

Street Youth in Canada

John Hagan and Bill McCarthy describe street youth in Vancouver and Toronto in their 1997 book *Mean Streets*. This book documents the findings from a series of interviews with close to 500 street youth aged 19 to 24. These interviews followed the experience of the street youth during the summer of 1992. Some of the findings:

1. Getting to the street. The importance of the social environment is evident in the histories of these street-youth. The vast majority of them related a history of conflicts with their families and at school. Many of their parents had difficulties of their own and frequently afflicted by unemployment and substance abuse. These youth also were likely to have lived in several different kinds of families, with two thirds of them having left reconstituted families (stepparents), single or foster parents, or group homes. Almost all of them had lived with a caretaker that used physical discipline and three-fifths had been hit so hard that they experienced bruising or bleeding. More females than males were sexually abused before leaving home. However, there was typically not a single event that caused them to leave but rather a series of events that precedes leaving.

2. On the street. While many street youth stated that they cherished the freedom they experienced on the street, their daily activities were focused around a search for food shelter and money. These activities placed them frequently in threatening situations, and they expressed a common concern about their safety. Many of the social services and facilities that are available for street people in general are not suitable for these youth. The lack of facilities for them may be caused in part of the fact that they are relative invisibility. There are few obvious signs of their street status noticeable to the careless observer.

3. Getting off the street. Although many street-youth move back and forth between living on the street and living in more conventional settings, a majority of the youth interviewed had been on the street for more than a year. Leaving the street is a difficult process for these youth, in part because of their disadvantaged status that originally led to them being on the streets in the first place, which has worsened since being on the street. First, they have no permanent address, thus limiting the possibilities of employers being able to contact them for work. Secondly, they lack the resources necessary to acquire the equipment and clothing required for many jobs.

The most important determinant of leaving the street is to find a job. Once employed, the street youth experienced what Hagan and McCarthy labelled "context dissonance" between their two social contexts—street and work. The irregularities of street life are very different from the regularities that employment requires. At the same time, the resources acquired by the individualistic efforts of employment are incompatible with the sharing that occurs within their "street family."

Source

Hagan, John and Bill McCarthy, 1997. *Mean Streets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.