The Contribution and Complications of Instability

in the Lives of Street-Involved Youth

Arnett (2004, 2007) operationalized instability as frequent changes in residence, with a qualitative change between time living with guardians, usually stable, and the semi-independence of the post-high school years, with frequent moves. Instability is a defining characteristic of emerging adulthood, and this seems right, but that might make sense only when there is a period of stability against which it is compared. For most street-involved youth stability in their childhood is limited, and so there is no prior stability for comparison. This makes their experience unusual—and unique. We believe that emerging adulthood theory can accommodate this difference.

The absence of stability is a challenge, developmentally, for these youth, and they are certainly victims. Yet it is also something that is characteristic of contemporary, late-modern life, as Wyn (2004) pointed out. Street-involved youth may be examples of how to manage without stability. While struggling to manage without a safe and secure place to call home, they nevertheless perceive having more control over their circumstances than they did previously while living with parents, and this perceived control may be more important than stability strictly defined. This perceived control occurs coincidentally when they encounter the responsibilities of emerging adulthood—in their mid-teens.

<2>Susceptibility to and Management of Change and Mobility

For street-involved youth instability is first experienced as frequent change during their childhood. Many had never lived with the same person in the same home longer than four years, and all had periods of time when change of home and guardian occurs several times over as short a period of time as a year or two. This unpredictability makes them appear to be vulnerable, and they are.

Yet vulnerability is not the only story. Their childhood prepares them to expect change, and by their teens, most reported that change itself does not frighten or threaten them. They learned to expect and cope with it. This means particularly that their experience of “home” and of stability is probably more fluid than for other youth. Home is less likely to be identified as any one place. Home is less likely to be tied to any one or two adults, biological guardians or not. Home is mobile. They “take home” where they find it, and they take home with them. Home and family are chosen—not ascribed.

The frequent change of housing, which is the instability as understood by Arnett and others, is the emerging adult characteristic for which street-involved youth are most similar to other cohorts of young people. Like other emerging adults, street-involved youth, beginning usually in their early teens, are also making plans with an uncertain future, and their present lives are also characterized by instability. The two distinguishing features of their experience of housing instability, however, is that they are experiencing it five to ten years younger than others and, second, for most returning home to the security of the parental nest is not likely. The immediate consequences of their young age of housing instability is that they are often not old enough to legally live independently, and this results in practical problems, like not being able to sign a rental contract for an apartment. The lack of parental resources also prevents them from reaching out to others for co-signatures. There is a long-term consequence: By entering independence long before they are able to become adults, they are likely to experience housing instability from their early teens into their late 20s and early 30s. In this chapter we first describe instability in childhood. This is susceptibility to change, composed of frequent change in housing, frequent changes in guardian, and changes as a result of parental mental health, addiction, and abuse/neglect. All of these are characteristics of instability imposed on them in childhood. Then we describe early experiences of being street-involved, including embracing change and taking some responsibility for themselves, and we also describe some of the problems that ensue.

<1>Instability in Childhood

Harden (2004) suggested childhood stability has three contributors: "limited movement from home to home" (p. 32), stability of family relationships, and parental mental health. The experience of the combination of all three is rare in the childhoods of most street-involved youth. It is not surprising that youth who leave home between 11 and 17 years of age have difficult childhoods, though it would be a inaccurate to offer these early childhood characteristics as deterministic; Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014) point out that most youth who have difficult childhoods do not leave home and that homeless youth often have siblings who do not leave home.

Street-involved youth are distinguished not because of their difficult childhoods, because many youth have difficult childhoods. They are distinguished instead because they left their difficult childhoods behind by moving away from their guardians—or were evicted--at a non-normative age. Street-involved youth are interesting because they leave or left “home” for reasons that are quite adult-like, at an age when most expect them to be children, and yet the consequent lives they create are anything but childish or child-like. Stereotypical emerging adults are often a bit out of sync, waiting for opportunities to participate in a career, waiting to complete education, and experimenting with lifestyles and relationships to find themselves. Street-involved youth are different because their lives have long been out of sync with normative hopes and expectations; most were alienated from members of their families and school relationships long pre-dating their teen years. A symptom of these circumstances is the frequency with which they moved in childhood.

<2>Instability in Living Situation

The early years of some youth were stable, measured at least by few changes in guardian or by contemporary standards. They do include divorces and step-parents, for example, but this is experience that they share with many youth. Shadi lived with both parents until age six, when his parents split. For a few months he lived with his grandparents, and then he split his time between mother and father until age 12, when his father disappeared. By age 14 he was living on the street. Kristi lived with mom until age 13, with grandparents for two years, and then left for the street. Carson lived with both parents until age 11, with mom for a year, with a sibling for a year, and then was placed in a group home. Carson ran away from his group home and lived on the street from then on. Rosie lived with mom and her stepfather until age 13. The next year her mom left her stepfather. At 15 Rosie moved in with her boyfriend for a few months, with friends for a few more months, and then to the street. Hans’ parents and grandparents co-parented him for his first three years, and then he lived with both parents until age 15, when he left them for a street life.

Youth with a history of temporary or permanent foster care experienced much more change. Initially, there would have been some reason that child protection was concerned about them, enough that removal from the home was considered necessary. Tasha lived with her mom in the first year of life but was in foster care by age 1, where she stayed for two years. After that she was raised in kinship care—by other relatives--and her mother was not involved. At age 12 she went back into foster care, and she was in and out of foster care the rest of her teen years. Troy lived with his mother and her friend until age 5, but then foster care entered the picture, and his mother and foster parents shared guardianship until he was 11, when he began to live in a group home. He stayed in the group home until age 14, when he ran away. Like Troy, Eartha lived with her mother early on, but then after age 7 her father and foster care shared custody of her until her mid-teens, when she left for the street. The parents of Julius needed help from foster parents from the very beginning, and they shared custody until age 6, when he went into permanent foster care. By age 14 he was on the streets.

There was often considerable change just before street involvement or just before what promised to be a return to a more stable situation with parents or foster care. At age 10 and in the space of less than one year, Teague moved from mother to grandparents, other relatives, an adoptive parent, and then to the street. Danny moved quickly from her mother to other relatives, couch surfing with friends, to the street and then moved in, at age 12, with new friends. Josh was adopted at a young age. At 15 he began couch surfing with friends, lived briefly by himself, and then was on the street. From age 11 to 14 Emily moved back and forth between grandparents, relatives, friends’ parents, the street, and also had short stints living in friends’ apartments. The frequency of the changes was sometimes chaotically high. For the 64 youth in all five waves, the average number was a little under five, with a range from 1 to 26 changes in living situations (we removed the person with 26 changes from the calculation of the average). These youth had considerably more change after their first encounter with the street.

For the 92 youth with foster care experience in the first wave, the average number of transitions from caregiver to caregiver prior to the time of the first interview (mean age = 16) was 9 and 30 percent of youth had more than 14 changes. These were changes in caregiving plan, where a child lived and with whom (regular transitions between separated parents were not counted). These estimates are conservative since those youth who had foster care experience likely lived in more than one foster home. There was also considerable variation among the youth in our sample, with a small number of them having few changes and other youth having at least one change every year.

Usually the period of change preceding being on the street was a consequence of a) the guardian evicting the child, b) the child deciding that the situation is not tolerable, or c) an outside authority—juvenile justice or child welfare—exerting its authority. For example, if a young person over the age of 10 years old commits a criminal offense, it is possible they would be placed temporarily in juvenile detention. Or if the relationship between the guardian and young person breaks down, they may be placed temporarily in foster care. In either case, these youth may return home briefly, but they usually do not stay very long. Similarly, the usual first situation away from parents was not living on the street. Rather, the street was often a second or third option after a longer period of familial and foster adjustments that ultimately did not work out. The reasons were diverse: The youth ran away after being released from juvenile detention, relationships with friends or a romantic partner with whom one was living fell apart, an extended relative evicted the youth for coming home drunk, and so forth.

At each of the five waves of interviews, each participant was asked where they had slept for the previous 30 days. For each interview, we examined the proportion of the total number of nights in each setting to provide a portrait of the group over time. There were three main themes: 1) slow progress towards more stable housing; 2) important differences between those who had a guardian as a backup plan and those who did not; and 3) the persistence of instability over time.

The first interview occurred for most youth after they had been street-involved and after they had left home for the first time. Some returned occasionally to their guardian's home. While 28% of the total nights at the first interview were with a guardian, only 8 of 64 stayed more than 25 days. Guardians did play a substantial role when they were part of an emergency backup plan. Twenty percent of the total nights at first interview were on the street and 10% were in shelters; together about the same proportion of days were on the street and in shelters as were with a guardian. One in four days were couch surfing with friends, extended family, and with romantic partners. Only 11 of 64 participants stayed in the same place for 30 days, and only 6% of nights were composed of paid rent in a room or house.

At wave two, there were substantial improvements in housing stability. The total number of days renting quadrupled, the number of days on the street was cut in half, and the number of shelter days was 20% of its wave one total. Eleven persons were able to pay rent for all 30 days, 26 were able to pay rent at least part-time, and 23 were able to stay in the same place for 30 consecutive days. Nevertheless, these are still a minority of the total. Also, the number of days with a guardian declined by about 25% from the first interview. Guardians were still a backup plan.

At wave 3, about six years on average from the time of the first interview, the number of days renting a house almost doubled from wave 2. Days on the street and days with a guardian declined again. There were 15 youth paying rent full-time, a relatively small increase from wave 2. Twenty-four of sixty-four youth stayed in one place for the previous thirty days, about the same as wave 2, and about the same number have paid rent for at least part of the month. Participants were finding places to stay that are not on the street, though stability was elusive.

At wave 5, the last interview, the number of days on the street had continued to decline, as did shelter days. For the first time no participant spent all 30 days in a shelter, so they continued to be less susceptible to homelessness. The number of days with friends declined with every wave since wave two. Twenty-eight of sixty-four stayed in one place for 30 days. Now only a slight majority were still on the move every month. More participants were paying rent, 39 of 64, and the average per month was $454, a substantial amount for a group with tenuous income streams. The total amount of rent paid by all participants was about $1600 at wave 1 and over $18000 at wave 5. There was thus increasing stability among the youth.

At the fifth interview a gap developed between those with an income stream or who could stay with parents and those without these options. Only five stayed with a guardian the entire month; guardians were still a backup plan for most rather than the go-to choice. For the majority there was less susceptibility to living rough and living in a shelter, yet there was still much change. It may be that in their early 20s these youth reached a point comparable to their same-age cohorts in the larger population, many of whom have tenuous incomes and varying abilities to pay rent. We might be able to suggest that the majority could no longer be classified as street involved, and the housing instability for the rest may be characteristic of youth who cannot live with their parents. Victoria is an expensive city, and during this study the vacancy rate has varied between 0.5% and 1.5%; obtaining an apartment without credit and while young is a challenge.

Table 3.1 shows 30-day housing patterns for a sample of individuals, that is, the locations where they lived in the 30 days prior to each interview. Some were able to pay rent by the last interview, some were still relying on guardians for occasional help, and overnights on the street were still part of the lives of two. Many were still vulnerable. [Insert Table 3.1 here]

<2>Instability of Family Relationships

Holland and Crowley (2013) used the phrase "nomadic childhoods" to describe their sample in which no participant had a consistent caregiver from infancy to adulthood. As a result, relationships with parents were "tentative and contingent" (p. 59). For our participants the nomadic part of the description fits well; tentative and contingent fits for most. The wide variety of caregiving relationships was notable. In addition to the commonplace experiences of splitting time between separated biological parents or living with only one biological parent, the range of family relationships also included living with a step-parent without one's biological parents, living with a sibling, grandparents, or extended family members.

It will not be a surprise that most of these relationships with biological or other guardians were short-term. The average number of short-term guardian relationships per youth was six. Many guardian relationships did not last or were never intended to be permanent. Still, primary attachments to a small number of people, with supplemental caregiving by others that allowed the primary attachment to continue, was not necessarily a problem. After becoming street-involved they contacted a guardian an average of 7.5 times in the two months prior to the first interview. About half of participants reported a guardian as one of their choices to call on in the case of a crisis.

A further consideration was the mix of influences stemming from those guardians. Of those youth who were street-involved in all five waves, 34 reported having had at least one positive male guardian influence, 24 reported not having any positive male guardian and 33 reported having had a male guardian whose influence was negative. Female guardians had more positive influences. Forty-nine youth reported a positive female guardian influence, though there were still 25 who said there was also a female guardian who had a negative influence. For those with a positive male relationship, it was less likely they would have a harmful relationship with a male. Those who experienced harmful males were less likely to have any other positive male influence. Participants were more likely to have a positive relationship with a female guardian even if they also had a negative female influence. Female guardian relationships compensated somewhat for negative male and negative female guardian relationships. Overall, then, there were more positive female than positive male influences, and positive female influences were associated with the presence of positive male influences. Participants had reason to be cautious about caregivers, parents and otherwise, but they also had some reason to be hopeful, even while they were usually not yet ready and not willing to go back to being under the authority of a caregiver.

Youth with foster experience had a more complex experience, being at least a temporary ward of the state, having semi-professional guardians, and often also in contact with biological parents. All youth with temporary or permanent foster experience were asked about their satisfaction with their care experience. They were split on the question. Fifty percent of all participants were dissatisfied with their placements, and the rest were undecided or at least somewhat satisfied. These data too are complicated by the mixture of situations in which youth were in care. Some of those with temporary care experience were in foster care by their own choice, being placed there after they were street-involved, and for them foster care was a reasonable choice. Several reported good experiences in care. Those who were placed permanently in foster care were likely to be less happy, since they did not stay in care, and like other participants who left their biological family, these youth left their foster care placements. Elsewhere (Magnuson, Jansson, Benoit, & Kennedy, 2015) we described foster care as a way station between other living situations and placements, even for those who were legally still wards of the state.

What none of these living situations or caregivers provided was stability, at least stability defined as living in the same place with the same caregiver for a long period of time. The phrase “nomadic childhood” is thus apt. If instability is susceptibility to change, these young people became familiar with it in childhood. They do not assume that relationships with caregivers will last. While this type of instability is likely to be at best difficult, the possibility of change also makes it less likely that someone will be stuck in a bad situation. In Tyler and Schmitz' (2013) study most participants experienced family substance use, child maltreatment, and/or witnessing violence. These histories are present in the lives of our participants as well. Only a handful of the initial wave one sample had not experienced some kind of trauma at some point in their lives. Where this is the case change may be desirable, even if not always easy.

Despite chronic childhood instability in family relationships, the separation from home was not simple. Tyler and Schmitz (2013) described "representative pathway trajectories" (p. 1721), that is, pathways to the street, and our sample’s trajectories were similar. The first is "transitioning in and out of family home," such as from dad's house to youth center to group home to dad's house to the street. A second is moving quickly through several foster homes to sister's house to police custody to the street. A third is a cycle of running away from mom and stepfather's house and returning--several times--before going to a detention facility and then to the street. A fourth is from living on the street to drug treatment to a transition house and back to the street. These are typical, though a greater proportion in our sample had somewhat less involvement with the legal and treatment system--police, detention, drug treatment - and these were followed by longer periods of street-involvement. Street-involved youth have both proximal and distal experience with change, and for the majority the option to escape a living situation and a guardian was important. The difference between change prior to leaving the guardian and change after leaving the guardian was that change was proportionately more under one's own control.

<2>Instability and Parenting

Parental mental health is the third leg of Harden’s (2004) explanation of childhood stability, in addition to limited movement from home to home and stability of caregivers. In this study we add to mental health parental abuse and experiences of parental neglect, addictions, and abandonment. First, though, not all youth had troublesome childhoods. Fourteen of the 64 participants said their childhood was good. All of these youth attributed their leaving to their own problems: drug use, rebellion, and immaturity. “I argued.” “I pulled away from my parents.” “I did a lot of stupid stuff.” “I did drugs, and left.” “I wanted to hang out with friends downtown.” “Dad kicked me out because I was a brat.” While these examples occur in the lives of many youth, for the youth in this study these became a long-term, street-involved experience. These youth do not regret their childhoods prior to leaving home, though only a few had stability defined as living in the same place with the same people for most of their childhood. These fourteen youth provide a caution about predicting the behavior and outcomes of individuals from background data, and they caution against assuming that only instability leads to troublesome outcomes.

The majority of the others had biological fathers who were always or usually absent or neglectful. A few fathers abandoned their children for long periods of time, and a small number of mothers abandoned their children. A substantial minority had one or both parents who were addicted to drugs or alcohol. Half of the youth reported at least some abuse or neglect. The abuse was usually hitting, and the neglect was often described as not being available and not providing the basic necessities of child supervision. A few youth mentioned that a lack of money was also a stressor. “I was the kid who never got to go on field trips.” Three youth witnessed parents being violent toward each other, in two cases boyfriends beating mom, and in the other case the parents beat each other. A few parents and caregivers died when the child was young, and one parent suffered a debilitating illness and the child was taken into foster care.

In sum, a minority of youth reported good childhoods; most of the rest had some experience of abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence, and a few lost parents to death or abandonment. Eleven were placed in foster care, and 10 of these were there because of parental neglect and abuse. Most youth experienced the fragility and contingency of family life in their early years. Again, most teen youth in western countries with these backgrounds do not leave their guardians, however troublesome. The young people in our study are distinctive because they did. Not surprisingly, street-involvement does not lead to more stability.

<1>Embracing Change.

Susceptibility to change is part of the childhoods of most street-involved youth. Some of this instability seems clearly to be a problem, such as frequent changes in caregiver while young. Not all change is bad, though; it is possible that because there is so much instability it draws our attention, and in so doing we are committing a variation of the Texas Sharpshooter’s fallacy; that is, we see instability and change, and because we see it, we draw a circle around it and believe that we have hit the target and that our self-imposed target is the cause of trouble. Similarly, some middle-class youth experience instability, and we call it emerging adulthood, but instability may not be always be that important and for the reasons we assume. It only works as a characteristic of emerging adulthood if it distinguishes one stage of life from another, and it does not for many street-involved youth.

When youth leave their guardians, most are moving away from and toward something. They sometimes are moving away from troublesome family and poor educational experiences. They sometimes are moving toward a community of supportive friends, toward independence and self-sufficiency, toward adventure, and toward alternative educational experiences. This mobility may be evidence of some strength and of aspirations for a better life. It may be more useful to focus on their aspirations and the match or mismatch between their aspirations and the social structure. It may also help to examine their experiences of change.

<2>Change is Good and No Change is Bad

Few youth in our sample have regrets about leaving home. It often feels like a good choice: "Yeah, I’m doing a lot better now than I did when I lived with my parents. I think like now there’s not a whole bunch of crap going on. And the rest of the time, you just go to school." Bruce said, "It's a lot different to be in a house where no one is yelling all the time." Once they are out of their home, some youth resist stability, especially when it is thrust on them. Des says, "I've been through a lot." He has had a rough time; his emerging adulthood experience is working out the implications of what it means to have had a rough time. He is easily angered, finds himself frequently involved in conflicts, and it worries him.

Still, Des occasionally opts to leave options that would seem to provide an anchor and some stability. He left foster care a couple times, beginning at age 10. Once he left because it was too far out of town, even though he liked the foster parents. A second time he did not like the lifestyle of the foster family, so he made false accusations so that his caseworker would move him out. The tradeoff, he says, is that while staying would have been safer, he is more "knowledgeable” about life. He was not the only person in our sample to blow up a placement--with foster families, with parents, and with friends. Not surprisingly, Des is always on the move, from the details to the big picture. In a typical day, he'll eat at three different places—the Y-Van, the Alliance Club, and he will buy a slice of pizza. He worked for a carnival, travelling around Canada, and then lost all his possessions in a fire. Like other youth, he had and has ambitions of travel, and he wanted to own a car and live out of it while he travelled. In the meantime, he was sleeping on the floor at a friend's house.

He believed he was a hard worker and says he would do anything asked of him. He was able to obtain jobs, and he was willing to try things to improve his life. He moved to another province and got a job working in a mine. Things were looking up—while he was there he cracked his addiction and he was proud of that. After a couple years there his mom was ailing, so he moved back to Victoria and enrolled in school. This was a notable commitment, because he and his biological mom were not close, and they had not lived together for years. But life in Victoria was not going well: Overall he said he had been "struggling, working, travelling." He did not have a permanent place to stay, so he had "stuff stored all over town," with friends. On the day of our second interview, he was dressed up for a date, and he had to retrieve his clothes from several locations. He also had acquired a dog, a bit of a hassle, because he could not take it to school, so every day he had to look for someone to watch it. He had returned to Victoria with a camper, but it was missing; he thinks it was towed, and he does not presently have the money to get it out of the lot. He was a little frustrated, though he tried to be upbeat and avoid being a "baby.” Times were tough, often exasperating. A few months later he obtained a job at a pizza joint. It did not pay enough, but it was something. He was still highly mobile and unsettled, sleeping in a park, and he did not think much was different since he was younger: All is change:

Changing and changing, and changing: place, and place, and place, never really had time to find out what my priority was, right? Like, what, who, who I was, because I was moving around so much. Like, I didn’t even know myself, you know? Like place to place to place. And, and through the ages of eleven to sixteen, those were the times that I was trying to figure out, when I was running away, “Who am I?” Right, like, “What’s my purpose?” You know, “What am I doing here right?” You know, “Why?” And, “What’s going on?”

While they search, they also made made choices that baffled adults and foiled the rationalized service system. Anthony left the foster system at a young age, lived on the streets for a few years, and then went back to foster care just before he became too old for care at age 19. The Ministry helped him arrange a residence in an independent living program for young adults who had been in care. After a few months, he left, saying that he did not like living with other people. That kind of stability was not enough.

Change for Anna was similarly desirable but less hectic than for Des and Anthony. Anna grew up living with her mother, along with numerous boyfriends, and for a period split her time between her stepfather and mother when they were not living together. If her parents had not been abusive, she thinks she could have finished school and would not have been on the street. Given the reality, though, she did not regret leaving, saying that "It was a good thing that I was on the street at a young age." The independence and responsibility was good and freed for her from the abuse and from the imprisonment of school.

For a time Anna lived in what she called a "community house," a house with many young adults sharing the costs, although she described as "home" a friend's house where she often ate dinner. She was 17 years old and had been living away from her mother and stepfather for two years. She was sifting through her options, especially for an income. At one time she had had a job, serving at a fast food restaurant, and she was now applying frequently for jobs, with no luck; she applied for "welfare" and housing assistance, the latter mainly to help her with the damage deposit. She was able to get income assistance but no housing assistance, and she was staying at shelters, couch surfing, and sleeping on the street. "That's life," and "Life's a bitch."

She attended school part-time, a small alternative school for girls. Overall she was pretty happy because of friends, and her major obstacles, in her view, were bureaucratic: Working with government caseworkers, figuring out how to get an apartment, and filling out applications. She sleeps, "walks a lot," and looks for work. She talked to her mother several times a month and reported that her greatest fear is "being stagnant." At the same time, she did experience occasional anxiety. Between the first and the fourth interviews, over a few years, she spent nights in numerous places: couch surfing, shelters, camping, but by the fourth interview, she had a place to live, though it was not always sitting well. "I have a place now which is kind of weird. It’s like my first place for awhile... it’s different having a place and going to school, but I’m thinking about dropping all that again and just becoming a vagabond once again because that’s my---I was born to do that--so... whether I like it or not I’m definitely a traveller." The responsibility of rent and space can be stressful.

She had a roommate, which she described as "weird,"" and the apartment was about eight kilometers from downtown; too far, she thought. She was still reasonably happy, had friends, and reported being well on most questions about mental health, but she also reported not always feeling that well physically or emotionally. And she was prescribed a medication for depression. Curiously, she says she did not seek professional help.

She was going to school regularly and because of it felt like she's "going crazy." She told her teacher that she might "pop on a train and leave." School had never been easy for her; she quit formal education in ninth grade to "do something I could feel good about." She concluded that school was about conformity rather than learning, and she liked her new alternative school, because there is "more freedom in what we learn." For income she was busking regularly, playing her banjo. She ate a lot of meals at school and at the Alliance Club, a day program that provided dinner, and over the years has made some income panhandling. Not long after, she did in fact "pop on a train and leave," going to Montreal for several months where she joined the circus. When she returned to Victoria, she was accepted into a short-term agriculture work program that paid a small salary, though not enough to allow her to rent a room, so she was living rough and busking again. Later, she found a place to live with a bunch of other people in a house, but after a few weeks she was being evicted because there were too many people. She was also back in school, somewhat restlessly. She was now older than many of the other students, and she found herself wanting to criticize their choices.

At the last interview she again reported doing fine mentally and no longer experiencing anxiety or feeling unwell. Her judgment about her own well-being was more nuanced. She was not necessarily happy about how things were going at the same time that she has plenty of friends and was not depressed. Over the course of three years, she has had an unsteady income and uncertain housing and, unlike most, even had a few days of reporting being hungry. Still, she had good friends and access to a reasonable school, though she was not always sure why she was attending. She had some adventures and had explored the world a little bit. She was optimistic about the future, hoping some day to use her artistic ability to make a living. Many things were not certain, even many of the basics of day-to-day life, but these did not seem to have permanent effects on her outlook or on her determination to keep looking, despite frequent change in her life. In this she was similar to many other emerging adults.

<2>When Change Goes Bad

Of course change and mobility can have unexpected consequences. At these moments their experience becomes more sobering, more of a reflection of their marginalized, vulnerable status rather than an expression of romantic, adolescent, or emerging adulthood exploration and adventure. Short-term, street-involved youth have emotional support from friends, they can borrow small sums of money and have good access to free medical care, short-term shelters, and food from charities. These protect them from short-term disasters. They are skillful at managing short-term setbacks.

When long-term plans fail, it is not surprising that their options are fewer. The key component of a long-term backup plan for most youth in the general population is a parent or guardian who can provide housing and cash, when needed. Forty to sixty percent of middle-class youth in western countries depend on a guardian for housing and financial support well into their 20s. Some street-involved youth have the option to briefly stay with a family member, but serious, sustained financial support is rarely an option. This distinguishes them from most other emerging adults; it distinguishes some street-involved youth who successfully develop long-term plans from those who struggle.

Even worse, sometimes the guardian is the source of the trouble. "I was living there with my mom and her boyfriend’s ex-wife and kids and going to school, and then we ended up getting our own place with mom’s boyfriend and I was just like, ‘Whatever. Do what you want, right? ‘Just leave me out of it.’ And I was going to school, whatever, and [my girlfriend] moved in, and all this, and we’re all living there and all of a sudden one day he [mom's boyfriend] just started flipping out and smashing stuff and hitting.” He and girlfriend lost a place to live.

Jobs are another long-term challenge. Mauricio was quite skilled at obtaining them, though keeping them was not so easy. As he narrates,

I was working at... the night shift baking. And then they got, all of a sudden the new owners just –boom- sold the place and got new owners. So these new owners, right, like I met them, the one guy, he’s a baker and his girlfriend served at lots of restaurants so they’re pretty much set up for that place, right? And then....so I, you know, kept working and told them what kind of breads I make and everything and then he saw that I had… my friend was in there one night with me, hanging out right? Which was fine with the other owners, right? Like, he just got so mad and he flipped out, got right in my face, screaming at me, calling me, “you’re stupid!” you know, swearing at me and telling me-accusing me of trying to steal from him, cause I’m having people in, right? Or that I had a plate of food that I was eating that night and I’m apparently stealing his food and stuff, right? I’m not supposed to be eating while I’m working there, and all this, right? And so he told me he doesn’t trust me anymore and he’s gonna stand there right behind me every night and watch every single move I make. So I said to him, you know, “if you’re gonna-if you feel that way about me I don’t know if I want to work for you, I don’t feel comfortable,” right? And he’s, “Oh I don’t care how you feel, it’s my business, it’s how I feel, blah blah blah.” So I said, “okay.” So the next night I set up my tent in the forest.

Romantic relationships also can lead to setbacks. Jesse was homeless and then moved to Ottawa with his girlfriend to work. He accumulated support networks there—and a job. Then his girlfriend decided that she wanted to come back to Victoria, and he followed. She broke up with him, and he became homeless, alone. He wants very simple things, like a little bit of cash left over at the end of every day, and what he had in Ottawa seems very far away in Victoria, because he does not have an identificaiton card, and so he cannot get legal work, set up a bank account, access mainstream health care, and so forth. When asked who has been most supportive in his life, he says, "myself."

Nicole had moved back in with her mother, and life was precarious. She wanted to go back to school, and she was waiting until she and her mother were not "financially screwed." Her father lived nearby, and he made a lot of money though he gambled most of it away and lived in a "shabby" apartment with beer cans and bottles everywhere. Nicole said life would be "fucking heaven" if her mother would quit drinking. Nicole was back in the position of parenting her parents. Such troubles are not uncommon, but for these youth the backup and emergency options are thinner and more difficult to access. Hence Anna’s attraction to the relative predictability of being homeless. There is at least day-to-day certainty there, and the sense of some control.

<1>Summary

In childhood, many of these youth experienced frequent change in living situations, frequent changes of caregivers, and uncertainties associated with parental mental health, addiction, abuse and neglect and, for some, witnessing domestic violence. The decision to leave “home,” and the ensuing experiences of semi-independence and emerging adulthood at a young age, represented a kind of stability, at least the day-to-day routine and security access to food programs, shelters, free health care, underground income, and the street friendship network. The symptoms of instability were still present such as temporary housing, even while they were able to exercise more agency. Some even rejected the accouterments of stability if it interfered with their agency and their participation in a community. Stability narrowly defined was not the goal.

The support systems around them, informal and formal, worked well as long as our street-involved youth were willing recipients of charity. They have food, housing, part-time educational opportunities, medical care, friends, and a lifestyle. While many housed emerging adults experience increasing change as a contrast with their childhood, street-involved youth experienced the instability of emerging adulthood as continuous with childhood, but with the advantage of increased agency, opportunity, and freedom from some trouble in the homes of guardians.

Later, when street-involved youth did try to materially improve their lives by searching for better employment, better housing, and better education, they faced the same challenges as other housed emerging adults but from a disadvantaged position, and this condition persists over many years. One characteristic of middle-class youth experience that is almost entirely absent from the experience of these youth is the fortuitous circumstance provided by social networks: access to an interesting job, guidance about where and how to get into school and pay for it, or inexpensive housing. One girl did get a job in a shipyard because of family connections, and she was the only one of the sixty-four.

The youth in our sample were behind and ahead of their biological age. Biological age and the associated meanings were somewhat arbitrary. In school most of them were “behind” or “different.” After independence, they were “ahead” of other youth, managing their day-to-day life with some skill and capacity over many years, long before normative social expectations. Street-involved or not, most youth were ahead or behind in one or another capacity, as defined by the social expectations, and social systems did not always respond well to either being behind or being ahead. As such, instability was in part a mismatch between their readiness and social systems, not just a description of individual lifestyles.

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