**<1>Introduction**

Canada and many other high-income countries have a sizable number of youth who are “homeless.” It is a premise of this book that the lifestyles, subcultures, and pathways of their world are familiar historically but have come to be seen as unique as a consequence of differential labelling of age-specific behaviour. In the following chapters, we present findings from our longitudinal study of “street-involved” youth, our preferred term for youth who are not living with their family, not going to school, and not working in the mainstream economy. We highlight their independence and show that their independence at a young age is unique today although not historically. We also show that the contemporary focus on their vulnerability obfuscates the social causes that make them so.

Here we describe Julie’s life to illustrate some of these ideas. At age 14 she decided that neither her life in formal education nor with her parents had a future, so she began to scout for a way to be independent of both. Eventually she succeeded, and in the early years of her independence, separated from school and parents, she experimented with lifestyle and life choices, with whom to be friends, and what to live for–choices characteristic of self-focus and “a reflexive enterprise.” As time went on, she found her identity as a street-involved youth was no longer enough, and she began thinking about and planning for future “possibilities,” especially about work, with some optimism and hope.

***<*3*> Julie***

Julie was born on Vancouver Island, Canada, and grew up with a younger sister. She lived with her biological parents until age 12 when her parents separated. Like many other children, she then shuttled between her parents. Julie liked and as an adult still liked her parents; even after becoming street-involved she had nothing critical to say about them, which is a little unusual among the street-involved youth in our sample. Yet dividing her time between them became stressful, especially because of her mother’s escalating mental health difficulties, including severe depression. Her mother’s depression had been manageable before the separation, but it was different and more troublesome with just Julie and mom in the home. Part of the problem was that her mother refused to take medication or seek professional help.

Julie did not have many friends growing up and often felt like an outcast at school. Teachers and a principal were concerned enough to recommend her to therapists. In Julie’s view, teachers “were the worst.” She found them to be inflexible, and she was placed in uninteresting “resource” programs rather than the regular classroom; she reported being too slow for the regular classroom and too quick for the resource programs. Nothing seemed to fit. She frequently skipped school before finally leaving after completing grade ten, at about age 15, saying she did not feel like going anymore. She did have aspirations to do more in school at another time, and she still wishes “teachers were more open-minded.”

At age 14 she began spending much of her time on the street, while still sleeping at her mom’s apartment. She started looking for a job so that she could move out, then moved in with an aunt as an interim step. At 17 she finally found a reasonable job and moved in with a roommate. The roommate did not work out well, and she left that apartment in a hurry, without a plan, and was homeless for a short time. As part of the complications of being homeless, she lost her job. Over the next two years she had less and less contact with her parents, especially with her mother, and was increasingly exposed to some of the temptations and risks of street life. She tried several drugs, including alcohol, pot, ecstasy, acid, mushrooms, heroin, and psychedelics. She was arrested once for illegal drug possession. She experienced some ongoing depression and emotional trauma but, like her mother, did not seek treatment for it. Early in her street experience Julie did have a boyfriend who she says was, “negative a lot and he didn’t want to get any help or influence of any sort.” She often felt confused and angry at the same time.

There were many difficulties, yet she was still managing her day-to-day life, working hard to find ways to make life better. She managed to find temporary places to stay, however tenuous, and she again obtained some mainstream income. Although she lost her health card at one point and thus access to her family doctor, she regularly visited the free youth clinic. She sought help for learning about sex and sexuality, and reported full control over her dating and sex life. When there was a crisis Julie sought help from friends, her father, and relatives. Her mother was notably absent from this list. Julie was usually happy, rarely lonely, and sometimes hopeful. She had a support group but missed intimacy and felt others had trouble being close to her. For a time she had emotional connections with counselors at the YMCA, but they all left their jobs and she did not know their replacements.

Many of Julie’s concerns at the time were typical of young people; the lesser concerns were “friends, just bullshit, landlords….” and “doctors who don’t pay attention.” Her longer-term interests were “…going to school, growing up, what do you wanna’ be, that was always a blank. I’d rather try a little bit of every field and see what I really want…. it’s all waiting to be seen and slowly pieced together.” It was not obvious to her how she was going to reconnect with school and workplace opportunities where these identities could be tried.

For several years there was considerable instability in housing, but eventually she obtained residence at a rooming house, and also did gardening for in-kind payment of housing. In contrast with her lonely childhood, she reported that her street-involved life included having friends, and the number of these grew steadily as time went by. By age 20 she thought she had 15 close friends, most of whom were also street-involved and engaged in the street economy. About half received money from panhandling and from friends, and some received help from family.

By age 22, Julie had acquired a part-time job, earning a small amount of cash each week, although her housing options were again fragile. As well as taking care of her own needs, she shared some of her cash with friends, and they shared with her. She received an additional $75 per week from busking (receiving money for performance on the street) and estimated she had a total weekly income of about $150. She also tried to make money by selling items on the street. She worried about a lack of basic necessities and was sometimes stressed about “not always being able to get by.” She occasionally used food banks and an emergency service that provided boxed food for youth.

Julie was also happy, probably partly because of a new boyfriend who treated her well and with whom she was living. She continued to apply for jobs and was hopeful about her prospects. There had been some recent changes in her friendship network; she acquired some new friends who were motivated rather than “people who don’t want to do anything with their life.” Her support system was now her dad, her partner, and a few new friends. She still busked occasionally to supplement her income, but was hoping to stop if she obtained a new job. Applying for jobs gave her everyday life a rhythm, and she hoped a full-time job would continue that: “…playing video games and watching TV doesn’t count.”

As always, her mom’s mental health was a problem and “a big emotional concern,” which was striking, as Julie had not lived with her mother for many years and for long periods of time had no contact with her. Still, Julie thought about her and cared about her. Over time Julie spent less time “downtown” and more time with relatives, including her grandma. Things seemed to be going well, although she had yet to locate a full-time job. She wanted enough money for a computer and a little space to work on school concerns, in preparation for going back to school. It signaled a change in her relationship to the street when she started to worry about some of her friends’ drug use, about “kids having kids,” and had some ideas about the right age to become sexually active and what people should know before they did.

Within another year, Julie had acquired a job cleaning a restaurant, and the rest of her life was going well. She still had the same boyfriend who continued to treat her well, and things seemed to be looking up, in her mind. Yet she was extremely fragile economically, and housing stability challenges had not improved. Her former boyfriend was no longer in the picture, and in the 60 days prior to the final interview she had stayed 12 nights with a parent, 14 nights at a friend’s place, and 10 nights at a youth shelter, mostly to get out of the rain and to take a break from street life. Julie was independent and responsible even while instability continued.

**<2>Young people in Canada**

Among the many remarkable aspects of Julie’s description of her life we focus on five characteristics. First, she continued to have a strong need to figure out who she is by exploring different roles. Second, a continuing characteristic of her life was the instability of important facets such as relationships and housing. Third, her search for a favored personal role and the instability in her life was driven in part by her strong focus on herself as an independent person. Fourth, throughout our contact with her, she vacillated between her desire to be an adult and reliance on social and personal support network associated with youth. The final characteristic that is noticeable is her remarkable optimism in light of the struggles she faced. Nevertheless, her homelessness, substance use and lack of formal income earning activities are mostly remarkable because of her age. If she had been older we would have not been so surprised because many people see rapid changes in their housing situation, substance use and money sources at some point in our lives, which from the outside seem insurmountable.

In Canada youth who were not in school, not working, and without a fixed address were the focus of a series of meetings and reports from 1969 to 1971 (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1970, 1971; Canadian Welfare Council, 1970; National Consultation on Transient Youth, 1970). Although it was noted that there seemed to be an increase in their numbers, the reports included scant description of the risks or threats to or from these youth and only a little discussion of the need to protect them. Recommendations for addressing the situation included establishing hostels and youth-oriented programming. This sober approach may reflect an understanding common at the time that exploration—and making mistakes—is a core activity of adolescence and youthhood.

In recent decades, expectations and hopes for all young people in Canada have increased and intensified. They are expected to achieve and perform, and adults worry more about youth. A much higher proportion of youth graduate high school than in previous decades, and a majority of Canadian youth attend some type of postsecondary training or education. Fewer youth than ever suffer infectious disease, disability, injury, or death, even though there are still demographic inequities. Parents, educators, and other professionals are now expected and expect to “produce” healthy, resilient young people. Deviations from a “normal” life path are considered mistakes, failures, and threats to one’s future.

Leaving high school before graduating is no longer seen as a reasonable choice or an alternative path to a working-class career: it is now considered a risk factor. Youth who are independent at a young age or who are mobile are no longer “transient”: they are seen as at risk, vulnerable, or homeless. Instead of hostels and youth-oriented programming, services are offered: shelters, interventions, prevention initiatives, counseling, job training programs, alternative schools, remedial programs, and harm reduction. These good programs are helpful to young people, especially in relieving some of the stress of finding shelter, food, and health care, while they also provide an informal educational and social network for them.

Not living with their family, not going to school, and not working in the mainstream economy are characteristics of both independence and vulnerability in young people. This duality creates an unusual starting point for discussing the concept of “emerging adulthood,” which Arnett (2004) defines as a phase of human development spanning adolescence and young adulthood, ranging from ages 18-25, when young people are no longer adolescents but have not yet realized full adult status. The experiences of the youth in our study illustrate a less usual pathway to young adulthood and an alternative application of emerging adulthood theory. These youth experience characteristic themes of emerging adulthood (Tanner & Arnett, 2009) at atypical ages, and because of these unusual experiences we further suggest that their lives exemplify late-modern changes in how adulthood is encountered, particularly the fragmentation described by Wyn (2004), in which pathways to adulthood are more diverse and less age-related.

The lives of street-involved young people challenge assumptions about the necessity of living under the protective umbrella of a nuclear family. They challenge our ideas about the right age to attain an education, to work, and to enter intimate, committed relationships. It is their independence at the “wrong age” that ties these issues together, even though they are certainly socially and economically marginalized. We believe that their being street-involved is risky because the dominant society is not prepared for their independence, especially the type of independence they insist is important. Canadians today are prepared to give them temporary shelters but not prepared—or willing—to help them have a home and to support their progress toward adulthood. This reluctance is because we associate independence with a certain kind of adulthood at a certain kind of age, and they neither look like adults nor look like the right age to be adults.

If we set aside the chronological age of street-involved youth, their life experiences seem to us much like those of other young people. They experience the characteristic features of emerging adulthood, and they arrive at adulthood despite difficulties, some distress, and with limited resources. Their lives teach us about emerging adulthood when leaving guardians and adolescence behind at an early age. In addition, using emerging adulthood theory to understand street-involved youth’s life transitions helps us think about more dynamic responses to their challenges, including some in keeping with the older idea of “transient youth.” To respond well means to aptly address their actual lives, especially with regard to pervasive instability, an idea central to emerging adulthood theory.

**<2>Instability**

We borrow from two different theoretical perspectives to interpret the causes and meaning of instability. Each perspective begins with the assumption that adulthood has changed in recent decades. Arnett (2015) states the changes that matter most are: a) the transition from an industrial to information-based economy, b) the sexual revolution, c) the women’s movement, and d) the youth movement. Wyn (2004) holds the changes that matter are“…an increasingly flexible labour market, dissolution of occupational boundaries, deregulation of labour, and increases in contract, part-time employment, increasing diversity in family structures, including decreasing rates of marriage and fertility and the increase in privatisation of both education and health services” (pp. 7-8).

Each of these perspectives emphasizes somewhat differing although overlapping consequences for young people. Arnett (2015) believes the effect of these social changes is a delay in access to adulthood; that is, a delay in entry to “traditional structures,” with instability an important but mostly temporary condition associated with the emerging adulthood life stage. Tanner and Arnett (2009) argue that development is a process of “recentering,” an idea that implies a linear, progressive path. In comparison, Wyn contends instability has become pervasive throughout the life course, and traditional structures like marriage, religion, and work are now less helpful as a guide to life at any age, not just in youth. According to Wyn, age and adulthood are increasingly decoupled; similarly, du Bois-Reymond (2009) says that life pathways are subject to “destandardization” (p. 33): it makes less sense to talk about shared pathways to adulthood. Cuervo and Wyn (2011) say that linearity is breaking down; that is, the sequence of experiences and timing of experiences that we assumed were part of growing up are now more varied.

Thus, Wyn and Arnett both claim change has occurred regarding the timing of access to adulthood and the timing of life experiences. However, they differ in defining the place of instability in relationship to adulthood. For Arnett, instability is *the* characteristic of emerging adulthood; entry to adulthood is delayed, and a decline in instability is a sign of approaching adulthood. For Wyn, encounters with adulthood may occur early as well as late, and contemporary destandardization of the life course means that instability is encountered throughout the life course, not just in youth.

Both perspectives call for a change in our common sense understanding of the “right” age for being a youth and the “right” age for adulthood. The “right age” is malleable, and problems ensue when there is a mismatch between social expectations, individual expectations, and the readiness—or neediness—of young people. Street-involved youth live with this kind of mismatch: they are out of sync with families, education, work, social expectations for romantic partnerships, housing policies, and health and social welfare systems. They feel “in-between” the expectations of adolescence and adulthood.

Feeling “in-between” may be a characteristic associated with an order of emerging adulthood and/or it may be a consequence of destandardization. Associated with this feeling is that there is a goal, however nebulous, to which young people aspire, and this goal is adulthood. Next, we describe conceptions of adulthood associated with emerging adulthood theory and with theories of destandardization.

**<2>Emerging Adulthood and Adulthood**

Arnett’s (2015) contends that instability gradually declines and eventually gives way to adult privileges and responsibilities. In addition to stability, young people in Arnett’s studies say that adulthood includes: 1) accepting responsibility for yourself, 2) making independent decisions, and 3) becoming financially independent. The extended time it now takes for most young people to complete postsecondary education and attain stable employment, coupled with delayed entry into long-term relationships, means that instability is prevalent into the mid-20s. Hence emerging adulthood is a stage between adolescence and young adulthood. This stage has five characteristics:

1. Identity explorations: answering the "Who am I?" question, and trying out various life options, especially in love and work;

2. Instability in love, work, and place of residence;

3. Self-focus, as obligations to others reach a life-span low point;

4. Feeling in-between, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult, and

5. Possibilities/optimism, when hopes flourish and people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives (Arnett, 2015, p. 9).

In Wyn’s view, these five characteristics might be experiences of “temporal individualisation” (Woodman & Wyn, 2015, p. 170); that is, not connected to age, stage or development. They may also be symptoms of the individualization of experience and what many believe are more demanding expectations of individuals that have developed in recent decades. Woodman and Wyn (2015) argue that in their Life Pattern study,

…participants have been reshaping patterns of parenthood, marriage, cohabitation, and work. They have, to greater and lesser degrees depending on the resources they have available to them, needed to rethink adulthood in terms not dependent on stability, security, and continuity, and have also needed to see themselves as responsible for their outcomes even in the face of structural barriers. [These data do] not make them all the same...highly stratified life chances and the ways that young people have worked within the conditions they face have created complex, diverse, and also unequal life pathways and outcomes. (p. 10)

This individualized interpretation of instability requires more “autonomy and personal development” and “…places a person entirely responsible for their own success or failure” (Wyn, p. 7, 2004). Instead of a delay, individualization leads to “…early engagement with adult practices. The transition processes are not “faulty” – they are shaping a “new adulthood” in which transitions are incremental, uneven and unpredictable” (Wyn, 2004, p. 12).

The attainment and experience of this new adulthood is confusing and demanding, for reasons that follow from both Wyn’s and Arnett’s theories; the route taken is contingent on social divisions. The attainment of adult work provides one example. Access to a stable career today takes longer than formerly, and for many that stability never materializes. Those for whom it does may take many years and require a long process of discovery, lateral movement from job to job, and trial and error. Workers and students in preparation for work are increasingly expected to be entrepreneurs, improving and marketing themselves, being open to change, ready to add new skills and take on new perspectives. As Mortimer (2009) puts it, “Success will come for those who have access to, and can mobilize, diverse resources– intellectual, psychological, and all the various elements of capital, including social and cultural capital as well as human capital– to obtain their occupational objectives” (p. 150).

These are lofty, somewhat abstract goals and activities; not surprisingly, access to resources is related to the individualization of experience that Wyn describes. Upper-middle class youth have access to “social capital,” perhaps most importantly economic and emotional support for education. They delay work longer than less-advantaged youth, focusing their time on educational and preparatory activities (Mortimer, 2009). By comparison, blue-collar youth tend to enter the work world earlier, often working 20 or more hours per week while in high school. They may encounter some experiences of adulthood, if not full adulthood, earlier than others.

A further, related expectation described by Wyn concerns higher order personal, social, and cognitive demands of the modern world. Kegan (1998) also describes the experience of being “In Over Our Heads,” at the intersection of our capacity and social expectations. We are expected to have the conceptual ability to manage complexity. Wyn (2009) says,

Successful “transition” into adulthood depends to some extent on being able to engage reflexively and continuously on the processes of constructing themselves as choice-makers and also to demonstrate that one takes individual responsibility, is resourceful and a “reflexive, enterprising subject”, regardless of age…. Young people are required to hold a strong future orientation and to be able to plan the process of becoming an adult. These subjectivities are an essential resource base for the successful negotiation of education and labour markets in new economies, as well as other aspects of life (p. 100).

From this perspective, change and instability is incorporated in one’s lifestyle and sense of self. Those who can manage it gain access to education and work more easily and cope better with change.

**<2>Adulthood and Street-Involved Youth**

These are high level expectations, and the reason we discuss them is that those who are most marginalized feel the effects of social change most acutely and have the fewest resources. Arnett’s life-stage theory and Wyn’s sociological insights help to explain the strengths and challenges of the lives of street-involved youth. For example, we believe street-involved youth encounter adult-like experiences early rather than late. Many leave their adult guardians due to eviction or by choice, and as a result learn to manage their own expectations and the expectations of others: to be responsible for themselves, to organize income and education, to organize a plan for the future, and to choose everyday ethical principles. These expectations, in the mid-teenage years, require considerable adaptation and creativity in the job market, in education, and in coping with a social welfare system unprepared for them. As Wyn suggests, these are expectations and activities of individualization. These are difficult tasks, which take time, with many missteps along the way.

At the same time, youth coping with these tasks exhibit characteristics of emerging adulthood, moving through stages of self-focus, feeling in-between, possibilities, and identity development. Applying these emerging adulthood ideas to their common experiences demonstrates that street-involved youth grapple with progress toward all three characteristics of adulthood described by Arnett: responsibility, independent decisions, and financial independence. Adulthood is certainly a goal for them as a life-stage, but it is also something they are living into as a kind of “subjectivity,” as Wyn describes it. The challenges of adulthood are not delayed, but are instead the context of their engagement with life.

**<2>Youth and Emerging Adulthood**

<3>***Julie***

Self-focus and feeling in-between were present in the very origins of Julie’s street-life. Difficulties with her parents and alienation from school provided the impetus for her detachment from both and her commitment to a way of life that was in-between. This life change required Julie to assume responsibility for most aspects of her own well-being, an early encounter with emerging and young adulthood. As Julie’s independence increased, she started to plan for future possibilities, to think about a somewhat longer-term future and to align the present with those hopes. Coincident with these emerging adulthood experiences, Julie’s story was one of early encounters with adulthood responsibility and lifestyles and a strongly individual struggle to get by and to move forward. She was in the midst of emerging adulthood while also moving toward Arnett’s interpretation of adult: independent and responsible for her own decisions, although still struggling with financial independence. Instability—a key characteristic of emerging adulthood—was pervasive, and not likely to disappear for Julie, even in adulthood.

If Arnett is correct that an emerging adulthood sense of self-focus is indicated by detachment from social institutions, Julie reached that point. One consequence of this was that identity was the emerging adulthood characteristic that was more challenging for her, and it is a problem for most of the other street-involved youth in our study; identity is more distinguished by its absence than its presence, in part because street-involved youth are isolated from the everyday social institutions that provide access to current and future identities.

According to Wyn, destabilized identity structures are a common problem for everyone –not just youth, while Arnett holds that identity struggle is characteristic of emerging adulthood. For Julie and other street-involved youth, identity is a problem because they are both too early and too late. They are too early for work: they are usually ready to work for a living at much younger ages than others, but very little of substance is available to them. Because of their situation, they do not have much access to the social and material capital that Wyn and Mortimer describe as buffers from early involvement in the work force. The social system’s accommodation for young people who take some years off from school and work is inconsistent, and the experience of self-focus and independence of early street-involvement leaves little time or energy for formal education. Later, when they become more interested in school they find that they have the same problems of access and support that they have had with work, but this time they are too late.

Julie’s age at departure from family, work, and school determined much of what happened to her later. Her age when she chose to re-engage determined which options were available to her and which were closed. Julie and others were thrown back on their own interpersonal resources for identity and for the incentive to persevere.

**<2>Why More Research About Street-involved Youth?**

Research on street-involved youth (sometimes referred to as homeless youth or marginalized youth) includes a rich literature on the multiple risks to their well-being and the antecedents of being street-involved. Bender et al. (2014), found that 85% of these youth had experienced at least one traumatic event while street-involved. There is so much literature about risks that some scholars, like Kidd (2012), have suggested that there is a need to renegotiate and reconfigure efforts that lead more directly to improvements in well-being for these youth, and to new and/or different understandings of what to do about the hazards they encounter. The case has successfully been made that street-involved youth have histories of problems and challenges for the future.

Other researchers, like Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014), argue for new data and new research. They are interested in homeless youth particularly, that is, youth who are “not housed,” but their work takes into account perspectives from the larger street-involved literature. They argue that more research is needed on the actual socio-economic circumstances of street-involved youth. Perhaps being without a home and being roughly the same age are not adequate reasons to assume similarity. They suggest using the phrase, “children in street situations” (Lucchini, cited in Aptekar & Stoeckling, 2014), which may help separate the identity of children from where they are living, and may help us attend to their differences. We do not know as much as we should about the heterogeneity of these young people, the heterogeneity of the “street situations,” or about the quality of their lives that result from interaction between the context and the person.

In this book we make a case for interpreting the experience of one group of street-involved youth from the viewpoint of emerging adulthood, which reduces the focus on risks and pathologies and increases the focus on individuals in relation to their social and material situations. While street-involved youth are certainly structurally vulnerable, and many have also been victims of violence and abuse—both prior to and after street-involvement—for the most part their everyday-life understanding of themselves is focused on their immediate goals and their hopes for the future.

For example, at the very beginning of their street-involved “career,” agency and responsibility are exercised. They may have been fleeing abuse, unsuccessful at being integrated in a school, foster home, detention center, or a group home. Others leave for reasons of “pull”: seeking independence/freedom, integrating with a group of other street youth, needing or wanting to make money. In both situations, there is a strength of will on the part of most of them to succeed after they have become street-involved. They make plans, organize material resources, create social networks, act entrepreneurially: they are creating a life. This commitment is something we still know surprisingly little about. To understand and support them as they go through their own version of emergent adulthood, societal response is best organized in the context of their existing social and material world, not their victimhood. As Karabanow, Carson, and Clement (2010) contend:

[T]there has been a surprising neglect on the part of the academic community to complete the analysis of street youth career patterns. The literature has provided an impressive grasp on the causes and consequences of street life − including family dysfunction, abuse and trauma, exploitation and alienation, poverty, addiction, and mental health and child welfare inadequacies − but little acknowledgment of how some of these young people complete the cycle and move away from street culture (p. 2).

The authors began this line of inquiry by asking street-involved youth about how they chose to leave the street, which turned out to be a process rather than single event (Karabanow, 2009). Karabanow, Carson, and Clement (2010) found that on average, it took five attempts for a young person to get “off the street.” Their description is unusual and interesting because it focuses on the existential and developmental steps of leaving the street. Youths became tired of heavy drug use, were bored, and felt “enough was enough” (p. 30). Some were motivated to leave due to pregnancy or encouragement from a romantic partner, having their birth or adoptive family or a close friend rooting for them, and generally building up enough motivation. They also had to be willing to take the risk of leaving street friends and a known neighborhood where their street life was located. It took time to summon up the courage.

On leaving the street, their ambitions were unexceptional: “When asked about their plans for the future, about dreams and hopes, most young people indicate a great desire to belong, have a family, find a loving partner, seek meaningful employment, accrue a safe place to live, and be part of civil society. And although their current lives are chaotic, unhealthy, and distressed, they hoped for a brighter future” (Karabanow, 2009, p. 18). Karabanow (2009) identified what he called “successful exiting,” not in terms of not being homeless but of “being in control” and “having direction.” These correspond to Arnett’s (2007) qualities of young adulthood, and in our view this is not accidental. They are living as young adults under extraordinary circumstances.

Finally, Aptekar and Stoeckling (2014) state that, "[t]he absence of longitudinal data reveals the largest gap in the research agenda on street-involved youth.” One of the most important reasons to follow these youth over time is to determine their ability to have productive intimate relationships and to survive economically as adults. Our study comprises five waves of data over several years, beginning with 189 participants; sixty-four participants of mixed backgrounds were followed through all five years. Our data include open-ended interviews and quantitative reports on their health and well-being, romantic relationships, income, relationships with family, social network, education, and life history. We also present additional life history data about the trajectory of street-involvement from birth to street-involvement and after street-involvement.

**<2>Plan of the Book**

There are always consequences of macro social-structural conditions for family life and the everyday lives of street-involved children (James & Prout, 1990). These conditions vary by culture, economic context, and geography; the particulars of these factors warrant closer study. For example, during the Great Depression millions of teenagers were on the move across North America because of family poverty or homelessness, looking for work, adventure, and a better way of life (Elder, 1994). They were transient. Social expectations about parental obligations toward their children were different then, and teenagers were expected to contribute to the economic life of the family. If young people had to leave the family to help the family, they did.

By contrast, North American parents today are expected to provide a closer socio-emotional bond with their children, and youth are rarely expected to contribute money to the family budget. Youth leaving home early are viewed at the least with suspicion and, more likely, as “at-risk” tragedies waiting to happen. Our social attitudes about the situation are more likely to be individualized and particularized in reference to the specific family and parents: parents, children (or both) are more likely to be blamed. At a time when many middle-class youth and emerging adults have an extended economic dependence on parents including living in the family home well into their 20s, street-involved youth are outliers, living independently and interdependently, many at very young ages. These conditions make adults anxious. In most jurisdictions they are too young to work, receive welfare, enroll in school as an independent adult, access health care without adult approval, and rent an apartment.

And yet they do it.  That they do is one reason why they continue to be so interesting and why we might consider adding—or substituting--curiosity about them to or for anxiety about them. Across North America, a population of young people who choose or who are forced to leave home persists, and we tell stories about the varied life courses of these youth and their encounters with emerging and early adulthood experiences, with a view to explicating their ways of being an emerging adult.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of our longitudinal study and the methods used to contact and follow our sample. We also briefly describe related research on these populations, especially on the well-being and competence of foster youth and street-involved youth, as we use emerging adulthood theory to make similar claims about their competence and agency.

Subsequent chapters examine the central themes of emerging adulthood using case studies and illustrations from the lives of street-involved youth. Chapter 3 focuses on instability in their lives, which begins prior to their street-involvement and increases in intensity thereafter. Prior to street involvement, caregivers and home change nine times on average, and after independence, change in residence is even more frequent. They experience instability in living situations, instability in relationships, and instability ensuing from parental difficulties, including mental health and addictions. Surprisingly, their leaving home may lead to a certain type of assumption of responsibility, a new kind of maturity.

The experience of becoming street-involved and leaving home or being evicted is important for understanding their experience of emerging adulthood, and these experiences are described in Chapter 4. Becoming street-involved is both a tragedy and an opportunity. Many perceive it as a necessary part of leaving something behind and as necessary for growing up.

In Chapter 5 we take up Arnett’s interest in the freedom from the routines of work and school and the accompanying self-focus. We find this interesting because these youth are young, and our participants are keenly interested in independence and freedom of choice. The decline in influence of social institutions is an emerging adult characteristic, and in the case of street-involved youth has a very particular meaning. They become free of school and family, and there is some experimentation and exploration in the process of finding a place for themselves.

In Chapter 6 we begin to portray the long process of thinking about and moving from short-term experiences and goals to emerging adult and adult-like goals and social roles. This chapter discusses the emerging adulthood characteristic of possibilities and the emergence of a different kind of hope later in the youths’ street-involved experience. Their previous focus on the present leads to increasing dissatisfaction, and they begin to plan for longer-term ambitions. This chapter describes the circumstances that lead young people to begin to want change.

As street-involved youth begin trying new ideas in anticipation of new lives, the meaning of being in transition becomes differentiated. In Chapter 7, we describe the experience of “NFA,” no fixed address. This material and psychic fact, in emerging adulthood terms, is being in-between. There are both psychological and structural contributions to this experience. Many experienced some form of trauma at some point in their early lives or on the street, and trauma has consequences for later experiences and outlook. Some have addictions that are difficult to quit. Almost all face serious financial challenges that make finding stability and access to education and job training troublesome, although having strong ideological principles or a family to rely on can help.

In Chapter 8 we chronicle how childhood experiences are taken up in identity. Street-involved youth live in a post-19th century world of choice and individualization without the long-term family support and commitment provided to other youth, and they live in the pre-19th century world of semi-independence without the societal connections that pre-19th century youth acquired through fostering, apprenticeship, and education. We describe some of the developmental principles that might be better incorporated into the lives of street-involved youth.

Finally, Chapter 9 summarizes our findings and considers policy implications. We describe four clusters of youth: stable and engaged, stable and unengaged, unstable and unengaged, and unstable and engaged. We detail the mismatch of chronological age, developmental experience, and social-structural opportunities, and the problems it causes. We suggest policy options that assume these youths’ emerging adult competence, especially in regard to education and work.

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