



# Substance Use among Calgary's Street-Involved Youth

## Calgary Youth, Health and the Street - Fact Sheet #2

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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.

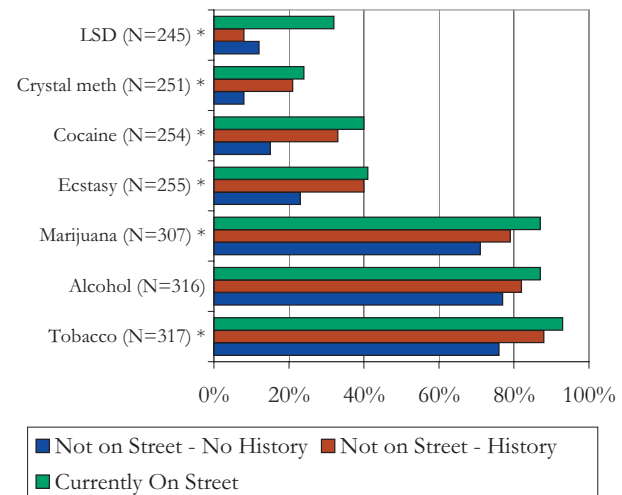
Between June and December 2005, 355 surveys were completed by street-involved youth on their street experiences in Calgary, and 40 interviews were conducted to provide a more in-depth look at these experiences. Youth targeted for the study were between the ages of 14 and 24, and involved in the street 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*).

### Substance Use in the Past Two Weeks

Substance use was prevalent among youth sampled. Although all youth reported high levels of substance use, those *Currently On Street* had the highest rates, with 99% reporting having used any substance within the past two weeks, compared to 93% of youth *Not on Street – History* and 87% of youth *Not on Street – No History*. Looking at specific types of substances used within the past two weeks, youth *Currently On Street* consistently showed the highest rates of substance use: tobacco (93%), alcohol (87%), marijuana (87%), hash (67%), mushrooms (56%), ecstasy (41%), crack (41%), cocaine (40%), LSD (32%), crystal meth (24%), morphine (16%), heroin (15%), and glue/gas (13%). See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Substance Use in the Past Two Weeks by Current Level of Street Involvement**



Based on a sample of 245 to 317 street-involved youth in Calgary.

\* Significance level  $\leq 0.05$

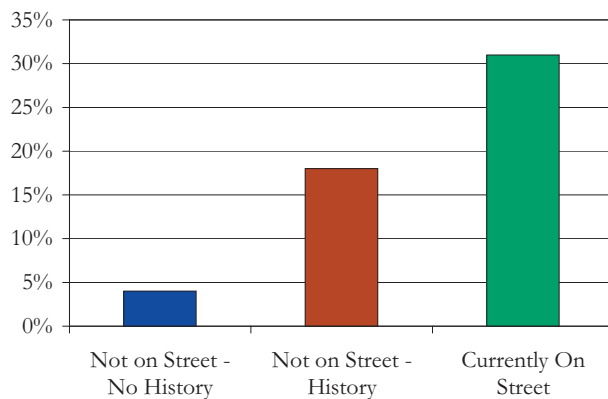
Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 44

## HIV-Related Drug Practices

Overall, 21% of youth reported having injected drugs before. A significantly higher percentage of youth *Currently On Street* reported using injection drugs than did other youth. Thirty-one percent of youth *Currently On Street* said they had ever injected drugs, compared to 18% of those *Not on Street – History*, and only 4% of those *Not on Street – No History*. See Figure 2.

In addition, 29% of all youth who had injected drugs reported ever sharing needles or injection equipment, including 100% of those *Not on Street – No History*, 25% of those *Not on Street – History*, and 26% of those *Currently On Street*.

**Figure 2: Injection Drug Use by Current Level of Street Involvement \***



Based on a sample of 342 street-involved youth in Calgary.

\* Significance level  $\leq 0.05$

Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 46

When asked if youth had ever shared a pipe for crack or meth, those *Currently On Street* more often reported having shared a pipe (67%), compared to 56% of youth *Not on Street – History*, and 22% of youth *Not on Street – No History*.

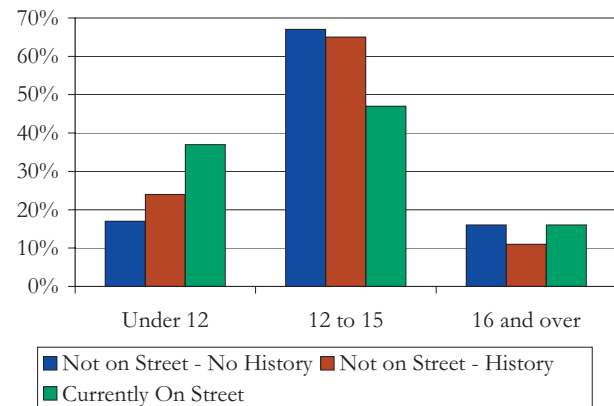
*A total of 94% of all youth reported using substances within the past two weeks, including 99% of those Currently On Street.*



## Age Substance Use Started

Many youth indicated that their substance use started at a fairly young age. Those *Currently On Street* reported a higher level of initial substance use prior to age 12 (37%) than did youth either *Not on Street – History* (24%) or *Not on Street – No History* (17%). Youth *Not on Street – History* or *Not on Street – No History* more often began substance use between the ages of 12 and 15 (65% and 67%, respectively). Overall, 14% began using substances after the age of 15. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Age at First Use of Drugs/Alcohol by Current Level of Street Involvement \***



Based on a sample of 323 street-involved youth in Calgary.

\* Significance level  $\leq 0.05$

Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 45

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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