

Still without Shelter: A Description of Issues Faced by Street Youth In Winnipeg 2007

Brief Summary

The purpose of the report was to describe the characteristics and issues of street youth in Winnipeg in order to better meet their needs. A similar study was conducted in 2005 and identified key areas of concerns (e.g., substance abuse, mental health issues) for this underserved group. At that point it was decided that a follow-up study should be conducted to continue to monitor the needs and issues of this group.

With the assistance of staff from Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY) and N'dinawe, the second survey of Winnipeg street youth was undertaken by the AFM in the summer of 2007. A total of 166 youth were recruited and completed both a questionnaire and an interview. The survey involved a range of questions, including demographics, questions about family background and history, and a number of standardized measures of substance use and dependence. The focus of the interview was on mental health issues, as these have been identified as significant problems for this population. Each respondent received \$25 for completing both the questionnaire and the interview.

Approximately 60% of the street youth identified as male and the largest proportion (63%) as First Nations or Metis. Most of the participants had lived in Manitoba all of their life and many had worked in the past year. The mean age of females was 18 and for males it was 19. Most of the participants had not yet completed high school or had dropped out altogether. Similar to 2005, the results indicated that the situation for youth living on the streets remains a life of risky behaviors, mental health issues and substance abuse and/or dependence. Several of them have reported abuse by a family member, few have graduated from high school and many of them meet the criteria for high risk drinking. Many meet the criteria for several mental health issues as determined by a diagnostic interview. The highlights are summarized below.

The responsibility of this social issues remains with a multitude of stakeholders. Although outreach programs are helpful in that they provide the initial contact for some of these youth, a seamless system where most of their needs can be addressed simultaneously would be ideal. The results have been shared with our key stakeholders (with reports being sent out to the broader community in the near future) and discussions have been on-going on how best to address the issues that are faced by street youth.

Highlights

Family

- Over half of respondents had been placed in at least one foster home.
- Just over 40% had been physically abused in the year before they left home.
- Nearly 20% of females and 8% of males were sexually abused before age 8.

- Nearly half of all participants said that they considered one or both of their parents/guardians as heavy drinkers.

Education and Employment

- Only 20% of street involved youth received a high school diploma.
- Less than 20% of participants reported regular work as a main source of income.
- Over 25% of participants reported their main source of income as welfare, EI, or other government support. The next highest sources of income were getting money from family or friends, panhandling, dealing drugs or doing drug runs, prostitution and theft.

Substance Use & Dependence

- More than 80% of all participants are current drinkers.
- Two-thirds of all participants were classified as high risk drinkers or showed signs of alcohol dependence and/or abuse.
- About half of current drinkers had their first drink by age 12.
- 96% of respondents have tried marijuana in their lifetime, with half currently smoking daily.
- Excluding alcohol and marijuana, stimulants and crystal meth were the most frequently used drugs, with about 5% and 8% (respectively) of youth reporting to use these drugs daily.

Mental Health

- Most participants reported symptoms of more than one psychological disorder. Discounting the substance use disorders, the average psychological disorder per person is nearly 3.
- Over half report suicidal thoughts or tendencies, with 20% meeting criteria for high risk.
- After depression and suicide ideation, the most prevalent mental health issues are anti-social personality and psychotic disorders.

Criminal Involvement

- Participants report involvement in a variety of illegal activities including theft, assault, drug trafficking and vandalism.
- The average number of different criminal activities per person in the past year was more than 2.
- Over one third of females and nearly two thirds of males have spent time in a detention facility.
- More males than females reported involvement with the sex trade.