Book Reviews

Karabanow, J., Carson, A., & Clement, P. (2010). <u>Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian</u>

<u>Youth</u>. Winnipeg: Fernwood Press.

Reviewed by: Patti Kendrick, MacEwan University

"Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" is written by Jeff Karabanow, Alexa

Carson, and Philip Clement, and is constructed from a compilation of interviews with 128

homeless youth and fifty providers of support services available to this marginalized population.

The authors include excerpts from the interviews throughout the book, giving insight into the

unique perspectives of those enmeshed in street culture. Karabanow et al. collected their data

from six major urban centres across Canada and present an analysis of the micro and macro

factors involved in the process of escaping homelessness and successfully integrating into

mainstream society.

At the micro or individual level, Karabanow et al. illustrate that the common issue for the

youth in the study pertained to confidence and self-worth. The progression from the state of

homelessness to leaving the street consisted of evolving from feeling worthless to attaining a

new and hopeful outlook with increased inner strength and ability.

"Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" begins by introducing the

circumstances that cause youth to end up on the street. Karabanow et al. paint a picture of family

life wrought with abuse, trauma and instability. Neglected and displaced, they find themselves

living on the street, thrust into a life of avoiding inherent dangers in the street environment and

trying to survive by meeting their own basic needs. Karabanow et al. illustrate how unhealthy the

background of youth family life has been if homelessness is a more viable option. The authors

note that: "on one level, it presents a safer and healthier space than that from which some young people come (this in itself is telling concerning the harshness of street youth's past experiences)" (p. 38).

Karabanow et al. describe a life on the street as a time of initial independence and freedom, with youth developing a sense of community with others who share their experiences. However, youth often become disenchanted with homelessness, life often becomes boring and they begin to picture life as they get older, still stuck on the streets. Karabanow et al. highlight some common themes that their data revealed once youth begin to question their street life. Participants experience a boost in self-esteem in a variety of ways: having a child or being in a relationship where worth corresponds to someone depending on them, finding enthusiasm for something to work on or work towards, or just having support from service providers from whom they can ask for help in a respectful and nonjudgmental environment. An excerpt from an interview exemplifies the importance of personal support on self-esteem: "If there weren't drop-in centres you'd really stop caring about everything.…[You would think] nobody wants me, nobody thinks I'm worth anything…People need to know they're worth something (Karen, age 19, Halifax)" (p. 52).

Karabanow et al. examine how confidence is paramount to street exiting. Youth gain life skills from support services, through which they gain autonomy, such as learning to budget their money or write a resume, and using resources to obtain employment and housing. Although the authors note that there is a grieving process involved in leaving street life behind and having to cut all ties to that community, by becoming increasingly self-sufficient, eventual success was achieved in joining mainstream life. Karabanow et al. state: "What our study found is that exiting

street life meant a renewed or rebuilt sense of citizenship-a shift away from exclusion towards inclusion" (pp. 15-16).

Also explored in "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" are the macro, structural aspects of Canadian culture that create barriers for individuals who wish to get off the street. Karabanow et al. found that what resonated with a lot of young people was described as "discovering how to function within formalized and bureaucratic organizational structures" (p. 65).

Karabanow et al. discovered that many youth felt like they were up against a brick wall, disclosing descriptions of being held back when trying to deal with institutionalized organizations. Stories consisted of how medical services were only available while homeless, social assistance did not pay enough unless recipients were creative or found someone who would share accommodations, and the problem of needing an address for employment while, at the same time, needing a job in order to find housing. Another Catch-22 faced was not being able to get jobs that paid well without adequate education, but education was hard to get without adequate income.

In the conclusions drawn from the study presented by Karabanow et al., they begin by stating that the homeless population lives simultaneously with, but separate from, civil society. The authors refer to two opposing ideas: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to "the importance of 'street families' for economic, emotional support, safety and protection" (p. 125). Although street youth need such supports in order to create a feeling of belonging for themselves, a shift to bridging social capital "appears to lead to new albeit delicate attachment and requires the individual to begin to develop new bonds. The

redevelopment of identity had much to do with becoming engaged in civil society, a bridging rather than bonding of social capital" (p. 16).

There has been ample research conducted that focuses on the root causes of homelessness and the constructs of street culture. Jeff Karabanow, Alexa Carson, and Philip Clement wrote "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth", detailing the results of their study on a lesser examined process, exiting street life. Limitations noted by the authors was a lack of participants who experienced homelessness in rural areas. The authors recognized that rural areas can contain similar problems but their data was accumulated exclusively from larger urban centres.

I think that a diverse audience would find "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" both interesting and helpful. Family or friends of youth who live on the street would be able to gain insight by reading the book and would better be able to understand how they can be helpful without judgment. Sociologists, social workers and psychologists are all professions that can benefit from reading Karabanow et al.'s book as interviewees specify what helps them regarding the type of approach that is taken by professionals. Policy makers could also examine the key issues with bureaucratic institutions and how such issues impede success in leaving street life. In addition, police officers might be able to gain knowledge of how to work with youth, rather than against them, considering they are not living the homeless lifestyle by choice.

I found "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" to be filled with stories that elicit feelings of empathy, being easily drawn into the struggles faced by homeless youth in Canada. From the data compiled from their study, Karabanow et al. paint a vivid picture of the trauma faced by a disadvantaged population, touching on such stories as being spit on, seeing friends die, being forced into drugs and prostitution, and surviving physical and sexual assault. The book introduces an interesting aspect of the youth homeless population; the idea that they do

not need to be studied, they need concrete solutions that will enable their integration into mainstream society. "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" is easy to read, at times frustrating in regards to the struggles faced by the studies' participants who are trapped in their situation, and capable of giving those who read it cause to rethink judgments they may have had towards the homeless population.