

# ***Changing Patterns for Street Involved Youth***

A project of:



The Yonge Street Mission



World Vision Canada

Submitted by:



Public Interest  
340 Harbord Street, Toronto, Ontario, M6G 1H4  
Tel: 416 531-5192 Fax : 416 531-7210  
E-mail: [info@publicinterest.ca](mailto:info@publicinterest.ca)

All rights reserved  
Yonge Street Mission  
306 Gerrard Street East  
Toronto, ON M5A 2G7  
Phone: (416) 929-9614  
Fax: (416) 929-7204  
Toll Free: 1-800-416-5111  
Email: [info@ysm.ca](mailto:info@ysm.ca)

December 2009

# Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i> .....	1
Patterns of Homelessness .....	2
Settings, Safety and Stability .....	3
Income .....	4
Youth Strategies.....	4
Social Networks .....	5
Services and Supports .....	6
Education .....	7
Health.....	8
Mental Health .....	8
Supports .....	9
Conclusions.....	10
<i>Background and Methodology</i> .....	12
Survey Demographics.....	14
<i>Findings</i> .....	16
Causes of Homelessness .....	16
On Ramps and Off Ramps.....	18
Social Networks .....	22
Settings, Safety and Stability .....	25
Children .....	27
Income .....	27
Education .....	30
Health.....	31
Mental Health .....	33
Youth strategies for addressing homelessness .....	34
Service use .....	35
Support.....	39
Service use .....	39
Program Access.....	41
Service Location and Youth Mobility .....	43
<i>Recommendations</i> .....	45
<i>Appendix A: Focus Group Report</i> .....	47
<i>Appendix B: Public Officials Key Informant Interviews</i> .....	58
<i>Appendix C: Service Provider Key Informant Interviews</i> .....	61
<i>Appendix D: Demographics Outline</i> .....	70



## ***Executive Summary***

To identify the changing needs of street-involved youth in Toronto, The Yonge Street Mission (YSM) conducted interviews with agencies serving youth and hundreds of street involved youth from all backgrounds, in all parts of the city. The study confirmed some expectations about the changing circumstances of youth, but also produced some surprising results, and provided solid evidence to support changes in policy and programs designed to support street involved youth.

## ***Patterns of Homelessness***

### **Homelessness is imposed on youth**

Youth have, for the most part, become homeless for reasons beyond their control. Whether they were kicked out of their homes, fleeing abuse or released from foster care, just under half of the youth interviewed simply had no other options available. Conversely, less than 1/3 of the youth interviewed identified being actively involved in activities, such as drug use, criminal activity or a decision to leave home, as the causes of their homelessness. Youth are predominately driven to the street, not drawn there.

### **There are distinct windows of opportunity for transitioning from homelessness**

Caught in what is generally an involuntary circumstance, many youth move quickly to leave the street. The data shows that almost one in five youth have been on the street less than 3 months and that a significant number of youth leave the street in that time frame, making this a critical period for re-housing and a key opportunity to intervene to support youth.

Conversely, if they have stayed on the street for two years, youth leave the street much more slowly, making the first two years almost a race against the clock for supporting the transition from homelessness.

The data also indicates that youth who have been on the street for eight years tend to leave infrequently. Homeless youth in focus groups corroborate this finding, noting that after eight years, the street is likely "all you know".

### **Immigrant youth have distinct needs**

Street involved youth who are recent immigrants display noticeably different patterns of homelessness. Generally, this group stays on the street for shorter periods and transitions to housing more rapidly. This suggests that interventions for immigrant youth should be focused on their specific needs and distinguished from the general strategies for addressing homelessness.

### **Age of arrival on the street has an impact**

More youth arrive on the street at the age of 16 than at any other age (21%). In focus groups youth noted that 16 is the legal age for homelessness, and the crises that have been building for some time push youth onto the street

when that option becomes legally available. The sharp upswing in homelessness at the first legal age suggests that early prevention strategies aimed at 12-15 year olds would be beneficial.

One in four youth said that they had left home before the legal age. Youth who became homeless before the age of 15 exhibit distinct characteristics. Sixty-three percent of youth who arrived on the street before the age of 15 stayed there for over 7 years, compared with 18% of the sample overall. Conversely, 42.1% of the youth who arrived on the street after age 20 had been on the street less than 6 months, compared with 21% of the overall sample. Clearly, being on the street at a very young age has an adverse impact on opportunities to transition from homelessness. Whereas homelessness that occurs later in life tends to be more episodic. Only 22.7% of the youth interviewed in Toronto were from the Greater Toronto Area, 14.6% were from other parts of Ontario and almost a third were from other provinces in Canada. To be successful, intervention strategies would have to be national in scope.

### ***Settings, Safety and Stability***

Youth showed a strong tendency to move frequently. Many divided their time between different areas. Less than half of all youth slept in the location where they tend to hang out, and roughly 1 in 4 (24.0%) never sleep in the neighbourhood they hang out in.

Many also moved their sleeping locations frequently. Only half of all youth (51%) slept in the same neighbourhood for over a month and 14.7% moved from one neighbourhood to another within a week. Mobility tended to be higher among women and Aboriginal youth and lower among youth sleeping in shelters and in temporary housing. With high levels of mobility, youth face considerable challenges maintaining stability in their day-to-day lives.

Surveys indicated that youth were increasingly selecting neighbourhoods in the west downtown to hang out and seek service, and that youth in inner suburbs required more service but were not always comfortable seeking that service downtown, where many service facilities are located.

Youth also face challenges around the establishment of safety and comfort in their lives. About 30% of those who stayed in shelters did so despite the fact that they did not feel safe there. This is noticeably below the 75% of rough sleepers and 47% of couch surfers who felt unsafe in their settings but nonetheless gives cause for concern. Women were particularly prone to feeling unsafe while couch surfing. 63.8% of women who couch surf felt unsafe or uncomfortable in that setting and consequently had a tendency to move more frequently.

Housing and safety have a significant impact on the lives of homeless youth. Couch surfers and rough sleepers are less likely to be in school than other homeless youth. Moreover, youth who saw their housing as “safe,” regardless of the setting, were twice as likely to be in school as youth who saw their current situation as unsafe (14% vs. 28%). Youth who felt safe in their current housing situation (regardless of the type) were also more likely to be employed than youth who did not feel safe (26.7% vs. 12.5%).

Youth were also more likely to report mental health issues if they were sleeping on the street (50%) or couch-surfing (43.3%) than if they were in shelters (35.8%). 52.7% of youth who felt unsafe in their housing reported mental health issues, whereas 36.3% of youth who felt safe reported mental health issues.

The instability of housing clearly takes a toll on the opportunities and wellbeing of homeless youth.

## ***Income***

Youth indicated considerable challenges with income. Many youth are reliant on a Personal Needs Allowance well below a subsistence level and many find Ontario Works benefits and ODSP benefits difficult to obtain and easily disrupted, requiring lengthy efforts to regain benefits. 57% of youth indicated that they could not obtain enough money to meet even their most basic needs. Youth in focus groups indicated that the vast majority of homeless youth participate in the informal economy to supplement their incomes, often in ways that compromise their safety and wellbeing.

## ***Youth Strategies***

Survey and focus group participants showed a strong tendency to focus on short-term strategies for addressing their needs and a marked disinclination to think in long-term strategic terms. Youth overwhelmingly selected the most visible, short-term options when making choices about their immediate future and took few, if any, opportunities to explore long-term planning opportunities.

Youth often dismissed long-term planning as ill-suited to their current circumstances. As one youth pointed out, it’s “hard to think long term when you haven’t eaten”. Short-term strategies were seen as more likely to provide immediate benefits and reflected the pressing nature of their immediate needs. Responses by youth in both the survey and the focus

group also reflected choices that were shaped by social influence much more than by strategic assessments or long-term implications. Youth tend to need ongoing support in developing viable long-term strategies for managing their circumstances.

## ***Social Networks***

### **Social networks tend to be opportunity driven**

The data shows social networks have a significant influence on the decision-making of youth. Where youth go, what they do and when they do it is heavily influenced by their social group. But these influential social networks are in many cases not built around intentional connections but are opportunity driven instead.

Overwhelmingly, social networks among street involved youth are composed of the people they met since becoming homeless. 72% of youth met their current networks through a shelter, on the street, or at a service for homeless youth. These are the communities they found themselves in, as opposed to ones they developed previously. Interviews with youth reinforce the apparent circumstantial nature of these relationships. Only 14.2% of the youth interviewed claimed to have selected their friends because they liked them. The majority of youth (64.7%) adopted their current social networks out of a sense of shared circumstances or needs, or simply because they lacked options.

The tendency to choose social networks based on pragmatic considerations also appears to increase the longer youth are on the street. Youth who chose their friends because they liked them had spent, on average, only about two years on the street, while youth who chose their friends because there was no one else averaged three years. Youth who chose their friends because of a connection relating to drugs had spent, on average, almost seven years on the street.

### **Life on the street affects self-perception and social choices**

Spending longer on the street was also a strong predictor of affiliation with street involved cultures. Youth who self identified as travelers, squeegeers, drug users or sex workers had spent an average of 5 years on the street. Youth who saw themselves as outside street culture averaged less than 3½ years on the street.

Spending more time on the street appears to reinforce tendencies among youth to make choices that reflect short-term pragmatic considerations, deepen attachment to street culture and diminish tendencies to make choices based on personal affinity.

## ***Services and Supports***

Youth rely heavily on the services offered by front line agencies. 63.4% of the youth surveyed use agency services regularly and over half use multiple services. 97.6% of youth who use services find them helpful and 70% find they helped a lot.

Older youth and youth who have been on the street for a longer time are more likely to be regular service users than youth who have been on the street for shorter periods of time. Immigrants were less frequent users of services as well. This suggests that the service infrastructure, while effectively accessed by youth who are in serious need on the streets, may be less well accessed by vulnerable youth who are less familiar with the system. In light of this, it is not surprising that youth often indicated a need for more outreach efforts by youth-serving organizations.

### **Service Location**

Transportation does not appear to be an insurmountable barrier for homeless youth. Just under half of youth indicated transportation was ever a problem for them. For those youth, the most common transportation problems involved access to work (14.9%) and miscellaneous trips (17.3%). Only 3.8% had trouble getting transportation to school, 7.2% had trouble getting transportation to services, and only 6.7% had trouble getting transportation to a shelter. Youth were consistent in describing their willingness to travel considerable distances over the course of a day if there was a compelling reason to get somewhere.

Location appears to be low on the list of barriers preventing youth from accessing services, with only 4.2% of youth citing location as a barrier to accessing services. This is reinforced by the low number of youth (17.8%) who indicated that services are not located where they need them. Youth in the farthest north-west areas of the city were more likely to feel isolated but also were hesitant to ask for significant service improvements, largely because they felt it was unlikely that the request would be granted.

The majority of youth interviewed access downtown services (68%). Youth in the outer areas of the city are noticeably less likely to use downtown services

more than half of youth from the east and west ends of the city identifying no use of downtown services. This disconnection from downtown services appears to have more to do with a lack of comfort or awareness than physical accessibility. Almost seventy percent said they have no desire to use the services or no awareness of them and only 8.5% cited transportation as a barrier.

## **Service Preferences**

Youth tended to select services they wanted to use on the basis of psycho-social criteria rather than practical criteria such as the convenience of the location. Only 7.9% of youth said they used a service because it was conveniently located. Instead, youth focused on services that were respectful and accommodating and were willing to travel, sometimes in harsh conditions and sometimes significant distances, to use those services. Services that were seen as judgmental or dismissive were not appealing and even ready access to them did not prompt youth to use them.

When asked how to improve services youth prioritized the aspects that provide comfortable and respectful settings, with 41.3% seeking more engaged, attentive and supportive staff. These psycho-social supports proved far more important to youth than practical accommodations such as better hours, improved services or even looser rules, which together were named by only 28.8% of youth. Women and immigrants were more likely to seek psycho-social improvements, while Canadian born males were more likely to seek practical accommodations.

Youth also followed social opportunities, seeking to be with friends and in locations where there was positive social interaction. They fled “drama”, conflict, people in crisis, and settings that were chaotic, dirty or infested. They consistently sought settings where staff were sympathetic, supportive and engaged. A secure and safe environment appealed almost universally to youth.

## **Education**

Almost one in four of the youth interviewed were currently in school. Another 15.6% had completed their high school education. That leaves a drop-out rate among homeless youth of 59.6%. Of those, the majority left because they were prevented from continuing either because of significant disruptions in their lives, or because they were thrown out of school, lacked funds, or their health or mental health prevented attendance. Only 13.4% of youth report having chosen to leave school.

People who began to live on the street before they were 16 were less likely to be in school than other youth (4.4% as opposed to 38.3%). Only 9% of youth who were on the street before 16 graduated from high school, about half the normal rate of graduation. Most youth found enrolling in school fairly accessible, though red tape sometimes made it challenging. They did, however, experience difficulty staying in school given the disruptive nature of their lives and the costs of supplies and transportation.

## ***Health***

31.9% of the youth surveyed described themselves as having health problems, and 89.4% had accessed health care in the last 12 months for a wide variety of reasons including check-ups, accidents, reproductive health and dental services. 84.5% said they were able to get the health care they needed, including prescription medications.

Generally, youth sought health care in comparatively casual settings. 65.6% got their health care from Community Health Centres (CHCs), drop-ins or through the welfare office. Only 15.6% maintained relationships with a GP and only 9.1% sought care through hospitals. Overwhelmingly, youth who identified their sources of health care preferred to get their health care from providers in the downtown core (71%). Youth in focus groups characterized these preferences as reflecting the desire of street involved youth to obtain care in settings that were accommodating and sympathetic to their circumstances, and to avoid service settings that seemed judgmental, dismissive or overly bureaucratic.

## ***Mental Health***

41.5% identified themselves as having anxiety, depression or other mental health issues. Youth in most focus groups believed this statistic under-reported the extent of mental health issues among street involved youth which they saw as affecting the majority of homeless youth.

These mental health issues appear to increase with time on the street. Almost 70% of the youth who had been on the street for over 4 years identified mental health issues, compared with 41.5% overall.

Despite the prevalence of mental health issues among homeless youth, 55.8% said they could not access the services they needed and only 38.4%

said they did not have difficulty accessing supports.

Women identified mental health issues about twice as often as men (60% vs. 30.2%), but were also more likely to get treatment for their mental health issues.

Youth indicated that there were some mental health services available, but those services were not seen as accessible. Most mental health services were seen as inhospitable and unresponsive to youth needs and there were fears that using those facilities could result in social stigma and long term labeling.

Though primary health care providers have created settings appropriate to street-involved youth that support utilization, mental health services do not appear to have had as much success creating settings where youth don't feel stigmatized or labeled, which has resulted in most youth facing mental health challenges receiving no treatment for them.

## ***Supports***

The role of sympathetic staff in youth-serving organizations is further reinforced by data on the supports youth choose to turn to for help. When asked who they turn to for help with the challenges they face, youth were significantly more likely to name agencies or caseworkers (39.1% combined), as opposed to friends or family (27.5% combined). Though 23.9% of youth continued to believe there is no one to turn to, almost as many believed agencies can provide the help they need (22.3%).

The choice of who to turn to for support appears to have important pragmatic components. Many respondents' choices are based most often on their belief that the person in question can help (43.9%). Only 19.6% made the choice based on trust. However, 31% of youth who said they seek support from someone they trust chose case workers as that support, while 20.7% chose agencies and 17.2% chose friends.

The capacity of agencies and caring staff to play a role of trust in the lives of homeless youth is clearly very significant. Interestingly, youth chose friends as a support primarily because they expected friends were inclined to be supportive (32.3%) or because they couldn't think of anyone else (18.2%), as opposed to being chosen because they can be trusted (17.2%).

Regular use of a particular agency or service made respondents somewhat more likely to rely on agencies (23.8% vs. 17.1%) and somewhat less likely to rely on no one (19.2% vs. 27.1%).

## **Conclusions**

Homeless and street involved youth are a population that has, predominantly, been forced into circumstances they find unsafe and insecure. Their ability to meet even basic needs is badly compromised and their circumstances are often chaotic and unstable. They tend to make decisions based on short-term, pragmatic considerations, eschewing long-term planning for the most part and forming social bonds with other youth based on opportunity as much as affinity. These patterns reinforce behaviors that can keep young people on the street for longer periods.

Youth appear to respond to opportunities to make the transition to housing in time sensitive ways and are most likely to make that transition in the first two years of homelessness. The longer youth are living on the street the more they see their identity defined by street culture and the more their social choices appear to be driven by pragmatic considerations. Strategies to prevent homelessness and outreach to newly homeless youth take on increasing urgency in the context of this data, especially given the tendency of the most recently street-involved youth to be less aware of services and supports than average.

Most youth value and benefit from services and supports provided to them. They seek settings that are more stable, accommodating and supportive when accessing services. They avoid services where they feel stigmatized or unwelcome and will travel considerable distances to spend time in places where staff are engaged and responsive. Staff who are able to reach youth on that basis are among the most important supports in their lives, with youth often identifying those staff as more trusted than their friends.

These characteristics provide some clear guidelines in developing and enhancing services for street involved youth, and underscore the need, in particular to address the significant mental health issues facing youth with services appropriate to their needs.

***Changing Patterns  
for Street Involved Youth***

## ***Background and Methodology***

Over the past two decades many changes have come to Toronto's inner city. New development throughout the downtown, demographic changes in the urban centre, and civic projects such as Yonge-Dundas Square have altered the face of Toronto's downtown and have affected the people who live there. Homeless and street-involved youth are among those people. The impact of these changes are hard to predict but can be profound.

Over the same period there have been changes in the services available to street involved youth in Toronto. Changing governments and shifting priorities have affected a variety of services including housing programs, youth programs, drop-ins and health services. These changes have affected youth too. Cultures also change over time. The youth of 1960 were not the youth of 1980, and the youth of 1980 are not the youth of today. These cultural changes affect the choices people make about the way they live their lives.

The Yonge Street Mission has always worked to adjust its services and programs to keep pace with changing times. As part of their effort to ensure that they continue to address the most pressing issues facing youth and reach those facing the greatest challenges, YSM has carried out a detailed study exploring the many changes affecting youth.

YSM sought guidance and input from professionals and colleagues in the youth services field from all parts of the city and most importantly has engaged youth directly in this process in order to understand the changing issues they face today, and the way they address them. Only by working directly with youth themselves could YSM accurately gauge the changing patterns of street life and revise and refocus services and strategies to reflect these changing circumstances.

YSM engaged Public Interest, an independent consultant, to conduct the research and produce this report. Over the course of the project dozens of service providers and hundreds of youth in all parts of the city were interviewed in order to learn about the changing needs of youth from all perspectives and from all parts of the urban geography. Public Interest staff conducted 20 interviews with front-line and management staff at agencies throughout Toronto with programming geared specifically to street-involved and homeless youth. In these interviews, respondents were asked about the youth populations accessing their services most frequently

and to identify groups they were aware of that were not accessing services. Respondents were asked both to characterize the different youth populations and to estimate the size of those populations to the best of their ability. There was a relatively high rate of consistency in the estimates.

This data was used to create a basic demographic segmentation of the street-involved and homeless youth population and served as a guide to set demographic targets for sampling the population by gender and ethnicity. In addition, the sample was selected to ensure that youth were interviewed in areas that were recognized as common challenges, including youth in school, youth facing mental health issues, underage youth, and those involved in gangs and rough sleeping. Targets were also set to ensure geographical representation. The list of target categories is attached in *Appendix D: Demographics Outline*.

To encourage survey participants to feel comfortable sharing potentially sensitive information, Public Interest recruited peer interviewers from the street-involved youth population. Peer interviewers were selected based on recommendations from staff working with homeless youth and were interviewed by Public Interest staff before being hired. Peer interviewers were recruited to reflect the circumstances and key attributes of a range of interview targets. The interviewers participated in a 2 hour training program that familiarized them with the interview methodology. Each peer interviewer was linked with both a staff member from the agency as well as a staff member from the Public Interest team to support them in the process.

Interview subjects were recruited through settings likely to be attractive to those subjects. Service providers with a relatively high proportion of clients in a particular demographic were used as venues to interview youth from those target groups. Peer interviewers were also directed to recruit using social networks available to them, including networks from outside the service user population.

Public Interest staff attended the interviews to ensure that the interviews reflected the specific targeted demographic and that the appropriate number of interviews required to meet the segmentation were completed. Public Interest also provided support and validated the information gathered. For each interview, the Public Interest staff member was introduced to the survey participant and then left the interview to take place without staff present. This allowed for methodological rigour without undermining the peer-based nature of the interview. Where agencies were used as venues, agency staff were also asked to confirm the demographics of interview subjects.

Interview subjects were provided with honoraria, distributed by either agency staff or Public Interest staff. The peer interviewers were also provided with honoraria upon the completion of each survey. After each interview was completed, the Public Interest staff accompanying the peer interviewer would conduct a detailed review of the notes with the interviewer to ensure completion and accuracy, and to obtain clarifications where required. Peer interviewers also received feedback on their interview techniques to ensure ongoing skills development.

Interviews were conducted with 208 subjects in the summer and fall of 2008, with 78 occurring during the summer months. This distribution of interviews enabled Public Interest staff to avoid skews caused by the influence of seasonal factors on the demographics and behaviours of youth.

The information gathered was analyzed using SPSS statistical software and examined the relative frequency of responses and cross-tabulating correlations between responses. Conclusions were analyzed in light of previous interviews with service providers and agency staff. Interim results were presented to YSM staff for feedback. The results of these discussions led to the selection of focus group participants and the design of the focus group guide.

Focus groups of homeless youth were presented with the data and asked to offer their perspectives on the analysis (for detailed descriptions of the focus group methodology please see *Appendix A: Focus Group Report*). The findings in this report reflect the analysis guided by the youth in these focus groups.

## ***Survey Demographics***

208 youth were interviewed in settings located throughout the City of Toronto. Considerable effort was taken to ensure that the sample represented a balanced cross section of the youth currently experiencing homelessness.

Of the youth interviewed 62% identified themselves as male, 34% identified themselves as female, and 4% identified themselves as transgendered.

Only 2.4% identified as being under the age of 16. Despite the strict confidentiality assurances, reported age is likely affected by laws that dictate that a minor must have a legal guardian and will be taken into custody if they attempt to access services. It was generally understood by the peer interviewers that some youth interviewed were under the age of 16 but would not identify themselves as such.

3.4% identified as being 16 years old and 27.1% identified as being 17 to 19. The largest group was between the ages of 20 and 22, at 35.3%. The third largest was between the ages of 23 and 24, at 24.2%. There were only 7.7% that identified as 25 or older.

Almost 14% identified their ethno-cultural background as Aboriginal, 26.9% identified as black, 3.4% identified as Asian (including South Asian), 22.1% identified themselves as having European heritage, 1% were Latino. 32.8% self-identified as not being from one of these ethnicities (close examination showed to be more deeply rooted in a discomfort with the labels than an issue of their identity).

6.1% were born in Africa, 11.1% were born in the Caribbean, 2.5% were born in Asia, 5.6% were born in Europe, 1.5% were born in South America. 22.7% were born in the GTA. Over 14% were born in Ontario outside the GTA, 32.3% were born in Canada outside Ontario, and 3% identified as having been born elsewhere.

30.1% of the youth surveyed hang out in the downtown core, 25% hang out in west downtown. Of the youth surveyed, 35.8% hang out in the inner suburbs, with 15.9% in the west, 16.5% in the east end and 3.4% in the north end of the city. The remaining 9.1% have no single habitual place to hang out.

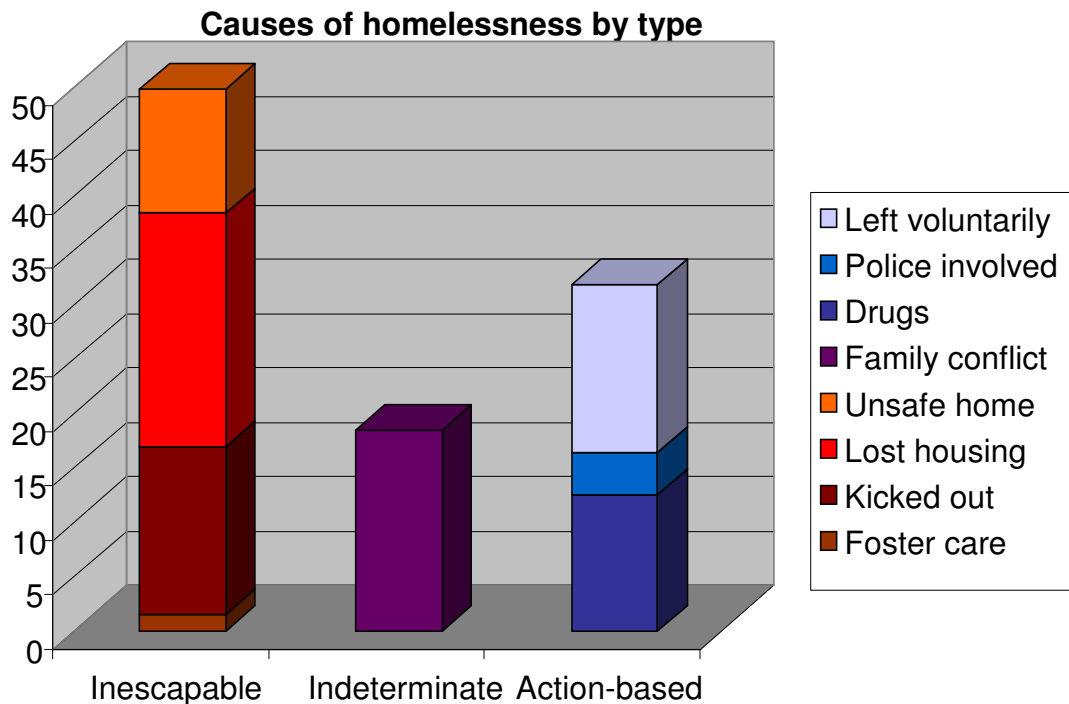
## Findings

Homeless and street-involved youth who described their situations paint a picture of a life that is precarious and inhospitable, but one that they have generally learned to navigate by primarily focusing on day-to-day survival.

### ***Causes of Homelessness***

Youth surveyed have, for the most part, become homeless for reasons beyond their control and that they believed were beyond their capacity to resolve. Youth described the reason they first became street involved. The descriptions fit eight general patterns.

Among the most striking data is the proportion of youth who described themselves as having no option but homelessness. Youth who are emerging from foster care, who were kicked out, who lost their housing or who were fleeing unsafe homes, none of which they can resolve themselves, make up almost exactly half of the population (49.8%).



Actions involving drugs, crime and self-selected departure caused homelessness for only 31.8%. Family conflict, which may or may not have been addressable by the youth, makes up the remaining 18.4%.

These statistics give the impression of a homeless youth that are far more often driven to the street than drawn there.

<b>Causes of Homelessness</b>	
Released from foster care	1.5%
Kicked out	15.4%
Lost housing	21.4%
Left an unsafe home	11.4%
Family conflict	18.4%
Drugs	12.4%
Police involved	4.0%
Left voluntarily	15.4%

#### **REASONS FOR FIRST BECOMING HOMELESS**

- "Foster care" - described youth who were released from the foster care system without a home to go to.
- "Kicked out" - described those youth who were ordered to leave by their parents or guardians.
- "Lost housing" - describes youth who lost their homes due to economic or social crises and had no other access to housing
- "Unsafe home" - described youth who faced violent or abusive situations.
- "Family conflict" - described youth reporting "conflict", but who chose not to elaborate. This no doubt results in underreporting of abusive situations but without further data, conflict cannot be assumed to be irresolvable.
- "Drugs" - describes youth who identified drugs as the sole or primary cause of homelessness. This underreports the extent to which drugs were involved with other factors.
- "Police Involved" - describes youth who became homeless after arrest or incarceration removed them from their homes and deprived them of the option of returning.
- "Left Voluntarily" - describes those youth who indicated that homelessness was a choice they made to abandon the family home outside of an immediate crisis.

## **"On Ramps" and "Off Ramps"**

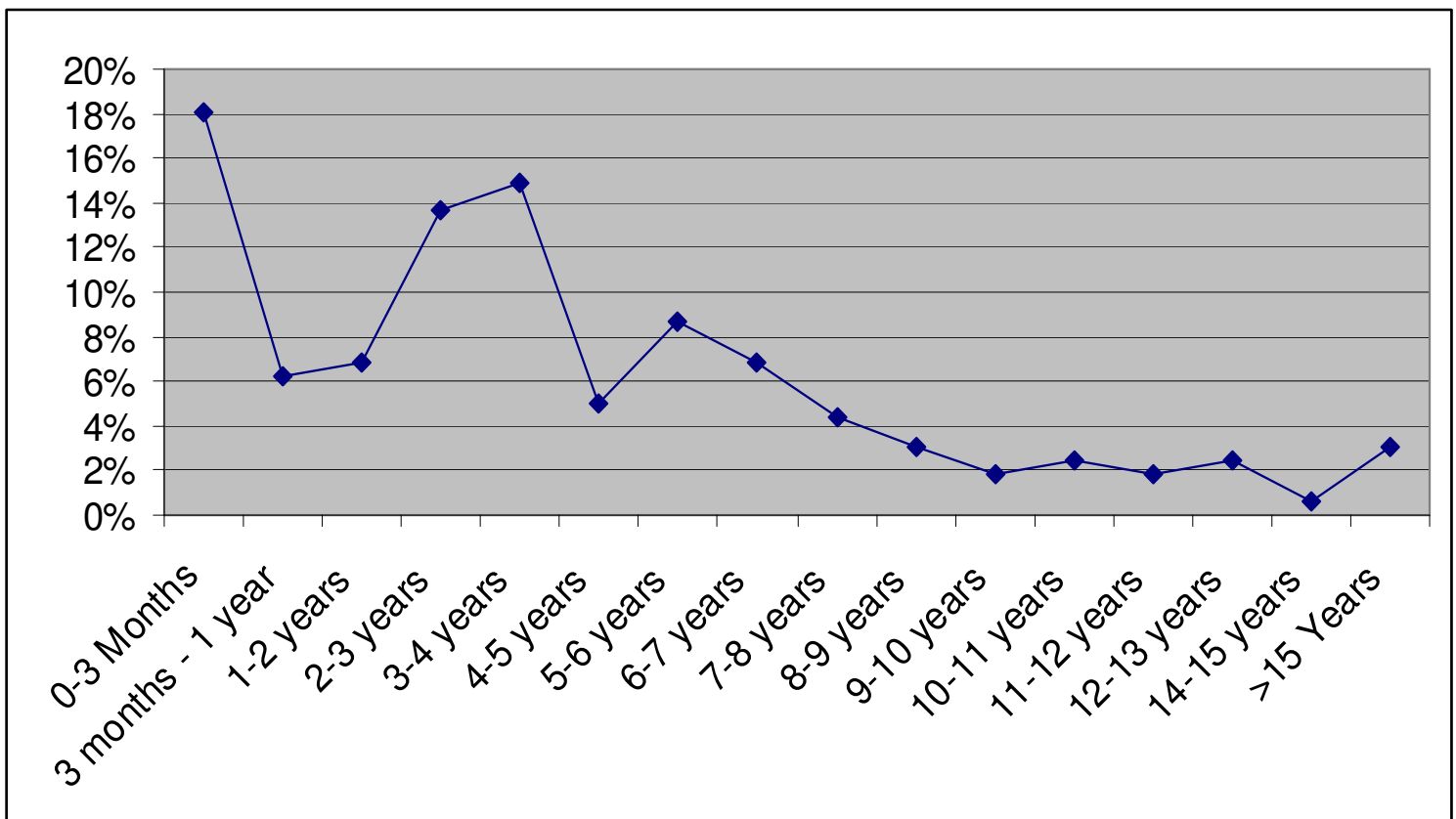
There are distinct patterns in the ways in which youth become homeless and street-involved and particular patterns to their leaving the street.

### a) Time on the Street

Youth do not appear to leave the street at random intervals but instead tend toward particular significant windows for making major changes in their lives.

One significant window for change is during the first three months of homelessness. Survey results showed far more youth who have been on the street for less than 3 months (18%) than youth who had been there for 3-6 months (3.7%), or, in fact, for any other period. This suggests that many youth leave the street during the first three months of homelessness. That makes the first 90 days of homelessness a significant focal point for potential intervention.

***Time since youth interviewed first became homeless***



Service providers that were interviewed were aware of a similar pattern during the summer months as youth take advantage of the warm weather to exercise some freedom, but find life on the street more daunting than anticipated. However, survey data shows this pattern applied equally to youth interviewed in the late fall, indicating that the three month pattern is not strictly seasonal, but a function of the wearing nature of life on the street. Youth in the focus groups concurred with this analysis. The three month mark is a significant test of “who can cut it” according to most of the youth interviewed.

Another watershed moment in the lives of homeless youth occurs at the end of 2 years. While the number of youth who have been homeless for 1-2 years is steady at about 6%, the number of youth who have been homeless 3 or 4 years is more than double that figure. This suggests that they are less inclined to move off the street after having “lasted” 2 years. This data may also suggest that more youth are returning to the street in this time frame, after having temporarily left. This makes the end of the second year on the street another key window for intervention, since three-year veterans of the street appear to be suddenly less inclined to leave.

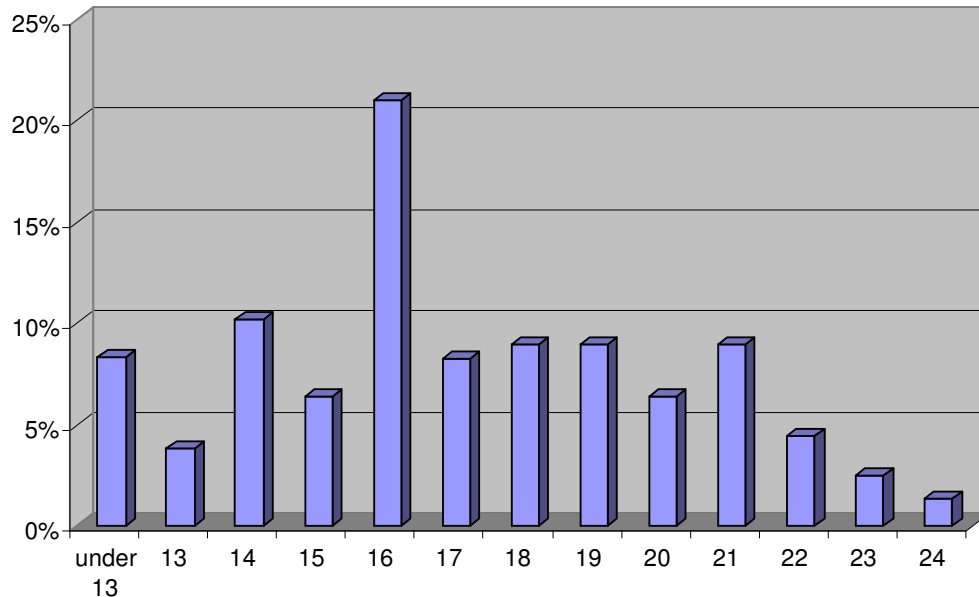
Some groups are less likely than others to stay on the street. Immigrants surveyed were significantly less likely to spend a long time on the street. Only 42.1% of street involved immigrants have been on the street more than two years, compared to 62.9% of non-immigrants. This suggests that immigrant homeless youth may need services tailored to their unique, short-term needs.

Women were slightly less likely to spend a long time on the street, spending an average of 3½ years on the street while men averaged slightly over 4 years. Conversely, transgendered people spent about 5 years on the street on average. This also indicates the need for specialized efforts to serve transgendered people.

### b) Arriving on the street

It is significantly more common for youth to first become homeless at 16 than at any other age. While between 5% and 10% of the sample arrived on the street at most ages, over 21% of youth interviewed arrived on the street at age 16.

**Age at which youth first became homeless**



While some service providers suggested that youth would distort these numbers to avoid admitting to illegal homelessness (16 being the first legal age to leave home) in fact, almost  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the sample did admit to leaving home before 16. In focus groups, homeless youth were not surprised by the findings. They noted that 16 was the first age of legal homelessness so parents would be more likely to kick youth out and youth would be more likely to go when there was no legal obstacle. Youth also emphasized their view that 16 was an age where youth begin to “act out” and resist authority more directly, leading to the conflicts that result in homelessness.

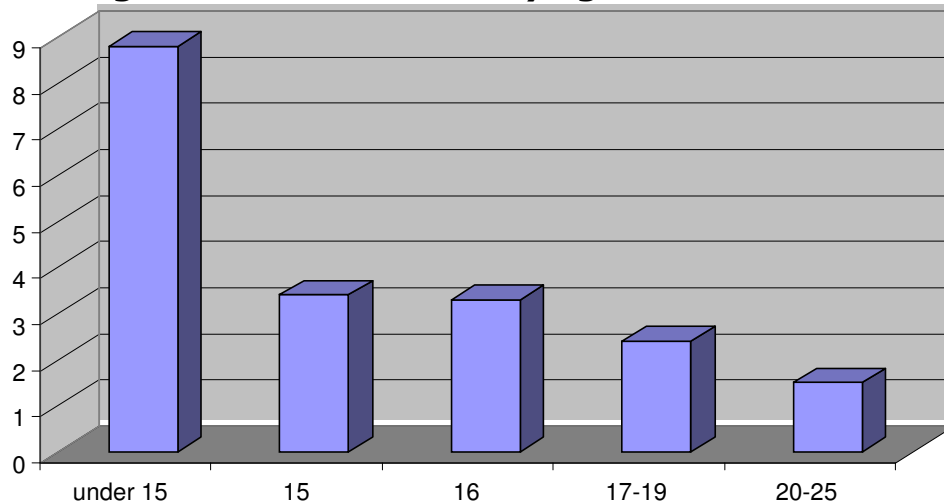
The age at which youth first become homeless has implications for their future. Youth who arrived on the street at an early age tend to spend longer on the street than youth who arrived later in life. 62.9% of youth who arrived on the street before the age of 15 had been there for over 7 years, compared with 18% of the overall sample. On the other hand, 42.1% of the youth who arrived on the street after age 20 had been on the street less than 6 months, compared with 21% of the overall sample. This pattern is found in all age groups in the sample. Youth who began street life younger consistently average a longer time on the street.

**Time on the street vs. age when first homeless**

Time on the Street	under 15	15	16	17-19	20-25	Total
0-3 months	2.9%	30.0%	12.1%	12.2%	31.6%	15.9%
3-6 months	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	7.3%	10.5%	5.1%
6-12 months	0.0%	0.0%	6.1%	4.9%	2.6%	3.2%
1-2 years	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	12.2%	13.2%	7.0%
2-3 years	2.9%	20.0%	45.5%	34.1%	36.8%	29.3%
4-6 years	31.4%	40.0%	15.2%	26.8%	5.3%	21.0%
Over 7 years	62.9%	10.0%	15.2%	2.4%	0.0%	18.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Homeless youth in focus groups recognized similar patterns for their experience, noting that for those who arrive on the street at a young age, “that’s all they know”. They also suggested that those who arrive at an older age feel a greater need to get off the street and a sense of failure if they cannot do so.

**Average time on the street by age when first homeless**



These patterns suggest a need for very early intervention and a strong focus on prevention, especially among youth 13-16 years old in schools and other settings.

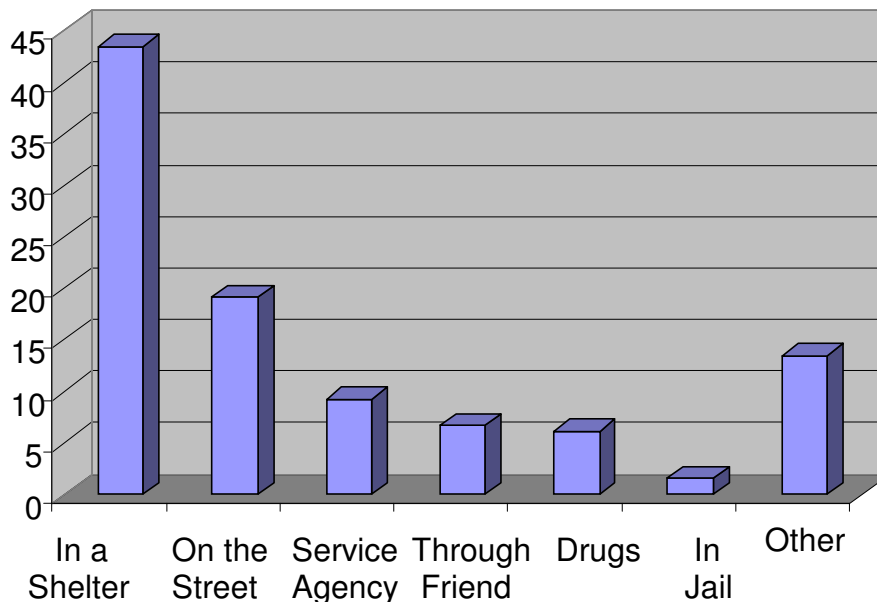
## ***Social Networks***

Service providers noted in interviews that youth tend to participate in social networks that are themselves often heavily connected to street life.

Survey data shows these networks were present, but that they were a consequence of life on the street and that youth became more profoundly street involved and decreasingly focused on a truly social connection over time.

72% of youth met their current networks on the street or through services and shelters serving homeless youth. Involvement in these networks was the result of being homeless and reflects networks that were found through circumstance and necessity as much as they were intentional.

### ***How youth met current contacts***

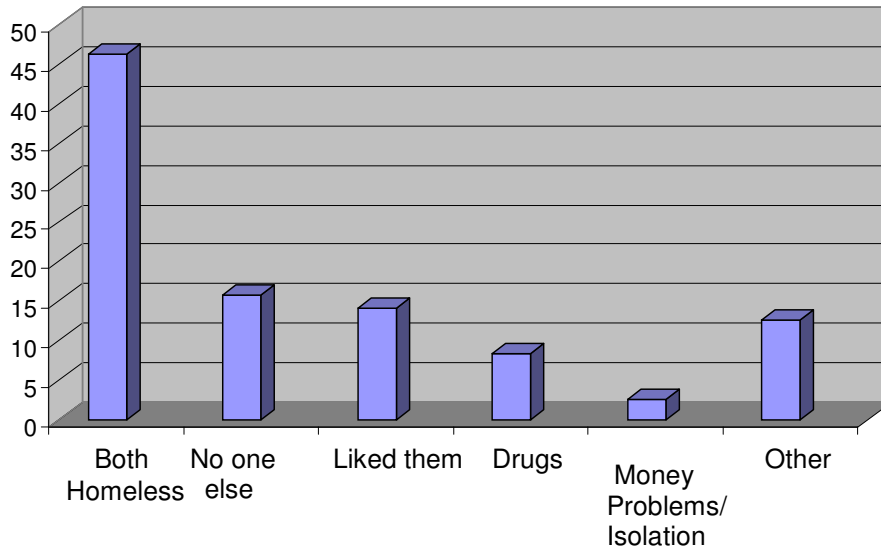


Furthermore, only 14.2% of youth claimed to have established the relationships they have because they liked the people in question. Most relationships are established out of necessity and the shared needs that come from the challenges imposed by homelessness.

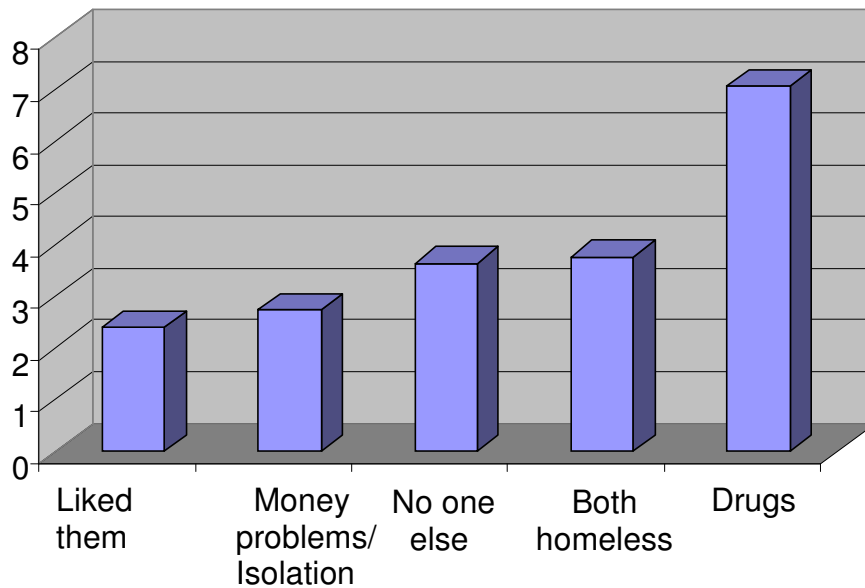
The tendency of youth to choose their “friends” out of necessity rather than attraction also appeared to rise with experience on the street. Youth give increasingly pragmatic reasons for choosing friends the more time they have spent on the street. Youth in focus groups recognized this tendency, but described it as a gradual development, in which social networks may involve

very different levels of loyalty and commitment. As youth put it "you have 'friends' and you have 'FRIENDS'".

**Reasons for connecting to other youth**



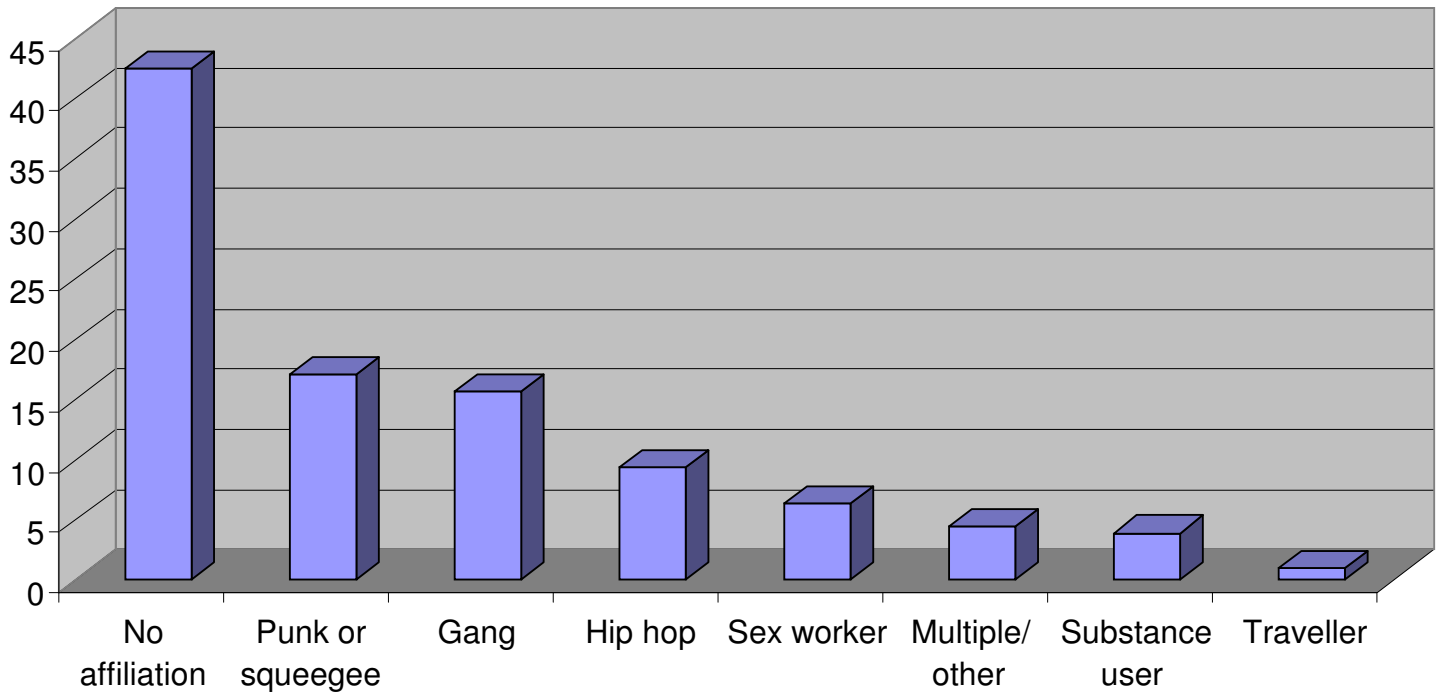
**Reasons for connecting to other youth by average years on the street**



Youth are also more likely to identify with street-involved subcultures if they have spent more time on the street.

Youth identified with a wide range of subcultures, including squeegeers, gang members, sex workers, hip hop, and drug users. But 42% of youth chose not to see themselves as identified with any of these groups.

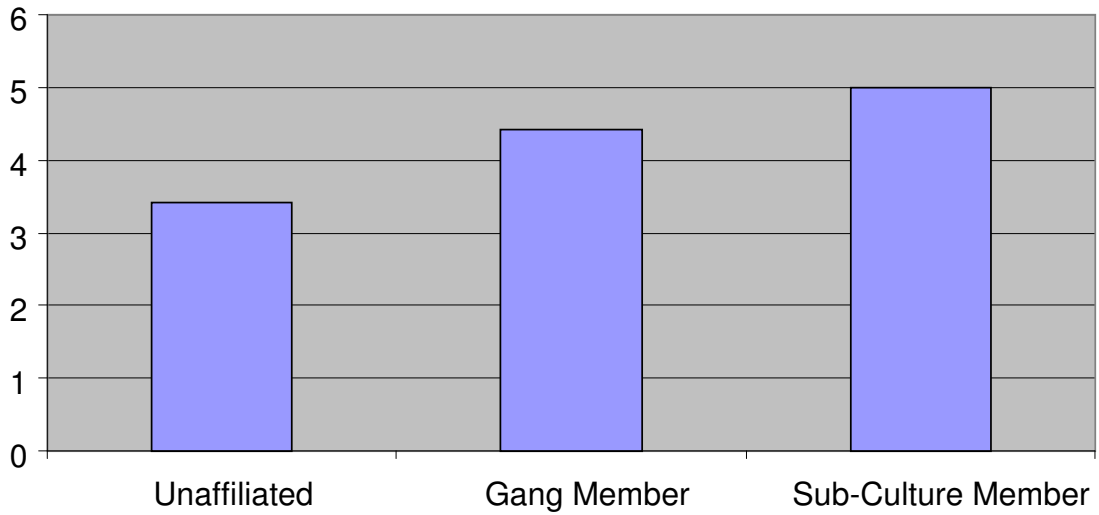
### **Percentage of youth with group affinities**



The tendency toward identifying with street-involved groups increases for people who have been on the street for a long time. Almost 60% of youth who saw themselves as squeegeers, travelers, drug users or sex workers had been on the street for over 4 years. Conversely, only about 35% of youth who were not identified with a sub-culture have been on the street that long. As a result, youth with no group affiliation had an average of 3.4 years on the street, while youth who saw themselves as part of subcultures were on the street an average of 5 years.

Gang members are an exception. Association with gangs was spread out among youth who have been on the street for varying amounts of time, but rose gradually with time on the street. This suggests that many gang affiliations pre-exist homelessness but gang affiliations increase as youth confront challenges in their lives on the street.

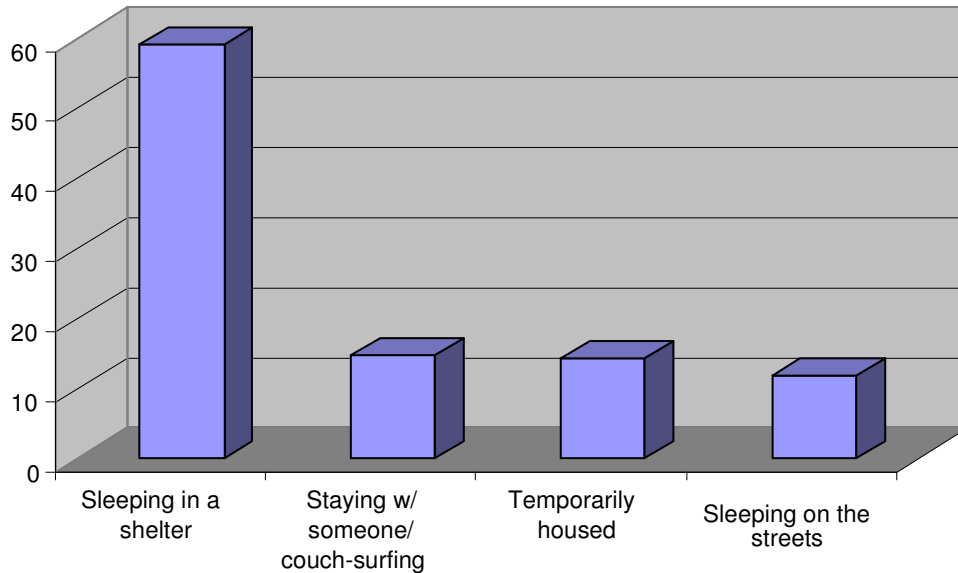
### **Group affiliation by average years on the street**



### **Settings, Safety and Stability**

Overwhelmingly, street involved youth that were interviewed reside in shelters, with couch surfing and rough sleeping comprising the other significant categories of homelessness. A little more than 14% of the sample were in "other settings" - mostly temporarily or precariously housed.

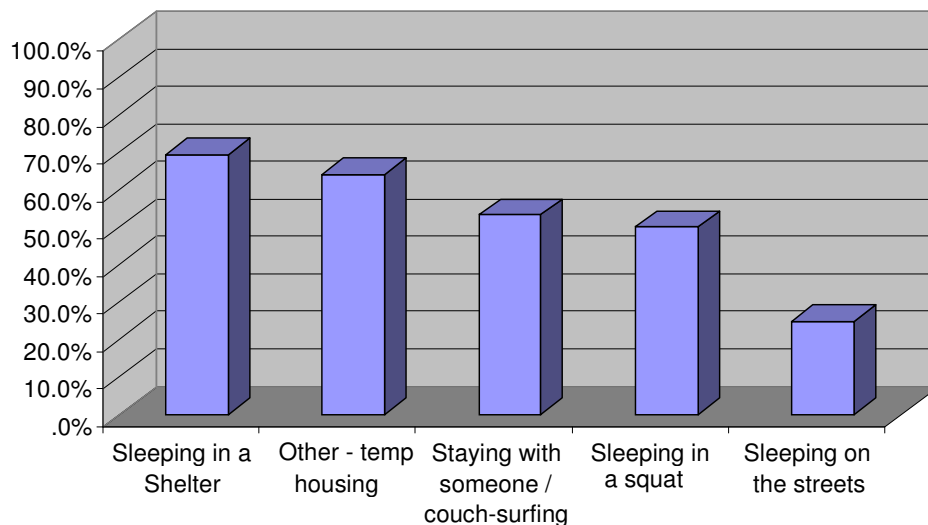
### **Current housing setting of youth interviewed**



The geographical distribution of housing types was not uniform. Rough sleepers tended to be more common in the west end of the downtown area (Bathurst to Jane, south of Bloor) rather than in the downtown core, and were rare in the suburbs. Homeless youth in the far west end of the city tended to couch surf more. Youth from the inner suburbs, as well as youth in the downtown core tended toward living in shelters more than the average.

The broad attraction to shelters was not unqualified. About 30% of those who were housed in shelters did so despite the fact that they did not feel safe there. This is noticeably below the 75% of rough sleepers and 47% of couch surfers who felt unsafe in their settings but nonetheless must give significant cause for concern.

### ***Sense of safety by current housing setting***



Women were particularly prone to feeling unsafe while couch surfing, with 63.8% feeling unsafe in that setting. They, perhaps consequently, had a greater tendency to move to other areas in the city frequently.

Housing and safety have an impact on the lives of homeless youth in a variety of ways.

Couch surfers and rough sleepers are less likely to be in school than other homeless youth. Homeless youth participating in focus groups pointed out how much harder it was to stay in school than to get into school. When life on the street becomes chaotic, maintaining a focus on school becomes impossible, and unstable housing is one of the sources of that chaos. Consequently, youth who saw their housing as "safe," regardless of the setting, were twice as likely to be in school as youth who saw their current situation as unsafe (14% vs. 28%).

Youth were also more likely to report mental health issues if they are sleeping on the street (50.0%) or couch-surfing (43.3%) than if they are in shelters (35.8%). Overall, 52.7% of youth who felt unsafe in their housing report mental health issues, well above the 36.3% of youth who felt safe and have mental health issues.

Housing circumstances seem to have little impact on income or income source, but sense of safety does. Youth who felt safe in their current housing situation (regardless of the type) were more likely to have income from employment rather than youth who did not feel safe (26.7% vs. 12.5%). Youth who felt safe in their current housing situation were less likely to receive benefits (59.3% vs. 69.6%) but were not more likely to have an income overall.

## ***Children***

Almost 20% of respondents had children. Older youth were more likely to have had children and youth who had originally arrived on the street under the age of 15 were the most likely (approximately 40%) to have children and remain homeless.

Men and women were equally likely to have children and there was a slight tendency for Aboriginal youth to have more children than other groups.

Most children (61.5%) were living with friends and relatives. 23% had been adopted or were living in foster homes. 11.5% were living with their homeless parents in shelters or temporary housing.

## ***Income***

58.5% of youth reported a regular income. Of the remainder, about 10% reported irregular income of various kinds, leaving 30% who reported no income.

Homeless youth in focus groups were incredulous about youth responses to income questions on the survey.

Youth in focus groups universally rejected the claim that less than 60% of youth had reliable income, insisting that most youth can get some income, if only a Personal Needs Allowance, and though it was in many cases insufficient, it was relatively reliable.

Youth in focus groups were equally skeptical about the low rate of reported "incidental" income. Youth in focus groups consistently asserted that between

70% and 90% of homeless youth obtain money through informal means at least some of the time.

44.3% of youth who reported income on the survey most often received it from government benefits with 13.5% of these receiving ODSP. 14.4% have jobs. 8.6% get money from panhandling or other means and about 4% of youth get money from friends and family.

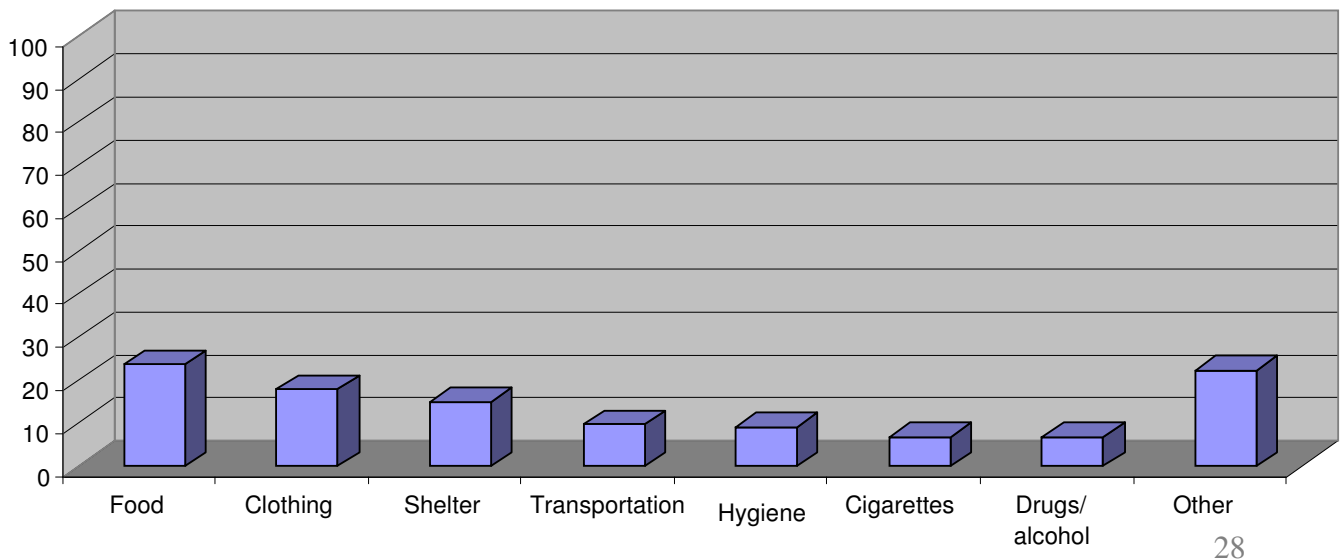
Youth in focus groups concurred that a 44% rate for government benefits seemed realistic. Despite the fact that most homeless youth are eligible and that there are organized efforts to support youth in applying, many youth felt that Ontario Works and ODSP systems rarely hesitated to remove them from the rolls for the slightest cause, and that the frequency of this interruption of service and the effort required to reapply were effective barriers to higher rates of Ontario Works and ODSP receipt.

Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Canadian youth served were somewhat more likely to report income from friends and relatives and people of European decent were somewhat more likely to be employed, and much more likely than any group to busk or panhandle.

Women were more likely to receive benefits (70.2%) than men (58.2%), and men were more likely to be employed (26.4%) than women (8.5%).

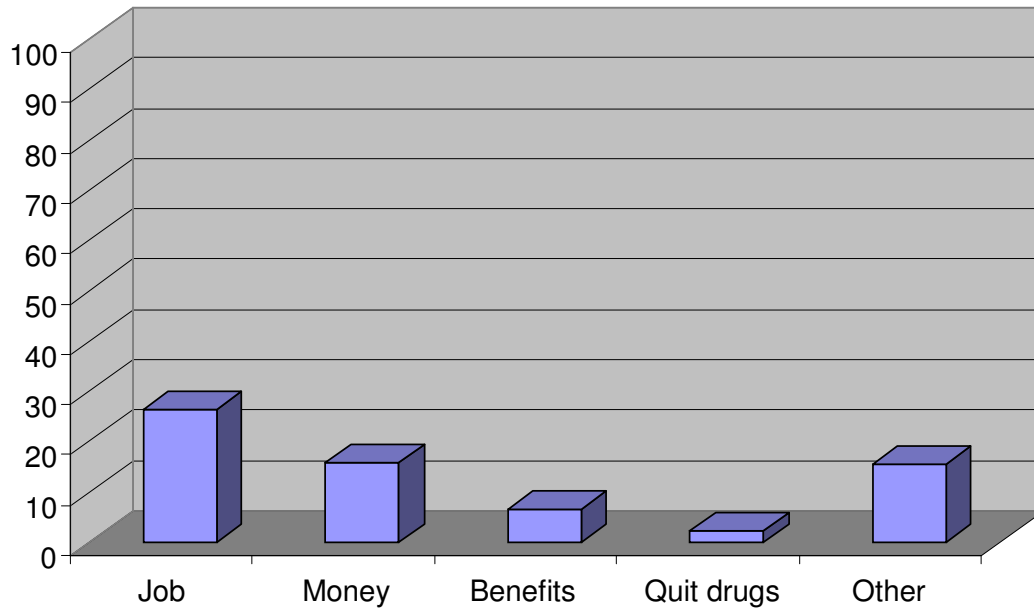
Most youth (57%) were not getting enough money to meet their basic needs. 23.6% of youth identified food as the need they cannot meet with their current incomes, and 17.8% stated that they can't afford sufficient clothing. Surprisingly, only 14.9% described shelter as a need their low incomes prevent them from accessing.

### ***Needs going unmet due to lack of income***



When asked to identify things that may ameliorate the impact of low incomes, most youth were unable to describe any solution. A minority (26.4%) indicate that a good job would help. The next most common solution suggested was to have more money (15.9%).

### ***Solutions to lack of income***



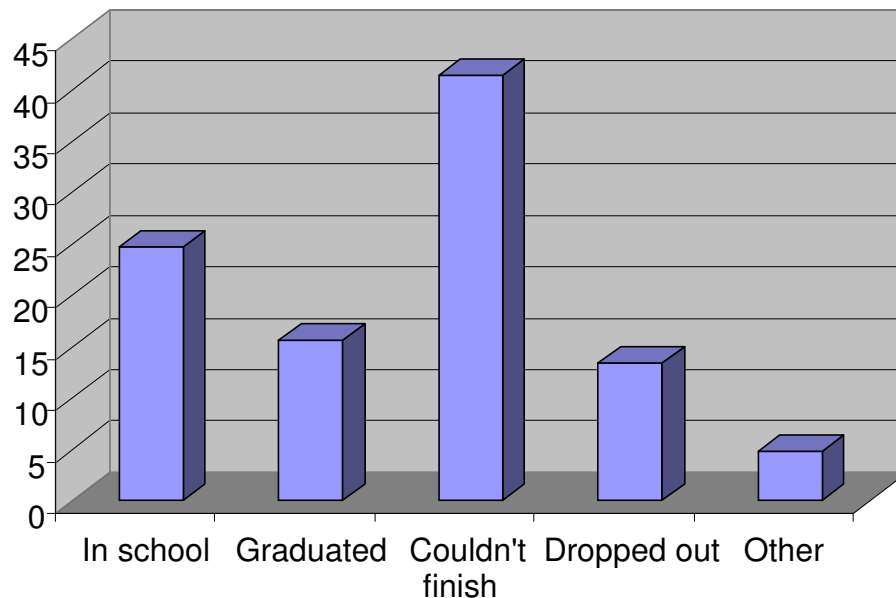
Recipients of government benefits were more likely to see their incomes as insufficient to meet their basic needs. 62% of Ontario Works and ODSP recipients felt that they were not meeting basic needs with their incomes, while only 40% of employed youth and 57% of youth overall felt that way.

Youth in focus groups corroborated these findings, underscoring their feeling that government benefits, including the Personal Needs Allowance, were not set at levels that reflected real costs in Toronto.

## Education

24.7% of the youth interviewed were currently in school. Another 15.6% weren't in school because they had completed their high school education. That leaves a drop-out rate among homeless youth of 59.6%. Of those, the majority left because they were prevented from continuing either through significant disruptions in their lives, because they were thrown out of school, because they lacked funds, or their health or mental health interfered with their ability to continue. Only 13.4% of youth report having chosen to leave school.

**School status of youth**



90% of the youth interviewed had at least some high school education. Of the 45% of respondents left school in grade 10 or 11, the most common period for leaving school and the most common age for leaving home (16).

People who began to live on the street before they were 16 were less likely to be in school (4.4% of youth who were on the street before 16, as opposed to 38.3% of those who arrived at 16 or later). Only 9% of those who were on the street before they were 16 had graduated from high school, about half the normal rate of graduation for the group as a whole. Those who were on the street before they were 16 were also more likely to have been kicked out of school than to have left voluntarily.

Couch surfers and rough sleepers are less likely to be in school than other homeless youth. Youth who see their housing as “safe” are twice as likely to be in school as youth who do not (14% vs. 28%).

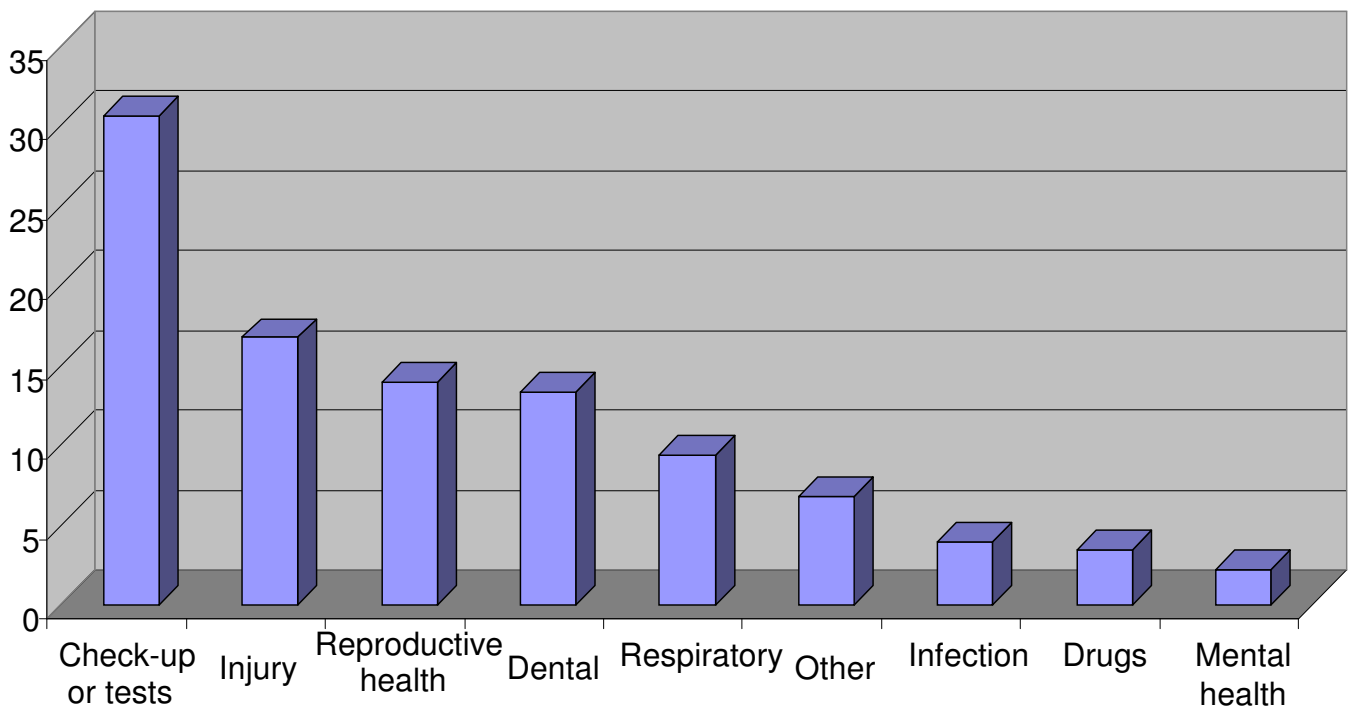
Youth who were staying in the downtown west were less likely to be in school than the overall sample (5% vs. 22%), reinforcing the high needs pattern for those youth. Youth in the downtown core had typical rates of attendance. East end youth were more likely to be in school.

Youth in focus groups corroborated these findings, indicating that for most youth enrolling in school was accessible, though for some, red tape made the process unreasonably complicated and at times unmanageably so. However, youth also noted that remaining in school in the chaotic circumstances imposed by homelessness was challenging and often insurmountable.

## **Health**

Most youth, like most people, confront health issues. 31.9% identified health issues, and 89.4% had accessed health care in the last 12 months. Health care had been accessed for a wide variety of ailments including check-ups, accidents, reproductive health and dental services. 84.5% of youth said they were able to get the health care they needed, including prescription medications.

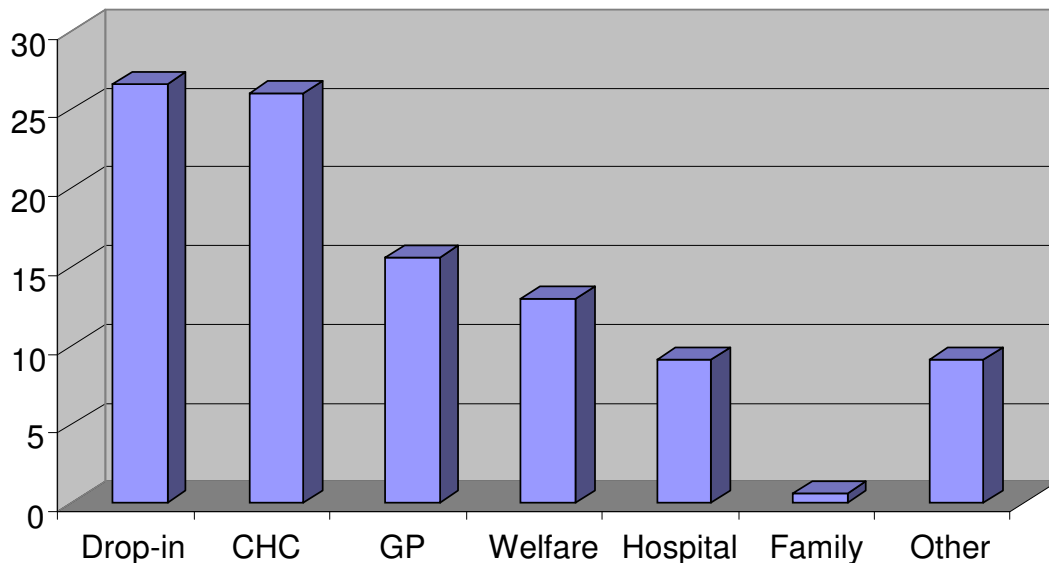
### ***Reasons for receiving health care in the last year***



Generally, youth sought health care in comparatively casual settings. 65.6% got their health care from CHCs, drop-ins or through the welfare office. Only 15.6% maintained relationships with GPs and only 9.1% sought care through hospitals. Overwhelmingly, youth who identified their sources of health care preferred to get their health care from providers in the downtown core (71.0%).

Youth in focus groups reinforced these conclusions. They generally found health care very accessible, with some exceptional cases involving transportation and occasional personal issues being mentioned. Youth felt they could get the care they needed, but strongly preferred to get it from sources that were less likely to be dismissive or judgmental. Youth felt the downtown service providers, especially the clinics and CHCs, provided this kind of accepting health care.

**Sites for accessing health care**



## ***Mental Health***

Questions about mental health issues revealed significantly different responses. 41.5% of youth identified themselves as having anxiety, depression or other mental health issues.

Youth in some focus groups questioned this figure, suggesting it was too low, and could possibly be as much as double. Youth felt that others would automatically underreport this issue, due to the intense stigma that continues to prevail.

Despite the prevalence of mental health issues among homeless youth, 55.8% of youth with mental health issues said they had difficulty accessing mental health supports. Only 38.4% said they did not have difficulty accessing supports. Youth accessed primary health care at more than twice this rate.

Youth were reticent to speak about mental health issues. Those that did identify barriers to service named a mix of stigma, avoidance and lack of access to services as the reasons they had not been obtaining mental health supports.

Youth in focus groups pointed to these same factors as key components of the lack of access. Youth were less concerned about the physical capacity of the mental health system to provide service than the capacity of the system to be a welcoming, genuinely accessible place that operates in a way that is sensitive to the needs of its clients, protective of their rights and not judgmental. Youth were wary about accessing needed mental health supports because of social stigma and fear of triggering long-term labeling.

Mental health issues appear to increase with time on the street. 68.6% of the youth who had been on the street for over 4 years identified mental health issues, compared with 41.5% in the overall sample. The mean time on the street for youth identifying mental health issues was 4.7 years, while the mean time for those without mental health issues was 3.3 years.

Women identified mental health issues about twice as often as men (60% compared to 30.2%), but are also more likely to get treatment for their mental health issues.

## ***Youth Strategies for Addressing Homelessness***

Though the survey asked youth several questions about their strategies for addressing homelessness, youth generally had difficulty describing the challenges they faced in specific and concrete ways.

Youth often identified shelter (48.6%) and income (53.0%) as major challenges for them, but given that almost half of youth did not identify these core issues as major challenges, it is not surprising that few youth identified any of the less immediate concerns when asked about the challenges they faced.

As previously noted, youth who were not meeting their needs with their current income identified access to food as the single most common problem, with 23.6% naming this issue.

Similarly, when asked what might offset the challenges that result from lacking income, 26.4% saw a job as helpful, 15.9% indicated more money would diminish their income challenges and 6.7% saw government benefits as helpful. Despite the fact that the majority of youth regularly use agency services and the vast majority of them find services helpful (see "Service Use" below), only 1.9% identified agency services as a way to resolve their lack of access to basic needs.

Needs and priorities articulated by youth appeared to reflect very short-term, immediate unmet needs, resulting in somewhat counterintuitive results. For example, 45.8% of youth who were without any shelter did not identify shelter as a need, despite the fact that 70% of them see their current situation as generally unsafe. The pattern of responses appears to indicate that youth who have resolved a challenge for the immediate future (for example, finding a place to sleep rough for the short term) ceased to consider it a major challenge.

These issues were explored with youth in the focus groups. Focus group participants, like survey respondents, tended to think primarily in short-term, immediate ways and to engage in little planning or process-oriented thinking. Two distinct exercises designed to test these tendencies showed them to be consistent, widespread and ingrained. When these tendencies were discussed with youth they acknowledged the weaknesses of strategies focused on short-term, immediate issues, but stressed the relevance of this approach to life on the street. As one youth pointed out, it's "hard to think long-term when you haven't eaten". Some youth in the focus groups saw long-term planning as a misguided approach, reflecting expectations of employment and acceptance that are unlikely to be accessible to them.

The consistency of this pattern underscores the need to engage youth in more extensive reflections on developing support systems in ways that reflect patterns of youth behavior and need, which may diverge at times from priorities and intentions initially articulated.

## ***Service Use***

Youth clearly rely heavily on the services offered by front-line agencies. Over 63% of youth surveyed regularly use agency services and over half use multiple services. Almost all of youth who use services find them helpful and 70% find they helped a lot.

Youth turned to a wide range of services. Youth interviewed had used Evergreen, YOUTHLINK Inner City, Covenant House, Evangel Hall, the Meeting Place, The Shout Clinic, YMCA House, Sketch, YES, Street Outreach Services, Queen West CHC, Native Child and Family Services, The Scott Mission, Youth Skill Zone, Turning Point, the Corner Drop In , Maggie's and Jessie's among others.

Evergreen and YOUTHLINK were the services most commonly used by the youth interviewed, both showing responses above the average in being named as very helpful.

There are no strong demographic patterns indicating who finds services helpful though there are some weak correlations suggesting that black youth may not find the services as beneficial as European and Aboriginal youth.

Youth who identified with street-involved subcultures are more likely to be regular service users and immigrants are slightly less likely to be. Older youth and youth who have been on the street for a longer time are more likely to be regular service users than youth who have been on the street for shorter periods. The mean street time for regular service users was 4.5 years, the mean street time for non-service users is 2.9 years. The mean age for service users is 21.5 years old, while the mean age of non-users is 20.3. This suggests that the service infrastructure, while effectively accessed by youth who are in serious need on the streets, may be less well accessed by newer, more vulnerable youth who are less familiar with the system. In light of this, it is not surprising that one of the most common suggestions youth made about improving the service system is increased outreach by agencies.

Agency staff interviewed described a wide range of outreach efforts they currently undertake but generally conceded that the overwhelming majority of their clients find their own way to the service or are referred by another service provider. Increasing outreach, especially to the youth who are newest on the street, would help to address this imbalance.

Youth in the focus groups consistently indicated that they were willing to travel considerable distances to reach programs they felt were “attractive”. Attractive programs were, overwhelmingly, those that were effective in providing psycho-social support, rather than those that delivered specific types of services, or were located in specific areas. The most important element of that psycho-social support, according to youth in the focus groups, was a sympathetic, engaged approach on the part of the staff. Youth with more experience of homelessness, as we have seen, tend to be more pragmatic in their selection of friends and support networks. Youth who are newer to the street are more vulnerable, and are more likely to be daunted by settings where staff are seen as disengaged, unsympathetic or judgmental.

When asked why they went to youth serving agencies, youth described basic needs most often (33.1%). This is not surprising given the high level of dependence youth have on the effort service providers make to meet those basic needs. Most youth (73.1%) access food through a variety of services (shelters 47.2%, drop-ins 38.5%, other services 12.5%). Over 30% of them get food from multiple service providers. Only 31.7% said they had the resources to buy some food. Similarly, 49% of the youth surveyed shower and do their laundry at shelters. Youth also access basic hygiene through other service providers resulting with 30% of those using multiple service providers for this purpose.

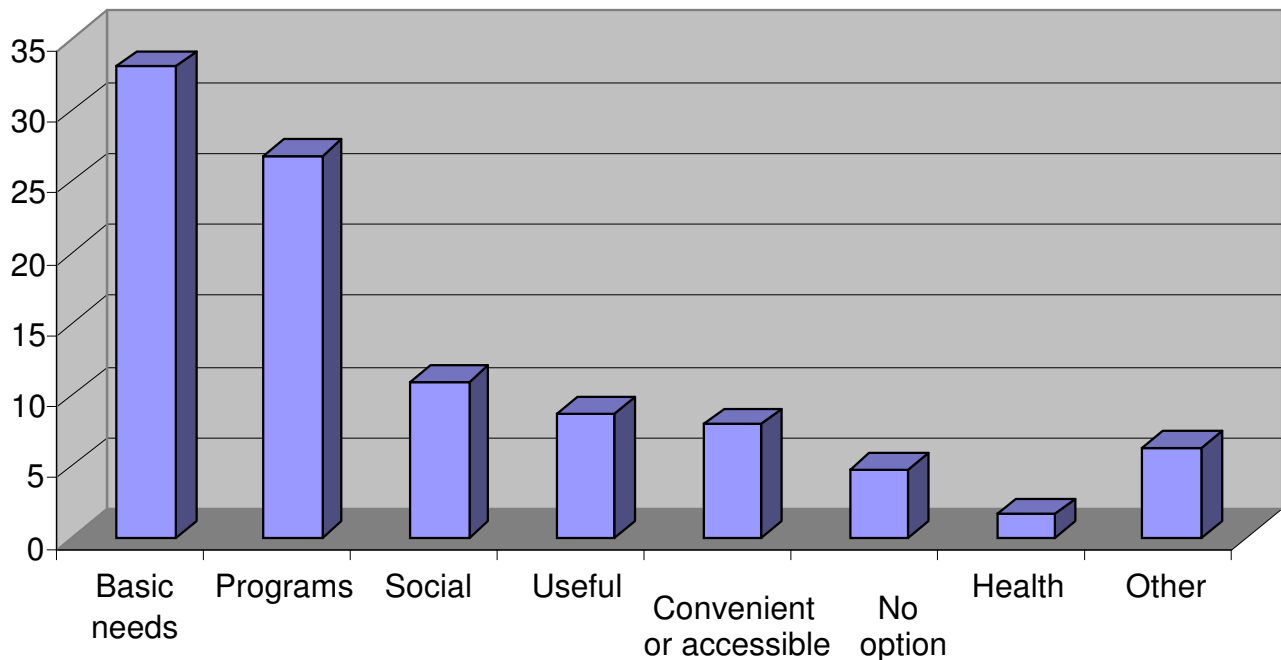
This short-term, basic needs focus should not be interpreted as simply seeing agencies in the most pragmatic light. It is worth noting that only 7.9% indicated that they used a service because it was convenient and accessible. Focus group participants repeated emphatically that they were willing to, and often did, walk considerable distances to access services that were more attractive to them. The key attractions consistently related to a sympathetic welcoming environment, with location and proximity being minor considerations in comparison.

26.8% of youth identified a variety of programs as their primary reason for using services, with employment programs among the most often mentioned. Also of note is the fact that one in nine youth named generic social attractions (10.9%) as their primary reason for using services, suggesting a subtext in the way in which they value services. Youth in both the focus groups and the survey consistently returned to themes of psycho-social support from service providers as a key consideration in their assessment of

any service provider. Youth in the focus groups could not emphasize enough how important the presence of friends and above all sympathetic and supportive staff were to service choice.

Youth in the focus groups described plans to visit a service provider to obtain food, but underscored repeatedly that the choice of which provider to visit was determined more by who was there, than by what was there. This is consistent with earlier studies, including the Toronto Drop-in Network's Homeless Drop-in Evaluation Report, which showed a tendency for service users to name basic needs served by agencies first, though deeper investigation showed they valued the psycho-social supports more heavily.

### ***Reasons for using services***



This emphasis on psycho-social benefits is borne out when youth describe how to improve services. 41.3% of youth expressed interest in increasing the extent to which they were engaged with the staff and found staff attentive and supportive.

These psycho-social supports proved to be in more demand than other identified pragmatic accommodations such as better hours, improved services or even looser rules, which together were named by only 28.8% of youth.

<b>Changes to services: Social Emphasis</b>	
Talk to us more	8.2
Listen more	7.2
Put yourself in our shoes	15.4
More supportive/ kind	25.0
<b>Combined social attractions</b>	<b>41.3</b>

<b>Changes to services: Accommodations</b>	
More accessible	6.3
Better hours	5.3
Less strict rules	5.3
More/better services	18.8
<b>Combined accommodations</b>	<b>28.8</b>

Women and immigrants are more likely to seek social goals than men. Canadian born males are more likely to seek other accommodations.

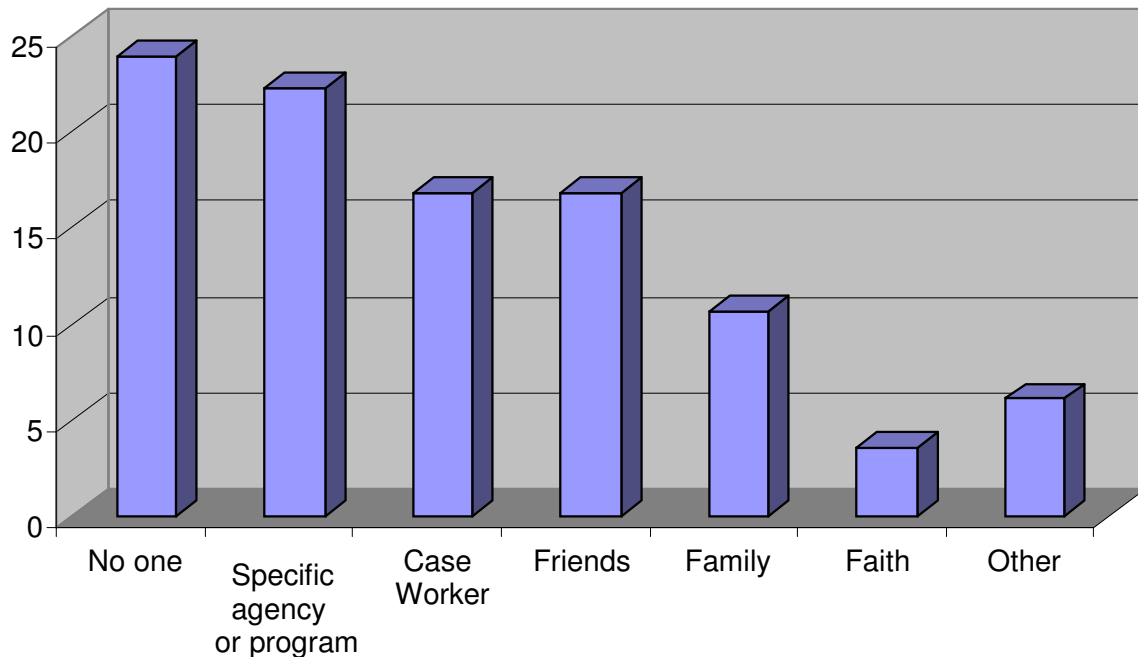
Youth in the focus groups underscored these findings, placing great emphasis on the significance of sympathetic and responsive staff. Youth placed far more priority on the staff in determining where to seek service than on the quality of the programs or the proximity of the service.

This emphasis on seeking sympathetic staff should certainly not be interpreted as an indication that youth find staff unsupportive or less than caring. While there are certainly instances of youth who have negative images of staff, research and focus group responses strongly showed that the service infrastructure is a critical support for youth and that youth are more likely to trust supportive and concerned service staff than anyone else in their existing networks.

## **Support**

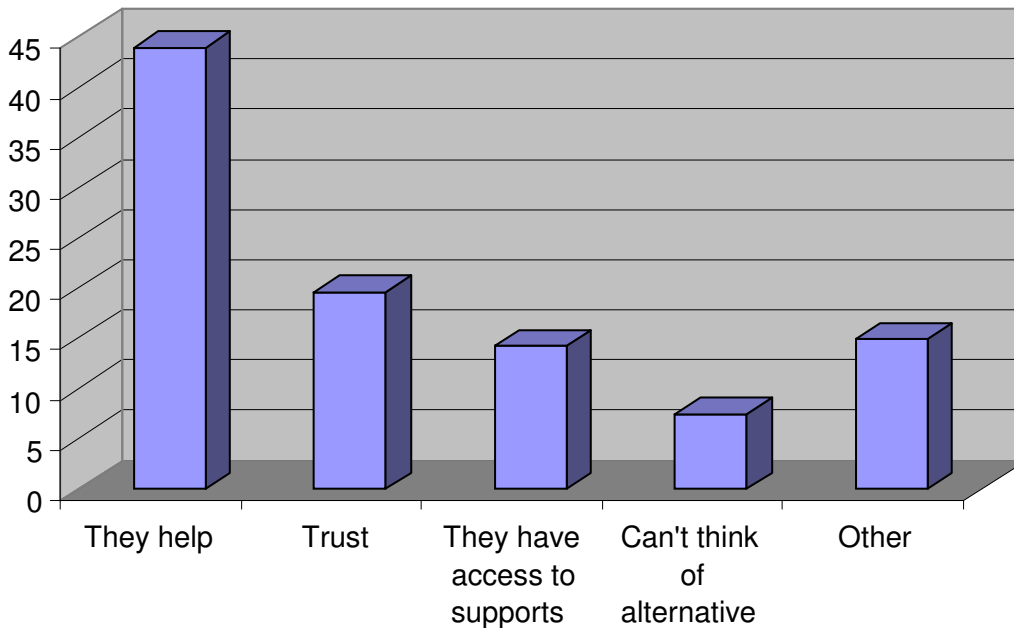
When asked who they turn to for help with the challenges they face, youth were significantly more likely to name agencies or caseworkers (39.1% combined) than friends or family (27.5% combined). Though 23.9% of youth continued to believe there is no one to turn to, almost as many (22.3%) believed agencies can provide the help they need. Clearly service providers play a big role.

**Who youth turn to for help**



The choice of who to turn to for support appears to have important pragmatic components. Respondents' choices appear to be based most often on their belief that the person in question can help (43.9%). Only 19.6% made choices based on trust. However, the patterns of trust provide even more telling evidence of the significance of sympathetic and supportive agency staff.

### **Why youth turn to the supports they choose**



Youth who chose a case worker as their source of assistance were more inclined to say they turned to them because of trust more than for any other reason. That connection to an individual clearly is a personal and valuable one for youth. If they identified an organization as their main source of assistance, they were inclined to say they went there for lack of options or to draw on resources. Interestingly, friends were chosen as a support because they are inclined to be supportive (32.3%) or because they can't think of anyone else (18.2%), as opposed to being chosen because they can be trusted (17.2%).

The most common recipients of trust were, in fact, case workers. 31% of youth who said they seek support from someone they trust chose case workers as that support and 20.7% chose agencies. Only 17.2% chose friends. The capacity of agencies and especially caring staff to play a role of trust in the lives of homeless youth is clearly very significant.

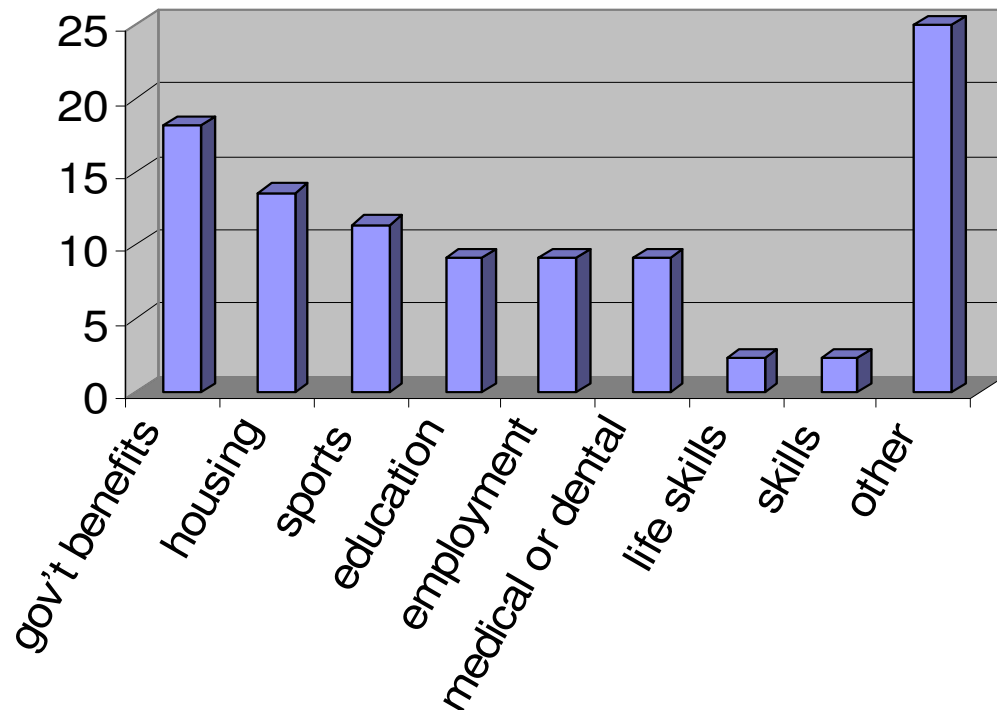
Regular use of a particular agency or service made respondents somewhat more likely to rely on agencies (23.8% vs. 17.1%) and somewhat less likely to rely on no one (19.2% vs. 27.1%). People with health or mental health issues are more likely to rely on service providers. People who perceived positive changes in their circumstances since they first were on the street tended to be people who turned to service providers for support and tended not to be people who relied on no one.

Youth in the focus groups clearly corroborated these findings. While always adding caveats that not all service providers have earned this level of trust, most of the youth who participated in the focus groups had experienced relationships of this kind and had a great deal to say about the value of supportive relationships with caring staff. Youth who lacked such relationships were, conversely, bitter about the lack of support and deeply resentful of staff who did not seek to create that relationship.

### **Program Access**

Only 23.6% of youth identified that there were programs they could not access. Over 75% of the youth interviewed claimed no such experience. Income and shelter programs dominated the list of inaccessible programs, being named by 18.2% and 13.6% of youth respectively.

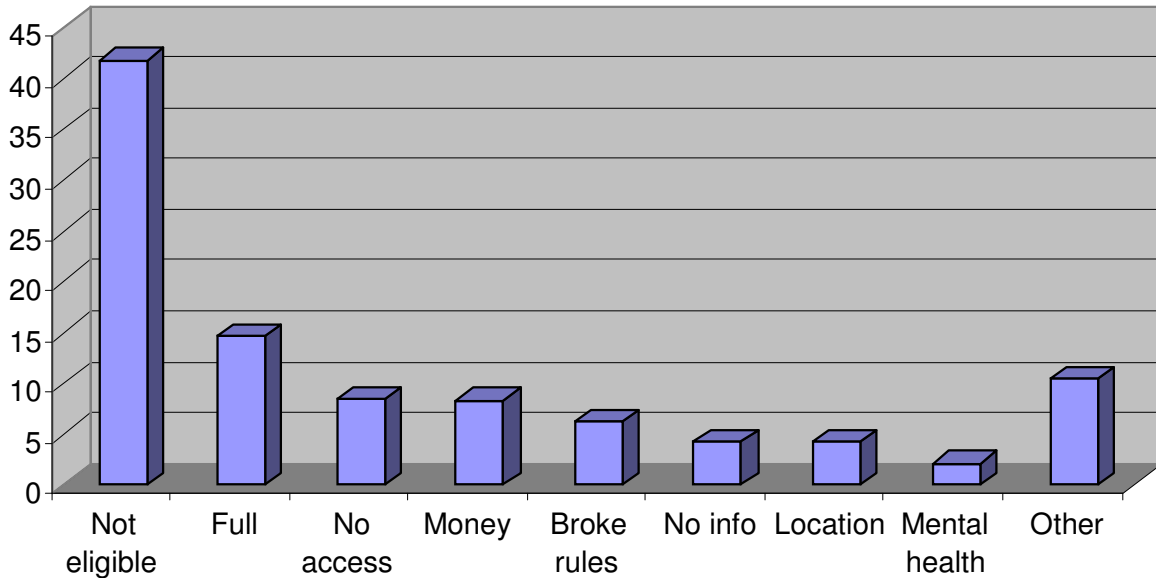
**Programs youth could not access**



Analysis of the barriers to programs suggests that qualifying for programs and the volume of services are the primary barriers named by 41.7% and 14.6% of youth respectively.

There are no clear demographic or geographic patterns to the experience of these barriers.

### **Barriers to program access**



Location appears to be low on the list of barriers preventing youth from accessing services, with only 4.2% of youth citing location as a barrier to accessing services. This is reinforced by the low number of youth (17.8%) who indicated that services are not located where they need them.

When asked about locating new services in accessible locations, youth in the outer areas of the city were slightly less likely to identify these needs than those in inner-city areas. This was somewhat surprising given the concentration of services in the inner-city

Youth in focus groups noted that the current transit system has made it easier to get to the inner-city than to get around in the inner suburbs. Youth in Scarborough, for example, felt a program downtown was as accessible as a program in another part of Scarborough.

Youth in the farthest north-west areas of the city were more likely to feel isolated but also were hesitant to ask for significant service improvements largely because they felt it was unlikely that such a request would be granted. Expectations of disappointment appear to play some role in minimizing youth requests for service improvements.

More than 31% of youth also indicated that there were places in the city they felt it was not safe for them to go. There were no clear patterns to that experience, and these issues appeared to reflect serious personal conflicts involving harassment, violence, drugs and gangs, rather than any clear demographic or geographic trends.

## ***Service Location and Youth Mobility***

Location and mobility do not appear to be insurmountable barriers for homeless youth. Less than half of youth indicated transportation was ever a problem (47.6%). For those youth, the most common transportation problems involved access to work (14.9%) and miscellaneous trips (17.3%). Only 3.8% had trouble getting transportation to school, only 6.7% had trouble getting transportation to medical care, 7.2% had trouble getting transportation to services, and only 6.7% had trouble getting transportation to a shelter. There are no clear demographic patterns and no consistent geographic patterns to these transportation barriers.

Most of the youth interviewed access downtown services (68%). Youth in the outer areas of the city were noticeably less likely to use downtown services, with over 57% of youth from the east and west ends of the city identifying no use of downtown services. Reasons for not using those tend to reflect a lack of interest in, or contact with the area (68.6%), rather than specific barriers to access or transportation (8.5%).

Youth in focus groups reinforced this sense that location was a minor consideration for selecting or using a service. Youth were consistent in describing their willingness to travel considerable distances over the course of a day if there was a compelling reason to get somewhere. Youth in the downtown described treks that amounted to 5-7 kilometers over the course of a day as acceptable if there were things worth traveling for.

Youth were also consistent in describing what the impetus might be for to make that effort. Youth followed social opportunities, seeking to be with friends and in locations where there was positive social interaction. They fled "drama", conflict, people in crisis, and settings that were chaotic, dirty or infested. They also consistently sought settings where staff were sympathetic, supportive and engaged. That secure and safe environment appealed almost universally to youth.

These criteria for choosing locations were not limited to selecting services. Youth from the focus groups described using similar criteria for determining where to hang out and where to sleep. Consequently, youth showed high degrees of mobility and only limited loyalty to any one geographic area for hanging out and sleeping.

Youth were asked where they slept last night, last week, last month and before that, as well as where they preferred to hang out.

Only 45.1% of youth claimed to have slept the previous night in the location where they tend to hang out, and roughly 1 in 4 indicated that they never sleep in the neighbourhood they hang out in.

Though generally mobile during the day, youth seem to be divided into two groups when it comes to where they sleep. About half of all youth reported sleeping in the same neighbourhood for over a month (51%), while 21.1% reported moving at least once during that period. Over 11% reported moving from one neighbourhood to another within a week.

Moves occurred for a wide variety of reasons including a simple preference for moving, forced departure, a desire to be closer to a supply of drugs, and an effort to escape a personal conflict. No single reason for moving garnered even 10% of the responses, suggesting that there are no systemic causes for the mobility.

Youth sleeping in shelters and in temporary housing tended to be less likely to change their sleeping locations than youth sleeping rough or couch surfing. Youth in temporary housing were also less likely to sleep in the neighbourhood they tended to hang out in, requiring additional mobility.

Mobility rates vary somewhat by demographics. Women are slightly more inclined to move than men and youth with more experience on the street are more likely to move frequently than youth who are newer to the street. Aboriginal youth were more inclined to move than youth with European backgrounds.

Location also played a part in mobility. Youth who hang out in the downtown core are among the most mobile youth surveyed. Over 73% of youth hanging out in the downtown core slept in another part of the city the night before they were interviewed, well above the rate of mobility for youth who hang out in other neighbourhoods. The smaller number of youth who slept in the downtown core the night before tended to remain in the neighbourhood where they hang out, but they still displayed higher than average levels of mobility, changing sleeping locations within the week slightly more often than most youth (17.6% vs. 14.7%). Conversely, youth sleeping in the downtown west were far less likely to change the neighbourhood they slept in, with only 5.3% moving within the week of the interview.

## ***Recommendations***

Efforts to support homeless and street involved youth should work to connect youth to housing and supports intensively in the first 3 months on the street and on serving youth that have been on the street for less than two years.

Outreach efforts designed to reach youth newly connected to the street should be increased to ensure that services and supports connect to youth as early as possible, during the critical periods.

Services for immigrant youth should be focused on those populations and should be designed to respond to their distinct needs.

Efforts to address youth homelessness should prioritize prevention programs for youth between the ages of 12 and 15 and should take place on a national scale to address the Canada-wide influx of homeless youth to Toronto.

Particular attention should be placed on youth under 16 arriving on the streets as their long term prospects of being housed appear to be lowest.

Safety is strongly correlated with success in attending school and obtaining employment, more than factors like type of housing. Efforts should be made to identify opportunities for youth to increase their sense of safety regardless of their current housing situation. Minimizing noise, “drama” and crises impact on the ability of youth to feel safe and stable in shelters. Efforts should be made to manage exposure to disruptive events in the shelters through crisis intervention protocols, as well as settings and staffing that minimize youth interaction with youth in crisis.

Given the widespread dependence of youth on the Personal Needs Allowance, efforts should be made to support increasing the allowance to an amount that meets basic needs in Toronto.

Since youth often find themselves removed from Ontario Works and ODSP rolls for minor infractions, support for reapplication and for addressing minor infractions with Ontario Works and ODSP staff should be provided where possible.

Service providers should review their service delivery models to ensure that services are delivered in ways that are perceived by youth as respectful and accommodating to maximize participation and accessibility. Stable staffing should be considered a priority as staff-youth interpersonal relationships also influence the effectiveness of service and youth attachment to supports. Emphasis should be placed on allocating staff time to have social interactions and to build personal relationships with youth, as these appear to have a more significant impact on youth connection to service than the mix of programs themselves.

Youth appear to be able to access health care in accessible, appropriate settings, but mental health services are less well attuned to youth needs. Youth serving organizations should actively seek to function as gateways to or hosts for mental health services to allow youth an access point that is perceived by them as respectful and approachable.

## ***Appendix A: Focus Group Report***

The information collected through the field interview process was compiled and analyzed. From this analysis, questions were developed in order to corroborate and further explore the key issues with focus groups that were made up of homeless or street-involved youth that had not yet participated in the survey. As a result of the analysis of the interview data, it was determined that 7 focus groups, broken down into four geographical regions, would be necessary: the Downtown Core (Spadina to Jarvis, Bloor to Lakeshore), Downtown West (Dufferin to Spadina, Bloor to Lakeshore), West (west of Dufferin), East (east of River & Don Valley Parkway), and demographically as "Non-Service Users," "Youth that became Street Involved before the age of 16", and one group with the youth that conducted the peer interviews.

Homeless youth were again hired to recruit other homeless youth as participants. The recruiters were paid an honorarium and directed to recruit youth based on the geographic and demographic criteria that we provided for them. Recruiters were required to provide the first names of the participants they recruited in advance to ensure that the groups would be an appropriate size and reflective of the target audience required. All focus groups had multiple peer recruiters to encourage a diversity of participant experience. Staff delivering services to homeless youth were also asked to help identify potential participants. Appropriate focus group space was obtained at Evergreen, Second Base, Youth Without Shelter, The Meeting Place and YOUTHLINK Innercity. All focus group participants were provided with honoraria as well as two tokens and a hot lunch.

In total, there were 56 participants in the focus groups covering a wide range of backgrounds. 34 participants were male and 24 were female. Only one person identified themselves as being younger than 15. The largest category represented was in the 16-20 age range with 29 participants. The range of 21-25 had 22 participants and only 5 participants were over the age of 26.

81% of the participants identified as sleeping primarily in a shelter, with couch surfing following at 14%. 4% of participants identified that they are now renting an apartment.

36% had first become street involved between 1 and 3 years ago. 35% had been street involved for 4 to 6 years. 15% had been street involved for 7 or more years. 8% for 3 to 6 months, 4% for half a year, and only 1 had been street-involved for less than 3 months.

There were 25 youth who “hang out” in the downtown core, 13 youth who hang out in the downtown west, 13 youth who hang out in the west, 11 youth who hang out in the east, and 12 youth identified that they travel between these locations to hang out.

28 youth identified that they access services regularly, whereas 29 indicated that they do not. Interestingly, 81% of the participants identified themselves as regularly sleeping in a shelter, but did not consider this a service that they were accessing.

The focus groups all had 8–10 participants, with the one exception being the focus group of peer interviewers, which was conducted as a more intensive 4-person session. Each group had a Public Interest facilitator and a note taker.

The focus groups were divided into segments, each designed to test or deepen the analysis of the existing survey data. Survey data was shared with the youth participating in the focus group to illustrate specific findings and youth were asked to provide their assessment of the data or provide fresh interpretations of it.

### **Choice of primary “hang out” venue**

In order to better understand the survey data on choices of location, youth were asked to describe how and why they chose to spend time in the areas they frequented. Youth decisions about where they spend time appeared to be strongly driven by social factors. When asked why they chose a place to hang out, youth emphasized the presence of “friends” and “people I know”. Choices of where to spend time were influenced heavily by peers and, in many cases, driven by group activities.

Familiarity and comfort were also significant factors. Youth tended to restrict themselves to areas that were well established settings where they knew their way around.

Few youth described their choices of location as influenced by services of any kind and a similar number noted access to drugs and alcohol as factors.

## **Changes in “hang out”**

Decisions to change venues were also heavily socially determined and peer influenced. Youth moved to alternate locations when there were attractive social activities to pursue there or when the people they spent time with chose to move.

Moves could also be determined by external forces such as police pressure or being banned from a location.

Some moves were the result of unidentified needs described as “needing to move”, “getting out of a rut” or “being bored”.

Some moves were determined by the need to seek healthier and safer settings. Youth sometimes found themselves in situations where they needed to avoid a setting to minimize self-destructive behaviour or avoid conflicts.

## **Places to sleep**

When describing their decisions about where to sleep, homeless youth continued to emphasize social determinants.

Choices of sleeping locations reflected their efforts to follow social opportunities and those may involve moving from place to place frequently in the day and could result in sleeping in a variety of locations at random.

Youth noted a tendency to try to sleep where they could find supportive environments and in particular good staff who would treat them with respect. Youth also sought settings that were quiet and clean with relaxed rules, friendly faces and “no drama”. Settings with a high volume of people in serious crisis were seen as unattractive.

In many cases, youth didn’t see the location they slept in as matter of choice. A combination of curfews, full beds and bans took the decision about where to sleep out of their hands. They move to where they can find an accessible bed, no matter what part of town it is in.

When informed that the survey showed a tendency on the part of many homeless youth to sleep in parts of the city where they did not hang out, youth had a wide range of possible explanations, suggesting that the decisions are more personal and do not follow strict patterns.

Some youth underscored the fact that the practice of sleeping away from the hangout was not universal, noting that they preferred to stay in one place for long periods of time.

However, some youth did choose to sleep some distance from where they hang out. For some, the deciding factor was comfort. They slept in a safe, established and secure place, but welcomed the opportunity to hang out in places that offered a little more excitement. Youth who hang out downtown were particularly prone to this view, seeing the downtown as an attractive venue for street life but a little too risky for sleeping in.

Youth were generally comfortable with sleeping outside in summer if a decent place was not available.

While youth readily noted that their choice of sleeping locations reflected their view of different possible venues, they tended to note concern about rules, their belief that some are unfairly kicked out, and their need to avoid "bad places". They made virtually no mention of supports or services as factors in the decision with the sole exception of the quality of food offered.

### **Choice of services**

The decision to use a service was heavily influenced by the people that were at that location. The tendency to follow friends played a part in that selection, but the desire to avoid certain people was also significant. Some personal issues were a factor in this decision but more often the decision was driven by a desire to avoid people with severe mental health issues, severe addictions, people who cause "drama" and older men with a long and unbroken history on the street.

Staffing was one of the key factors in service choice. Staff who "really want to help" and who treat youth in a respectful, non-judgmental manner were seen as an important attraction to services. Staff who were seen as disengaged, "just doing a job", disrespectful or harsh made youth less interested in a service provider.

Comfort and familiarity were again, also factors in the choice of which services to use.

The range of services was seen as a more important issue for youth than a specific service (with the exception of food, which was mentioned in many groups). A broad range of services tends to keep youth at a service but did not figure prominently enough in the focus group discussions to be seen as a principle attraction.

## **Locations and Travel Patterns**

Whether addressing service choices or sleeping locations, youth expressed very little concern about location. Youth showed a very high tolerance for travel. Downtown youth saw St Clair Avenue, Parkdale and The Beaches as perfectly accessible locations, insofar as there were reasons to go there and the weather is tolerable. Distances of several kilometers were not seen as a barrier by most youth as time was usually not at a premium and the TTC is often accessible even without a fare. Youth in Etobicoke tended to be less comfortable with travel, but youth in Scarborough saw fewer problems with traveling long distances.

Few youth expressed concern about the location of services and most were surprised by our emphasis on location as a potential factor in accessibility. Youth in Rexdale were sometimes an exception, thinking that services located closer to them were desirable but also seeing that as an unrealistic expectation.

Youth tended to see the west downtown as a somewhat safer and a more accommodating setting than Yonge street. Despite the indications to the contrary in the survey responses, youth saw the west downtown as less "hardcore" than Yonge Street. Youth agreed with survey results that indicated a higher experience of harassment on Yonge Street, making them feel that the "vibe" was better in the west downtown.

## **Safety**

Youth were not surprised that the majority of homeless youth describe themselves as "safe". Youth underscored the fact that the presence of friends creates a greater sense of safety, and that homeless youth tend to band together to provide an environment that offers some security. Youth also stressed the fact that spending time on the street normalizes the experience and the standards of safety may be different for those youth than for other people. Some youth pointed out that homelessness may be seen as safe relative to the violent or difficult setting that youth had left behind.

The focus groups expressed no surprise that many youth see shelters as unsafe. Exposure to other homeless youth who were in a variety of ways destabilizing were seen as the principle cause. Youth cited fights, "crack-heads", "assholes" and stealing as typical challenges they would face in a shelter.

Youth also noted that their sense of safety was sometimes undermined by rules they saw as unreasonable or unreasonably enforced. Many youth felt they had little control over their circumstances in settings with strict rules

and there were frequent references to people being kicked out or banned for unfair or inconsistent reasons.

Some youth believed the reported numbers were low and believed that the majority of youth feel unsafe in shelters.

Youth expressed no surprise at the data showing “couch surfers” and youth staying with friends felt unsafe, but emphasized the insecurity of the circumstances as the key factor. Depending on friends’ hospitality, concern about overstaying their welcome and anxiety about being kicked out causes insecurity among “couch surfers” even when the offer of shelter comes from a friend.

Some youth indicated that they see isolation as safest because when they are alone they feel that they are largely in control of their circumstances.

Overall, youth felt that they felt safe when they were with people who treat them well, people they could trust, and in places that were familiar, clean and quiet. As a result, the physical security of the setting had little impact on their assessment of safety and many felt that rough sleeping was attractive if the alternative involved being in a shelter with people who were in crisis or where staff were overly strict or disrespectful. If nothing else, rough sleepers have each other and freedom from unwelcome interventions

## **Education**

Youth confirmed that it was easy to enroll in school for almost anyone who wished to do so, but found that staying in school could be challenging. The chaos of their lives made it hard to focus on school work consistently and some found travel to school challenging due to costs and time.

The vast majority of youth in the focus groups saw school as important and valuable, recognizing the key role education plays in improving their prospects and providing access to better opportunities in the future. Most youth have made an effort to acquire at least a high school diploma. Youth were very interested in the possibility of accessing scholarships to enable them to enroll in colleges or universities.

## **Income**

The focus groups were presented with the results of the income questions on the survey. The youth in the focus groups expressed doubts about the information provided on this topic by the youth who were surveyed.

40% of the youth surveyed indicated they had no regular income at all. Youth in the focus groups felt that was highly unlikely. Youth in the focus groups believed that most youth could regularly access a Personal Needs Allowance, if nothing else. However, youth in the focus groups agreed that access to Ontario Works benefits and ODSP benefits was difficult and could easily be disrupted, requiring lengthy efforts to regain benefits.

The focus groups flatly rejected claims by youth in the survey that only 10% had any informal income. Youth in the focus groups assumed youth who were surveyed intentionally underreported income and believed that somewhere between 70-90% of youth gain income from a range of informal activities including panning, drug dealing and squeegeeing.

## **Health**

Youth in the focus groups agreed with the survey results showing health care was widely accessible. Focus groups participants believed that almost anyone could get basic health care if they wanted it, through drop-in clinics, CHCs or sometimes hospitals. Some youth noted that getting consistent and convenient care can be a problem at times but generally speaking care was readily available.

Focus groups were not surprised that youth in the survey tended to access care in the downtown core. Downtown health care providers were visible and numerous but they were also seen by youth as more welcoming to homeless youth and more likely to provide “hassle” free health care.

## **Mental Health**

Though the survey showed 40% of youth reporting mental health issues, youth in focus groups felt that the number of youth identifying mental health issues was low, often roughly half of what it should be. Focus group participants felt that youth were likely to be reticent about identifying their mental health issues and would under-report.

Youth surveyed reported low rates of access to mental health services, with 55.8% of youth with mental health issues not accessing services. Youth in

the focus groups felt that the lack of access was not a function of lack of service opportunities but rather a function of barriers such as stigma and fear of long term labeling that prevent youth from accessing the services. Youth felt that there would be more access to mental health services if there were greater efforts to create welcoming, secure environments and to reduce the experience of stigma for users of the service.

## **New Suburban Services**

Youth in focus groups were, like the youth in the survey, hesitant to recommend the creation of more services in the former suburban communities in Toronto. Scarborough youth found accessing other areas in Scarborough more challenging than accessing downtown locations and were therefore not inclined to see more services in the east end of the city.

Rexdale, located in the city's north-west, tends to be more isolated and youth in that area were more inclined to suggest new services in that community.

## **Articulating Needs**

The youth who responded to the survey expressed certain views that were difficult to interpret. 63.4% of the youth surveyed had regularly used agency services, over half had used multiple services and 97.6% of service users had found them helpful. Youth identified services and their staff as the organizations they count on more than they identified their friends and described service staff as people they trust more than any other group. Youth repeatedly expressed concern and sometimes resentment about their loss of eligibility or access to a service. However, youth rarely named a desire for more services as a strategy that could help them overcome challenges and rarely identified services as a priority for determining where they go or what they do.

The focus groups explored this anomaly by testing the way in which youth imagined strategies they might use to address challenges.

When asked to describe future plans, youth identified ambitious goals including high levels of affluence and property ownership, with little concern for realistic goals. When asked to identify activities they might undertake to achieve any of the goals, few youth identified any practical plans or even any processes at all. This tendency to eschew practical planning efforts correlates well with the tendency to name pragmatic solutions to challenges like the establishment of more services.

In a second test, all focus groups were asked to name activities that might improve the circumstances of homeless youth. Youth consistently named short-term, unstable strategies such as theft, prostitution and drug dealing far more often than stable, reliable long-term strategies such as collecting benefits or seeking employment. When youth reviewed their choices and identified their overdependence on short-term strategies they reinforced rather than revised their decisions.

Youth focused on short-term plans such as immediate ways to meet needs, despite their long-term ineffectiveness. Youth pointed out that it is "hard to think long-term when you haven't eaten" and some youth saw long-term planning as misguided, reflecting that expectations of employment and acceptance were seen as unlikely to them.

Overall, youth consistently displayed a tendency to avoid thinking of strategies to achieve goals that were not immediate, and immediately under their control. In that context, the decision of youth not to propose service expansions as a method of addressing their needs seems predictable rather than counterintuitive.

## **Youth Entering or Exiting Homelessness**

Youth were not surprised to learn that far more young people become homeless at 16 than at any other age. Youth noted that 16 is the legal age to leave home and some pointed out the barriers to accessing shelter and services that face youth under 16. Most youth, however, placed more emphasis on their belief that 16 is the age when rebellious behaviour and resistance to authority begins. This belief was widespread among the youth and was taken as an established fact by most.

Youth in focus groups also confirmed the finding that young people who start life on the street at 15 or younger are likely to remain on the street longer. Youth who became homeless at a young age were seen as unlikely to be able to imagine an alternate outcome. Focus group participants believed that youth who became homeless later were seen both as more likely to seek alternatives and more likely to see remaining on the street as a failing rather than an inevitability and therefore more likely to find ways to leave.

Focus group participants reinforced the finding that many youth leave the street in 3 months or less, seeing the 3 month mark as a watershed point for those who "can't take it". On the other hand, there were no explanations for the large number of homeless youth who had been on the street for 3-4 years. Youth saw the finding that youth on the street of 8 or more years tended to stay indefinitely as reflective of their experience.

## Support from People

Youth in the focus groups were asked to assess data on who youth turn to for support. The survey data indicated that many youth turn to service providers and staff more than to their friends and that youth were more likely to trust some key staff than they were to trust their friends.

Youth in the focus groups were quick to note that "friends" is a loose term which covers a wide range of relationships. Some "friends" were heavily relied on and shared a strong bond, but most youth saw the majority of their associates as acquaintances who are in the relationship out of convenience and some mutual benefit, but who lack a strong commitment to each other. Some youth pointed out that given the right opportunities, they felt most "friends" would "stab you in the back" and reinforced a frequent theme: "you can't count on anyone," "you have to be on your guard".

Some staff working at service agencies, on the other hand, have earned real trust. Staff that have shown understanding, honesty and loyalty, and who have been consistent in their commitments were likely to win the trust of youth in ways that their casual friends were not.

Youth who participated in the focus groups believed that good workers were ones that made them feel confident about themselves. Good workers showed respect and offered dedicated and consistent support. However, youth made it clear that in their experience not all staff met these standards. Most youth had experience with bad workers which they characterized as regarding them as only "a number" and who made them feel judged. It is clear that many youth feel that they are getting useful and effective support from agency staff, however, there is a general consensus that the service system could be improved if more staff conveyed respect for individuals and had a greater ability to provide youth with independent resources (e.g. a larger Personal Needs Allowance).

## **Using Services on Yonge Street**

Youth who used downtown services felt that there were changes happening on Yonge Street. They felt that Yonge Street had become “cleaner” and more gentrified, with more pressure from police. This view was widely held by the youth who had regular access to the Yonge Street area.

Youth from the former suburbs did not tend to comment on the gentrification of Yonge Street but did express reticence about extensive stays in the downtown, finding that the homeless people who frequent Yonge Street were too “hard core”, expressing discomfort about the type of people they were likely to encounter there.

These factors, combined with the high level of mobility, make the location of a facility on Yonge Street less compelling as a strategy than it may have been 20 years ago.

## ***Appendix B: Public Officials Key Informant Interviews***

To better understand the influence of public policy on the homeless and street involved youth who frequent the downtown core and Yonge Street in particular, Public Interest staff interviewed the local City Councillor, staff at the City of Toronto Streets to Homes program for housing homeless people and the Community Liaison Officer with the police division serving the area as well as an academic expert on homelessness.

Respondents agreed that the number of homeless youth seems to have significantly decreased, at the same time that the number of street-involved youth has remained consistent. They felt the demographic makeup of homeless youth in the area has not changed much. The predominant ethnicity is Caucasian, which has not changed over the last several years. There is a sense that about 7 years ago there was some increase in cultural diversity, with more newcomer Caribbean, South-Asian and South-Americans in the downtown core. As well, there seems to be some increase in the number of young women. The Aboriginal population seems to have remained the same.

There has been a shift in subcultures in the area. Caucasian punks, who used to be the predominant subculture, having moved west from the downtown core. It is agreed that there remains a significant "traveler" youth population that arrives in the spring or early summer and moves on in November.

The downtown core and particularly the Yonge Street strip has been seen as "the place to go" and the heart of the city for years. This well known central location makes it a natural destination for both tourists and homeless and street-involved youth. This area used to be central to the sex trade, but this has diminished over the last 5 years. It has been identified, however that this still continues in neighbourhoods nearby. One respondent felt that street hustling has "disappeared with the internet". There was an overall consensus that panhandling has decreased but there is the feeling that there is more selling of underground market items like pirated DVDs. Youth had historically been attracted to the area because it provided access to non-gang related drugs. One person felt there was an increase in drug dealing on bicycles, and increased drug and alcohol use.

All respondents agreed that during the course of the last decade there has been a concerted effort to make tourists more comfortable in the area and as a result there is now a feeling that it is generally safer. There has been an effort to groom the area, and one person said the area "feels wealthier". New buildings have been built where drug trafficking used to take place and there has been a shift from small independent business owners to large chain stores.

Respondents said that the south part of Yonge feels gentrified, but the areas north of Gerrard Street have not yet been affected. There have been 13 expropriated properties, and there are new developments such as Toronto Life and Ryerson University, with more applications for new developments between Victoria and Sherbourne and Gerrard and Queen. One respondent referred to it as a "safer more vibrant shopping and entertainment district".

The local police division's position was that, as a tourist destination, Yonge Street requires particular attention in terms of keeping it safe. There is a Directed Patrol Assignment which is a collaboration between Division 52 (west of Yonge) and Division 51 (east of Yonge), whose purpose is to liaise with tourists, businesses, agencies, service providers and the public, while enforcing the law. It was generally recognized and confirmed by the Community Liaison Officer that there is an increased police presence.

A policy was put in place four years ago to make the police presence more visible, and to maintain a daily presence. There are now officers that receive particular community complaints, such as drug dealing, who respond by establishing a maintained and visible presence in that spot for 30 days. Respondents recognized that the majority of youth are not a danger to anyone but that there is still a feeling that youth, and street-involved youth in particular, are being discouraged from hanging out in the area by security and police.

Respondents indicated a growing sense that homeless youth were not a welcome part of the current face of Yonge Street. There is also a growing tendency for community members to raise complaints about the activities of homeless youth. For example, representatives from the community made a complaint to police about panhandling outside of Sanctuary Ministries on Charles Street and police sent representative to "educate youth on the legality of begging".

The Safe Streets Act was mentioned by several of those we interviewed as having had a significant impact on street-involved youth. Most felt that, in the past, there were "a lot of squeegee kids using the money to buy drugs", but that after the Safe Streets Act was passed they have moved away from this area. A reduction in break-ins and panhandling is also felt to be a result of this Act.

The opening of Dundas Square late in November 2002 was a key moment in the history of Yonge Street. The intersection had been among the most common hangouts of homeless youth but was cleared and renovated as a civic feature that would be the "heart of the city". The Square is operated by a Board of Management which is directed to operate Yonge-Dundas Square as "a business venture". Some respondents felt that the neighbourhood appeared to be "polished up" with the opening of Dundas Square.

Youth that have had encounters with the justice system appear to feel that they are not permitted to hang around the area anymore. Some have been banned entirely from Dundas Square as a result of either criminal acts or loitering. It was suggested that the extent to which security is enforced seems to be particularly associated with this location and so potentially, if the act had taken place somewhere else, the repercussions would not have been the same. One person interviewed said it feels as though there's been a "tight grip" ever since Dundas Square came about.

Everyone interviewed recognized that there are many agencies supporting street involved youth working in the area. For Streets to Homes there has been an expanded mandate from just serving the sleeping rough population to also working with anyone street-involved. There has been work done on building relationships between agencies, the BIA and the police services. The police now have an officer to use as a resource for specific complaints and have also worked with agencies to educate youth on the consequences of panhandling. However, it was identified that the role of the police is to enforce laws, such as the Safe Streets Act, and not to "eliminate homelessness". Police have trained agencies on the process for filing complaints about specific officers.

There is a general feeling that the overall numbers of homelessness youth has decreased across the city, although there are still a lot of youth accessing the shelter system. Respondents pointed out that there is increasing homelessness outside of the downtown core, but that services are less plentiful there. Youth who may wish to move from the increasingly gentrified downtown may find there are insufficient resources available to them. In order for youth to integrate into the community and not feel isolated, they need access to resources that will support them to live independently, otherwise they are at risk of cycling back into street life. Expanding the focus of services from the downtown would therefore be potentially beneficial to Youth who are leaving the area for more hospitable settings.

## ***Appendix C: Service Provider Key Informant Interviews***

### ***Methodology***

Public Interest conducted 20 Key Informant interviews with management and front-line staff at agencies throughout Toronto that provide services for homeless and street-involved youth. These agencies included: Toronto Drop-In Network, The 519 community centre, Covenant House, Street Outreach Services, Children's Aid Society, Canadian Training Institute, Youth Without Shelter, SHOUT clinic, Touchstone Youth Centre, Eva's Place, SOY (Supporting Our Youth), Turning Point Youth Services, Youth Unlimited, YOUTHLINK Innercity, Evergreen, Native Child and Family Services, Second Base Youth Shelter, Maggie's, Sancta Maria House (group home for women aged 15 - 19), and SKETCH. Of the people interviewed, 26% had at less than 5 years experience, 48% had 6 to 10 years experience, and 26% had more than 10 years experience in the field. The least experienced person interviewed had two years of experience. Two self-identified as having experienced homelessness or street-involvement themselves.

Four agencies identified their catchment area as non-geographic, most identified that their catchment area is all of the GTA, two are specific to downtown core, two served all areas west of Yonge Street, and one served the area east of Victoria Park. Ages served range from 14 to 29, with some of the services being gender-specific.

### ***Findings***

#### **Reaching Youth**

Most of the agencies conduct some form of outreach. Youth are connected to the service by referrals from other agencies or by self-referral through word of mouth. Four of the agencies received referrals from social services such as hospitals, police and the City of Toronto. A few indicated that youth find out about them through their web presence. Two agencies said that they advertise throughout the city in free newspapers and on television. Many conduct workshops at other agencies and in schools.

Distributing pamphlets and circulating newsletters or activity schedules also helps agencies reach out to participants. A few of the agencies also identified attending special events such as Pride Parade and Nuit Blanche as ways to be more visible to homeless youth. Many of the agencies have staff specifically dedicated to outreach, some full-time.

In addition to delivering services on site, seven of the agencies have drop-in programs. Many conduct outreach and provide services by foot, such as distributing harm reduction tools. A couple of agencies said they send out volunteers to interact with street involved youth one-on-one. A few use vehicles such as bicycles and vans.

## **Client Populations**

Many of the agencies already have specifically targeted populations as a part of their mandate. Most provide services specifically geared toward the homeless population but some provide general services that just happen to have attracted homeless youth. About half of the agencies identified specifically targeting populations, including young women, specific racialized or ethno-cultural communities, and people with concurrent disorders of mental health and addictions, or mental health and legal issues. Some are focusing more on substance abuse prevention education.

Most agencies have seen some increase in diversity and in racialized youth. The number of refugees had risen significantly but dropped sharply after immigration practices changed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Some agencies see this population as beginning to increase again.

Clients appear to be getting younger and the number of women appears to be increasing. There is a significant increase in mental health issues among homeless youth and an increase in alcohol, crack-cocaine and heroin use. The homeless LGBT population was seen as increasing. Populations of "hidden homeless", including couch surfers, were believed to be increasing. Some staff felt it had become harder to make money off the streets, with more police targeting racialized youth and youth "working" the streets. Two providers, however, said they noticed no changes in the homeless youth population.

## **Subcultures and identifiable groups**

Several of the respondents said that they perceive their clients as identifying with subcultures from across the spectrum, including squeegeers, punks and drug users, but also noted that many of the youth don't self-identify. Two respondents cautioned against overly simplistic definitions as some youth try to hide their homelessness, and others are those that are highly street-involved and embrace that identity, but are technically housed.

Many identified an increase in lesbian, gay, bisexual and two-spirited populations, a few specified an increase in transgendered youth, and particularly transgendered youth involved in the sex trade. One agency pointed out that there is a difference between sexual orientation and identity.

The most commonly identified subculture was punks, although this may be because this group is easy to identify. Punks were seen as being particularly transient.

Drug addicted youth and dealers were identified as a specific group. Mental health was specified by one agency worker, who estimated that 25% of youth have mental health issues. Many identified a population of gang-involved youth (who should not to be confused with youth that identify as "gangsta").

## **Education**

All but one agency noted that some youth participating in their programs are in school or some form of training. Estimates of the number of youth in school ranged from about 10% to 80%, and in the case of one group home, 100%. One shelter said that they recently installed 20 new stable beds in order that youth could study and continue their education through to university level. In this shelter 80% of youth are attending school as a result of the positive influence on the other youth at the shelter.

## **Seasonal Change**

Most agency staff saw changes in the youth population that can be credited to seasonal change. They find spring to be the busiest season, summer to be the season when homelessness is most visible, and fall to bring a big shift to shelters. Populations dwindle again as the traveling youth move on later in the fall. One agency said that changes seemed to correlate with the school year because there were younger youth accessing services in the spring (perhaps leaving home in conjunction with dropping out), but withdraw from services in the fall (perhaps as they return home to try again in the fall).

The predominant pattern of travel still seems to be from the Maritimes, to Quebec to Toronto, to BC for the winter. Smaller numbers of youth travel from the prairies to Toronto. One shelter identified a sharp increase in occupancy this summer as a result of targeted outreach. Some of the transient summer population are travelers that either spend their winters in BC or find winter housing. Others are youth that are at risk of failing public school and drop-out to “check out the street scene” in the summer. These youth often return to school and housing in the fall. Economic opportunities in western Canada and a bad economy in the Maritimes draw youth to Alberta where they can make money. Only one mentioned youth coming from the United States.

### **Shifts and challenges in the sector**

Service providers felt that some of the changes they have seen are a reflection of a shift in society towards greater awareness and diversity in Toronto. Most specifically this has meant a greater diversity in the youth that they serve.

Agencies sensed that young people are increasingly seen by the public as the perpetrators of more violent crime, and that this is causing a general societal fear of youth, and particularly street-involved youth. They identified an increase in the “criminalization” of homelessness, resulting in increased policing with a more punitive approach. Overwhelmingly service providers identified family breakdown as the most significant cause of youth homelessness.

Some service providers identified new policies as having a positive impact, such as the Streets to Homes Project; however, negative consequences were identified far more frequently. These included changes to Ontario Works and the Safe Schools Act which placed new pressures on homeless youth. Several respondents identified problems with a lack of financial resources that resulted in a lack of staff and no ability to offer services beyond basic needs, such as entertainment.

Some respondents noted that access to detox beds has been “drastically reduced” which has had a dramatic impact. A consequence of which is the youth in need of these specialized services are now ending up in hospital emergency units or shelters. Exacerbating the situation, crack-cocaine is seen as more accessible and cheaper than in the past and use seems to be on the rise. It was identified that there is a need for addiction services that are geared specifically toward youth, including rehabilitation and long-term housing.

Many service providers felt that there is an increased demand for supportive housing for youth with mental health issues. They also identified long waitlists to access psychiatric care as a significant challenge. One service provider suggested that a positive impact on this could be made by providing short-term counseling to youth who are on waitlists.

Housing for youth in general is a greater challenge as a result of an already challenging housing market.

Other challenges identified, in addition to the continuing stigma associated with accessing their services, include a lack of “aftercare program” for youth older than 21 to ease them into independent living, and several indicated youth lacking legal ID as a barrier.

Some service providers felt that the lack of general societal support results in an absence of positive role models for the youth other than agency staff. There is a suggestion that some service providers have unintentionally developed unrealistic expectations of youth, which is felt to be a reflection of a lack of experience and understanding of “what it’s like for this population”.

Some service providers had the opinion that agencies are working in isolation from each other. This has had a negative impact on service-usage by transient youth who may already be reticent to access services particularly if they find that they have to begin the intake process all over with each new agency. Although some service providers felt that agencies are working together now more than before, they still believed more could be done. There was the suggestion that if agencies could share more information they would be able to service clients more effectively.

## **Underserved Groups**

Agency staff identified the youth least likely to access services as the chronically street-involved youth who are already distrustful of many agencies. YOUTHLINK has had some success building relationships with this population, but those who have been independent for some time are less likely to access shelters as are those who have profound addiction issues. Those with concurrent mental health and addiction issues are also hard to connect with, as are those with disabilities and severe mental health issues. Youth with full-time jobs often lack the opportunities to access services during regular business hours.

Gang-involved youth tend to be less engaged with services. Youth who speak little English have very little access to services, and undocumented youth tend to be cautious about using formal programs. Youth who are under 16 often shy away from services for fear of being reported, though some access

services by giving a false age. Muslim youth and Asian youth tend to avoid shelters in part because of cultural stigmas.

Most respondents identified long wait lists for housing and mental health services as barriers for youth. The second most identified was the youth's fear and lack of trust in service providers.

Predominantly, agencies identified a real challenge in supports for transgendered youth, but also for the broader LGBT community. For example, any gendered service poses a significant barrier to providing services for transgendered youth, both for those that identify as transgendered, and for those that identify as a particular gender. Unequal gender distribution of beds at shelters, with roughly 2 male beds to 1 female bed, was identified as creating a challenging dynamic.

Discrimination based on race was identified less frequently by service providers, but was noted as an issue by some. Securing housing for Black male youth is a particular challenge. Cultural expectations make Caucasian homeless youth relatively easy to identify and prioritize for service but homeless Black youth who don't "dress the part" are less likely to be identified and served. Black youth are also more inclined to hide their homelessness. Many agency staff identified this as an issue that is specifically dealt with through policies and programming. Agency staff felt that their organizations have been successful in their efforts to prevent discrimination based on gender, race or sexual orientation in the practice of their agencies.

### **Conflicts Affecting Services**

Access to service was not severely affected by clearly identifiable inter-group conflicts, according to agency staff. Gangs, and people wearing gang signifiers have caused some barriers to accessing services, and homophobia was mentioned by some respondents as creating barriers. Several mentioned general social group and interpersonal conflicts that arise from time to time as a barrier to accessing specific services, but not in a consistent and continuous way.

## **Interpersonal Supports**

Agency staff indicated that Youth have a big couch surfing network, which is precarious and provides for a significant population of housed but heavily street involved. Youth also support each other by information sharing, particularly in the form of peer support from someone who understands from their own experience and treats them with respect and dignity. Agency staff see youth as creating their own “street family”, to provide them with both emotional support and protection. This sense of security and stability in establishing a sense of community is particularly important when being bounced around shelters. There is some potential for negative impacts as well from street youth peer groups, such as recruitment to gangs and sex work. One service provider said “if they don’t let go of their friends in shelters they often end up back in shelters”.

## **Service Needs**

Staff overall said that drop-ins are the most used service they provide. The second most identified was counseling and support workers. Health and dental clinics are popular as well as harm reduction services. Vocational programs and housing were also identified. A few agencies identified that they used to provide more services in a workshop format but that they are no longer well attended and have reduced this programming. Supportive housing and more mental health services were overwhelmingly identified as needed. Supportive housing for youth with mental health issues is a critical priority. One respondent suggested that there should be more counseling provided on a “drop-in” basis. Affordable housing in general was also identified as something that is needed. Some agencies felt early intervention and preventative programs were beneficial and that support in obtaining ID and access to dental care would be helpful. Some respondents believed that there was a need for a shelter specifically for LGBT youth. One service provider suggested that there are two gaps on the street, after 18 and after 24, and suggested that these transitional points were when youth particularly need support.

While many agency staff said they felt that services should be delivered “all over”, there was an even split between those that felt services should be located downtown and those that felt that services should be located outside of downtown, far enough away from the temptations of the downtown lifestyle. Several specifically mentioned that mental health services should be located throughout the city.

Overwhelmingly, mental health was identified as the most pressing health issue facing homeless and street-involved youth. It was also identified by

most respondents as an issue that needs more services. Most agency staff acknowledged that there was an ongoing need to meet basic needs, such as food and housing, and the health issues related to a transient lifestyle, such as bad back and feet and infections, were in need of being addressed. Sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV, were also identified as a significant health issue. Preventative health care and poor diet were also seen as a pressing health issue, as well as managing drug withdrawal and substance use. Many agencies said that they think these needs aren't being met because of very long wait lists, and that there is more funding needed and more staff. The Sherbourne Health Centre was mentioned as doing a good job of serving the LGBT population, such as with their Infirmary, but they have a very long wait list. In terms of medical care, some suggested that agencies should adopt a "don't ask don't tell" approach to support undocumented youth accessing services.

## **Changes in Agencies**

Most agencies recognized a need to adopt policies that ingrained anti-discriminatory practices for businesses and agencies supporting street-involved youth. Some agencies felt that additional training for agency staff including anti-oppression training and anti-poverty training should be pursued. Agencies recognized a need to create a positive environment where youth feel like they can be themselves; otherwise, they won't access services. This would include more harm reduction policies, education around how to support sex-workers, and more training on how to connect with youth while still remaining professional. One person felt that there should be policies around addressing street-involved and homeless youth with minimal conditions attached, as well as more flexibility in the hours that services are provided. Several agency staff suggested more client-centered policies would help, as well as incorporating more opportunities to put youth in leadership roles within organizations, such as on advisory committees. One staff said "the biggest strength and untapped potential is the capacity of youth. That can bring change".

## **Funding**

There is a strong sense that the city should be promoting supportive-housing. There should be more funding to agencies to expand youth specific programming, and the way that agencies are funded should be examined. There should be more flexibility in policies to support programs that have outcomes that are difficult to measure. The overall emphasis on counting the number of clients served rather than focusing on the quality and effectiveness of the services provided should be re-examined. There should be more funding for drug-rehabilitation programs that are focused on treating the cause and not the symptom. The funding formula for Personal Needs Allowance and shelter per diems should be revisited as it is not enough to meet the needs of the youth in Toronto and not enough to meet the needs of youth in school, who require books and transit costs.

## **Other Issues**

Several talked about the “criminalization of poverty” and the policing of the community. Many service agency staff felt that this community is over policed and targeted with selective enforcement such as jay-walking tickets. Some respondents felt that policies prohibiting pan-handling should be revisited as they saw it as an ineffective strategy that swept people from one area of the city to another. Respondents also felt that sending youth to jail is likely to deepen rather than lessen their long term crises, by giving them a criminal record and putting them at a higher risk of developing addictions and health risks resulting in decreased capacity to successfully get off the streets. Some believed that police should use shelters as an alternative to jail and that additional funding should go into hiring community workers which is a much more successful, as well as cost-effective, approach to offset crime. Agency staff often thought that police efforts might be better spent enforcing the laws to protect and intervene on behalf of homeless youth when there is a theft or an assault.

Respondents also thought that the response to the needs of immigrant and refugee youth should also be re-examined. Refugee youth that arrive are placed in the youth shelter system along with street-involved youth and they are already very vulnerable. This creates a potentially negative situation that could be better addressed with more discrete streams of services.

## **Appendix D: Demographics Outline**

### **Targeted Segmentation**

Gender:

Transgendered 5-6%

Women 30-35%

Men 60-65%

Age:

People under the age of 16 4-5%

Immigration and ethnicity:

Refugees 5%

Immigrants 20%

Latino 2-3%

Caucasian 60%

Aboriginal 15%

Afro-Caribbean and African 20%

Asian 1-2%

Affiliation:

Gang members 10-15%

Punks 5%

Sex Trade 5%

Squeegeers 10%

Mental Health 15%

In School 20%

## ***Focus Group Basic Demographics***

In total there were 56 participants in the focus groups. Of those 34 were male and 24 were female. Only one person identified themselves as being younger than 15. The largest category represented was in the 16-20 age range with 29 participants. The range of 21-25 had 22 participants and only 5 participants were over the age of 26.

81% of the participants identified as sleeping primarily in a shelter, with couch surfing following at 14%, and 4% participants identified that they are now renting in an apartment.

36% had first become street involved between 1 and 3 years ago. 35% had been street involved for 4 to 6 years. 15% had been street involved for 7 or more years, 8% for 3 to 6 months, 4% half a year, only 1 had been street involved for less than 3 months.

There were 25 occurrences of youth "hanging out" in the downtown core, 13 occurrences of youth hanging out in the downtown west, 13 occurrences of youth hanging out in the west, 11 occurrences of youth hanging out in the east, and 12 youth identified that they travel between these locations to hang out.

28 youth identified that they access services regularly, whereas 29 identified that they do not. However, considering that 81% of the participants identified that they regularly sleep in a shelter, the youth predominantly did not recognize this as a service that they were accessing.

## ***Peer Interviews Basic Demographics***

Of the youth interviewed, 62% identified themselves as male, 34% identified themselves as female, and 4% identified themselves as transgendered.

Only 2.4% identified as being younger than 16. Despite the strict confidentiality assurances, this was probably greatly impacted by CAS laws that dictate that a minor must have a legal guardian and will be taken into custody if they attempt to access services. It was generally understood by the peer interviewers that many more of the youth interviewed were under the age of 16 but would not identify themselves as such. 3.4% identified as being 16 years old. The largest group was between the ages of 20 and 22, at 35.3%. 27.1% identified as being 17 to 19. The third largest was between the ages of 23 and 24, at 24.2%. There were only 7.7% that identified as 25 or older.

13.7% identified their ethno-cultural background as Aboriginal, 26.9% identified as black youth, 3.4% identified as Asian (including south Asian). 22.1% identified their ethnocultural background as European, 1% identified as Latino, and 32.8% predominantly self-identified as being from multiple backgrounds or other ethnicities.

6.1% of respondents identified as having been born in Africa, 11.1% were born in the Caribbean, 2.5% were born in Asia, 5.6% were born in Europe, and 1.5% were born in South American. 22.7% were born in the GTA, 14.6% were born in Ontario, 32.3% were born in Canada but not Ontario, and 3% identified as having been born elsewhere.

We asked youth about the geographic areas that they hang out in, in Toronto. 30% indicated that they spend time predominantly in the Downtown core. The second highest group, at 25%, spends time in the downtown west. These numbers drop dramatically to negligible numbers in the downtown east and north-west, with only 1% combined. Further removed from the city's centre, this number increases again to 32% divided nearly equally between east and west. Only 3% spent time in the north. 9% identified that they spend time in more than one of these areas.



---

Changing Patterns for Street Involved Youth

[www.ysm.ca](http://www.ysm.ca)

Dec 2009