



# Mental Health among Calgary's Street-Involved Youth

## Calgary Youth, Health and the Street - Fact Sheet #5

Catherine Worthington, Bruce MacLaurin, Dawn Dittmann, Olivia Kitt

### 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.

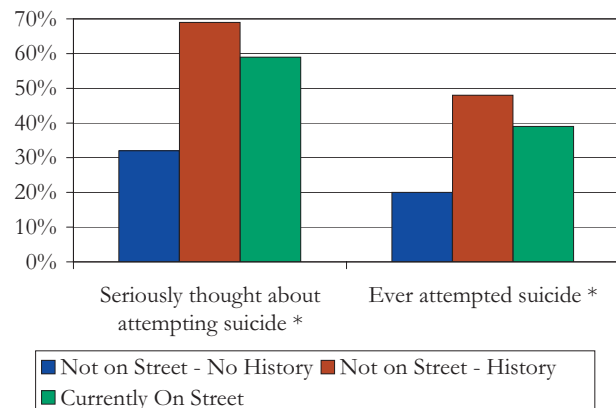
Between June and December 2005, 355 surveys were completed by street-involved youth on their street experiences in Calgary, and 40 interviews were conducted to provide a more in-depth look at these experiences. Youth targeted for the study were between the ages of 14 and 24, and involved in the street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

### Suicide and Mental Health Issues

Of youth surveyed, 38% said they had ever attempted suicide, and 57% had seriously thought about attempting suicide. Of those *Not on Street – No History*, 32% had thought about attempting suicide and 20% had attempted suicide. Higher percentages were found among youth *Not on Street – History*, with 69% having thought about attempting suicide and 48% having attempted suicide. Youth *Currently On Street* fell somewhere in the middle, with 59% having thought about attempting suicide and 39% having attempted suicide. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours by Current Level of Street Involvement**



Based on a sample of 345 street-involved youth in Calgary.

\* Significance level  $\leq 0.05$

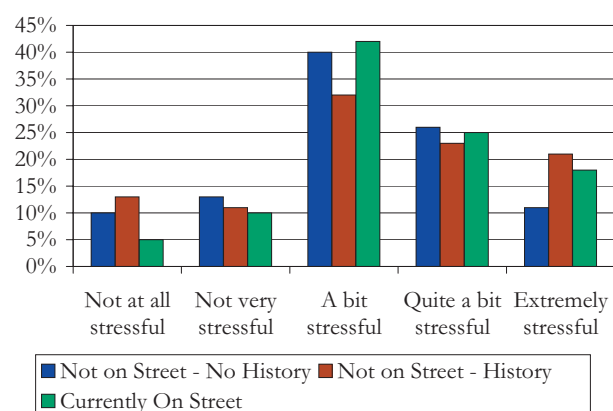
Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 33

In addition, 43% of youth *Currently On Street*, 53% of those *Not on Street – History*, and 26% of those *Not on Street – No History* reported being diagnosed with mental health issues when growing up.

## Stress Levels and Coping Mechanisms

When asked how stressful most days are, many survey participants reported fairly high stress levels, with 42% overall saying most days were either quite a bit stressful or extremely stressful. While fewer youth *Not on Street – No History* reported most days being extremely stressful (11%), compared to youth *Not on Street – History* (21%), and youth *Currently On Street* (18%), these differences were not significant. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Stress Level by Current Level of Street Involvement**



Based on a sample of 349 street-involved youth in Calgary.  
Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 34

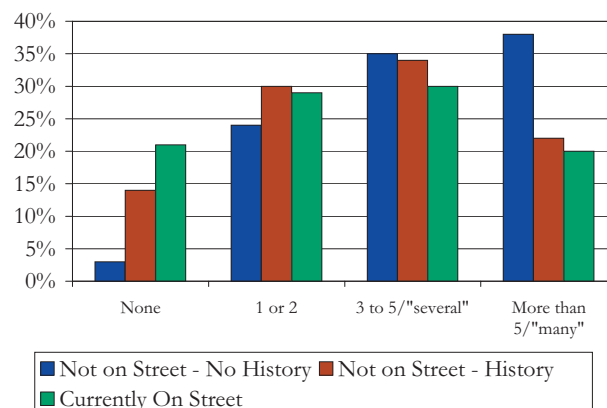
Surveyed youth reported participating in a number of activities when stressed. Forty-seven percent of those *Not on Street – No History* mentioned talking to friends/counsellors, compared to 42% of youth *Not on Street – History*, and 29% of those *Currently On Street*. In addition, many youth mentioned using tobacco/drugs/alcohol, including 51% of those *Not on Street – No History*, 64% of those *Not on Street – History*, and 75% of those *Currently On Street*. Other activities youth said they engaged in when stressed included listening to music (62%), sleeping (41%), watching television or playing video games (36%), reading/writing (33%), crying (32%), fighting (30%), working out/doing sports (28%), burning/cutting/self-mutilation (10%), or taking a break from drugs/alcohol (7%).



## Emotional Support

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* more often said they 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 3.

**Figure 3: 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  $\leq 0.05$   
Source: *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street: Final Report*, Table 43

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.

Suggested Citation: Worthington, C., MacLaurin, B., Dittmann, D., & Kitt, O. (2009). *Mental Health among Calgary's Street-Involved Youth*. Calgary Youth, Health and the Street – Fact Sheet #5. Calgary: University of Calgary.

*The Calgary Youth, Health and the Street study was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, HIV/AIDS Community-Based Research Program. Views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the funder.*

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



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY