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New McCreary study finds high rates of street involved and marginalized Aboriginal youth in BC

Youth and communities call for more services for families, youth

A new McCreary report released today provides a detailed analysis of the experience of marginalized and street involved Aboriginal youth in B.C.

Called *Moving Upstream*, the report analyzes the experiences in nine B.C. communities of 410 homeless, inadequately housed, street involved and marginalized Aboriginal youth ages 12 to 18. It also includes the response to these findings from Aboriginal community members, and calls for increased services.

The report is a further analysis of an MCFD funded McCreary Centre Society survey conducted in late 2006 of marginalized and street involved B.C. youth that found more than half the youth (54 per cent) who participated identified as Aboriginal. This was a significant increase over a similar study in 2000.

Concerned about the increase, community members requested more information about the health of these youth. With funding provided by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), McCreary Centre, with support from UBC School of Nursing, was able to hire a team of Aboriginal researchers to analyze the findings and hold discussions with Aboriginal service providers, Elders and community members in each of the nine communities from the original study.

Community discussions suggested several possible reasons for the significant increase in Aboriginal participants between the 2000 and 2006 study, including an increase in the Aboriginal youth population, the effects of a lack of affordable housing and inadequate social assistance, and youth feeling more willing to identify as Aboriginal.

“Although the original survey was not created solely for Aboriginal youth, these findings suggest Aboriginal youth continue to experience the legacy of colonization, and the cultural disconnection that this causes,” said Annie Smith, Executive Director of the McCreary Centre, a non-profit organization concerned with the health of young people in British Columbia. “I think the report clearly shows the need to ensure there are Aboriginal-specific programs and services available to children, youth and their families in their communities.”

“The challenges Aboriginal youth face in all these communities are sobering,” said UBC Associate Professor Dr. Elizabeth Saewyc, who serves as McCreary Centre’s Research Director and was Principal Investigator of the study. “At the same time, it’s important to recognize how many of the young people we surveyed had strong hopes for their future, and were working hard to create a better life. Despite the obstacles, many were going to school, were working, were connected to their family, and reaching for healthier opportunities.”

Other key findings include:

- A large number of the youth reported leaving home before entering their teen years. Over 40 per cent had first run away at age 12 or younger, and one in three had been kicked out by age 12, underscoring the importance of early interventions with families.
- 47 per cent had gone hungry because they or their parents didn’t have money for food.
- Violence was a significant issue for most of the youth. 63 per cent reported having witnessed family violence, and almost 60 per cent having been physically abused. One in four reported experiencing racial discrimination in the past year.
- Despite the problems they face, Aboriginal youth in the worst circumstances are still doing their best to complete their education. Forty-one per cent of those who lived in squats, abandoned buildings, tents, on the street, in hotels, and in shelters were still attending school.
- Young people said their communities needed more services; the most common services needed were for safe and affordable housing, job training and work experience.
- The community discussions highlighted the importance of connecting street-involved youth with cultural and traditional teachings in order to strengthen their relationships to their cultures and communities.

According to Saewyc, both the youth and community members identified housing as a key issue. “At each of the community discussions, our research team heard about low vacancy rates, high rents, discrimination from landlords, and the lack of housing in many First Nations’ communities and on reserves,” she said.

In the report introduction, BC’s Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond wrote, “...a closer look at marginalized and street involved Aboriginal youth tells a grim story of our service delivery system failing to reach Aboriginal youth and the cracks in our civil society which challenge the most vulnerable.”

For more information about the report, please contact:

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The full report is available for free download as a PDF at www.mcs.bc.ca.

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***Moving Upstream* Backgrounder**

The McCreary Centre Society's original study was entitled *Against the Odds: A profile of marginalised and street involved youth in BC*. (Report also available at www.mcs.bc.ca)

The survey was administered in late 2006 to young people involved in a street lifestyle, including those who were homeless, panhandling, involved in the sex trade, selling or using drugs, engaging in criminal activities, or who had recently left these situations.

The survey was a pencil and paper questionnaire based on previous McCreary youth health surveys, with additional input from an advisory committee of representatives from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth-serving organizations from nine communities across B.C. Communities that participated in the study were Abbotsford and Mission, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo, Prince George, Prince Rupert, Surrey, Vancouver and Victoria.

More than half of the 762 youth who completed the survey indicated Aboriginal identity (54 per cent). In contrast, only 10 per cent of youth in B.C. schools are Aboriginal (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Among the 410 Aboriginal youth in the survey, the majority reported First Nations status (59 per cent), while another one in four said they were Aboriginal without status (26 per cent), 11 per cent were Métis, and one per cent were Inuit. The rest either indicated Indigenous ancestry from outside of Canada, or did not provide specific information about their Aboriginal ancestry.

Youth between the ages of 12 and 18 completed the survey. The average age was 16 years old. 48 per cent were male, 51 per cent were female, and one per cent were transgender or did not provide this information.

Street involved and marginalized Aboriginal youth reported a number of challenges that can affect their health long-term. Among these:

- 42% of those who participated in the survey had been in foster care.
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth (LGB) were highly over-represented, especially among female participants.
- 30% of males and 23% of females had been sexually exploited. Youth who reported physical or sexual abuse were twice as likely to be sexually exploited as those who were not abused.
- 1 in 3 youth had been pregnant or had caused a pregnancy.
- Consistent with other street involved youth, Aboriginal youth were likely to report a family history of substance use, as well as to use drugs or alcohol themselves.
- 30% of females and 18% of males had attempted suicide at least once during the past year.