Self-Focus: Leaving Home and Becoming Street-Involved

In the previous chapter we described three kinds of instability in the lives of these youth before they became street involved: instability of living situation, instability of relationships, and instability ensuing from parental difficulties, including mental health and addictions. We also described how that instability follows them into street-involvement. In this chapter we describe the process and experience of being separated from their guardian or guardians, including what these young people think about this separation. We also describe how street-involved youth account for their separation from guardians, because how and why street-involved youth separate or are separated from guardians matters to their unusual experiences of self-focus, emerging adulthood, and to their experience on the street.

Their leaving home and the first couple years of street involvement are characterized by self-focus, in the emerging adulthood sense, with an important difference. Arnett's (2004) explanation of the "age" of self-focus is that it occurs after one’s life is organized by parents and school and before the commitments of marriage and a career. Street-involved youth have a different trajectory. Arnett says that youth are “freed” of routines; “freed” works as a descriptor for street-involved youth, even when they are evicted, though this freedom can be scary. The word “routines” does not work so well, because life before separation was often chaotic. It is not the freedom from routine that they seek. Yet we cannot consider their leaving to be “early” or leading to increased “risk” without considering some assumptions, conditions, and historical changes.

Even though there is currently a normative expectation for youth of aged 14 through 18 to be guided and supported by their parents or guardians, the early age of separation for the street-involved youth in our study was not unique historically or cross-culturally. Children sent to boarding school in the past and today experienced the same dislocation; similarly, at the beginning of the 20th century, many youth of ages 12-14 in Western, industrialized countries were sent to apprenticeships and to jobs on farms and domestic service. This still remains the case in many low and middle-income countries. The obvious difference is that under those conditions there was constant adult supervision, and youth were expected to be responsible and competent though perhaps not mature.

If the age of emancipation should not worry us, perhaps the radical freedom street-involved youth temporarily attain should. There are examples of this freedom in other settings where parents have been unable to support their children, such as in areas ravaged by illnesses or armed conflict affecting adults disproportionally. Canada and some other high-income countries stand out today for the proportion of young people who have the kind of radical freedom resulting from being disconnected from family and many other social institutions. There are undeniable risks of this freedom, and for pre-teens and early teens, the separation from parents or other caregivers may seem catastrophic and traumatic and some things are likely to have long term negative consequences.

Still it is important to remember that bad things had already happened to most of the street-involved youth in our study and to their immediate family prior to their departure from the home, including death of a family member, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, serious mental health difficulties, victimization, and neglect. Similarly, we might worry about the effect of their leaving home on their schooling, but their leaving home was often another consequence of their problems in schooling—not a cause of disconnecting from school. Almost all youth we interviewed reported serious trouble in school or alienation from peers at school for many years prior to street-involvement. Only one participant continued attending the same school without interruption at the time of leaving home. For the others, school is a source of distress, loneliness, and boredom. Neither home nor school was a haven.

We should worry more about how unprepared our communities are for their separation from home/guardians. If at one time many youth had apprenticeships, however inappropriate and harsh this may now seem, street-involved youth have no comparable infrastructure. It could be different. We return to this point in the policy chapter. In the absence of an infrastructure for their participation in society, youth were on their own, with some support from charitable organizations and harm-reduction services. They did not fit. Street-involved youth may be an exemplar class of the late-modern expectation, described by Giddens (1991) and Furlong and Cartmel (1997), in which over time the management of risks is off-loaded from institutions to individuals, who are expected to manage the complexity of their lives. The idea of emerging adulthood itself may be a consequence of this experience of individualization; in their late teens and early 20s, at least there are institutionalized rituals for coping. Teenagers on the street have to figure it out by themselve, as Wyn and Harris suggest (2004).

The early experiences of figuring it out themselves made up an element of self-focus, and the process of figuring it out began before they become street involved, with a stance toward and about their parents. When we asked the youth in our study about what had happened with their caregivers, the explanations were variations on four different types of accounts: 1) *post hoc* developmental interpretations ("I was stupid."), 2) intolerable and unacceptable home conditions, 3) youth maturity and parental incapacity ("It's too hard to be a kid and take care of my parents"), and 4) a desire for freedom to explore the world.

<1> *Post-Hoc* Developmental Interpretations

Some of these youth left home on their own volition because they felt they could no longer live with parental expectations and rules. Others were evicted by a guardian who were unable to cope and decided that the youth’s activities could not or should not be tolerated. In either case, at the time of leaving home, most youth thought their parents were stupid, terrible, incapable, and unreasonable. They reported growing apart and arguing frequently. A few years later when we asked youth about their parents, many youth say something like, as Eva put it, "I was stupid and doing drugs/causing trouble. I can see now that they were trying to help." Other youth reported similar developmental changes in perspective while recognizing that their family situations were complicated by factors such as parental conflict, poverty, parental addiction or mental health issues.

<2> *If I didn’t leave at a young age, I’d probably still be the stupid immature kid I was.*

One root of developmental discord in families is the mismatch between child and parental expectations about independence. The street-involved youth with regrets about leaving their guardians behind still did not regret the independence they gained. For those who reconciled with their parents, none gave up that independence, and the reconciliation was made possible by parental accommodation or recognition of their independence. A consistent theme of developmental accounts was taking responsibility for one's own role in the collapse of the relationship with parents, feeling some regret about the harm done to the relationship, and yet not regretting leaving home. Relationships with parents often improved after a year or two away from home. According to Sid, “When I was fifteen, my dad kicked me out because I was a brat. And I ended up like going downtown and getting involved in the wrong crowd. I know it’s the wrong crowd now..." Sasha said being kicked out was fair; at the same time, she never wants to live with her dad again.

Dara summarized two years of parental trouble like this: “It was a crazy summer... I got kicked out and ah… I was just basically just runnin’ around the whole time, I was just not doing much except for drugs and a bunch of stuff and… all I really cared about was my friends....Then eventually I realized that I was young and naive and went back to my mom’s and fixed things up with her and got like counseling and stuff and… and we sort of get along a lot better now.” Dara’s mom adjusted her expectations, though there were still tensions: "She’s a lot more easy-going about things, like smokin’ pot and drinking and stuff.... she doesn’t like the fact that I don’t come home and stuff, she wants me to move out soon...." Dara moved out again, with a boyfriend, for three years. When that relationship ended and she risked being homeless, her mom invited her back. Dara did not regret moving out: "I kinda learned everything really fast and but so in a way I wouldn’t really have changed that." But she did regret "being a bitch to my mom."

Liv identified biology and typical adolescent experiences of feeling uniquely not normal. "My frustrations were...you know, going through puberty, hormones out of whack, boys, the way I looked…. I still am concerned, frustrated. My most important worry though was like I was always wondering why my brain wasn’t working the same as everybody else’s." Liv's developmental language was ordinary, though her anxiety about her own identity and about being normal was serious: She had once attempted suicide. These were developmental accounts with intensity and serious complications. In addition to routine fighting with her mother, Zaheera was also dealing with an addiction: "Everything was okay up to the point when I turned like thirteen or fourteen, when I started getting into fights with my mom and leaving a lot of the times. And then disappearing for months at a time." Her mom supported her throughout, despite her leaving. Zaheera lived with her romantic partner and did not intend to ever move back home, but she visited her mother once a week and was grateful for her mother's support.

Frankie blamed himself for the problems with his family. He smoked pot at home, to his mother's exasperation. "...the way she found out – well I never told her about it; she found out because she lifted up my mattress one day and found – like literally a huge fuckin’ pipe collection with like maybe thirty to forty pipes...Yeah kind of went... rocky there for a little bit…” Frankie left home, going back only for short periods of time when he needed a refuge. He thought this was the best solution: "Because if I didn’t leave at a young age I'd probably still be the stupid immature kid I was." Later reflections on leaving indicated maturity on Frankie’s part: “I don’t really know how to explain it but like we get in fights and like, we don’t agree on things and then I just like leave....I was being like a bitch to my parents and like I wouldn’t, I would like leave for the week at a time, and like not call or anything like that and, just, wasn’t really thinking. Just like more thinking just about myself.”

<3> Developmental Discord Complicated by Parental Troubles

Tate’s explanation of what happened with his mother began ordinarily enough:

I don’t know, I hit puberty, things starting getting different. I was more distant I guess, more, more trying to be independent. Especially at like twelve, thirteen, that’s really when like everything gets independent. I want to run my own business almost… That’s how I felt when I was like just starting to grow up, right. And so that’s when I really wanted to get independent by myself and take care of things. And then at ages 13, 14, girls start looking good, yeah. And then, I don’t know, started…started caring more about social things rather than just like the sandwiches with the crust cut off. So, yeah, that’s how it starting changing.

Tate desired a mother who understood the changes he was going through, saying that his mother was not just anxious but “petrified.” She was overwhelmed--cutting herself--Tate said, and responding to whatever he was doing by “putting me down.” “I come home on one day when I did something good like, ‘Hey Mom. I made my appointment and then I picked up my cheque and I didn’t do any drugs today.’ And then the answer from her was: ‘Well, it’s a matter of time until you fail.’ I’m never good enough for her.” Tate still believed that his mother supported him by sticking around, even though she was not nice to him. But just as parents are sometimes unable to cope with their children’s behaviour, sometimes children are unable to cope with parent’s behaviour. Tate says that she was “done with” her cutting herself.

Street-involved youth such as Tate experienced the developmental family dynamic intensified by additional parental challenges. Tate’s mother self-harmed. Other parents drank too much, used drugs, gambled, or were emotionally manipulative and controlling. Typically, these youth rebelled, and they left home. Also typically, they and the family later renegotiated the relationship. Leila described her early to mid-teen self as a “mouthy little bastard,” as someone who would not listen. Her mother drank heavily and was consumed by sadness about her divorce from Leila’s father. Eventually, Leila moved out. Later, after living elsewhere, she moved in with her father, and that did not work out. In her early childhood her father had been absent, and now he tried to be a “heavy-handed” father. She left him and eventually moved back in with her mother. Life was better. “I’m glad that me and my Mom can finally get along. We kind of get along more like friends now. It’s not the whole mother, daughter like, clean your room kind of thing anymore. It’s kind of neat because she knows that I’ve lived on my own now and that I have basically, had to do things basically by myself all of these years and she’s finally recognized that I’m basically an adult now. I don’t really act like a teenager anymore. She gives me lots of independence.”

Some parents and some youth did not learn to adjust to each other. Adyn’s dad was an addict and unreliable. Adyn’s mother was critical of Adyn. She eventually moved in with a boyfriend who became abusive. Subsequently, she lived with a roommate who had a meth habit. Eventually Adyn moved back in with mom, but again it did not go well: “Like I tell my mom, ‘You can’t hate me, you can’t actually legitimately hate everything about me, no, you can’t.’ ‘Yes I can.’ ‘Okay, fine, whatever, you can. You can.’ Yeah, it’s bad." Adyn continued to live with mom while still living a street-involved life--coming home late after mom went to bed, sleeping in until she went to work, and going days at a time without seeing her.

A mix of developmental change and youth addiction also separated families, yet some of these breaks were eventually reconciled. At a young age, Charity learned to smoke pot and use other drugs from a cousin. Many extended family members were also users. Eventually Charity started using heroin: "I did it for like three years, and so I was – I was used to that lifestyle, and that lifestyle was more comfortable than trying to be at home and being normal.” Her parents split up, because dad could not cope with Charity’s addiction. Mom moved into an apartment with her. After Charity got clean, there was a reconciliation between her parents who, she says, were amazingly supportive thereafter.

Developmental adjustment and stress also occurred in youth relationships with foster parents and in relationships with caseworkers. Conflict and independence were negotiated in relationships with everyone. Juanita loved her foster sister but did not always love her foster mother: "I hate her right now. Usually she’s okay. She’s better than most foster parents, but I refuse to go to Christmas dinner to her uncle’s house, so she got mad at me!" Juanita was also unhappy with her caseworkers, because they did not approve her request to move out of her foster home and live independently.

Jacob too voted with his feet: "I stayed there for a little bit and then just ended up leaving because it was a shitty area… It just sucked there so I ended up at my friend’s house." After a period of homelessness, Jacob was admitted to a new foster home. It was a backstop, but one for which Jacob was thankful, because homes were not always available. He was also re-negotiating relationships with his biological family, though recently he had stopped talking to his biological mother: "She’s kind of crazy a little bit. Just like on the rocks and she like--we got in a big fight and she stopped talking to me. She was crazy and like hard to deal with, but I still loved her because she’s my mom." When asked what would have made his life better, if he could have changed his childhood, Jacob said: “[not having] such a crazy parent... And like maybe a dad--like right from the get go. Like if we didn’t have to get involved with all that weird stuff. Like I wonder how it would be. I’d be doing a lot of different things [he starts crying].”

Monique kept running away from home as a child because "My mom was like crazy and stuff." Monique was in foster care for a year, on the streets for awhile, and then back to mom's, but that didn't work out very well. Monique went to a different foster home but did not like it. The goal was "for me to, like do counseling, and do family mediation with my mom and get all my stuff like straightened out and then go back home. It didn’t work out like that." Monique said that since she was 13 “[I] made my own rules...so it's hard to be in a program." Still, things were slowly improving with her mother: "Well, we can actually like talk and not, like, get in a fight now." Nevertheless, Monique did not ever see herself living with her mom again.

The youth, foster parents, a caseworker, and biological parents made up an unusual ecological system. The caseworker was the gateway to many other services as well as other foster homes and independent living support. The foster parents and the biological parent or parents were sometimes sources of support and other times sources of stress. Youth who were wards of the state in permanent care had more options than non-care youth, including foster care youth in temporary care because youth in permanent care had a greater chance of obtaining a Youth Agreement (a type of independent living) and their caseworkers were legally required to have ongoing contact with them. A few youth with foster care experience had the option of living with a biological parent, a relative, as well as foster care and Youth Agreements. This looked somewhat better on paper, since whether an option was available depended on timing, funding, and probably on other demands on that caseworker. Much like other youth do with their parent or parents, foster youth renegotiated relationships with caseworkers and foster parents, like Brandon: “I want to be in care. I want my old foster home, it was good. And they said I could come back.”

<1>Intolerable and Unacceptable Home Conditions

*I just sorta’ noticed that, I’m not just like some sort of idiot, that I could actually go out, get a job and live a life.*

Sometimes life at home was intolerable: Abuse by a parent, a parent being abused by a partner, neglect of children. One participant, Tristane, caught his stepfather beating his mother; Tristan intervened and successfully defended her. Out of concern for her safety, he asked her to choose between himself and her boyfriend, and she chose the boyfriend. Two youth had parents who preferred dating to parenting, leaving children unsupervised and uncared for hours and days at a time. While she was in foster care, the parent of Anna moved to another province without telling her. Care by relatives was a possibility for some, but it did not always work out. Staying home was intolerable because it was stressful and harmful. When they were old enough to learn about other options, some of our participants did then leave. Leaving may also have been an act of capitulation. Tristan left after attempts to protect his mother failed. If that violence had not occurred, he said: "I probably would not have been homeless. That’s how it started, was they got in a fight, and I got in the middle, and we got in a fight, and I left."

Prior to leaving their family home, some of the street-involved youth we interviewed were abandoned first. Zana related: "After my mom told the family, the whole family, who my father was they kinda’ all drifted away from her." Dad had a notorious criminal history. Zana said I was "left to fend for myself," cooking her own dinner, doing homework, and taking care of her daily needs even as a young child. Her parents were alcoholics, often drunk or not around. As Zana aged, "It went downhill. I started being – trying to be more independent, and not wanting to be around them as much. With my dad, it didn’t work so well. With my mom, it was just easy, just to go off and do what I want. She didn’t really care." After Zana was placed in foster care, her biological mother repeatedly disappointed her by promising to pick her up, but then not showing.

The experience of abandonment or loneliness at home was at times accompanied by similar experiences at school, as Chanel related: “I was subject to being teased a lot. This one girl actually used to run around saying, about me: ‘Don’t touch her. You’ll get disease. She has ADHD.’ Yeah, so I was alone for a while because of that. Actually, when I was eight was the first time I tried to kill myself." Chanel said, "I was diagnosed with depression when I was in third grade. I didn’t really, I – I didn’t connect with the other kids –- very well, I didn’t really have friends until middle school."

Perceived abandonment came in many shapes. Sometimes it was an absence, even when the parent was present, and it was also the experience of not being protected by a parent. Manny’s mom would drink until she passed out, and then he and his siblings would finish the bottle. Later, in his early teens, his older brother hit him violently. Manny became a bully himself, someone known among the other kids "as a bad person." Similarly, Vlad lived with his grandmother through middle childhood, because his parents were "crazy like pill-popping, drunk parents." His grandmother was alcoholic and "psycho". Vlad had his own mental health issues and at about age nine he spent a year in a psychiatric ward.

Derek's parents were alcoholics and left him and his siblings alone, including one stretch for three days at a time. He was in and out of foster care, and he was introduced to alcohol and cigarettes at age 6; other drugs followed. Derek was in a bad foster home, with foster brothers who introduced him to drug running. After all this, he said: "I didn’t know how to ask for help in school, growing up. And I didn’t want to ask for help and that was my big problem with school. With work and yeah, all, with life and all that stuff I just kept it all to myself and with my friends and stuff but they didn’t, like we don’t, we were too young, we didn’t know how to like jump out and ask for help and stuff like that. My parents never told me. I never thought it was okay to ask for help and that was one of my problems."

The sense of abandonment and the associated pain stayed with some youth for a very long time. Trey’s dad used heroin and died early and he remembered being beaten by his mother and was "put" in foster care by age 6. In his teens, he was living with his mom again. During an argument, she said: "'I raised you all my life' and I was like 'no you didn’t, the Ministry raised me' and then she started crying and I just told her to shut her face and I walked out and lived on the streets for a little bit, and then they put me back in the foster home." A short time before this interview his mother stole his income tax return cheque from him, and he decided to give up on her. She can "burn in hell," said Trey.

<2>Coping After Abuse

*--I’m actually smart, being away from my parents.*

Steph was in foster care now, after being homeless. But leaving her parents was her own decision: "They hit us when we were little too, it’s just like how, the whole situation and my dad was drinking a lot ‘cause he was sad too...and my step-mom was really messed up...so the whole thing was just a big, I don’t know. Spazz out. So the relationship changed in the fact that like, when I was, I don’t know, when I was like twelve or thirteen I kinda started realizing that it was not okay, and that I didn’t have to stay there and like, put up with it." Leaving sometimes resulted in healthy learning from experience and in more rather than less happiness. Antoine was abused by his mother and stepfather, and once he left he began learning things on the streets that helped him mature. Josh said he's more happy, being away from his parents, because: "I’m just doing stuff more myself instead of like living with my parents. Just more like growing up, I guess."

Karim was evicted from home and ended up being homeless for a long period of time. Later, after being in foster care for eight months her stress level has declined substantially compared to when she lived at home, which “was not a good place." Karim returned to school and was getting A grades. Colin too seemed to find himself after leaving home.

Interviewer: It sounds like you have lots of really, pretty important family members. Colin: Yeah, now, but like before I didn’t really care about that kind of stuff, but now, like, know that I’m important, and I gotta do stuff.

It is interesting that even when they are abused, few of the street-involved youth in our study claimed to be innocent. They did not cover up their own role in family dramas, like Amber: “When I was eleven I started, I don’t know, not going to school and stuff and like hanging out with the wrong crew and, you know, doing drugs and stuff. And I’m like, by the time I got to 13 it got really bad and I was hitting my little sisters and my mom and my step-dad, and then me and my step-dad would scrap it out until my mom called the police on me and then one day they finally said, ‘This is enough, you’re not allowed to live here anymore.’” This eviction turned out to be for the best, she says: “I feel better than when I lived at home…. I was being abused at home.” Amber had recently started attending school and had quit using drugs. Things were looking up.

Jessie’s dad was angry and aggressive when Jessie was young, and then was absent. His mom started dating, and "everything went invisible." In childhood Jessie was moved frequently from parent to parent to foster home and back. While saying that "my mom’s crazy," Jessie still maintained a relationship with her and was staying with her again part-time, but he also had other living options -- with relatives, friends, and on the street. His organization of housing options seemed to be part of grappling with himself, independently of his mother and family. He was troubled by the power of his own temper, and he was worried that he had inherited his father's temperament.

Audrianna was raped when she was twelve. “Like, I was kind of forced to grow up really fast. And I did. I hung out with so many people that were older than me. That – that was just part of the everyday life, you know?” Mom drank, a lot. Like Jessie, Audrianna had preserved some autonomy from her mother’s home by having other places to go to, though she stayed at home most of the time: “I don’t go home till like four o’clock in the morning and I leave at like nine so it’s kinda like me just staying at the shelter.” When asked if her mother was okay with this, Audrianna said she did not know because they never saw each other.

<1>Youth Maturity and Parental Incapacity

Some of the youth who left because conditions at home were intolerable or who were evicted accepted a certain amount of responsibility for themselves and for family members, even family members who had been abusive and neglectful. Another group of youth responded to conditions similar to those in other accounts, but rather than escape, their motivation was an opportunity to be more mature. Libby said that from ages 11-14, "I became more independent. Like, I do everything by myself. Like everything an adult would do by themselves, I would do by myself. I basically took care of myself, after like ten. I grew up really fast. And I was like working full-time by twelve, and going to school full-time." Bobbi stated directly: "I was more mature than my parents, and so I wanted my independence" while Alicia maintained: "It was too hard taking care of my parents and being a kid at the same time." Also like adults, some youth moved in with their partner.

At some point, depending on family did not work, as was the case for Stella: "... trying to get off the street and get a job and go through post secondary education and all that but depending on others, especially family, doesn’t work anymore; I’m too old... it kinda’ gets to a point and you’re just like, okay now I gotta’ kinda’ do it by myself..." More poignantly, Devin noted: "I guess we became more friends than that they were parents. Because I kind of passed them on the maturity scale.” Roscoe put it this way,

Roscoe: My most important worry was getting out of my parent’s house when I was younger. And after that I was just basically trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

Interviewer: And what would have made your growing up years better do you think?

Roscoe: More stable family environment, less control issues, more involvement with like normal social activities and I guess like freedom to do my own stuff.

Interviewer: And how do you think that would have changed your life if at all?

Roscoe: I’m not sure it would have changed where I’m going to end up. You know? Like I think that to an extent, I’ve done a pretty good job of figuring out like who I am and I don’t know how many of the problems that I’ve had can be blamed on my parenting problems.

Parents were no longer part of Roscoe’s frame of reference. Leaving entailed commitment and sacrifice, for some. May stated: "I had to drop out of school to work two full-time jobs when I left my parent’s house in like the beginning of grade eleven. And so like on my Youth Agreement I like went back to school, and now I have to do an extra year. I should’ve gradded in June, but I’m supposed to do an extra year, and then I’ll grad…. 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."

Martina talked about her parents like they were her children: "My mother and stepfather broke up – well, they got married and then, you know, broke up. And then she lived on her own with me for a while, and she met another guy, and we moved in with him right away. And then like a couple months later, I got kicked out. She started getting rough with me. I felt like I could never do anything right, even though I was trying, it – just no one noticed. And – I don’t know--too much yelling and screaming, and it was more about the guy than me. He didn’t want me there. She was more worried about what he wanted than what I needed.” Martina’ s parents were apart for 12 years, and just got back together. “And now they’re back together, so I live there but now that they’re together for some reason I just don’t wanna be there. It’s like my job is done, and I wanna be on my own now."

Sometimes youth also talked about intensely negative comments from parents. Robbie’s mother told him over and over that she always regretted having him, with graphic details about her going to the abortion clinic several times but each time changing her mind. Remarkably, Robbie was still committed to his mother:

I’ve been trying to patch up my relationship with my mother - and it’s been hard for me because she was diagnosed from the time I was born with schizophrenia and – in the last couple of years she’s picked up a rather nasty crack addiction…it’s like trying to fight an uphill battle constantly all the time you know, and she’s wanted to have a normal relationship with me for my whole life and I’ve wanted to have a normal relationship with her for my whole life. But she’s …. constantly emotionally abusing me and it’s a situation that I’m tired of and I like I can’t deal with it anymore... When she wants to be a family again and then she starts emotionally abusing me and dissing me and selling my food out of the fridge for crack…we end up getting into some sort of fight I generally end up getting arrested or thrown in jail overnight or taken to the drunk tank and – then you know she won’t talk to me for months on end and then after a few months she’ll call me up and remind me of how much she hates me.

<1>Freedom to Explore the World.

Much of the earlier portion of this chapter is about “freedom from.” This section is about “freedom to,” and we include it in this chapter about leaving home because this type of freedom is easier if one is not living at home, and because youth described this freedom as part of the reason for leaving home. Freedom and being young are idealized in North American culture. In the 1930s, millions of depression-era teenagers rode the rails looking for a better life. Developmental theory of the time incorporated some aspects of freedom, like experimentation and moratorium, into the very definition of adolescence (see, for example, Erikson, 1950). After WW II “youth culture” became a serious topic of study by social scientists, and youth culture was in part characterized by a temporary freedom from adult expectations and responsibilities. Becoming adult too soon could be a problem of “foreclosure,” a sign of developmental psychopathology. Today Danish Folk Schools (Borish, 1991) provides young people opportunities to take a time out from life while pursuing a hobby or craft. The idea of a “gap year” gives sanction to the experience of taking a break, perhaps to “find oneself.” The Canadian province of Ontario allows high school students to do an extra grade 12, called a “lap year”, when they can take classes for fun rather than in pursuit of a degree.

Street-involved youth are the Huck Finn to mainstream society’s Tom Sawyer. Tom yearned for Huck’s freedom to fish, swim, and eat whenever he wanted, and Huck himself squirmed when Tom’s aunt sought to “civilize” him. Huck could not be convinced to go to school. Still, Huck Finn’s freedom was at the cost of occasional beatings from a drunkard father. Street-involved youth might be the Huck Finns of our communities, those whom other youth envy for their freedom from school, from perceived parental oppression, and from pressures to conform and succeed. They have more opportunities to try more drugs and have more sex than other youth. They also experience some of the harsher consequences of this freedom.

Some of the youth had grand adventures. One couple travelled with a carnival for a summer. More than a few tried hitchhiking to another part of Canada, some just in British Columbia and to Alberta, but a few as far away as Toronto and Montreal. We quoted elsewhere the desire of Anna to just “pop on a train and leave,” which she eventually did, and several rode the rails to other part of the country. Another had her first encounter with living away from her parents at age 14. It occurred because she happened to meet two other teens who were planning an adventure to Vancouver, just for fun, and she decided that she would join them. She did not return home for a couple years. The desire to be free of rules meant that several youth preferred to camp out rather than live in a shelter. And many youth who said that education was important to them also said they wanted a break and were not ready to go back to school. A few, including Sten, said, "I'm at the age when I should have fun and enjoy myself." Freedom can also have a political element. One youth, Brad, aimed to live free of capitalism and the oppression of commercial exchanges. The long-term goal was to join a commune in eastern B.C., and while still in Victoria he lived for a time in a housing collective organized to eliminate hierarchies.

Freedom was desired in smaller touches as well. Kane left foster care because, "I like to have my own space." Another, Corey, had long been mobile despite being in foster care for a couple years. As he spent more and more time on the street, as he put it, "I was getting more into town, you know, I was getting charged by the police, you know, stuff like that, so I was like, you know being brought back to his place and yeah, then I was just like I’m tired of it. “You know like, it’s too far out, you know, like you guys are great people, you know I really liked it, but, it’s time for me to move on. You know? And like, I was shocked that I actually stayed there for two years." Good foster parents and a nice home were not enough. Harrison started hanging out in downtown Victoria, despite his family living 100 kilometers away. He identified as gay, and small-town life was not appealing. His parents wanted him to stay home, but "I just want to try to –to figure things out for myself out here." Harrisson did not discuss directly whether being gay was a part of difficulties with his parents, but he was open about his popularity on the streets of Victoria, the attraction of young men to him, and his enjoyment of raves and drugs. For him these were a vocation for several years.

Drug use was prominent in a few stories of exploration. At a young age Marci came to British Columbia from Ontario, believing that interesting drugs were available here that had not yet entered Ontario, particularly crystal meth. It was certainly true that many drugs were and are available on the street in Victoria, and for many they were an important, enjoyable part of the freedom of independence. Later, all youth came to see this drug use as part of a problem, and we discuss other elements of drug use in the next chapter.

<1> Summary

In this chapter, we described the experience and conditions of leaving home as one part of early experiences of self-focus. Such intense alienation from and trouble with their parents—and schooling—was not part of the experience of older, middle-class emerging adults. For some of the street-involved youth in our study, their experience of self-focus is the inverse of middle-class youth, being victimized by parents and guardians rather than protected, alienated from social institutions rather than included, and finding themselves more responsible than the adults around them. Those youth whose aim was freedom shared more characteristics with mainstream youth than others, but even these youth were probably more like Huck Finn than Tom Sawyer.

The experience of self-focus also included overcoming hardship, making a fresh start, grappling with education, and other experiences with drug use and addiction. We discuss these challenges more thoroughly in the next chapter. It is helpful to remember that these experiences are in part a consequence of independence from parents/guardians and the mismatch between their age and the availability of structural supports. As we mentioned earlier, older middle class teens are emancipated but with a series of social rituals and connections lined up to support this emancipation. Tom Sawyer grew up into his parents’ world. Huck Finn did not have that option.

<1> References

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