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**“IT AIN’T EASY BEING ON THE STREETS”: UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF  
STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH IN SOUTHERN ONTARIO THROUGH A CLIENT-  
CENTRED APPROACH**

by

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B.Soc.Sc (Honours), University of Ottawa, 2015

THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Criminology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Master of Arts Criminology

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## Abstract

Tens of thousands of street-involved youth in Canada live in various forms of precarious housing – living outside on the streets, in youth shelters, couch surfing, and so on. Research into the needs of street youth often employs a “top-down” approach, relying on health researchers as experts on their needs as opposed to directly engaging the sentiments of the youth themselves. This literature is often based on the assumption that meeting the needs of street youth involves providing access to opportunities for minimizing the risks posed by street life. This study serves as a counterbalance to this literature by employing a symbolic interactionist and client-centred approach to give these youth the opportunity to describe their experiences of street life. Instead of focusing on protecting youth from risks, it treats them as capable individuals who are experts in defining their needs and as stakeholders in the services offered to them. There is also an identified need in the literature for research on the needs of street youth that is holistic and simultaneously examines multiple aspects of their lives. Through in-depth one-on-one interviews with 15 street youth in two Southern Ontario cities, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how these youth define various aspects of their lived experiences of street involvement, their needs, and the ways in which they go about meeting those needs. Despite facing a number of challenges related to family conflict, mental health issues, and issues with obtaining shelter, among many others, participants of this study represent a highly resilient, resourceful and disciplined group of young people who are invested in the social services offered to them. I also argue that, in spite of the fact that they feel marginalized in society, the client-centred approach empowers these youth by honouring their wisdom as a key contribution to research directly impacting them.

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## **1. Introduction**

Street-involved youth in Canada comprise a marginalized and diverse population of young people. Canadian street youth live in various forms of precarious housing and living conditions including youth shelters, couch surfing between friends and family, and outside in makeshift shelters. Estimating the number of street-involved youth in Canada is extremely difficult for a variety of reasons including varying definitions on what constitutes street youth, the often impermanent nature of being street-involved, the transient nature of street life, and the difficulty in accessing this hard to reach population. One oft-cited statistic in the literature estimates that approximately 150 000 youth in Canada are street-involved (Dematteo et al., 1999). In more recent estimates, Gaetz, DeJ, Richter and Redman (2016) note that at least 235 000 Canadians encounter homelessness per year, with approximately 18.7% (approximately 44 000) of this group being youth between the ages of 13 and 24.

Mass numbers of youth living on the street represent a relatively new problem in Canada. Prior to the 1980s, the Canadian homeless population was comprised in large part of single, older men (Gaetz, DeJ, Richter & Redman, 2016). The shift towards a more diverse homeless population, including increased numbers of women and youth, occurred as a result of macro level issues related to lowered availability of affordable housing, changes in the economy, and diminishing government spending on social services (Gaetz, DeJ, Richter, & Redman, 2016). Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow and Marsolais (2013) suggest three major reasons that youth become street-involved: individual level factors, most often involving family conflict and violence/abuse within the family; structural level factors, including poverty within the family environment and parents' inability to care for and support them; and institutional failures, wherein "systems of care" such as the justice system, child services, and healthcare fail to

provide the necessary services for young people as they transition through childhood into becoming more self-sufficient adults (pp. 3-5).

In spite of what the research shows, street youth are often simplistically portrayed by the general public as criminal, rebellious, defiant and “bad” (Deisher & Rogers, 1999; Gaetz, O’Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow, & Marsolais, 2013; Gaetz, 2004, p. 424). Ironically, these youth are much more likely to be on the receiving end of a crime, with increased risk of victimization for a variety of crimes including assault, theft, sexual assault and vandalism in relation to their non-street-involved peers (Gaetz, 2004). Moreover, although Gaetz, O’Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow and Marsolais (2013) note the previously cited three main reasons that youth tend to become street-involved, street youth face a variety of complex issues and as such tend to have very unique individual lived experiences and needs. Among other issues, the literature suggests that street youth are at a greater risk for issues related to mental health, involvement in the criminal justice system, substance use, and risky sexual behaviour (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016; Deisher & Rogers, 1991; Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Feng et al., 2013; Haley & Roy, 1999; Kirst, Frederick, & Erickson, 2011; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998; Tozer et al., 2015). While they are forced to deal with their own interrelated challenges with regard to their health and well-being, these youth also face general public misconceptions about their circumstances.

Some researchers have sought to shed light on the more complex nature of youth street involvement and youth homelessness, although the perspectives of youth themselves have been overlooked in large part. This existing literature on the needs of street youth, conducted mostly through the lens of a public health perspective, tends to make most conclusions based on the reduction of these aforementioned risks. In this regard, street life is characterized as an extremely



dangerous way of life, especially for young people. As such, much of the literature defines meeting the needs of street youth as providing access to opportunities for minimizing risk via intervention on behalf of social and health services to discourage youth from street life (Cheng et al., 2013; Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2013; Feng et al., 2013; Haley & Roy, 1999; Karabanow & Clement, 2004). The existing research also tends to employ mostly “top-down” methods to meeting the needs of these marginalized youth by relying on public health researchers as experts on their needs as opposed to directly engaging the sentiments of the youth themselves. While this type of research may involve asking street youth about their habits and behaviours, the ways these youth participants define their needs are often overlooked and conclusions about their needs are instead made by the researchers (Cheng et al. 2016; Cheng et al., 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Feng et al., 2013; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998). Beyond this, there is an established need in the literature for research that broadly examines the interdependence of various needs of street youth more holistically as opposed to examining single issues in isolation of one another (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998; Robinson & Baron, 2007).

With this project, I have sought to address these deficiencies in the existing research by enlisting street youth as experts on their own needs. I employed a client-centred approach, which entails that solutions to meeting the needs of street youth can be best understood by speaking to the youth themselves who are directly experiencing and affected by this (Rogers, 1946; Rogers, 1951; Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2014). I interviewed 15 street youth in two cities in Southern Ontario in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences of street involvement. More specifically I sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do street-involved youth describe how they came to be street-involved and their

lived experiences of street involvement?

2) How do street-involved youth define their needs?

3) How do street-involved youth go about meeting their needs?

4) How do street-involved youth perceive the benefits and deficiencies of social services in their geographic location?

For this project, I have employed a symbolic interactionist approach that focuses on understanding what street life means to these youth, including not only the dangers and challenges of street life but also the lessons learned and skills obtained as a result of it. In doing so, this research provides useful information for social services and other organizations that work alongside street youth that may assist them in making services meaningful to their target clientele and thus maximize client engagement.

## **Chapter Outline**

In order to understand the contributions of this thesis, a detailed description of the existing literature, the methodological and theoretical approach I employed to address the gaps in this literature, and the findings of my research, this paper is organized as follows:

Chapter Two contains a literature review on research related to the needs of street youth with a major emphasis on Canadian literature. The first section begins with a discussion on the dominant theme in the existing research: the reduction of risk as a way of meeting the needs of street youth. Following this, I examine how some researchers have sought to shift away from this risk-oriented approach toward a framework of resilience. The second section outlines the expert-centered approach to meeting the needs of street youth. This top-down approach employs street youth as participants in the research simply to describe their habits and behaviours. Health professionals and researchers who work with youth utilize this data to make conclusions about

the needs of this group. I then touch upon how recent research has begun to engage the sentiments of the youth themselves with regard to their needs. The literature review concludes with the final section outlining the identified need for holistic research that reflects the various interdependent needs of street youth, as opposed to focusing on single issues.

Chapter Three outlines my theoretical and methodological approaches. It begins with a discussion on the symbolic interactionist theoretical framework for the project. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the key principles of symbolic interactionism. I follow this with a rationale for the use of this perspective as a way of complementing existing research on the needs of street youth. I then provide an explanation of the methodology used in this project. I first explain how I recruited street youth participants via social service agencies and then discuss the benefits of one-on-one interviewing in generating a narrative that is reflective of participants' genuine feelings and experiences. The following section touches upon the extra ethical consideration and care that is required when working with a vulnerable group and the ways in which I mitigated these ethical concerns. This chapter ends with a discussion on the use of a grounded theoretical framework for data analysis.

Chapter Four focuses on the basic material needs of street youth. In particular, the chapter outlines the ways in which street youth go about obtaining food and their experiences related to finding shelter, with a focus on youth shelters. I then discuss the healthcare needs of street youth. Beginning with an explanation of how street youth describe their experiences related to physical health and healthcare, the chapter concludes with a discussion on mental health. While some participants identified concerns related to their physical health, healthcare concerns of participants were largely related to mental health.

Chapter Five discusses the social relationships and social worlds of street youth, beginning

with a focus on family including parents, siblings, and youths' own children. The chapter then discusses intimate partners and concludes with friendship, with a specific section dedicated to friendships with other street youth.

Chapter Six focuses on the strategies of resilience and adaptation that the youth have obtained as a result of their experiences on the street. These strategies include being resourceful, being disciplined and having perseverance, and maintaining a general optimistic attitude.

Chapter Seven addresses street youths' experiences with social services beyond youth shelters. More specifically, it concentrates on their feelings with regard to social service workers, their experiences in drop-in centres, their experiences with employment and housing services, and their opinions regarding potentially beneficial services for street youth that are currently missing or lacking in their cities.

Chapter Eight discusses the client-centred approach as a way of empowering street youth. I explain that despite the fact that street youth have a general sense that most people look down upon them and negatively stigmatize them, they are willing to participate and are personally invested in research that directly impacts them.

Chapter Nine contains a discussion on the key findings of the research and the implications that these findings may have for youth and social service providers alike. The chapter wraps up with a discussion on the limitations of the study related to its methodology as well as paths for future research in the area of the needs of street youth.

## **2. Literature Review**

The following chapter contains a literature review on research related to the needs of street youth, focusing for the most part on Canadian literature. While past research has most often focused on reducing the risks associated with street life in an effort to address the needs of street youth, a few researchers have begun to emphasize the need to examine the resilience of street youth. Much of this risk-oriented literature also fails to ask the youth themselves about how they define their needs, instead employing them as participants to report on their various behaviours and basing conclusions about their needs on the expertise of public health researchers. Some researchers have begun to seek more detailed narratives from street youth in order to better address their needs, though more research in this area is needed. There is also an identified need in the literature to examine the various complex and interdependent issues and needs of street youth together as opposed to focusing on single issues.

### **Moving Beyond Risk to Quality of Life**

A growing body of research regarding the needs of street-involved and homeless youth in North America has developed over the past few decades. This research originates from a variety of fields ranging from sociology to criminology with the largest contributions coming from the field of public health. Much of this public health research emphasizes the danger of street life for youth and focuses on risk. It examines what risks street youth face and deduces their needs from these elevated risks. As would be expected, the language of risk permeates this literature. The Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) states that street-involved youth represent "...an emotionally and physically vulnerable population" (p. 1). Street youth are said to be at a higher risk of 1) involvement in risky sexual behaviour, such as being involved in sex work and engaging in sexual intercourse without protection mechanisms (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002;

Cheng et al., 2016; Elliott, 2013; Haley & Roy, 1999; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006); 2) substance abuse and intravenous drug use (IDU) (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Cheng et al., 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Feng et al., 2013; Haley & Roy, 1999; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998; Tozer et al., 2015); 3) involvement in the criminal justice system (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Cheng et al., 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson 1998) and 4) mental health issues (Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Kirst, Frederick, & Erickson, 2011).

The primary intention of this research is to highlight the potential harms associated with street life. While such research helps to raise awareness about life on the streets and may ultimately encourage public support for effective interventions for street youth, the needs of street youth are not solely defined by risk. Attention to these risks may be beneficial in addressing the physical and basic needs of street youth, but ignores needs that go beyond these basic ones but may be necessary for street youth to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life. These may include the need for creativity and self-expression, compassion, social interaction and support, and respect, among others. Beyond this, without considering the perspectives of the youth themselves in combination with this literature, the above research tends to portray street youth as victims of their environment who lack the ability to escape street life without intervention from social service workers, health care researchers and the public in general. While this research is important in identifying the adverse conditions that street youth face, incorporating the voices of the youth themselves to complement this research is essential in counterbalancing the risk-dominant literature.

As an alternative to this, other researchers have sought to reframe the risk paradigm to examine the resilience, adaptability and strengths street-involved youth manifest in meeting their

needs. For example, Kidd and Davidson (2007), in qualitative interviews with homeless youth in New York City and Toronto, identified strategies of resilience employed by their participants in surviving the harsh conditions of street life such as developing “street smarts” to navigate street life or engaging with spiritual beliefs to give them a sense of hope for a meaningful and fulfilling future (p. 225). In another example, Tozer et al. (2015) focused more specifically on life experiences and personality characteristics of some street youth that contribute to their resilience to IDU such as concern for the impact of drug use, strong self-esteem, contact with older street-involved individuals who warn them about its dangers, strong personal relationships, having to care for someone (child, pet, etc.), and having witnessed negative impacts of this behavior amongst family members (p. 2). In this approach, street-involved youth are framed as having agency in determining the course of their lives rather than as passive victims of a risky environment. While this type of research is still cognizant of the various risks posed by life on the streets, it emphasizes treating street youth as agents capable of taking control of their environments to deal with the risks and dangers it presents. Thus, the meaning and purpose of activities defined as “risky” is understood more complexly than previous research may have presented. For example, Kolar, Erickson and Stewart (2012) note how “engaging in violent behavior should not be oversimplified as maladaptive” but rather is necessary in order for street youth to “defend [themselves] or...develop a reputation of being able to do so” (pp. 753-754). Thus, while violence may pose a risk for street youth, it can also be understood as a strategy that street youth choose in order to handle the various pressures of street involvement.

Beyond recognizing that risky behavior can also be understood as strategic or useful action, research in this area focuses on street youth as resilient in the face of hardship. Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry and Flynn (2007) discuss “extraordinary resourcefulness” as a

strength possessed by many street youth (p. 32). They note how street youth in their study were well equipped to avoid exploitation by others and to take advantage of the many social and health services available to them. Their study represents a unique approach to advocacy amongst this population in emphasizing a “strengths-based approach” (p. 39). They found that these young people used spirituality and social networks with peers as a “source of support and hope” (p. 34). They also noted how their participants were optimistic about life on the streets, seeing it as a temporary and at times even exciting lifestyle, despite also recognizing the associated dangers. In contrast with risk-centred research, this approach acknowledges street youth as intelligent actors who marshal the resources they have available to shape their own lives and address the risks with which they are confronted. In an effort to move past the dominant “risk and psychopathology” approach to research on street youth, Kidd and Davidson (2007) note how street youth are resilient in finding strategies of survival on the street, making personal connections with encouraging individuals such as friends and partners, and remaining strong “in the face of the various challenges of the street” (p. 234). This type of research helps to balance the risk-oriented, top-down approaches by empowering street youth to take control of their own lives as a solution to overcoming risk and adversity, as opposed to relying solely on the help of professionals and researchers. Further research should continue to expand on this extremely limited body of literature emphasizing the resilience of street-involved youth.

In addition to examining resilience, Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater and Wolf (2010) noted that there is a tendency to overlook the importance of “quality of life”/“well-being” in research regarding “effective interventions for homeless youth”. This would include research examining “socioeconomic security, social inclusion, social cohesion, and empowerment” on an individual and societal level, or research related to how youth feel about their position in society and their



interactions with others within and outside of the street community (pp. 637-638). Kufeldt, Durieux, Nimmo and McDonald (1992) argue that the tendency to overlook these matters is rooted in the fact that the basic material needs of food, clothing, shelter and health care are concrete and less complex to address and manage. In contrast, concepts such as well-being and quality of life are ambiguous and have varying definitions. Different people have varying needs when it comes to social inclusion and cohesion. For example, some individuals may emphasize spiritual or religious needs as related to their well-being, though others will not. Thus, people derive social and emotional support from various sources. While meeting basic material needs is certainly important, there is more to life than food, clothing, shelter and health care; human beings also require companionship and community with others to live well. Attending to quality of life issues can also have a positive impact on mental health and empower street youth to live healthy, stable and fulfilling lives.

An illustration of why examining quality of life is important when attempting to assist street-involved youth can be found in the research on the influence that pet ownership has on a street youth's quality of life. Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry and Flynn (2007) state pets were "perhaps the most passionately discussed topic" among their street youth research participants (p. 33). Participants in the study described their pets as sources of stress relief, companionship and encouragement. Lem, Coe, Haley, Stone and O'Grady (2013) found that pets served as a source of happiness and motivation to live more stable lives among street youth. This research demonstrates what can be gained by examining quality of life issues among street youth. Risk-oriented approaches focus on avoiding the dangers of street life. However, there is more to street life than avoiding risk. How these youth find happiness, contentment and joy is also important for service providers to understand as it makes street life more livable. This

literature regarding street youth and their pets also serves to highlight the value of qualitative research on the needs of street youth that directly engages these young people's lived experiences. Because quality of life can take on a variety of meanings for different individuals, the client-centred approach is necessary for gaining greater insight into these more abstract needs of street youth. The research provides a prime example of how qualitative interviewing can uncover truths about the social, spiritual and intangible needs of street youth where quantitative survey data falls short.

### **From a Top-Down to a Bottom-Up Approach**

Much of the research that has identified the various risk factors that street youth face has also tended to suggest “top-down” approaches to meeting the needs of street youth. In general, a top-down approach is one in which individuals with greater social power and influence are deemed experts whose advice should be sought out and prioritized. Decisions made at the “top” ultimately impact the lives of those at the bottom. In research on street youth, various public health researchers are deemed experts in identifying possible youth at risk and developing strategies to redirect them away from these risks. These top-down responses tend to overlook how those at the bottom, in this case the youth themselves, understand their own needs and instead grant researchers the dominant role in identifying these youths' needs.

While much of the risk-oriented literature does involve the youth themselves as research subjects, the researchers make the conclusions on the needs of street youth based on how the youth describe their patterns of behaviour and living conditions, as opposed to explicitly asking the youth what their needs are (Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016; Feng et al., 2013; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998). For example, Cheng et al. (2013) employed survey data from 685 “at-risk youth” showing that factors such as “frequent

alcohol use and daily crack smoking” as well as “recent incarceration and difficulty accessing housing” are associated with “transitions into homelessness” (p. 124). Using this data they make the claim that greater “structural supports, especially supportive housing and providing youth with economic empowerment” are needed to curtail youth homelessness and its “associated harms” (p. 126). Other researchers propose that medical doctors and other health care professionals determine when they believe a young person is at risk based on information disclosed to them via this “privileged [doctor-patient] relationship” (Haley & Roy, 1999, p. 382). Haley and Roy (1999) suggest “physician[s] can play a pivotal role by developing an intervention plan for troubled youth” where the professional recognizes a young person to be “at-risk”. Physicians are encouraged to work with the youth, their family, schools, social services and police to work toward preventing “further social alienation and ultimately street involvement” (p. 382). Doctors are encouraged to “explore the underlying causes” of substance abuse and behavioural issues that “are known to precede and be associated with” these behaviours (pp. 381-382). Therefore, while they may be seeking the youth’s input to a certain degree by asking the youth about what possible life circumstances may have led to certain behaviours, they do not directly ask the youth what they believe to be appropriate solutions to their issues. Similar research suggests health care providers should determine children and youth who are at risk and refer them to appropriate services in the community (as cited in Elliott, 2013, p. 317). Medical doctors and other health professionals develop treatment plans and solutions to what they deem as too risky a lifestyle for a young person. They view youths’ issues solely through a medical lens as they are trained to do so. Their focus is on issues related to healthcare such as drug and alcohol use, risky sexual behaviour, and mental and physical medical diagnoses (Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016; Deisher & Rogers, 1991; Feng et al., 2013; Haley &

Roy, 1999). In this regard, other needs and experiences of the youth may be overlooked.

Although these researchers are asking youth about their experiences on the street, their questions may not dig deep enough to gain a holistic understanding of the youths' needs and experiences.

For example, as exemplified in the aforementioned research on street youth and their pets, certain information about the needs of these street youth may only be discovered by specifically asking them about their lived experiences and needs.

This type of research is an important part of increasing awareness of the health issues faced by street-involved youth, particularly among younger youth and those who are less able to clearly communicate their needs for themselves. However, allowing street youth to identify their needs themselves (as opposed to the professionals who work with them) is a key part of helping social service providers and other professionals cater to this marginalized population. This method is the most efficient way to make services meaningful to those making use of them and as a result is beneficial in encouraging maximum participation. When services are designed based on directly asking youth about their opinions on service provision, they are more likely to see the benefit of engaging with that service.

Emphasizing how youth define their own needs is often associated with the idea of client-centred approaches to service provision. The term "client-centered" originates in the work of psychologist Carl Rogers. He developed an approach to psychotherapy that he termed "person-centered therapy", in which therapists are intended to convey a non-judgmental and empathetic attitude toward their clients, in which they actively listen to clients without cutting off or offering advice (Rogers, 1946). In the most simplified terms, the approach involves the therapist guiding their client to self-realization and developing their own solutions to their internal issues (Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2014). Within social service provision, Altena, Beijersbergen and Wolf (2014)

note how over the past roughly decade and a half, the assessment of social services from the perspectives of homeless youth clients has become increasingly popular due to increased “quality assurance of services for the young homeless, the shift towards a more client-centered service provision, and the increasing demand for accountability of services” (p. 195). In contrast to the top-down approach, Barry, Ensign and Lippek (2002) also suggest that the most effective approaches to meeting the health care needs of street youth emphasize a “client-centered orientation” in which service providers seek feedback from clients and work toward an understanding of their clients’ subculture (p. 147). Referring to their twice-weekly healthcare clinic designed for street youth, they note how their “youth-centric programming” provides an efficient way for healthcare professionals to reach youth (p. 147). First of all, this approach involves gaining a deepened understanding of street youth culture. For example, the authors note the importance of healthcare providers understanding the significance of street youths’ relationships with their peers and street families, welcoming clients to bring these people to the clinic with them when they feel more comfortable doing so. In addition, they garner constant feedback from the clients about what the clinic is doing well for them and what could be improved. In essence, the client-centered approach to services for street-involved involves gaining a deeper understanding of the subculture of the clientele as a way to better empathize with and fit services in to their social worlds, in addition to seeking feedback from the youth themselves directly on social service provision in an effort to provide continuously improving services (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Altena, Beijersbergen, & Wolf, 2014). While Barry, Ensign and Lippek’s (2002) developed their client-centered approach as related solely to healthcare, their framework provides an effective model, transferrable across various types of social services for street youth.

Instead of healthcare researchers acting as the experts on street youth's needs, in this model, street youth may act as the experts on their own needs with the professionals responding attentively to these needs. The youth outline what they need in relation to social services so that social services can use this to inform their service provision. Social services are only useful and effective when clients "buy in" and believe that the services are relevant to them. While recent research has begun to employ this approach, this literature is more limited in nature when compared with the aforementioned top-down approach. Some researchers have begun to seek street youths' opinions and narrative with regard to their experiences in social and other services directed toward them. The research suggests that health and social service staff attitudes and demeanor toward street youth clients has a strong impact on youths' decision to access services and the benefits they derive from services (Heinze, Hernandez Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Nicholas et al., 2016; Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill, & Strother, 2011). In the public health field, Nicholas et al. (2016) conducted focus groups and interviews with street-involved youth in a major Western Canadian city to explore their experiences with emergency services. They found that the youth suggested staff be more sympathetic toward and aware of issues faced by street youth; the youth "predominantly reported negative experiences" including shortened meetings with health care professionals, lack of or difficulty with follow-up, and a perceived "lack of... interest in and support to [street youth]" on behalf of health care professionals (p. 858). Nicholas et al. (2016) conclude that improving emergency department workers' willingness to hear out and adapt to the concerns of "[street youth] and their advocates" will contribute to improved services for the youth in a more "welcoming" environment (p. 860). In a similar vein, Heinze, Hernandez Jozefowicz and Toro (2010) distributed surveys to youth clients of social service agencies in a Midwestern US city to solicit their feedback on services offered by these agencies.

Unlike surveys used within risk-oriented research that simply ask youth about various lifestyle choices and subsequently adjust service provision to cater to what professionals believe youth need, this study involved directly asking the youth about the factors that affect their decision to access services. They found “older youth” tended to emphasize “agency rules, organization and predictability” in determining their contentment with an agency, whereas “younger youth” more often focused on “safety” (p. 1370). Youth of all ages emphasized empowerment through supportive relationships with staff and a sense of belonging as important aspects of the social services. Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill and Strother (2011) conducted comparable research through survey data with youth who had had contact with street-outreach workers. They found that most youth generally described positive experiences with these workers and over half of their respondents suggested street outreach workers “made a difference in their lives” (p. 473).

Overall, these studies are effective in determining ways in which service providers can reach and build solid working relationships with street youth (Heinze, Hernandez Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Nicholas et al., 2016; Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill, & Strother, 2011). That being said, there still exists a gap in the literature regarding how street youth actually define their needs. While this type of research provides a foundation for seeking meaningful input from clients on service provision, the findings are confined solely to the first point of contact that youth encounter in health and social services. This is certainly an essential part of maximizing client engagement, though it does not offer insight with regard to what needs these staff can help youth with and what specific types of services and programming they require. Future research should expand upon these types of studies to continue to engage street youth directly in the discussion regarding their needs in order to facilitate services and programming that cater to what specific services and programming these youth are seeking.

## **Ascertaining Needs through an Integrative and Holistic Approach**

In addition to the patterns of risk-oriented and top-down approaches to street youth intervention, many researchers working with these youth study a certain aspect of their needs in isolation of others. As the Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) points out, street youth are not a homogeneous population but are rather “as diverse as the rest of the Canadian population” (p. 1). With varying demographics, family histories and reasons for leaving home, these youth often face a number of interconnected issues that have led to their living on the streets. As such, a focus on the various interweaving histories and characteristics of street youth may be most efficient in gaining an understanding of their complex needs. The Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) identified a need for a “multi-faceted approach” to working with street youth rather than a focus on “single-issue public health interventions” (p. 37). Since street youth are often faced with a variety of intersecting issues, it is likely that “comprehensive services” would be most effective (Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998, p. 251).

Robinson and Baron’s (2007) study on the effectiveness of employment training programs for street youth provides one example of a single-issue intervention approach to researching the needs of street youth. Researchers have identified employment opportunity, alongside many other essential services, as an important strategy in meeting the needs of street youth (Evenson & Barr, 2009; Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill, & Strother, 2011). In interviewing street youth in downtown Toronto specifically about their experiences in employment programming, Robinson and Baron (2007) found that, while most of their participants lacked employment experience and had had trouble maintaining long-term jobs in their past, they held a generally optimistic outlook on their experiences in job training programs. Despite the fact that programs may not necessarily lead to a job in all cases, participants noted the benefits of



“exploring work options, building confidence, and gaining skills in general” (p. 45). Alongside these benefits, some youth noted areas for improvement including improved relations between staff and youth and increasing availability of jobs and employers. While employment programs are an important aspect of service intervention for street youth, Robinson and Baron (2007) note the need to examine the interdependence of various aspects of “disadvantage” in the lives of street youth. In addressing the limitations of their research, they note that “focusing on employment in isolation of these other issues fails to acknowledge their interrelationships” (p. 54). That is to say, if researchers only focus on specific types of programs (such as those which are employment-related) and neglect to ask youth about other aspects of their lives, they may miss key information that is indirectly related to their experiences in employment services. While it is certainly of value to examine the effectiveness of specific interventions like employment programs, street youth in many cases face various interconnected obstacles in their day-to-day lives. They suggest that future research examine employment programs in relation to other types of programs and issues affecting street youth like “housing, health, drug and alcohol use, as well as background issues related to coming to the street” (p. 54).

There has been one major research project in recent years in Canada that has focused on a holistic approach to understanding the various complex lived experiences and needs of street youth in an effort to identify best practices for social service provision. Evenson and Barr (2009) conducted one-on-one interviews with nearly 700 street youth in Calgary, St. John’s, and Toronto in an effort to identify and ultimately fill gaps in social service provision for this population. They found that, since street youth are a diverse population with unique individual needs, they require multiple interconnected services and supports such as education, healthcare, employment assistance, and so on.

In conclusion, there are three identified gaps in the literature with regard to addressing the needs of street youth. First of all, much of the existing research on the needs of street youth focuses on the reduction of the various physical risks street life poses to them. These solutions to meeting the needs of street youth are focused on reducing these risks and, as such, treat street youth as passive agents subject to being completely controlled by their environment and fail to account for agency and resilience as it is related to the lived experiences of street youth. Secondly, much of the existing research is rooted in the public health perspective and takes on a “top-down” approach to meeting the needs of street youth. While street youth are often surveyed about their typical habits and behaviours, public health researchers simply use this data to determine what they believe to be the needs of street youth and best practices for meeting those needs. Recent research has begun to delve more into asking youth about their opinions on social services and their experiences within social services, though the results of these studies are often focused on staff attitudes and demeanor as a factor in youths’ decision to access services. This research has not yet begun to ask youth how they themselves define their needs and what services they may see as beneficial for them in meeting their needs. Lastly, while several researchers have identified the need for more comprehensive studies on the interconnecting needs of street youth, there exists but one recent study in Canada that has endeavored to broadly examine these various interdependent issues.

With this project, I have shifted away from assumptions about the risks of street life. My research explores both the challenges of street life as well as the life lessons that participants have learned as a result of their street involvement. Secondly, I am using a client-based approach that will provide insight about street life based on the voices of those who have actually experienced it, as opposed to making prior assumptions about the needs of street youth. In an

effort to complement the already well-documented perspectives on the needs of street youth by public health researchers who work closely with these youth, I have engaged street youth in this conversation on what their needs are and what services currently or could potentially be beneficial in helping them meet their needs. Lastly, this project builds upon the limited amount of literature on Canadian street youth that seeks to holistically address the various interconnected needs as opposed to focusing on single-issue interventions. My conversations with participants circulated around a wide variety of topics such as their interpersonal relationships, experiences with various social services, issues related to physical and mental health, financial resources, employment programs and housing assistance, among others. This research project provides a comprehensive view of the lived experiences of street youth and their self-defined needs in addition to the ways in which social services are currently addressing their needs and how they can continue to improve upon doing so.

### **3. Theoretical and Methodological Approach**

#### **Symbolic Interactionism**

This research project is rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective. Symbolic interactionism posits that human beings are involved in an interactive process with their world, giving and deriving meaning from their physical and social environments as a result of social interplay (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism treats the meanings that individuals ascribe to objects and others within their environments as truths. By employing this theoretical perspective, my research seeks to provide a unique perspective to a field of research that, as previously mentioned, is heavily dominated by public health perspectives and thus positivist theory. Similarly, early symbolic interactionists sought a theoretical and methodological shift from rigid “prevailing practices in the physical sciences” toward a perspective with the potential to more adequately examine “human group life” (Prus, 1996, p. 68). Human group life comprises both individual and collective experiences, shaped and defined by individuals through their relationships and interactions with others; or, more simply put, group life encompasses “the world of everyday experience” (Blumer, 1969, p. 35). Thus, conducting my research from the interactionist perspective is an effort to complement the existing research stemming from positivist theory that is not equipped to identify patterns in the group life of street youths.

Symbolic interactionism particularly gained ground in the 1960s as “critical and qualitative perspectives” became more common in the discipline of sociology moving beyond the traditionally dominant positivist perspectives (Fine, 1993). The overarching belief of symbolic interactionism is that reality is shaped by how individuals interpret their interactions with one another and their environments. Blumer’s (1969) three basic tenets of symbolic interactionism serve as a concise definition for understanding how this theory works: (1) humans

treat their environments and objects/others within their environments in accordance with the meanings they attribute to them; (2) these meanings stem from the social interactions that humans have with others in their environment; (3) these meanings take shape within the individual as a result of the “interpretive process” they use to understand and make sense of their interactions. Similarly, Mead (1934) also described symbolic interaction as the processes of (1) “interpretation”, ascribing meaning or explanation to other’s behaviours; and (2) “definition”, communicating to others how they should act (as cited in Blumer, 1969, p. 66). People develop their own meanings and understandings of behaviour based on their interactions with others and act toward others in accordance with these meanings. Human beings also fit “their own intentions, wishes, feelings, and attitudes” to how they interpret others in their social environment (p. 66).

The continuation of these processes also allows symbolic interactionists to identify patterns in human group life. Through the constant interpretation and definition of social interaction within groups of people, cultural understandings and patterns of behaviour are developed (Prus, 1996). The interactionist concept of the “social world” helps to explain this idea further (Strauss, 1978). The social world refers to spaces in which individual members of a group develop shared meanings and discourse surrounding certain aspects of life. They do not necessarily need to be confined to a certain physical space, but rather are connected to others through shared and similar experiences. Some common examples include the worlds of baseball fandom, country music, Catholicism, surfing, and the LGBTQ+ community, among countless others (Strauss, 1978). As people interact with one another within these “arenas” and collective meanings are established and performed upon, sociologists can study them to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the members of these groups. The social world of street

youths provides one such example of a group who, despite having their own experiences, share certain common understandings among each other with regard to street life.

As such, with much of the previous research involving street youth employing quantitative methods and stemming from the field of public health, this theoretical perspective provides an innovative way of involving street youth in the research that directly impacts them. In this project, I have sought to present “the reality which engages [street youth], the reality they create by their interpretation of their experience” (Becker, 1963, pp. 173-174). By studying the meanings that youth themselves ascribe to their everyday experiences and needs, the research is intended to provide valuable insights into how to make services and interventions meaningful to these youth. Employing a symbolic interactionist perspective to gain a deeper understanding of street youths’ perspectives regarding their lived experiences and needs expands upon the very limited research which seeks to engage the feedback of street youth themselves in shaping services available to them. Moving beyond the more commonly employed top-down approach, my research seeks to incorporate the voices of those who are at the bottom but who are directly impacted by social policy initiatives. Moreover, employing a sociological symbolic interactionist perspective provides a new approach to a subject matter that is heavily influenced by public health and scientific perspectives.

## **Methodology**

The following section of this chapter explores the methodological approaches used in this project to complement the symbolic interactionist informed framework, including the definition of the term *street-involved youth*, recruitment techniques, my method of data collection, ethical considerations, and my analytic approach. In order to understand the lived experiences of street-involved youth, their self-defined needs, their ways of meeting these needs, and their interactions

with and understandings of social services in their city, I interviewed 15 street-involved youth at two social service agencies in Southern Ontario. Using the constructivist grounded theory method, I allowed major themes to emerge from the data and help me gain a greater understanding of the complex social worlds and lived experiences of street youth (Charmaz, 2014). Conducting research with this vulnerable population posed unique risks, though I was able to mitigate these risks by paying careful attention and consideration to participant confidentiality and informed consent. My position as a white, university-educated, middle class female with no lived experience of street involvement must also be considered as it relates to the findings of this thesis.

**Defining the Target Population.** To begin, the term *street-involved youth* is broad and is used to describe a diverse group of young people with varying degrees of housing instability. As noted by Elliott (2013), street youth comprise a “heterogeneous population with different degrees of street involvement” (p. 5). In my research, I use this term as opposed to the term “at-risk”, which was identified by Canadian street youth in a prior study to be too broad of a term (Evenson & Barr, 2009). Avoidance of the term at-risk reflects the desire to shift away from the risk paradigm. For the purposes of my research, I used an adapted version of the definition of street-involved youth developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2006): a young person who has “run away from home or from another place of residence”, “been thrown out of their home”, or “been without a fixed address” for “at least three consecutive days” (p. 41). I have also removed their original criterion of a youth who has “been absent from their residence for at least three consecutive nights”. This criterion is unclear and broad as it does not provide reasons for or conditions surrounding the youth leaving home. Additionally, the three aforementioned criteria are sufficient in defining the range of research participants I sought to interview and thus

encompass my definition of a street youth. Street-involved youth and street youth are used interchangeably throughout my project, with the latter providing an abbreviated form of the former. In an effort to be inclusive of all interested participants in my target demographic, I avoided rigid age restrictions on participants and instead recruited youth in their teens or early 20s.

This research project received ethical approval from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board (REB) in November 2016. Upon receiving REB approval, I began the process of recruiting participants. Recruitment relied solely on access through social service agencies that service street youth throughout Southern Ontario. Using Google, I searched for social service providers for street youth in a large city (population > 1 000 000) and a smaller but growing city (population between 50 000 and 99 999) (Puderer, 2009). I identified 22 prospective agencies. I contacted the agency staff member who seemed most appropriate for the purposes of requesting assistance in recruiting participants. In cases where a specific staff member could not be identified, I contacted the agency's general information email address. In cases where a valid email address could not be identified, I telephoned the general phone number for the agency. I inquired about these agencies' interest in posting the recruitment poster (Appendix A) throughout their agency and/or on their social media as well as their willingness to accommodate one-on-one interviews on the agency property.

Through these recruitment techniques, two drop-in centres (one in each city) agreed to support the research project. Drop-in centres in general are social service organizations, most often located in urban areas, designed to provide a range of services to street youth sometimes including but not limited to: providing food, employment assistance (ex. interview practice, resume writing help), housing help, medical services, art supplies, outreach (delivering supplies



such as food and harm reduction tools to people on the street), a place for youth to “hang out”, and so on. From the end of November 2016 to mid-January 2017, 2 interview dates were scheduled at the agency in the large city and 3 at the agency in the smaller city. Recruitment posters were posted around the two buildings on the scheduled interview dates. Scheduled interview drop-in times coincided with each agency’s respective drop-in hours (hours in which any interested youth seeking services are invited to stop by the agency). I was provided with a relatively private space within the building to conduct the one-on-one interviews. For a set number of hours, youth could choose to drop in and participate in an interview with me when the door was open to the room where interviews were taking place. Participants received a \$5.00 gift card to Tim Horton’s as a token of appreciation for providing their time and insight to the research. At the request of one of the recruiting agencies and in an effort to provide a comfortable and friendly environment for participants, I provided coffee and doughnuts on some interview dates. Once the staff member at each agency expressed that they felt I would be unlikely to find any new potential participants there, I ended data collection.

**Data Collection.** Data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 15 street-involved youth. A semi-structured interview guide was created to provide a framework for conversation between the interviewer and participants and to assist me in answering the research questions (Appendix B). The semi-structured nature of the interview guide simultaneously helped to maintain open dialogue that allowed me to gain a deepened understanding of the participants’ subjective perceptions of their social worlds (Strauss, 1978). Open-ended interview questions allow participants to respond as they see fit and to describe their feelings and experiences in as much detail as they wish. This is essential in the symbolic interactionist perspective in encouraging participant agency in how they answer the questions

and describe the meanings of their lived experiences. By encouraging and allowing a detailed narrative through these open-ended questions and eliminating any leading questions, the participant has the opportunity to share their genuine feelings and experiences.

The interview guide questions were derived from the research questions in order to yield pertinent information. To illustrate, the following interview questions are examples (though not an exhaustive list) of those which were designed to answer the first research question (“How do street-involved youth describe how they came to be street-involved and their lived experiences of street involvement?”):

- (a) Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what a typical day looks like for you?
- (b) Can you talk to me about the things that make you happy in your daily life – what sorts of things do you look forward to each day?
- (c) Can you tell me a little bit about the events that led to you becoming street-involved?

I employed a client-centered approach to the interviewing process (Charmaz, 2014; Rogers, 1951). The focus of the interview was entirely based on the “concerns and words” of participants to ensure that I elicited an unbiased, undirected and genuine narrative from the youth (Charmaz, p. 96). In cases where I sought further information or clarification on a participant’s response, I used their own words to phrase my questions and encouraged participants to speak freely about whatever came to mind when asked my open-ended questions.

In total, 15 youth participated in an interview. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 20 minutes to 1.5 hours. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 25, with a median age of 19. In terms of gender identification, 4 participants identified as female, 9 as male, 1 as gender fluid, and 1 as having no gender. With regard to ethnicity, 3 participants identified as Caribbean, 1 as African Canadian, 3 as white, 2 as indigenous, 1 as Asian, 1 as Middle Eastern, 3

as having both white and indigenous heritage, and 1 as unsure of their ethnicity. The amount of time spent street-involved varied between participants from 2.5 months to on and off throughout their entire life, though 4 participants did not give a specific answer to this question. At the time of being interviewed, 7 participants were residing in a shelter and 2 in transitional housing, while 6 participants were reflecting on past experiences of street involvement with 2 living at home with a parent and 4 living on their own with or without a partner.

Prior to the interview, youth were briefed on the key components of the written consent form (Appendix C) and asked to fill out and sign the form. The form provided youth with the option of whether or not to agree to be digitally recorded via voice recorder. Four youth declined to be recorded and instead agreed to me taking typed notes on a laptop during the interview. All other interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder.

Upon the completion of all interviews, I transcribed all of the digitally recorded interviews verbatim. Notes from the unrecorded interviews were reviewed for clarity. Identifying information was removed from all interview transcripts and interview notes. Interview recordings, transcripts and notes were stored on encrypted USB storage drives to which only I had access. These files will be destroyed upon successful completion and defence of the master's thesis. Participants who requested an emailed copy of their interview transcript/notes on their consent form were contacted. Those who responded to my initial email message to confirm their identity were sent a PDF copy of the transcript/notes in February to March of 2017. I requested that the participants contact me about any changes to the notes/transcript by the end of April 2017 (when the research began being presented publicly at academic conferences). None of the participants requested that any changes be made to their transcripts.

**Data Analysis.** Upon complete transcription of all interviews, transcripts of recorded interviews and notes from unrecorded interviews were coded using an open-coding process as part of the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). The constructivist grounded theory approach is a complementary method of data analysis to the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective. Grounded theorizing of the data involved creating codes (and later theories) as they evolved from the data itself during the coding process (as opposed to creating preconceived codes based on previous literature to then apply to the data). The researcher derives this theory from the data through their intimate familiarity with it and a careful and repetitive analysis of all collected data. Codes were developed in an effort to not only answer the research questions identified prior to the outset of the project, but also to identify any other clear patterns consistently appearing throughout the data. Coding was conducted using *NVivo* coding software.

I conducted several rounds of coding. I began with initial coding of all the data in an effort to begin familiarizing myself with all interview data and entering the “interactive analytic space” in which I was able to start noting some of the major broad themes in the research and taking note of them (Charmaz, 2014, p. 109). This interactive space involved reviewing the data several times and “reliving” the interviews, as I simultaneously reflected on my in-person interactions with participants to decipher their words and the meanings behind them. As I progressed into focused coding, I began to identify the more prominent themes in the data. More general codes were also first ascribed to selections from all of the interviews for the purposes of organizing the information. These codes were later broken down into smaller sub-codes. For example, the larger code “family relationships” was eventually divided into smaller sub-codes including “sibling bonds” and “parental conflict”. In general, coding of interviews constituted a

non-linear and highly involved process of categorizing and re-categorizing data in an effort to most accurately express the perspectives and concerns of participants.

By employing a symbolic interactionist approach, using semi-structured one-on-one interviews and employing the constructivist grounded theory method of data analysis, I sought to provide an accurate representation of my participants' experiences and opinions. With so much of the existing research lending focus to the perspectives of professionals who work with street-involved youth, my symbolic interactionist informed methodology seeks to fill the gap in which street youths' own perspectives tend to be more often overlooked in the existing research in this area. While conducting interviews within a vulnerable population poses a number of ethical challenges, these can be overcome when the researcher focuses on informed consent and pays extra care and attention toward maintaining client confidentiality. The findings of this project offer valuable general information for social service providers and the public at large regarding street youths' social worlds that could not be uncovered alone through research involving professionals who work with these youth in more specific contexts.

**Ethical Consideration.** Conducting qualitative interviews on the lived experiences of a highly vulnerable and marginalized population requires special ethical considerations (York University's Human Participants Review Committee, n.d.). As previously mentioned, these youth are at an elevated risk for a variety of issues related to their well-being including criminal justice system involvement, mental health issues, risky sexual behaviour, and substance use (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016; Deisher & Rogers, 1991; Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Feng et al., 2013; Haley & Roy, 1999; Kirst, Frederick, & Erickson, 2011; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998; Tozer et al., 2015). Additionally, as outlined by York University's Human Participants Review

Committee (n.d.), individuals who conduct research with participants who have lived experiences of homelessness must be mindful of the fact that many participants may suffer from trauma-related mental illnesses and may experience multiple intersections of marginalization related to sexuality, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, and visible minority status. In addition to being mindful of these issues, researchers must conduct their research in a “non-judgmental way” (York University’s Human Participants Review Committee, n.d., para. 11). With these issues in mind, I entered the interviews with the expectation that youth were likely to divulge highly personal information that could elicit emotional distress on their behalf and made all efforts to avoid or minimize this.

As such, all youth were advised prior to the interview that they were not required to share any information they did feel comfortable sharing and that they may end their participation in the interview/research project at any time without explanation. Before asking the youth to sign the confidentiality form I briefly outlined the key components of the form. I explained to them how the information would be stored privately to maintain their confidentiality and that it would be destroyed upon successful completion of my project (and ultimately my degree). I also explained that I would be the only person with access to their interview recordings, consent forms (which contained their names and email addresses) and their transcripts (which did not contain any names or other identifiable information) and that their identity would be kept anonymous in any public dissemination of my research (including the final written thesis and academic conference presentations related to the project). I provided a telephone number for free mental health related assistance in Ontario (the provincially funded Mental Health Helpline) on the confidentiality form and verbally reminded participants that they could contact this number should they feel any distress as a result of the interview. I also reiterated during the interview that they do not have to

answer any questions they do not feel comfortable answering as I approached more personal and sensitive questions. Because I was conducting interviews at the organizations themselves during open drop-in hours, I would stop the interview if at any point I thought another person (staff member or client) would be able to overhear the conversation. While I was given private spaces in the agencies that other youth did not have access to during drop-in hours, on a few rare occasions there were staff members who were unaware that the interview was taking place and thus entered the space to obtain supplies for their work. I then informed the participant of this observation and asked if they wished to continue the interview. On each of these occasions, the youth did not express any concerns about this and continued on with their interviews. At the end of each interview, I reminded youth to contact me via my email address provided on the consent form should they have any questions or concerns about the research. Use of the pronoun “they” and adjective “their” throughout this paper is used to help maintain participants’ confidentiality, as opposed to reflecting their preferred pronouns.

**Researcher Positionality.** In any qualitative study it is imperative to reflect on how the position of the researcher may impact the response of participants, particularly when the researcher is an outsider to the target population being studied (Charmaz, 2014). In the scope of this project, my status as a white middle-class female with a university education and no lived experiences of street involvement very likely impacted participants’ responses. I attempted to mitigate these concerns by maintaining a friendly atmosphere, dressing in casual clothes and maintaining a sense of non-judgment toward my participants. Moreover, through my experiences volunteering with street-involved youth over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to informally learn about some common experiences of these youth and some of the language used by participants. As such, this allowed me to understand participants when using terms that may

not be familiar to individuals outside of their community (e.g. “street family”) and thus establish rapport with participants and a greater understanding of their responses (Charmaz, 2014). That being said, certain privileges I am afforded are impossible to hide or minimize, such as my whiteness and university affiliation, and thus must be acknowledged as potentially impacting the results of my research.

Researchers who study marginalized youth populations must also establish an egalitarian and trustworthy relationship with their participants. In their research with marginalized youth (in this case street sex workers, refugees, and/or those who are homeless), Couch, Durant and Hill (2012) noted the importance of affirming their “separation and independence from the ‘officialdom’ of agencies and government” (p. 51). This is due to the fact that members of their target populations often had unfavourable experiences with certain authoritative groups like the “community agencies, reporters, church groups and police” (p. 51). While I conducted my research within a community agency, youth attend these drop-in centers by choice and as such are likely to have mostly positive experiences with them. I explained to the youth that the purpose of my research was to complete my thesis to obtain my degree and that my choice to study this topic was simply based on my interest in it and effort to create greater awareness around their experiences and opinions.



#### **4. Basic Material Needs**

The following chapter will begin the findings section of the thesis, exploring how street youth go about meeting their basic material needs and specifically examining their experiences with obtaining food, shelter and healthcare. While food seems to be a relatively easy need to meet, accessing shelters with strict rules poses a greater obstacle for some youth. Street youth are able to obtain food from a variety of social services like drop-in centres, shelters, and through their government assistance money. Obtaining shelter poses more of an issue for youth; they often described situations in which shelters were unwilling or unable to accommodate for their unique circumstances. Moreover, while some youth had concerns regarding their physical health, healthcare concerns of the youth were largely with regard to mental health. Participants noted mental health issues as a major challenge in their lives and discussed the importance of mental health services in helping them meet their needs. As noted by Kufeldt, Durieux, Nimmo and McDonald (1992), these basic material needs are often the easiest needs to manage and thus provide a good starting point for social services seeking to address the needs of their street youth clients.

##### **Food**

To begin, the youth typically discussed food as being a need that is relatively easy to meet while being street-involved. Most participants discussed both shelters and drop-in centres as being a reliable source for food. As Participant 9, a 19-year-old currently living in transitional housing, succinctly put it:

“I never really had a hard time finding food because of [the drop-in where the interview took place] and because of the [local youth shelter]”

Social services represented the major source of food for nearly all of the participants in this research.

Over half of the youth described youth shelters where they were residing as their main source of food while living on the streets. In some cases, youth obtained food from shelters in which they did not live, accessing food banks and other programs through these shelters. As Participant 5, a 23-year-old youth currently living in a shelter, discussed:

“[Name of shelter] is really strict, so I wouldn’t wanna live there, but like the drop-in services, I like that because when I was on the streets, right, sleeping outside... I could take food there – like I had a container, right, like first I can eat food there and then I can fill up my container with food for later”

As in this case, shelters were seen as beneficial not only for youth needing a roof over their heads, but for other programs that they offer, specifically providing meals.

Beyond shelters, drop-ins offer another source of food for youth. There were less youth who described drop-in centres as their main source of food than youth who noted shelters as their major food source. Drop-ins were more often described as an added or alternative source for meals from the shelter. As Participant 5 continued:

“Like sometimes, at the shelter, you know, they don’t have food that is good, I come here to [the drop-in where the interview took place]...for food”

Participant 13, a 19-year-old youth living in a shelter, described the abundance of food available at the drop-in:

“There was so much food available, like [the drop-in where the interview took place], you come here, you could eat basically whenever you want you just have to wait ‘til [they’re open]”

In general, drop-ins were described as another source of food that added variety to what was being served in the shelter.

In a few cases, youth talked about their Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) money as helping to pay for food. There were 3 participants who discussed food as one of the major expenses that their monthly cheque would go towards:

“ODSP...we would get a basic needs allowance, and I would usually spend mine all on food and clothes” (*Participant 4*)

“Well I have money ‘cause I’m on ODSP, disability, so like I have money to buy food and I have money to buy clothes, I have money to take the bus” (*Participant 11*)

Participant 5 also discussed ODSP as providing a back-up plan in cases where food was not available from social services:

“I’m on ODSP, so that helps, you know...at the shelter sometimes they run out of food and I can buy food, you know.”

While a less popular method, government assistance provides another way for street-involved youth to avoid going hungry.

These findings regarding the relative ease with which street youth are able to access food stand in contrast to the existing literature on Canadian street youths’ access to food (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Palepu, Hubley, Russell, Gadermann, & Chinni, 2012; Tarasuk, Dachner, Poland, & Gaetz, 2009; Tse & Tarasuk, 2008). In earlier research, among their 19 street youth participants in Toronto, Antoniades and Tarasuk (1998) found that majority of their participants either had issues with gaining access to adequate food “or were concerned about their ability to do so”, related to issues of income, housing stability, access to kitchens and access to free food through social services (p. 374). Dachner and Tarasuk (2002) noted similar findings in their research with clients of a drop-in centre for homeless youth in Toronto, citing a “constant struggle” for these youth in accessing enough nutritious food. Tarasuk, Dachner, Poland and Gaetz (2009) further noted that street youths’ poor access to sufficient food and drinking water led them to resort to “stigmatizing”, dangerous and sometimes illegal methods of obtaining “small amounts of food for immediate consumption” such as panhandling, stealing or eating leftover scrapped food (p. 1440). While many homeless youth access free meals via social services, there are issues associated with this including inadequate

nutrition in these meals, limited hours of operation, and the time-consuming nature of accessing these programs because of travel time to get to the location and having to wait in line (Tarasuk, Dachner, Poland, & Gaetz, 2009; Tse & Tarasuk, 2008). Additionally, while their research applied to a broader range of homeless and “hard-to-house” participants between the ages of 15 and 73, Palepu, Hubley, Russell, Gadermann and Chinni (2012) noted how concerns regarding their access to food went beyond simply whether or not they were able to obtain enough food. Participants in their research across several major Canadian cities noted difficulty in obtaining food that is flavourful, appetizing and nutritious, describing their meals as being often heavy in fat and carbohydrates and mostly deprived of protein and vegetables. Thus, while the findings of my own research suggest access to food does not pose much of an issue for the participants of this small study, it is imperative to consider the vast amount of existing literature that suggests the opposite is true. This dichotomy between my own findings and the existing literature may also be explained by my recruitment methods to a certain extent. In recruiting participants solely through drop-in centres which provide food for their clients, my sample may be biased toward street youth who are able to access food. As a basic human necessity, providing adequate nutritious food to street youth is an essential part of meeting their needs. Future research may wish to consider ways in which some street youth who do not regularly access drop-in centres have difficulty with meeting their nutritional and food needs.

## **Shelter**

With regard to material needs, gaining access to shelter was discussed as a greater challenge for participants than food. In general, participants described youth shelters as being their best option for meeting their shelter needs to avoid sleeping outside and the dangers associated with this. At the same time, participants often struggled with the strict and rigid nature

of the rules of most youth shelters. First of all, six of the 15 participants discussed experiences of being kicked out of youth shelters at least one time, and for some on multiple occasions.

Participants described being removed from their youth shelter for a variety of reasons related to rule-breaking:

“At the shelter, right...when I feel disrespected, I feel like I have to like address it, you know, and like I have to defend myself, right. But that’s a problem, ‘cause that’s why I was getting kicked out of every shelter...I would last like a couple days and get kicked out, like my fastest record getting kicked out was 15 minutes of being there.” (*Participant 5*)

“They’ve kicked me out for some pretty stupid reasons...I got discharged because I broke my wrist I think it was, and I went to the hospital, and I got a cast, and I forgot my feedback sheet which is a sheet they just send with you to the doctor [as evidence that the youth attended their appointment]. And I went back to my doctor and got it filled out for them so they know what’s going on, and they accused me of writing it even though my cast was on my writing hand, like I admit the writing looked exactly like mine, but not when I was wearing a cast...And the same thing happened again, I went to intake, I got my cast changed, it was very apparent I got it changed, it went from red to green and it was very obvious, and I forgot my feedback sheet, and they wouldn’t let me in. They have some pretty stupid reasons for discharging people.” (*Participant 3*)

“Sometimes because [my partner and I] were together and like trying to have a relationship, it was very hard to be in shelters because we got separated, and there’s a no contact rule in youth shelters where you can’t touch, you can’t hug or anything like that. So, we got – I got kicked out of a lot of shelters too.” (*Participant 4*)

In most instances, youth discussed being removed from shelters where staff followed strict policies. While these services need to ensure the safety and well-being of all clients, some youth discussed how the rigid nature of shelter life made it difficult for them to engage with the services. That being said, youth shelters provided a main source of shelter for youth. When they were removed from the shelters, they had no choice but to find shelter in public areas, an alternative that was most often seen as less desirable. The following quotes demonstrate a few of these examples:

“I slept in the TD Bank twice and, yeah...in the vestibule area, like where the ATM is. ‘Cause it’s open 24 hours and it was a warm place and it was [the middle of January]...

shelter is a big thing, 'cause I was kicked out of the [youth shelter] even though I had nowhere else to go...so I [also] ended up staying with multiple friends like couch surfing for 2 weeks.” (*Participant 9*)

“A lot of times we had to just sleep outside because we couldn’t, we didn’t wanna stay in shelters and we couldn’t find any friends that would let us stay, or we got sick of staying in dirty apartments and stuff... being homeless, people would always kick us out of places and stuff like that... I would dread like getting kicked out of places” (*Participant 4*)

“I got discharged...And then I stayed on the streets with my ex-boyfriend for a few days...And I was with my ex-boyfriend and then I got bed bugs, and I was covered in bed bug bites” (*Participant 3*)

Conditions on the streets, whether related to hygiene, physical comfort or interactions with the public were generally seen as worse than the conditions within the youth shelters. In other cases, youth experienced sleeping outside prior to finding a youth shelter as opposed to sleeping outside as a result of being kicked out. Terrible living conditions outside motivated participant 15, a 19-year-old youth living in transitional housing, to connect with a shelter:

“I was homeless for a bit...I lived like under a bridge for like 3 days...I slept on a park bench. It’s pretty – it’s not fun... most of the days I...bathed in [the river]...And then I was like, fuck...I was on one pair of clothes, so I was like I fuckin’ hate this shit. So I was like, I need to get like, you know, somewhere. I went to school...[and] like called the [local youth shelter] from my school.”

In general, while participants felt that remaining in a youth shelter by adhering to their strict rules was difficult, many times there are no sufficient alternatives to finding adequate shelter. Participants need youth shelters to avoid the discomforts and risks associated with finding shelter in public places.

While the structured nature of youth shelters did not always lead to a youth being forcibly removed from the shelter, other youth talked about how strict adherence to rules made shelter life difficult for them. In discussing mandatory programming at one shelter, participant 15 noted how this structure stood in contrast to the freedom that their peers who do not reside in shelters are entitled to:

“Fuckin’, you have to wake up before 9. I wanna sleep in, it’s summer – like what does a usual teenager do throughout the summer? Usually fuckin’ sleep or go party.”

Despite needing the shelter in order to avoid the dangers and discomfort of sleeping outside, this participant felt the shelter’s services were an infringement on the autonomy afforded by their non-street-involved peers. Another participant even noted how the structure has interfered with and made it difficult for them to maintain their mental health:

Like the mental health issues, like sometimes I’ll be hallucinating, suffer from psychosis, I’ll be paranoid, you know. And like, since I’m on the streets or in the shelter, the curfew, the wake-up time is very early so you don’t get enough sleep so you’re in a bad, like, you wake up all cranky and upset and like, you know what I mean? So. When you have a place to live you get to do what you wanna do and like, that’s basically it.” (*Participant 11*)

Living in the shelter, this youth is not always able to effectively cope with and treat their mental health issues as a result of strict shelter regimens. While they needed to access the organization’s services in order to meet their shelter needs, it became difficult for them to balance this with meeting their other needs, specifically related to mental health. As demonstrated in this example, in some cases, the rules of the organization and the nature of shelter life did not correspond well with individual needs. Participant 4, a 23-year-old who had lived on the street for about five years up until a few months prior to our interview, effectively summed up this idea in relation to their own experiences:

“In my experience...for the shelters, a lot of them...they’re so like gung-ho on like improving the person’s life...they’re so strict about the rules sometimes, they don’t look at the individual life and have really like a plan to help them with their mental issues. It’s more of like physically how can we get you a place...like a job, and all that stuff. And it’s like, some people just aren’t ready for that, some people just need the time, like the mental help, and if they’re feeling mental anguish at their shelter, they’re gonna wanna leave and they’re gonna end up on the street, because that’s happened to me a few times. Like I was crying on the couch because of like a friend that had committed suicide like before that and then the staff didn’t really seem to care about my emotions...he walked up and would just throw another rule at me, like ‘Oh guys, make sure you don’t touch’, because my boyfriend was sitting on the couch in front of me. So it’s like, I think there needs to be more of a realization about people’s emotional and mental needs before just

their basic needs, as well as their basic needs. But it's not just about getting a job or going back to school or integrating into society, sometimes they just need some kind of therapeutic release or help."

While in many cases clients may need to be removed from the facility for the safety and well-being of all other clients and staff, all-encompassing rules may not always effectively accommodate individual needs. Moreover, while shelters' main priority is to assist youth in meeting their basic needs of shelter and food, their tendency to overlook individuals' basic needs related to their emotional and mental well-being inhibits some youth from being able to access their services, whether they are forcibly removed from the shelter or leave on their own accord. Youth shelters are not always the easiest places for street youth to live, though they have very limited alternatives for obtaining shelter. In general, more than half of the participants discussed strict rules and regimens as causing some degree of difficulty for them in meeting their needs. In the above instance, this participant in particular discussed a need for more holistic and individualized attention to clients within the shelters. Many youth described difficulty in being able to meet their individual needs with blanket rules in the youth shelters that are applied to all youth regardless of their unique circumstances. Participants described a need for greater balance on behalf of shelters in recognizing their individual needs and autonomy while also enforcing rules that ensure the safety and well-being of all staff and clients.

That being said, the participants' perspectives with regard to their shelters were somewhat mixed. For example, despite having been discharged from one shelter, participant 10, a 22-year-old youth living in a shelter who had been street-involved for three months, noted how upon their removal staff assisted them in finding a new shelter. In other cases, the youth recalled how some shelters tend to be more lenient than others. In one example of this, participant 5



discussed how staff at their current shelter seemed to be more understanding and a better fit for them than previous places had been:

“I feel like [it’s] a special shelter, they’re understanding, they’re not like too scared – it’s a harm reduction shelter, so they give like harm reduction kits and stuff. They’re not like too strict on the rules, like curfew is 11, but like I come home at like 1:30, they don’t have a problem with that.”

This youth in particular drew a distinction between their current place of residence and previous shelters. They appreciated their current shelter’s willingness to understand and accommodate for their personal circumstances, routines and habits. While majority of participants discussed shelter life as being at times too rigid and strict, a few others described shelters that were more considerate of their individual needs and conditions.

Overall, obtaining basic needs poses a challenge for some street youth. While getting food proves to be relatively easy with drop-ins, youth shelters, and government assistance money, accessing shelter poses a unique barrier for some. While the strict rules and regulations of youth shelters create difficulty for some youth in being able to live there, youth shelters were described as street youths’ best option for obtaining shelter. Some participants discussed a lack of attention and understanding of individual needs as creating an obstacle for them in accessing the shelters. However, other participants did note differences between shelters with regard to staff culture and attitudes. Shelters where the staff were more lenient with the youth were seen as being more helpful and engaging. Finding a balance between maintaining the order and safety of a youth shelter while being sympathetic toward individual needs and circumstances of clients seems to encourage greater street youth client engagement.

In contrast to my methodology, much of the earlier existing literature specifically focusing on Canadian youth shelters comes from the perspectives of the shelter staff and administrators as opposed to youth clients (Karabanow, 2002; Karabanow, 2004a; Walsh, Shier,

& Graham, 2010). Shelters for street youth came into existence in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the homeless population became more diverse in age and gender and greater numbers of young people were leaving abusive and problematic family situations (Gaetz, DeJ, Richter, & Redman, 2016; Karabanow, 2002; Karabanow, 2004a). These shelters were originally intended to be short-term, emergency living conditions (Karabanow, 2002; Karabanow, 2004a). While they initially served solely “hard-core street kids”, those youth who were escaping abuse and turmoil in the home, their clientele became more diverse into the 1990s and beyond (Karabanow, 2002, p. 106; Karabanow, 2004a). In particular, two downtown Toronto youth shelters began to take on a variety of young residents for various administrative reasons largely related to securing greater funding and addressing decreases in clientele (Karabanow, 2002). Moreover, amidst the severe budget cuts to social services under the Ontario Conservative government during this decade, youth shelters in Ontario began to take on clients with other more complex issues such as behavioral issues, addictions, mental health issues, as well as youth exiting the child welfare system (Karabanow, 2002; Karabanow, 2004a). As a result of these expanded parameters on eligible clientele and resulting overcrowding, shelter staff into the early 2000s described feeling “overwhelmed and ineffectual” (Karabanow, 2004a, p. 312).

In contrast to my findings in which youth described a highly rigid and regimented nature of youth shelters in which they had difficulty meeting their individual needs, Karabanow (2004a) found that shelter workers indicated that they became less strict as a result of the influx of these new types of residents. Shelter worker participants in this research study described becoming more lenient on youth shelter residents with regards to substance use, curfew, and inappropriate language, among other rules. Shelter staff felt the need to loosen strict rules with youth staying for longer periods of time and requiring more support to attend to their complex issues

(Karabanow, 2004a). In more recent research, Walsh, Shier and Graham (2010) interviewed shelter administrators in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom in an effort to identify “factors that contribute to the success of youth shelter and support programs” (p. 46). Participants identified several elements of successful shelter programming including integration within the neighbourhood (through community relationships as well as similar physical aesthetic to surrounding buildings) and offering program that is not “all-encompassing” but rather tailored to individual and diverse needs of residents. They suggest further research focus on these various factors as related to the experiences of the youth. Karabanow (2004b), in conducting interviews with street youth and service providers in Canada and abroad, similarly found that actively involving youth residents in policy revision within shelters is crucial to delivering “meaningful” services. Also important is creating a comfortable and clean physical environment in the shelter and using a strengths-based approach to counseling and interventions (Karabanow, 2004b). It is difficult to compare the findings of my research to the existing literature on Canadian youth shelters since there is no research available on the subject within recent years. Notwithstanding, service workers must consider that youth clients may have different perspectives than themselves on how services are provided. While this may be due to the fact that street youth who are on the verge of independence are likely more inclined to notice any strict enforcement of rules than those staff who are enforcing these rules, it is well worth shelter staff considering the perspectives of those clients whom they are trying to reach. Street youth shelters seeking to make services meaningful for youth should consider the individual needs, circumstances and perspectives of their clients over strict adherence to shelter program structure and regiments when this does not threaten the safety and well-being of other clients and staff.

## Healthcare Needs

While food and shelter represent more immediate concerns for street youth upon entering street life, healthcare can also become an important issue for many. The following section of the chapter explores street youths' perspectives with regards to their needs related to their mental and physical health. Physical healthcare needs were discussed as being more easily met than mental health concerns. Youth were also more immediately impacted by mental health diagnoses and conditions than physical ailments. With regard to both mental and physical healthcare, the youth discussed taking advantage of the resources available to them in order to maintain their overall health and well-being.

**Physical Health.** In general, physical health was seen as less of an immediate concern for the youth than mental health. When asked about physical health care needs, a few participants stated that they did not see themselves as being consistently in need of this type of care since they were already healthy for the most part. For example, as the following participants specifically stated:

“I really don’t give a shit about healthcare. Like, I love taking care of myself, I know I’m healthy as fuck, I know that for a fact.” (*Participant 15*)

“Healthcare, I don’t really need it, because, even though I’m a big guy, I’m very healthy for what I am, so I really don’t need any medication or anything.” (*Participant 6*)

While some youth saw themselves as being overall physically healthy, they did note conditions of living outside on the streets as creating a risk factor for more temporary physical illness. Participant 6, an 18-year-old who was in the very early stages of moving out of transitional housing into their own apartment at the time of our interview, was not overly concerned about their physical health, though they discussed how common illnesses became unavoidable while they were living outdoors:

“I could tell you that, a winter night, not a fun night when you’re on the streets, especially if you don’t have any...overhead coverage, ‘cause sleeping in the snow with nothing but a t-shirt, you’re definitely gonna get sick that week”

Participant 4 spoke similarly about the conditions of street life as conducive to physical illness:

“There’s a lot of health risks too. Like I used to get sick all the time...a lot of times when I was street-involved, I would end up in ambulances. Like, there was a point where I was ending up in an ambulance, going to the hospital for like every other day or twice a day one time. And it’s because the stress and I was having seizures and nobody knew why”

While similarly noting the connection between physical illness and street life, this youth also noted a relationship between mental well-being and physical illness on the street.

Bearing in mind these concerns, a large majority of the participants explained that obtaining physical healthcare while street-involved is not difficult. Participants discussed a variety of ways that they are able to obtain this care:

“There’s always the walk-ins [clinics] that we could go to.” (*Participant 7*)

“So like basically in Canada, healthcare’s free, so as long as you have your health card you should be able to go to any hospital or any doctor in [the city], but if the doctor’s full you have to find another one or just go to the hospital” (*Participant 11*)

Participant 12 also described the shelter as taking care of all their basic needs including food, shelter, and healthcare. Many youth enrolled with OW or ODSP also noted how these programs cover their healthcare needs. Reflecting on past experience of street involvement, participant 4 explained:

“Healthcare-wise, [shelter staff] were accommodating, like they would ask – and it was always free, it wouldn’t cost me anything, ‘cause I’m on ODSP – so they would always ask me questions about my mental health, my physical health...I was always able to find healthcare when I needed it.”

For the most part, participants discussed being able to obtain physical healthcare when it was needed. As previously mentioned, while participant 15 did not see themselves as in need of

consistent physical health care, they did note an incident in which their government financial assistance plan covered the cost of an emergency surgery:

“I had to get a tooth removed really really bad...I chipped it really bad...I called OW and said ‘Hey could you help me pay for – like, just pay for my tooth’, they’re like ‘Yeah’”

Generally, concerns around long-term physical health did not emerge as a major overall burden for a vast majority of participants.

**Mental Health.** While physical health did not pose a major obstacle, mental health concerns represent a unique barrier for street-involved youth. Not surprisingly when compared to the existing literature, a vast majority of participants referred to having dealt with at least one mental health issue throughout their lives (Deisher & Rogers, 1991; Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Kirst, Frederick, & Erickson, 2011). They discussed having coped with in the past or currently dealing with extremely serious disorders including anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, multiple personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychosis and schizophrenia. Many participants had several mental health diagnoses. Some youth suffered from concurrent disorders, battling substance addiction alongside mental health issues (O’Grady & Skinner, 2007). Several participants discussed their mental health issues as being a major challenge in their lives. In some cases, youth saw their mental health issues as causing them to struggle with keeping up with their day-to-day responsibilities. As participant 15 reflected on their previous experiences with depression:

“I used to be like a guy who just sat in his room every day and not give a shit about life. I was like – I was, you can say, depressed. I was very depressed after my [close family member] passed away. I just stayed in my room every day. I didn’t go to school for fuckin’ four months. I just gave up on school. And they knew why.”

For this youth, mental health issues caused them to be unable to cope with their daily routine. While they talked about mental health as being more of a past issue, other youth talked about

their mental health as currently posing a major obstacle in their lives. Participant 11, a 24-year-old youth living in the shelter with five years of experience on the street, noted:

“The hardest part of my life is the schizophrenia mental health issue. So sometimes I suffer from like psychosis, I start hallucinating, and I’m bipolar, so one sec, ten minutes I’ll be feeling good, then ten minutes I’ll be upset ‘cause I’m bipolar. But I try to go with the flow and stay out of trouble.”

There were several other participants who were quick to point out their mental health issues when asked about what are the most difficult or dreaded aspects of their day-to-day lives. In another example, participant 12 talked at length about the effect that PTSD had on their daily life. Their mental health issue made it difficult for them to even be outdoors in public for extended periods of time.

Moreover, some participants discussed having to shape their routines around their mental health issues and make sacrifices in order to be able to maintain their mental health. For example, as participant 5 noted:

“Some days like I work, I work part-time because like I need sleep right, so if I worked too much I would hear voices at work right, so I chose part-time on purpose. It’s the smart thing to do.”

Participant 9 even discussed having to make a major sacrifice in terms of their physical health in order to maintain their mental health:

“Like the meds is a big thing. The [physical health issue], if I’m not properly medicated for it, after a long period of time you could die from it. But I figured that my depression meds were more important than the [physical health issue] meds, ‘cause I’d rather not feel like crap about myself every day.”

This participant talked about their inability to afford the expensive medications prescribed to treat their multiple health issues. They were the only participant interviewed who expressed immediate concern for their physical well-being. They were forced to choose making their mental health take precedence over a serious physiological condition. Mental health issues were

overwhelmingly discussed as having resulted in major struggles for a greater part of all participants, as they generally placed strong emphasis on dealing with their mental health issues in an effort to live happily.

Many of these youth also discussed seeking professional help for their mental health issues and generally spoke positively of these experiences. Participants talked about connecting with these resources through a variety of services and organizations including their probation officers, hospitals (including those devoted strictly to mental health services), youth shelters and drop-in centres. All participants who discussed having obtained professional help from psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health professionals noted that these services had had a positive impact on their mental well-being. Drop-in centres were specifically noted as being among the most accommodating and understanding organizations for helping them obtain mental health services. As participant 4 noted (referring to both mental and physical healthcare):

“I was always able to find healthcare when I needed it...in drop-in centres, the healthcare is more understanding.”

Similarly to a few other participants, this youth pointed out drop-in centre staff in particular as being compassionate with regard to client mental health needs and reaching out to connect them to the services available. While participants discussed several different ways of connecting with these services, drop-in centres were especially noted as being helpful in this regard.

Healthcare needs and concerns of participants were largely focused around mental health. While one youth in particular noted major difficulty in treating their physical condition (as a result of prioritizing their mental health), a vast majority of them did not point out any major or serious impediments to their physical health. This finding is similar to that of Worthington and MacLaurin (2009) who, among 355 Calgary street youth, found that a vast majority of them characterized their “general and physical health” as good, very good or excellent. With this in



mind, other research echoes similar findings to my own that, despite this, street life can be conducive to common illnesses that may be uncomfortable but manageable including colds, flus, foot and back issues, and exhaustion (Elliott, 2013; Karabanow et al., 2007).

Most of my participants noted their mental health issues as impacting their lives in some way. Many researchers studying the needs of street-involved youth in Canada and beyond have emphasized the mental health concerns of this marginalized population, noting street youths' elevated risk for mental health issues (Deisher & Rogers, 1991; Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Karabanow et al., 2007; Kirst, Frederick, & Erickson, 2011). Nonetheless, street youth are resourceful in finding ways to mitigate both physical and mental health concerns. Past research suggests that street youths have been reluctant to engage with formal health services due to feeling stigmatized by professionals in these systems; instead, they are more likely to utilize those healthcare services which are specifically geared toward reaching youth on the street such as street outreach teams, drop-in centres and youth shelters (Karabanow et al. 2007; Nicholas et al., 2016; Worthington & MacLaurin, 2009). In my own similar findings with regard to physical health, care was more easily obtained and often covered by social services including shelters and ODSP/OW. In terms of mental healthcare, while it represented a more complex need, participants in my study discussed taking advantage of various services in order to care for their mental well-being, from the criminal justice system to social services such as shelters and drop-ins. My own findings regarding participants accessing mental health services through a variety of resources including hospitals and criminal justice officials stands in contrast to previous research regarding street youths' reluctance to access healthcare through the more formal systems of support. Nonetheless, my findings regarding my participants' success in obtaining mental and physical healthcare through drop-in centres, in combination with the literature noting that these

specialized and street-youth-focused forms of support are more attractive to street youth, suggests social services are uniquely positioned to engage street youth with health initiatives. With a deepened understanding and sympathy for their complex issues and unique lived experiences, social service professionals who service street youth are well equipped to encourage youth to access healthcare when they need it. Social services, including drop-in centres and youth shelters, should continue to offer healthcare services headed by professionals who are considerate and compassionate of the plight of street youth so that these youth can continue to feel comfortable accessing these supports.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, despite the seemingly simple nature of meeting the basic needs of street youth by providing them with adequate food and shelter, such needs are not always easily met by each youth in their individual circumstances (Kufeldt, Durieux, Nimmo, & McDonald, 1992). While the existing literature suggests otherwise, participants in my own study did not describe a struggle to obtain adequate food, since they were able to access it mostly through OW/ODSP, drop-in centres and youth shelters. Obtaining shelter on the other hand became a bit more difficult for some youth. While youth shelters posed the preferred choice for youth in obtaining shelter, the rigid nature of shelter life made it difficult for youth to meet their individual needs. Sometimes these individual needs were as simple as wanting the freedom to be able to choose when they wake up during the summer time off of school; other times, individual needs were more complex and related to getting enough sleep to maintain their mental health. All in all, my participants suggested that those youth shelters that are flexible to the individual circumstances of their clients are the most beneficial for them in being able to meet their needs.

Beyond these more immediate concerns related to food and shelter, the youth also raised concern for their health, most often emphasizing mental health over physical. While life on the streets may foster and exacerbate common illnesses and ailments, mental health concerns are a major area of concern for street youth, as is similarly outlined in the literature and my own findings. Mental health concerns can impact youth in various aspects of their lives. Coping with and treating their mental illnesses were described as a major priority for many participants. They accessed mental healthcare through various services from the criminal justice system and clinics to social services like drop-ins and shelters. Their sentiments regarding the helpfulness and sympathy specifically of social service staff in addition to past research echoing the efficiency of social services in delivering healthcare to street youth suggests social services are capable of and well accustomed to offering inviting healthcare options for street youth.

## 5. Understanding Street Youths' Social Relationships and Interpersonal Supports

The following chapter moves beyond the more basic material needs of street youth to explore their needs related to their social worlds and interpersonal relationships. Participants tended to end up on the street as a result of issues related to the traditional main system of support, the family. As such, it provides an efficient starting point for understanding the social needs of street youth. Understanding their experiences with family, intimate partners, friends, and other street-involved youth leads to a deeper understanding of their interpersonal systems of support and how these relationships impact their lived experiences of street involvement. Social service providers can then encourage youth to foster relationships that benefit them in meeting their needs and striving for more stable living conditions.

### Family

**Conflict with Parents.** A vast majority of participants described very complex relationships with their parents. To begin, all of the youth cited some type of conflict with their parents as the main reason that they were initially kicked out of or left their home and ended up on the street. This conflict ranged in how it was manifested as well as in severity. For example, there were a couple of youth who described getting into a physical fight with a parent upon being kicked out:

“I was street-involved starting at 15 I think it was – 15 or 16. And my mom was abusing me and I didn’t wanna live with her anymore and she kicked me out, so that kinda solved the not wanting to live with her anymore. But I got very upset with her because I had no reason to be kicked out, it was all her fault, we got into a fight and she hit me so I hit her back, and I ended up kicking in her door and that’s what caused me to go the hospital, the police were called and then my psychiatrist told me to [leave].” (*Participant 3*)

“Me and my mom got into a very physical argument which started with her hitting me and ended with her telling me to get the fuck out of her house.” (*Participant 9*)

Participant 14, a 19-year-old youth who had lived on the street for approximately two and a half months during adolescence, also described a similar altercation, connecting it more specifically to their father's issues with substance abuse. While this youth did not specify what led to them leaving home for the first time, they described an incident in which, as a teenager, they tried living with their father after having already moved out on their own at some point prior:

"My father, he suffers with a crack-cocaine addiction, on and off with him. So I was living down the street from him. I had my own apartment with my girlfriend, she moved out, my lease was finishing, my dad's wife and him were arguing because...the [drug] abuse was too much, so she temporarily left...so he was very weak...I could tell he just wanted to like die. So to myself I was like, you know what, my lease is up, his wife's not over there, let me just move in. So I moved in, stayed in the living room, slept on the couch, paid him 300 dollars, set up a little set up with my own little living room, my bed there, here a TV...the [drug] abuse got too much for me...things got out of hand...he usually never smoked it in front of me and stuff but like he was getting comfortable, so he was like smoking in the house and one time he tried to smoke next to me, we got into a big fight, like physical fight, and then I just decided to pick up and leave from there. And he went to...rehab and they told me I couldn't stay at their apartment."

This youth was forced to leave this living situation when it became too difficult to cope with their father's drug abuse and a physical fight between them ensued.

Some other youth talked about verbal altercations, as opposed to physical violence, that led to them being kicked out while living with their parents. Participant 5 provided one example of this:

"Well it started with like after high school, you know. 'Cause when I was in school, no problem right, I was busy most of the day, right? But like when high school was finished right, I was at home all the time...my mom didn't like that, so, since I'm home all the time, we'd get into arguments about stupid stuff. She wanted me to be outside, being productive, doing something, and I was – I was job searching and stuff but it's hard finding a job, you know."

Participant 13 spoke of a similar situation in which their parents disagreed with how they were biding their time. Reflecting on the events that led to them being street-involved, they stated:

"It was mainly conflict between my parents. I was kicked out of my mom's house because I kept asking about RESP...and I was somehow led to believe that either my

mom or my dad was trying to take it away from me. I don't know which parent instilled that thought in my head. And my dad kicked me out because I told him to fuck off after he numerously pestered me with going to school and I didn't have enough courage to tell him I didn't wanna go to school, I just wanted to work on my book."

For other youth, when asked what led to them becoming street-involved they described more general issues of conflict with their parents, as opposed to noting a specific altercation that led to their removal from their parents' house. For example, participant 4 described having lived in and out of foster care and between several different relatives throughout their life due to issues within their immediate family. They stated:

"So basically I grew up in kind of a broken home. My dad was in jail most of my life since before I was born. I suffered emotional abuse from my mom, physical abuse from my brother."

Instability in their family caused them to move back and forth between their parents, grandparents, foster parents, and eventually the street and youth shelters.

In the above examples, youth most often placed the responsibility for their street involvement outside of themselves and instead on their parents. Getting kicked out was seen as being a result of their parents' inability to care for and/or understand their needs and concerns. Conversely, there were a small number of youth who placed responsibility on themselves for being kicked out. Participant 7, a 17-year-old who had been moving between homelessness and living with their parents throughout their teen years, was one of these few who assumed full blame for their street involvement:

"I had a good home. I have a good home. When I was a kid I was young and dumb and wanted to party...I wanted to feel the struggle everyone else felt. I couldn't really give you a reason why, I thought it was maybe the cool way to go, but once it happened it wasn't too cool, it was like, oh where am I gonna go tonight? What's the next meal I'm gonna have? ...I was [kicked out]...because of the partying, because of the stupid decisions I was making. My mom was fed up with me and finally told me 'Well you want out? Well here, get out then, shut the door'. And so I took my things and I got out."

This youth expressed a sense of regret for the way they had behaved prior to being kicked out.

Participant 11 similarly noted their lack of deference to their parents' authority and their parents' inability to cope with this as their reason for being removed from their home. When asked about the events that led to them being street-involved, they responded:

“Me, like not listening to my parents, my mom and dad, grandfather, my aunties. So like, they helped me get a place and I lost it, so they're basically saying like ‘You have to use your money and find a place and get a place’. That's it. It's a struggle.”

They also indicated a sense of understanding towards their parents kicking them out, as they went on:

“Well my family is there for me, but like I'm an adult so I have to do things...on my own. And like, they say I don't listen...And I have younger brothers and sisters, so my mom and my dad and my grandfather has to take care of my younger [siblings] since I'm on ODSP and like I can deal with myself, I can find my own rent and place to live...I'm [an adult] so I know what to do.”

This participant was forgiving of their parents despite being kicked out and was sympathetic toward the need for them to focus on taking care of and providing for the younger children in the family. They spoke about their need to be responsible for taking care of themselves as they were entering adulthood. Overall, while conflict with their parents was the sole reason cited for all participants becoming street-involved, this clash was described in different ways from verbal feuding to physical violence. The majority of participants tended to place blame for these disagreements on their parents, though a small few took this responsibility upon themselves.

**Sibling Bonds.** Unlike the conflicted relationships that most of the youth had with their parents, many participants (though not all) cited strong connections with their siblings. In a few instances, youth with younger siblings discussed their tendency to act as a guardian toward their younger siblings. They discussed feeling the need to take on a parental role in watching over

their siblings when they felt that their parents were incapable. In one particularly detailed example of this, participant 6 stated:

“My mother and father, they were heavily, heavily into the drug business...you name it, they probably sold it or they did it at one point...my stepfather, he was not really, how do I say – father material?...when I was there, like when I was in the family, I was there to basically babysit and parent my brother while my mother and father were over doing drugs, selling them, or probably out ‘til about 5 o’clock in the afternoon. So basically here I am, getting up at 6 in the morning, waking up my brother, getting him showered, get him all ready, go to school with him, and then make sure he’s safe all day while I’m doing my own school – at the age of ten by the way – and making sure that he doesn’t get in trouble, then also spending half my time making sure my parents don’t get in trouble, because me, when I was ten years old I’d always make sure that everybody was safe to the best I could.”

In this example, as was the case for other participants, the youth felt a sense of responsibility to watch over and provide for their younger sibling in the absence of a capable guardian.

Beyond simply providing guidance and support for younger siblings, other youth talked more generally about receiving support from their siblings. For example, as participant 15 explained:

“My brother is my best friend too. I love him...if I ever fall, or if I like ever retrace my roots, my brother, like I would go to my brother and like, ‘Yo bro, I need help’.”

This participant discussed having a strong bond with their brother, referring to the significant role this relationship plays in contributing to their well-being. All in all, most youth cited less difficult and more mutually supportive relationships with siblings, unlike the more complicated parental relationships.

**Parental Responsibility and Joy.** Participants also tended to describe strong relationships with their own children. All participants who talked about having their own children noted the extremely significant impact that having a child has had on their lives. These youth spoke adoringly of their children. For example, participant 3, a 19-year-old who had lived on the street for three years during adolescence, spoke generally about how their daughter played



a huge role in their daily routine and happiness. When asked about what they look forward to each day, they responded “Right now, it’s taking care of my daughter and my horses when I get to see them” (the horses are left under the day-to-day care of their grandparents). When I asked this youth about what their “perfect day” might look like, they responded, “My perfect day would be being with my fiancée and my daughter”. Their daughter seemed to be a consistent and significant source of happiness in their life.

In a couple of other instances, youth noted more specifically how having a child represented a sort of “wake-up call”. They discussed how having a child came at a pivotal moment in their lives that caused them to reflect on their self-described destructive and dangerous behaviours and make a positive change. In reflecting on the major role that their child plays in their happiness and well-being, participant 14 noted how having a child “saved [their] life”. They further expanded:

“When I was homeless...well I got a letter to my Children’s Aid office I go to every month, and they told me basically there’s a letter here you need to look at. I looked at it, it said that, um, I’m having a baby [laughs]. [My ex-girlfriend] was already 9 months pregnant, this was a couple weeks before she gave birth that I found out. I was still living on the streets, recently got stabbed...just a big wake-up call, I woke the fuck up [laughs]. Woke the fuck up...So at the end of the day to me, it’s like, you know, it’s all what you wanna do with your life. Sometimes you need a wake-up call.”

This youth described how having responsibility for a child changed their life instantly. The responsibilities of parenthood caused them to disengage from their dangerous behaviours on the street, eventually finding their own apartment to rent. They also talked about having opposing interests and daily routines prior to having a child. The following excerpt from our conversation exemplifies this shift in mindset:

“S: ...Can you describe to what like sort of a perfect day looks like for you – who you’re with, what you’re doing?

P: See, you have to be more in detail about that because like, now, the perfect day for me is I have a son, so the perfect day is hanging out with him, chillin’.

S: Has that changed since you were street-involved then?  
P: Yeah I was – I never had a kid when I was living on the road.  
S: OK. So when you were street-involved, what do you think you would have thought of as being the perfect day?  
P: The perfect day?  
S: If you think back.  
P: Like I said, I made enough money for the day...go buy myself a bottle of Hennessy, get a blunt, that's the perfect day [laughing]."

This participant drew a distinction regarding their daily routines before and after they had their son. Their interests completely changed as a result of their child. Without pinning it down to a particular moment as in the previous example, participant 7 also spoke similarly about how their life changed for the better after they became a parent:

"[My daughter] – oh, she's lovely. She is great. She...puts a smile on my face every day. She gives me a reason to continue doing good instead of like giving up. 'Cause I used to give up a lot, I'd just say eff it and like just give up, so. But I can't now because I have a responsibility, which is her, so."

In this example, the youth described having their daughter as causing a shift in their mindset toward a more optimistic one. Participant 7 also discussed working toward regaining custody of their daughter:

"She's not in my care right now, right, so I'm doing things to get her back type thing, and it just makes feel good every day, achieving those goals. And so, each day – not like every day specifically, but like as the days go by, I'm getting news, so on and so forth."

This youth described having a child as motivation to work toward a more stable future in order to be able to adequately care for their child. Taking care of a child in general seems to provide youth with a sense of purpose and meaning in their day-to-day lives.

**Continued Relationships with Family.** Recalling that a vast majority of the youth left home due to conflicts with their parents leading them to be kicked out, the participants spoke diversely in how they characterized their current continued relationships with their parents.

There were a few who had broken off ties with their family members, at least for the most part.

When asked if their parents still play a role in their life, participant 6 stated:

“Not as much as...they did. But I guess you could say they’re prying to get to mine, now that I’m quote unquote ‘successful’. And by that I mean ‘cause I have money.”

This participant saw their continued contact with their family as largely being a result of their family’s financial interests as opposed to genuine connection. Participant 9 also discussed having very limited contact with their family. Also in response to the question of what role family plays in their life, they responded:

“Not too much as of right now. My dad called me a disappointment to the family, my mom barely talks to me, she – my sister, she disowned me kinda thing. So I really only talk to my brother and that’s only once in a while ‘cause he lives in [city in Southern Ontario]. But I used to go see them quite often, once a week at least. I just needed them, and then when they started picking apart my life, picking apart what I was doing, I just kinda stopped going to talk to them at all.”

This youth talked about their relationship with their family as gradually disintegrating over time due to a lack of empathy on behalf of their family and misunderstanding toward their experiences.

While other participants noted a similar disconnect between their experiences of street life and the lives of their families, this did not always necessarily lead to severed relationships. As participant 4 said:

“Yeah, I keep in contact with my family...I’m going to see them for Christmas and stuff. My brother, like I care about him a lot...we grew up together, but we have a very different mindset – but, I do love my family and they love me, but it’s hard when they don’t get what I’ve been going through, stuff like that. But they care and that’s the important thing too. Yeah.”

This participant discussed overlooking these differences in viewpoint in order to maintain their family connections. Other youth seemed to have an understanding of what caused them to have to leave home though they too still deeply cared about their parents. Participant 5 noted:

“My mom, like I’m seeing her on Sunday right...like, we keep in contact like once in a while. We don’t talk like every day or too often but like in August she bought me a pair of shoes and my sister pitched in...so like I know that they love me and shit and they want the best for me...But like, if they ever said I could come back home, that I could go back, you know, like I need like my own space, like I’m [an adult], right. I’m living with...my mom and my sister, right. And they – we’re gonna argue over stupid things, you know. Like, and I’m too old to just, to mindlessly listen to what my mom says...So, I love my mom but I just can’t live with her.”

Despite maintaining a caring relationship with their immediate family after being kicked out, this youth recognized their incompatibility for living together.

For the most part, participants maintained some sense of attachment or care toward their parents, although they described the extent of their actual relationships with them much differently from one another. These relationships covered a wide spectrum in terms of degree of contact. For example, participant 11 stated, “Well like as long as I get to speak to my mom like once a day I should be happy”. On the other end, even participant 6 who as previously mentioned had quite limited contact with their parents, noted a strong mother-child bond. They reflected on their best memory with a social service being their removal from their mother’s care by CAS (Children’s Aid Society):

“Yep, that’s it. I think that’s the best memory I had [with a social service]. Even though it was probably the saddest memory for me at the same time, because, you know, I was [age] and I really loved my mom, ‘cause you know, I’m a [child] to a mother. But looking back, it was probably one of the best memories because getting away from her was the key I needed to start becoming happy myself. Because I always, my teenage years all the way back to childhood, I was mainly focused on making other people happy, and it kinda threw me into depression [during my teens]”

Similarly to participant 5’s previously discussed narrative, this youth noted how despite truly caring about their mother, they understood that living with her did not create a healthy environment for them.

Overall, youth discussed complex continuing relationships with their families. Despite most of the youth having been kicked out of their home, a majority of them did note that they

still deeply cared about their parents and immediate families. Participants discussed a range of degrees of contact with their parents, with one participant who speaks to their mother daily to others who have little to no contact with their parents. For some youth, differences in life experiences and perspectives caused a disconnect between them and their parents. Sometimes this disconnect led to severed relationships, while other times youth were able to see past it in order to maintain these relationships that they considered to be important. Some participants seemed to understand and appreciate the reasons that they were unable to live with their parents. In general, most participants expressed that they did truly care about their parents, despite varying levels of complexity and degree of contact in these relationships.

These findings provide important contributions to the literature in furthering our understanding of how street youths' relationships with their families impact their experiences of street life in diverse ways. Though the focus in the literature remains largely on their relationships with their parents, it is well documented that problematic family situations, including those characterized by conflict, abuse, mental health issues, addictions issues, and/or socioeconomic insecurity, represent the main reason that youth end up on the streets (Evenson & Barr, 2009; Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow, & Marsolais, 2013; Kufeldt, Durieux, Nimmo, & McDonald, 1992; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011). As such, social and other services for street youth tend to rely on the assumption that "the majority of street youth are fleeing abusive and otherwise problematic family contexts" and require a "protected alternative" to these contexts in order to thrive as they progress into adulthood (Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011, p. 8). Although for some street youth peaceful reconciliation with their family may not be possible nor safe, there are many youth who are interested in and would benefit from rectifying complex family relationships (Karabanow &

Clement, 2004; Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011). Therefore, Winland, Gaetz and Patton (2011) suggest social services should consider this approach more widely, as family reconciliation programs are currently quite limited in the Canadian context. Congruent with my findings, they suggest that family relationships can play an important and supportive role for some street youth entering young adulthood. Moreover, in Canada there is a gap in the literature with regards to research that focuses on the role that street youths' siblings and own children play in their well-being and happiness. My findings suggest that sibling relationships can provide some street youth with support from someone who has a deepened understanding of their background and life circumstances. Some street youth also seem to derive a sense of responsibility and purpose in their lives in caring for their children and, in some cases, younger siblings. As such, social service providers equipped with this awareness can support youth in fostering these relationships through, for example, programs devoted to parenting skills. Beyond this, previously mentioned family reconciliation programs should also consider the impact of relationships with both parents and siblings. While future research may endeavour to study these two aspects of their families more closely, my findings provide a starting point for understanding the impact of strong relationships with their children and siblings in particular, and in some cases parents.

### **Intimate Partners**

Beyond family, for youth who discussed having an intimate partner, these relationships were often highly valued and played a significant role in their lives. For these participants, a common response to my interview question regarding what they would describe as being their perfect day involved their partners, as demonstrated in the following:

“My perfect day would be being with my fiancée and my daughter” (*Participant 3*)

“My perfect day would be like with my girlfriend all day” (*Participant 15*)

There were several others participants who gave very similar responses to this question.

For a few of these youth (though not all), their relationships with their partners had a somewhat complicated history, though they were able to persevere through more difficult times in their relationship. As participant 7 discussed their relationship with their boyfriend:

“It was very up and down at the beginning, because he was an addict and I was – not really a drunk, but I would drink quite often, so it really wasn’t – it wasn’t like a proper relationship everybody is supposed to be in type thing. And then I got pregnant, and then I started realizing what to do, what not to do, right from wrong, common sense. And so we managed to change our ways and so now we’re good, so now he’s positive, I’m positive, we’re on the same page about things.”

A little while later in our conversation, they continued:

“[I] fought for him...I fought for our family to stay together every single day, ‘cause I’ve seen faith in him.”

This youth was one of a few participants who expressed that, although their relationship with their partner had been fraught with some difficult circumstances in the past, they sought to move past these instances because the relationship was so important to them. For some of the youth living on the streets with their partner, the challenges of being street-involved became a source of difficulty for both them and their partner while at the same time providing them with an overall mutual understanding of their separate issues. This complex notion is exemplified in the following narrative from participant 4:

“I was kind of lucky being on the streets this past year because I had my partner by my side the whole time, I wasn’t alone...Like we were both struggling with our own issues, but like we both loved each other, that was the main thing, like we tell each other we love each other all the time. We try our best to understand each other’s feelings, stuff like that.”

This youth valued having the support of their partner while street-involved as a way of helping them cope with their poor living conditions. Overall, youth who discussed having an intimate partner emphasized the importance of these relationships. While in some cases they had faced

some hardships caused by them and their partner's individual issues, they discussed moving past these obstacles to protect the relationship.

Currently, there is limited research in Canada regarding the role of intimate partners on the lives of street youth. In a few cases, the focus of the research is on the role of intimate partners as perpetrators of abuse in the lives of street youth (Hayashi et al., 2016; Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995). Though they did note that some street youth describe finding a trustworthy intimate partner on the street as extremely difficult, Kidd and Davidson (2007), similar to my own findings, found that street youth in their research emphasized the role of their intimate partners as “a source of motivation and support”, sometimes even the primary “reason they decided to reduce their drug use and try to get off the street” (p. 228). As discussed in the previous chapter regarding needs related to shelter, some participants described having difficulty continuing their relationships with their partners while living in youth shelters. Youth described these shelters as not always accommodating their needs related to the support they derive in their intimate relationships with rules that prohibit any touching/hugging between youth. While these rules serve an important purpose in keeping all clients comfortable and safe, shelters and other service providers servicing street youth may wish to further examine the effectiveness of strict enforcement of these rules. Further research may also seek to expand upon the limited amount of research discussing the role of intimate partners in the lives of street youth. This means understanding not only the support they derive from these relationships but also the complexities and issues that exist in them (including violence and abuse, though this did not evolve from my own findings). This will be beneficial for social services seeking to better understand their clients' relationships and how to best support them while also enforcing these non-contact rules intended to protect all clients.



Such research is key for social service providers who want to be able to empathize with clients and cater services to fit their life experience. Navigating how to best approach street youths' relationships with their intimate partners is undoubtedly a very complex endeavour lacking a "one-size-fits-all" solution. Existing research provides no clear and definitive explanation of how street youth are impacted by their intimate partners: some researchers outline the positive and motivating factors of these relationships while others have emphasized the more negative impacts including violence and abuse. While further research may continue to explore their impact on street youth, these relationships are often diverse and largely varied between different youth. Social service providers who are open to the varied and complex meanings of street youths' intimate partner relationships are equipped to understand how to best support their clients on an individual level in their unique circumstances.

### **Friendship and Relationships with Other Street-Involved Youth**

**Friendship.** My discussions with youth regarding the need for friendship in their lives were very diverse between different youth and often highly convoluted. To begin, there were a few youth who mentioned that having friends was not a need for them. While some appreciated having friends, they did not emphasize this as an important part of their life. Participant 5, for example, stated:

"Friendship and companionship for me, it's not really a need because like I'm an independent person, I like having my alone time. Like time with friends, like it's fun, but like I don't wanna hang out with my friends like every day or all the time."

There were also a few other youth who discussed being abandoned by many of their friends after becoming street-involved and, as a result of these experiences, they no longer place emphasis on friendships as an important aspect of their social support. Participant 15 was one such individual:

"I don't care if I have friends to be honest. I really don't care. I lost a lot of fuckin' people, I lost a lot of good friends, but like – not like they died, they just all ditched me

and I don't give a shit about them at all...Like where were you when I needed you the most, you know? Like, I said, 'Yo, I'm living on the fuckin' street'...Fake friends are like shadows man, they stick out throughout the day with you and then disappear at night."

This youth described placing greater emphasis on other relationships in their life, such as their brother and their girlfriend, due to having had negative experiences with friends in the past.

On the other hand, there were many youth who placed strong emphasis on their friendships. This was particularly prevalent in cases where the participants felt that they needed friendship in order to replace the family support that they were lacking, as exemplified in the following quotes:

"I like to have a lot of friends and a lot of people to socialize with because that's who I talk to is mainly my friends as I barely have any family in my life." (*Participant 3*)

"I have very few friends and they've all kinda like became my family because I don't have the family, so." (*Participant 9*)

Participant 6 noted a similar outlook on friends, though they described taking a few years to come to the realization that friends could play an important role in their well-being:

"I always thought that – until I think last year, it's like I thought, no, I don't need anybody. I've been well enough to manage on my own. But, it wasn't until like last year that I actually thought, I think friends are actually a good support for me, 'cause if I'm not gonna get it from my family, why not friends, right?"

For some participants, they saw their friends as being their main source of support where their family was not able or willing to support them.

In discussing friendship with these youth, the meaning of the term friend emerged as a contested one, with varying definitions. One youth, participant 13, stated:

"I've been very confused as to what friend means...I would say that the friendliest people to me are strangers, people I've never met in my life...the more I know you I feel like the more I'm gonna destroy your life"

This youth noted how connecting with strangers as opposed to friends who they keep in touch with on a regular basis allowed them to protect themselves and others emotionally. Feeling more comfortable with strangers as a result of their fear of causing emotional distress by forming too close of a bond with others led to their confusion surrounding what constitutes a friend. Others discussed varying types of friendship and the opposing ways in which these two types of friends impact their lives. In a few cases, youth drew a distinction between their “party friends” and “real friends”. In the following excerpt from our conversation, participant 7 began to tease out these differences:

“S: Let’s start with friends, can you describe to me the role that friends play in your life?  
P: Some are OK, some were my party buddies. But I mean, my party buddies they’re OK too, it’s just, it’s just constantly they’re like drinking, partying, going out doing something, just something. It’s not ever like a chill movie and it’s, it’s quiet, it’s – you know? So it’s um, it’s OK.  
S: It’s important to have that for you then, those nights where you don’t maybe wanna –  
P: Yeah, yes. Very important.”

Since this youth had, as previously mentioned, dealt with issues around their alcohol use and was currently in the process of trying to regain custody of their daughter, they emphasized the need to have friends who they can spend time with outside of partying. Participant 9 also touched on this divergence between different types of friends, emphasizing the need for genuine and supportive friends:

“I used to think that I had to have friends to keep going. But it’s nice to have friends, but at the same time you gotta make sure that they’re actually your friends and not just people to go out and do drugs with, not just people to go out and drink with, not people that are gonna send you spiralling down a hole – they wanna help you get out of this hole.”

This participant mentioned this distinction in an earlier part of our conversation as well, where they were explaining to me the reasons why they enjoyed living in one city in particular:

“I had friends [there] – actual friends, not just people to do drugs with, not just people that hang out with me because I have a job and have money, not people that wanted to be drinking all the time – it was actual friends.”

This individual in particular demonstrated a clear understanding that only some friendships go beyond common superficial interests. Related to the ambiguity of the term “friend”, youth seemed to differentiate between two different types of friends. The first type encompassed others with whom they party. These types of friendships were based largely on these common superficial interests, where the youth simply saw these friends as being people to drink, do drugs with, and “go out”. The second type of friendship involved a deeper personal connection, wherein youth described this type of friend as someone whom they trust, going beyond being simply someone to party with, and being an important source of support for the youth. While one youth seemed to see a bit more value in having both types of these friends, it was clear that they emphasized the need for friendships that stem beyond partying. Youth derive the most interpersonal support from friends whom they can spend time with outside of a context of partying. These friendships provide them with a source of encouragement to avoid partying and live more stably.

**Relationships with Other Street-Involved Youth.** My discussions with participants surrounding their interactions within the street community were also laden with complex understandings and mixed feelings. At the same time that they described a hostile general attitude within the broader street community they were also able to meet some of their closest friends on the street. To begin, some youth stated that the street community was comprised of mostly an adverse and unfriendly environment. When asked about how they describe their interactions within the street community, participant 6 responded:

“Believe it or not, it was more hostile than it was with people who weren’t on the streets, a lot more hostile, because people would always try to screw you over... There’s no trust.

Definitely not trust on the street. You do not trust anybody on the street and you don't – I say, make friends but don't get close with them. That's what I would say."

This youth attributed hostility in the streets to a lack of trust between individuals competing for resources to survive. Participant 14 very closely echoed this sentiment in our discussion surrounding their interactions within the street community:

"Don't get too close, 'cause at the end of the day you're here by yourself. So that's what I always thought to myself. Don't get too friendly. Don't make no friends, 'cause this is not the place to make friends. That's pretty much it, keep to yourself... Two people coming from a bad position and a bad place in their lives cannot help each other out. They won't work. You're on drugs and he's an alcoholic, what are you guys friends for? It just doesn't add up, like you guys are only gonna make each other do bad shit."

As opposed to chalking up their perceived lack of community among street-involved individuals to distrust, this youth saw it as stemming more from the complex personal issues faced by street youth. They described relationships between street-involved people as being unhealthy.

Participant 4 described interactions with others in the street community on two opposite ends of the spectrum: from deeply aggressive interactions of competing for resources to survive, to forming family-like bonds with others. When I asked this participant about their interactions with others in the street community they stated:

"It's mostly positive. But it's somewhere in between too because in the past – sometimes it becomes just about survival, and I've gotten into physical fights with people on the street, because after a while like, when you're just trying to survive, compassion goes out the window... So, there's the point where people that you get involved with friendship-wise become like your family... But it's – when you're actually in the situation where it's survive or – it's like life or death, it's like survive or don't, you get into fights, you get bickering and stuff like that."

The notion that interactions within the street community were very mixed from physical violence with others to establishing strong friendships was a common one. Participant 14 was even one of these youth who, despite characterizing the street community as an inappropriate place to form friendships, described meeting a close companion on the street: an exception to their rule

regarding friendships with other-street youth. They continued to expand on our aforementioned discussion regarding friendships between street-involved youth:

“There was one girl that I met [in the shelter]...the only person I’ve actually connected with and I talk to like on a daily basis because...she had her head on point. She knew why she was here and how she was gonna get out and she was focused. That’s what I liked, I was thinking to myself, yeah, I need to get out of here too, you know what I mean. So, I just want to keep myself around positive people, like typically here is not a positive place.”

Amidst the chaos of street life and the various complex issues of the other youth they encountered on the street, this participant formed a bond with someone whom they felt provided them with a source of encouragement due to their shared experiences. Amidst these diverse interactions with other street-involved youth described by many of my participants, there were several other youth who also placed more emphasis on the extremely strong personal connections they made on the street, as opposed to the general sense of hostility among the broader community. When I asked about the role that friends play in their life, participant 9 stated:

“They helped me get away from drugs, they helped me pick myself back up, or they’ve been through it all with me. Like, a few of them have been homeless with me and a few of them have gotten off drugs with me...They’ve just helped me out a lot.”

Similar to participant 14, participant 9 saw friends as a source of encouragement while they were dealing with substance use issues and other issues related to their street involvement. This participant, along with several others, noted how their friendships were able to grow through shared experiences and mutual understandings of each other’s life circumstances.

Some youth also used the term “street family” to describe these tight-knit interpersonal circles they established on the street. This term is used by street-involved individuals to describe the strong connections they make with one another that they see as going beyond friendship,

representing even tighter familial types of relationships. In describing the relationships they had made with their street family, participant 3 stated:

“Friends are my biggest support, especially when you meet them on the streets, you guys get closer, a lot closer than what you would if you’re just living at home and you meet someone at school. You kind of start hanging out with a group of friends, I’ve noticed anyway in my experience, and you guys stick together when you’re in the shelter or on the streets, or wherever you may be. You just sort of stick together and they’re there for you and a big help.”

This participant drew a distinction between what they understood to be a typical definition of friendships and the friendships they made while street-involved. Participant 4 effectively summed up the role of the street family in the lives of many street-involved youth:

“I’m closer with a lot of my street family than I am with my actual family because I see them more often when I come downtown and stuff. And it’s like, they’re always happy to see me...like they’re sometimes going through their own problems, but I feel like sometimes they’ll light up when they see me. And it’s like they don’t want anything from me, they just like want my presence and it doesn’t really feel like friendship anymore...it feels more like they’re family because we’ve been through the same things...someone who is in the same situation or a worse situation than you has been there, and they’re willing to help you, it’s just like you get a connection with those people and it’s more than just like typical friends.”

So while the street community can sometimes be a site of chaos with individuals resorting to violence and theft in a desperate attempt to survive, it also provided a source for some of the most meaningful friendships for participants. Through shared experiences of the absence of family support, common substance use issues and the adverse conditions of street life in general, street youth are able to form solid relationships with their peers. These relationships provide youth with meaning and support as they navigate street life together.

Some other researchers have similarly noted the important role of friendships in the lives of street youth. Kidd and Davidson (2007) note the importance of friends for street youth, as they encourage each other in dealing with their similar experiences of the adverse conditions of street life; friends can help them avoid feelings of loneliness and “[contribute] to a sense of self worth”

(p. 228). However, this often depends on the behaviours and habits of their friends. These attitudes and behaviours of friends have been demonstrated to have an impact on street youths' own behaviours. For example, Tozer et al. (2015) note that street youth who associate with others in the peer group who "[look] down upon" IDU are more likely to avoid being involved with this behaviour (p. 5). On the other hand, seeing the negative consequences of IDU on their friends and family who are injection drug users also served as a "cautionary tale" that helped street youth see the potential for destruction in their own lives as a result of IDU and thus avoided it altogether (p. 7). Additionally, Quirouette, Frederick, Hughes, Karabanow and Kidd (2016) note how street youth who are trying to exit street life and its associated risks are more successful when they limit contact with their street-involved friends "who might pull them back into risky situations or bad habits" and instead foster relationships with "housed and stable friends and family" (p. 390).

With this in mind, social service providers must consider the complexities of the impact of friendships for street youth. While my own findings and those of other researchers suggest that friendships are a significant source of support for youth, particularly those with damaged or non-existent relationships with their families, previous research shows that peers and friends can also influence the behaviour and habits of street youth, whether healthy or not. While navigating supportive and trustworthy friendships on the street may be difficult for some youth, these findings suggest that many are able to distinguish between those friendships that are healthy and those that may have a negative impact on them. Social service providers should then encourage youth to foster friendships that the youth feel are contributing to their well-being and helping them in achieving their goals including avoiding substance use and transitioning off the street. In a previously mentioned example of this, Barry, Ensign and Lippek (2002) allowed street youth



clients of their health clinic to bring in their friends while they were attending their appointments, as they recognize that friends often represent a main source of support for these youth. An appreciation for the significant role that friends play in the lives of many street youth may be key to helping maximize client engagement by allowing youth to be surrounded by their support system when accessing services while also bringing in new potential clients.

## **Conclusion**

Exploring the social relationships of street youth allows for a deepened understanding of the interpersonal supports they receive and how these impact their experiences of street involvement. To start, participants often described a complicated web of family relationships and history. All participants cited some conflict with their parents as being the reason they left home or, as in most cases, were kicked out of their home. Despite conflict with parents, siblings generally provided a source of support in many instances and many youth felt protective of their younger siblings in particular. Youth who had their own children spoke dotingly of their children, whom they described as providing them with a sense of motivation for self-improvement. As well, some youth, though not all, had reconciled with their own parents and maintained contact with them. Intimate partners, though they sometimes noted having had difficulty in their relationships in the past, also were discussed as playing a significant role in the happiness and well-being of many participants. When it came to friendship, the youth had diverse views on whether or not they needed friends in their lives. Many youth differentiated between different types of friends based on the genuineness and level of connection in these relationships. For those youth lacking family supports, friends filled a void and provided their main source of interpersonal support. While participants described the street youth community as sometimes being a hostile and unfriendly environment, some participants discussed meeting their

closest allies on the street. Shared experiences of the adverse conditions of street life tend to transform friendly connections into extremely close bonds, with a few youth describing their friends as being more like family. All in all, personal supports are essential to the well-being of these youth especially when they are struggling with street life, providing them with hope, comfort, and a sense of purpose in their lives.

Social service providers would benefit from understanding the complexities of these various relationships so that they can encourage healthy and stable relationships that help street youth to meet their needs, set goals for their future and work toward achieving these goals (e.g. obtaining employment and/or education, finding stable housing). Not all street youth are alike in the ways that they derive personal support from family and friends. Particularly with regard to their parents and intimate partners, the dynamics of these relationships often vary. In some cases, family reconciliation programs may be beneficial for youth who see potential in establishing supportive relationships with their families (including both parents and siblings) in spite of a history of conflict that may have led to their street involvement. Social service providers may also benefit from understanding the importance of intimate personal relationships for youth by helping older youth foster these relationships while accessing services, all the while ensuring rules that are meant for the comfort and safety of all clients are still met. With regard to youths' own children, providing programs that support street youth parents will also help them fulfill their parental responsibilities and thrive in this role that provides many of them with a strong sense of purpose in their lives. Moreover, friends play an important support role for many street youth with severed ties to family. While the adversity of street life may make it difficult for youth to form trusting and healthy relationships with one another, many described meeting some of their closest friends on the street. Social services that understand and foster these relationships

will be able to fit into the lives of their clients and encourage their engagement with services. The findings of this research provide a basis for understanding the manifold sources of interpersonal support for street youth, though future research is needed that focuses on more specific types of relationships.

## 6. Resilience and Adaptation

In building upon how street youth go about meeting their needs, the following chapter will explore the strategies of resilience and adaptation that participants described as being a way for them to meet these needs and cope with adverse conditions of street life. Researchers studying street youth have described the concept of resilience in similar ways to one another: “what keeps [street youth] going and what they pull from to get by” (Kidd & Davidson, 2007, p. 219) or “how youth survive on the streets” (Tozer et al., 2015, p. 2). Kolar, Erickson and Stewart’s (2012) definition describes resilience as strategies employed by youth to maintain their “functionality or psychological well-being in the face of difficulties”, focusing on the mental health aspect of adapting to adverse environments (p. 747). They also employ the Preventing Violence Across the Lifespan Research Network’s (2010) definition of resilience: “a dynamic process in which psychological, social, environmental and biological factors interact to enable an individual...to *develop* [emphasis added], maintain, or regain their mental health despite exposure to adversity” (as cited in Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012, p. 746). As such, resilience refers to not only maintaining one’s well-being as it was before, but also further growth of the individual and their personality in the face of adversity.

My own findings related to the resilience of street youth encompass a broad definition of resilience influenced by this literature to explain how street youth develop adaptive strategies of self-sufficiency and discipline (Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; Tozer et al., 2015). Participants described self-sufficiency and discipline as being necessary strategies of survival for those who become street-involved at a young age. Many participants also discussed developing a sense of gratitude and maintaining an optimistic outlook on the present and future in spite of the strain of street life. In the context of my research, resilience is

also focused on moving beyond simply maintenance of youth's well-being on the streets and emphasizes on the *development and growth* aspect of resilience as mentioned in the definition cited by Kolar, Erickson and Stewart (2012). Youth felt that they were able to grow and become stronger than they were before as a result of their street involvement. Survival on the streets means not only being able to simply meet their basic needs like food and shelter, but also working to maintain and develop their psychological well-being.

### **Self-Sufficiency**

First of all, participants discussed becoming self-sufficient as being a fundamental life lesson that comes with living on the street. The youth had no choice but to familiarize themselves with the social services available to them and find efficient ways of generating some financial income. As participant 14 noted, finding out how to meet one's basic needs on the street is a learned skill that does not always come easy:

“One thing is not everything is handed to you. Even in the streets, I mean, certain things are handed to you, like this program here, you're giving out five dollar Tim cards. But, most things like sometimes are a struggle, like just the whole aspect of...having family around here and like that whole feeling, you don't have that.”

Lack of parental and family support, further amplified when they entered street life, was a huge factor in forcing youth to develop their independence in meeting their needs. Becoming self-sufficient went hand in hand with this independence that many youth were forced into upon being kicked out of their homes as young teenagers. Similarly to participant 14, many of the youth contrasted street life to living with a parent or guardian when discussing the resources they sought out for themselves on the street. In reflecting on the greatest life lessons that street life had taught them, participant 9 stated “you learn how to basically take care of yourself at a young age”. Moreover, participant 3 stated:

“You kind of have to fend for yourself and figure out where everything is yourself and figure everything out by yourself. You have to find out where you can eat, what times you can eat, whether or not you wanna be in a shelter. If you’re outside during the winter, you have to find a sleeping bag, you have to find a way to keep yourself warm, and a lot of that involves panhandling... I’d say it helped my anxiety a lot. Before when I was living at home, I’d make my mom call and make all my appointments, I’d make her drive me, and she would basically do everything for me which almost every parent does for every kid, I would say, from what I’ve seen. But, being on the streets has taught me to be able to do all those things without being anxious, because you meet a whole bunch of new people and you have to make your own appointments and you have no one to depend on in that way.”

While this often begins as an unfamiliar and frightening experience, learning to be self-sufficient became an invaluable life skill for many street youth. As participant 5 also noted:

“I became a better person since I got kicked out. When I was living at home, I felt like I was like a kid and like, I felt like I would never be able to live on my own, like I felt like dependent on my mom taking care of me. But now, after being kicked out, I feel like I can survive on my own. Like especially living at [the shelter], I learned how to cook and stuff.”

For many participants, forced independence taught them how to support themselves and take advantage of the services available to them. In discussing their newfound ability to look after themselves, participants described feeling better off than they were before becoming street-involved and having to develop self-sustaining strategies of survival.

### **Discipline and Perseverance**

In determining how to meet their food and shelter needs for themselves by panhandling and taking advantage of the social services available to them, many of the youth described having developed strong self-discipline. Similarly to becoming resourceful, for many of the participants self-governance came about as a result of being forced to learn this skill in order to survive on the street. Some of the youth discussed having to prioritize their needs over their wants in order to ensure that they are met, since meeting basic needs while living on the street requires some extra effort. As participant 6 stated:

“When you’re on the streets, you kinda gain like that sense of like – oh, instead of like getting something that you want, you have to focus on the things you need or else you know that you’re not gonna have a good time. I’ve learned that the hard way honestly, yeah. Well, what could I say? It ain’t easy being on the streets.”

This self-regulation is a life lesson that many of the youth developed as a result of being forced to learn how to take care of themselves at a young age. Some youth discussed this as it directly relates to finances and budgeting. For example, participant 11 echoed this, stating:

“Living on the street, like you have to save your money, budget your money, ‘cause you’re not gonna be in the shelter forever and you don’t wanna go to the adult system...I’m a kid that like cares about [my life] and trying to do the right steps, trying to one day live in a condo or like a room or something to that effect.”

Like this participant, the youth who reflected on having a strong intention to exit the shelter system or street life in general discussed being disciplined as a key to their success. While different youth labelled this skill with different vocabulary, they all talked about a deeply rooted drive to leave behind street life that was reflected in their behaviour. Participant 4, who was living in their own apartment at the time of their interview, reflected on their experiences in finally being able to obtain housing:

“I’m very persistent in getting things done, and it’s because I got to the point in my life where I decided I’m not being homeless anymore, I’m getting a place. So every day I would come here...I’d go on the computer and I would search up like housing, like every day I would just sit there and like tune everyone out...and like they’re like going to smoke weed and all this stuff...I did that for like the longest time, like weeks and weeks I would just keep searching and searching, and it’s – persistence is definitely something that homelessness helped me with...Persistence, because you’re gonna find a way to get what you want. Like, other people may have things handed to them, you know, and they don’t really know how to be persistent, but that’s one of the things that I gained and that’s how I got my place, and that’s how I get really anything that I want is persistence.”

As exemplified in the above quotation, youth discussed having to avoid outside distractions and temptations in order to work hard at achieving their goals.

In other cases, this sense of discipline came simply as a result of the strict rules set out by youth shelters and other social service agencies, as opposed to being related to long-term

independent housing goals. Youth were forced to adapt to the rules of the shelters in order to obtain the services they needed from the organization. In discussing life lessons obtained while being street-involved residing in a shelter, participant 7 noted:

“It taught me rules are gonna be everywhere, anywhere you’re gonna go there’s always gonna be rules, always gonna be authority...And I had to, you know, deal with it, suck it up. It taught me not to fight, bite my tongue when it’s needed.”

Similarly to the above example, participant 10 discussed how shelter life is far different from living at home with parents. This participant noted the “discipline” they learned as a direct result of the rigid nature of shelter life, stating the inability “to get away with certain things” as being far different from the freedom they were entitled to while living at home with their parents. Being street-involved forces youth into more stringent and restricted living conditions that require discipline in order to endure street life and, for some, eventually leave it behind.

### **Gratitude and Optimism**

Another strategy of resilience that seemed to help participants through the hardships of street life is the optimistic perspective and sense of gratitude that many of the participants maintained while living on the street. Carver, Scheier and Segerstorm (2010) define optimism as the level with which individuals “hold generalized favorable expectancies for their future” (p. 879). Higher levels of optimism are associated with higher levels of education and income, improved personal efforts to maintain good health, and greater satisfaction with personal relationships (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstorm, 2010). In line with this notion of a positive outlook on their futures, youth expressed an attitude of gratefulness for the resources available to them in the present, like social services and personal items; as defined by Sansone and Sansone (2010), gratitude refers to “the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself” (p. 18). Youth in my study most often reflected on the value of what they have as opposed to what they



are missing. An optimistic outlook on their future and gratitude for their position in life developed as a way for youth to withstand adversity on the street and push forward to create a better future for themselves.

First of all, participants described a confident and positive attitude toward their future as a component of perseverance in overcoming their struggles and achieving their ultimate goals of more stable living conditions. In their interview, participant 9 shared some words of wisdom and experience for those currently struggling with street involvement:

“Just like [don’t] be ashamed of how you do stuff, like how you get your money, how you get your next meal, how you get whatever you need to get through whatever, and [don’t] let other people bring you down on how you do it, because that’s how you know how to do it and you will find your way out of it.”

This youth in particular had a forward focus and was confident in their ability to overcome street life, in not only themselves but also their peers.

Other participants similarly talked about maintaining optimism as a healthy coping mechanism for dealing with the harsh conditions of street life. Participant 4 discussed a few different ways that they and their intimate partner learned to enjoy life while living on the street:

“While we were homeless we did a lot of things that...we considered fun, like, when we had a tent we just considered it camping – yeah, it was hard because we didn’t have a place, but we just – we always tried to look at it in a positive way, just like, “we’re going camping”. Or like...we went to a baseball game here once, like we just tried to make the best of our situation.”

Participant 5 also discussed finding what they believed to be healthier ways of bidding their time and enjoying leisurely activities while living in a shelter:

“Like me, I’m homeless but like I’m blessed, like I have so much stuff like video games, laptop, like I have stuff to occupy my time...Some people get depressed when they’re in the shelter. Like me, I’m not one of those people, like I’m a confident person, I try to stay positive all the time, but there’s some people [that] like being in the shelter, they just feel like total shit so they do stuff to cope with it, like they may drink or do other stuff.”

Keeping a positive and grateful attitude and enjoying leisurely activities allowed this youth to feel contented in their current situations while being able to look forward to their future with determination and self-assurance. Developing a sense of gratitude for what they had contributed to a positive outlook on life and a way of maintaining their mental well-being.

While optimism and gratitude were used as strategies for survival and perseverance among many participants, a few also noted the need to maintain a balance and reflect on the more difficult aspects of their lives. As participant 13 continued on to explain, maintaining optimism would be impossible without withstanding and distinguishing this from their emotional pain. In reflecting on what skills and life lessons they obtained on the street, they stated:

“Privilege is probably one of the biggest things that I would have to emphasize on because anyone, anyone – being alive is a privilege. Being conscious is a privilege. If you have those things, every – literally every single thing else becomes something you can be grateful for...But I guess it’s how we see things that determines what that is... Like I don’t know why everyone’s like they’re chasing positivity. I never understood that because I would see positivity as nothing if that’s all you would experience. Positivity would mean nothing. You need some sort of negativity in life in order to be able to process positivity. A lot of people think that they can completely erase negativity...They don’t allow themselves to meld and experience things with what’s really going on.”

While positivity is certainly important for living a happy and satisfying life, allowing oneself to process painful experiences and reflect on their more difficult emotions was seen as a way of gaining a sense of gratitude. Other youth also discussed it as a way of providing them with confidence in their own ability to persevere through difficult life circumstances and motivate themselves to continue on, as demonstrated in the following quote:

“My future is very important to me. Like I dwell on the past sometimes, but...I dwell on it for motivation... like, ‘Look at what you were doing before and look at what you’re doing now – you’re ten times stronger. Don’t give up on yourself’...But you can give out on yourself and like you can cry whenever you want because like the past hurts, but...if you dwell over it too much, you’re gonna be stuck in it to be honest.” (*Participant 15*)

While maintaining an overall positive attitude was seen as important for many youth, many did note that it is necessary to maintain a sense of balance. Reflecting on painful experiences provides a way of understanding one's place in life while keeping a positive attitude allows one to move beyond these experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Through experiencing and persevering through hardship and adversity, street youth are able to learn many important life skills. Being, for the most part, self-dependent from a young age forces youth to learn how to provide for themselves and profit from social services. As previously mentioned, much of the existing literature on the needs of street youth is focused on their elevated risks, though some researchers in Canada and the United States have begun to explore resilient strategies employed by street youth (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016; Tozer et al., 2015). My findings regarding the resilient and adaptive strategies employed by participants serve to further contribute to this literature. As has been identified in the literature, street youth tend to be a resourceful group who are efficient in making use of social services to help them in meeting their needs (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Thompson et al., 2016). Other researchers have also similarly identified having a positive outlook on one's life and one's future as an effective strategy of resilience and adaptation for street youth (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Thompson et al., 2016; Tozer et al., 2015). My finding regarding those youth who discussed becoming self-disciplined and avoiding distractions and temptations as a way of helping them meet their goals of exiting street life is one that has not yet been identified in the literature. As the literature continues to expand beyond risk toward resilience, more research may be able to delve further into this

concept of self-discipline and uncover new strategies of resilience of street youth not identified. Keeping a positive attitude also allows them to cope with their current circumstances while seeing potential for improving themselves in the future and meeting their long-term goals of housing stability. Contrary to how they believe the general public perceives them (as will be discussed in chapter 8), this particular sample of street youth represent a self-described resilient, adaptive and motivated group of young people, equipped with the tools to meet their needs, survive, and overcome their street involvement.

## **7. Street Youths' Experiences with Social Services**

The following chapter examines street youths' experiences with social services and how these services help them in meeting their needs. I will begin with a section regarding street youths' interactions with social service staff. As youth shelters have been discussed in greater detail in chapter 4 regarding basic material needs, this chapter lends focus to other social services. The following sections will explore participants' experiences with more specific types of services including drop-in centres, as well as employment and housing help. The chapter will conclude with a discussion on services that they feel are currently missing or lacking but would be beneficial for street youth. The term "clients" refers to individuals who utilize the services offered by social service organizations. Understanding their attitudes toward social services and their staff is beneficial for helping them cater to their clients and thus maximizing client engagement.

### **Social Service Staff**

Social service staff represent a first point of contact for street youth when they engage with social services. Staff may include both those who are paid for their work as well as volunteers who work frontline and interact with the youth. Staff attitude and demeanour seem to have an impact on youths' decisions of whether or not to engage in and continue using social services. Participants described their favourite staff members as being those who showed genuine regard for their well-being, were enthusiastic about their work, and created a positive and friendly environment. In particular, several youth talked about appreciating staff who were intuitive about their needs and approached them in a friendly manner when they thought they might need assistance. Participant 3 recalled one of their most memorable experiences with a social service provider:

“My experience would’ve actually been here at [the organization where the interview took place]. I was really upset...and [the staff member] actually reached out to me and she noticed that I was a little bit...upset ‘cause I didn’t know where I was ‘cause I’ve never really been in [the downtown core of the large city] by myself, and she came up to me and introduced me to everyone and she helped me through it. And that’s memorable because now I have great people to reach out to, like I come here every time I need to and everybody’s so accepting and supportive.”

The staff person was able to perceive that the youth was feeling upset and approached them to provide support and assistance, without the youth having to even ask this of the staff. This participant’s initial positive interaction with a staff member also seemed to set the tone for subsequent encounters. Youth generally seemed to appreciate staff members who were proactive with their clients. As participant 4 also recalled:

“There’s a [staff]...he’s very caring, but he’s efficient too, so he’ll always – once we got a place, like, I kind of get this feeling that people are just gonna push me aside, they don’t really care, and he was like ‘Let me get your number so I can let you know about furniture’ and this and that, and he asked me today if I needed to [get food]...stuff like that. It’s just like, I don’t know, they’re very caring.”

These youth seemed to interpret the staff’s intuition and extra help as a sign that they are genuinely personally invested in their job, as opposed to simply working to get paid. Youth appreciate and connect with staff members who go above and beyond what clients specifically ask of them in an effort to help the youth to the best of their ability.

Youth were also very grateful for staff who were able to create a positive and encouraging environment for them. The following quotes from two participants exemplify this:

“Ever since I started coming [to the organization where the interview took place] I started to feel happy and – because I was in a more positive environment I guess, and I felt the support coming from the volunteers here. So ever since then I’ve been coming here and so I still come here for the same reason. If it wasn’t for the volunteers I probably wouldn’t even be in a house.” (*Participant 6*)

“Besides like the food and stuff, they also helped me get into addiction counselling. They’ve helped me while I was on drugs...instead of “Hey, you’re doing – you’re fucked up’, like, they just say like ‘Hey, what’s going on? Why do you feel like you need to do this?’ ...it’s really nice just to feel welcomed.” (*Participant 9*)

Not surprisingly, participants discussed a positive and non-judgmental attitude on behalf of staff as being an important factor in their decision to access services. As has will be discussed in detail in chapter 8, participants for the most part feel that they are generally looked down upon by others. This may explain why youth felt that positive and encouraging staff members at social service agencies were so impactful and memorable to them. Youth discussed staff members who are motivating and encouraging towards youth as being major systems of support for them in overcoming issues related to their street involvement. Youth felt most comfortable and empowered in environments where staff sought to gain a deeper understanding of their predicaments, as opposed to automatically expressing negative judgment toward them. Oftentimes, this positive and encouraging attitude goes hand in hand with staff members' willingness to go above and beyond what the youth ask of them. Where youth perceive staff to be passionate and enthusiastic about their jobs, it seems that they are willing to provide whatever extra support and assistance they believe clients may need.

The existing literature that focuses on street youths' experiences with staff of social services in Canada is quite limited. Interestingly, the previously mentioned small body of literature that specifically asks street youth about their needs is largely focused on their needs related to social services and workers with whom they come into contact. Much different from my own findings in which youth focused more on the personal connections made with staff and other clients of drop-ins specifically, Heinze, Hernandez Jozefowicz and Toro (2010) noted more practical concerns of their street youth participants regarding their decision to utilize certain services (including youth shelters and drop-ins). They found that older youth tended to place importance on "agency rules, organization and predictability", whereas younger youth prioritized "safety" (p. 1370). Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill and Strother (2010), in their research regarding

street youths' experiences with street outreach workers, found that a majority of their participants indicated that these workers had "made a difference in their lives" (p. 473). The findings of this study help to expand on this idea by explaining how social service workers in general are able to have such a strong impact on street youths' lives by providing them with positive reinforcement and going beyond their job requirements to help youth. They also move beyond describing the practical concerns and potential benefits youth derive from their interactions with social service workers to explain the intangible benefits they derive from building connections with motivating and caring workers.

### **Drop-in Centres**

Perhaps due to the fact that my interviews with youth took place in drop-in centres, the above examples all describe youths' experiences with drop-in staff. Drop-in centres represent essential social service organizations for street youth by providing a wide variety of services in one place. Barman-Adhikari and Rice (2014) have referred to these organizations as "one-stop-shops". The following quotes provide a non-exhaustive list of the range of services that the participants access through the drop-in centres where my interviews took place:

"There's food, free food, job search – we mainly come here for the job search but then I realized there was other stuff too, like healthcare, like I even got my teeth cleaned here...I came here to talk to the psychiatrist" (*Participant 5*)

"Like this was the hangout spot, just the cool spot...just good vibe, good people" (*Participant 7*)

"I used [the organization where the interview took place] to shower...get my toiletries...I'd get everything here" (*Participant 9*)

"I use the computers, there's housing workers, there's a lot of workers, there's like – yeah – the chefs and stuff." (*Participant 11*)

"Job, they have healthcare, there's food. It's just a good community if you wanna get involved....if you're part of the arts...I don't know – if you like people, then this place is for you." (*Participant 13*)



“These 2 girls from my class were telling me...that [this organization] gives out like diapers and formula and stuff, so I was like...I’m gonna check it out” (*Participant 14*)

From simply providing youth with a place to hang out and relax, to specialized services like employment assistance, healthcare and housing help, drop-ins provide a wide range of supports in one place. Drop-in centres also try to provide street youth with as much as they can in terms of other basic needs including hot meals, other food, baby supplies, and so on. As participant 3 noted, “Any drop-in centre is really good for support and whatever you basically need, if you need to talk to someone”. As such, drop-ins are a huge source of both material and emotional support. As participant 4 also noted:

“They always have like options and they’re like taped on the walls or the staff will know about them, or they have different services and you get to know what services are around, like all the services are connected. Like if you go to [this organization], then you’ll know about [the shelter], and you’ll know about [another shelter]...”

In cases where they are unable to provide a service themselves, they seek to connect clients with other organizations that may be of benefit to them.

Beyond this, many participants noted the sense of community they derive from being involved with a drop-in centre. While some youth described simply stopping by whenever they were in need of specific services, others spoke more generally about the drop-ins as providing them with a place in which they felt welcomed and accepted in a group. These facilities run as a social environment, providing clients with the opportunity to not only connect with staff but also meet one another. Participant 11, who was interviewed in the large urban city, stated:

“I come to [this organization] for some food, for like some support and stuff, to hang with like these kids that are from [this city] that are on the street or like need help or just here hanging out, enjoying the services.”

Drop-ins provide an opportunity for street youth to network with one another and meet friends and peers with similar life circumstances. Participant 4, also interviewed at the facility in the

large city, echoed this idea stating, “When you come to these places, like when I come to drop-ins and stuff like that and I see other youth, I just have a general understanding that they’re kind of going through hard times”. Being part of the drop-in centre community provides youth with a sense of comfort and connection with others.

A few participants from the drop-in centre in the smaller city even went so far as to describe the organization’s community as a family. Participant 9 used the following analogy:

“It’s like a living room. It’s like where the family meets and then we all go our separate ways and we all go home and we all go to bed, and then we meet back here tomorrow after school, and it’s just like – it’s great to talk about how school’s going or how’s working going or how’s life going, what’s going on in your life right now, what’s your challenges. It’s really nice to get to sit down and talk to other youth about their challenges and be like ‘Hey, I went through that too’ or ‘I am going through that too, we can go through it together, we can get through it together’”

A couple of other youth who were interviewed at this same drop-in in the small city also described this community as a “family”. As previously discussed regarding street youths’ strong friendships with other street youth, participants sometimes likened their relationships with their street-involved peers to being like family, sometimes referring to these comrades of theirs as a “street family”. Connecting with others who have shared experiences provides them with a sense of community. The drop-in centre creates a space for these youth to come together, share their experiences with one another, provide one another with mutual support, and build these strong family-like bonds with one another.

To my knowledge, this study represents the first of its kind in Canada to uncover the impact of the drop-in centre community on street youth. While other researchers have noted the importance of street youths’ friendships with other street-involved peers in helping them form a sense of community, none have noted the connection to drop-in centres as a place of community building for street youth (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Kidd & Davidson, 2007). This

research provides a basis for understanding the meaning that participation in drop-in centres has for street youth who regularly access these services.

### **Employment Services**

Beyond the more general sense of community and emotional support that youth may receive from engaging with social services, they also benefit from some of the more targeted programs available at these organizations, including employment services. First of all, many participants discussed a strong interest in obtaining employment. A vast majority of participants expressed finding employment or maintaining their current employment as a high priority. In one particular example of this, participant 15 responded to my question regarding what they look forward to each day: “Getting a job. Motivating myself to get a job every day”. While some youth preferred to find jobs on their own time, majority of participants discussed accessing employment services to help them find jobs, particularly through the drop-in centres. Drop-in agencies offer a variety of services related to employment from more informal support where staff simply help youth write their resume, to more formal support where entire programs are dedicated to training youth for future employment. Resume writing help was a commonly accessed resource amongst participants: nearly half of participants noted that they had received help with resume writing most often at a drop-in agency, either formally through an employment training program or informally during drop-in hours. Resources related to finding employment emerged as a need for many youth who emphasized obtaining a job as being a key to finding satisfaction and success in their lives.

Employment training programs are another commonly accessed service in drop-in centres. In some cases, youth also discussed being connected to employment programs through their youth shelters. Some participants also cited municipal government resources as well as

organizations related specifically to employment assistance as places where they were able to engage with employment training programs. While they may somewhat vary in terms of program length and more specific content from organization to organization, these programs generally involve a scheduled series of courses regarding how to obtain employment in addition to general workplace knowledge. As participant 6 briefly described one such program, “We did some workshops, workplace safety hazards, interview process, what workers [expect] of you, and all that other stuff about work”. Participant 4 also discussed how these programs tend to operate the way a job itself would by interviewing candidates to determine their fit for the program, as they stated, “There’s like training programs and they have interviews at the actual centre...to get you into the program”.

Nearly half of participants mentioned having participated in an employment training program like this at some point. The youth described these services as helping them with confidence and self-assurance. As participant 7 said, “it boosted my confidence level... ‘cause it’s around people who like support me, wanna help me, so – it made me feel happy”. In this instance, the youth found others within the program to be motivating and encouraging of them. Others described a confidence boost from the actual knowledge they obtained with regard to gaining employment. As participant 6 continued:

“The interview process for one, it made me confident when I did my first interview. Second, when I got the job...the first interview I did with, like on my own, made me very – a lot more confident in what I was doing. So I knew what I was doing, how to dress and everything”

By learning more about how the interview process worked and what employers generally expect of potential employees, this youth was able to harness their knowledge to succeed in getting their first job. In some cases, the employment training program offered a starting point for youth to go out on their own and find jobs using the knowledge they learned. In other instances, participants

noted that their participation in employment training programs had helped land them jobs. The programs themselves build connections with businesses in the community so that they are able to connect youth more easily with potential employers upon their successful completion of the program. In one example, participant 5 stated:

“I did a [several weeks long] program, and yeah, like after that they set me up with the interview...I’m pretty positive that if I didn’t use that program I would never get a job, ‘cause like you don’t know how long I’ve job searched. Like I went all on [major street in the city] and [other major street in the city], like I’d print out a bunch of resumes, even online, no response. But like it’s hard to get a job just like a random person going in – most people get the job from someone they know or someone puts in a good word for them, that’s what [this place] did. I did the program, they put in a good word for me, that ‘He’s hardworking’ and stuff, yeah, I got the job.”

Overall, participants spoke optimistically about their experiences in employment support programs. From simply obtaining quick resume advice from staff members to participating in organized employment training programs, youth described these services as essential in helping them find employment.

Some youth did, however, note that there were instances in which factors outside of the social services made it difficult to benefit from such programs. A prominent example of this was a lack of trust on behalf of employers that made it difficult for them to obtain or maintain a job. For example, participant 4 recalled one such instance, stating, “I tried to apply to this store but they ended up banning me from the store because they thought I stole something when I didn’t, so I never got that job”. Participant 12 more specifically noted the stigma associated with having to use a youth shelter address on their resume. In their experience, having the shelter as their address made it difficult to find work, as they suspected that employers were discriminating against them because of this. Participant 1 also suggested that employers in general be more trusting toward youth. While it is certainly not a simple task, creating awareness around issues faced by street youth, reducing stigma, and encouraging employers to provide youth with

opportunities regardless of their housing situation may help to reduce employer discrimination toward street youth.

There has been very limited research regarding the effectiveness of employment training programs for street youth in Canada. Robinson and Baron's (2007) study examining Toronto street youths' experiences with employment training programs yielded similar results to the findings of my research. They found that, similarly to the participants of my study, their participants had an overall positive view of these programs. As many of my participants also indicated, while they did not necessarily always obtain a job through their participation in employment training programs, they noted other intangible benefits including interviewing experiences and supportive relationships with program staff (Robinson & Baron, 2007).

Participants in their study also emphasized the importance of enthusiastic staff who are genuinely interested in their job as a way of motivating and engaging youth. They also suggested that these programs build greater connections with companies who would be willing to hire the youth. Robinson and Baron's (2007) findings are reflected in the concerns of the participants of my research who suggested that companies be more trusting of street youth who are participating in these types of programs in an effort to find work. Further research should continue to explore the benefits that youth derive from employment programs and their suggestions for improvement to these programs to continue to improve the success of employment training for Canadian street youth. Gaetz and O'Grady (2013) also argue that employment training programs for street youth are most effective when they incorporate meeting other needs of the youth simultaneously including housing, nutrition, health, and social support. This may help to explain why participants often described drop-in centres, where youth are able to access various services to meet diverse needs, as organizations where they access helpful employment training programs.

## Housing Help

Unlike the overwhelmingly positive experiences expressed by many youth with regard to the benefits of employment assistance, experiences regarding housing help tended to elicit more mixed responses. Participants described obtaining housing help from a few different services including the drop-in centres, shelters, municipal government organizations, and non-for profit organizations. Generally this type of service involves clients meeting with housing workers who can assist them in finding housing listings of places for rent, what to look for in viewing apartments, help with lease agreements, and other first time housing related help. There were a few youth who stated that they struggled to get in touch with and benefit from working with a housing worker. As participant 9 recalled:

“I met with [a] housing [worker] and it didn’t work out very well. She basically told me that I needed to have my ID. I had no ID, I had no money for ID. So she basically told me there was nothing that she could do, there was nothing that she could help me with, so.”

This participant was unable to access the service due to a lack of funds to get their proper personal documentation. Another participant recalled having greater success searching for housing on their own, since they found that housing workers tend to be quite busy in their day-to-day work:

“My boyfriend said that I became a better housing worker than the housing workers...because it’s like, they’ll help but it’s like I guess they have a lot to do in their job, right? So – but the good thing is that it’s not just housing workers, it’s the whole – like the computer lab, I could [go there] every day and it’s – you can’t rely on the housing workers to help you, it’s about being persistent in yourself. But I did access them a lot and they would give us tokens to go and see apartments and stuff.” (*Participant 4*)

While they relied on housing help for the tools to help them search for and choose an apartment, this youth noted that they had to independently search for a place to live. Youth may benefit from the resources available at social service organizations, such as computers to search for housing, as a starting point for searching on their own for a place to live.

However, not all those participants who described engaging with housing agencies and housing workers were lacking confidence in the helpfulness of these resources. As participant 11 recalled:

“Well, there’s different housing support programs throughout [the city]...they give you like bus fare...to attend your housing meeting or attend to see the landlord...because I can’t find housing myself because like I’m kinda young...like using the internet and stuff and like, it’s like harder, or it’s taken, or they don’t want you because you’re like [a visible minority] youth or something like that...that’s why there’s staff and like other mentors that help you with housing.”

Unlike in the previously discussed examples, this participant described being able to directly benefit from housing workers who have more experience with finding housing and are there to guide youth in finding a place to live. That being said, while the experiences of those who had worked alongside a housing worker were mixed, an overwhelming majority of participants had never accessed housing support services. As such, it is difficult to make conclusions about street youths’ experiences with housing support workers.

Beyond housing support workers, there were a few participants who referred to transitional housing as another source of housing support they had received. Transitional housing is considered a “next step” for youth who are beginning to exit the shelter system. In these programs, youth have either a room or an apartment where they live with social supports and low expenses for a limited period of time (usually 1 year), as they save money and prepare to be able to afford their own housing. Similar to the situation with housing workers, these youth had mixed feelings and experiences regarding their participation in transitional housing. For example, participant 15 talked about the struggles of having to live with others whom they did not choose to live with:

“I just wanna like save up money so I can get the fuck out [of transitional housing]. I’m looking for a place to fuckin’ just crash, like to actually move the fuck out. Move in with



a friend – I’ve been asking everybody...I hate it there. I just hate it there so much...It’s just people like to steal shit”

While participant 15 spoke quite negatively of living with others in transitional housing, participant 5 reflected on a much different experience in a similar program:

“I learned how to cook, how it feels like to live on my own...and like, getting along, like living with people, like getting along with them, you know...not causing any fights, to cooperate with people...if you’re sharing a space with people, you got to think about them too. Like some stuff will get them mad and some things they do will get you mad, so you gotta like compromise.”

While other youth who had experience in transitional housing did not describe their experiences in much detail, these two youth in particular described quite contrasting reflections on their participation in transitional housing. Again, it is difficult to draw conclusions based on these limited accounts, though it is clear that transitional housing can have varying consequences and benefits for street youth. For some, living with others whom were not chosen by the youth themselves causes major conflict, whereas for others, transitional housing has the potential to provide youth with important life skills for one day living on their own.

There exists very little research in Canada that seeks to incorporate the feedback of youth themselves with regard to housing support services. In their research with homeless youth suffering from mental health issues, Forchuk et al. (2013) found that most participants in their study tended to prefer the housing first approach to obtaining services and housing over the treatment first or treatment and housing together models. As the name implies, housing first involves first getting youth into safe housing, providing them with support to maintain their housing, and leaving treatment of mental illnesses as a next step in the process. As Forchuk et al. (2013) note, their findings suggest that obtaining proper housing is a major concern for street youth. In my own findings, youth described mixed feelings toward their experiences in housing support services. Further research should focus more on youths’ experiences with housing

support programs to help better understand how to address housing, as it emerges as a major concern for many street youth.

### **Services Missing or Lacking for Street Youth**

In general, most youth seemed to be taking advantage of and benefitting well from the social services available to them. Nearly half of participants noted that they did not feel that there were any services missing or lacking for street youth in their respective cities. For those youth who did note services that were missing or lacking, they were most often suggesting increases in the services that they were already heavily accessing. For example, participant 4 noted the need for more shelters that accommodate youth couples:

“It was very hard for [my boyfriend and I] to find a place like for a couple. Like there was a drop-in program that they did, an out of the cold program, but it was like mats on the floor in this like basement lounge area. But we found this one couple’s shelter but they wanted to have some sort of proof that you were a couple and they don’t have that for youth, like they don’t have a couple’s kind of bedding situation for youth.”

As previously mentioned, youth shelters seem to be the best option for obtaining shelter for youth living on the street and intimate partners provide a strong source of support for some street-involved youth. Considering that some youth shelters will accommodate young people who are age 18 and older, providing beds for couples can allow street youth to be able to access an important service while also being accompanied by someone with whom they feel safe and supported.

Recalling the various ways in which youth profit from drop-in centres, there were also a few participants in the large urban city who suggested that the street youth community would benefit from more drop-ins. When asked what services they felt were missing for street youth in their city that they wished they could see more of, participant 11 responded as follows:

“So like more recreational centres, more drop-in centres for like the homeless or people that are just in need or people who just wanna hang out and stuff like that...Because

Canada is like – has four seasons...it's cold, so you don't really wanna be on the streets, living on the streets...Like I said more recreational programs, recreational centres, drop-ins, like all over [the city]. Like there's a few, but there's not many in [the suburbs] so people come [downtown] to come hang out and like talk to housing workers, talk to the employment worker..."

This youth reflected on how helpful the drop-in where our interview took place was for many youth, suggesting that creating similar organizations all throughout the city would be a great way to reach and engage more clients who might struggle to make the trip into the city's downtown core. Participant 14 expanded on the need for more drop-in and recreational programs for youth and brought up another interesting point related to staff in these organizations. In response to this same question about services missing or lacking in this city, they responded:

"More drop-ins for youth, keeping them involved with the community...you can see like a person who works at the rec centre – like you get to know that kid from when he's young to when he's older, you have a relationship. That's better instead of him just walking in there at 17-years-old and, you know, 'Who the fuck are you?'... 'cause that's how we think. So...you know what I'm saying, like just building relationships...It's possible, it's completely possible, 'cause I have it myself. Like little community centres and hubs in my neighbourhood, I've known these people for like, since I was a kid...Little organizations – those things keep moving positive, and keep youth alive, in check, 'cause they have someone to talk to. Some people don't have dads, they don't have moms, so they just listen to fuckin' dumbass friends...So yeah, just community groups, that would be it. More community drop-ins."

Similar to participant 5, this individual talked about the need for more localized drop-in centres in smaller communities outside of the downtown core. They also pointed out the need to reach youth from a young age so as to build a foundation for a strong and trusting relationship with them. Creating more drop-ins in smaller communities provides potential for staff to create meaningful long-term relationships with clients. All in all, youth suggested that creating drop-in recreational centres in different areas throughout the city provides a way to get young people involved with their community and avoiding the dangers associated with street life.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, street youth seem to benefit greatly from the various social services available to them. As they generally constitute a highly resourceful group of young people, participants in this research study in particular emphasized the importance of various services. Specifically, they described intuitive and passionate social service workers as well as drop-in centres and employment support as being essential to their well-being and success. While housing support services seemed to elicit more mixed reviews, participants did note a few benefits of engaging with housing help. Since they find youth shelters and drop-ins to be helpful and often crucial resources, participants' main suggestions for filling gaps in social services for street youths in their city involved improved shelter access and increased drop-in agencies scattered throughout their city. By exploring these youths' experiences with social services, social services can gain a deeper understanding of their decisions regarding how they access services and as such design services in a way that best meets their needs and perspectives.

## **8. The Client-Centred Approach as Empowerment**

The following chapter explores how the client-centred approach to researching the needs of street youth can help counter these young people's experiences of social marginalization. Many of these youth feel socially isolated and vilified by the general public. Despite this, they convey a willingness to assist in the research and a confidence in their roles as agents for positive social developments in this area. Youth seem eager to participate in research as it provides a unique opportunity to share their thoughts with someone who is actively listening, interested in what they have to say and non-judgmental. Some youth also participate in an effort to dispel the negative stereotypes that they believe cloud the general public perception of them.

### **Hostile Public Perceptions of Street Youth**

A vast majority of participants characterized the general public perception toward street youth as one of negativity and hostility. Only participant 11 indicated a belief in a sympathetic view of street youth, arguing that the donations made to keep shelters and other social services running implied public concern for their welfare. Most other participants indicated that they felt a lack of empathy and understanding for street youth in society. This was discussed a few different ways. Some youth explained how they had come to this conclusion as a result of their experiences while being street-involved. As participant 3 stated:

“From what I’ve noticed, people just walking on the sidewalks for example, they just give you dirty looks and they don’t bother asking why you’re on the streets. If you’re panhandling, they assume it’s for drugs and they assume that you’re...up to bad things and that’s why you’re on the streets.”

Participant 6 echoed a similar sentiment and connected this idea back to a stereotypical perception of the cycle of poverty, discussing the belief that many people assume street involvement is a result of the family environment:

“I see what people think, that we’re just kinda screw-ups and probably just delved into

the whole drug business and became failures like our parents probably were.”

Most participants described their perception that the general public views them in a negative way as being a result of their interactions with presumably non-street-involved strangers. By reading their body language, these youth believe that most passers by look down upon them with disapproval, disgust and a lack of sympathy.

In many cases, these youth also saw this absence of compassion as coming from a lack of experience with and genuine understanding of the complex issues faced by street youth.

Participant 14 saw the general public perception of street youth as: “bad, criminals, they’re on drugs”. When asked why this might be, this youth seemed to understand why many people might feel this way, stemming from fear:

“‘Cause that’s the appearance it gives off. When you walk down the street, you see somebody sitting down on the corner, he’s typically dirty...begging for money, or they’re talking to themselves, a lot of mental health cases, stuff like that...obviously, like if you’re from outside that bubble, that does not look cool. That looks scary as fuck.”

This participant described having had similar reservations about the street community prior to entering the youth shelter themselves. They would later come to the realization that this population is much more diverse than they had previously thought. As they further elaborated:

“I’ve lived in the shelter...and when I got there, obviously, I’m thinking drug addicts, prostitutes, all sorts of fuckery...It’s a lot subtler than I thought, you know what I’m saying. A lot of normal kids...a lot of mental health, a lot of drugs, but you know what, typically it’s like normal to me. It’s not like what I expected it to be. It’s just kids. Everybody has their own fucking problem, that’s all it is to me.”

This participant seemed to gain a better understanding of the complex issues that their peers face with regard to their street involvement. Another youth similarly mentioned that unfamiliarity with street life is a likely cause for the misconceptions surrounding the street community:

“People think that we’re lazy, we have problems, like getting kicked out, they think we’re like using the government...They think that we’re dirty...But that’s ignorance, you

know...Like if you don't know from firsthand experience, you're gonna judge someone a certain way."

In general, many participants spoke similarly about the idea of ignorance contributing to the stereotype that the street youth population is comprised of lazy, misguided young people who abuse drugs. When people are unaware of the manifold issues street youth face as well as the diversity of this marginalized group, these misconstructions persist.

### **Street Youth Participants as Interested Stakeholders**

With that being said, street youth participants seemed eager to communicate their perspectives and contribute to the research that directly impacts them. Participating in the research provides them with a way of countering the hostile narrative and empowering them as valuable contributors to the research. Most of the youth described their reason for participating in an interview as going beyond the modest gift card provided to them for their time and efforts. Many youth seemed to indicate that they felt a sense of responsibility to share their story in an effort to help others who may find themselves in a similar position. As Participant 9 stated:

"I like to talk about what happened and what is still happening, and hopefully one day it won't be happening – not for me, I don't really care if it's happening to me – for other people."

It is clear that this participant felt that their contributions have the potential to instigate positive change in the way that others understand the complex issues faced by many street youth.

Participants in general were able to see the value of their input in this research.

Beyond the effort on behalf of some participants to contribute to broader shifts in how people think about street youth, some participants derived personal benefit as a result of their participation by having the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences with someone who was interested in what they have to say. Participant 4 discussed not only seeing the merit in

sharing their experiences, but also the personal benefit that participating in this type of research provides them:

“Every time there’s something, like a survey or something being offered or whatever, I always take it...especially if I have nothing to do, it’s something to do, and it’s kind of nice to have someone there to like – to listen to and appreciate all the...information you have to provide, the knowledge and wisdom about street life or whatever it is.”

Beyond referring to her experiences as “wisdom”, this youth conveyed a sense of worth they derive out of offering their insights to research on street youth, knowing that her perspectives are valued. Participant 15 spoke with similar confidence in their worth, discussing the potential for their input on street life to effect positive change in the future:

“I just like to share my story, and like my story is a beautiful story...in my eyes, I just love it. It’s like – it’s a powerful story. Everyone’s story in their entire life is powerful. Like, everyone has their own voice but like some are actually scared to use it to stand up for their dreams, for their passions, all that. Because, like, some people have been tormented so hard in their lives that they’re scared to even use their own voice”

This youth expressed not only pride in sharing their own narrative, but also a sense of concern for others in recognizing that experiences of rejection and abuse can damage a person’s readiness to come forward and share their own perspectives.

In general, it seems that many street youth experience social marginalization, suggesting that the general attitude toward them in society is one of disapproval and disgust. In a survey of over 1000 Canadian “young people who experience homelessness”, Gaetz, O’Grady, Kidd and Schwan (2016) noted similar findings regarding street youths’ social marginalization (p. 5). Participants of their research made similar comments to my own participants regarding the general public perception of street youth in the Canadian public, such as:

- ““People tend to believe kids who end up in shelters and/or living on welfare are all messed up, undisciplined delinquents when a lot of the time it’s not their fault”” (p. 58)



- “‘When you see kids’ ...people we are not scum. Geez, we are human beings, too...” (p. 111)
- “‘Not all of us are bad kids. Just made some mistakes and never had a proper family’” (p. 111)

Gaetz, O’Grady, Kidd and Schwan (2016) also found that 83% of their survey respondents reported having been the target of bullying in school. They also note that 63% reported being a victim of violent crime in the previous year, making them nearly “six times more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population” (p. 79).

In spite of their understanding of themselves as socially excluded, mistreated and misunderstood, so many of these same youth are interested in providing their inputs for reasons beyond the moderate compensation that researchers sometimes provide to their participants. Based on this, it is clear that a client-centred approach, one in which the research is centred around the concerns and perspectives of the youth themselves, empowers these young people by honouring their lived experiences and wisdom as key contributions to the research. Their empowerment is evident in the way the youth speak about how they see potential for change by sharing their experiences and referring to their contributions to the research as powerful and wise. Incorporating their contributions into research provides a platform for them to share these impactful narratives with the academic community, social service providers and the general public alike. Not only is it valuable to gain the firsthand perspectives of street youth to help service providers working with these youth gain a deeper understanding of their social worlds, it also seems to provide a positive, somewhat therapeutic experience for some youth in having their voices heard. When youth are able to benefit from and feel empowered by the research, they are more likely to participate in future research. Moreover, these benefits may represent a rare

instance in which research participants experience direct benefit from their participation, as most research primarily benefits “society and...the advancement of knowledge” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014, p. 21).

## **9. Conclusion**

This study was conducted in an effort to elicit the personal narratives of street youth in Southern Ontario with regards to their lived experiences of street involvement and the ways in which they go about meeting their needs. By conducting qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 15 youth, I gained an understanding of the ways in which they define various issues related to their street involvement and some of their experiences with social service provision. The following chapter will review the general contributions that this research makes to the existing body of literature on the needs of street-involved youth in Southern Ontario, specifically related to a shift away from risk-oriented literature, a focus on more bottom-up approaches to understanding their needs, and an effort to examine their needs in an integrated and holistic way. I will then identify the key themes that this research outlines: (1) street youth participants represent empowered and interested stakeholders in the research on their needs, (2) street youth face various complex issues in relation to their social supports and basic material needs, though they cannot be seen as simply passive subjects whose elevated risks for various dangers related to street life must be managed; and (3) social services are a huge support for and provide essential services to street youth, though they feel that there remains room for improvement. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion on the limitations of my research and paths for future research.

### **Contributions to the Existing Literature**

As discussed in chapter two, this research sought to address three main gaps in the literature. First of all, this project shifted focus from the dominant risk-oriented approach to meeting the needs of street-involved youth to an approach that is more focused on resilience. It has been well established in the literature that street youth are at a greater risk for issues related

to their mental health, sexual health, substance use, and criminal justice involvement (Barry, Ensign, & Lippek, 2002; Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016; Elliott, 2013; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Feng et al., 2013; Haley & Roy, 1999; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Green, & Robertson, 1998; Tozer et al., 2015; Kirst, Frederick, & Erickson, 2011). This project sought to contribute to the limited research on the needs of North American street youth that utilizes a framework of resilience (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; Tozer et al., 2015). By doing so, I emphasized the strengths of street youth in being able to meet their needs and explored their various strategies of resistance to the adverse conditions of street life. Participants in my research described being resourceful in taking advantage of the social services available to them, learning to be mostly self-sufficient in meeting their needs, being disciplined in their efforts to obtain a better life for themselves, and maintaining an optimistic outlook toward their future. Also, in shifting away from the risk paradigm this research lends more focus to quality of life of street youth. As opposed to simply discussing risks associated with street life and ways to mitigate these risks, I have identified various ways in which street youth address needs related to their quality of life. Participants described the important role that friends and family play in relation to their well-being and happiness. Moreover, participation in groups, more specifically the drop-in centre communities where I conducted interviews, contributed to a sense of community and belonging for many of these youth. As there is more to life satisfaction and happiness than simply risk management, understanding street youths' social relationships contributes to a deepened understanding of their needs beyond those basic ones to include those related to happiness and mental well-being.

Secondly, this research is an attempt to incorporate more of the voices of street youth themselves on their own needs. Much of the existing research on the needs of street-involved youth ascertains their needs through the expertise of public health researchers (Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2016; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Feng et al., 2013; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Ringwalt, Green, & Robertson, 1998). While youth are most often participants in these studies, researchers survey youth with questions about their lifestyles, habits and behaviours. The researchers, often in the field of public health, then identify the needs of youth based on their results. This research also places physicians in a role in which they are able to identify any behaviours of youth that may deem them to be at-risk and work with the youth to encourage them to divert from these risky behaviours (Haley & Roy, 1999). While this research holds value for those youth who may be less able to speak for themselves, particularly younger youth, my research employs an approach in which youth are treated as the experts on their own needs. While some researchers in Canada have asked youth about their experiences and needs related to more specific services, such as emergency department services, drop-in centres, and street-outreach workers, my project is the first to my knowledge which asks youth about their needs on a broader scale (Heinze, Hernandez Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Nicholas et al., 2016; Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill, & Strother, 2011). As stakeholders in this research, understanding the needs of street youth through their own perspectives is an essential part of understanding how to meet their needs. From basic needs related to food, water, shelter and healthcare, to those more complex needs which address the emotional well-being of street youth, asking the youth about their needs is the most efficient way to identify them.

Finally, this research sought to identify and examine the needs of street youth through an integrated and holistic approach as opposed to focusing on single issues related to the needs of

street youth. In their study regarding the effectiveness of employment services for street youth, Robinson and Baron (2007) highlight the need for research that examines the various facets of marginalized faced by street youth. In discussing the limitations of their research that focuses on one sole issue in isolation of others, they note that future research should address interrelated issues of street involvement simultaneously including housing, substance use, mental health, physical health, among many others. Only one previous study in Canada takes this holistic approach to understanding the various complex needs of street-involved youth in Southern Ontario by looking at multiple issues concurrently (Evenson & Barr, 2009). My research is an effort to continue to build upon this. By discussing various issues with youth including their basic needs, health, relationships with friends and family, experiences with social services, and so on, I have identified some of the ways in which these multiple issues are interrelated.

### **Key Findings**

Street youth represent a vulnerable group of young people. My participants described feeling marginalized based on their perceptions of how they are viewed in the general public. Street youth feel that they are cast as wayward, rebellious and ill-behaved young people whom most members of the general public feel little sympathy towards. Despite this, they express a strong interest in contributing to the research that can dispel these myths and contribute to positive change in the future with regards to how they are treated (Deisher & Rogers, 1999; Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow, & Marsolais, 2013; Gaetz, 2004). It is clear that this client-centred approach, where the research is centred around the concerns and perspectives of the youth themselves, empowers these young people by honouring their lived experiences and wisdom as key contributions to the research. Not only is it valuable to gain the firsthand perspectives of street youth to help service providers working with these youth gain a deeper

understanding of their social worlds, it also seems to be a positive experience for the youth themselves. Participants of this research project described seeing the value of their input in spreading awareness of the issues faced by street youth; they referred to their contributions as wisdom and expressed confidence in the potential for this type of client-centred research to effect positive change in the way that people understand the needs of and issues faced by street youth in Southern Ontario.

Involving street youth in the research on their needs in a meaningful way requires researchers to move beyond risk management and explore the strengths and resilient and adaptive strategies of these young people. In my research, it is clear that these youth face various hurdles in life in relation to family conflict, obtaining shelter, and health issues especially with regard to mental health, among many others. In spite of these challenges, street youth tend to be very adaptive, learning from their challenges by obtaining unique ways of meeting their needs. Being without much of the traditional parental/guardian support that their non-street-involved peers are entitled to, street youth are forced to make their own way. This provides them with a variety of transferrable skills including being disciplined and focused on their goals and resourceful in finding help in achieving their goals. In order to survive the adversity of street life, they often also form deep connections with their peers who have similar experiences. Maintaining a positive attitude and a sense of optimism toward their future also makes street life more liveable.

In being resourceful, street youth tend to make efficient use of the social services available to them. Social services, particularly drop-in centres, provide a wide range of meaningful supports that are able to engage youth in one place, as opposed to being scattered and thus difficult to access. Youth not only gain valuable concrete benefits in these agencies such as

access to healthy food and employment assistance, but also less tangible benefits via supportive and encouraging staff members and a sense of community among their peers. While drop-in centres were emphasized as one of the main sources of social services, youth also access support through other organizations including youth shelters, municipal organizations, and other non-for-profit agencies. Despite the wide range of supports that youth are able to take advantage of throughout Southern Ontario, many youth indicated a need for an increase in services. More specifically, cities throughout this region may benefit from more localized community drop-in centres and an increase in more flexible youth shelters where youths' individual needs are taken into account.

### **Limitations of the Study and Paths for Future Research**

While I have addressed several gaps in the literature and uncovered a number of key findings regarding the needs of street youth in Southern Ontario, it is important to consider the various limitations of my small-scale research project. Conducting research within a social service agency also poses a number of limitations. Due to ethical considerations, accessing youth through a social service agency provides the most appropriate recruitment method for a novice graduate student researcher. That being said, generalizations from this study can only be made in relation to those youth who are well connected to social services. This eliminates a segment of the population who are either not at all connected to social service agencies or perhaps only connected in a very limited capacity. It is worth considering that this group may have their own unique circumstances that may contribute to their inability or unwillingness to access social services. While it may be difficult to reach these youth, more experienced researchers may wish to consider creative and ethical strategies of recruitment that have the potential to engage these youth.



Due to the time constraint of approximately one year to complete the research, this study involved a mere 15 youth in only two drop-in centres in the region. As such, generalizing their views to the overall population of street youth throughout Southern Ontario must be done with great caution. While this research provides a starting point for exploring the lived experiences of street youth throughout Southern Ontario, future research may consider interviewing larger numbers of youth in a variety of organizations to gain a bigger picture understanding of their needs and experiences.

It is my hope that this research project contributes to greater awareness for both social service providers and the general public alike regarding the more complex, beneath-the-surface issues that street youth face every day. This research is intended as a complement to the existing research that emphasizes the perspectives of healthcare professionals and social service workers to provide a more comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of meeting the needs of street-involved youth in Southern Ontario. By engaging the sentiments of the youth themselves, I sought to move beyond simply discussing the challenges of street life but also to learn more about the various life lessons and skills that youth have obtained as a result of their street involvement. While the views of experts and professionals in the field are undoubtedly important, there are certain aspects of street life such as these strategies of resilience that can only be explored by talking to the youth themselves. Interviewing youth about their perspectives also allows social service providers who work with these youth to gain a deeper understanding of the views of those whom they seek to help. When we as researchers engage as participants those whom our research directly impacts, we are able to make our results meaningful to them and empower them to take action.

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## **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!**

If you...

- ✓ Have run away from or been thrown out of your home or another place of residence,
- ✓ Are in your teens or early 20s and;
- ✓ Have been without a fixed address (couch surfing, living on the street, living in a shelter, etc.) for at least 3 days in a row

...I would like to talk to you.

I am a Laurier student looking to learn more about the experiences of street-involved youth in Southern Ontario. I would like to hear more about your personal story.

This research is intended to bring to light the voices of street youth in an effort to educate researchers, social service providers, and the public in general about your needs and the needs of your peers!

Your participation in this research would involve:

- A 1 hour **one-on-one interview** with me; you will be asked about your experience with street involvement, what's important to you, and how you go about meeting your needs.

***YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL BE KEPT ENTIRELY CONFIDENTIAL.***

If you are interested, please e-mail **SAM** at  
[styc8440@mylaurier.ca](mailto:styc8440@mylaurier.ca)

*PARTICIPANTS WILL BE THANKED FOR THEIR TIME WITH A \$5 GIFT CARD TO TIM HORTON'S*

**THIS STUDY HAS RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL THROUGH WILFRID  
LAURIER UNIVERSITY'S RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD (#5092)**

## Appendix B

### One-on-One Interview Guide

#### **Introductory Questions and Lived Experiences**

- 1.) Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what a typical day looks like for you?
- 2.) Can you tell me a bit about how much time you spend on the streets? For example, do you spend most of your day outside, or are there places you have to hang out, to sleep, things like that?
  - a. How long have you been street-involved?
- 3.) Have you lived in any other cities? How did you end up in (NAME OF CITY)?
  - a. Can you talk to me about which city you've enjoyed living in the most and why that city is your favourite?

#### **Describing Needs**

- 4.) Can you talk to me about the things that make you happy in your daily life – what sorts of things do you look forward to each day?
- 5.) On the other hand, can you talk to me about the more difficult aspects of your day-to-day life? Are there any things you fear or dread having to deal with on a daily basis?
- 6.) Can you describe to me what your “perfect day” looks like? Who are you with? What are you doing?
- 7.) So, I know discussing “needs” is a pretty broad term, since it is discussed in different ways in different situations. To start, for example, sometimes people talk about needs as being basic to a person's survival – things related to food, water, shelter, healthcare, and the like – needs that are essential for you to stay alive. Can you talk to me a bit about how you go about meeting these kinds of basic needs?
  - a. Can you describe to me which of these needs are the most difficult to meet, and why?
- 8.) Sometimes people also talk about our needs as going beyond just these basic survival needs and discuss needs as also being related to our well-being and happiness. So for example, many people would argue that we have also have a need for a sense of community, for friendship/companionship with others, a need for respect, needs related to our spirituality, and so on.
  - a. Can you talk to me about how important these different social, psychological and spiritual matters are to you?
  - b. Can you describe to me which of these needs are most important to you? How do you go about seeking out these needs?
- 9.) You mentioned *x* (if anything up to this point has been mentioned about friends, family or any

*other sort of companions*), can you describe to me the role that friends, family or any other people in your life play in helping you live happily and/or “get by”?

- a. If you belong to any other groups that you get support from, can you tell me a bit about those?

### **Barriers and Advantages to Meeting Needs**

10.) In general, can you talk to me about how the ways you go about meeting your needs each day probably differ from youth who aren’t street-involved?

- a. First of all, what sort of skills and ways of getting things done do you feel your experiences have given you that young people who don’t spend time on the streets won’t get?
- b. On the other hand, what sort of challenges do you feel you’ve faced in meeting your needs that youth who don’t spend time on the streets don’t face?

### **Social Interactions**

11.) Can you tell me a bit about the events that led to you becoming street-involved?

12.) How do you think other people perceive street-involved youth in general?

13.) How would you describe your interactions with others who are non-street-involved? Are they mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in between?

14.) How would you describe your interactions with others in the street community? Are they mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in between?

### **Social Services**

15.) Can you tell me a bit about your experiences at (RECRUITING AGENCY/ ORGANIZATION NAME) – how long you’ve been coming here, how you came to know about it, what types of services you access here, that sort of thing?

16.) I’d like you to think about the best experience you’ve had with any sort of social service agency/organization in this city or any other city at any time in your past. Can you describe it to me and tell me about what made that experience so special to you?

17.) Have you ever accessed any housing support services? Can you describe your experiences with them?

- a. Can you describe some of the benefits – what you got out – of your participation in housing support services?
- b. Can you describe some of the difficulties you faced in your participation in housing support services?

18.) Have you ever accessed any employment support services? Can you describe your experiences in them?

- a. Can you describe some of the benefits – what you got out – of your participation in employment support services?
- b. Can you describe some of the difficulties you faced in your participation in employment support services?

19.) Can you describe what you think the various social services in this city are doing well in helping you meet your needs?

20.) What services do you think are missing in this city that you wish could be available to you and other street-involved youth?

- a. Can you tell me a bit about why those services are important to you? How would they help you?
- b. Are there any services not offered that you may not personally need, but some of your friends might?

### **Concluding Questions**

21.) Can you tell me a bit about why you decided to participate in my research and be interviewed?

22.) Are there any questions I have not asked that you think are important and that you think I should be asking future participants in this research?

23.) Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview that you think is important for people to know?

### **Demographic Questions**

- What is your age?
- With what ethnicity do you identify?
- How do you describe your gender identification?

**WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY**

**INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

**Understanding the Needs of Street-Involved Youth in Southern Ontario: A Client-Centred Approach**

Research for the Master of Arts Thesis Degree Requirement of  
Samantha Styczynski (styc8440@mylaurier.ca),  
Under the Supervision of Dr. A. Christensen (achristensen@wlu.ca)

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

You are invited to participate in this research study. The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of street-involved youth in Southern Ontario and to gain a greater understanding of how these youth describe and go about meeting their needs. This study has received ethical approval from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board (#5092). The research will provide insight into how the youth themselves describe their living conditions and needs in order to help service providers serving this marginalized population understand their social worlds. The research will be guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do street-involved youth describe their lived experiences of street involvement?
- 2) How do street-involved youth define their needs?
- 3) How do street-involved youth go about meeting their needs?
- 4) How do street-involved youth perceive the benefits of social services in addition to what is currently missing in social service provision in their geographic location?

The researcher is conducting this study to meet the requirements for her Master of Arts in Criminology degree. The research will involve semi-structured interviewing of street youth in their teens and early 20s. The researcher is seeking to conduct approximately 10-20 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with interested participants. Any findings of the research published in academic and non-academic publications will be made available to interested stakeholders including social service providers and policy-makers in the cities where the research takes place.

**PROCEDURES**

Your participation in the research will involve your participation in a one-on-one interview. Interviews will be conducted in a time and place that is convenient for you (and works within the schedule of the researcher). Interviews will be conducted at the convenience of the participants

and the researcher in general during the regular workday (Monday-Friday between 9:00 AM and 5:00 PM). Each interview will last for approximately 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. You will be asked questions regarding your opinions and experiences of street involvement and how you define and go about meeting your needs as a street-involved young person. You may end the interview at any time. You are not required to answer every question and may decline to answer any questions if you wish to do so. You may also review your interview transcript via e-mail if you request to do so at the bottom of this form and provide a valid e-mail address. Upon participating in the research and reviewing your transcript, you will be given the opportunity to remove any of your data from the research prior to the findings being published in the researcher's Master's thesis.

## **POTENTIAL HARMS/RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are no physical risks to participation in this research. The risks involved in this research are restricted to emotional distress and discomfort: street-involved youth have been demonstrated to be at an increased risk of having experienced physical, emotional, mental and sexual abuse. Street involved youth are also at a greater risk of having a history of mental health issues, substance use issues, involvement in the sex trade, and involvement in illegal/criminal activity. Since the research involves asking participants to describe their lived experiences of street involvement, participation in the research may cause individuals distress in having to reflect with the researcher on psychologically and emotionally difficult past experiences.

Should you experience any emotional/mental distress/discomfort as a result of your participation in this research, please contact the Government of Ontario's Mental Health Helpline at 1-866-531-2600. This is a free and confidential telephone service funded by the Government of Ontario. Staff will provide you with information about mental health services available in your city/region and will offer you guidance and support in finding counselling and/or other effective ways to maintain your mental health.

## **BENEFITS**

This research is intended to give street youth a voice regarding their lived experiences and needs. Your participation in the research will contribute to published findings made available to social service providers, policy-makers, academic researchers, and the public in general to inform people of the needs and experiences of street youth, specifically in Southern Ontario.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your participation in the interview will be kept confidential. Interviews will be recorded via digital voice recorder. The digital recordings will be transcribed verbatim. Upon signing this confidentiality form, you will be assigned a participant number. Interview transcripts will be labelled only by your participant number (NOT your name) and all potentially identifying information will be removed. Afterward, all digital voice recordings will be destroyed. Throughout the research process, digital voice recordings and interview transcripts will be stored on an encrypted removable USB storage device, with only the researcher being able to access these files. Interview transcripts will be stored until December of 2018. At your request prior to

the publication of the Master's thesis, your data may be destroyed and removed from the research. This consent form will be stored in a locked drawer, separate from the interview transcripts and voice files, which only the researcher has access to. Consent forms will be destroyed at the end of the study. Your participation in the study will remain completely anonymous in any publications that stem from this research. You may be anonymously quoted in research publications should you agree to it by signing the specified line at the end of this form. No identifying information will be used in anonymous quotations.

## **COMPENSATION**

As a thank you for your participation in this study, you will receive a \$5.00 gift card to Tim Horton's. Should you decide to end your participation during the interview, your compensation will not be revoked.

## **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You will not be penalized for declining to participate in this research. You may request to cancel your interview at any time prior to the meeting. If you choose to end your participation during the interview, the recording device will be immediately shut off and your data will be promptly destroyed/removed from the research. You may also decline to answer any questions throughout the interview without penalty. You may choose to withdraw from participation in the study at any point prior to the publication of the researcher's Master's thesis. You will be asked to sign 2 copies of this consent form, one for your own records and one for the researcher's records.

## **FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION**

Should you request it during your interview and provide a valid e-mail address, you may review your transcript via e-mail. Interview transcripts will be available within 3 months of the interview date. The research findings will be used in the researcher's Master's thesis and may be submitted to academic and non-academic relevant publications. Any publicly available publications containing the findings of this study will be forwarded to the research participants who provide valid e-mail addresses.

## **QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the researcher at [styc8440@mylaurier.ca](mailto:styc8440@mylaurier.ca)

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. R. Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University Research (519) 884-1970 ext. 4994, [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca)



## CONSENT

### YOUTH AGED 16 AND OLDER

I, (*please print your name*) \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study in accordance with the above stated terms and conditions.

I agree to being recorded via digital voice recorder during my interview:

\_\_\_\_\_ YES                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I understand that I may cancel my interview at any time prior to the interview. I also understand that I may end my participation at any time during the interview and have my data permanently destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_ YES                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I would like to receive a copy of my transcript to review following my participation in the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ YES                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I would like to receive information regarding publicly available publications on the findings of the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ YES                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO

*If you answered "yes" to one of the above 2 questions, please indicate a **valid e-mail address** to which you would like the transcript and publication information to be sent:*

\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the researcher directly quoting my interview transcript anonymously in the researcher's Master's thesis and any other publications on the findings of this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ YES                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## YOUTH UNDER THE AGE OF 16 – LEGAL GUARDIANS

I, (legal guardians – please print your full name) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ have read and understand the above information. I agree to allow (please  
print the full name of the youth who will be participating) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study in accordance with the above  
stated terms and conditions.

I agree to allow the participant to be recorded via digital voice recorder during the interview:  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I understand that the participant may cancel their interview at any time prior to the interview. I  
also understand that the participant may end their participation at any time during the interview  
and have their data permanently destroyed.  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I agree to the researcher directly quoting the participant's interview transcript anonymously in  
the researcher's Master's thesis and any other publications on the findings of this study.  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

LEGAL GUARDIAN'S SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## YOUTH UNDER THE AGE OF 16

I would like to receive a copy of my transcript to review following my participation in the  
interview.  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I would like to receive information regarding publicly available publications on the findings of  
the study.  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

*If you answered "yes" to one of the above 2 questions, please indicate a **valid e-mail  
address** to which you would like the transcript and publication information to be sent:*

\_\_\_\_\_

*LEGAL GUARDIANS: Please note that the interview transcript will be the property of the  
participant and it will be at the participant's discretion whether or not the transcript is shared  
with you.*