

Study of B.C.'s street-involved and marginalized youth yields surprises

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Vancouver, BC -- One in three British Columbia street-involved and marginalized youth living in abandoned buildings, cars or on community streets report they still attend school, according to a new survey whose findings show resilience in the face of rejection and violence.

Called "Against the Odds," the study offers a profile of more than 760 street-involved youth - adolescents who have been without stable housing or who are active in street life - aged 12-18 who live in nine communities throughout B.C. Conducted between October and December 2006 with the help of street-involved youth and social support agencies, it offers regional data as a follow-up to a 2000 study also conducted by McCreary Centre Society. Both studies were primarily funded by the B.C. Ministry of Children and Family Development.

"Many of the findings may be surprising to communities," says principal investigator Elizabeth Saewyc, research director for McCreary Centre Society. "These youth have faced shocking levels of rejection and violence, both within their families and on the street. But despite having the odds stacked against them, most of them are amazingly strong and resilient, working hard, attending school and looking for opportunities to improve their lives."

Key findings include:

- One in three youth still attended school while staying in an abandoned building, tent, car, squat or on the street.
- Aboriginal youth were disproportionately represented among street youth, with sharp increases since 2000. For example, in Vancouver the percentage rose from 37 to 65 per cent and in Prince Rupert from 76 to 88 per cent.
- Gay lesbian, bisexual and teens were also over-represented: one in three females and one in 10 males identified as gay, lesbian and bisexual.
- One in three youth reported they were working at a legal job.
- Thirteen per cent of youth were parents, and more than one-third of these parents' children lived with them.
- 57 per cent of females and 15 per cent reported sexual abuse, either in their family, outside their family, or both. More than one in three of the youth reported they had been sexually exploited.
- More than one in four youth had been exposed to, and used, alcohol or marijuana before the age of 11, often before becoming street-involved.
- Contrary to findings from 2000, B.C. does not appear to be absorbing large numbers of youth from outside B.C. 84 per cent of youth in the survey were from communities across BC.

- Youth in each of the nine communities surveyed identified job training and shelter as the most needed services.

“This is not just a Vancouver study. These problems exist everywhere,” Saewyc says. “We spoke with youth in nine communities across the province, and asked where they’d come from. Most of them are from B.C., and many of them had lived in several places within B.C. before their current location. Nearly half were surveyed in the same community where they’d lived before becoming street-involved.”

Researchers’ recommendations include support for struggling families, especially parents of younger teens. Substance abuse treatment, mental health services, safe and supportive housing, and job training are also needed. In addition, they recommend that Aboriginal organizations be given resources to offer safe housing and other supportive services to youth.

“Youth have the same rights as everyone else to live in an environment that is healthy, safe and nurturing,” says Saewyc. “We need to support distressed families, to help their children before they end up on the street.”

Next steps include further consultation with Aboriginal communities in B.C. and a follow-up analysis focused on marginalized and street-involved Aboriginal youth. That study will be launched in May and results will be reported in late 2007.

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