

STREET YOUTH: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SMALL TOWNS AND CITIES

By: Les Voakes, 1991

Paper Presented at:
The Rural Mental Health and Addictions Conference
Sudbury, ON August 1992

Abbreviated paper published
Canadian Criminology Justice Association: Bulletin 1991

In 1991/92 Health and Welfare Canada funded a unique project under the Community Action Program of the National Drug Strategy. In one small eastern Ontario town, a Streetworker was employed for seven months at 30 hours a week to investigate the issues, problems and needs of the local youth with particular attention to substance abuse activities.

During this project, the Streetworker developed an appreciation that there are indeed street youth within small rural communities and towns. The project adopted and adapted a definition for identifying "small-town street youth" from the research originally developed by Reginald Smart and his colleagues at the Addiction Research Foundation in their report on Drugs, Youth and the Street (1990). The Toronto study used the following criteria to define a "street youth":

- Participants must have used at least one social service facility directed towards street youth in their lifetime. (Our small town project had to drop the qualification of "street" youth and insist only on a use of a service for youth in crisis. In small towns there are rarely if ever services devoted solely to street youth, or even solely to youth);
- They must have left school before completing Grade 12;
- They must have lived away from their family (or guardian) at least two days during the past year. (Our study asked this question with the additional wording of "due to family difficulties.");
- They must have run away or been thrown out of their home at least once;
- and They must have been homeless (i.e., without a place to stay) at least once. (We clarified the term of homeless by asking them if they were ever in a situation of

"no fixed address.")

Smart and his team decided that a "street youth" would be someone 24 years of age or younger plus the first criterion, or a person who had experienced a combination of three or more of the other listed situations. This study's definition included three additional criteria in addition to Smart's:

- Did the youth consider him/herself to be a street kid?
- Had the youth committed more than one crime without ever being arrested?
- Had the youth ever been arrested?

To ensure these additions and minor changes would not change the comparison significantly, our youth participants were required to meet at least 3 of the criteria plus criterion one. In fact, most of those interviewed in the detailed questionnaires easily satisfied five or more points.

Different from the A.R.F. study, the Streetworker project was interested in the activities of all youth (not only streetyouth) of the community. This provided a " whole" picture of the community and some interesting comparisons between different groups of youth within the community. Large urban areas are extremely difficult to study other than by using macro-social theories for analysis and through a large sampling of survey questionnaires. In small towns, participant observation is a valuable method to collect insights that later assist in analyzing quantitative data in a qualitative approach.

After some interaction through participant observation by the Streetworker, the project began to collect short life-histories on local youth. Later, those that most fit the criteria of our "street" definition, were interviewed in depth using a questionnaire/interview schedule based on many of the same questions asked in Smart's research concerning Toronto street youth.

The results were that the project identified approximately 30 35 youth that fit .the criteria, with 20 that volunteered to complete the in-depth questionnaire. This study provided, we believe for the first time, proof of the existence of small-town street youth, by using the same criteria of definition as a previously conducted urban study. The public, in general, associates the phenomenon of street youth as an urban problem with little or no connection to small towns and rural areas. Our study found not only are there street youth in small towns, but their existence is connected to the city street youth situation.

As the project progressed, I began to realize differences between the small-town/rural street youth contacted in this project and the street youth I had worked with in two different Canadian cities.

The A.R.F. study solidified my realization by providing quantitative data with which to compare the differences, and my personal and professional experiences aided in furthering the comparison.

There are two fundamental differences between small-town street youth and city street youth, both influencing and intersecting each other while affecting many aspects of the youths' lives. The first difference confirms one of the traditional stereotypical beliefs about small towns. In a small town everyone does know everybody and there is little separation between private and public lives. Street kids in small towns are highly visible and known to all - by name. Not only does everyone know the youth, most know the youth's parents and often the grandparents. In addition to the youth knowing and being known by most of the community, the youth regularly interacts and communicates with significant adult influencers; i.e., teachers, parents, relatives and neighbour. This maintenance of a social connectedness, albeit often a strained one, has important implications on other differences which will be discussed later.

Urban street youth are, for the most part, anonymous to most of the surrounding population. Family and other significant adults usually live in other areas from where street youth conduct their activities. Some of the youth are from "the projects", some are middle class kids looking for excitement, and there are also some kids from the "burbs". Many street kids are not from the city in which they eventually locate, arriving from other urban centres or from small towns nearby. In Smart's study, 70% of the street youth interviewed were not from Toronto. In 1983, one group home for youth in Windsor, Ont., whose clients would fit the street youth definition, estimated over 25% of their clients for the past two years were from small towns in the nearby counties. The kids arriving in the city from the "sticks" are unknown and anonymous to everyone in the city.

City street youth are best known by police and social agencies that specialize in assisting street youth, but for the general public they are nameless. The youth become known to only a few and usually by their street names. Their real names are not mentioned except in the official business of the criminal justice system. The real "self" of the urban street kid *is* kept separate and secret. Pre-street life *is* also kept secret, not only from all those who interact with the youth, but eventually from the youths themselves. A new self-identity emerges defined by the experiences of the street and based on anonymity or a new adopted identity.

Because of this fundamental difference in public anonymity, street youth from small communities have very different problems, *issues*, and needs from those in the city. This paper will continue to explore only a few of these differences connected to the anonymity issue.

The second difference *is* that small town youth exist and survive in small towns but can migrate and adapt into city street life; whereas, city street youth cannot move to and become small town street

youth, unless the small town was his/her original home community.

Consider that this Streetworker project in eastern Ontario found a ratio of three street youths per one thousand (3:1000) in one small town. Estimates for Toronto suggest there are approximately four street youth per 1,000 (4:1000) in that urban centre. If the conservative estimate is accurate then 25% of all city street youth are from smaller communities, then our results suggest that there are at least the same ratio of small-town street youth as there are city street youth. If migration is generally one-way (from small town to urban area), then this simple difference between the two locales has important implications to encourage social policy planners and governments to reconsider their funding allocations in addressing the contemporary phenomenon of street youth.

Labelling "Street Kids"

In urban centres it is relatively easy to find street kids: just ask someone to point them out. The "label" of street kids is widely accepted and understood by police, governments, the public and by the youth, even if everyone has difficulty explaining an exact definition for the term. Self-identification as being a street person is seen by urban youth as a romantic badge of honour, especially in the early stages of life on the street. The problem for researchers is that many of the youth who identify themselves as "street" youth may not really fit a precise definition in sociological terms. However, the wide public acceptance of the label promotes the labelling by others, and eventually by the youth themselves: the classic "them" and "us" situation.

With the high degree of anonymity present in urban areas, youths who have only briefly taken on the "street kid persona" (or has not fully integrated or self-identified as being "street") can quickly shed the mask, and therefore the label, if or when they choose to return to a more conventional lifestyle. The urban centre malls are places that this type of behaviour *is* most apparent. Many mall "gangs" are youth from middle-income families who adopt the street kid persona for a brief period- sometimes for a summer, a couple of weeks, sometimes for only a few hours every Friday and Saturday night. The label of being a street youth, in urban centres, can be quickly affixed, but as long as the youth does not fully incorporate the lifestyle as his/her way of defining "self", and for those that have an alternative option in escaping the street, the label can be quickly discarded by leaving the geographic area where the label originally applied.

Even for the more entrenched street youth in the city, the main method of changing their lifestyle *is* by leaving the area. Often this involves returning to their home community and family. Others choose to start "fresh" in a new community, although this *is* the tougher road to successfully making the transition to a non street lifestyle.

In small towns, the label of street youth *is* widely applied to groups of youth but rarely to an individual. There is substantial resistance to self-identification as a street youth. When asked about this question of self concept, small town youth would state they believed many individuals might consider them as street kids (i.e., police, teachers or retailers) but they rarely considered themselves as "street". Parents had the greatest influence on the internalizing process of the street identity by the youth, but even for these youth there was still a resistance towards the term. As small town youth are never anonymous, they are unable to be successfully separated from the larger community. The division between "them" and "us" cannot be so easily achieved. So, although a community may acknowledge there are local street kids, and may generically point out groups that they consider as candidates, there are few that are willing to name names, or be otherwise specific about who is a street kid. (An exception to this rule appears to be for those with regular business in a small town but who do not live within the community. For these people, there is an anonymous view towards local youth.)

This ability or inability to successfully affix the label of street kid has many implications for the community and to the youth themselves. One implication is that the youth who does not incorporate the concept of being "street" behaves significantly different from a youth who has accepted the label and all its implications. For example, a self-acknowledged street youth in the city would rarely maintain regular school attendance, whereas, in small towns, those that easily met our criteria of street youth are often involved in some type of schooling (i.e. Futures, alternative schools, etc.) and over half attended regular high school.

Although many of the small town street youth did acknowledge varying levels of low self-esteem, these feelings were not expressed in the self-neglect common to urban street youth. Hygiene was maintained at reasonable levels and there was no reluctance to seek medical treatment when required. In part, personal care was a function of accessibility to facilities (i.e., showers, washing machines, etc.) but the self-esteem factor must be considered. In my experience working with street kids in Windsor and Ottawa, those youth that had become fully associated with urban street-life had very low levels of self-esteem and their personal care was neglected, even when safe facilities were made available. It would often require an adjustment period before the street kids would take regular showers and otherwise maintain regular personal hygiene practices.

Socially Isolated/Segregated

This is where the anonymity factor works for the urban street youth, and against the small town street youth. In cities, if a youth is able to "escape" the street life environment, s/he has a chance

of re-uniting with parents/family or simply making a fresh start in some other location. This is not easy for the youth who is fully involved in the drug and prostitution sub-culture, but is achievable - especially for those who are assisted by special agencies or services (i.e., Operation Go-Home). These youth have the opportunity to make a fresh start by leaving the geographical area of their street life existence.

A fresh start is very difficult for small town street youth. Small town/rural communities know of all the activities in everyone's history. Generally speaking, the conservative nature of small towns make them very unforgiving for even minor transgressions of the community's moral standards and codes. Once these boundaries have been exceeded, a youth's future within the small community becomes destined as that of a marginalized person, and this marginalized role may possibly continue for the rest of one's life. The only option to this marginalized fate is to leave the area completely: in effect a community ostracism, not unlike the method used by many small-scale tribal societies to effect social control.

For a youth, the only place to go after a community ostracism is the urban areas, usually to the downtown core of a city where most social services are located. Unfortunately, this is the worse place to be for the inexperienced youth, who may be quickly recruited by gangs, pimps or other undesirable persons.

I personally witnessed this type of scenario on a number of occasions. One woman was so ostracized and "monitored" by the community for her past behaviours (drug using), that she felt she had no choice but to leave for the city. In the town she was closely scrutinized by the C.A.S., the police, and her neighbours - even though she was attending counselling to quit her addictions and had enrolled in educational upgrading programs. Local businesses would give her none of the usual courtesies that local customers received, and she found it difficult to locate rental accommodations. She was in fact, through community ostracism, forced to move out of town.

In contrast, I knew of two girls who had left the small town, tried the city street life, but later returned. In the city, they indulged *in* drinking and drug abuse. Prostitution was their only means of earning *income*. Fortunately, after about six months they wanted out of that degrading lifestyle and had families willing to try again. They returned to their families' homes, re-entered local high schools, got part-time jobs, and nobody discovered the details of their experiences - only that they "left home for a while". From these examples, a conclusion we can reasonably draw *is* that, once identified as a problem youth within a small town, the chances for redeeming oneself and leading a "normal" life within that community are much lower than for an urban youth seeking a fresh start.

Basic Needs for Survival

Although all street youth, urban or rural, have the same needs of food, shelter, and clothing, their methods of acquiring these basics differ. The urban street youth quickly becomes dependent on the social services provided within the city. There is usually a youth hostel or other emergency shelter offering a bed and three meals a day, and most have some type of used clothing depot connected to the operation. Social assistance (welfare) *is* reasonably accessible from those emergency shelters; often a social worker makes regular visits to the shelter to review each case. As those shelters are located in the downtown core, the area for prostituting is nearby whenever extra income is required. The urban street youth in his/her cloak of anonymity can access any or all these methods of survival with little concern of "public" embarrassment. There is of course substantial damage to the youth's self-esteem, but the anonymity factor is important *in* making the adaptation. For urban street kids that originated from poor urban centres, the utilizing of available charitable services has been a part of their entire life, and the transition is not traumatic and easily accepted.

Small town street youth resist the services of the few available "helping agencies" within the community, with the exception of welfare. Small town youth reported a disgust with the idea of getting clothes at the Salvation Army Thrift Store or local St. Vincent de Paul outlet. They reported that they would be embarrassed if their friends knew they had to buy used clothes given to charity. As well, the volunteers and sales staff at these stores are usually known by the teen, often neighbours or friends of the family, adding to the self-conscious teen humiliation. Another explanation that some youth suggested was that the clothes likely were donated by someone in town, probably a friend or peer. As the youth population in a small town is relatively limited, the clothes would be recognized not only by the original owner but by the entire peer group. All these reasons were considered to be embarrassing and humiliating to the small-town street youth.

(One suggestion to small-town used clothing distributors that might assist in the situation is that they arrange to have all donated items from their town exchanged with another small town's collections. Swapping store staff and volunteers may be more difficult, but should be done whenever possible.) The general method of filling/satisfying basic survival needs in a small town is based, not on external assisting agencies, but through a youth's social network. For example, a small town street youth finds housing among friends, extended family and neighbours. These arrangements may be very temporary and "ad hoc", but it is very unusual for small town youth to be without a reasonably comfortable and safe place to sleep within their own community. Sometimes these places of shelter are informal arrangements for only a few nights, while some last longer with formalized agreements with the welfare worker. I encountered a number of relatives or neighbours that housed a youth

sometimes without, but often with, the youth's parents' support of the arrangement.

These housing situations almost always provide the youth with at least some daily food, if not all meals once the arrangement becomes stable. Additional food is acquired by visiting friends or family for the occasional meal.

Most importantly, these housing situations provide a safe place to sleep and maintain personal care. The safety factor required for uninterrupted, restful sleep cannot be over-emphasized as a major benefit that small-town street youth have over city street kids. In my experience, urban street youth, as with most homeless people in the city, suffer from sleep deprivation and personal care neglect.

Hostels are not safe places to sleep. There is continuous noise interrupting one's sleep and there is always the risk of someone stealing what few possessions a person might have. Street people sleep fully dressed with their shoes tied tightly and knotted to prevent theft attempts, whether they sleep in a hostel or outdoors. Taking a shower in hostel risks too much, and personal care and hygiene deteriorates to levels that eventually require medical attention.

Sleep deprivation has been researched as a source of poor judgement, irritability, disorientation, depression, and it may eventually induce hallucinations and psychotic behaviours. Youth suffering from these symptoms of sleep deprivation in cities find themselves in high risk situations.

The small town street youth gets the sleep required to avoid these problems. Facilities for personal care (showers, clothes washing machines, etc.) are freely offered in safe environments. The result is that associated medical problems and the dangerous symptoms of sleep deprivation are avoided.

Clothing acquisition is also based on this personal networking that small-town street youth rely upon. Clothes are acquired from two main sources. The first are clothes given to them directly by friends. These clothes are not given in a "charitable expression"; they are given in the same spirit as they would if the youth were still living with parents. Kids swap, trade and give-away clothes to friends as a normal part of their social interaction. Because the small-town street youth usually retains social links to youth within the community, including those that still live at home, they continue to be a part of the entire youth social network. The benefits for the recipient are: 1) the youth gains needed clothes; 2) the clothes are current and consistent with the style of the community's youth fashion; and 3) there is no stigma attached in this type of giving - it is not considered "charity".

The second method of clothes acquisition is also unique to the small-town street youth. Clothes are often received as presents from family. These gifts are not related to the "need" for

clothes as much as a continuance of the normal family cycle/routine of gift giving since the smalltown street youth maintains some link or interaction to family, the usual occasions of gift giving continue to be observed; i.e., Christmas, birthdays, etc. By remaining within the small town, the youth retains the opportunity of gifts from extended family and friends, benefits the youth.

As these gifts are not directly connected to the situational need of the youth, and the giving remains in the purview of "normal" connective relationships with family and friends, a youth not only gains the needed clothes, but safeguards a degree of self esteem by not requiring charity. The familial connection maintained through these gift givings also provides an important linkage for assisting in any possible future reconciliations. These familial connections and events should provide social workers/agencies with a starting point for assisting in the process of full reconciliation between youth and their family. An opportunity not often available in the city situations.

Prostitution

In urban centres, the main methods of street youth income are thefts (B&E, robberies, shoplifting) and prostitution. Both boys and girls use prostitution for income, particularly the younger, less street-experienced youth. Prostitution is extremely risky behaviour. There is the risk of STDs - including HIV and AIDS. There is also the high risk of violence from both the johns and the pimps. Girls risk pregnancy and later have a higher risk of cancers that are linked with having multiple sex partners. There are also the criminal charges associated with prostitution that can further complicate a youth's life.

In cities, multiple sex partners in prostitution is the rule and is necessary for economic survival. The anonymity of the relationship between the "john" and the "hooker" in large urban centres ensures the prostitute continuous and multiple sex partners, with all the associated risks.

In small communities, a youth (usually but not always female) may "exchange" sexual favours to an individual who provides accommodation. In the small town, neither the participants nor most the community regards this arrangement as "hooking". The stigma is more towards the idea of loose morals, rather than as prostituting. These arrangements invoke no police interest in the situation unless the youth is under 16 years of age.

As distasteful as these situations are to most of the community, the risk factor is significantly reduced from the urban situation. The small-town youth "exchange of favours" for accommodation usually involves very few sex partners, and thereby reduces the associated risks with a multiple-partner sex-life. The potential for sexually transmitted diseases and violence, although still present, are greatly reduced. Most importantly, this non association of being a prostitute does not damage the

self-esteem of the youth to the same level as for those youth that must "hook" in the city. This difference has multiple advantages for the small town youth in their later personal relationships and self-worth development as compared to the urban street youth hooker.

Conflict Resolution

Another area of difference between urban and small town street youth is in their methods of conflict resolution. In the city, any conflict involving a street kid is resolved with as little public awareness as possible. Disagreements are preferred to be worked out on a one-to-one basis, usually in private. Occasionally, a youth may involve a gang to ensure the odds are in his/her favour, or at least that they will be balanced, but the conflict always remains away from the public eye. Only those directly involved are involved. When physical violence occurs, weapons are usually involved. Knives, baseball bats and various types of clubs are the most common weapons; guns are usually involved in situations that involve a drug conflict.

In small towns, conflict resolution is a highly public affair. A conflict between two persons is openly discussed by youth throughout the community, often with many advisors offering suggestions for resolution. Unfortunately, the most usual method for younger teenagers to resolve a conflict is through a "fight". These fights are highly public and publicized. The actual event is likely to be held in a downtown location, often on a sidewalk or parking lot. The fight remains a conflict between the two opponents with friends and spectators on-hand to witness and ensure nobody else interferes. occasionally friends of the opposing combatants get involved between themselves, but not in a gang fight situation, more as separate "sympathy" fights.

Small town fights among teens rarely employ weapons other than fists and feet. The witnesses ensure the fight remains "fair" and any involvement of a weapon by one combatant will likely invoke an interceding by the witnesses. Recently, small town youth have begun to involve more weapons in their fighting, but this generally occurs more with the older youth (over 20 years) and usually after excessive alcohol has been consumed.

Although small town fights can end in injury requiring medical attention, they are unlikely to be life-threatening. The public domain of a small-town conflict resolution, appears to limit the potential for life-threatening injuries. Furthermore, the public witnessing of the conflict usually ensures "closure" to the situation. Neither side of the conflict can claim a result that was different from what had actually happened, as there are always witnesses to set the record straight.

In this section, I have focused on the "physical" method of conflict resolution, but it is important to note that the public involvement in conflicts often leads to resolution without physical

fighting. The public can negotiate and act as intermediaries to resolve an issue without violence. The non-violent, negotiated settlements appear to be the preferred method for youth as they leave their teenage years.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is very much a part of street life in both towns and cities. The choice of substances used appears to vary widely, but some generalizations can be made. In the city, the street youths' main objective in drinking or using drugs is to get high. Smart (1990) and others *in the field* have long argued that the function of getting high for street youth is to escape or cope with their past or current experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and I agree. These street youth are different from mainstream youth, whom reports a more recreational/social function of alcohol and other drug use. For the urban street youth, getting high is done whenever and as often as possible, controlled only by factors of availability and cost. In the city, getting "high" *is* done alone or *in* small groups of friends. There are many drug choices for urban street kids, including marijuana, hash, hallucinogenic acids, heroin, cocaine or crack, with many forms and varieties of the above. For the very poor and desperate there are also inhalants such as modelling glue, Pam and Lysol spray.

Alcohol, although preferred by most initially, is too expensive for most street kids as compared to the relatively inexpensive illegal street drugs. Street youth, due to their economic limitations, will opt for the cheaper and faster high, whenever alcohol is not affordable. As there are concentrations of street kids within specific areas of each city, the peer substance abuse activity shifts towards the illegal drugs and there is no peer stigma against any of these substances -only personal preferences for the desired high. Peer pressure then becomes focused on using the cheaper forms of intoxicants mainly so that everyone' can share and afford. Alcohol is still heavily used whenever affordable, however in social gatherings other drugs are usually more accessible. ("Social" groups are substantially different between small towns and urban centres. Urban street youth socialize in small collectives whereas the smalltown street youth usually socializes in large groups.)

Crack cocaine is an excellent example of street drug adaptation and marketing. Powder cocaine was a product for the middle-class and the rich. It has always been and continues to be very expensive. Crack was developed as a cheap alternative for lower income groups. It was inexpensive, as compared to cocaine, but provided similar effects - although crack is a more intense, short-lived high.

Other methods of "getting High" include inhalants such as modelling glue, Pam and Lysol spray. These substances are highly toxic and dangerous for the user, but are easily obtained and

inexpensive.

In small towns the drug of choice for all youth is alcohol, and there is considerable peer pressure to consume this substance every week-end: in small towns, getting high is a social activity mainly restricted to the week-ends and summer vacations.

Other illegal substances are used also within small towns but mostly by youth in experimental phases. This small town study found in our initial analysis, that over 2/3 of the street youth interviewed stated their introduction and often their only experience with illegal substances was in experimental circumstances. This was particularly interesting considering the small town studied in this project was widely considered to be the "drug centre" for the county. There is a definite stigma within small communities towards the use of any drug - except alcohol. In some small towns there is a slightly less connected stigma towards the use of cannabis derivatives, but generally speaking alcohol is usually preferred. The Addiction Research Foundation has numerous reports revealing that, in contrast to the continual media hype on the "drug problem", illegal drug use has continuously declined in most areas of the country for the past decade...as has alcohol.

In the small town that I researched, illegal drug usage was mainly limited to cannabis derivatives. There were only a few regular cocaine users and hallucinogenic acids. There were virtually no users of crack, designer drugs and only one reported use of an inhalant. No youth reported having ever used an IV drug or having knowledge of any youth who had, with the exception of steroid users.

Street youth of a small town are still a part of the larger youth peer group and therefore are affected by their influences. Therefore, drug use is limited only to those who are the most marginalized and who cannot afford alcohol. Using drugs in small towns is avoided by most street-youth as it reduces their already limited social sphere.

At this point it is important to state that it has long been known by researchers and counsellors involved with street youth, that youth who become entrenched in the street/drug culture have often suffered physical and/or sexual abuse as children. Alcohol and other drugs are used as a desperate and often unconscious method to cope or temporarily escape from their emotional pain. I am not speaking about the youth, or adults, who engage in week-end drug use for the occasional social high. I am specifically discussing the youth who desire to be intoxicated as often as possible. The Ottawa Youth Services Bureau found (1990) in their study on street-youth prostitutes that 60% had a history of physical assault and 74% reported a history of sexual assault prior to their street lives. They also found that over 76 % of those youth were serious substance abusers (daily users). This type of correlation between drug use and childhood assaults is as relevant in small towns as in the cities,

and it is here that agencies serving street youth should focus their attention. I would suggest for many northern towns, particularly among the poorer, isolated communities, that youth who are desperate to remain intoxicated by alcohol, solvents or other chemical substances should be simultaneously assessed as possible abuse victims.

My final comment on substance abuse concerns many small towns insistence on mythologizing the extent of their community's drug situation. In small towns, as in the cities, drugs are seen as an ultimate evil, whereas excessive alcohol consumption is regarded, at worst, as irresponsible and immature. I have found one of the most common myths espoused by small towns *is* an over-estimation of the community's drug usage. It would appear every small town attempts to "out-do" its neighbours on how "bad" its drug problem has become. The facts rarely support the assertions and we can speculate as to the many reasons for this odd behaviour:

- Fear of the unknown, namely drugs. Alcohol is familiar to all, and not nearly so feared.
- The mass media's coverage of every drug story throughout the continent presents an unreal illusion of an ever present and pervasive problem.
- Detroit TV news stations that are available in almost every community in Canada via cable television services.
- The American government and advertisers' highly politically motivated campaign towards "war on drugs".

Communities should be aware that they are reinforcing myths that can create many negative repercussions that few would predict; i.e., people wanting to leave the community or businesses not wanting to locate in "drug infested communities".

Conclusions

Throughout this paper/discussion, I have occasionally suggested areas that are important to improve the lives of small town street youth and indirectly aid in the plight of many city street youth who originated in smaller communities. My position, arrived at from this small-town study and many years with city street youth, is that there are many opportunities to develop strategies that would reduce the over-all numbers of street youth by focusing more resources within small communities.

Briefly, small-town street youth:

- 1) Are identifiable through a simple method of assessment.
- 2) Are accessible through contacts with social services and often through educational \ employment programs.
- 3) Are not as entrenched in a street life existence as with city street youth. Small town street

youth maintain, although tenuous and fragile, a connectedness to the whole community.

- 4) Have suffered less damage and assault on their self esteem, due to their shorter experiences in street life, than the most urban street kids.
- 5) At all times express the desire to lead "normal" lives, and be a part of the wider community, whereas urban street youth do not always want to leave the "street life", particularly in the early phases of their street experience.

Considering these five points, small-town street youth should be regarded as exceptionally good candidates for successful social intervention and prevention strategies and their place in the migratory chain in becoming big city street youth, make them particularly important candidates, worthy of our attention.

As stated earlier, many differences between small-town street youth and urban street-youth are determined by the anonymity/or lack of anonymity of the youth within their social environment. The anonymity/or lack of anonymity of the youth within their social environment. The other important point is that the youth's place of origin plays a significant role on the ability of the youth to change their situation. As discussed, these two points have a multitude of implications and effects upon a youth's immediate and long-term situations, only some of which this paper has reviewed. For social planners and social agencies, these points must be taken into consideration for effective policies and programmes.

Utilizing the points made in this paper, some useful strategies might be formulated that would involve federal, provincial and municipal governments in concert with social agencies, community developers, business, and some real grass roots action. Strategies that would recognize the unique opportunities to assist small town youth in general, and small town street youth specifically might include:

- 1) Government funding allocators need to reconsider their exclusive recognition of urban street youth issues, and provide funds to assist small town street youth. Assisting small town youth would be cost effective and more likely to be successful than serving the same youth after they have become entrenched and damaged by a city street life experience.
- 2) Small towns need to adopt policies that recognize and cope with their own youth problems, ending the current pattern of "shipping out" their problem youth to larger urban centres. Group homes, including open custodies and addiction rehabilitation residential programmes for youth, should be established within small towns, for each area's youth; ensuring the opportunity for the youth and community's continued interaction. It is within

their home community that youth would best be served while in the process of overcoming their problems.

- 3) Service providers need to recognize the adaptation strategies employed by small town street youth and adjust their policies and procedures to enhance or otherwise assist. Too often policies and procedures encourage dependence on the social welfare system and aiding non-governmental organizations. For example, social assistance policies should be more flexible to aid youth that have found accommodation with neighbours and or friends. Under current social assistance policies, these arrangements may not easily "fit" the guidelines. The refusal of welfare benefits often results in the youth becoming more transient, eventually moving to urban centres; or the youth re-adapting their accommodation arrangement to "fit" the guidelines, usually by becoming more dependent on the system. A little flexibility or changing of policies would be less expensive for the community and society as a whole. It would also allow the youth to use their ingenuity to devise a living situation that *is* most appropriate to his/her needs.
- 4) Small towns should develop overall strategies for community development in planning for social, recreational, and housing needs that includes the recognition of all youth. Most small communities plan towards the needs of families, particularly middle-class families with young children. Services for low income, single parent families and teen-agers are rarely considered: these groups are either neglected in planning or purposely segregated through traditional but biased policies. The best example of this situation can be witnessed in the recreational planning present in most small towns. Small town recreation is heavily focused on organized team sports. Team sports are exclusionary by their very nature. They can only include a limited number of players, there are substantial monetary costs for equipment and competition travel, and require a high level of parental involvement. Obviously a single parent, low income family cannot meet most of these requirements, regardless of the athletic talent of the youth. Other forms of sports and recreation are required to ensure all youth the option of recreational participation.
- 5) The provision of a centrally located space in small towns for all youth to interact, socialize, recreationalize and have access to guidance/counselling services. These teen centres must be primarily organized and operated by youth from the community, with some assistance by supportive and responsible adults.
- 6) All towns and community should actively seek youth involvement in the decision-making processes, particularly in those that affect youth. Youth involvement and advice to town

councils, recreation departments, school boards, and social service providers should not be thought of as "preferable", it should be viewed as necessary. Youth involvement is too often expressed by a token teen representative. Our small town study found a possible solution was to assist the teen centre in organizing a youth advisory council, composed of a wide cross-section of the community's youth, including street youth and teenage mothers. Inclusion of these youth on the advisory council or other similar structures, is an important step in re-enforcing the connecting bonds between the street youth and the community. Our teen centre has not yet fully organized its advisory council, but it shows promising development.

- 7) Peer counselling should be available in all communities. Small town street youth maintain a wide network of friends and peers as part of their survival strategies. A peer counselling program would provide additional support or assistance to the community's youth.
- 8) Another significant difference between urban and small town street youth appears to be in their choice of accessing information and advice. In Smart's (1990) study, the street youth of Toronto reported a reliance on friends, particularly street friends, for advice or help. Information was usually gained through the media, friends, or service providing agencies. In our small town study, the street youth reported that their main source of information and advice as either their parents or some other significant adult. Information and educational campaigns for small towns must recognize the importance of the community's adults role. Businesses, church leaders, seniors local service clubs, etc., should all become involved in ensuring their members are educated to the services in the community that may assist adults and youths when problems arise. A new attitude of acceptance and approving of community members accessing help will also need to be fostered, but the first step would be for all adults to know of the services available. The approach might be to develop a campaign explaining that knowledge of an appropriate helping service may be as important to a neighbour, friend or child, as C.P.R. might be if he/she were having a coronary: IT TOO, JUST MIGHT SAVE A LIFE.

These are only a few suggestions, every community is unique and should respond and adapt in methods that best suit their populations. However, do not rely on only the traditional methods, attempt some new approaches that might gain attention from sectors of the community that has not been involved in the past - and be sure to get some youth input.

Finally, I would like to conclude by stating that although there are differences between urban and rural street youth, both groups share in their desire for a better life. Each suffers daily assaults on his self-esteem and are individually, very lonely people. Most importantly, we should remember that the term street youth *is* in fact an oxymoron, for all street kids are cheated of the real experience of youth - and sadly, that is something that can never be regained.

Bibliography and Recommended Readings

- Earl, Christopher Early Family and Sexual Experiences of Male and Female Prostitutes. Canada's Mental Health, Vol. 38, No.4 (7-11) Dec. 1990.
- Chambliss, William J. The Saints and the Roughnecks. Society, Vol.11 , NO.1., November/December 1973.
- Mohatt, Dennis F.,
& Mohatt, Karen Sharer At Risk Rural Youth: A Community Psychology Approach to Identification and Intervention. Presented at the Second International Rural Mental Health and Addictions Conference, North Bay, Ontario 1990.
- Smart, Reginald, Adalf, E.,
Porterfield, K., Canale, M. Drugs, Youth and the Street. Addictions Research Foundation, Toronto, 1990.
- Voakes, Les A Small Town Street Worker' .s Report. TriCAP, Smiths Falls, Ontario 1992.
- Youth Services Bureau of
Ottawa Ottawa Street Prostitutes: A Survey Youth Services Bureau, Ottawa, May 1991