



Determinants of Health among Calgary's Street-Involved Youth

Calgary Youth, Health and the Street - Fact Sheet #12

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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*).

Physical & Social Environment

Living conditions on the street are less than ideal for maintaining good health (e.g., lack of shelter, warmth, and sanitation). Forty-two percent of youth reported having been on the street five or more times or "many" times for more than one night at a time. In addition, 21% of youth surveyed said they had spent between one and six months on the street, 10% had spent between six months and one year on the street, and 36% had spent more than a year on the street. When asked if finding affordable housing was an issue for youth, 63% mentioned having problems finding affordable housing in Calgary.

In addition to housing issues, violence was a major concern for street-involved youth. Over three-quarters of all youth surveyed (76%) said they had been a victim of violence while on the street, including 83% of both youth *Currently On Street* and *Not on Street – History*.

Education

When asked what level of education youth had completed, 23% of all surveyed youth said junior high or less, 46% said some high school, 17% said high school, 10% said some post-secondary, and 4% said post-secondary. A greater percentage of those *Not on Street – No History* said they had completed high school (28%) or post-secondary education (7%), while a larger percentage of those *Not on Street – History* said they had completed junior high or less (29%), or some high school (52%). Furthermore, over half of those *Not on Street – History* (52%) and those *Currently On Street* (53%) had been kicked out, suspended, or dropped out of school.

Individual Practices

Eating habits varied among surveyed youth. Overall, 39% had eaten most of their meals in the past seven days at a social service agency, followed by home-cooked food (33%), restaurant/fast-food (13%), take-out food at home (5%), convenience store food (5%), or “other” (5%). Compared to other youth, those *Currently On Street* more often ate at a social service agency (65%), while those *Not on Street – No History* more often ate home-cooked food (63%).

Substance use was also prevalent among youth, with 94% of all youth reporting having used substances within the past two weeks. Substances used most frequently included tobacco (88%), alcohol (84%), marijuana (81%), hash (58%), mushrooms (49%), ecstasy (37%), cocaine (32%), and crack (29%). Youth *Currently On Street* reported the highest use of all substances compared to other youth.

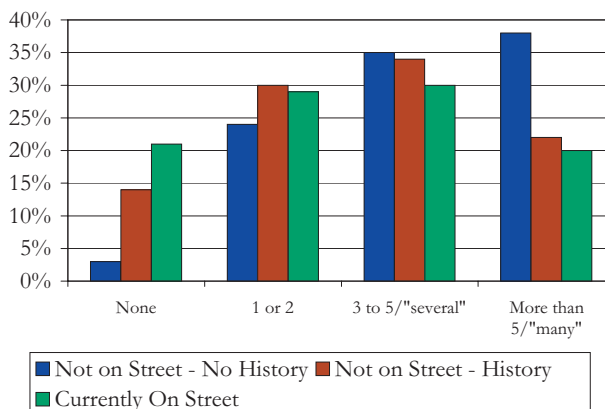
Suicidal thoughts and behaviours were common among street-involved youth surveyed. More than half (57%) of all youth reported they had seriously thought about attempting suicide, including 69% of those *Not on Street – History*, 59% of those *Currently On Street*, and 32% of those *Not on Street – No History*. Nearly half of youth *Not on Street – History* (48%) reported they had attempted suicide before, compared to 39% of those *Currently On Street*, and 20% of those *Not on Street – No History*.

Social Support Networks

When asked about their level of emotional support, surveyed youth *Currently On Street* reported having significantly less available support than other groups (15.0 points on a 28-point scale, compared with 17.6 for youth *Not on Street – History*, and 18.8 for youth *Not on Street – No History*). Youth were also asked how many people they could really count on. Those *Currently On Street* had significantly fewer people they could count on. For example, these youth more often had no one to count on (21%), compared to only 3% of those *Not on Street – No History* and 14% of those *Not on Street – History*. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Number of People Youth Can Count On by Current Level of Street Involvement *



Based on a sample of 302 street-involved youth in Calgary.

* Significance level ≤ 0.05

Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 43

Health Service Use

When asked where youth went when they needed medical services, 17% of youth surveyed said they did not use medical services, 66% said a walk-in medical clinic, 23% said a hospital, 19% said a doctor during business hours, and 13% said a mobile clinic on the street. When asked if youth had used counselling services, 15% of those *Not on Street – No History*, 26% of those *Not on Street – History*, and 10% of those *Currently On Street* said they had.

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



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