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## **"I FEEL LIKE I'VE REALLY GROWN UP"**

*A brief report about street-involved youth*

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“I feel like I’ve really grown up:”  
A Brief Report About Street-Involved Youth

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## *“I feel like I’ve really grown up”*

This is a story about street-involved youth, particularly those who are in this situation for a long time. They become young adults while and because they are street-involved, and here we describe some of their pathways from childhood to young adulthood.

It is a story of their success and also their particular challenges. They make their way to adulthood in a unique way, and understanding their uniqueness may aid efforts to support their eventual inclusion in adult work, education, and social life. We propose the following:

- Many leave home to escape trouble or to try a different life path. This could be supported rather than treated as a risk factor.
- Street-involved youth obtain independence with considerable trouble; they reject interventions that threaten this independence.
- Harm reduction and short-term support services work well.
- When youth are ready to make a commitment to adulthood, they receive little help making decisions and gaining access to adult life.
- Traumatic experiences contribute to their uniqueness, and accounting for and adapting to their differences as a group and as individuals may be more useful than trying to change them.

- They are almost always the “wrong age:” Sometimes they are too young and sometimes they are too old—for help, work, income support, health care, education, and developmental experiences like making mistakes and experimenting.
- Middle-class Canadian youth receive educational subsidies of \$5000 to \$20000 per year to attend college and university and some also receive subsidized summer employment. Comparable help would substantially and meaningfully improve the life circumstances of street-involved youth.
- Few street-involved youth have an effective advocate to help them re-engage with formal education.

These suggestions are distilled from a forthcoming book, *“I Feel Like I’ve Really Grown Up:” The Experience of Emerging Adulthood Among Street-Involved Youth* (Magnuson, Jansson, & Benoit, in press), that describes street-involved youth who were part of a longitudinal study in Victoria.

The first wave of interviews included almost 200 participants and was followed by four more waves of quantitative and qualitative data. By the 5th wave of interviews, after 6-10 years, 64 young people were still partially “street-involved.”

It is these 64 who are the focus of this report, and we use themes from the emerging adulthood literature to illustrate their experience. We begin by describing the instability in their early lives, because it shaped their experiences.

## INSTABILITY

Harden (2004) suggested that childhood *stability* has three contributors: “limited movement from home to home” (p. 32), stability of family relationships, and stability of parental mental health.

The youth we followed over five waves had little childhood stability in any of these categories. Most had “nomadic childhoods” with frequent home moves and frequent changes of caregivers. Most experienced some trauma in their early lives such as witnessing violence, family substance use, or child maltreatment. As a result of these they were accustomed to change and had learned to accommodate it: “No change is bad and some change is good.” “My greatest fear is being stagnant.”

Leaving home at a young age looks to most of us like a tragedy. For them it is frightening to leave yet may also be an opportunity and adventure. Many young people declared that it was an important part of their educational experience and an integral part of their development.

## LEAVING HOME AND SCHOOL

*“I just sorta’ noticed that, I’m not just like some sort of idiot, that I could actually go out, get a job and live a life.”*

Most street-involved youth had a troubled early family experience as a result of the death of a family member, drug and alcohol abuse, serious mental health difficulties, victimization, and neglect.

The experience of abandonment or loneliness at home was at times accompanied by similar experiences at school: “[Because of school], actually, when I was eight was the first time I tried to kill myself.” Chanel said, “I was diagnosed with depression when I was in third grade. I didn’t connect with the other kids very well, I didn’t really have friends until middle school.” Alienation was a central experience and conflict rarely occurred at school or home without also occurring in the other setting.

*“I’m actually smart, being away from my parent.”*

Some left because conditions at home were intolerable. Leaving home in their view was necessary so that they could grow up. “I was more mature than my parents, and so I wanted my independence.” “It was too hard taking care of my parents and being a kid at the same time.”

Some study participants who were evicted by a parent accepted a certain amount of responsibility for contributing to the eviction because of, for example, drug use. Other youth left home for adventure. One couple travelled with a carnival for a summer. Anna talked early on about wanting to “pop on a train and leave,” and a couple years later she did. After they leave home and school, they are free to experiment with their lives, a “self-focused” experience.

## SELF-FOCUS

According to Arnett (2005), emerging adulthood is “... the time of life that is the least subject to institutional control” (p. 155), particularly control by parents and school. Arnett and others are talking about young people in their 20s, after high school or college. Street-youth experience the same thing in their early to mid-teens, before high school. For example, Dinah felt freed, at least temporarily, from troubles with family and troubles with school. A new horizon opened with new possibilities and new responsibilities.

**Alienation was a central experience and conflict rarely occurred at school or home without also occurring in the other setting.**

A second characteristic of self-focus was that for a substantial number of youth the use of drugs and alcohol was part of the initial appeal of street-life; being free of school and parents made it easier.

Third, many youth described the satisfaction and the difficulties of the “school of everyday life.” They were proud of their hard-won maturity, expertise, and wisdom and wished formal education would also be more immediate and experiential. In formal education, they felt lost, while in daily life they experienced the rewards of everyday life problem solving. Even so, they knew they had to

return to school eventually, and there was a gap between where they were and where they wanted to be.

## FEELING IN-BETWEEN

During the first year or two of street life the present is interesting and challenging enough. Later the present begins to feel unsatisfying, and they recognized that their long-term future would be somewhere else—and they wanted to be a new version of themselves.

- They began to recognize that some of their friendships needed to change if their life was to change.
- Street-life became less meaningful.
- Drug use became more troublesome.
- They wearied of being financially vulnerable or homeless.
- Some became frightened at the direction of their lives.
- Responsibilities to others, including a partner or a child, became more important.
- Some had utopian aspirations such as living on a commune and creating an alternative economy.

A sense of meaningfulness was important to their adult aspirations, and they imagine future lives of purpose and responsibility, even with the threat of permanent marginalization. It may be important for us to set

aside our social expectations about the right time to be in school, the right time to live with a family, the right time to be employed, and the right time to be independent—and the right sequence between these.

Our linear expectations of progress and expectations that they know how to make progress are not always realistic. Their images of the future were hopeful, yet their grasp of how to get there were often opaque. It takes time.

## THE STRUGGLE TOWARD ADULT LIVES AND ADULT IDENTITIES

Almost all street-involved youth eventually decide to move away from friends perceived to be destructive, and they search for more supportive networks. They move away from trouble. They try school, at least part-time, and entry-level jobs. They find promising romantic partners.

After 6-10 years there was some variation in their status, achievements, and progress toward stability and engagement. Most had made progress, with struggle, toward an adult life, although for most it remained tenuous. Much of the progress was a consequence of turning 19, when it was possible to gain access to at least minimal adult services, including income support, adult low-income housing, new health care options, and some adult education programs.

This structural change makes a difference. This might be a good lesson for an easy way to help them even before age 19.

**STABLE AND ENGAGED** (n = 42): This category included the largest number of the participants in all five waves. These young people were doing reasonably well at wave 5, and the reasons include the availability after age 19 of income support, obtaining work, being able to return to live with a parent, and/or support from a boyfriend or girlfriend. About half of these youth were working full- or part-time, and half were attending school full or part-time and many were simultaneously working and attending school. A small number were parenting full-time. Some were attending school to obtain their high school diploma and some were obtaining trades skills.

**STABLE AND UNENGAGED** (n = 8): These youth did not have crises, but they were not employed or going to school. One person was living in an apartment and baby-sitting for cash while looking for work and thinking about whether school was a good idea. She was otherwise doing fine. Other participants were between jobs or trying to figure out what to do next after the last job or school period.

**UNSTABLE AND UNENGAGED** (n = 12). This group still faced serious challenges. Some had worked though none were employed at the time of the last interview. None were going to school. Two were coping with

romantic break-ups that made their housing and financial status precarious. They wanted something more than the “whole downtown scene” but finding the income or employment option to make it possible was hard. For a few it was the temptation that was the

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**UNSTABLE AND ENGAGED** (n = 15): This group had at least part-time employment or education but were struggling with housing. All but two were hopeful that life was improving because of a new job, having rid themselves of troublesome boyfriends, gaining access to a Youth Agreement, making plans with a caseworker, or just having a good time exploring the world. Yet some had serious troubles: One youth was reeling from learning of her HIV+ status. A baby of one mother had been temporarily removed by Child Protection.

problem, especially using substances and also the easy money available from selling substances. None were receiving any help figuring out their lives, except when they were arrested or otherwise in trouble.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 64 street-involved youth we followed encountered developmental experiences out of order and out of sync with other youth. Our participants experienced emerging adulthood, we believe, several years earlier

than housed youth, that is, before they finished high school and enrolled in post-secondary. For most their unique pathways “worked” more or less, understood as escaping troublesome home situations, learning from experience, and maturing. During this time they received excellent services to prevent harm: health care, shelters, emergency food, youth worker support, and so forth. The services work because they are responsive to the unique circumstances of young people.

However, they are still out of sync with and excluded from adult employment and educational opportunities, in part because of the mismatch between their age and typical social expectations. On their own they have trouble knowing how, whether, and where to begin to solve this problem, and there are few or no services with a successful record of helping them re-integrate into school and work.

It is gratifying that in Victoria so many long-term street-involved youth praised the availability and quality of services and interpersonal support they received. We still need to backstop these supports with a) housing, not shelters, b) education and training that more quickly gets youth to jobs, and c) adult-like income supports so that youth do not have to live from urgency to urgency.

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