shared by all street-involved youth, it is also important to recognize the unique needs of each subgroup.

2.2 Demographics and Trends

The number of young people without adequate housing is a growing concern. We do not know exactly how many youth are homeless. For the most part, they are an elusive population. Many have no permanent address. Some are involved in illegal activities and most avoid police and child protection systems. Moreover, we lack consensus on how to define and count them. Estimates vary according to definitions and measures and these reflect diverging philosophies, theories, and political agendas (Peressini & McDonald, 2000).

Canada lacks national data and systematic measures of youth homelessness (Backé, 1999). As a result, estimates of incidence and prevalence vary widely. In Canada, 53,434 youth under the age of eighteen were reported to have run away from home or other care arrangements in 2000. Over 70% had run away in the past (National Missing Children Services, National Police Services, & Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2001). The actual number of street-involved youth is considerably higher because these statistics do not include throwaway youth who are evicted by their parents or guardians. In addition, many cases of runaway

and throwaway youth are not reported to the authorities. It has been estimated that there may be 150,000 homeless youth in Canada (Caputo et al., 1997).

While males make up the majority of older homeless persons, the number of young females on the street is on the rise. The majority of reported runaways under the age of eighteen are female (National Missing Children Services et al., 2001). In major Canadian cities, females composed one half of the homeless youth population (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association with Novac, Serge, Eberle, & Brown, 2002). Aboriginal youth, especially Aboriginal women, are disproportionately represented among homeless youth (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) youth are also over represented in the homeless youth population (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001), composing up to one third of the group (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002).

Several trends have been identified among homeless youth: 1) the incidence is increasing; 2) an increasing number are chronically homeless; 3) the age at which youth become homeless is decreasing, especially for females; and 4) more identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Street youth under the age of fourteen are particularly vulnerable because they cannot legally work and do not qualify for social assistance. They may be less aware of services and supports available. These factors put young adolescents at risk for exploitation.

We interviewed twelve youth with street experience between May 22 and September 26, 2002. Our sample was not representative; however, it did cover a broad range of individuals and experiences. We talked to youth who, at the time of the interview, covered the spectrum of street involvement. Half were street-involved at the time of the interview. They were actively engaged in the street lifestyle and did not have secure, long-term housing. Two were in the early

stages of transition off the street. They had very recently been accepted into a transitional living facility and they were trying to make connections with the education or employment systems. These youth still had ties to the street, but were not involved in many street activities at that time. Only one of the youth in our study was late in the transition process. As a result, this youth had returned to school and was employed part-time. In addition, connections to the street had been severed. The remaining three youth had been off the street for a long period of time. They had re-established themselves in mainstream society and were actively pursuing long-term goals. This group was very unlikely to return to the street, unlike those in transition who were still in a very precarious position.

The majority of participants were female (n = 9). The youth interviewed ranged in age from 15 to 27 years with the majority being younger than 18 (n = 8). Most became street-involved while in early adolescence. Seven were on the street before their fifteenth birthday. Three were between fifteen and seventeen and two were eighteen when they left home. The participants spent between six months and four years on the street. Most spent one or more years on the street (n = 10). At the time of their street experience, only one participant had completed high school. Three had not completed junior high and eight had started high school. Seven of the twelve were White. The remaining five were Aboriginal or Métis. Four grew up in middle class families, while five were from lower income families. Three did not disclose their socio-economic status. Eight of the twelve participants resided in Winnipeg prior to becoming street-involved. Three were from rural Manitoba within close proximity to Winnipeg. One participant had lived in Vancouver prior to becoming street-involved. Several mentioned a romantic partner of the opposite sex. None of the youth with whom we spoke identified themselves as GLBT. Given the literature suggesting that GLBT youth are over represented in the street youth population, it is possible that sexual orientation or sexual identity were factors in becoming homelessness for some of the youth in our study. All of the youth were in a vulnerable position by virtue of their street involvement. It may be that being different in terms of their

sexuality made them more vulnerable. As a result, they may have elected to conceal this part of their identity.

2.3 Street Youth Profiles

Adam

Adam is a seventeen-year-old White male who has been living on the street for three years. Adam is a gentle looking young man who is smaller in stature than most of his peers. The interviewer described him as the kind of kid who is so endearing that you wish you could take him home. He wore a blue t-shirt and dark pants to the interview. He grew up in a middle-class suburban home. His mother left when he was about six years old. Adam and his older and younger brothers learned to look out for each other because their father was either doing his own thing or at work. Adam's father secretly used crack for about twelve years before he lost control. He owed money to a loan shark and put his kids' names down as collateral. Adam and his older brother, Duncan, moved out onto the street, while their younger brother went to live with their grandmother. Adam decided not to live with his grandmother because he developed a love of travel after hitchhiking to visit a friend. At the time he left home, Adam had only finished the eighth grade.

Adam found his way to Osborne Village where he met a couple who were squeegeeing⁵. They showed him around the area and he started hanging out there. He continues to earn money by flagging⁶ or squeegeeing. He says most people ignore them, but a few yell at them to get a job. He just ignores it because they don't know anything about him or his plans:

Lots of people don't understand how we live and the kind of choices we got. I mean some people tell us to get a job. Look at the clothes

⁵ Squeegeeing refers to youth washing windshields of cars stopped at traffic lights with the expectation that drivers will tip them for the service.

⁶ Flagging involves sitting or standing on the sidewalk or median of a busy street holding a sign asking for money.

we got; we can't get a job with some of the clothes we got. So why don't you get a job to get more clothes; you just contradicted yourself there. I mean nine times out ten people will ask why don't you ... get a job to get more clothes or why don't you buy new clothes. We've got to spend our money on food first like we only make thirty, forty bucks a day.

Adam had a close call while squeegeeing in Calgary when the light turned green before he could make it to the median. He crouched between the lanes of traffic and hoped that he “didn’t get it.” He was clipped by the mirror of a truck, but was uninjured.

Adam goes to a local grocery store where he has an arrangement with the owner to shoplift. He also uses the food bank at a street youth outreach agency. He has used the internet access at this agency to find jobs. He also used an agency that connects people with temporary work, usually in construction. The advantage of flagging or squeegeeing is that he doesn’t have to wait for a paycheque. When asked if anyone had approached him for sex, Adam responded that the only person he has sex with is his girlfriend. He says that he has seen other street youth solicited, including one man who offered five hundred dollars for oral sex.

When Adam was fifteen, he travelled to B.C. where he lived with his uncle for a year. During this time, he completed grade nine and half of grade ten. Adam likes anything to do with Mathematics, but dislikes Social Studies, History, and English. He came back to Winnipeg before going to Toronto where he lived for several months. He returned to Winnipeg just before his sixteenth birthday and has stayed ever since. Adam has had some scary experiences hitchhiking. He once got a ride from a trucker who was acting “weird.” Adam had to jump out of the truck while it was moving to get away. He ended up losing his bag, tent, and money. He had to sleep on the road for two days and walk to Toronto.

Adam has had colds while living on the street, but has not had any serious infections because his immune system is strong. He doesn't normally seek medical help, unless he needs it, as was the case when he broke his hand punching a wall. Adam was in the hospital for two weeks after he was beaten up by a couple of big guys who jumped out of a truck in the "middle of nowhere." They hit him in the head and he was knocked unconscious. The next thing he remembered was waking up in the hospital. Adam was going to physiotherapy because he hurt his back while "backyard wrestling" where he and his friends do WWF wrestling moves on each other. He had been "power bombed"⁷ during one of their matches.

Adam says that using pot makes his life easier because it relaxes him. He got on cocaine once and ended up stealing some cars. He sold them to "chop shops"⁸ for cash. After he got caught, he went to Narcotics Anonymous and kicked his cocaine habit. He has tried everything from ecstasy to opium, but has avoided injection drugs because he doesn't like the idea of sticking something in his arm or getting AIDS. Adam saw a tape of his dad when he was "all fucked up" on drugs. He decided that he didn't want to be like that so he has stopped using hard drugs.

After eighteen, Adam can get a permanent criminal record so he doesn't want to do anything stupid. He figures it will be a good time to settle down. Adam doesn't like child protection agencies because he likes being able to do his own thing. He knows of kids who were put in foster homes where they were treated badly, which he says is not what they need. He says that many foster parents only want to collect money.

Adam is currently living with five other street youth in a one-bedroom apartment rented by his friend's mom who used to be a street kid herself. They sleep on

⁷ Power bombing is a wrestling move where one person grabs the other between the legs, flips him/her upside down and slams him/her into the ground on his/her back.

⁸ A chop shop is a place that disassembles cars and sells the parts.

wall-to-wall mattresses scavenged from dumpsters. They stay there in the winter, but go off on their own in the summer. He really likes the arrangement because they always have food in the fridge, even if it's only bread and butter.

Adam planned to hitchhike to Toronto again one week after the interview because it was summertime and he just couldn't stay in one spot. Adam and his girlfriend were also planning to visit Ottawa before heading to Vancouver for the winter. Adam has family there so he could get a job with one of them easily.

Adam gets along with all of his family, except his father who he feels was never really a parent to him. He talks to his mother, who lives downtown with her three children from another relationship, frequently. He says that his friend's mother with whom he lives has been more of a parent to him than anyone. She is the person to whom he turns when he needs to talk.

Adam would like to become a construction contractor because he is good at picturing how to put things together.

Adriana

Adriana is a sixteen-year-old Aboriginal woman who grew up in the inner city projects. Adriana was quite fashion conscious. Her dress and appearance were very feminine. At the time of the interview, she looked like most kids her age. One could not have identified her as a former street kid from her appearance alone.

Adriana began having fights with her mother after her older sister was kicked out of the home and moved to Ontario. She was sad that her sister wouldn't be around so she began to rebel. She would throw things at her mother, which got her sent to a youth agency for anger management training. She says that her mother never knew what triggered her anger. Adriana didn't like her mother's boyfriend who punched Adriana and put her and her sisters down.

Adriana's mother kicked her out when she was thirteen. She didn't know where to go so she slept outside her mother's house the first night. It was very cold that night and Adriana tried unsuccessfully to get her mother to give her a jacket. Eventually, she found a blanket in the neighbour's yard to sleep under. She slept on the street for one night and then moved between friends' houses. When their parents got fed up with her living with them, she would move on. One of her friend's parents "knew [she] was a good kid" and agreed to let her come and live with them on a reserve in Ontario where they were both teachers. Adriana's mother didn't want to see her living on the street anymore so she paid for her ticket to Ontario.

Adriana lived with this family for two years and was able to complete grade 8. In high school, she had to stay at a boarding house where the owners did not like Adriana and her sister. Adriana was still grieving her mother kicking her out so she turned to alcohol. The homeowners continued to treat them badly so Adriana and her sister left after four months. They had nowhere else to go so they went to live with their grandparents in an "old folks home." The landlord didn't want kids living there so again they were kicked out.

Around this time, Adriana was sexually assaulted, which increased her dependence on alcohol. To cope with the trauma, she drank everyday even while babysitting. She also used marijuana because it was easily accessible through friends or her sister. Adriana's substance use caused many problems. A male she refused to kiss while at a drinking party assaulted her. Police picked her up for being drunk in public and put her in the drunk tank. However, she has avoided getting a criminal record.

Adriana's sister moved in with her boyfriend while Adriana went back to Winnipeg on the money she made babysitting. A friend with whom she had stayed before agreed to let Adriana stay with her. She paid the family for food and other

expenses using money she earned babysitting and dealing drugs. Unfortunately, the family had their own serious problems that forced Adriana out. The parents were alcoholics and the father was a member of a motorcycle gang. One of the sisters was a crack addict who was “wicked” and attacked Adriana.

Adriana was still drinking and doing drugs, including ecstasy, mushrooms, acid, cocaine, crack, and hash oil, which made her even more depressed. She also had friends who were gang members with whom she got into arguments that turned physically violent. She eventually went to a child protection agency for help. The first social worker she saw was mean to her and kept berating her for living on the street. She was eventually transferred to another social worker who was very nice. The social worker told Adriana about a transitional living house. She placed her there and Adriana described it as:

... this big house with a lot of rooms, a lot of bathrooms, and just luxurious. And it was just going to be really nice and I thought that would be really cool. And ...it's the [house] I'm living in right now and I actually liked it and I still do.

Since moving into the house, Adriana has stopped using drugs. She has been clean for five months. She still drinks occasionally, but does not get drunk. She came to the house with few possessions since the clothes, pictures, and journal she took from home were stolen or lost in her frequent moves. She says that getting hooked up with the independent living home is the reason she is succeeding today. Currently, Adriana attends school and works. Adriana says that her mother is proud of her now, which makes the hard work worthwhile. She tries to keep her younger sister from going through this kind of experience. Adriana encourages her to stay in school and helps her with job search strategies. Adriana is trying to get into a work experience program, which will help to build her résumé. The staff at the transitional living facility has also approached her about becoming a mentor.

Adriana hopes one day to have a house, car, and computer. She would like to work as a music producer because she likes to rap. She doesn't want to live on social assistance for the rest of her life. She says that her street experience made her stronger and smarter. Her advice to other street kids is:

Try your hardest cause it's actually a good feeling when you get off the street. I'm so proud of myself right now cause of all the things I've done for myself and I find like moving into that house - I finally have goals for myself in life and I'm going to do 'em.

Annette

Annette is a seventeen-year-old White female. She is short and has bright red hair. She hugged the pillows and outlined hearts with her fingers during the interview. Annette grew up in a middle-class suburban neighbourhood. She regularly attended a private school in Winnipeg where she completed grade 10. She started living on the street when she was fourteen because her parents were too restrictive and she felt they weren't letting her experience life. She describes herself as a very independent person who didn't like having curfews and other rules. During this time, Annette started using marijuana of which her parents disapproved. Her older brother had been a drug addict who was involved with the street. Annette's parents believed she was a bad influence on her younger sister. Her parents would threaten to kick her out so one day she decided to leave. She had friends who were supportive and would let her stay with them. One of her friends would share things with her; including the money they made panhandling⁹. She says that sharing is the only way to survive on the street because when you haven't got something someone else does.

When Annette panhandled, she would dress down so that she looked "like a bum." She said that she liked it when people would buy her lunch because they didn't want to give money. Annette often went without eating because she had no

⁹ Panhandling or panning involves sitting or standing in an area with a high volume of pedestrian traffic and asking people who pass by for change.

money, didn't feel like it, or was too high. She also worked as a carnie, which she said was "a tiring life, but an experience." When they deserted her in Calgary, she phoned a street-youth outreach organization in Ottawa who arranged for a bus ticket home.

Annette liked to sleep outside in parks during the summer, even though it was scary at times. She trusted God to watch over her. She stayed at shelters occasionally because they were safe places to clean up and regenerate before returning to the street. While living on the street, Annette was sexually assaulted at the age of fourteen. She said that she felt dirty afterwards and distrusted men. She said that the experience taught her how to be tough. She became involved with drugs, which would make her "freak out" and slit her wrists. Lack of support was a major problem because she often felt insecure and unsettled.

Constant sickness was something Annette experienced on the street. She often had a sore throat and cough. She also felt weak frequently from lack of food. She wouldn't seek medical help; instead, she would just ride it out until she could get some sleep.

Police harassed Annette during her time on the street. In one case, police falsely accused her of being a tagger¹⁰ and searched her bag. Annette believed that many people, including the police, are prejudiced toward street youth. She has avoided getting involved in crime because she is trying to find a job and an arrest would hurt her chances.

The closure of a community centre, which was a location for drug trafficking, took away a valuable resource for Annette and others like her. She said the community centre had computers, which kids would use to try to find jobs. Annette also used the counselling services at a street-youth outreach service, which helped her get into a transitional housing facility. She likes living there

¹⁰ A tagger is a person who draws graffiti on public property.

because she can have a house and go to school without a lot of rules restricting her freedom. Annette described the difficulty of escaping the street by saying:

It was always basically the same thing, man. It was like a circle. I could never get out of it. I would always like try, but it was always the same things the street, drugs, so I wasn't really getting anywhere, you know, just the same things every day.

Annette went to several public schools after leaving home, but dropped out because she was depressed. Currently, she has completed several courses in grade 11. Annette was able to get a job at a doughnut shop. Within two years, Annette hopes to graduate from high school, save some money, and go to university. She hopes to have her own apartment and feel like she is an adult who is on the right track. She said that she would like to be Prime Minister so that she can reform the government. A self-described hippy, she wanted to bring back the spirit of peace and love embodied in the '60s. However, she thought that becoming a psychologist or social worker who works with children and teens was a more feasible career path. Annette believed that her street experience would be an asset because "some people don't understand so they don't ... know what to do."

Duncan

Duncan is the nineteen-year-old brother of Adam. He has just started "putting [his] life back together in the past two months" after living on the street for three years. He currently lives in a one-bedroom apartment with six other people and squeegees for money. He and his roommates have scrounged mattresses and other things from the garbage in order to accommodate everyone.

Before living on the street, Duncan grew up in a middle-class suburban neighbourhood. His mother left the family when he was a child. When he was in grade eight, his father began to use crack. At first, his father would disappear for hours at a time and, later, days. His dad eventually lost his job as a result of his

drug use. Despite being only fourteen-years-old, Duncan quit school and got a job at a fast food restaurant in order to take care of his two younger brothers. Duncan was unable to make ends meet and the family lost their home. His youngest brother stayed with their grandmother while Duncan and Adam lived on the street. Duncan said that he had too much pride to ask anyone for help.

Duncan says that he doesn't remember much about his first few days on the street. He packed up as much as he could fit into a bag and just started walking. He ended up in Osborne Village where he met other street youth who taught him how to survive. He said that he was pretty good at finding places to stay. In the summer, he would sleep in the slides at local parks. He mostly panhandled and squeegeed to make money, which he would spend on a cheap hotel room if he made enough. The hotel was substandard and Duncan was paranoid about getting scabies from the mattress. There were public showers available but he refused to use them because he "didn't trust anything about the ... hotel." Duncan said that he learned to trust his instincts in order to survive.

Duncan says that his drug use, which included amphetamines, crystal meth, cocaine, and crack, was a form of self-medication to battle depression. Duncan said:

Between fourteen and fifteen the only thing I did was work to help my brothers survive, all right, but that became my life. Then, well, my brothers weren't there anymore so I had no life. So I went and tried to do something new and I got hooked on crack. Yeah, a lot of people end up hooked on crack all right.

He used drugs as a form of escape and it was the only time he really felt good although coming down was the "shits." Duncan's friends weren't into drugs so he would most often use them alone in his hotel room.

Duncan didn't want to go to jail so he avoided crime for the most part. However, he robbed a couple of doughnut shops while wearing a ski mask and carrying a knife. The police never caught him.

Duncan hitchhiked to Toronto twice because his philosophy was "I would only be happy if I wasn't here." A person could make a lot more money in Toronto, but there were more expenses and temptations so Duncan returned to Winnipeg where everything was familiar.

Duncan sometimes resorted to buying food because the stuff he could get at food banks and soup kitchens was unsavoury. Duncan lived in a homeless shelter for about a year and said that it was "horrible" because the living conditions were rough, including bad smells and lack of heat. He managed to continue going to school and did well in his classes. He was able to complete part of grade eleven.

Everybody on the street gets sick, according to Duncan. He suffered from bronchitis and scabies while living on the street. A dealer, who he owed about a hundred dollars for cocaine, cut him up. He went to the hospital for stitches but took off before the staff could call the child protection agency.

Duncan would like to go to school to learn a trade, such as woodworking or carpentry, both of which he enjoys. He doesn't want to end up in a dead-end job for the rest of his life. He wants to get a permanent home and pay bills like "normal people." He says that he needs to get off the street on his own terms or else he will end up back there. Duncan still lacks proper identification, which prevents him from doing adult things like buying cigarettes. At the time of the interview, he hadn't used hard drugs in six months and was feeling much better about himself as a result. He says that prevention is the key to keeping kids off the street. Duncan believes that self-esteem education beginning in kindergarten would help a lot of kids.

Evangeline

Evangeline is a seventeen-year-old, Aboriginal woman. At the interview, she was dressed very conservatively in a dark tracksuit. She had short, dark hair. At first, she was very shy, but as the interview continued she began to open up and tell her story. Evangeline cried during the interview because she really wanted to go home and live with her mom.

Evangeline began getting kicked out from home by her mother when she was thirteen years old because they argued about everything. When she left, she was only allowed to take one bag of belongings with her. She tried to stay with family, but their house was already overcrowded with relatives coming from the reserve, so she would either sleep at a friend's house or wander around all night. Evangeline says that she was scared living on the street because there were "a lot of weird people out there."

She was hanging around with the wrong people who were involved with alcohol, drugs, and crime. They eventually got her involved in these activities. Evangeline would participate in break and enters and car thefts in order to get money. At the time she found crime exciting, but now says that it was "childish." She continued to attend school while on the street, but quit after being sent to the youth centre for seven months on a criminal charge. It was a difficult time for her and she says that she "cried a lot." She was able to complete some grade nine and ten credits while in the facility.

Evangeline was placed in the care of a child protection agency after family members became worried about her. The agency placed her in a series of foster homes from which she would run away. She would stay with friends until the police found her and took her back to the group or foster home.

Evangeline's grandmother would feed her and let her use the shower when she went to visit. Evangeline never told her about being homeless, although she thought her grandmother suspected it. She tried panning for money, but said that the experience made her feel "embarrassed" and "stupid." She would spend most of the money she got on alcohol.

Evangeline spent about a month sleeping rough¹¹ during the summertime. She was never the victim of violence or approached for sexual favours. During this time, she knew of few services available to kids on the street. She saw the homeless people who inhabited Main Street and decided she didn't want to become one of them. Her older brother, who spent two years on the street, helped Evangeline make the decision to leave the street for good:

Yeah, cause I just started listening cause I was thinking I don't want to live that life anymore. I was like - I don't want to live on the street or running from house to house like or whatever and you're not going to know where you're gonna sleep the next day or you don't even know if you're going to be alive.

Evangeline and her mother began trying to work out their differences, but when that didn't work out, the staff at the safe house in which she was living told her about a transition home for street-involved youth. Living independently was a big change for Evangeline. She was used to her mother setting rules or living in an institution with a strict routine.

Evangeline is currently trying to get back into school through a special program for Aboriginal youth. She would like to become a doctor or a nurse one day so that she could care for her mom in her old age. Her friends have been able to get off the street too and she still has contact with some of them. More than anything in the world, Evangeline would like to live with her mom.

¹¹ Sleeping rough means sleeping outside with out shelter.

Jane

Jane is a twenty-seven year old Aboriginal woman. Today, she looks like a typical university student. She has jaw length, straight black hair and wears glasses. She was dressed causally in jeans and a sweater. Jane was very open and animated in her description of her time on the street. Compared with some of the other youth to whom we talked, she had been less entrenched in street culture. While she encountered difficulties on the street, she described her experiences more positively than most of the others.

Jane was adopted by a White family and grew up in a small town just outside of Winnipeg. She has a brother and sister who are much older so she was raised like an only child and spoiled by her parents. Jane felt like an outcast growing up because the community was predominantly White. Jane coped with the harassment she experienced at her school and in the community by becoming very quiet, withdrawn, and distrustful of others. Even after moving to high school and then a private school, Jane still carried the feeling of “not being good enough.” Grades were never a priority for Jane; she says that she was more interested in getting friends and feeling like she belonged. Jane had a good relationship with her family, but there were tensions because she wanted to get out on her own and have her own space. In the summer following grade 12, Jane met a young man at the Forks in Winnipeg. Her parents had “dragged” her to a church service that evening and Jane invited the young man to it. They soon started dating.

When she was eighteen, her boyfriend, who had travelled extensively, asked her to go to Toronto with him. Despite her parents’ protests, Jane and her boyfriend hitchhiked to Toronto where they initially stayed with friends. Jane saw her trip as an adventure and didn’t mind having to sleep outside when their money ran out. When they didn’t have a place to stay, they would wander around all night, sleep in parks, squat in abandoned houses, or stay in hostels.

Jane and her boyfriend hung out with several of her boyfriend's acquaintances. They would pan enough money to buy alcohol and drugs and party until the cops broke it up. Jane got in trouble with police for shoplifting, but no charges were laid. She eventually discovered that her boyfriend was a junkie who made money as a male prostitute. Jane said that male prostitution was common among the youth she knew. It was a way to make money so she didn't care about his involvement. Since he was not monogamous, Jane began fooling around with other men, which made her feel accepted.

Jane had a thyroid problem that required daily medication. Her boyfriend knew of clinics in Toronto where she could get her pills when she couldn't afford them. She also said that she felt sick all the time while living on the street. The street drugs would take away her appetite so she would often not eat. When she did eat, it would make her ill. She got pneumonia several times, but did not receive medical treatment because she had lost her identification.

Jane got off the street after contacting a street-outreach agency that arranged for her to return home. During the time she was waiting to go home, her boyfriend left Toronto. She said that life was better after he left because he was not well liked by the other street youth. A friend gave Jane a place to stay and money to spend. Just as life was picking up for Jane, she had to catch her bus home.

Jane and her parents began rebuilding their relationship after she returned home. However, she led a double life in which she secretly continued using drugs and partying. Jane wanted to find a profession so she entered a co-op program through her high school. She chose to work at a travel company as she had enjoyed her travelling experiences. She was able to save enough money to return to Toronto for a week. This trip, Jane had money for a place to stay, but still partied with her old friends on the street. Her co-op experiences and trips to Toronto inspired Jane to go into travel counselling in which she earned a

diploma. It was a difficult time for Jane because her mother died while she was studying in Winnipeg. She ended up finding work in the city and eventually met people who invited her to their church. Unlike her previous church experiences, Jane enjoyed it and joined a Bible study group. The experience had a profound effect on Jane:

I just wanted to get out of this lifestyle cause, you know, it was dragging me down. You know like my boyfriend was dragging me down, drugs were getting really, really boring and I really didn't want to drink anymore cause I had gotten myself in trouble and I was like I wanted to get away from myself kind of a thing ... so I studied the Bible and got baptized and I became a Christian.

Today, Jane says she has mended her relationship with her family. She says that they are best friends and she was able to regain their trust. Jane says she was very impressionable and naïve during the time she spent on the street, which was about five months. Jane is currently in university and plans to go into social services. While she says that she is still working on things, Jane's life today is drastically different from the one she had a few years ago.

Leanne

Leanne is a seventeen-year-old White woman. She came across as a no nonsense kind of person. She had two dogs who were in the backyard of the home in which she was living. She kept a close eye on them during the interview. She was very outgoing and seemed to like having someone listen to her story. She gave lots of details about the situations she encountered on the street. She spent a year and a half on the street when she was fifteen. She lived in Winnipeg before moving to Vancouver when she was eight. Her mother told her to leave because of her behaviour, which included smoking marijuana in the house. She was also not doing well in school because of learning disabilities and she dropped out during grade 10. Leanne and her mother tried to work out their

differences several times while Leanne was staying in a safe house, but their efforts were unsuccessful.

Leanne lived on the street in downtown Vancouver. She panhandled in front of liquor stores and slept behind the post office or in an underground parking lot. She occasionally stayed with friends who were addicted to crack, which Leanne also began to use. While on the street, Leanne spent 90% of her money on drugs and 10% on food. The crack diminished her appetite so she only ate once a day, usually from 7-11.

Her companions were two dogs, one of which she had when she lived at home. A puppy she adopted while she was on the street was later stolen while she was sleeping. Leanne said that people usually gave her food for her dogs. A drug dealer she knew would give her crack if she bought dog food because he said the dogs were too thin.

Leanne never had any major health problems while she was living on the street. She lost weight because she didn't eat enough while she was smoking crack. She also had mono for seven months and developed chronic liver failure from crack use. When she needed medical attention, she would do something illegal so the police would take her to a safe house where the staff would take her to a doctor. She was stabbed when she refused to get crack from her dealer because the buyer did not have enough money. She was also shot in the knee as a bystander to a bank robbery. Friends treated both of these injuries because a doctor would be required to notify police, which Leanne did not want.

Leanne had several run-ins with police who she felt treated street kids unfairly. Often when Leanne and the other street youth found shelter, someone would call the police because they were trespassing. Since they were minors, the police would take them to a safe house when their parents refused to let them come home. She disliked both the staff and the other residents at the safe house, as

well as the curfews and other rules. She would go “AWOL” from the safe house, which meant that the police would be looking for her. She had several other charges for minor offences, such as jacking¹² people, for which she served several weeks in the youth detention centre. She once punched an officer in the face who threw her up against a car without announcing that he was with the police. The officer had mistaken her for a suspect and Leanne injured her hand during the altercation. Leanne was arrested for possession of crack when police raided the house she stayed in with her friends. She said that she was not in possession of any crack at the time, but the police did not believe her. Her parents were phoned and her dad drove to Vancouver to bring her to live with him in Winnipeg.

The move to Winnipeg forced Leanne to stop using crack because she could no longer access her dealer. She still uses softer drugs, such as marijuana, mushrooms, and ecstasy. Her father kicked her out after she was falsely accused of planning to bring a gun to school and expelled. Her dad sent her to a group home where she stayed for six days before being sent to a safe house. She disliked the group home because of the strict rules. Eventually, a social worker placed her in a transition house where she has been for several months. She is currently looking for a job, but is having trouble finding one that suits her skills and interests. Leanne says she can do any kind of work “as long as it doesn’t deal with a cash register” because she is slow at counting change and the people staring at her make her nervous. She has a slight anxiety disorder, which makes dealing with the public difficult. She also has charges pending for jacking people even though she doesn’t do that anymore. Leanne says that she doesn’t plan for the future, but would like to live in a place where she doesn’t have to worry about the people around her.

¹² Jacking involves a group of people who accost and beat up people on the street and take items of value, such as jackets or cellular phones.

Mary

Mary is a twenty-six year old mother of three who became involved with the street when she was eighteen. She identifies herself as Métis. Her birth parents were both substance users who were homeless from time to time. She was placed in several foster homes before being adopted at the age of seven. Her first baby was apprehended by Child and Family Services (CFS)¹³ and removed from her custody. She dealt with the loss of her child by turning to drugs. CFS gave her money and put her up in an apartment, but did not teach her how to budget so she ended up losing her home.

Mary was forced to leave her hometown in rural Manitoba because the police were going to arrest her. She went to both her birth mother and adoptive parents, but neither was able to take her in permanently. Her adoptive parents drove her to Winnipeg and dropped her downtown with only a hundred dollars to find an apartment and manage her life. Mary was unfamiliar with the city and unaware of any services available at the time. She often resorted to sleeping in parks, parking garages, or squatting in abandoned houses with others. She had friends on the street but she said you could never really trust them because they could “stab you in the back at anytime.” In order to get food, she would panhandle or steal from grocery stores. Mary turned to dealing drugs to pay off her drug debt. While Mary had friends who were involved in prostitution, she never became involved herself.

Mary had an aunt who helped her by getting her first into a shelter and then into a rooming house. Many of the rooming houses in which she lived lacked heat and clean water. In addition, parties were common and Mary was evicted as a result.

¹³ Child and Family Services is the child protection agency in Manitoba.

Mary got off the street after she got pregnant. She met with a social worker who told her about a live-in centre for young pregnant women. There she learned how to take care of herself and her baby. Mary says that not learning how to follow a routine was one of the reasons she ended up on the street. The centre helped her acquire those skills.

Today, Mary is working to stop the intergenerational cycle of substance use and abuse that was a part of her upbringing. She is a devoted mother who returned to school to complete her high school diploma after dropping out in grade 10. She also works on short-term contracts at a community resource centre and plans to become a peer-mentor. Mary would like to go to university to become a social worker. Following the formal interview, the interviewer spent some time talking with Mary who had her youngest child with her. The interviewer said that you could see the close bond between the two of them. Mary was definitely one of the success stories.

Pickles

Pickles is a fifteen-year-old Aboriginal female who has been on the street for three years. She was dressed in dark pants, a hooded sweatshirt, and a baseball cap with beer caps bent in semicircles around the peak. Her clothes made it hard to tell if she was a male or female at first. Her hair was natural and dark. It was cut short on one side and left longer on the other. She was quiet and soft-spoken. She also gave shorter answers than many of the other interviewees. Pickles' mother abandoned her and her father. Pickles and her father never got used to "the fact that [they] had to be together." There was a lot of tension between them, which would lead to fights. She left because she couldn't stand the way they were treating each other. Before leaving home, Pickles went to school even though she hated it. She dropped out after leaving home because there "was no other way for [her] to deal with everything."

She went to Osborne where she met other street youth. At first, she stayed with an eighteen-year-old male she had met. Since, she has couch surfed¹⁴ between friends' places. On occasion, Pickles had to sleep outside, including one night she spent on a discarded couch when it was -35° C. She ended up having to run into a bar to warm up and then wandered around all night to stay warm. Sleeping under bridges is another way she has escaped the elements when she had no place to go.

Pickles has never been involved in the sex trade. Instead, she pans, flags, and squeegees for money. She says that it is harder to make money this way in Winnipeg now because there are so many people doing it and people don't give as much. People have yelled at her to get a job, but she says she doesn't care. Her response is to give them the finger.

She spends her money on partying and food. Pickles mainly gets food from a convenience store or fast-food chain. She has used the food bank at a street youth outreach agency. She says these services are very helpful. Pickles says, "Street kids need as much support as they can get." Food and job opportunities would make a big difference in their lives. According to Pickles, many kids don't exist in the eyes of the government because they lack identification needed to access services.

Pickles mainly uses alcohol and marijuana when she parties. She says that you have to be careful with the drugs you use because she has had pot laced with heroin. Parties can also be dangerous. One night after she had been drinking, Pickles was invited to a party with some people she didn't know. It ended up being a gang party so Pickles decided to leave. She took one last shot of vodka with some other people and passed out. When she woke up, a big woman was beating her on the ground. She managed to get away, but she was spitting up blood and her nose was bleeding. Pickles didn't know where she was. One of the

¹⁴ Couch surfing means to stay with friends on a rotating basis.

men at the party offered her a place to stay. He started sexually harassing her when they got back to the apartment so she left.

Another issue for Pickles is the police. Under the squeegee ban, the cops will “jump out of their car and attack” street kids. In one case, the police beat her up and then charged her with assault. She was given community service hours for the charge, although she hadn’t done the hours at the time of the interview.

Pickles has never had a job, but says she would take one if it were offered to her. However, she doesn’t want to spend her whole life “flipping burgers.” She plans to finish school one day. Pickles tried returning to school while living on the street, including through a hospital-based school program that taught psychological coping skills and academic classes. Her dad enrolled her in the program, but she didn’t see any point in going so she took off again.

Pickles has some contact with her mom by telephone and she sees her dad on occasion. She used to talk to an outreach worker at a community agency, but after she left Pickles didn’t want to talk to anyone else. She says that when she needs someone to talk with she talks to herself. She hopes to finish school and get her own place within the next few years because she knows she couldn’t live off flagging and squeegeeing forever.

Sarah

Sarah is a twenty-year-old White woman who grew up in a small town outside of Winnipeg and lived on the street for four years. She liked to make her own clothes and always had funky outfits. She had short hair that was dyed a different colour each week and a nose ring. She was very composed, articulate, and passionate during her interview. Sarah grew up in a home where there were many problems, including violence. She started getting kicked out of her home once or twice a month when she was eleven-years-old. She would often stay with her school friends, but after dropping out of school began to hang out with street

kids more. When she was twelve, her father kicked out the whole family because he didn't want a family anymore. Her family went to live with a relative in rural Manitoba, but left because the relative was physically abusive. They went to a women's shelter where the windows were barred and they were not allowed to make phone calls. Afterwards, they moved to a halfway house, but Sarah's mother eventually went back to her father. When he kicked them out after a month, her mother took Sarah and her siblings back to live with the relative who continued to be abusive. Sarah ran away to Winnipeg, but was apprehended by CFS and returned to her father's custody. By the time she was thirteen, she was living on the street permanently.

Sarah would squeegee in order to make enough money to live. She was able to get one job but she had to lie about her lack of education. She didn't keep the job for long because she lacked math skills. She was forced to sleep outside sometimes, but would stay with friends when she could. In order to get food, she would often dumpster dive¹⁵. She didn't normally use soup kitchens because food poisoning was common since they use expired food from grocery stores. Many street kids avoid soup kitchens and shelters because older street people, who often suffer from mental illness, populate them. Sarah had older street people steal her stuff and threaten to stab her with needles. Of people on the street, Sarah said:

You don't trust anybody on the street because you can't, but they're the only people you really have ...

Sarah said that street sickness, which included respiratory infections and feeling run down, was a part of everyday life. Getting medical care was difficult because many doctors will not see people who don't have identification and medication is often unaffordable. During this time, many of her friends who were intravenous drug users were dying of AIDS or hepatitis. Sarah has seen friends overdose so she didn't get overly involved with drugs.

¹⁵ Dumpster diving means getting discarded food from restaurant dumpsters.

Sarah says that her street experience was not entirely negative. She was able to travel all over Canada by hitchhiking. Being transient is a part of street culture and she believes other cities have much better services for street youth than Winnipeg. Other cities are also less violent she says because they don't have as much gang activity.

Sarah left the street when she was sixteen. A social worker helped get her social assistance and a job with a street youth resource centre. One of the street youth outreach workers helped her find an apartment.

Currently, Sarah is trying to complete her high school education, but says that it is difficult because she needs a full-time job to make ends meet. She feels that being forced to live on the street took away opportunities. She wishes that she had the opportunity to complete her education, get a good job, and go to university or college. Sarah hopes to work in a helping profession, such as counselling or psychology.

Squeak

Squeak is a seventeen-year-old White male who has been living on the street since he was fourteen. His appearance was intimidating because he was a big guy with a shaved head, except for some long strands on the top of his head, who wore army fatigues. Squeak was more frustrated and angry than the other participants. He describes himself as a communist who hates "all races equally." People are often mistrustful of him because of his appearance. He lived in a group home after being kicked out by his parents for staying out too late. He found school boring and was expelled in the ninth grade. He said that a kid got stabbed five feet from him at school. Squeak describes himself as a "bad kid" who had to find his own way to a safe house after the child protection agency failed to remove him from the home. After spending a few days at the safe house, he was transferred to a group home. Squeak disliked the people at the

group home and found life boring there. The police removed him after he went “loco and like wrecked the place.” Squeak was placed in a series of foster homes before leaving the child protection system for the street.

Squeak often slept outside under bridges or in parks. He and other street kids would set up tents in a park somewhere because there is safety in numbers. They also usually had a large dog with them for added protection. He would also stay with friends when he could. He sometimes stayed with a woman he referred to as his “step-mom” because she had street experience so she could relate to him. He made enough money squeegeeing to meet his needs, which included using alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. One of the biggest hassles on the street was “assholes driving by telling us to get a job.”

Squeak hates the police. In particular, he claimed an officer had assaulted and threatened him. Squeak has been in trouble with the law for a variety of offences, including being drunk in public, fighting, mischief, and destruction of property. He has done time four times for assault with a deadly weapon, joyriding, and breach of probation.

Squeak’s health was pretty good because this was the first year where he didn’t have strep throat. He normally stays in bed, takes a shot of whisky and a sip of water, and sleeps under lots of blankets when he’s sick. He says sweating it out is the best cure. He went to the hospital when he needed blood taken out of his kneecap, but didn’t go to the hospital when he dislocated his jaw. He and Pickles were drunk and he was poking her with a squeegee so she kicked him four times in the jaw. His jaw dislocated and was jutting out the side of his face. Squeak punched it back into place. He retaliated by power bombing her. He said:

We were just wrestling. She’s like my little sister... It’s nothing.

As a child, Squeak had travelled across most of North America with his dad who is a long-distance truck driver. Currently, he likes to hitchhike to different cities

every couple of months. Squeak plans to leave the street after going to Toronto and Vancouver. He wants to find work as an actor after making enough money as an extra to buy Christmas presents for his family with whom he still has some contact. He thought he would eventually get his GED and become a trucker or join the army.

Tasha

Tasha is a sixteen-year-old White female. She had bright orange hair and bruises on the side of her face and a red eye. A male who lived in the area had bottled¹⁶ her and then punched her in the face. He chased her with a knife after he hit her. Tasha said this individual had attacked one of her friends too. She held the consent form in front of her face at the start of the interview. She seemed shy and unsure of what to say; but as the interview continued, she began to open up.

Tasha lived with her mother and grandmother until she was sixteen years old. Her older sister had been placed in a group home when she was younger. Tasha began using marijuana and drinking. She would go out and not call or return home before her curfew, which led to conflicts with her mother. One night when Tasha returned home drunk after being away for two days, her mother told her to “get the hell out of [her] house.” Her mother sent Tasha to a crisis stabilization unit where she stayed for about three days. She was moved to a group home during which time Tasha began drinking and smoking more. She was also frequently involved in fights. She started hanging out with gang members and resorted to jacking people for money to buy booze, cigarettes, and marijuana. Tasha found jacking exciting at first, but later came to regret her involvement after being arrested. At the time of the interview, she was awaiting her court date for three counts of robbery. She figured she would be going to the youth centre for a few months. She planned to escape:

¹⁶ Bottled means being hit with a bottle, usually a beer bottle.

I think if you build up enough trust you can like take out the garbage and now it's only the girls that can do that if they earn enough trust. And then you can just run away... Well, you would have to run really fast.

Tasha has spent about a month on the street during which time she lived in shelters, group homes, or at party houses. At the time of the interview, Tasha had been living in an independent living house for about a month. When asked about that time in her life, Tasha said:

When I look back on that time, it was really stupid. I just wish, honestly I just wish, I never started doing anything like that.

She had been kicked out of school in grade eleven for skipping. Tasha plans to return to school in the fall, but has not set any specific goals for the future.

2.41 How Youth Tell Their Stories

An important theme that emerged from the data was how youth tell their stories. The participants in our study did not portray themselves as victims. We came to think of them as stoics, people who did what they had to in order to survive. They talked about very traumatic events in a very matter of fact way. Despite serious family problems, most said they were not angry with their parents. They actively fought for their independence and autonomy. They saw themselves as survivors and agents who were in control of their lives. For many, their travel experiences became integrated into their self-concept. They were people who had seen the world and lived life on their own terms. Most presented themselves as invulnerable. Physically, many appeared rough and hard because of their street experiences, which included poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, and the persistent threat of violence. Many had altered their appearance by dying their hair unusual

colours, wearing distinctive clothing, or displaying body piercing. However, some were very gentle in appearance and would easily meld into mainstream society.

Beneath the hardened exteriors were hurt, scared kids who had been let down by everyone who was supposed to look after them. They were keenly aware of the ways in which they were disadvantaged compared to their non-street-involved peers. They were also cognizant of their disadvantage in society. Life was always uncertain. Many said that they would go to sleep at night unsure of whether they would wake up in the morning. Their age put them at risk for exploitation in the black markets because they had few or no means of making money legally. They talked about breaking down sometimes when the weight of their situation became too great. They desperately wanted to have normal, adult lives, but were unsure of how to achieve their goals. Family was a notion they had romanticized and many dreamed of having the kind of family they never did.

Goffman's "dramaturgical" metaphor is useful in understanding the dual nature of these youths' presentations of the self. Goffman asserted that as with actors in a stage production, individuals adopt different roles. There is backstage reality, which refers to one's behaviours in private where one transitions out of "character" and back into one's genuine personality. Onstage behaviour refers to the ways in which we present ourselves publicly. Just as an actor portrays a role so do individuals in their daily lives based on the expectations for their social role and the constraints of the situation (see Klein & White, 1996). What we initially saw was onstage behaviour – the way the youth presented themselves in public. Later, as they became comfortable with the interviewers and their surroundings, they began to let their backstage identity show through.

A good example of this phenomenon can be found in the youths' responses to questions about health problems. When asked if they had any health concerns, almost all of the youth said no. However, further probing revealed that all had experienced respiratory infections, acute conditions, chronic conditions, or

injuries. One researcher likened it to animal behaviour in the wild. Injured or sick animals will often try to hide their disability because it makes them a target for predators who will go after the weakest member of the group. In the urban jungle, the same relationship may apply. If one looks or acts vulnerable, one will *be* vulnerable to street predators.

We believe this is one of the most important findings of this study. The existing literature has not examined the ways in which youth present themselves to society or the function their mask of invulnerability serves. Yet, the perception that “admitting weakness is admitting defeat” presents a serious barrier to youth accessing services because if one doesn’t have health problems then one doesn’t need a doctor. Service providers need to find innovative ways of offering services targeted to street-involved youth that respect their independence, autonomy, strength, and power.

2.42 Approaches to Understanding Youth Homelessness

Two broad approaches can be used to understand youth homelessness. The first is a micro level or individual approach. A micro approach says that biographical or personal deficits put youth at risk for homelessness (Peressini & McDonald, 2000). Personal limitations, rather than structural constraints, are the primary cause of unstable shelter arrangements. Interventions focus on the individual’s psychological, emotional, behavioural, and social resources. While it was evident from the interviews that these kids had personal characteristics, such as extreme rebelliousness, involvement with alcohol and drugs, learning disabilities or difficulties, mental health concerns, and histories of family conflict and violence, that contributed to their street involvement; we believe that a structural approach lends itself to more fruitful interventions.

A macro level or structural approach to homelessness asserts that gaps or problems within social institutions lay the foundation for youth homelessness (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Poverty and lack of affordable housing are issues for young people because their lack of education and job skills places them at a disadvantage in the labour market, which, in turn, restricts the range of housing available to them on the free market. The problem is further compounded because they lack access to social benefits by virtue of their age and discrimination against young people in the housing market. The child protection system has serious gaps in service, especially for sixteen and seventeen-year-olds who are pushed out of the child protection system, but have not yet reached the age of majority. These youth are usually not eligible for social assistance without parental consent, which they are often not able to obtain. Even younger youth who are in care find that the care they receive is frequently not adequate. As some of the youth to whom we talked recounted, care received within the child protection system is sometimes neglectful and even abusive. Homelessness becomes the most favourable option. Youth may also not be able to get help for mental health problems or addictions because of gaps in service provision and parental consent requirements. At a broader level, it is the social, political, and economic structures in society that determine what services are provided, how they are delivered, to whom they are targeted, and to what extent they are implemented.

A specific macro level approach that lends itself to this area of study is conflict theory. One of the most pervasive and prevalent themes in the youths' stories is conflict. Conflict theory aims to explain conflict within and between groups (Klein & White, 1996). Conflict theory asserts that conflict is the normative state of the world and harmony is a fleeting phenomenon. Social groups are naturally in competition for control over scarce resources. Thus, society can be divided into the powerful who control the means of production and the powerless who do not (Klein & White, 1996). There was a range of conflict that emerged from our

interviews. There was evidence of stress and tension among the youth and between the youth and community residents. At times, this tension erupted in violent encounters.

All of the youth experienced conflict prior to their street involvement. These youth had been violated by virtue of the systems meant to support them failing to protect them from homelessness. All of the youth encountered conflict within their families, either as witnesses, victims, or perpetrators. For some, conflict took the form of stress and tension as the youth fought parents for more power and autonomy. For the majority, these conflicts escalated to violence. Their parents wielded more power by virtue of their age, experience, and control of resources. As a result, these kids had few opportunities to negotiate with their parents. When conflicts were unresolved, the youths' power disadvantage left them with few alternatives to the street.

Conflict is also evident among street youth. Street culture is a violent one because resources are scarce, which leads individuals to fight to keep the things they have and try to get ahead by taking the resources of others. Most youth adopt a violent persona as a survival strategy. They dress in ways that are perceived as intimidating. Their language is often angry and profanity laden. Even their play is violent.

Yeah, every once in a while I've even dressed up in drag and went out on the street just to fuckin see what people think... Man some people got pretty scared...Look at that guy with the mohawk running around the street in drag.

Yeah, if they [mainstream society] wouldn't be like two-faced bastards and get that friendly Manitoba off their license plates because God damn it Manitoba ain't friendly and they are fucking assholes.

Society's got to give people like us more respect. They can't look down on us just because the way we look and the way we act. We act, like, kind of violent towards each other just cause that's how we play... I get into fistfights with my girlfriend for fun all the time... She punched me in the face one day and we just starting punching each other and then we stopped and had a beer and started to laugh about it.

There is competition among street youth for prime territory for making money. Tensions also exist between subgroups of street kids who inhabit the same locations. At times, youth find themselves victims of violence at the hands of their peers and, other times, they are the perpetrators.

On the squeegee corner, there is a guy trying to claim the corner to himself and so he dragged me into it cause like he's going to back me out because I let him use the corner and I was like, "No, I ain't gonna do that. The corner is for everybody." He told the wrong person he was going to do that and ... he got hurt pretty bad by this one guy. I don't know where he is right now, but I don't think he's going to try that again.

These kids also encounter stress and tension between themselves and mainstream society. While most people assume that the youth are the source of violence against society's upstanding citizens, the opposite is often the case.

Don't be snobby towards us. Don't be ignorant that's all I ask. I don't know I'm not ignorant to you. I've never met this person in my life and they're being ignorant to me – I don't like that. I'm trying to be nice and they're being ignorant or they just ignore us. "Can you spare some change?" They ignore us. They either ignore us or tell us to get a job or something. They don't know who we are. They shouldn't be telling us what to do. They don't know our plans.

[So what kinds of things do people do to piss you off?] *Huck stuff out their windows and hit me in the head that's first off... Oh man, I've been hit in the head with salt and pepper shakers and papers and shit... It's worse out on the perimeter [highway] because people just fly by and huck them out the window and hit you in the head.*

Society's propensity to make the problem of youth homelessness disappear is another source of tension. An initiative, such as the squeegee ban that was passed under the guise of it being "for their own good" because squeegeeing is dangerous, creates an "us versus them" mentality. Squeegeeing is a way youth who experience barriers to traditional employment earn money to meet their needs. It can be a more socially acceptable form of entrepreneurship than drug dealing, crime, or prostitution. The squeegee ban made a common source of income a criminal act without introducing an alternative these youth perceived as acceptable. It brought youth in conflict with some members of mainstream society. Youth who continued to squeegee became criminals, instead of victims of the system. It also brought youth into conflict with police who have the task of enforcing the ban. Ignoring the causes and consequences of youth homelessness pushes youth further to the periphery of society and weakens ties with the mainstream. They are set further adrift with few safety nets to prevent them from floating into the deep, dark waters of the underworld.

We believe that a youth-oriented system that addresses gaps in the major institutions with which youth interact, namely the family, school, community, employment, child protection, youth corrections, and healthcare systems, can have far greater effects on the lives of all youth than individual intervention programs. In a system that functions effectively, youth who are at-risk for poor psychosocial outcomes would be identified and receive treatment or supports. When problems arise in one institution, another would respond by identifying the situation and mobilizing resources. Thus, by improving the structural components

of society, we would better enable youth at risk to overcome deficits and lead empowered lives.

2.43 Reasons for Becoming Street-Involved

Consistent with the literature, we found that these youth experienced difficulties with a variety of social systems while they were living at home. They had a variety of personal or biographical concerns that contributed to problems with other social systems. However, the social systems themselves failed to identify these youth as high risk and thus did not intervene. Additional problems arising from alienation from or conflict with these systems were critical factors leading up to these youth becoming homeless. Of particular importance to the lives of these youth were: family and extended family, the education system, the child protection system, and the youth corrections system.

Individual

These youth were high risk for a number of reasons at the level of the individual. Rebellion and experimentation are normative behaviours in adolescence; however, these youth were either extreme in their deviance or experienced serious consequences for their behaviours. They did not like or adhere to rules set by their parents, teachers, or society. Breaking curfews, alcohol and drug use, and skipping school were common. These youth are very independent, autonomous, and proud individuals who often accepted the consequences of their actions or circumstances without seeking help.

I was smoking a lot of weed in the house and she [mother] was allergic to it and didn't want it in the house. And she basically didn't like the way I was behaving. She thought maybe I was teaching my little sister, you know, to do that the things I was doing and she didn't want that so basically she told me to stop doing what I was

doing or I had to leave. And I wasn't, at that point, ready to stop doing what I was doing so I left.

My parents were trying to I guess – what's the word – keep me from, I guess, experiencing and going out and living life, you know . . . I'm very independent so I needed my independence and it was tough because they had their things and I had mine. We would clash so they were basically like you can't come back so I left.

Family

Research has shown that, rather than being a free choice, youth are frequently forced to the street because of familial instability and conflict (Ayerst, 1999; Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001, 2002; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002; Caputo et al., 1997). Indeed, the youth in our study often experienced stress and conflict within their families. Conflicts ranged from arguments over parental rules or values to parental substance use to physical and sexual abuse.

The breakdown of their parents' relationships became an issue for many of the youth. Several had been abandoned by one of their parents. The absence of that parent placed strain on the relationship between the remaining parent and the youth.

I hadn't seen my mom in about four years. When I was in grade eight, my dad was doing crack and stuff. I didn't know at the time.

A lot of tension between me and my Dad because he's a single parent. My Mom had abandoned us, well me anyways. And we couldn't get used to the fact that we had to be together. We had a lot of fights and I was like I just left cause I couldn't handle the way we were treating each other. We couldn't live with each other so I left . . .

Many parents used a “tough love” approach in which they demanded absolute adherence to their rules or else the youth would be barred from home. Unresolved conflict between parents and their children was clearly evident in the youths’ narratives.

It’s not all poor parents. It’s poor kids too... Yeah, there’s a lot of, you know, parents that just blame the children for everything and there’s a lot of problems. And they take their problems out on ... [Their kids?] Yeah. It’s that whole tough love mentality. It’s bullshit.

[I was kicked out at home] cause I never got along with my mom. We argued over the littlest things . . . She kicked me out. Like she would just tell me to leave. Okay, I’m thirteen. Where am I going to go?

Several parents were involved with drugs or alcohol themselves. Physical violence and emotional abuse were also noted in most of the youths’ family backgrounds, which has been noted in the literature. For example, in a sample of 195 runaways from Toronto, 86% had experienced serious physical abuse beginning at twelve years old or younger by a parent or stepparent. Females were at greater risk than males for all categories of abuse (Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995).

Yeah, he [father] got on to crack and apparently he’s been doing it for about twelve years now and he lost control of it. He went to a loan shark and he borrowed like about \$400 and he put our names on it as the collateral.

My family had a lot of problems and there was a lot of violence in the home. A lot of abuse . . . One time when my mom and him [father] were fighting, he like pulled her by the hair and got her on the ground and I intervened.

I got slapped in the face, burned with cigarettes, hit with a belt. You name it; I got it... My mom was thinking there was something wrong with me like I was brain damaged. She took me to a psychiatrist because she thought there was something wrong with me and there was actually something wrong with her. It's really weird how that happened.

None of the interviewees disclosed any specific instances of sexual abuse; however, the literature suggests it is common among street youth (McCormack, Janus, & Burgess, 1986). It is possible that the youth did not want to be seen as victims and chose not to reveal any experiences.

Many parents appeared to have little involvement in ensuring their children were placed in a supportive living environment outside the home.

I was a burden so I ended up having my parents just drop me off in Winnipeg . . . Yeah, at the bus station. They gave me a hundred dollars, I remember, and told me to try to find an apartment and stuff.

She [mother] called like the crisis stabilization unit . . . They [service provider] drove me there . . . I was never at [a group home] before. It was pretty scary. I was kind of calling my Mom to go home and she said, "No."

For most of the youth with whom we spoke, there was a family pattern of street involvement. Six had siblings who were street-involved and several mentioned that they worried their younger siblings would end up on the street too. This finding weakens arguments that youth homelessness is caused by individual factors. If only one child in a family was street-involved, one could argue that child was a "black sheep" or a "bad seed." However, a pattern of street

involvement among siblings suggests that there are dysfunctional family dynamics that are contributing to the youths' risk for street involvement.

After dealing with my brother who was like me also a drug addict, on the street, this and that you know. But, you know, they're tired so you know they just like to blame and they blame it on us. You know, it's your fault she's like this. It's like why? I'm not her parent you know. Use your brain, totally.

My mom kicked her [older sister] out and she left for Ontario. I was sad she wasn't around so that's why I was being so mean to my mom.

I was talking to her [younger sister] today and she doesn't want to go to school. She's just pissing me off. I tell her to go to school.

Extended family members and other support systems may not be well equipped to protect youth from impending homelessness (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2002). Several of the youth with whom we spoke had extended family within close geographic proximity, but they were often not able to take the youth in permanently. In other cases, the youth did not want to burden them so they did not ask if they could live with them. However, relatives, especially grandparents, provided some limited support to the youth, such as meals, shower facilities, or temporary shelter.

We had people coming in from our reserve to stay and they would stay at my families' houses so it was like packed as it is so there wasn't enough room for all of us.

[So didn't anybody, your grandma or some relatives, didn't anybody come and ...] *I had way too much pride.* [So they offered and you said no way and just kind of took off?] *Yeah, pretty much.*

I'd go to my granny's or something and shower.

Our grandparents took care of us for a little while until they kicked us out again because ... the landlord didn't want us there anymore.

Despite dysfunctional family relationships, many youth report that they want to maintain relations with their parents (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2002). The youth in our study also tried to maintain contact with one or both of their parents. However, many reported that they no longer fit into their parents' lives.

She [mother] has her own life now. And she does whatever she wants to do. What makes her happy so ... [It's not part of your life?] Not really part of mine.

This is the guy she's [mother] going to be marrying and I just do not like him. That's why I don't want to live with her anymore.

Many parents had new relationships that often included children. Some parents did not want youth to have contact with their half siblings because they thought the youth would be a bad influence.

My mom is living on [street near the area where street kids hang out]. She's got two kids. She just finished having another so ... [So do you have any contact with her?] Yeah, I talk to her quite often. [How is that relationship?] It's building up ... I haven't seen her in like seven years.

I can't see my half-brother out in Calgary cause like he's only one or two ... His mom doesn't like who I am.

School

Many at-risk youth experience further conflict and alienation within the education system due to problems with classmates, teachers, and the curriculum. They often skip classes and eventually drop out when school becomes too stressful. These youth are often not proficient with academic skills, such as reading and math, but also transferable skills, such as communication, organization, computer usage, and problem solving, which are increasingly sought by employers (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Thus, upon leaving the school system, these youth are unemployable or marginalized into low skill, low paying, and unrewarding jobs.

We found that school was a source of stress for the youth in our study. For many, problems within their families prevented them from concentrating on their studies and this resulted in poor academic performance. Several identified themselves as having learning disabilities or being alienated by their peers. Some felt that school was a waste of time; in other words, they did not see it as relevant to their life situation.

[Was school hard?] *It wasn't hard as much as it was just not being able to concentrate on anything. Like I knew what I had to do and I knew I could do it and all that but I didn't see any reason for myself to do it cause I didn't see any point.* [Because of all the trouble at home?] *Because of everything, yeah.*

They [teachers] didn't know how to teach me. They just didn't understand how to teach me. I have learning disabilities and they didn't understand how to get around them no matter how many times I explained it to them.

When I was in . . . elementary, I was in a predominantly White community so being Native I was like the outcast and people didn't like me and stuff.

Child Protection Agencies

The child protection system, which is designed to protect youth, is often unsuccessful. Many youth living on the street were once in the care of a child protection agency, but ran away or became too old to remain in guardianship (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). As a result, these youth are not receiving the support and counselling they need to overcome the hardships in their lives.

Many of the kids with whom we talked reported being let down by the child protection system. Most of the youth in our study were preteens or early in adolescence when they became homeless. For many of these kids, the child protection system should have been involved with their families prior to the situation escalating to the youth being forced from the home. Several youth had contact with child protection workers. Many had experiences in which they felt the system was not meeting their needs. Based on our participants' reports, it appears they should have been removed from the home, but were not. In other cases, child protection agencies did not seem to be involved in any way with families where both parents and children were in distress. Several kids had contact with the mental health system or life skills programs, but did not receive any family level interventions to stabilize their situation at home. Finally, those who were removed from the home experienced more instability as they were shuffled through various living arrangements, including crisis stabilization facilities, foster care, and group homes.

My grandfather still hit me. I ran away back to the city and CFS put me back with my Dad...My dad put on such a good face, like you know, "I never told my family to leave – I never," he loved me and blah, blah, blah. This is absolutely disgusting because he's mental.

I tried CFS and they just do nothing. They just fucked me over. Honestly, they are just a bullshit organization and they should get rid of them. Fuck it and they should put some good people in there.

I was in grade eight when my dad started doing crack and stuff. I didn't know at the time. Nobody really did. He would just sort of disappear for a few hours here and there and turned into a couple of days. And then he got fired from his job... I quit school. I got a job and started trying to take care of my brothers... And it didn't work. Lost the house. Hit the street.

I had to see a psychiatrist cause of my anger but she [mother] didn't really know what triggered that [her anger].

They attempted to go but then CFS is like blah, blah, blah, we're trying to keep families together now and all this. It's just a big sham. I ended up having to find my own way down to Mayfair¹⁷... I stayed for a couple of days. I ended up getting transferred over to Ndinawe in the North End... And then I got thrown into the crisis unit again for my second time... I went back to Ndinawe¹⁸ and ended up getting kicked out of there and got put into a foster home out in like St. Boniface. Ended up getting kicked out of there. Thrown in one in Trashcona. Got kicked out of there. Got thrown into one down around here. Got kicked out of there.

Youth Corrections System

Kurtz and Kurtz (1991) reported that abused adolescents are more often served by the youth correctional or mental health systems than child protection agencies. In our study, a few of the youth indicated they received some care in the mental health system before moving to the street. Several had connections to CFS. We only found one clear example of a youth for whom involvement with the criminal justice system was a factor contributing to homelessness.

¹⁷ Mayfair is a service provider for troubled youth.

¹⁸ Ndinawe, short for Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad, is a youth shelter.

[I] got kicked out of [town in rural Manitoba] by the police. They told me “you will leave or you will be put in jail.”

It is evident that the facilitators of youth homelessness are complex. The literature suggests that these youth experience stress and conflict within many of the systems with which they interact. Interventions that strengthen the connection between youth and one or more of these systems may have the potential to preclude street involvement. Too many kids find themselves in a situation where they perceive they don't belong anywhere in mainstream society – their families don't want them, they have difficulties at school, the child protection system has not addressed their needs, and the youth corrections system is one they would like to avoid. They find themselves living on the margins of society and discover many hardships there.

2.44 Reasons for Leaving Home

All of the youth we interviewed perceived that they had no other alternative than to leave home. However, the youth can be grouped into two broad categories: those who were forced to leave because of serious family problems and those who left because they wanted adventure and freedom.

My family had a lot of problems and there's a lot of violence in the home, a lot of abuse. Basically, there were so many reasons why we would get kicked out.

We had the choice of whether we wanted to stay or go back home, basically. And I didn't want to go home because I was having fun, you know. I was fighting with my parents and I felt like freedom.

The majority fit into the former group in which serious family problems prevented them from remaining in the home. A few, on the face of it, left primarily for

adventure and freedom; however, it seemed that there were underlying family issues as well.

2.45 Life on the Street

Once on the street, day-to-day life becomes a constant struggle to meet basic needs, including shelter, safety, food, and money (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Youth often experience cycles of being homeless and sheltered, but it is the instability of their housing arrangements that puts them at risk.

Scary and Exciting

The youth in our study said that the experience of being on the street is both scary and exciting. Most of the youth enjoyed the freedom of the street by virtue of living outside the rules and responsibilities imposed by mainstream society. However, the uncertainty and vulnerability of their position within society was unsettling.

...time meant absolutely nothing to me then. So thinking back on it now, it's kind of like it's all kind of floating, ethereal.

No, you never feel safe. You're always sleeping with one eye open. You never know what's going to happen next.

Nowhere to Turn

When they first became homeless, most youth were unaware of the services available to assist them on the street and help them get off the street.

Yeah so, I didn't have any resources so I just ... I know family was here but I didn't know how to go about approaching [them]. I don't know. I just slept on benches. I never heard of even the shelters.

It was really hard. I didn't – I was like getting really thin. I didn't know where to turn for food. I was sad. There was nothing else to do.

Others consciously chose not to be part of the protective system. For them, life on the street was preferable to the restrictive rules of institutional care.

They were getting worried about me so they called CFS and so CFS picked me up and they put me in care. And they just started moving me around from like foster homes and group homes. They kept moving me around ... cause it wasn't working out cause I still kept taking off.

Then they moved me to Ndinawe... It was kind of shitty there. Things seemed to get worse after. Drinking every night. Smoking up every day ...and getting into fights.

No, why would I go from a place where I had access to all these wonderful drugs and like I'd be so high I didn't have rules? No boundaries. Why would I go to CFS when I had all that?

Meeting Basic Needs

Meeting basic needs was a daily struggle for youth on the street. Most did not have reliable access to food and shelter. Food banks and soup kitchens were not widely used because of the perceived risk of food poisoning and an aversion to contact with older street people. Fast food restaurants and convenience stores were common sources of low-cost food. Several youth said they appreciated it when people who were unwilling to give them money bought them food.

To find food, we would do a couple of things. We would dumpster dive and sometimes we would know what time restaurants would be throwing out their food or you know like even like Tim Horton's when they're throwing out their donuts ... sometimes shelters, but

not all the time because it depends on what city you're in cause you usually don't want to eat in soup kitchens. You would get food poisoning ... because where they get their food from it's all like expired food like from Safeway or you know any grocery store, so it's like ...vegetables and stuff like they would basically - the soup kitchens would make slop.

I spent a month living on Burger King. Oh it's so deadly.

I would eat once a day at 7-11. I think it was \$2.50 or something to get a hot dog, a drink, and chips.

People would come and you would ask them for spare change but you know they would think you would go and spend it on something stupid ... so they would go and buy us like a whole bunch of food, drinks or whatever like at a hot dog stand or whatever. That was really nice you know. We would actually get a meal.

Street youth often cycle through periods of living at home, couch surfing, or in shelters, group homes or other institutional settings, such as youth corrections centres (Ayerst, 1999; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2002; National Missing Children Services et al., 2001). In Winnipeg, it is also common for youth to sleep in parks during the summer and travel to warmer cities during the winter (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Those who do find shelter often live in overcrowded or inadequate housing (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001).

Indeed, many of the youth in our study found shelter by couch surfing. Some had used short-term shelters, but these were not stable living arrangements and most of the youth did not like staying there. Cheap hotels were used by several youth, but these establishments were perceived as unclean and a haven for parasites.

Staying outside was common, especially in the summer. Bridges, parkades, and parks were common places to camp out. Some squatted in abandoned buildings. Occasionally, they found themselves without shelter during the winter and were forced to brave the elements.

I was hanging around with people I usually hung around with. I was like staying at their houses and then I had nowhere else to stay after that because their parents were getting fed up with me.

It [the shelter] was scary and they took away everything like our bags and put us in a cubby-hole and stuff like that and we were like no we can't do this we'd rather sleep on the street than you know have some older man like practically on top of you ...It's absolutely disgusting. So we left and we slept in a stairwell.

Sometimes there would be other people in the park and I would talk with them and sleep there or they would show me an abandoned house or whatever and sleep in there.

I don't trust anything about the [cheap hotel]. I was paranoid about sleeping on the mattress and getting scabies.

I've slept outside on a couch and it's like 35 below and I had a sleeping bag and I woke up later and my feet were just frozen. Just, "Oh my God!" And I ran to [hotel/bar] and stayed in there for a while and ended up walking around all night so I didn't freeze.

Most adopted a "do what you have to do" attitude toward daily life.

You don't really know. You just go day by day. Whatever happens happens. Whatever you do you do.

It was basically nature to me. It was what I knew. It didn't really get hard in anyway. You have to face hard things everyday, like getting raped sometimes, you know. But the harshest reality you have to face everyday and that's normal to you.

Social Networks

Developing social networks was important for survival; however, across the interviews, there was a sense that one needed friends, but could not trust them entirely. As one participant noted, sharing resources among several street youth was an important survival strategy.

...it was kind of like a street family and stuff like that. When you're on the street you kind of have a sense of who needs to be there, you know, and who doesn't so that's something I guess they know. I mean you don't trust anybody on the street because you can't but they're the only people that you really have so.

I have friends that I trust enough not to steal my shit. Even then it can get pretty shaky sometimes.

You survive too eh by sharing because when you don't have something someone else has something and they'll share it with you. And another time they won't have something but you will so you share it with them. And that way everyone gets something out of it, eh.

When the youth in our study first became homeless, most kept their old friends from when they lived at home. Sometimes, these friends helped by letting them stay with them for a period of time. However, as time went on and the youth were not able to find permanent housing, they began to lose touch with their non-street-involved friends and strengthen ties to other street youth.

So I went to a friend's and told him I had no place to go. I'm lost so help me. So I did have some supportive people.

I went to one of my friend's houses cause she gets up for school at that time and she let me sleep in her bed until she got back from school and then she fed me cause I never ate that day.

I was hanging around with people I usually hung around with. I was like staying at their houses and then I had nowhere else to stay after that because their parents were getting fed up with me and I went to Ontario.

I started getting involved in street life and those people became my only friends because I wasn't attending school anymore because I can't. I had to, you know, find food, and find shelter and stuff like that.

Several noted that the community of street kids in Winnipeg, and even in Canada, is fairly small and tightly knit. All of the youth knew other kids who were street-involved. Those who had travelled, which were the majority of youth, had street friends in other cities with whom they made connections when they were in each other's "home" city.

Yeah, there's like a giant circle [of street kids] around Canada that all know each other... We help each other out and we know each other fairly well. There's just different groups, but we all sort of know each other. It's a giant circle and a bunch of little ones inside it. Friends that basically is what it is.

He [boyfriend] knew people from Toronto and he's seen them like a million times before so he knew all these people so we were all there.

Street kids often have contact with other groups who may not be homeless, but spend time on the street. These people tend to be engaged in the black market. Drug dealers, prostitutes, and gang members were a few of the people the youth in our study mentioned as part of their social networks. Often their association with these individuals led to violent encounters.

We called a dealer once and he came down to give my buddy the rock that he asked for. He says to me, "If you go out and buy the biggest bag of dog food you can find, I'll give you sixty dollars worth of rock for free."

Yeah like there's a few times that I would go with her [friend who was involved in prostitution] and she would do her trick or whatever, but then she would leave me with the person and she would take off with the money and I wouldn't see her again and I'd be stuck dealing with this guy because she didn't do her trick or she would steal his wallet... And I have gotten beaten up by her clients because I was the second one with her.

Another guy from a gang ... he was calling me a slut and stuff like that. So I called him a slob¹⁹ and they hated being called slobs. So I called this guy a slob and he pushed me down the stairs and stomped me in the face, but I still got up and left them.

Many of the youth in our study had adopted a friend's parent. They saw these individuals, usually their friend's mother, as being more like a parent than their own parents had been. These individuals played an important role in providing support and practical assistance to street-involved youth.

I stayed at my step mom's... She's not really my mom. [You just call her that?] Yeah cause she's like really – she's like my mom

¹⁹ Slob is a derogatory name for this gang.

basically. She's like been with me for a while so... She's somebody I can relate to. She's been there done that... She understands everything to a T.

My best friend in Ontario, her parents are teachers and they agreed to take me cause they knew I was a good kid.

As noted previously, extended family, especially grandparents, also provided the youth with practical help while they were living on the street.

My grandma's going to be making, I don't know what, some kind of meal that can stay out in the heat and it'll be fine [to take on the road while hitchhiking]. She keeps telling me to get a job and settle down but she said it's up to me what I do... Yeah, she understands where I'm coming from cause my dad was exactly like I was, the same with my mom.

She [aunt] told me about the shelter ... like Salvation Army and stuff... She picked me up one day and she took me to welfare and welfare didn't really want to help but she made enough stink about it to get me into a rooming house.

A surprising group in the social networks of street youth is outreach workers and social workers. Despite rejecting the child protection system itself, youth often found a particular person within an agency to whom they could relate and who they perceived as being supportive. These workers were often able to connect youth with resources and initiate the process of transitioning off the street.

I was on social assistance and I worked with OGH with [outreach worker]. [And how did you find out about OGH]? Through [social worker] right after I was at her office I went straight to OGH. She [social worker] is with Child and Family Services... She's a

wonderful woman. You would love her, a cool lady. Basically, that's what I did and [outreach worker] helped me find an apartment.

Making Money

Street-involved youth often lack the resources to get a job, including a fixed-address, identification, education, and job related skills (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Those who are employed are usually in low wage and low prestige jobs, and this can lead to disconnection from the traditional labour market (Baron, 2001).

We found survival on the street is dependent on making money in some way. Most of the youth we talked with experienced numerous barriers to finding employment in mainstream society. Eleven of the twelve people we interviewed had not completed high school and, as a result, lacked the skills needed to find a decent job.

Squeegeeing makes me more than McDonald's.

I got a job and I lost the job and we lost the apartment and back on the street. And basically that's the pattern that I went through because it was quite obvious that I didn't have the math skills or anything like that. Even the last couple of years that I was in school, I wasn't fully there because of the traumatic things that had happened to me in my home.

I have a slight anxiety disorder, which, yeah, anything with a cash register or fast food basically I won't do.

They often turn to illegal activities, such as prostitution, crime, squeegeeing, or flagging, for money (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001; Caputo et al., 1997). These activities can create additional problems for youth, including criminal records and an increased risk of being the victim of violence (Ayerst,

1999; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001, 2002; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002).

The youth in our study did turn to the peripheral labour market in order to make money. Panning, flagging, and squeegeeing were common sources of income. Many of the youth treated these pursuits like a job, which they dutifully performed each day until they had enough money to meet their needs. Saving money for long-term goals was not common. Several of the youth indicated that poor budgeting or money management skills resulted in their being on the street or unable to leave it. Others also turned to criminal activities, such as robbery, theft, and drug dealing. Interestingly, none of the youth we interviewed said they had been involved in prostitution or the exchange of sex for favours. Many knew men and women involved in the sex trade, but denied participating themselves.

CFS put me up in an apartment and handed me some money and said this is your rent money. They never showed me properly how to budget and stuff so I was put on the street. The way I saw it was becoming a drug dealer so that's how I started.

I tried it [panning]. Yeah and then it was embarrassing and I felt really stupid ...I felt really bad because, I don't know, I felt like a bum.

Basically, for money, I would just squeegee. That was before the squeegee ban. So sometimes you would make like fifty cents or like sometimes you would make a few dollars but basically you only made what you needed to eat and survive that day and then you left.

Violence

All of the youth with whom we spoke had witnessed or been the victim of violence while on the street. Often their peers perpetrated the violence; however,

stories of police brutality were also common in their narratives. Many were at risk because of their involvement in illegal activities, such as drug dealing.

I'd been partying one night ...I took a shot of vodka and then I was gone. And when I came back, I was being punched out. I was just being beat on. I couldn't do anything. I was just lying there taking it.

He [police officer] grabbed me by my leg and nearly suffocated me. Slammed my face against the cop car and then he had the fucking nerve to threaten me that if he ever caught me in the back lane at night ever again he's going to fucking kick the shit out of me.

This guy wanted some crack, basically, and I refused to get it for him because, well, first of all, he was three dollars short and my dealer didn't like that. He didn't like being shortened at all so I refused to get it for him ...he pulled a knife on me and he said I better call my dealer for him or he was going to stab me and I refused to call my dealer ... and he stabbed me and then he just took off.

Most of the females we interviewed reported being sexually harassed or sexually assaulted. However, they were not willing to elaborate on their experiences. As a result, we are uncertain whether these women were victimized while living on the street or at home. We found both males and females experienced violence and sometimes perpetrated violence. One female spoke of how she tried to keep herself safe because of her awareness of male violence against women:

[So was he (boyfriend) ever violent with you or physically abusive with you?] See the pole that would be one of his legs. He was very skinny, very scrawny. I would always make sure that I was physically bigger than the men that I would go with because my sister had got beaten by her husband all the time and I always thought no man would ever touch me that way so ... and he was

smaller so if he ever tried anything like ...I would sit on him. I'll beat you up, you know. So yeah, I've been working out since grade eight.

We found no evidence that the women in our study formed romantic or sexual partnerships with males solely for protection as has been suggested in the literature (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002).

Substance Use

Many youth turn to drugs, alcohol, and other substances to cope with the harsh realities of street life (Ayerst, 1999; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, street youth have a higher prevalence of depression (Ayerst, 1999), suicide attempts, and self-harm compared to other young people (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002).

Substance use as a coping mechanism was a common theme in the narratives of the youth in our study. While many had used prior to becoming homeless, all used substances to varying degrees while on the street.

When you're on the street, this is just my personal experience, life is the shits. The only thing you can think about is escaping it. How you do that, I think, varies from person to person right. I did drugs.

[What makes your life easier or better?] *Pot. Honestly, pot. It relaxes me on very, very stressful days. I normally go out and buy a gram and smoke a bowl and sit back and relax.*

I'd be drinking all the time because that's about the time I was raped and I was also getting upset about that too and that's when I became an alcoholic.

Despite regular substance use, the majority did not see themselves as addicts. Many stated that they had consciously chosen not to get involved with “hard” drugs like heroin or cocaine.

Health

Homeless youth have a higher than average number of health problems combined with a lack of medical attention (Barry et al., 2002; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Both acute conditions, such as injuries, respiratory infections and dermatological problems, and chronic diseases, including HIV and depression, are prevalent in this population (Barry et al., 2002; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Exposure to the physical elements, sleep deprivation, and inability to maintain personal hygiene contribute to “street sickness,” which is the constant feeling of malaise (Council on Scientific Affairs, 1989). Food insecurity often leads to nutritional deficits, which can aggravate existing conditions or reduce immunity to new infections. Many youth rely on fast food restaurants and soup kitchens, which typically offer meals high in fat and low in nutrition (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Deisher and Rogers (1991) concluded that preventative health education, particularly in the areas of nutrition and sexuality, are needed in the homeless youth population; however, many youth do not seek care within the mainstream health system. Street youth often wait until acute or chronic ailments become exacerbated. Then, they will seek medical care from emergency facilities that are not equipped to provide comprehensive health assessments or preventative education (Deisher & Rogers, 1991).

When asked about their health, most youth in our study said they did not have any major health concerns. Further probing revealed that most did indeed have acute or chronic health conditions. Many had injuries that were self-inflicted, accidental, or due to violent encounters with others on the street. Street sickness, which was described as respiratory problems and a feeling of malaise, was

universal across this group. Consistent with the literature, many did not seek professional help until it was absolutely necessary. Friends often played the role of doctor and patched them up.

I mean you always have street sickness no matter what. It's just a sickness that you always have like a constant cold and bronchial and feeling ugh from being ...out all the time and just tired and worn out and stressed out ... but you don't want to get sick on top of it because, you know, a lot of times you can't afford an antibiotic.

The crack makes you not want to eat so I lost a lot of weight but ... and I had mono once but other than that my health is actually just fine ...Yeah, I ended up with chronic liver failure because of the crack.

I would never go to the hospital. I don't like the doctors. They don't know what they are doing. All they do is call the police and I don't need bullshit from the boys. I went to my buddy's place and had him sew it [stab wound] up.

Yeah, I had broken my hand punching a wall one time and I was so stubborn I wouldn't go get my fingers back into place or bandaged up. It took me about two days before I actually got off and went. I was trying to eat some cereal and I just ...the spoon went flying and the cereal and I said, "Alright I'm going to the hospital."

Travelling

One of the most positive experiences the youth had on the street was travelling across Canada. They romanticized their adventures on the road. Many said that it was part of street culture to be transient. Sometimes they went to see friends, but most often went just to see another city. Since they did not have the money

to pay for public transportation, more dangerous means, such as hitchhiking or train hopping, were used to get from place to place.

[What made you leave Winnipeg?] Cause ...it's a hole, basically. Like where was I getting here? I was getting nowhere here and it was just part of my street culture to be transient.

Yeah, the summer is when everyone packs up and starts travelling around Canada and sometimes down to the States ...I don't know, like the first time I went out on the road, I loved it. I enjoyed every minute of being on the road. I love adventures.

Yeah, I got picked up at this truck stop and this trucker started like, I don't know. I had to jump out of his truck when it was moving otherwise – because he was like I don't know it was like he was going to do something to me and he was acting really weird. I lost my backpack, my tent, and all my money. I was stuck on the road for like two days walking to Toronto.

I hitchhiked. There's also train hopping, but I never actually got to do that because it's so dangerous. The only reason I didn't train hop is because you need to know. You need to go with someone that really knows about train hopping because if you go on to one car you could like – the vibrations can like break your back and stuff like that.

Interactions with Existing Services

A major problem in Winnipeg is the lack of shelter services for youth both on a short-term and long-term basis. Almost all of the youth reported that they avoided shelters affiliated with child protection agencies because their activities were too rigidly regulated. Some youth had been involuntarily placed in care at these agencies. As a result, they avoided all services provided by these agencies.

Furthermore, participants indicated shelters affiliated with child protection agencies often contacted the youths' parents or the police. In some cases, these agencies returned street youth to their parents even when the youth were unwilling to be reunited.

Participants tended to seek help from service providers who did not specifically cater to street kids only when it was absolutely necessary. They reported being uncomfortable with the adult clients of these agencies. Some participants noted that many of these clients appeared to have mental health issues, which raised safety concerns for the youth. In particular, some female participants indicated they had negative encounters with adult men in shelter situations.

When the participants in our study did need services, various barriers prevented them from gaining access. For example, many did not have identification, such as a medical card, to access health services. They did not have money for medication or other items not covered publicly. Sometimes, they feared service providers would contact the authorities and send them home. Quite often, they learned to live with the problem or find their own alternatives, such as friends who doctored them and Jack Daniels as anaesthetic.

I don't think there's enough cause there is a lot of people on the street. I think there should be more places for youth to go on the street. All I know of is Mayfair and Ndinawe. I think there should be more cause there's a lot of people out there.

I don't think the city realizes the fact that they may put money into, you know, soup kitchens and all these things, but they're more geared for older street adults and they don't recognize the separation.

No, I couldn't have a cigarette – like that's gonna deal with me. They stick me in a place [crisis stabilization centre] where I can't smoke; I can't even go outside. Of course I'm going to snap.

Yeah, most people think we do this as an option. I mean for me, it's not really an option. I don't want to go to CFS. I just don't like the idea. I like to do things on my own a lot.

You know and some people don't even have ID, medical card to even you know see a doctor and most doctors won't accept you [without a medical card].

I went to the hospital. They stitched me up. They said they were going to call CFS and I said I needed to use the washroom. And I went to the washroom and I waited until I could see the orderly's feet walk by cause he was watching me. He wasn't allowed to not watch me. Opened the door real fast and bolted... That was really painful though man cause I ripped out a couple of stitches.

Preferred Service Delivery

Most of the youth in our study had travelled extensively throughout Canada and they reported that larger centres offered services that better met their needs. Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal, and Toronto were identified as some of the cities that had developed innovative outreach programs specifically for street youth. The young people in our study liked services that were street-youth oriented and could be accessed on a “no questions asked” basis. Contact for immediate needs, such as food or clothing, provided the opportunity for youth to connect with outreach workers for counselling services or supports to get off the street. They wanted staff who could relate to them and their experiences.

It was better in almost every other city... Because there is so much more for youth in other cities and I could survive better - like in

Montreal, you can hardly get hungry cause it's like Chez Pops is awesome. Like they have food every day and they have health services and tea and just so much stuff... Cause they're ... street youth geared and there was just so much available to you.

The shelters, like in Quebec in Montreal, they're so supportive and they make it more like home and they give them more of a stable feeling. More of an at home feeling. You know and the workers are really cool. They're not like all PC²⁰ and you know.

Like in Calgary, there is a place called Youth Aid. It was an all night clinic that you did not need any medical card and you didn't have to pay. It was awesome because it was there for you all the time. They had needle exchange, shower services ...

I think some of these workers get their degrees and they just sit in big fancy chairs and they've never been there.

The youth wanted more than crisis services. They wanted long-term support to help them make the transition off the street.

Two days a month [in a shelter] is not going to help kids get off the street... It is more like they need more like a couple of weeks so they can get on welfare or something... Even a safe house that you don't have to contact any sort of authority figure.

Food and job opportunities – like odd job opportunities because ...like some street people have their own issues; maybe with the law or maybe they don't even exist in the whole government shit and they can't really get jobs or ID.

²⁰ PC is an acronym for politically correct

Street-involved youth face a daily struggle to meet their needs. They are often unable to make the transition into independent living because of their lack of education, skills, and resources. These young people face the harsh realities of the street, which can lead to or exacerbate substance use, mental illness, and other health conditions. It is evident that there are serious gaps in services for this group, and these gaps allow many youth to fall through the cracks of the social safety net.

2.46 Leaving the Street

It has been reported that youth are most receptive to interventions within the first couple of weeks on the street. As they inhabit the street for longer periods of time, they begin to become entrenched in the lifestyle (Caputo et al., 1997). For the majority of street youth in a study by Caputo et al. (1997), a critical life event, such as the death of a friend, an arrest, or being threatened by others, motivated them to seek help leaving the street. Other motivators included disillusionment with street life, hitting rock bottom, fear, and taking on responsibilities.

Our participants noted similar events that led them to start actively trying to leave the street. Some of the youth had a set time frame during which they planned to leave the street, but for most a life event motivated them.

When I turn eighteen. I'm going to start settling down and getting my life back together. Until then, I'm probably going to keep myself lost in the system.

I had a baby and that baby saved me... I look back on him and say I'm glad I got pregnant even though his Dad and I broke up like a month after I got pregnant. And I look at [him] everyday and know everyday that's why I stopped.

Leaving the street is often a process during which information, resources, and support are critically important. Research has demonstrated the need for four types of help: “1) compassion (which includes individualized and unconditional attention); 2) limits and consequences for their actions; 3) practical assistance (including housing, food, money); 4) professional intervention (may be listening and dialogue or may go as far as residential placement with support)” (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2002, p. 2).

Most of the youth reported that a mentor or an exceptional person within an agency was instrumental in getting them off the street.

The person we're staying with ... all of us call her Mom ... she's been more of a parent to me than anyone ever has. A few times, and honestly a few times, I've just cuddled up with her and started to cry, "Why did I end up like this? Why can't I have been rich and happier?"

I'm a very independent person. I don't like asking for help. And I'd like die because of the street, you know, like even when I got pregnant and being at [supportive living facility for pregnant women], I put myself back in school and I learned about breastfeeding and doing just a bunch of stuff.

While support from others was crucial to leaving the street successfully, youth in our study indicated that inner strength and resilience were also key. These young people did not see themselves as powerless individuals. A belief in one's self, a grand vision of the future, and religion or spirituality were some of the resources, which motivated them to get off the street.

[I'm very struck by you saying that there's a fire in you and I think that's a really wonderful thing for you to have. How come you have that fire? Where does it come from?] I always have it. It's just in my soul... I've always been very opinionated and you know very for

people... Like always sticking up for people and like you know fighting for basically rights.

Basically, I didn't want to live like that at all. I didn't choose to live like that. And I wanted to do so much with my life and I still want to do so much with my life.

In the Bible, they often say how to live life so that's what got me you know like a completely different track than I've actually ever been on. So I quit the drugs, quit drinking, quit smoking. You know got rid of the boyfriend because he was horrible anyway. You know changed a lot of values. Changed a lot of stuff in my life.

Leaving the street is a difficult process. Caputo et al. (1997) reported that the freedom, power, excitement, and money available on the street made it difficult to leave. Street youth know how to survive on the street; however, many report uncertainty about their ability to function in mainstream society (Caputo et al., 1997). Most of the youth to whom we talked wanted to return to mainstream society. They experienced trepidation at the prospect because they were not certain they could survive off the street. Furthermore, the freedom, money, and drugs were often difficult to leave behind.

... It is illegal to live on the street and all that, but I enjoy it. I like having a lot of adventures in my life. Everyday is like a new adventure for me.

What I did is try and get a job... You save your money and you get an apartment, but it never worked for me because I was on crack so ...

Gaps in services to aid the transition into independent living have been noted in the literature (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Caputo

et al. (1997) found that stable housing, gainful employment, access to suitable services, and social supports are vital to successful reintegration. Most youth want to live in self-contained units rather than in a communal setting (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Although Winnipeg does not suffer from housing shortages compared to larger centres in Canada, much of the very low cost private housing in Winnipeg is poor quality, inadequate or located in undesirable areas (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2001; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al., 2002). Furthermore, there are few alternatives. For instance, there are only two agencies in Winnipeg that provide limited and temporary shelter for street youth, and no longer term transitional housing services are available.

Several barriers prevented youth in this study from leaving the street permanently. It is important to note that all the youth wanted to leave the street on their terms and live independently. They were aware that their lack of education and job skills would make the transition difficult. Not having identification was also an issue for most of the youth. Leaving the street was a process that took time. Stability was one of the key factors in successfully making the transition back into mainstream society.

You can't take a kid off the street and put him in a place where they are going to have rules galore because they are not going to stay. It needs to be a stable place. No one's going to mind having a place where they can come and eat and sleep and stuff like that but it can't be a place like where you can't do anything.

The only way it makes me a bit angry is cause I wish ... I did have all my schooling and I was like going forth with that and I could actually get a good job and actually go to university or college ... but I can't because I still have to get my grade twelve and that affects me so much cause there is so much that I want to do and I

won't be able to do that until X number of years so that's where it does make me bitter.

They [street kids] don't even exist in the whole government shit and they can't really get jobs and ID and people need ID to get ID to even start getting a job.

If you're trying to get them off the street what's going to happen is they're going to get off then they're going to be back on the street then they're going to get off the street and then be back on the street. There needs to be some sort of transition place.

A report by the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association et al. (2002) identified a need for the following services in Winnipeg: a 24-hour shelter for youth; transitional housing with services (especially for Aboriginal women from outside of Winnipeg); addiction treatment; and mental health services. Similarly, Dulmage (1996) recommended the provision of training in life and job skills, as well as education, for youth who are living independently. In addition, support was needed to develop social networks and work out the issues that brought them to the street. The findings of our study reinforce the need for these services.

2.47 Looking to the Future

Most of our interviewees said that they did not plan for the future. Instead, they focused on the struggles of the present. This finding is not surprising given that many of our participants were still street involved or just recently off the street. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, one must first meet physical needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing, before one can think about higher needs (Maslow, 1954). For many of the youth in our study, the struggle to meet basic

human needs was an ongoing one. Security and safety were also pressing issues for most, even those who were in transitional housing at the time of the interview. They reported not feeling safe in their surroundings and lived their lives on high alert because they never knew what would happen next. Those who had been off the street longer, showed signs of moving towards achieving higher goals, such as love, belonging and esteem. It is evident that street youth need stability in order to meet their basic needs and feel safe in their surroundings, which can free them to pursue higher goals.

When asked about their ideal life, all listed things they wanted to accomplish. None of them saw themselves still living on the street in the next few years. Finishing school, having a career, family, and a nice lifestyle were common goals. Several wanted to go into helping professions, such as counselling, psychology, or social work. While these kids liked to dream big, few had realistic expectations for the future or concrete ideas for implementing plans.

[So do you ever think about where you'll be in a couple of years?] *I don't plan for the future. [No? How far ahead do you plan?] I don't.*

Two years? Two years, well, I plan to be graduated. Hopefully, I'll be working somewhere – where I'm going to save up for university cause student loans are just – I think they are bullshit. Student loans are bullshit. So I'll be working. Probably have my own apartment. You know, I'll be starting my adulthood in two years.

I want a car and I want a big house one day. I want a nice house inside with couches and a whole bunch of furniture just to make it look nice and possibly another car. [Why is the house important to you?] Because ... I've lived in so many houses. I want one of my own now – well not now, but pretty soon.

I want to be a doctor or a nurse actually cause when my mom gets old and sick then she won't have to travel far to go to the doctor.

I want to have my social work degree. I mean – I could sit on my butt until my son is six as welfare says, but why do that? I want to be somewhere in five years when my son turns six.

2.5 Operation Go Home

Operation Go Home was the community agency with which we partnered. We conducted the interviews at a facility they operated in Winnipeg. Many of the youth we interviewed were their clients; others were friends or acquaintances of OGH clients and a few had no connection to OGH. However, what emerged from the interviews were positive evaluations of OGH services and negative evaluations of other service providers with whom the youth had contact. It is possible that this group was biased because of their links to OGH; however, we believe it is more than that. OGH delivered services that fit with what the literature (see for example Bridgeman, 2002; Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, 2002; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2002) and the youth in our study predicted would be effective.

OGH is one of the few agencies in Winnipeg whose mandate is to provide services exclusively for street-involved youth. They operate independently of child protection agencies. As a result, youth who use this service do so voluntarily and are able to determine which services they want. OGH provides: computer and internet access for résumé development and job searching; a food bank; phones and voice mail; and access to youth workers who provide information, referral, and advocacy. They also try to reconnect youth with their families or, when reunification is not possible, ensure that their needs are met as well as can be.

The young people in our study consistently noted the lack of long-term shelter services for youth in Winnipeg. OGH does not currently operate a short or long-term shelter facility. There are only two agencies providing shelter services to youth in Winnipeg. According to the youth, these shelters provide short-term, nighttime accommodation only. The youth identified a need for long-term shelter with a home-like environment and opportunities to make connections with other supports in order to make the transition into independent living.

Several other agencies provide crisis stabilization facilities or group homes for youth. These facilities tend to be clinically oriented. They are seen by youth as having an institutional feel, which they do not like. Some have secured living facilities, which the youth perceive as more akin to a prison than a home. Excessive rules are also problematic because these youth liked being independent and autonomous.

The only other agency in Winnipeg with the mandate to provide services specifically for street kids is Powerhouse. They provide similar services to OGH, including drop-in services, referrals, telephone and voicemail access, laundry, and a free store. Like OGH, they do not offer any shelter services. Only one of the youth in our study mentioned using Powerhouse. This finding may be because Powerhouse had reopened in February 2002 after relocating and the youth had not accessed it at the time of the interview. It may also be that the kids were already involved with OGH and Powerhouse did not offer any additional services needed by the youth. Although our study did not explore services of specific agencies, it could be a component of another study.

OGH undertook an initiative to provide transitional housing and support service for homeless youth with funding from the Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative (WHHI) through the Government of Canada's Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, the federal-provincial Residential Rehabilitation Assistance

Program (RRAP) and the City of Winnipeg's Housing Policy Initiative ("WHHI funds youth transitional housing and support programs," 2002). The goal was to assist youth in developing the skills and resources to live independently. An old house was remodelled to accommodate four sixteen and seventeen-year-old women who could remain in the house until they turned nineteen. In addition, a staff member from OGH served as a residential advisor and live-in students acted as mentors and provided assistance to the youth. Residents had their own rooms and common areas, such as the kitchen and living room, were shared. Each resident was responsible for the maintenance of the house. Youth lived independently and were responsible for providing their own meals. A condition of their tenancy was that they were in school, seeking employment, or working. The house had minimal rules. The residents could not have or use alcohol or drugs in the house; however, they could choose to use these substances off the premises. If they were disruptive because they were drunk or high, they would be removed from the house by staff or police.

The transition house modeled what the youth we interviewed and the literature suggested would be successful. Indeed, the youth who were currently living in the transition house said that they liked it and it had helped them to re-establish their life so they could focus on long-term goals. Unfortunately, the house closed in 2003 because of insecure funding.

2.6 Summary of Our Findings

What stands out from the interviews is the alienation these youth have experienced within every major social institution affecting their lives. It is evident that our participants perceived having no choice but to live on the margins of society because they lacked places within mainstream systems. As a result, they have in turn rejected society and developed a distinct alternative social group. Silver et al. (2002), in their study of school experiences among Aboriginal youth, found that they fought back against the education system because it did not fit

with their values and goals, and rejected them. The same argument can be made with street-involved youth. They reject mainstream society because the institutions that are supposed to take care of them do not meet their needs, allow them to fall through the cracks, and ultimately reject them.

This is not how the issue is typically seen. Many people attribute youth homelessness to micro or individual level factors, such as substance abuse, psychological disorders, or personality problems. However, our findings highlight the vital role that social structures play in the health and well being of at-risk youth. It is obvious that structural components are contributing factors. The advantage of focusing on bridging the gaps within social institutions, rather than focusing on individuals' problems, is that more kids can be reached. Prevention and early intervention are critically important in protecting youth from homelessness.

The young people in our study, spoke positively about their interactions with street youth oriented agencies, particularly OGH. OGH is one organization that has attempted to provide short-term and long-term supports to youth in a way that encourages and facilitates service use. At OGH, youth are considered as independent, autonomous individuals who can decide for themselves which services to use. It seems that this agency was successful because it operated independently of child protection agencies and did not have the power to apprehend or detain youth. The youths' stories also underscored the importance of street experienced or empathetic staff within agencies serving this group. Many of our participants cited a key person within the agency as a major contributor to their transition off the street. Unfortunately, the transitional housing facility operated by OGH closed down because of insecure funding. As a result, the youth who lived there were once again caught in the cycle of instability and discontinuity that characterizes youth homelessness. For the short time it operated, the house showed promise. The youth who lived there were beginning to reconnect to society and plan their futures. Unfortunately, their plans were

dashed because the issue of youth homelessness has not been a priority for social policy and programming.

Part Three

3.1 Conclusions

While our sample was not representative, we found that the majority of youth in our study became homeless at a young age when they were far from achieving the milestones of adulthood, such as graduating from high school or post secondary education, or finding a good job, that normally precede leaving home. They remained on the streets for a significant period of time because they were trapped between systems intended to serve children and those for adults. As suggested in the literature, most of the youth in our study perceived that they had no viable alternative to homelessness. They did not freely or willingly choose this path for “kicks” or “excitement” as stereotypes might suggest. Rather, most left to escape serious family problems.

What stands out for us is that these kids do not fit anywhere in mainstream society. Many of their parents have written them off as lost causes and moved on with their lives, which effectively means that youth can never return home. Schools are not well equipped to deal with the personal, familial, social, and academic problems these youth face. Communities have responded by shunning out-of-the mainstream youth, rather than mobilizing resources to help them become contributing members to the area. They don't have the training or the skills to succeed in the employment market. They are often too old for the child protection system and too young for social assistance so they fall through the cracks. As youth spend more time on the streets and move from being curbsiders to entrenched street youth, there is one system they begin to fit into more and more – the criminal justice system. They live in a world where there are few sources of legitimate income available to them. The squeegee ban made their efforts to make money in a socially acceptable way illegal. Youth are pulled by

the gravity of the streets into the vortex of street culture where crime is rampant. Youth who desperately need caring and compassion are far more likely to be punished as criminals and incarcerated where they will likely learn to be better criminals.

We as a society need to find ways to break the cycle of entrenchment in negative systems. As we have outlined in this paper, youth become homeless when multiple systems fail them. We believe these failures need to be addressed. We also need to look at macro level forces. At the heart of youth homelessness lie the larger issues of poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, gaps in social services, family violence, social isolation and a myriad of other social problems. These problems are not unique to this group. They negatively impact the lives of all marginalized and oppressed groups.

Our recommendations were developed directly from what the youth told us about gaps in existing services and preferred services. We believe that the literature supports these recommendations. We have chosen to focus on concrete initiatives that can immediately following implementation improve the lives of street-involved youth. We believe these needs are of the highest priority. Responsibility for implementing these recommendations falls on all three levels of government. The Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative, which is a limited, short term initiative of the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba Provincial Government, and the Federal Government of Canada, could provide seed money. However, securing sustainable funding is of critical importance to providing stability and continuity in service provision. These recommendations lay the foundation for developing and implementing long-term strategies to eradicate youth homelessness.

We also believe that the larger social issues underlying youth homelessness need to be addressed. It is beyond the scope of this study to make

recommendations for broad social change; however, we believe the Federal Government of Canada should make it a priority for social policy.

3.2 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION #1: INTERVENTION ON THE STREETS

We recommend the development of crisis intervention services for street-involved youth that place their needs at the centre of programming.

This agency will:

- a. Provide services separate from child protection agencies.
- b. Provide immediate assistance in securing food, shelter, and clothing for homeless youth.
- c. Provide a range of flexible programs that respond to issues of immediate concern (e.g., food banks, health concerns, violence)
- d. Hire staff who have street experience.
- e. Link youth to long-term supports to facilitate reunion with family or independent living.
- f. Operate from a philosophy of empowerment.

RECOMMENDATION #2: TRANSITION OFF THE STREET

We recommend the development of transition housing and support services specific to street involved youth to facilitate the process of leaving the street.

These facilities will:

- a. Provide single occupant dorm rooms with common areas for cooking and leisure activities.
- b. Provide mentoring by staff members who work with youth to oversee the functioning of the house and provide support to residents.

- c. Have minimal rules and allow residents to be involved in developing and maintaining the culture of the transition house.
- d. Provide referrals to other service providers (e.g., counsellors, lawyers, addictions treatment, education upgrading).
- e. Receive ongoing and adequate funding in order to ensure the continuation of service provision.

RECOMMENDATION #3: STAYING OFF THE STREET

We recommend the development of a comprehensive, coordinated system of services to better support youth in staying off the street.

These services will provide a continuum of support from housing assistance to developing social networks to employment skills over an extended period of time. These services will:

- a. Provide housing assistance to ensure youth have adequate, suitable, affordable, and secure housing.
- b. Assist in the development of social support networks within the community.
- c. Provide counselling and programs such as anger management, and communication skills development.
- d. Provide life skills training (e.g., budgeting and money management).
- e. Provide education upgrading and alternative education programs for youth.
- f. Provide employment skills training and preparation, and job search assistance.

RECOMMENDATION #4: PREVENTION

We recommend further research to identify gaps within the social institutions with which youth interact.

Questions to be addressed include:

- a. How can the conditions that put youth at risk of homelessness be better identified within the systems with which youth interact (e.g., family, school, community, and child protection system)?
- b. What characteristics and conditions make youth resilient?
- c. How can problems within the family be better addressed? What supports do parents need in order to cope with the challenges of parenting adolescents?
- d. How can schools better address the needs of at-risk youth? How can they support youth who experience family problems? How can they better serve youth with learning disabilities or learning difficulties? How can they foster better peer relations among students and between students and teachers? How can they make the school curriculum more relevant to students?
- e. How can communities support at-risk youth? What social supports can community members provide? How are these supports best delivered (e.g., through community based recreation programs, drop-in centres, or youth groups)?
- f. How can the child protection system better meet the needs of at-risk youth? How can gaps encountered by older youth be addressed? What are the alternatives to foster care and group homes?
- g. How can social programs assist youth who are unable to live at home? What are the gaps in the social safety net? How can these gaps be addressed?

Finally, we recommend that societal support systems be examined to determine changes needed to better support and respond to those at-risk youth who fall outside the mainstream.

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