



# Resilience among Calgary's Street-Involved Youth

## Calgary Youth, Health and the Street - Fact Sheet #15

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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*).

### Future Goals

Nearly all street-involved youth surveyed mentioned having at least one goal for the next year, with only 10% saying they had no goals. The most popular goal was to find employment or find better employment (54%), followed by continuing education (47%), finding better housing (45%), improving health or fitness (43%), improving emotional health or well-being (38%), getting off the street (34%), finding new friends (27%), dealing with an addiction (24%), and reuniting with family (18%).

The majority of youth who participated in interviews could readily identify personal goals and changes they wanted to make for themselves in the future. In particular, none of the interview respondents wanted to be on the streets. One youth described a common wish, the dream of "getting a full-time job, saving up some money, getting my own apartment, and just keep working and working and go back to school and eventually be able to pursue a career." Many youth interviewed spoke of relationship goals, including being in a healthy relationship, getting married and having children. Many also indicated that these things could not be achieved under their current circumstances. In order to achieve their goals many youth said that they would need to "be involved in an upgrading program" and "finish up the rest of their schooling." A few of the youth felt that making positive life choices would mean making "a commitment to quit drugs."

*Nearly all youth (90%) had goals for the next year, with the majority wanting to find employment.*

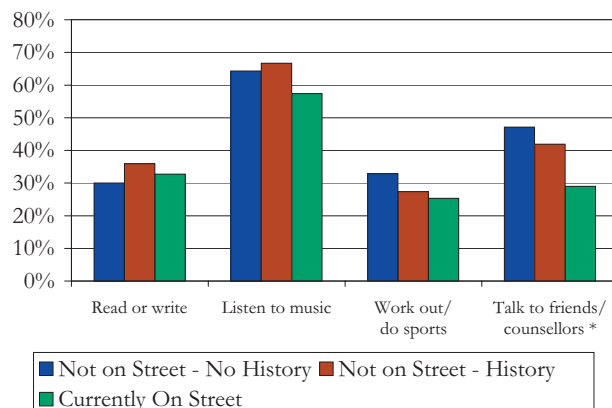


## Positive Life Choices

Nearly half of all youth surveyed (49%) received their main source of income through working and employment. For many of these youth, street life was seen as a temporary experience that would be resolved by employment. Until they could save enough money for living costs they relied on shelters and related resources for survival.

When asked what youth did when stressed out, several responses indicated positive coping mechanisms. A large percentage (62%) listened to music, 37% talked to friends or counsellors, 33% read or wrote, and 28% worked out or played sports. Youth *Not on Street – No History* more often talked to friends or counsellors (47%), compared to 42% of youth *Not on Street – History*, and 29% of those *Currently On Street*. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Stress Relief Activities by Current Level of Street Involvement**



Based on a sample of 349 street-involved youth in Calgary.  
 \* Significance level  $\leq 0.05$   
 Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 35

Although a majority of youth surveyed had been involved with the criminal justice system, several mentioned alternative measures programs as an effective way to deal with crime among youth. These programs resolve cases primarily by community participation, rather than the typical fine. Youth felt that these programs held them accountable for their actions and had logical consequences.



## Social Support

Interview participants described distinct groups that provided friendship and support to members. Many considered these groups to be a family that took the place of biological families. One youth said, “He (my street brother) knew how my dad treated me and how he showed like no care or affection for me so he (my street brother) has been helping out, taking care of me.” The street family would be there for personal, financial and emotional support.

*“My mom... kicked me out at a young age and the only people I have are the people that brought me into the gang - that was my family.”*

Overall, youth surveyed had a fairly high level of emotional support. While 15% said they had no one to count on, 28% said they had one or two people they count really count on, 33% had three to five or “several” people, and 24% had more than five or “many” people. Level of emotional support varied significantly by level of street involvement. Compared with other youth, those *Not on Street – No History* more frequently reported having more than five or “many” people they could count on (38%), while those *Currently on Street* more often said they had no one to count on (21%).

This fact sheet is based upon the report, Worthington, C., MacLaurin, B., Huffey, N., Dittmann, D., Kitt, O., Patten, S., & Leech, J. (2008). *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street - Final Report*, Calgary: University of Calgary.

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



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