NFA (No fixed address): Feeling—and Being—In-Between

Most street-involved youth are hoping for some combination of the three characteristics of young adulthood to which other emerging adults aspire, as reported by Arnett (2007): 1) Accept responsibility for yourself, 2) make independent decisions, and 3) become financially independent. Progress toward financial independence, responsibility, and wise decisions was possible, despite the difficulties they encountered. Happiness and satisfaction were also possible, even when circumstances were challenging. These were contingent on eventual progress toward adult opportunities, or at least hope that there will be progress.

Arnett’s (2004) characteristic of emergent adulthood as the time when individuals start to “take responsibility for oneself” is a particularly apt description of the circumstances for the young people in our study. Often they feel as if they had been forced to take responsibility for themselves even when everyone else around them thought that they were—or should have been--taken care of by others. This was also a time when their early entry into emergent adulthood stood in stark contrast to others who enter this stage at a later age. These young people who sought to—or were forced to--take responsibility for themselves faced many obstacles. Some of these obstacles were caused by laws that restricted their access to the labour market and paid them a training wage much lower than minimum wage, as well as laws that forbade them from entering into legal contracts, including rental contracts.

These three characteristics are useful, and they are good descriptors of youth ambitions. As Arnett found, these are what adulthood *looks like* to young people. What it is to *be* an adult and what is feels like to be an adult is something different. Feeling adult ensues from qualities of experience and the meaning associated with that experience. In their study comparing middle-aged adults to young adults, Battersby and Phillips (2016) describe the difference between the *search* for meaning and the *presence* of meaning, and these are available in varying proportions in the lives of adults and contribute to the feeling of being adult. Feeling in-between childhood and adulthood is developmentally and existentially in part the search for and trying out of ways of finding meaning.

In this chapter, first we tell the story of three youth who grappled with what it feels like to be adult. Two of these three youth experienced significant trauma in their lives, and we consider for the first time the meaning of trauma experience for what it felt like for them to be in-between and in preparation for being an adult. We then discuss in some detail the complications of financing emerging adulthood while street-involved.

Ava, Kurtis, and Katrina were all street-involved for several years, for different reasons, under different circumstances, and with three different outcomes. Each of them had some experience of enjoying the freedom in the early years of street involvement, and each tired of those experiences after some experimentation: That lifestyle was no longer satisfying. Their commitment to becoming adult drove their departure from street life. For example, Katrina had a terrible childhood; her relationship with her boyfriend helped her transcend and see past her childhood difficulties. Katrina’s care for her partner and her baby transcended everything. Katrina thus found meaning in adult commitments.

Kurtis also tired of his early street life, but he had trouble leaving it behind. He wanted an ordinary life, a life that *looked* adult: a job and a small place to live. On probation Kurtis had access to some resources that many other street-involved youth did not, including free addiction treatment and a place to live while in recovery. The intensity of treatment and recovery were satisfying for Kurtis but made everyday life after discharge seem boring. The intensity and community of his weekend partying life also made the day-to-day boredom of being unemployed intolerable. It is not that day-to-day life nor his partying life were entirely satisfying, but the party life was at least a temporary diversion. Without a job, his days were lonely, and he could not find meaningful things to do though he had some recognition of other options. An adult life eluded Kurtis, in part because he had difficulty finding work where he might learn how to be an adult.

Unlike Katrina and Kurtis, Ava had an ordinary childhood until an older cousin introduced her to heroin. Heroin was fun, and Ava took three years off from other things to enjoy it. She was street-involved, spending most of her time with street friends, using street services, and not going to school. She had one important advantage: Her mother was committed to seeing Ava through this, even to the point of separating from Ava’s father when he wanted Ava to leave home. It may have helped that Ava’s mother underestimated the depth of the problem, and Ava at one point said that her mother was “in denial.” It did not matter; when Ava tired of heroin use as a way of life, she was able to return to her old life and live with mom, without ever really having to consider and resolve longer-term decisions about independence and self-reliance. Unlike Kurtis and Katrina, finding food and paying rent were never stressors in Ava’s life, and unlike Kurtis and Katrina, Ava had not suffered trauma in her early life. Like Kurtis, Ava had not yet achieved an independent young adult life by the time of our last interview. Like Katrina, she found something meaningful. Unlike Katrina, a return to adolescence was always available by returning to being a daughter and adolescent under the care of her mom.

<2> Katrina: Adulthood as a Fierce Commitment

Katrina's traumatic experiences began early: Her father did something horrible, something shameful, and the public notoriety split the extended family and caused Katrina considerable mental anguish. Relatives disowned Katrina and her mother. Katrina was temporarily placed in foster care during one of her mother's hospitalizations. Later, while under the care of a relative, Katrina was sexually assaulted. The assailant was jailed, and Katrina read a statement in court about the impact of the crime on her. She was proud of this and also embarrassed.

School was not a refuge. In middle school Katrina felt out of place, with few friends. She had "coke-bottle" glasses, and she learned slowly, so she was always behind. She was self-conscious, and she was bullied by "native girls," particularly crushing because Katrina is Metis. She also found that the number of students in the school was overwhelming. She was frequently depressed and anxious in her early teens and at one point she attempted suicide. She quit school after 9th grade, stopped living with her relative, and moved back with her mom until age 17, when she left home for good. That first year of independence was eventful. She met a boy she liked, and they already considered themselves to be engaged to be married. Everyday life was a scramble for income. She had tried selling drugs, though at the time of this first interview her main income was panhandling, making $350 a week. She was generous, sharing half her money with her boyfriend and also sharing with her family. She had been arrested once for theft and once for prostitution-related solicitation, though she denied being paid for sex. Still, she was feeling pretty good about life at that time. Her boyfriend and friends were kind and caring, and she cared for them. For the first time in her life she had a community and someone devoted to her.

She and her boyfriend decided that they wanted a baby, and soon she was pregnant. The pregnancy was the impetus for trying to “go straight:” She obtained a job in fast food, full-time, making $450 per week. That was a start, though she still had many ties to the underground economy and to street life. She was delivering drugs and selling, earning an additional $1300 per week. She was also still panhandling, so her income-related life was busy. Despite the money, she and her boyfriend were for a time still living underneath a railroad bridge, mainly because they had just returned to the city and had not yet had time to locate housing; housing managers are cautious about renting to someone so young and the only income they could document was the legal income. Most of her friends were selling drugs, and some were “stripping” and doing porn for extra money.

Even so, her aim to go straight was serious. She tried to get admitted to an independent living program, but she was caught in a catch-22 situation. Her case worker wanted her to have an apartment first and the apartment manager wanted proof that she was on independent living. She described life as being like a train track with a big rock in the middle and "you're gonna have to push it or...walk around it and so we're just moving one day by day so far..." What made the effort worth it for Katrina was her boyfriend: They faced those fears together.

In the next year she had her baby, and they found a small basement apartment. Because of the pregnancy and baby, she kept her promise to quit using recreational drugs and smoking, and she was no longer selling drugs. The focus of her life was her family, because the child is "my own.” She still had a few friends making money illegally, but she also had more friends who are working or receiving unemployment. She joined a parenting group. She was also thinking about how to get back into school. She was continuing to move toward a mainstream life, though to cover the income shortfall she was also now earning money doing webcam photoshoots.

A few months later she was happy, even a bit giddy. She had obtained a new job working as a nanny. She was pregnant again, and she was now on financial assistance though not reporting the income from the job, because money was still tight. Still, she was completely out of the underground economy. It had been some time since she had been seriously depressed and anxious. She had thrown herself into parenting and being a partner; that relationship was now over five years old, and life was very good. Her boyfriend had new job prospects, she was working full-time, and she loved being a mother.

Katrina made a commitment to her boyfriend and the two of them to parenting. These commitments transcended the day-to-day challenges over several years. These were adult choices—permanent commitments to each other and to their children. Compared to mainstream emerging adults, these choices are chronologically backward. Most would experience education first, then career, and commitment and then parenthood. This is the typical pathway of a middle-class emerging adult. It also reflects a middle-class faith in the economic reward. For Katrina these adult choices were a lifeline—long-term, meaningful goals that made the struggle worth it. Eventually they achieved stability, being able to manage an apartment, entry-level jobs, and their parenting, with the help of subsidized child care and income assistance. Neither had graduated from high school, and she worried about that. Socially they were still tied to the street, through friends, though the composition of her friendship network was gradually moving away from street-involvement.

<2> Kurtis: On the Outside Looking In

Kurtis’ early life and early street-involved life were not very different from Katrina. But there were some important differences. We met Kurtis during the summer shortly after he was laid off from his landscaping job, and he was having trouble finding another job. He was employable and worked hard, but when the employer found out about his criminal record for theft and that he was on probation, Kurtis was let go. This was frustrating to him because he badly wanted to be a part of the mainstream economy. Now unemployed, he described his life as a "vicious cycle." This was because when he should be going back to school or working he was instead hanging out with his friends, making a bit of money selling drugs, and partying on the weekends. Kurtis came from a family that struggled with addiction; his father died from drinking, and his mom drank heavily, experienced serious depression and cut herself. His brother was an alcoholic and partied with Kurtis every weekend. Kurtis had ambitions of being different, and he found alcohol gross. He preferred getting high on party drugs, because he felt in control and alert as compared to the fog of alcohol in which his family lived. He intended that the partying life would be temporary, having fun while he was young and then later getting serious about life. That plan did not work out.

Later that year he was picked up by an ambulance after passing out on the street after a party. The ambulance crew knew him and knew he was on probation, so they called the police. The police held him overnight, and his probation officer required him to go to treatment again and then to a recovery home. Things were okay after he got out, at least for a bit. He had also quit selling drugs because of the risk of being caught while on probation. He found that in treatment and jail he felt better, more quiet, and more peaceful. The problem was that when he got out of the recovery program, he did not have a new life plan. Standing on a street corner one day, he said to himself, "Is this it?"

Kurtis started to recognize that “sometimes what I do is not what I want.”

And all I’ve done is just partied, learned how to sell drugs, how to make money that way and just kind of live on impulse. Go here, go there.... I mean you know like I’m one of those people who just needs my friends around me. I don’t even like smoking weed anymore. Like it gets me so paranoid and just kind of like dumbfounded. And I just really don’t like it. But if all my friends are gonna go from a place where I am and say, “Let’s go smoke some weed,” I don’t want to be alone so I go with them. And if it comes my way, I think of it like a cigarette and I take a couple puffs, I pass it. I don’t want to be the odd one out who doesn’t smoke it even if I don’t like it. And I get stoned and I’m like, “Oh, that was kind of dumb. I don’t want to get stoned anymore.” But see, with like uppers like ecstasy and blow and ketamine and drinking, it’s fun because all your friends are around, we’re all fucked up and it’s a feeling when you go to talk to somebody and you feel awkward or you feel like you don’t know that person so well, if you’re messed up, then you could turn a conversation asking a stranger for a cigarette to like you know, just like knowing their life story. It’s nice and it’s interesting and it’s out of the ordinary because you don’t go around and bond with people all the time, but it’s nice to do that. I like to get high and talk to my friends when I’m all messed up ‘cause you have this really good happy vibe, and it’s not an illusion; some people say it’s an illusion but it’s because you’re messed up, I just feel like I release any emotion that I have.... But then once you come down from those drugs, it’s kind of like, you can’t talk in full sentences anymore. You’re so trapped in a lifestyle of just going downtown every day and like what else--like everything that I used to do, if I wanted to go play sports or if I wanted to go to the wax museum or go to the library and check out a book or do school work, I’m kinda like, “Why?” now. And you play your video games and you watch your favourite TV show and you’re not interested in it whatsoever ‘cause all I want to do is go hang out with my friends and kind of live the life of, you know, a suspicious kind of crowd that’s up to no good. And I look at everyone else and I say, “Fuck you” you know? And I don’t feel comfortable in like my hometown anymore. I don’t feel comfortable other places. I’ve been hanging out downtown for so long that that’s become my community. Like the Bay Centre block, Alliance Club, Sanctuary, Sunset Lounge where we go to rave, that’s like my community. And I just feel at home there.

This was not a moment of happy recognition. Kurtis started to have moments of panic: "I spent a lot of time fucking around. I don’t have my education. I don’t have work. I don’t have much of a resume and it’s kind of like I don’t know what to do. So, ultimately, I can totally see myself starting to you know, do things that I didn’t think I would do again." The network of professional support services reported by Kurtis and many others to be excellent can be difficult for some to escape.

Kurtis was right to worry. He subsequently hit bottom, sleeping on the streets and getting high all the time. His friends abandoned him. He described himself at that point as having been the guy who used occasionally for fun and did okay to the guy who used frequently because he had to. So he again spent more time in a detox program and then several months in a recovery house, managing to avoid using for seven months. He started working landscaping again, and he spent all his spare time going to Al-Anon meetings. After that there had been some hiccups: He spent three weeks in jail and some more time in treatment and recovery. He had been stealing again: clothes, groceries, and electronics and then selling them. He also felt worse, mentally and emotionally, and was starting to feel guiltier and more like a failure. It appeared that his doctor was also getting desperate; Kurtis was given a series of anti-depressant medications, including Wellbutrin, Trazodone, Citalopram.

When last we interviewed him, Kurtis had again lapsed into using drugs and with more intensity, this time adding heroin and methamphetamines to his old party drugs. For the first time he was spending a lot of money on using, about $1200 a month. He was lonely and was losing hope that he could be stable again, and he was worried that his small support network, including his mother, was giving up on him. The gap between his desires and his life was widening: he wanted little more than to know every morning where he would sleep that night, a quiet place to sit and think, and a job that did not tempt him back into old lifestyles. He fantasized about stocking shelves at a local grocery store during the day and having a small, clean efficiency apartment to himself where he could spend the evening alone. He worried on a daily basis about just saying, "I don't give a fuck."

Compared to Katrina, whose street community was usually supportive, most of Kurtis’ friends were a group of people whose preoccupation was planning thefts. Katrina found some kind of transcendent meaning in her relationship with her partner, while Kurtis’ struggled to find something in which to believe. “Not using” was not a powerful enough goal. Neither Katrina nor Kurtis liked to be alone, and Katrina met that need with a romantic partner, while Kurtis, who was more social, became lonelier over the years.

<2> Ava: Returning to Being the Daughter

Ava's ethnicity is Mi’kmaq, an unusual Indigenous identity on the west coast of Canada. Ava was not sure about her sexual orientation but was currently dating Po. Together they were an interesting, somewhat exotic lesbian couple. Ava lived with her mother; Po had been in foster care, and when Ava and Po started dating, Po stayed overnight occasionally, and then it became a habit. This became a problem, because Ava's mother could not afford to subsidize Po, and things were tense. Po was trying to get back into foster care, though she was reluctant to go back to a family style foster home—at the time this was the only available option. One of the stressors on Ava and her mother was that Po's parents were homeless; they found out that Po was living with Ava and would stop by the house, asking for things, and they would also phone erratically and impolitely in the middle of the night, demanding money. When Ava and Po saw them on the street, they would stop Po on the street to ask them for help injecting. Po changed her phone number so they could not call and that helped, but because everyone was around downtown, they could not help but run into each other occasionally. Drama ensued.

When we met Ava, she had been street-involved for long enough that she had passed through the self-focused, more romantic phase and was now trying to get to a place where she could move on. She had a bit of a "been there, done that" attitude. For example, she had tried making money by selling drugs, and it did not go well: "I was busted." At the moment Ava was a bit worried about her own drug use and was finding it annoying listening to the younger kids talk about how great it was. She was thinking that she might need some help detoxing from her own drug of choice, heroin. Otherwise her goals were specific and immediate: Jobs, money, house, with Po. She was using heroin several times a day and still composed and thoughtful.

She had some things going for her, including a physician who knew about the addiction. A few weeks later this physician managed to get Ava and Po on a methadone program to help with the heroin addiction. It was going well, though it had introduced a conflict in Po and Ava's relationship, because Po was not sticking with the program. She did not want to hang out with Po when she was using. The next year Ava reported being off methadone, not using heroin, and working. And she had left Po, a relationship of several years: "I'm not doing drugs and being with people I shouldn't... I have money that doesn't go towards drugs, and I can actually buy stuff for myself." There had been some gratifying recognition from her family for her improvement, and she was herself surprised at how well it went. "When I was doing heroin, it was – like, I did it for like three years, and so I was used to that lifestyle, and that lifestyle was more comfortable than trying to be at home and being normal."

She sought out the friends she had before dropping out of school and before her heroin using days, and they welcomed her back. Her street friends had also quit using, but she was nervous about spending time with them: "It's not that I don't have love for those people, that they got clean, but I think together it would be too difficult to stay clean." Associated with the change was also a dramatic change in attitude about romantic partners. She no longer "needed" to be in a romantic relationship. She had had a boyfriend briefly after Po, but she ended it after a few weeks. ".... too much drama.... And it was like--I'm not co-dependent with anybody. I can't stand like constantly being with somebody, and constantly, you know, having to worry about how he feels or what you are going to feel." Her description of her freedom from heroin sounds like her freedom from boyfriends, finding her sense of self, less fractured, less cathected with others, a self that is whole, with “integrity.”

<1> Trauma’s Contribution to Being In-Between

In addition to a place to live and a mother committed to her, Ava had one additional advantage: Her childhood, by her account, was ordinary and without much trauma. Kurtis and Katrina had experienced severe trauma, and this is true of most of the street-involved youth in our study, with a few exceptions like Ava. This trauma reverberated throughout their lives. It is one important reason for the rest of us to set aside expectations for the right time to be in school, the right time to live with a family, the right time to be employed, and the right time to be independent. Understanding their trauma seemed important to understanding their experience of being in-between. First, normative expectations about timing were suspended. Second, the experience of trauma was emotionally and narratively intense, such that these youth said they felt older than their age, and their struggle with the aftermath was part of what they meant when they talked about the “school” of everyday life.

Bender et al. (2014), also noted the pervasiveness of trauma among homeless youth. They cited studies finding that “71% reported experiencing three or more types of abuse before leaving home, and 18% experienced five or six types” (p. 53); all experienced at least one traumatic event on the street. Eight percent of the general population had symptoms of PTSD, while as many as 38% of homeless youth did. In Bender’s study, “The most commonly reported trauma prior to leaving home was emotional neglect (92.3%) followed by emotional abuse (91.7%), physical neglect (87.6%), physical abuse (83.4%), and finally sexual abuse (38.6%). On average, youth reported experiencing four different types of trauma prior to leaving home” (p. 56). Like the youth in our sample, “Youth shared that they would rather be homeless than live with the constant possibility that they would “suffer both physical and mental abuse” at home” (Bender, 2014, p. 57). Like Finkelhor et al (2007) before them, Bender et al. (2014) noted that youth describe victimization “as a condition rather than an event” (p. 61).

One interpretation of being in-between while street-involved was that it had to do with sorting through the meaning of “having been through a lot,” as one youth, Angelia, put it. This takes time. Ava, who did not experience trauma, regretted dropping out of school. She also regretted using heroin, stating that she “wasted three years.” Many youth who experienced trauma has similar regrets, but they rarely spoke of their street-involved time as wasted. Usually they were grateful for the street wisdom and experiential learning, even if they also wished they had more formal education. Their exercise of independence meant going at their own pace and repeatedly making their own choices, perhaps simply for the reason that one could. It may be that this kind of freedom was necessary for them—necessary in the process of making sense of their experiences. The price of denying that freedom in an effort to protect them may be too high: Most youth in our sample fled from demands that they give it up.

<1>Financing Emerging Adulthood

Financial independence was one of the three legs of emerging adulthood’s idea of adulthood, and most youth were working toward this goal. Katrina and her boyfriend were committed to going straight, but they still occasionally needed to dip into the pool of the underground economy to get by. Kurtis’ goal of a mainstream adult life was hindered by his inability to obtain employment, and his inability to obtain employment increased the probability he would find trouble. He needed something to order his daily life, such as a job, and without it his need for excitement remained high.

It is possible that these street-involved youth shared some of these characteristics with mainstream emerging adults, most of whom achieve the socio-economic class of their parents. Still, it may be useful to consider socio-economic intergenerational change, because it is not obvious that street-involved youth would fare worse than middle-class Canadian or American youth in their 20s or 30s. It is one reason for our claim that the application of the emerging adulthood framework to street-involved youth is not far-fetched. Another reason for a brief digression into the economics of emerging adulthood is that social expectations about financial independence for those in their 20s and early 30s are changing; it is more acceptable to live with one’s parents, and there is a recognition that there is a generational challenge.

The incomes of street-involved youth are lower than for millennial youth, but society does not invest as many resources in them as it does for others. Seventy percent of Canadians receive some kind of transfer payment from the government; few street-involved youth do. Most are too young for government benefits, though a few gain access to Youth Agreements, an independent living program, and a few gain access to foster care. Many require some charity—free food, for example. The cost of that charity is minimal. They are probably saving the government educational funds, since no school district is receiving the stipend for their attendance. The part-time education in which some enroll is cheaper than mainstream education during their high school years. They are unlikely to ever enroll in university or college, more saving for tax payers. There are some health costs, for the free clinic, but because they are young and their needs are few, this cost too is likely far less than for older adults. Those not living in foster care are saving the government at least $12,000 per year and for some much more. A cost-benefit analysis would be interesting: busking, panhandling, part-time work, and dealing marijuana recycles money through the local economy quickly; they spend it immediately. They might be adding to the economy more than they are receiving.

Moreover, about thirty-six percent of 18-31 year olds in the U.S. were living with a parent in 2012, the highest proportion since 1969 (Kraus, 2014). Parents of these young adults are spending eight hours per week caring for them. A later, more comprehensive report (DeSilver, 2016) found that 32 percent of 18-34 year olds in the U.S. are living with their parents, 42.3 percent of 20-29 year old Canadians are living with their parents, and in Europe just under half of 18-34 year olds live with their parents. In the Western world more adults are living with their parents than at any time since 1940.

In North America living with one’s parent as an adult has not been considered normative, even inspiring jokes about slackers, yet it is common and increasingly necessary and accepted. Living without one’s biological parents while younger than 18 is also not considered normative, but it happens in most societies. Social expectations about millennial youth—those in their 20s and early 30s—are being revised in much of the Western world. We suggest that we also need to revise our age-related social expectations for others, at least for street-involved and homeless youth, in the other direction. If our society is accepting and at least somewhat understanding for middle class adults to live with their parents because they have difficulty attaching to the labour market and cannot find affordable independent housing, we suggest it might also be acceptable for teenagers to live without their parents when the relationship between parent and child is as strained as described by the youth in our study. If age-related expectations can and do change for older emerging adults, perhaps they could and should change for younger teenagers, if the outcome is in their best interest. It has long been acceptable for youth to live in elite academic, athletic, military, and religious boarding schools. It is also acceptable—if not desirable—for youth to live in foster care and prisons. It is not a great stretch to conceive of other means of living independently when the circumstances are such that returning to a guardian is not tenable.

The argument for revising our social expectations is based on their unique cases, their circumstances. Because they are committed to independence, they are not going to go to a foster setting that “looks” like a family, and most will not or cannot return to a family that they previously rejected or rejected them or that harmed them. These options are a step backward. The risk of further trouble is perceived to be too great. Street-involved youth learn to manage their independence, and they work out, often experientially, what it means to be responsible. The leg of the young adulthood triangle that causes the most stress, that puts at risk progress in other areas, is the need and expectation of financial independence. The very small number of youth with families as backstops, like Ava, do not need special intervention, and a cluster of youth in the middle, like Katrina, somehow manage to muddle through, though we do not make life easy for them. We should worry most about the rest, like Kurtis, some of whom like him have special circumstances—a criminal conviction, missing identification, a disability—that make it challenging.

It is not just the money that is needed. Some of these youth have in fact “earned” a lot of money. But with regular employment comes a regular life, and many youth would make mistakes and need to start over. It would not be very expensive to open the door to employment for these youth, and in North America in past decades employment programs did just this for young adults, such as the JPTA program in the United States. These provided real jobs to youth who were shut out of the employment market.

The average income for 16-19 year olds in Canada is $7450, and for 20-24 years olds it is $17,600 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Making it easier for more youth to earn these small amounts would make a difference to easing the vulnerability of youth to the underground economy and provide some relief to the daily stress of accessing room and board. They know how to make money last, and it would provide the financial support that middle-class youth expect from family.

<1> Summary

In every chapter we suggested that some youth are making choices to be adult, or adult-like choices, at unusually young ages and in unusual circumstances. In this chapter we briefly mentioned the common middle-class expectation that a long period of preparation, in school, and then waiting for a middle-class income before making adult commitments would be rewarded. Katrina and her boyfriend turned that sequence on its head. They chose parenting first and then worked on how to make the necessities of life possible—an apartment, a modest income, and health care. Katrina still expected to go back to school and to have better employment opportunities. It was the adult commitment to parenting and to one’s partner—to the care of others--that was the incentive for these. It is a different kind of in-between.

There is a literature about “individualization” (see, for example, Giddens, 1991, Chisholm, 2006. & Wyn, 2004) about young adulthood, suggesting that the markers of adulthood are diverging such that there are fewer guides as to the right time to be a parent, the right time to go to school, to get married, and so forth. These are being chosen in non-traditional sequences and are sometimes chosen late and sometimes chosen early. It may be that the emerging adulthood model is best suited for capturing middle-class expectations, while the individualization model best describes working-class expectations.

Tagliabue, Crocetti, and Lanz (2016) studied whether one’s expectations for adulthood influenced one’s perception of emerging adulthood, and vice versa. The expectation of financial independence in adulthood would matter if one is currently financially vulnerable, making one feel “in-between.” One’s current financial vulnerability would matter less if financial independence was not part of one’s goal. Katrina’s expectation was that she be able to support herself, even if that support was a mix of income from a mainstream job, income assistance, occasional use of a food bank and, more rarely, the use of the street economy. This is closer to the description by Munson, et al (2013) of self-reliance rather than financial independence. What mattered most to Katrina was the meaningfulness of the permanent commitments to the family. She was stoic and perhaps visionary in aiming at a meaningful goal and making it happen. She worried less than we might expect about her financial unpredictability.

Kurtis idealized a simple life of work, an ideal with which he had little experience; while waiting for it to materialize he entertained himself with small thrills, primarily communal drug use. It worked as a diversion but was an unsatisfying life. He knew he should want something else, and he could describe what that something else looked like; he did not get much help from others for participating in that “something else,” and on his own he could not sustain the search for meaning. He was responsive to the reactive services protecting him from the worst consequences of street life. Unlike Katrina who transcended those services and that life, he had not yet found the pathway away from the street. From a middle class perspective it is tempting to think that Kurtis should have made a commitment to something adult, as Katrina did, and then use his intelligence and savvy to make it happen. But those choices are much harder to make if one receives few encouragements, with low self esteem and few assurances that those commitments will produce positive results in the long term.

Ava also found a diversion from everyday life, in heroin, and like Kurtis she ran up against the limit of its ability to satisfy. The difference between her and Kurtis was she that even though she had partially abandoned life with family and friends, except for being housed with her mother, when she was ready she was still able to integrate relatively seamlessly back into their lives. Street life was a three-year dalliance for her. Most street-involved youth were moving away from family and toward something better. Ava was taking a holiday from her former life, and she went back. Kurtis had no choice but to move forward, but his progress stalled.

The 64 youth in all five waves, and the 189 youth in wave one all left their mainstream schools, although a handful returned. They left their families, or were evicted (except for Ava). About twenty percent of youth in British Columbia do not finish high school within the usual four years. About four percent of Canadian youth leave—or are removed from—their families, staying with relatives, friends, or going to foster care. Some of the sociology of childhood literature (for example, Eisenstadt, 1956) has long addressed the arbitrariness of some social expectations, like age of high school graduation, age of emancipation, and age of entry into employment. The street-involved youth in our sample were a mix of ambitions in this regard. They wanted and needed access to education at non-traditional ages, often older. They wanted and needed access to employment income at non-traditional ages, often younger. In Victoria they had access to health care through special arrangement, but the mainstream system was best accessed through a guardian. Most social welfare programs providing income were for those 19 and older, including programs for those with disabilities, and those were entitlement programs: If qualified one automatically received the benefits. Those younger had to persuade a caseworker, and even if that was possible there was a limited amount of funding. Things could easily and inexpensively have been different.

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