



Service Views among Calgary's Street-Involved Youth

Calgary Youth, Health and the Street - Fact Sheet #10

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Background to the Study

Street-involved youth have been identified as an at-risk group for numerous health issues, including alcohol and drug abuse, STIs and HIV, pregnancy, and suicide. Working in partnership with many youth serving agencies, AIDS Calgary and researchers from the University of Calgary developed the *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street* study to examine the health and HIV risks, coping mechanisms, and service needs of the broad spectrum of street-involved youth. This fact sheet is one in a series highlighting key findings from the study.

Between June and December 2005, 355 surveys were completed by street-involved youth on their street experiences in Calgary, and 40 interviews were conducted to provide a more in-depth look at these experiences. Youth targeted for the study were between the ages of 14 and 24, and involved in the street to varying degrees. Thus, in this study the term 'street-involved youth' included youth who were currently living on the street; youth who were not living on the street but who had lived on the street in the past; and youth who were involved with street culture but were not currently living on the street and had no history of living on the street. This last group primarily included youth who spent time on the street or in public places during the day.

A total of 47% of survey participants were currently living on the street (*Currently On Street*); 33% were not living on the street but had lived on the street in the past (*Not on Street – History*); and 20% were involved with street culture but were not currently living on the street and had not lived on the street in the past (*Not on Street – No History*).

Positive Aspects of Services

The majority of street-involved youth interviewed spoke positively about many aspects of services available to them. Youth appreciated services that were flexible, had employees with positive attitudes, offered a comfortable atmosphere, and provided a sense of safety and security.

Youth felt that flexibility around curfew times and open meal programs were necessary to meet individual needs. Flexible program times and full day programs were also appreciated.

The majority of the youth shared positive experiences in interacting with the staff, citing ease of conversation, mutual respect and support as integral to trust and relationship-building. Several youth cited the relatively young age of staff as a positive factor. Interview respondents stated that non-judgmental attitudes were essential to creating an open and accepting atmosphere and developing trust.

Many youth commented that services enjoyed by youth were those that offered a comfortable atmosphere and entertainment. In the shelters, youth appreciated access to a range of activities. Youth indicated they often associated these services with "home" or "a homey feeling."

Finally, youth appreciated safety and security offered by some services for street-involved youth. These services provided not only a drug and alcohol free environment but also an alternative to negative influences and criminal activities. These services provided venues where youth could relax.



Service Availability and Use

Youth interviewed appreciated shelters that provided accommodations and necessities. Food was available at shelters and other venues, and was described as being plentiful. At some shelters, youth described the expectation that they would contribute by doing chores to obtain food, entertainment or bus tickets.

Youth reported that some services offered on-site counselling and support for youth. Several youth indicated that they appreciated the contact they had with these on-site counselors, who would also provide referrals to community resources, such as education programs and treatment facilities.

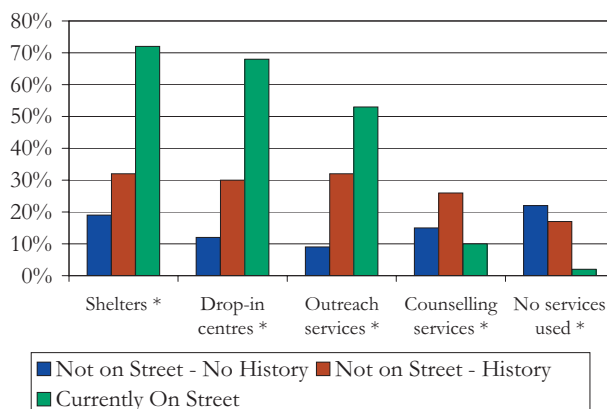
The youth interviewed indicated that a few street youth services offered skills training and employment services which, as one youth said, “helped me get back into school. Helped me get a part-time job and taught some more responsibility to become an adult.” At these agencies, youth said they had access to computers to create résumés and staff to teach them how to do proper job searches. Program staff would walk youth through mock interviews and send them resources on places that were hiring.

Many youth reported using health services on an as-needed basis. The majority were aware of health services provided in the community and specific services provided at each clinic. Information and basic medical care were accessed from street friends and outreach workers, as well as a street survival guide provided by shelters and outreach workers.

Among survey participants, services used most frequently were shelters (48%), drop-in centres (44%), medical clinics (41%), outreach services (37%), and food banks (32%). Surveyed youth *Currently On Street* reported greater use of shelters (72%), drop-in centres (68%), and outreach services (53%) than other youth. Those *Not on Street – History* more frequently reported using counselling services (26%), compared to 15% of youth *Not on Street – No History*, and only 10% of youth *Currently On Street*. Finally, youth *Currently On Street* reported the greatest use of services overall. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Street Services Used in the Past 3 Months by Current Level of Street Involvement



Based on a sample of 333 street-involved youth in Calgary.
 * Significance level ≤ 0.05
 Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 78

Major Concerns with Services

Youth expressed a variety of concerns with services offered, including unsafe or inaccessible locations; limited hours of operation; limited availability of accommodation, especially during winter; services that were dirty, dangerous, or had a reputation for substance use and criminal activity; high caseloads, employee turnover, and some staff with negative attitudes towards youth; restrictive program rules and expectations; limiting program policies (e.g., services restricted to those not using alcohol or drugs); and waiting times and cost of medical care.

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For more information, please visit the following websites:
<http://www.aidscalgary.org>, <http://fsw.ucalgary.ca>



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