Summary: The Implications for Policy of Street-Involved Lives

In this concluding chapter we discuss the policy implications. For instance, the labour laws in Canada that restrict the full participation of young people in the labour market are well-intended to protect youth, but these laws also unintentionally prevent some youth from earning a much-needed independent income. Similarly, the bureaucratic and competitive secondary education system, intended to prepare all youth for long-term futures, creates formidable barriers to success for street-involved young people who have been alienated from education and from learning and who need more immediate results from schooling.

We begin by describing the circumstances of these young people at the last interview, differentiated by their comparative stability and engagement. 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.

<1>Stability and Engagement

Fowler, Toro, and Miles (2011) analyzed retrospective data from emerging adults who were formerly in foster care. They described three sources of stability: Housing that is independent of a parent or guardian, engagement with the labour 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*. Fowler et al (2011) 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)

These categories work for street-involved youth as well. We build on these three categories and add a fourth category, unstable and engaged, to account for another small group of our participants. 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 is viewed as an indicator of instability. Yet for street-involved youth reconciling with a parent can be a signal of progress. Similarly, obtaining income assistance can be interpreted as an indicator of dependence or, as with some 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 their perspective. 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 and inclusion.

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 especially 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 time 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.

<2> Emerging Adulthood While Stable and Engaged

This category included the largest number of the participants in all five waves (n = 42). Table 9.1 includes a summary for a sample of them. These young people were doing reasonably well at wave 5, and the reasons were diverse. These reasons include the availability of income support, obtaining work, 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.

<2>Emerging Adulthood While Unstable and Engaged

A much smaller number of participants were in this category (n = 15), and 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 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]

<2>Emerging Adulthood While Stable and Unengaged

An important group of participants fits this category (n = 8), though they are a mystery in many respects. Two youth who were living with a parent during this pause. One person was living in an apartment and babysitting for cash while looking for work and thinking about whether school was a good idea. She was otherwise doing fine. Other participants were between jobs or trying to figure out what to do next after the last job or school period. It is likely that this is a temporally limited category, since most older youth make some attempt to gain access to work or school. Being stable and unengaged may be a “pause” or moratorium.

[Insert Table 9.3 about here]

<2>The Troubles of Emerging Adulthood: Unstable and Unengaged

By the last interview there were only a few youth in this category (n = 12), but they had serious though not necessarily permanent challenges. 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, they were experienced enough to want something more than the “whole downtown scene,” as one person put it. For some the problem was finding the income or employment option that makes it possible to find another “scene.” For a few it was the temptation that was the problem, especially using substances and the relative accessibility of earning money by selling substances.

Only one seemed to have 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]

<1>What Should We Make of their Experiences?

Several years after leaving the family home, all but a handful of the young people in our study were striving to find stability, still employed or looking for work, attending school or making plans for school, setting up households, re-negotiating relationships with parents. They were busy organizing the mundane details of everyday life. If they were not so financially erratic and poor, their lives would appear from the outside to be similar to most other emerging adults. And they *are* similar, though with different pathways. They ought to be provided the same opportunities and supports accessible to other young people, especially social welfare, housing, employment and educational opportunities instead of bemoaning the seeming “mistakes” they make.

Only a few have parents who can contribute money. 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, “…[they] seem to be completed in the absence of typical parental supports” (p. 343). Likewise, the street-involved youth in our study did not have families who were in a position to provide much practical or emotional help.

In addition to their similarities with other youth, street-involved youth were also unusual. They are 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 circumstances and limited support. The characteristic that is important was the common experiences of trauma and periods of significant and often clinical depression. Trauma is dis-orienting. How we respond to it makes a difference, and we often respond incorrectly, unintentionally confirming the dis-orientation.

<1> Trauma and its Consequences for Social Policy

There is a link between trauma and other life challenges. As Fratto (2016) states: “[C]linicians should appreciate the link between how traumatized children understand the world and interact with others differently from other children.” This should be true of everyone who is part of the response and care system for street-involved youth. It also has implications for youth education and employment services. Children and youth who experienced trauma have difficulty with “1) emotion identification, processing, and regulation; 2) anxiety management; 3) identification and alteration of maladaptive cognitions; and 4) interpersonal communication and social problem solving” (Mahoney, Ford, Ko, & Siefried, 2004). The American Academy of Pediatrics (n.d.) has noted that traumatized children are “…watchful for danger, have negative beliefs about the world, about caregivers, and about themselves… will respond to anything they think is a threat more quickly and forcefully than other children…. are more likely to misread facial and non-verbal clues and think there is a threat where none is intended.… will challenge the caretaker, often in ways that threaten placement” (p. 12).

Evaluations of the variety of therapeutic and psychological interventions for young people with trauma histories (Gillies, et al, 2012; Patel, Kellezi, & Williama, 2014; Roberts, et al, 2016) have found some support for the effectiveness of strategies such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, though the effects are usually modest, and most studies do not look for or find effects longer than one month following an intervention. A second 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 one’s facial expressions and intentions, be calm, thoughtful and kind. Even when responding to aggression, they are recommended to affirm the child’s feelings and self worth. The National Academy uses the phrase “repeat, repeat, repeat.” They also emphasize the phrase “don’t take things personally.” Persistence of care and support is deemed crucial.

These descriptions of the consequences of trauma for how caregivers respond treat the experience of trauma as a unique phenomenological and existential state of being. Changes in this state of being take time, persistence, and patience. Attempts to provide order and discipline that we consider routine can be accidentally harmful. As one high school principal said about former attempts to discipline youth, “All these years I thought I was teaching but I was causing harm” (Ideas Network, CBC Radio, 2016). In his case, teaching itself was often perceived by youth as a threat, as aggression; of course, so was tackling misbehavior head-on.

Devising effective responses to these characteristics 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, 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 participants, in every wave of data collection, affirmed their interest in education and mainstream employment. Overall, these are under-emphasized in practice, policy, and research about street-involved youth. What 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. To these are also needed additional opportunities of accessing education and employment.

<1>The Strengths and Weaknesses of Harm Reduction and Charity Services

We group these two together, because in practice they serve similar roles. During the time of this 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 person said, “It is hard to go hungry in this town,” and some complained that it was too easy to be street-involved, since there were so many shelters. They thought that some youth were street-involved as a lark rather than out of need.

These services work. Youth did not go hungry for very long, although sometimes weekends were hard. Most youth had access to at least temporary shelter, most of the time, for the same reasons. A free, walk-in clinic with staff whose specialties were youth medical needs was available several times each week. This clinic treated medical needs, provided education about sexuality, and also provided some counseling, clinical and personal. We reported that youth compliment and are grateful for the harm reduction and charitable services available to them, including temporary housing, meals, outreach workers, a safe place to hang out on many afternoons and evenings, the free health clinic, and short-term counseling. These ease the transition to life on the street and ease the maintenance of life on the street. There were a few complaints about these services such as that some housing programs had too many rules. The shelters make residents leave early in the morning, and there was nowhere to store one’s possessions. The transitional housing services had a curfew and restricted visitors.

Still, many youth knew they were fortunate in this respect. For meals there was often more than one choice of place to eat, and the quality of the food was generally high; they “tolerated my ridiculous vegan diet!” There was more than one shelter program, and there were also some options for intermediate length stay housing. Staff from the youth clinic were almost universally praised. One experienced youth felt many newcomers were not really serious, such as youth who showed up in the summer after school was out, stayed around for a few weeks having fun, and then disappeared. 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 praised by youth for giving them space, being non-judgmental, waiting until youth are ready and want help, and providing resources to protect themselves.

The provision of health services, food, and shelter is crucial. These are intended to be temporary uses and intended to prevent the worst consequences of street life. The majority of street-involved youth—and homeless youth—need these services temporarily, from a few days to a year. When these short-term options become necessary for years, this is a problem. While they are on the street, they have access to short-term counseling and guidance that helps them make use of the support system and organize their day-to-day life. Over time the services continue to be important, but they were not intended to be long term supports. 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 were viable options leaving street life required some reconciliation with a parent, not always easy to do. For a few more youth the challenges were personal struggles with addiction and/or mental health difficulties. For the majority 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. They are consequences of structural gaps. A few youth reported giving up apartments or being tempted to give 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. Because of the lack of long-term support, the period of street-involvement is unnecessarily prolonged. If the options provided to middle-class youth were available to street-involved youth, the problems both individual and community-wide would be greatly reduced.

Another example of the structural challenge was education. Youth complimented the part-time and alternative education options, at least in terms of their availability, the interest of the teachers and staff, the flexibility of the curriculum, and the possibility of working at their own pace. Yet none of these youth managed to finish high school in these programs over the course of the study. It might not seem surprising, since they were all street-involved for several years. The local education programs did help many other young people obtain their high school diploma. Like them, most of these youth viewed education as a worthy goal, and they were all encouraged to enroll in school. 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. We will return to this challenge later in this chapter, and we will discuss further the nature of education with these populations.

<1>Giving up our Preconceptions

We are uncomfortable with young people appearing to reject the security of their families and the school system. We are uncomfortable with how they spend their time, sometimes even when those actions are demonstrations of responsibility. They manage their health, look for work, are perpetually seeking better housing options, seek to find educational opportunities, and manage relationships with caseworkers, youth workers, shelter staff, probation officers, therapists, physicians and nurses, landlords, roommates, and romantic partners. They also use drugs, have sex, sell drugs, panhandle, busk, “fly sign” (advertise their need on a cardboard sign), and squeegee. Some of them make a living through theft, and a small number sold sex. Our authentic instincts have always been protection, and these are understandable and empathetic responses. We want them to be off the street and participating in mainstream teenage activities. Failing that, current policy is to help mitigate the likelihood of bad things happening. Harm reduction stalls for time, until young people are ready to move on.

Meeting these needs prevents catastrophe, but this should not be confused with helping integrate young people into mainstream life. Experiences, interventions, programs, and communities to help them mature successfully are scarce. We do well at responding to the part of young people that is unique and specialized, but we do poorly at responding to the human and developmental side of their humanity and experience. We return next to education.

<1>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). Because they are in government care and often coping with complex emotional issues, educational expectations are often different; 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, and coincidence, such as living under abusive conditions that were never reported to authorities.

It also misses youth whose situations are grim but do not qualify for care. For members of these populations their personal experience in education is challenging, often painful. 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 “…when neglected or abused children succeed in school, they are less likely to engage in violence or be incarcerated. In other words, success in school can help children overcome even very disadvantaged beginnings” (p. 2). They pointed out that most research argues for the importance of education but that same research has very little to say about how to do it. Participants in their sample frequently blamed themselves for their difficulties in school, describing their own behavioral problems and poor study habits, and they also credited themselves when things improved for trying harder and paying attention in class.

One interesting dynamic was that both youth and their foster parents described youth as doing well even when grade point averages were very low. Both seemed to accept near failing or, more positively, barely passing, as successful. School staff rarely knew about the child’s case history, and so they rarely devised curricula responsive to student circumstances. Caregivers were mainly concerned about behavior and showed much less interest in school performance. Finally, few foster youth and few caregivers reported that someone was available to be responsible for the educational progress of the child. Caregivers wanted the school to do more, and the school wanted caregivers and the child to do more. All were satisfied with less disruptive behavior, and achievement was a secondary concern.

This was true in our sample as well. Street-involved youth face the same problems, and because they are living independently, these problems are even worse. 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 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, if one 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. These youth demonstrated that they can learn, but there is a mismatch between their capacity and educational responses. Part of that learning plan could be providing someone—a teacher or youthworker—who takes a long-term interest in their informal and formal education and who has experience adapting to youth experience.

Workable models for helping foster and street-involved young people implement a life plan already exist, including youth transition conferencing (Asscher, et al, 2014; Howard, 2013), a process of helping the youth identify goals and identify people who can help with those 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.

Youth without a high school diploma understand well that their lack of formal education is a barrier to employment. Early on many feel deeply the gap between their lived experience of learning, the satisfactions of day-to-day accomplishment, and the seeming aimlessness of formal education. They know that formal education is important, and they wonder why it has to be this way. We wonder why as well, at least for youth like those in our study for whom the current system does not work. Later most of them begin working toward a degree or trade. But perhaps for them the educational response is backward. Instead, one option is to assist youth with finding learning experiences a) that are enjoyable and provide a glimpse of new worlds, and b) that also provides them with the means to generate income.

The “Food Safe” training provided by one local employment agency in Victoria is the right idea: It gets youth the simple, basic qualification they need to work in restaurants. As far as we know this was the only widely available practical training available to these youth. Yet there are occupations in every local industry as well as local and provincial government for which a little bit of training would go far. 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 youth with disabilities. These participants receive training and ongoing support, and employers receive help adapting the workplace to accommodate their disability. The ability to earn income may be the most important avenue of social inclusion. They are motivated to work, and working gives them access to the wider adult world and an alternative to their street-youth community. This could be done for street-involved youth.

<1>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” (Hagen & McCarthy, p. 179). In our study, only a small number of youth “succumbed” to the street, 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 reduces participation in crime, and in our sample when street-involved youth obtained a straight job their income from the underground economy went down, dramatically. Almost everyone said they preferred a straight job to working underground.

The underutilization of skills in the sense that labour 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 used. 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 rate 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. These youth have capacities to learn skills, and they have an interest in meaningful work. Yet they receive less help than anybody else gaining access to these.

<1> Concluding Remarks<1>

As Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014) say about homeless youth, many of those who leave also have siblings who do not leave, and we do not know why. This is true too of some of these youth. 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, it seems unlikely that efforts to reconcile them would be effective.

Although it was not possible, it would have been helpful to have followed them longer. Were they trapped in “precarious” work or did they manage to more stable jobs? How many managed to go back to school, and what type of education worked for them? How many others found romantic partners, and were those partners from the same social class? We also do not have data from youth who were participants in the first or second wave of data and whose street-involved status was shorter. It is possible that a study of their full trajectory would teach us more about the possibilities and limitations of their entry to early and full adulthood of former street-involved youth. Still, our intent was to learn how those who struggle longest manage their lives, and we have illustrated that even these youth desire what they perceive as mainstream adult lifestyles. Their aspirations are a matter of public policy—for all young people.

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 inequity and social policies that leave them out. Further, features of emerging adulthood, like instability and feeling in-between, are common developmental experiences and also consequences of the structural organization of young lives.

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 that the experience of change and instability in the lives of young people 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 guardians, these young people aspired to young adult lives, at a time when most would say they are not ready. Despite serious structural obstacles, most did do so to some degree, and this is developmentally interesting.

Wyn (2004) described individualisation as a condition of late-modern life, and this is often a problem. Yet it is an opportunity as well, because individualisation includes individualisation of life path; leaving 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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