

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 8(1), 2016, pp 283-287
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index/php/cjfy>

Karabanow, J., Carson, A., Clement, P. (2010). Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth.
Winnipeg: Fernwood Press.

Reviewed by: Jessica Mayer, MacEwan University

In the book, “Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth”, authors Jeff Karabanow, Alexa Carson, and Philip Clement display their findings from interviews they have conducted with youth across Canada. These individuals are from a range of different cities being: Vancouver, Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary and Toronto. The book demonstrates conclusions from qualitative interviews, and portrays the perceptions directly from the youth participants themselves. The authors focus on four particular types of individuals while they gather their research: (1) youth living on the street, (2) youth who have left the street life scene, (3) youth who are in the process of leaving the street life, and (4) individuals who are working with these young homeless people. Karabanow, Carson and Clement have organized this book into an assortment of multiple stories that allow the reader to see deeper into the depths of homelessness, including details regarding the overall culture of life on the streets as a young individual, and what it really takes to separate oneself from the lifestyle living on the street brings (p. 9).

Karabanow, Carson and Clement define street youth as being young adolescents and outline how these young adolescents have similar characteristics to other mainstream youth in society, yet explain how they are drastically different as well. “Street youth can be at times spirited, adventurous and resilient. Like many youth they search for and need to carve out a space for themselves within their environments” (p. 13). The authors provide samples of the

Book Reviews

perspectives from the youth participants to outline the differences in these individuals, and compare them to the majority of the rest of the youth around them in society. They explain how street youth are: (1) extremely diverse, (2) heterogeneous, and (3) complex. In addition, Karabanow, Carson and Clement provide examples of some vivid labels that these individuals living on the street obtain, as to further describe the concept:

The generic term “street youth” is made up of a number of intersecting or interconnected subcultures including hard-core street-entrenched young people, squatters, group-home kids, child welfare kids, soft-core “twinkies,” “in-and-outers,” punks, runaways, throwaways, refugees and immigrants, young single mothers and those who are homeless because their entire family is homeless. (p. 20)

Furthermore, Karabanow, Carson and Clement provide a broad description ensuring one can fully understand what it entails to be considered an individual bearing the street youth label:

street youth are defined as young people who do not have a permanent place to call home and who instead spend a significant amount of time and energy on the street (such as in alleyways, parks, storefronts and dumpsters), in squats (usually located in abandoned buildings), at youth shelters and centers, and/or with friends (typically referred to as “couch surfers”). (p. 20)

Karabanow, Carson and Clement explain that many individuals suffered from abuse and unstable family life and home conditions before they ended up on the streets.

To study the reasons as to why individuals decide to leave the streets, Karabanow, Carson and Clement explain that the process can be very complex and subjective for each individual. “... some youth decide to get off the streets based on specific and identifiable realizations, while others simply decide without obvious casual explanations” (p. 32). Street youth face many challenges as they attempt to exit life on the street, and it is a non-linear process that involves intense levels of courage (p. 32).

Karabanow, Carson and Clement look closely at the reasons for motivation to get off the street that these youth find, and find several categories being: (1) support from a romantic

Book Reviews

partner, (2) personal support systems, (3) help from friends, family or others, (4) sense of self, (5) finding a personal passion, and (6) increased responsibility. Each individual faces their own personal factors, and challenges but inevitably they will all end up facing a variation of internal and external factors, no matter the situation (p. 55).

There are two crucial steps that Karabanow, Carson and Clement outline in regards to exiting street life and re-entering civil society: (1) finding somewhere to live and (2) finding a stable job. Additionally, education may become important for the youth as they engage in society again. The authors acknowledge that in order to leave the street it “requires determination and hard-work: understanding the need and commitment involved in creating distance with street culture, severing ties with street friends and street communities, redefining relationships with service providers and building new communities and networks of friends” (p. 109). Developing a new sense of self, cutting off the ties to the old ways of life and maintaining motivation are generally some aspects that they face in regards to maintaining their life off of the street.

From the personal examples provided from the homeless street youth themselves, to the descriptions demonstrated by Karabanow, Carson and Clement, it is evident that this book was written with the intent of displaying two major themes in regards to homelessness in Canadian youth today. These two goals being, first: (1) social exclusion, and (2) social capital. Social exclusion as defined by the authors is “as a marginalized and alienated population, street youth are unattached to mainstream culture and as such, outside the realm of public citizenship in terms of political involvement, economic engagement and social rapport” (p. 15). Secondly, “social capital refers to notions of trust, reciprocity, social support and social ties embedded within networks” (p. 15). Karabanow, Carson and Clement analyze the street youth from an “economic context” of “youth surviving day-to-day on the streets” (p. 13). The authors also highlight 6

Book Reviews

significant stages that are common to the youth who have attempted to leave the streets: (1) precipitating factors, (2) courage to change, (3) securing help, (4) transitioning from street, (5) change in routine, and finally (6) successful exiting. (pp. 13-14).

Karabanow, Carson and Clement attempt to display the importance of the process that Canadian street youth endure as they aim to turn their lives around for the better. These young homeless individuals struggle with not only the environmental, economic and social hardships but as well there is a huge personal, individualistic component they face. Youth struggles with maintaining the motivation and confidence to take the steps necessary to exit the street, and even once they are free from the street they still undergo hardships within mainstream civil society. Karabanow, Carson and Clement highlight the key issues that youth face, in addition they clearly depict the goal of their book when they state “by shedding light upon these young people’s travels into and out of homelessness, we are provided with a glimpse not only of street disengagement, but street youth culture in general” (pg. 9).

Upon analyzing the overall quality of the book, I have come to the conclusion that I would have enjoyed even further detail into what life on the street is really like for these individuals. It is evident that they face several hardships upon entering and exiting this lifestyle, however, I am also interested in more detail concerning the culture they encounter while actually being out on the street. Thus being said, I do acknowledge that the purpose of this book was solely to focus on individuals exiting street life, as it is not a widely discussed topic, therefore the book is still exceptional regardless of my thirst for more detail.

This book is a great introduction for an individual seeking insight into the concept of homelessness among young individuals. Therefore, for any person in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and women studies who are interested in the dynamics of this lifestyle,

Book Reviews

specifically regarding adolescents, I would highly recommend this book. While reading, “Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth”, I was engaged and interested. Throughout the book I was impressed in the way the authors described and portrayed their research in a very interesting fashion. The examples, inserts and stories from their real life research participants added a great dynamic to the book. It was a very useful technique to present their findings in a way that kept me as the reader interested. The examples provide true and honest insight so that one can have a better understanding first hand as to what these individuals were going through emotionally, physically and mentally.