



WHAT BRINGS YOUTH TO THE STREETS OF DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER?

BACKGROUND & METHOD

- It is estimated that between 500 and 1,000 youth in Vancouver may be without shelter on any given night. However, little is known about what brings youth to the streets in the first place, and what makes it difficult for them to leave this environment.
- To learn more, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 38 young drug users who were spending the majority of their time on the streets of downtown Vancouver at the time of the interview.
- Researchers were interested in how young people described becoming involved with street life in downtown Vancouver.

QUICK FACT

OVERALL, THE COMBINATION OF HOMELESSNESS, HEAVY DRUG USE, AND INVOLVEMENT IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES APPEARED TO MAKE IT PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT FOR YOUTH TO LEAVE STREET LIFE BEHIND.

FINDINGS

- Many participants reported that they moved to downtown Vancouver often in search of affordable housing, when their previous living situations “fell apart” or became “unlivable.”
- Shortly after moving, many participants ended up homeless and involved in harmful drug use practices and risky income generation activities, including sex work and drug dealing.
- Youth reported that heavy drug use made it increasingly difficult to pay for housing or find a job. They also reported that getting involved in drug dealing and sex work resulted in further emotional stress that often led to more harmful drug use.
- Overall, the combination of these circumstances—homelessness, heavy drug use, and involvement in illegal activities—was what appeared to make it particularly difficult for youth to leave street life behind.

IMPLICATIONS

- To prevent entry into street life, the findings of this study emphasize the need to target early interventions at youth experiencing serious trouble at home or at school.
- Strategies to keep youth from becoming entrenched in street life may include providing access to safe and affordable housing, as well as opportunities for higher education and legitimate employment.
- For young people who are currently on the streets, there is an urgent need for affordable and safe housing combined with drug treatment facilities.

Fast D, Small W, Wood E, Kerr T. *Coming 'down here': Young people's reflections on becoming entrenched in a local drug scene. Social Science & Medicine*, 2009; 69(8): 1204-1210.

