The Implications for Policy and Practice

In this concluding chapter we discuss ways that socio-economic and related policies could be redesigned to improve the circumstances of street-involved youth. We begin by describing the circumstances of these young people at the last interview, differentiated by their relative income and housing stability and their relative engagement in social institutions. We also revisit some implications of their common experience of early life trauma. Finally, we comment on the comparative fairness of youth policy and suggest ideas that may help quicken the process of reintegration of street-involved youth.

<2>Stability and Engagement

Fowler, Toro, and Miles (2011) analyzed retrospective data from emerging adults who were formerly in foster care and. concluded that for former foster youth, “[a] single developmental trajectory did not exist…” (p. 343). The authors elaborated:

Like emerging adults in the general population, the majority of urban aging-out youths secure stable housing and use connection to social systems, such as school and work, to acquire gradually adult roles and responsibilities…. These youths obtain high school education and increasingly take advantage of employment opportunities to connect to contextual support. However, these achievements seem to be completed in the absence of typical parental supports. (p. 343)

The authors (Fowler et al., 2011) described three sources of stability for the foster youth as the aged-out of care: Housing that is independent of a parent or guardian, engagement with the labor force, and involvement in educational institutions. The authors found that some youth were stable and engaged; some were stable and unengaged; and others were unstable and unengaged. These categories are useful for understanding the pathways out of street involvement for the youth in our study. Below we build on these three categories and add “unstable and engaged” to fully account for the diversity of our sample. We do so to accommodate our qualitative data that include youth’s self-evaluations of their well-being as part of the interpretation of their circumstances. An example is the status of living with parents, which in the work of Fowler and colleagues (2011) is viewed as an indicator of instability. Yet for some street-involved youth in our study, reconciling with a parent is a signal of progress. Similarly, obtaining income assistance can be interpreted as an indicator of dependence or, as for the youth in our sample, receiving income assistance is a first means of integration into community life and expectations.

Another difference between our work and that of Fowler et al. (2011) is that they coded employment and schooling independently; in our scheme if participants were employed *or* going to school they were considered to be engaged, and we defined engaged as “having something useful to do,” from the youths’ own perspectives. For example, if someone was employed full-time while not having a high school diploma and not going to school, we considered them engaged. In addition, participants were included in the engaged category if they were full-time parents, because parenthood was so important to them. A further difference we considered was that income assistance, independent living programs, and disability assistance were coded as indicators of stability and evidence of success. We considered these supports as indicators of transitions from street-involvement and from temporary services and a first step toward social integration in mainstream society.

One reason for our more liberal interpretations compared to other work is that housing in our research site --Victoria, British Columbia-- is expensive and challenging for the majority, but especially those with low income. Young people struggle with both low income and inadequate housing, a macro-economic problem. The unemployment rate reached its peak at 15.2% in 2009 for youth aged 15 to 24 (Certified General Accountants of Canada, 2012), and many young people in their 20s live with their parents. For street-involved youth, the situation is even more challenging, and we have argued that one lesson of the experience of street-involved youth is their ability to function well in many respects despite un- and under-employment and housing challenges. A second reason for our more liberal interpretation of stability is that the very definition of emerging adulthood includes a period of instability, and for the youth in our study some connection with the education system, formal labour market, or formal social supports was a sign of increasing stability following a long period of greater instability.

These modifications mean that for stable and engaged youth we included participants who were working or going to school or actively involved in parenting. These participants may have secure housing independent of their guardian or be living with their guardian under satisfactory conditions, including due to successful reconciliation. For those who were stable and unengaged, participants had secure housing independently of or with parents and were not employed or going to school or parenting. Participants who had stable housing and were unengaged were typically choosing between different pathways or had recently lost a job and were looking for another. For unstable and unengaged, participants had precarious housing, including being homeless, and were not employed or going to school.

For our participants, housing became increasingly important as they aged. The balance between the excitement of constant change and new experiences associated with their early time on the street following disengagement from parents or guardians was later followed by a search for the predictability, security and comfort of a place to call home. Some of our participants, even after several years, had not found such a place and were instead still living in temporary housing. Some of the youth we coded as stable but unengaged may be in temporary housing, if that housing was predictable and was used as a result of circumstances such as returning to the parental home after losing an apartment because a relationship ended.

<3> Emerging Adulthood While Stable and Engaged

This category included the largest number of the participants (n = 32). Table 9.1 includes a summary for a sample of them. These young people were doing reasonably well at wave 5, and the reasons for their success were diverse. These reasons involved the availability of income support, obtaining employment, being able to return to live with a parent, and support from an intimate partner. About half of these youth were working full- or part-time, and half were attending school full or part-time and many were both working and attending school. A small number were parenting full-time. Some were attending school to obtain their high school diploma and some were obtaining trades skills. In addition to work, some youth were receiving support from a Youth Agreement, and some were receiving some type of income assistance. The main difference between income assistance and the Youth Agreement was that youth could receive a Youth Agreement only until their 19th birthday, and only those 19 and older could receive other types of income assistance, like disability assistance and assistance provided to those not working and not receiving unemployment benefits. Those on a Youth Agreement were allowed to work, and some did. Those on adult assistance plans were not then allowed to work, although the law has since changed to allow some employment income.

[Insert Table 9.1 about here]

By definition, all youth in this category had some kind of stable housing, and most were living independently. All ten who lived with a parent were living with their mother. Five lived in some type of foster care, and all of these were satisfied with this arrangement. Two participants were committed to full-time parenting with their baby and living on a combination of the other parent’s employment and income assistance. Even so, some had struggled recently. Four youth had just completed treatment programs for addiction or completed a cycle of outpatient treatment but were now maintaining sobriety. Several youth had ongoing conversations about reconciliation with family members with whom they had not lived for several years. One youth decided that maintaining a relationship with mom was not good for him and stopped communicating.

Taken together, these were ambitious and hopeful young people, exerting effort towards obtaining or maintaining work, education, and personal relationships. They wanted to work and go to school, although most of them distinguished between learning and school. For the minority of youth who were receiving help from social services as their main income, their Youth Agreements, income assistance, and foster care were crucial to helping them establish themselves in school and in work. These were not permanent options, though the youth were happy to have this support when they needed it.

The major difference between these youth at the end of the study and the same youth at the beginning was that most were now old enough to legally work in the formal economy, old enough to receive income assistance, and old enough to sign formal contracts to rent rooms and apartments. As noted earlier, Youth Agreements were not given to youth under age 16 and landlords were not willing to rent housing to them. Income assistance programs were also not available to them. This was the most important structural difference between the same youth at 13 to 15 and then from 16 to 25. For those youth age 16 and older, they found it hard to support themselves exclusively through the Youth Agreement program and the benefit was eliminated on their 19th birthday. Then they were eligible at older ages for adult supports. We have described some of the individual, social psychological changes they underwent over the course of these years but for most, the reasons that life improved was simply because of a change in their eligibility status for access to what might be seen as universal social programs and the housing and work rights protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Access to these at younger ages would solve many problems.

<3>Emerging Adulthood While Unstable and Engaged

A much smaller number of participants (n = 15) were in the category of Emerging Adulthood While Unstable and Engaged . Table 9.2 includes a description of some of them. The situation for these youth was particularly challenging because they were involved with employment or education but were continually struggling with their housing. All but two were hopeful that life was improving because of a new job, having rid themselves of troublesome boyfriends, gaining access to a Youth Agreement, making plans with a caseworker, or just having a good time exploring the world. Yet some had serious troubles: One youth was reeling from learning of her HIV positive status. A baby of one mother had been temporarily removed by Child Protection. Compared to those stable and engaged, this second category of youth continued to struggle with stability. For this group immediate respite from housing struggles is the direct solution: Social housing or a Youth Agreement style subsidy.

[Insert Table 9.2 about here]

<3>Emerging Adulthood while Stable and Unengaged

A third group of participants fits the category (n = 8) of Emerging Adulthood while Stable and Unengaged. Two youth who were living with a parent during this time. One person was living in an apartment and babysitting for cash while looking for other work and contemplating returning to school. Other participants were between jobs or trying to figure out what to do next after finishing the last job or the school period. It was likely a temporally limited category, since most older youth made some attempt to gain access to work or school. Being stable and unengaged was likely a “pause” or moratorium.

[Insert Table 9.3 about here]

<3>The Troubles of Emerging Adulthood: Unstable and Unengaged

By the last interview there were only a few youth (n = 09) in this final category. They had experienced serious problems that hindered their advancement, though they not necessarily permanent stalled. Some had worked though none were employed at the time of the last interview. None were going to school. Two were still coping with damaging break-ups with partners that made their housing and financial status precarious. Like most other older street-involved youth, the youth in this latter category were experienced enough to want something more than the “whole downtown scene,” as XX put it. For some the problem was finding the income or employment option that makes it possible to find another “scene.” For a few of the youth, it was the temptation of downtown hangouts that was holding them back especially the draw of using substances and the relative accessibility of earning money by selling substances.

Only one youth in this category seemed to have completely given up attempts to become engaged, and his burden was both the challenge of choosing wisely how to fill his time and the pressing desire to fill that time with getting high. The others wanted to become engaged, and these were the young people for whom the most immediate solution seemed likely to be a job; by comparison with those who were stable and engaged, these participants had found it difficult to locate employment.

[Insert Table 9.4 about here]

<2>What Should We Make of their Experiences?

Several years after leaving the family home, all but a handful of the street-involved youth in our study were occupied in one way other, either striving to find stability, still employed or looking for work, attending school or making plans for school, setting up households and/or re-negotiating relationships with parents/guardians. Yet they continued to face financial uncertainty and their lives appeared from the outside to be similar to most other emerging adults.

Only a few of them had parents/guardians who were able to contribute money. Likewise, they did not have families who were in a position to provide much practical or emotional help. Fowler et al. (2011) point out that parents spend an average of $2200 (USD) per year on each of their children ages 18 to 34. While the former foster youth in their study have achieved much, the authors note that“…[they] seem to be completed in the absence of typical parental supports” (p. 343).

The street-involved youth in our study were similar. They looked like emerging adults, even in their early to middle-teens. Their independence, responsibility, emerging sense of themselves, and developing aspirations were typical of emerging adults but atypical because our street-involved youth were several years younger and atypical because they had done so in spite of their challenging living circumstances and limited support from others. They also shared the trauma and periods of depression.

<2> Trauma and its Consequences for Social Policy

There is a link between trauma and other life challenges. A body of literature addresses the caregiving response, in some arenas called “trauma-informed practice” and in others called “psycho-education.” This literature describes the practical implications of trauma for identity, emotional regulation, behavior, and world view and then works out the implications for how direct practitioners and caregivers can reorganize youth’s everyday life over longer periods of time. For example, the National Academy of Pediatrics (n.d.) advises foster parents to avoid taking things personally, help children interpret their facial expressions and intentions, be calm, thoughtful and kind. Even when responding to aggression, foster parents are guided to affirm the child’s feelings and feelings of self-worth. The National Academy recommends that foster parents “repeat, repeat, repeat” And “don’t take things personally.” Persistence of care and support is deemed crucial for successful child and adolescence coping with trauma

Devising effective responses takes time and skill, and these responses are “programs.” If we can remember this, that a program is a response to a population, in this case a subculture of street-involved youth, then there is some hope that we will have the patience. In other words, a program has “pedagogical intentions.” This intention can be implemented in each of the arenas of assistance, including employment, education, health, and short-term programs, like shelters.

Despite repeated disappointments, almost all of the youth in our study, in every wave of data collection, affirmed their interest in education and mainstream employment, which are under-emphasized in practice, policy, and research about street-involved youth. What instead receives more attention are the charitable and harm reduction services offered to protect youth from the consequences of poor housing, lack of an income, and the threat of lack of access to food and health care. This attention is deserved, and these services function well to protect youth. However, they also need additional opportunities of accessing education and employment.

<2>The Strengths and Weaknesses of Harm Reduction and Charity Services

In this section, we have grouped harm reduction and charitable services together, because in practice they serve similar roles. During the time of our study, temporary shelter and meal services were provided simultaneously by large agencies and also by small, self-funded, community and religious groups. The consequence of these services was the same: Access to safe lodging and free, nutritious, and tasty food. So much so that more than one of the youth in our study said, “It is hard to go hungry in this town.” Some of the youth even complained that it was too easy to be street-involved, since there were so many shelters.

These harm reduction and charitable services usually worked as they intended. Youth did not go hungry for very long, although sometimes weekends were food was sparse. Most of the youth we spoke to said they had access to at least temporary shelter most of the time. A free, walk-in centrally-located youth clinic was easily accessible during the week. The clinic treated health concerns, provided education about sexuality, and also provided some counseling. The youth were grateful for the youth clinic and other free services available to them, which helped them transition to life on the street and helped them survive there. . A few youth complained about some housing programs having too many rules or that the shelters make residents leave early in the morning, and there was nowhere to store personal belongings.

Staff from these youth services, especially the youth clinic, were generally praised. Some of the services did particularly well with accounting for the impact of trauma and the consequences of independence. Many of these services are staffed by and supervised by people with an education in disciplines like child and youth care, social work, and public health; these professionals were applauded by youth for giving them space, being non-judgmental, waiting until youth are ready and want help, and providing resources to protect themselves.

Food, shelter and health and social services were crucial but were intended to be temporary while the youth were street-involved However, when these short-term options become necessary for years, this is a problem. As youth age and want to leave street-life, there was inconsistent and disorganized help figuring out how to do so.

In sum, youth were lonely and without many resources while living with their family, received a variety of excellent short-term supports while on the street, and then as they aged the supports for moving away from street-life were scarce. For a few youth whose families provided viable options, leaving street life mainly required reconciliation with a parent. For a few other youth the challenges were personal – including coping with substance use and/or mental health difficulties. However, for the majority of the youth in our study, the challenges were structural—consequences of the way the larger world was organized, as Wyn (2004) described. These are not emerging adult developmental experiences of instability but rather were the consequences of socio-economic gaps. A few youth reported giving up apartments because it was less stressful to live on the street and in shelters than it was to worry every month about where to find the rent. Other youth faced educational challenges. Youth complimented the part-time and alternative education options available to them, at least in terms of their availability, as well as the interest of the teachers and staff, the flexibility of the curriculum, and the possibility of working at their own pace. Yet over the course of the study none of these youth managed to finish high school in these programs Most of these youth viewed education as a worthy goal but they found it difficult to manage the demands of earning an income and maintaining a place to sleep while going to school. Invariably at some time they dropped out or postponed school.

<10>Appropriate Education Options

Youth who do not fit mainstream expectations for educational participation and progress often have numerous professionals in their lives, few of whom who have expertise in nurturing learning and education. Youth in government care are a case in point. These youth have caseworkers, caregivers, teachers, legal advocates, health workers, and youth workers, and yet study after study finds that it is rare for any one of these adults to take responsibility for working on educational progress (see, for example, Finkelstein, Walmsley, & Miranda, 2002). Intentionally or not, youth receive the message that others do not think they can learn.

There has been a lot of attention in recent years to the educational challenges of youth who “age out of care.” A decade ago Courtney and Hughes Heuring (2005) pointed out that the emphasis on this population is a narrow choice, since it misses youth who are in care temporarily at younger ages and who are released to their parents, and it misses youth who leave care of their own volition before they “age out.” We add to this that it misses youth who share many of the same characteristics as youth in care but are not in care because of accidents of geography, such as happening to live in a jurisdiction that is less likely to take in youth in care, or coincidence, such as living under abusive family conditions that were never reported to authorities.

Services for youth who “age out of care” also misses those whose situations are grim but do not qualify for such government care. For members of these groups their personal experience in education is challenging, often painful. Their educational outcomes, measured by completion rates, literacy, and numeracy, are poor. These problems are not fatal, but they do require a change of habits of mind and habits of practice.

Finkelstein, Wamsley, and Miranda (2002) reported that “success in school can help children overcome even very disadvantaged beginnings” (p. 2). They pointed out that most research advocates for the importance of education but that same research has very little to say about how to do it. In our sample of street-involved youth their educational progress and participation is limited by a) unstable housing, b) low income, c) the time it takes to generate income, d) lack of guidance about educational options, e) lack of support from family and friends, and f) lack of curricular and educational responsiveness to their unique life conditions, especially their former bad experiences in school and their past experiences of trauma.

The education system in North America is responsive to the hopes and expectations of middle- and upper-class citizens. Schools are available that specialize in accommodating athletes, specialized health needs, pedagogical preferences, religious and political values, and curricular choice. In British Columbia, Canada, where our study took place, the money for each student follows the student to the school, whether public or private. In some school districts across North America it is possible to enroll in university and college courses for free when the youth is still in high school. These options are excellent and illustrate how adaptation might occur. It is not a stretch to suggest that if money can follow other students, such as to private schools, the money might follow street-involved youth and be used to individualize a learning plan. The youth is our maintained they can learn and are willing to do so but there is a mismatch between their capacity and educational responses. Part of that learning plan could be providing someone—a teacher or youth worker—who takes a long-term interest in their informal and formal education and who has experience adapting to youth experience.

Workable models for helping street-involved young people implement a life plan already exist, including youth transition conferencing (Asscher, et al, 2014; Howard, 2013), which helps the youth identify their individual goals and pinpoint professionals to help achieve these goals. Some of the infrastructure is already in place, including online options, alternative schools, classes in the regular school system, and the wide variety of adult educational options being offered by these same institutions. The barriers to participation may need to be adjusted to make their participation possible. It is also important that these activities lead somewhere.

The “Food Safe” training provided by one local employment agency in the research site of our study is the right track: The program provides youth with the simple, basic qualification they need to work in restaurants. At the time of writing, as far as we know this was the only affordable accessible practical training course available to street-involved youth. Yet there are occupations in every local industry as well as local and provincial government for which basic training would likely lead to employment. Models for this already exist, such as in job training and support services for those with disabilities. Victoria has over 20 different supported employment programs for this disadvantaged group. Youth with disabilities have access to basic training and ongoing support, and employers receive help adapting the workplace to accommodate employees with different disabilities.

<2>Secure Employment: Financing Emerging Adulthood

Financial independence is one of the three prongs of emerging adulthood, and most youth in our study were actively working toward achieving this goal. Hagan and McCarthy (2005) said that research might need to “capture the realities of risk and resilience . . . to distinguish those youth who succumb to the street from those who do not” (p. 179). In our study, only a small number of remained disengaged from peer and social institutions, and the key difference between those who did and those who did not was access to some means of income. Youth received a lot of support from peers for figuring out how to get by on a daily basis, but they received little serious support for gaining access to the mainstream employment market. One very good employment program provided 10 weeks of payment while they acquired employment skills and identified employment goals. This service was complimented by many youth, and it worked well for some of them because it provided excellent preparation; however, it did not provide long-term employment.

Like other emerging adults, their common experience is one of underemployment, the “underutilization of skills and underutilization of labour” (Certified General Accountants Association of Canada, 2012). For those youth who otherwise struggle to fill their time with something meaningful, work provides some self-sufficiency, autonomy, friends, social integration, and independent, legitimate income. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that employment reduced participation in crime, and in our sample when street-involved youth obtained a “straight” job, their income from the underground economy reduced dramatically. Almost everyone said they preferred a legitimate job to working underground.

The underutilization of skills in the sense that labor economists think of it is less of an immediate issue, since most of these youth have completed only grade 9 or 10. It is still a problem long-term; in Canada “…the capacity of the economy to tap into the enlarged pool of better educated youth has not kept pace of improvement in the level of educational attainment of workers” (Certified General Accountants Association of Canada, 2012, p. 34). Simply, over the past few decades workers are better educated and there has not been a corresponding increase in the number of jobs where their education can be applied. This is also a problem for young people without degrees and diplomas because the service jobs they are most likely to obtain are also being filled by others with degrees and diplomas. The better paying jobs that historically paid good wages to young people without degrees, including forestry and mining, are not widely available and those that are available are competitive. The percentage of youth working part-time who would prefer to be working full-time has doubled over the last decade (Certified General Accountants Association of Canada, 2012)

Underutilization is also an issue in the developmental sense. The street-involved youth in our study had capacities to learn skills and they had an interest in meaningful work. Yet they received less help than housed youth as they transitioned into adulthood.

<1> Concluding Remarks

As Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014) have observed, many street-involved who leave home also have siblings who do not leave, and we do not know why. This is true too of some of the youth in our study. Are they more or less mature? More or less distractible? Are their problems in school worse? Aside from those who were abused, is there a mismatch between parenting style and developmental level? There is a mystery here. Because so few returned to their parents/guardians, it seems unlikely that efforts to reconcile them would be effective.

Our study ends abruptly after the fifth wave of interviews. We would have loved to maintain contact to see how the trajectories we describe herein play out over the life course of the participants in our study. In their mid- to-late- twenties, were they trapped in “precarious” work or did they manage to find more stable employment? How many of them managed to go back to school, and what type of education worked for them? How many of them found stable romantic partners? Still, our intent was to learn how participants fare over a period in their lives when they share many characteristics of other people during Emergent Adulthood stage even though the youth in this study enter this stage at a relatively young age. Despite this aged differential, we have illustrated that these youth desire to achieve what they perceive as an adult identity.

In conclusion, the lives of street-involved young people are a mix of emerging adult developmental experiences, existential resilience and courage, and late-modern, structural circumstances and policies. Street-involved youth live experiences common to young people, and they do so with some characteristic strengths. The difficulties these youth face are exacerbated by social inequities and social policies that marginalized and exclude them.

Some characteristics are so fully the consequences of the structural organization of young lives that until those conditions are alleviated, it is difficult to say with precision what “developmental” means. We noted in earlier chapters that the experience of change and instability in the lives of young people in North America has changed considerably over the past 200 years; these changes are direct and causal consequences of changes in the macro-social order and not consequences of human developmental consistency. At the same time, while separating and separated from their parents/guardians, the young people in our study aspired to adult lives within a social context that most would say they are not ready..

Wyn (2004) described individualization as a condition of late-modern life, and this is often a problem. Yet it is an opportunity as well. Leaving parents/guardians early and choosing independence could be a viable life path for those who believe it necessary. It would require some changes in policy, but it could be done in such a way that young people could experience both harm reduction and also inclusion in education, work, and community life.

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