Apples to Apples:
A Comparative Demographic Analysis of Homeless and Housed Youth in Canada

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Abstract

The demographic profiles of homeless youth are varied and play an integral role in the experiences these young people have. This article reports on detailed demographic data collected from 187 homeless youth in the *Youth Matters in London* study, and compares it to demographic profiles of youth in the general Ontario population and with samples of homeless youth from five major Canadian cities. Results indicate demographic data is not consistently collected and/or reported upon by researchers, making comparative analysis challenging while highlighting the need for a standardization of demographic data collection. Comparisons between homeless and housed youth indicate that the homeless youth had lower educational attainment, higher pregnancy/parenting rates, increased cohabitation, greater unemployment, and low annual incomes. Demographic comparison between the six homeless youth samples indicate some similarities and some key differences, particularly in relation to pregnancies/parenting, education, employment, and income. Implications for researchers, policy-makers, and service providers are discussed.

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Introduction

Effective planning for any population requires a sound understanding of the

characteristics that define its members, and differentiate them from others. This article reports on

the demographic characteristics of 187 homeless and street-involved youth enrolled in the

Canadian-based *Youth Matters in London* (YML) study and compares the findings with

demographic data collected from other large-scale studies of homeless youth in Canada, as well

as with statistical data of youth who are housed.

Youth homelessness researchers often collect demographic information as part of their

studies, with the recognition that they are working with a diverse population and that this

information is needed in order to provide targeted interventions. Yet, while researchers collect

demographic characteristics about their own sample participants – such as their age, sex, gender,

sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity (among others) – this information is rarely used to conduct

comparative analyses against other homeless youth samples and/or youth in the general

population.

In this article we examine two key questions: (1) what are the demographic

characteristics of the YML sample of homeless youth, and how do they compare to those of

housed youth within the same Canadian province, of Ontario; and (2) how do the demographics

of the YML sample compare to those of other homeless youth across Canada?

Literature Review

Demographic analysis is an integral part of social science and health-based research.

According to the American Psychological Association (2001), describing the demographic

profile of a sample can be beneficial for assessing the results, making comparisons between and

across groups, generalizing the findings, and making comparisons in replications, literature reviews, and secondary analyses. In recent years, collecting demographic information on homeless youth has become increasingly important, with the growing recognition that they are a heterogeneous population.

Studies are regularly conducted in Canada, the United States of America, and Australia, yet there has been limited concerted effort to examine the similarities and differences between the homeless youth samples included in the range of studies. Similarly, few researchers have attempted to undertake comparative analysis between homeless and housed youth samples. Some notable exceptions include matched-sample studies related to sexual minority youth (Walls, Hancock, & Wisneski, 2007), psychopathology (McCaskill, Toro, & Wolfe, 1998), family environment (Wolfe, Toro, & McCaskill, 1999), and behavioural health problems (Haber & Toro, 2009). Critical comparative analysis is imperative, especially given Toro, Lesperance, and Braciszewski's (2011) caution that, "...studies find rather different profiles of homeless youth, depending on sampling strategies, target age groups, gender balance, measures used, and other methodological factors" (p.1).

To date there has been little uniformity in the kinds of demographic information collected and/or reported upon by youth homelessness researchers. This lack of consistency is concerning, given that recommendations put forth by researchers may be adopted into policy and practice, without critical evaluation of their generalizability to other locations and sub-groups of homeless youth. In 1998 the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) launched a pilot project aimed at addressing the lack of consistency in data collection around this population of young people. The *Enhanced Surveillance of Canadian Street Youth*, generally referred to as E-SYS, was designed to collect data on street youth through multiple cycles and across various locations, such as

Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Halifax (PHAC,

2008). While this collaborative initiative has offered considerable insight into various street

youth samples across Canada, the collection and evaluation of data remains an ongoing process.

To date, only limited demographic information has been publicly reported as outlined in the

results section of this article.

      The need for consistent and comprehensive demographic reporting is rooted in the

recognition that targeted responses offer the most promise for working with this marginalized

group of youth. Living on the street presents these young people with many challenges, dangers,

and risks, but not in a uniform way. Their experiences and responses are largely influenced by

demographic factors, like age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. In order to

understand homeless youth, and offer strategic responses that benefit them, it is important to first

understand the importance of these identity markers in shaping their experiences. Further

complicating demographic analyses (yet making them even more pressing) is the

intersectionality of these characteristics. For instance, while it is estimated that between 20-40%

of homeless youth self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ)

(Ray, 2006), the experiences of these youth are influenced not only by their sexuality but also by

intersecting factors, such as Aboriginal identity (Abramovich, 2012).

      Research has shown that demographic factors intersect in complex ways that go beyond

simple notions of accumulating or multiplying disadvantage (Frederick, Ross, Bruno, &

Erickson, 2011). The implications of understanding demographics, and their intersections, are

clear when examining the research on many issues effecting homeless youth today. For instance,

while it is recognized that poor mental health is more common among homeless than housed

youth (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010; Votta & Manion, 2004), detailed

demographic analysis indicates that certain conditions, like depression and dysthymia, are more commonly present in older and female homeless youth (Rohde, Noelle, Ochs, & Seeley, 2001). Depression is also more common among LGBTQ identified youth (Frederick et al., 2011; Noell & Ochs, 2001), with one study finding that in the preceding twelve months these youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to have seriously considered, planned, and attempted suicide (Gattis, 2013). A range of sex-based suicide indicators have also been identified among homeless youth, with male suicidality associated with being gay and having emotional distress, and female suicidality associated with being younger and having low self-esteem (Leslie, Stein, & Rotheram-Borus, 2002).

The use of substances, commonly to self-medicate, is also higher among homeless youth (Kelly & Caputo, 2007; Kirst & Erickson, 2013; Sanders, Lankenau, Jackson-Bloom, & Hathazi, 2008; Shillington, Bousman & Clapp, 2011). Demographic factors play an important role in understanding different usage patterns (Baron, 1999). For instance, LGBTQ youth are more likely to report higher lifetime use (Gattis, 2013), a greater variety of drug use (Frederick et al., 2011), and injection drug use (Noell & Ochs, 2001). Higher rates of substance use have also been found among homeless youth who are white/not Hispanic or African American and who are male (Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008).

The risk of becoming HIV-positive is reportedly higher among homeless youth (Boivin, Roy, Haley, & Galbaud du Fort, 2005), and may be linked in part to high-risk substance use practices (DeMatteo et al., 1999; Marshall, Kerr, Livingstone, Montaner, & Wood, 2008). Demographically, HIV-positive homeless youth are more likely to be older, male, of Aboriginal or African American descent, and low-income earners (Linton, Singh, Turbow, & Legg, 2009). LGBTQ youth are also at high risk of acquiring HIV (Rew, Whittaker, Seehafer, & Smith,

2005); with research indicating bisexual females are at the greatest risk (Gangamma, Slesnick, Toviessi, & Serovich, 2008). Positive HIV status may also be linked to high-risk behaviours like survival sex, which is more common among females (Gangamma et al., 2008) and LGBTQ youth (Gattis, 2013; Marshall, Shannon, Kerr, Zhang, & Wood, 2010).

Delinquent behaviour often increases as young people enter street life (Thompson et al., 2010), but the relationship between homeless youth, criminality, and victimization is not straight-forward. While homeless youth, as a whole, report difficulty with the law (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Votta & Manion, 2004), there are clear demographic differences. Male youth are more likely to report receiving attention from the police (O'Grady, Gaetz, & Buccieri, 2011) and being arrested (Kirst & Erickson, 2013). African American and Aboriginal youth are also more likely to experience greater levels of police surveillance and harassment (O'Grady et al., 2011), while LGBTQ youth are less likely to report being arrested (Noell & Ochs, 2001).

Victimization is common on the street as well. One in-depth study of homeless youth in Toronto found the most highly victimized to be young, female (particularly African Americans), and LGBTQ (particularly females) (Gaetz, O'Grady, & Buccieri, 2010). Female youth often report altering their appearance to look tougher as a protective measure (Gaetz, 2004), however, other research has indicted that having an unkempt physical appearance may actually increase one's risk of sexual victimization (Tyler & Beal, 2010). Male victimization may be associated with survival sex (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004), the use of a weapon (for those who are heterosexual) (Frederick et al., 2011), and is less likely to be reported to an authority figure (Gaetz, 2004).

Violence is not limited to the street, as many youth identify abuse as a reason for leaving home, particularly among young women (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Tyler et al., 2004). The home

lives of these youth are often described as problematic and, as such, many are involved with child welfare agencies and foster care (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Nichols, 2013). This involvement is often particularly difficult for Aboriginal youth, given the historical trauma of residential schooling in Canada (Baker Collins, 2013; Ruttan, LaBoucane-Benson, & Munro, 2008, 2010).

The demographic profiles of homeless youth are varied, and play an integral role in the experiences these young people have. The literature shows that demographic factors (such as age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity) impact their health, mental health, suicidality, substance use, HIV rates, engagement in survival sex, criminality, victimization, home lives, and involvement with child welfare authorities. Gaining a better understanding of the demographic characteristics of homeless youth is important, as it allows for a better understanding of who they are, how they experience complex issues, and how to best implement effective policies to assist them. A growing number of researchers are calling for targeted interventions that take into account the needs of youth, based on their demographic characteristics (Chisolm, Mulatu, & Brown, 2009; Leslie et al., 2002; Rew et al., 2005). This article assists in this effort by providing detailed demographic data from the YML study, as well as a comparative analysis with other homeless and housed youth samples in Canada.

Methods

Design

The main objective of the YML project was to investigate and better understand youth participants' choices regarding treatment and service options over a three-year period. A cross-sectional, mixed methods approach was used, with participants completing both an in-depth

quantitative interview, as well as more qualitative open-ended questions. The quantitative

component was based on several questionnaires, including such topics as demographics, health,

housing, quality of life, and social support. Ethics approval was granted by the Research Ethics

Board of Western University, in London, Ontario.

Sample

A total of 187 individuals were enrolled in the study, with all participants being initially

located within the city of London, Ontario and its surrounding region. To be included in the

study participants needed to be between the ages of 16 and 25, experiencing a serious self-

reported mental health disorder (a formal diagnosis was not required), and either homeless or

precariously housed. Housing definitions followed those used by the At Home/Chez Soi study

(Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2008). Individuals were considered to be absolutely

homeless if they were living in places not usually used for sleeping (e.g. outside on the streets, in

parks, cars, or parking garages); staying in shelters or hostels; or leaving an institution (such as a

prison, jail, or hospital) with no place to stay. Individuals were considered to be precariously

housed if they were staying in a Single Room Occupancy, rooming house, or hotel/motel, and

had been absolutely homeless at least twice previously.

Measures

The current study is a secondary analysis based on three questionnaires from the YML

study. These surveys included the 'Demographics, Service & Housing History' (DSHH),

'Housing History Survey' and 'Vocational Time-line Follow-back' (VTF).

For each measure, with the exception of age, annual income, and the number of

undesirable moves in the previous five years, individuals were given a list of categories and

asked which category they belonged to. For example, to assess gender, individuals were asked to

indicate whether they were male, female, or other. For current sources of income, individuals were allowed to select more than one category. As for the measures that were not categorical in nature, age was determined by calculating the amount of time, in years, between the individual's reported date of birth and the interview date. Annual income was calculated from the VTF questionnaire where individuals were asked to estimate their total income from all sources for each of the previous three months. This was then summed for a three-month total, and multiplied by four to estimate the total annual income for the previous year. Finally, data regarding undesirable moves was taken from the Housing History Survey where participants were asked to estimate the number of undesirable moves they had experienced in the previous five years.

Where necessary, data from the YML sample was regrouped to match the CCHS categories, which allowed for a more direct comparison. Age was transformed into a categorical variable with four groups: 15 to 17 years; 18 to 19 years; 20 to 24 years; and 25 years. To be able to compare cultural/racial origins, data from YML was condensed from a long list of possible cultural identities (e.g. Asian-East, Asian-South, Black-Canada, Black-Africa, etc.) to two categories - White (i.e. White-Canada and White-Europe) and Visible Minority (i.e. all categories except for White-Canada and White-Europe). Education data originally contained categories which separated individuals attending a particular level from those who actually completed a level (e.g. completed grade 8; attended high school but did not complete; completed high school; attended university but did not complete; completed university). To be able to compare samples, individuals were regrouped into the following categories: less than secondary school graduation; secondary school graduation; some post-secondary; post-secondary graduation. With respect to current source of income, data was again condensed from a long list of options, (e.g. earnings from regular work, earnings from casual work, disability income,

panhandling, etc.) to three categories: employment income; employment insurance, workers'

compensation, and social assistance; and other. Finally, annual income was transformed from a

continuous variable into a categorical variable with six groupings: no income; less than $20,000;

$20,000 to $39,999; $40,000 to $59,999; $60,000 to $79,999; and $80,000 or higher.

Some data from the CCHS was also reclassified to achieve a more equal comparison.

Number of children was derived from two questions: living arrangement; and number of

individuals in the household. If the respondent did not indicate they were a parent living with a

child they were considered as having 0 children. If they indicated they were either a) a parent

living with a spouse/partner in a household of 3 persons; or b) a single parent living in a

household of 2 persons they were considered as having 1 child. If they indicated they were a

parent living with their partner/spouse in a household of 4 or more persons, or a single parent in

a household of 3 or more persons they were considered as having 2 or more children.

Employment status was also based on two questions: working status last week and

currently attending school, university, or college. Within the working status last week, if an

individual indicated they had a job the previous week they were considered employed. If they

indicated they did not have a job last week, or were permanently unable to work, they were

considered unemployed. If an individual indicated they were currently attending school,

university, or college, they were considered to be a student.

Analysis

The purpose of this paper is to compare the demographic characteristics of the YML

sample with two key groups – housed Ontario youth and other homeless youth in Canada. First,

the study sample was compared to a general Ontario youth sample. To that end, data was pulled

from two cycles of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) to serve as comparisons. The CCHS is a cross-sectional survey conducted by Statistics Canada that collects information related to health status, health care utilization, and health determinants for the Canadian population. Random digit dialing is employed within a pre-designed sampling frame in order to obtain reliable estimates for the Canadian population at the health region level.

Data from the 2009/2010 CCHS was chosen as one comparison, as data collection for this survey would have taken place around the same time as baseline data collection for the YML study. Data from the 2011/2012 CCHS was chosen as the second comparison as it reflects the most current data available on Ontario youth. Within the CCHS data, individuals who indicated they were between the ages of 15 and 24 years, and currently resided in Ontario (n=5578) were selected for the comparison, and weights were applied as necessary for descriptive statistics.

For the categorical measures in both samples, frequencies and percentages were calculated. For the number of undesirable moves, the mean number of moves and the standard deviation were calculated.

As level of education can be highly dependent on age, and given the age groups in the two samples were not exact (i.e. YML included those 16 years to 25 years, and the 2010 CCHS included those 15 years to 24 years) a sub-analysis of age group and education was undertaken. The percentage of individuals in each education level was calculated for each age group and compared between the YML sample and the 2010 CCHS sample.

The second objective, comparing the YML sample demographics with other homeless youth, was achieved by conducting a literature search through Google Scholar. Given that demographic data reporting may be limited in journal articles, the search was extended to include grey literature as well, through the review of on-line research reports. Five Canadian youth

homelessness studies were identified that provided extensive reporting on demographic data.

These studies included three from the E-SYS project in Ottawa (Ottawa Public Health, 2011),

Edmonton (Alberta Health Services, 2011), and Saskatoon (Public Health Services, 2011), as

well as research conducted in Toronto (Linton et al., 2009), and Calgary (Worthington et al.,

2008). Demographic data was collected, as reported by the researchers, and is presented

alongside the YML data for comparative purposes.

Results

Question 1: Comparing Homeless and Housed Youth

The first question we explored was, "What are the demographic characteristics of the

YML sample of homeless youth, and how do they compare to those of housed youth within the

same Canadian province, of Ontario?" The comparison of sample demographics between the

YML sample and housed Ontario youth can be found in Table 1. Overall, the CCHS cycles seem

similar with little change between the earlier and later responses. There were, however, several

notable differences between the YML sample and the two broader Ontario samples.

Table 1: Comparison of sample demographics to a broader Ontario youth sample

	YML		CCHS 2009/10	CCHS 2011/12
	n	**%**	**%**	%
Age (years)				
15 to 17 years[a]	27	14.8%	29.7%	29.4%
18 to 19 years	39	21.3%	19.0%	17.3%
20 to 24 years	113	61.7%	51.2%	53.4%
25 years	3	2.2%	N.I.	N.I.
Gender/Sex[b]				
Male	122	65.2%	51.7%	51.0%
Female	62	33.2%	48.3%	49.0%
Other	3	1.6%	N.I.	N.I.
Cultural/Racial Origins				
White	135	72.6%	67.9%	65.8%
Visible minority	51	27.4%	32.1%	34.2%

	YML		CCHS 2009/10	CCHS 2011/12
	n	**%**	**%**	%
Level of Education				
Less than secondary school graduation	149	79.7%	34.6%	33.0%
Secondary school graduation	27	14.4%	20.6%	22.9%
Some post-secondary	11	5.9%	18.3%	16.4%
Post-secondary school graduation	0	0.0%	26.5%	27.6%
Marital Status				
Single, never married	146	78.9%	90.7%	93.5%
Common-law/Cohabiting with partner	37	20.0%	5.0%	6.2%
Married	1	0.5%	4.0%	2.4%
Widowed, separated, or divorced	1	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%
Number of Children				
0 children	131	70.8%		97.3%
1 child	39	21.1%	N.I.	1.7%
2 or more children	15	8.1%		0.9%
Number of Children Provide Support To				
0 children	22	40.7%		
1 child	28	51.9%	N.I.	N.I.
2 or more children	4	7.4%		
Current Employment Status[c]				
Employed	13	7.0%	56.1%	55.4%
Unemployed	140	75.3%	43.9%	44.6%
Student	31	16.7%	63.2%	66.3%
Volunteer work, unpaid	1	0.5%	N.I.	N.I.
Other	1	0.5%	N.I.	N.I.
Current Sources of Income[d]				
Employment income	22	11.8%	74.5%	76.5%
Employment insurance, workers' compensation, social assistance	104	55.6%	3.7%	3.4%
Other	60	32.1%	21.5%	19.8%
Total Annual Income[e]				
No income	8	4.3%	16.2%	13.9%
Less than $20,000	158	84.9%	57.8%	60.4%
$20,000 to $39,999	12	6.5%	18.4%	19.6%
$40,000 to $59,999	4	2.2%	5.9%	4.7%
$60,000 to $79,999	1	0.5%	1.4%	1.0%
$80,000 or higher	3	1.6%	0.2%	0.5%

N.I. Not included in CCHS sample/questionnaire

a YML data reflects individuals with a stated age of 16 to 17 years

b YML asked participants for their gender where the CCHS asks for sex

c YML allowed for the selection of one primary employment status while the CCHS data allows for multiple statuses

d YML allowed for the selection of multiple sources of income while the CCHS only allowed one

e YML annual income was calculated by taking the total income of the previous three months and multiplying by four

From this analysis, the YML sample contains a slightly lower percentage of 15 to 17 year olds (14.8% vs. 29.7% and 29.4%) yet a slightly higher percentage of 20 to 24 year olds (61.7% vs. 51.2% and 53.4%). This sample also includes a slightly higher percentage of males than what is found in the broader population (65.2% vs. 51.7% and 51.0%). More than twice as many individuals in the YML sample had not yet achieved a secondary school graduation (72.6% vs. 34.6% and 33.0%) than in the CCHS samples. Comparison of marital status revealed individuals in the YML sample were three to four times more likely to be living common-law or cohabitating with a partner (20.0% vs. 5.0% and 6.2%), but were far less likely to be married (0.5% vs. 4.0% and 2.4%) when compared to the broader youth sample.

In relation to employment and income, direct comparisons are difficult due to the inherent differences in the questions used in the two samples. However, it does appear that individuals in the YML sample were far less likely to be employed (7.0% vs. 56.1% and 55.4%) or to consider themselves a student (16.7% vs. 63.2% and 66.3%), and far more likely to be unemployed (75.3% vs. 43.9% and 44.6%) than their broader population counterparts. This is further highlighted in the current sources of income, where receiving employment income was six times more prevalent among the broader population (74.5% and 76.5% vs. 11.8%), but receiving social assistance was 15 times more prevalent among the YML sample (55.6% vs. 3.7% and 3.4%).

The analysis revealed key educational distinctions between the two samples. The results of the cross-tabulation between education status and age group are shown in Table 2. In the 15 to 17 year age group the results are similar between the samples with 100% of participants in YML and 92.7% of the broader youth sample having less than a secondary school graduation. However, as the age increases there is a shift in the broader Ontario youth sample where the

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prevalence of a less than secondary school graduation decreases (15 to 17 years: 92.7%; 18 to 19

years: 22.8%; 20 to 24 years: 6.9%) while the prevalence of higher education levels, such as

post-secondary graduation, increases (15 to 17 years: 0.1%; 18 to 19 years: 7.2%; 20 to 24 years:

51.4%). The most drastic differences can be seen in the 20 to 24 year age group where the YML

sample was ten-times more likely to have less than a secondary school graduation (72.6% vs.

6.9%), slightly less likely to have a secondary school graduation (18.6% vs. 21.6%), less than

half as likely to have some post-secondary education (8.8% vs. 20.0%), and far less likely to

have a post-secondary graduation (0.0% vs. 51.4%).

**Table 2: Education status by age group comparing *Youth Matters in London* sample
to a broader Ontario youth sample**

	15 to 17 years		18 to 19 years		20 to 24 years		25 years +	
	YML	CCHS 2010	YML	CCHS 2010	YML	CCHS 2010	YML	CCHS 2010
Less than secondary school graduation	27 100.0%	463352 92.7%	34 87.2%	74992 22.8%	82 72.6%	63480 6.9%	3 75.0%	
Secondary school graduation	0 0.0%	13314 2.7%	5 12.8%	135366 41.1%	21 18.6%	197981 21.6%	0 0.0%	Not Included
Some post-secondary	0 0.0%	22273 4.5%	0 0.0%	95363 28.9%	10 8.8%	183190 20.0%	1 25.0%	
Post-secondary graduation	0 0.0%	707 0.1%	0 0.0%	23728 7.2%	0 0.0%	469915 51.4%	0 0.0%	
Total	27 100.0%	499646 100.0%	39 100.0%	329449 100.0%	113 100.0%	914566 100.0%	4 100.0%	

Question 2: Comparing Homeless Youth Samples

The second analysis question asked, "How do the demographics of the YML sample

compare to those of other homeless youth across Canada?" Table 3 provides comparative data

on the YML sample demographics in relation to available information from studies with

homeless youth in five major Canadian cities (from the three provinces of Ontario, Alberta, and

Saskatchewan). These geographically diverse samples showed similar average ages (ranging between 19 and 24), were comprised primarily of males, and a majority in each city identified as white. London was the only city reporting marital status, with a notable percentage of youth living with a partner (20%). The available information indicated a high rate of reported pregnancies and/or children in London (29.2%), Ottawa (58%), Edmonton (42.6%), Saskatoon (61%), and Calgary (42%), although London and Calgary were the only cities to obtain this information from both males and females. Originally, we also set out to compare the number of children respondents were supporting, however, only London-based researchers collected this information.

Age-appropriate levels of education were attained by 46% of participants in Edmonton and by 25% of participants in Ottawa. The majority of participants had not completed high school in London (79.7%), Toronto (50.7%), and Calgary (67%). Employment status information is considerably lacking, although sources of income data indicates employment is the most common source in Calgary (41%), government assistance in London (55.6%) and Ottawa (66%), and other sources in Edmonton (45.1%) and Toronto (39.6%). Annual income showed the majority of participants in London reporting earning less than $20,000 (84.9%) and those in Toronto generally earning less than $15,000 (71.0%).

**Table 3: Comparison of Youth Matters in London sample demographics
to other Canadian homeless youth study samples**

Characteristic	London n=187		Ottawa n=200		Edmonton n=200[a]		Saskatoon n=131[b]		Toronto n=138		Calgary n=163[c]	
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age (years)												
Median	21.0		19.0		19.0		--		--		--	
Groups												
15 to 17 years	27	14.8%							--			
18 to 19 years	39	21.3%							--		58	36.0%
18 to 21 years	--								61	44.2%	--	
20 to 24 years	113	61.7%	--		--		--		--		90	55.0%
22 to 25 years	--								50	36.2%	--	
25 years and older	3	2.2%							--		15	9.0%
26 to 30 years	--								27	19.6%	--	
Gender/Sex[d]												
Male	122	65.2%	110	55.0%	138	69.0%	90	68.7%	112	81.2%	114	71.0%
Female	62	33.2%	90	45.0%	61	30.5%	41	31.3%	23	16.7%	46	29.0%
Other/Transgendered	3	1.6%	--		1	0.5%	--		3	2.1%	--	
Cultural/Racial Origins												
White	135	72.6%	148	74.0%					92	66.7%	89	56.0%
Visible Minority	51	27.4%	54	27.0%	--		--		46	33.2%	71	44.0%
Level of Education												
Less than secondary school graduation	149	79.7%							70	50.7%	105	67.0%
Secondary school graduation	27	14.4%	--		--		--		59	42.8%	27	17.0%
Some post-secondary	11	5.9%							4	2.9%	21	13.0%
Post-secondary school graduation	0	0.0%							4	2.9%	5	3.0%
Completed level appropriate for	--		25.0%		46.0%		--		--		--	

-- Not reported
[a] Figures represent 2010 cycle
[b] Figures represent 2009 cycle
[c] Figures represent youth 'currently on the street'
[d] London, Edmonton, and Toronto examined Gender while Ottawa, Saskatoon, and Calgary examined Sex

Apples to Apples

Characteristic	London n=187		Ottawa n=200		Edmonton n=200[a]		Saskatoon n=131[b]		Toronto n=138		Calgary n=163[c]	
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
age												
Marital Status												
Single, never married	146	78.9%										
Common-law/Cohabitating with partner	37	20.0%	--		--		--		--		--	
Number of Children												
0 children	131	70.8%										
1 child	39	21.1%	--		--		--		--		--	
2 or more children	15	8.1%										
Ever Pregnant	--			58.0%[e]	26	42.6%[5]	25	61.0%[5]	--		90	58.0%[f]
Current Employment Status												
Employed	13	7.0%	90	45.0%	58	30.1%	--				65	41.0%
Unemployed	140	75.3%	--		--		--		--		--	
Student	31	16.7%	84	42.0%	--		67	51.1%			23	15.0%
Current Sources of Income												
Employment income	22	11.8%	90	45.0%	58	30.1%			22	15.9%	65	41%
Government Assistance	104	55.6%	132	66.0%	48	24.9%	--		42	30.3%	14	9%
Other	60	32.1%	--		87	45.1%			55	39.6%	53	34%
Total Annual Income												
No income	8	4.3%										--
Less than $15,000		--									98	71.0%
Less than $20,000	158	84.9%										--
$15,000 to $24,999		--	--		--		--		--		22	15.9%
$20,000 to $39,999	12	6.5%										--
$25,000 to $34,999		--									7	5.1%
$35,000 to $44,999		--									1	0.7%
$40,000 to $59,999	4	2.2%										--

-- Not reported
[e] Representative of females only
[f] Represents pregnancies of self or partner

Discussion

Having a sound understanding of population-specific demographics is imperative for creating and implementing informed responses. In this paper the homeless youth sample from YML was compared to a sample of housed Ontario youth, as well as samples of homeless youth in five other Canadian cities. Key demographic factors that were examined included: age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, number of children, education level, employment, and annual income. The results indicated many differences between the youth in London and the housed youth, and mixed results when compared to other homeless youth across the country.

Comparatively, the homeless samples were more highly comprised of older youth, males, and white individuals than the housed sample. Marital status, while only reported upon by the London study, was an important variable that showed a large percentage of homeless youth cohabitating with partners, and more so than their housed peers. These findings suggest the need for further research on cohabitation / marital status among homeless youth, and the need for researchers to include these variables in their demographic data collection.

The findings in relation to number of pregnancies and children indicated that the homeless youth samples reported considerably higher numbers than did housed youth. It is difficult to make direct comparisons with this data, however, given that it was collected and reported in different ways. For instance, some researchers recorded data on pregnancies while others asked about the number of children one has, and some reported data from only female participants. These notable differences mean that direct comparisons cannot be made between the youth samples. However, the key underlying finding of the reported data

is that homeless youth experience more pregnancies and have more children when compared to their housed peers. This finding is significant and highlights the need for parenting resources and supports among this population of young people.

Educational attainment was found to be higher among the housed youth than those who are homeless, with the gap growing as age increases. This suggests there is an urgent need to connect younger homeless youth with education supports before they fall too far behind their housed peers. Although low educational attainment was found in all homeless samples, the results, like the parenting data, were difficult to compare directly as a result of inconsistent collection and reporting methods. Whereas Ottawa and Edmonton reported on whether the youth completed age appropriate levels of education, cities like London, Toronto, and Calgary reported education as a categorical variable. The data from each available city indicates low educational attainment, and attainment lower than housed youth, but direct comparisons are not able to be made given the key data differences.

Finally, while methodological differences in the collection of employment and income data present comparative challenges, the results suggest that homeless youth are far more likely to be unemployed and to receive social assistance than the housed Ontario youth. Within the homeless youth samples, the data was sparse but generally showed that incomes sources other than employment were common in all cities but Calgary.

Limitations

This study was subject to several limitations. The first limitation is that the analysis conducted here was a secondary analysis of data previously collected. It is therefore limited to the measures that had already been collected, and the purpose for which they had been

collected. Secondly, all of the responses given by participants were, in part, based on their ability to remember previous events. As such, the data could be affected by a certain amount of recall bias. Third, the participants included in the YML sample all were experiencing serious self-reported mental health disorders, which may have contributed to differences in the demographic profiles. Finally, because of the different instruments used in each sample, some of the comparisons made between the London homeless youth sample and other youth samples could not be exact. Thus, these comparisons should be made with caution.

Conclusion

Overall, this study highlights three important outcomes. First, demographic data is not consistently collected and/or reported upon by researchers, which makes comparative analysis difficult. Moving toward a standardization of demographic data among youth researchers would improve the quality of the data and allow for a better understanding of sample representation. Second, comparisons between homeless and housed youth indicated that the homeless youth were significantly different in many important ways. More research is needed to better understand the social and structural factors that contributed to lower educational attainment, higher pregnancy/parenting rates, increased cohabitation, greater unemployment, and low annual incomes among youth who are homeless. Finally, the demographic comparison between the six homeless youth samples indicated some similarities and some key differences, particularly in relation to data on pregnancies / parenting, education, employment, and income. Where possible, researchers, policy-

makers, and service providers should collaborate to share resources, best practices, and strategies across these (and other) cities.

More research is needed to better understand these differences and the contributing factors that affect homeless youth in different cities. Homeless youth in Canada are a diverse population who differ not only from housed youth, but from one another. Demographic analysis is needed to better understand these young people and to implement targeted and informed responses.

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