**Introduction**

Canada and many other high-income countries have a sizable number of youth who are transient or “homeless,” a term that is common in the literature, and most of these young people manage to successfully achieve adulthood. 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 chapters that follow, 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 the consequences of this independence for their vulnerability and show how they exercised their independence at a young age is unique, even though it is their vulnerability that is familiar.

Below we describe Julie’s life as in illustration of some of these ideas. At age 14 she decided that neither her life in formal education nor her life 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 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, 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.

<1>Julie

Julie was born on Vancouver Island, Canada, and grew up with a younger sister. She lived with both parents until age 12 when her parents separated. Like many other children, she then shuttled between her parents. Julie liked and still likes her parents; even after she became street-involved she had nothing critical to say about them, not common 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 depression. Her mother’s depression had been manageable before the separation, but it was different and more troublesome when it was just Julie and mom in the home. Part of the problem was that her mother refused to take medication or seek professional help.

In addition, Julie did not have many friends growing up and often felt like an outcast at school. Teachers and a principal noticed and were concerned enough to recommend her to therapists. The teachers, in Julie’s view, “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. The last school grade she completed was year 10, at about age 15 to 16, and she had frequently skipped school before finally stopping, saying she did not feel like going anymore. She did have aspirations to do more in school, 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, and then she 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 more time 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 was much trouble, and 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. Though she lost her health card at one point and thus access to her family doctor, she regularly visited the free youth clinic. She sought out help for learning about sex and sexuality, and she 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 period of 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.” The 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 had been considerable instability in housing, but eventually she had obtained residence at a rooming house, and she also did gardening for in-kind payment of housing. By contrast with her lonely childhood, in her street-involved life she reported having friends, and the number of these grew steadily as time went by. By age 20 she thought she had 15 close friends, a dramatic improvement. Most were also street-involved and also involved in the street economy. About half received money from panhandling and from other friends, and some received help from family.

Later, at age 22, Julie had acquired a part-time job, earning a small amount of cash each week, though her housing options were fragile again. In addition to her own need for cash, she also shared some of it 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 a total of about $150 of income per week. She had also tried to make money by selling items on the street. She worried about a lack of basic necessities and was sometimes stressed by “not always being able to get by.”  She occasionally used food banks and an emergency service that provided boxed food for youth.

She was also happy, probably at least in part a consequence of a new boyfriend who treated her well and with whom she was living. She had continued to apply for jobs and was hopeful about the prospects. There had been some recent turnover in her friendship network, acquiring 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 she was hoping to stop if she obtained one of the new jobs. Applying for jobs gave her everyday life a rhythm, and she was hopeful that having a full-time job would continue that: “…playing video games and watching TV doesn’t count.”

As always, her mom’s mental health was still a problem and “a big emotional concern.” This was striking, because Julie had not lived with her mother for many years and for long periods of time did not have contact with her mother. 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 things, in preparation for going back to school. It was a signal that her relationship to the street changed when she started to worry about the drug use of some of her friends, 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. And yet she was impressively economically fragile and the housing stability challenges had not improved: In the 60 days prior to the final interview she had stayed with a parent for 12 nights, 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. She had also stayed with her father, friends, and her partner. Julie was independent and responsible even while instability continued.

<1> Background

In Canada “transient youth” 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). Transient youth were defined as those who were not in school, not working, and without a fixed address. It was noted that there seemed to be an increase in their numbers, and yet the reports included little description of the risks or threats to or from these youth and only a little discussion of the need to protect them. The recommendations for addressing the situation included establishing hostels and youth-oriented programming. This sober approach may reflect a common understanding at the time that exploration—and making mistakes—is a core activity of adolescence and youthhood.

In recent decades the intensity of expectations and hopes for all young people in Canada have increased. They are expected to achieve and perform at young ages and adults worry more about youth. A much higher proportion of youth graduate high school, and a majority of Canadian youth attend some type of post-secondary training or education. Fewer youth suffer infectious disease, disability, injury, or death, even though there are still demographic inequities. Parents, educators, and other professionals are 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 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, a range of services are offered: shelters, interventions, prevention initiatives, counseling, job training programs, alternative schools, remedial programs, and harm reduction. These are good programs and helpful to young people, especially in relieving some of the stress of finding shelter, food, and health care, and they also provide an informal educational and social network for young people.

Not living with their family, not going to school, and not working in the mainstream economy are characteristics of both independence and their vulnerability. This is an unusual starting point for a discussion of 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 an alternative, unusual pathway to young adulthood and an alternative application of emerging adulthood theory. They 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 young people who are street-involved 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, neven though they are certainly socially and economically marginalized. We believe that their street-involvement 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 is because we associate independence with a certain kind of adulthood at a certain kind of age, and they do not look like they are adults or 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 other young people. They experience the characteristic features of emerging adulthood, and they arrive at adulthood despite difficulty, some distress, and with limited resources. Their lives teach us about emerging adulthood when one leaves guardians and adolescence behind at an early age. In addition, using emerging adulthood theory to understand street-involved youth’s life transitions help us think about more dynamic responses to their challenges, including some in keeping with the older idea of “transient youth.” To respond well means aptly addressing their actual lives, especially pervasive instability, an idea central to emerging adulthood theory.

<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. To Arnett (2015) the changes that matter most are the a) transition from an industrial to information-based economy, b) the sexual revolution, c) the women’s movement, and d) the youth movement. To Wyn (2004) 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 different though 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 as 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. By comparison, Wyn contends instability has become pervasive throughout the life course, and the traditional structures like marriage, religion, and work are now less helpful as a guide to life at any age, not just when one is young. 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.

Wyn and Arnett both thus claim something has changed about the timing of access to adulthood and the timing of life experiences. What is different between Wyn and Arnett is 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 when young.

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. They require us to rethink what it means to be on time, too early, or too late. 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. Youth who are street-involved 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 feeling in-between is that there is a goal to which young people aspire, however nebulous. This goal is adulthood. Next we will describe conceptions of adulthood associated with emerging adulthood theory and with theories of destandardization.

<Emerging Adulthood and Adulthood>

In one vision of adulthood, instability gradually declines and eventually gives way to adult privileges and responsibilities. In addition to stability, young people in Arnett’s (2015) studies say that adulthood includes: 1) Accepting responsibility for yourself; 2) making independent decisions; and 3) becoming financially independent. The extended length of time it now takes for most young people to complete postsecondary education and attain stable employment, coupled with a 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 question "who am I" 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 or stage or development. These may also be symptoms of the individualization of experience and what many believe are more demanding expectations of individuals 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, individualisation 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 is one example. Access to a stable career today takes longer, and for many that stability never materializes. For those who do find it, the process of getting there 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 have been increasingly expected to be entrepreneurs, improving and marketing themselves. They are expected to be 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 educational. They delay work longer than less advantaged youth, focusing their time on educational and preparatory activities (Mortimer, 2009). Blue-collar youth by comparison tend to enter the work world earlier, often working 20 or more hours per week while in high school. They may encounter some kinds of experiences of adulthood, if not full adulthood, earlier than others.

A further, related expectation described by Wyn has to do with higher order personal, social, and cognitive demands of the modern world. Kegan (1998) also described 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 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.

<Adulthood and Street-Involved Youth>

These are high level expectations, and the reason we discuss these is that those who are most marginalized feel the effects of social change most acutely but 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 as a result of eviction or by choice and as a result they 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-teen age years, require considerable adaptation and creativity in the job market, in education, and in coping with a social welfare system not prepared for them. As Wyn suggests, these are expectations and activities of individualisation. These are difficult tasks. It takes time, with many missteps along the way.

At the same time, they exhibit characteristics of emerging adulthood, moving through stages of self-focus, feeling in-between, possibilities, and identity development. We apply these emerging adulthood ideas to common experiences of street-involvement. In so doing street-involved youth are grappling 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.

<1>Youth and Emerging Adulthood in Julie’s Life

A self-focus and feeling in-between were present in the very origins of Julie’s street-life. Her difficulties with her parents and her alienation from school were the impetus for her detachment from both and her commitment to a way of life that was in-between. This kind of life 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. Coincidental with these emerging adulthood experiences, Julie’s story is one of early encounters with adulthood responsibility and lifestyles and a highly 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, though still struggling with financial independence. Instability—a key characteristic of emerging adulthood—was pervasive, and for her not likely to disappear, even in adulthood.

If Arnett is correct that an emerging adulthood sense of self-focus is indicated by detachment from social institutions, Julie is there. One consequence of this is that identity is the one emerging adulthood characteristic that is more challenging for Julie, 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.To Arnett, 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. For work they are too early: 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 this 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 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 problem of access and support that they have had with work, but this time they are too late.

Julie’s age of departure from family, work, and school determined much of what happened later. The 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.

<1>Why More Research About Street-involved Youth?

The research literature 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 street-involved 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 we 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 it. The case has been successfully 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 for assuming 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 it may help us to 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 the 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, even for those who are pushed out: Being forced out by a parent, fleeing abuse, unsuccessful integration 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 are making plans, organizing material resources, creating social networks, acting entrepreneurially: They are creating a life. This commitment is something we still know surprisingly little about. If we are 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 it took an average of five attempts for a young person to get “off the street.” Their description is unusual and interesting because its focus is on the existential and developmental steps of leaving the street. Youth became tired of heavy drug use, they were bored, and “enough was enough” (p. 30). It took time to summon up the courage. Some were also 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 neighbourhood where their street life was located.

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 as “being in control” and “having direction.” These correspond to Arnett’s (2007) qualities of young adulthood, and in our view this is not an accident. 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 includes open-ended interviews and quantitative reports of their health and well-being, romantic relationships, income, relationships with family, social network, education, and life history data. We also present additional life history data about the trajectory of street-involvement from birth to street-involvement and after street-involvement.

<1>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 their family’s 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, 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.

In 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” and tragedies waiting to happen. Our social attitudes about it are more likely to be individualized and particularized in reference to that family and those parents: Parents or 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, for 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.  This 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 to leave home 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 with these populations, especially research on the well-being and competence of foster youth and street-involved youth, because 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 is focused 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, on average, nine times, and after independence change in residence is even more frequent. They experience instability of living situation, instability of relationships, and instability ensuing from parental difficulties, including mental health and addictions. Surprisingly, leaving home may lead to a certain kind of assumption of responsibility for themselves, 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 of leaving home 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. To us this is 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 this 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 portraying 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 is about the emerging adulthood characteristic of possibilities and the emergence of a different kind of hope later in their street-involved experience. Their previous focus on the present leads to increasing dissatisfaction, and they begin to plan for longer-term ambitions. In this chapter, we describe the circumstances that lead young people to begin to want change.

As street-involved youth begin trying new things in anticipation of new lives, the meaning of being in transition becomes differentiated. In Chapter 7, we describe the experience of “NFA,” of having no fixed address. This is a material and psychic fact. In emerging adulthood terms this 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 experience and outlook. Some have addictions that are difficult to quit. Almost all faced serious financial challenges that make finding stability and access to education and job training troublesome, though having strong ideological principles or a family to rely on can help.

In Chapter 8 we chronicle how childhood experiences are taken up into identity. Street-involved youth are living in a post-19th century world of choice and individualization without the long-term family support and commitment provided to other youth, and they are living 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.

The final chapter, Chapter 9 summarizes our findings and considers policy implications.. There we describe four clusters of youth: stable and engaged, stable and unengaged, unstable and unengaged, and unstable and engaged. We describe in more detail the mismatch of chronological age, developmental experience, and social-structural opportunities, and the problems this causes. We suggest policy options that assume their emerging adult competence, especially in regard to education and work.

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