Street-involved youth in Canada

By Cris (Cristine) Renna

An estimated 150,000 youth are street-involved youth in Canada, but it is suspected that this number may actually be much higher. Certain youth are at greater risk of becoming street-involved, including Aboriginal youth; lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer (LGBTQ) youth; youth in government care; and young males. Youth become street-involved for a multitude of reasons. The most common is conflict within the family; other reasons include wanting independence or to move to a larger city, being thrown out of the house and trouble with the law.

Street-involved youth can encounter many challenges in their day-to-day lives. They may experience stigma and discrimination, lack of access to health and social services, high levels of interaction with the criminal justice system, lack of access to jobs and education, family instability, and poor access to nutrition. Street-involved youth —particularly those that are LGBTQ—are also more vulnerable to sexual, physical and weapon-related assault, as well as robbery. Street-involved youth also have higher mortality rates: more than 11 times that of the general youth population.

Despite these challenges, street-involved youth often show great resiliency. They often have a strong sense of self-worth, feel secure in their beliefs, and are confident in their abilities. As well, they often have positive coping mechanisms that help them deal with the challenges they experience; these include having friends, time for personal reflection, interests and hobbies, and hope for the future.

Rates of HIV, hepatitis C and STIs among street-involved youth

Street-involved youth are particularly impacted by HIV, hepatitis C and STIs, with HIV rates three times that of the Canadian adult population, and hepatitis C rates more than six times that of the general Canadian population. Furthermore, street-involved youth who inject drugs are four times more likely to have hepatitis C infection than street-involved youth who don’t inject. Finally, STIs rates can be up to 30 times higher among street-involved youth than among youth in the general population.

Sexual activity

Research tells us that participating in high-risk sexual activity is an integral part of street life—activities that put them at risk for HIV and STI transmission. Street-involved youth are often sexually active, engage in sex at an earlier age, and have multiple sex partners. They report low rates of condom use and some also engage in sex work.

Substance use
Many street-involved youth use drugs. Youth may turn to drugs to help them deal with the difficult realities they face on the street. Among those who use drugs, many engage in injection drug use and share needles, injecting equipment and crack pipes—all of which put them at risk for HIV and/or hepatitis C.

Older youth are more likely to inject drugs, perhaps because this becomes more normalized the longer a young person lives on the street. Youth who consider injection drug use unacceptable prior to becoming street-involved may change their minds as they repeatedly witness others use injection drugs. While younger youth are less likely to take up injection drug use, those who do are more likely to participate in risky behaviours such as sharing needles.

An innovative intervention

Eva’s Initiatives, a Toronto-based agency that provides services to street-involved youth, has addressed the need for youth to reconnect with their families before youth become entrenched in street life. By doing so, the agency hopes to prevent the engagement in high-risk behaviours that street life promotes and sustains. To this end, Eva’s has created its award-winning Family Reconnect program, which works with young people aged 16 to 24 who are already, or are at risk of becoming, street-involved and their families. Young people who have recently left their family home or who have had recent contact with their family are seen as soon as possible to help facilitate reconnection. Through the program, young people and their families (however the young person defines family) are offered supportive counselling as well as referrals to other supports in the community. The focus of this counselling varies with each family and often encompasses areas such as grief and loss, living well with mental illness, anger management, life skills, dealing with family conflict and communication breakdown.

Program coordinators work with young people and their families towards various outcomes. For some of the youth, returning home may not be an option, but increased communication and a better rapport can encourage family members to support the youth as they establish their own lives. For others, relationships improve so much with their families that they elect to return home. Sometimes, the program is not successful at opening up the lines of communication; nonetheless, the counselling process has proven to be effective in assisting them to move forward in their lives and develop as healthy young people.

The Family Reconnect Program did wonders for us … After struggling through the years of my troubled youth, my family and I couldn’t be closer, if not geographically at least in every other way. My parents are here for me and I am here for them. It’s been 10 months living on my own and finally I feel some stability.

—Bre-Ann

Initially, we sought the advice of a specific Counselor [at the Family Reconnect Program]…for our son who was struggling with many issues, including no life focus, a volatile temperament, and disrespect for our family values… The Counselor offered us support at a time when we did not know where else to turn. Our son was provided with a safe place to stay, in addition to professional assessments and in-house counseling. All the while, my husband and I continued to receive guidance that included strategies on how we could cope within our lives and on how we could help our son help himself. Most importantly, we were provided with an empathetic sounding board and we were never judged.

—anonymous

If you are interested in finding out more about the Family Reconnect Program, visit Eva’s Reconnect Toolkit. To read more first-person accounts of the impact the program has had on families, see the Family Storybook.

Moving upstream

Programs such as Family Reconnect underline the need to move upstream and work with families, to prevent youth from becoming street-involved whenever possible. This program also highlights the growing understanding that there may be pivotal moments for some young people, where intervention could prevent them from transitioning to a life on the street. And as they reconnect with family and avoid life on the street, these youth become less likely to
engage in behaviours that place them at risk for HIV, hepatitis C and STIs.

* Family could mean a community of origin, a cousin, grandparent, family friend, guardian, sibling, biological or non-biological parent(s). This definition is up to the young person to discern.

References

About the author(s)

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