

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 8(1), 2016, pp 289-293
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.

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Jeff Karabanow, Alexa Carson, and Philip Clement's book, "Leaving the Streets Stories of Canadian Youth," is a reflection of voices of youth, ages sixteen to twenty-four, living on our Canadian streets. This book is a synthesis of findings from interviews with one-hundred-and-twenty-eight youth and fifty service providers in six Canadian cities, (Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver), examining various ways in which young people have successfully or unsuccessfully "disengaged" from the streets. The authors weave together the collection of stories that examine the difficulties of being young and homeless. Perspectives vary from research assistants, who worked on the streets interviewing youth, who were in numerous stages of exiting street life; to service providers, who were consulted about their direct observations; and then directly to the source, the youth on the street. The "heterogeneity" of street youth is repeatedly highlighted and supported throughout this book. The authors address that the culture of street life is diverse and complex and draw two important concepts about those who makeup homeless youth: (1) they are equally diverse in terms of background , and (2) they are equally diverse in terms of present experiences and future aspirations. The book is impeccably organized into chapters and has meaningful quotes from the people on the streets throughout which tie in nicely.

Youth, people between the ages of sixteen to twenty-four, are the fastest growing part of the homeless population in Canada. There have been multiple sources written about street

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engagement and street culture, however, little attention and few sources has been paid to how youth move off of the street. The voices of the street youth are heard throughout this book; it explores the attempts of these youth to exit street life, looking at the motivations and hardships or challenges, as well as the supports and barriers these youth have or do not have that can either aid or hurt them through this process. This book examines the services that are available, from shelters and particular programs to mental illness and drug use; these programs that should be available are to help street youth find housing, income and the strength needed to start their new life. The authors write the book in a manner that paints a focus on the voices of distinct participants. The participants are: (1) young people living on the street, (2) young people exiting street life, (3) young people who have exited the street, and (4) those who work on the “front lines” with these particular individuals.

The book emphasizes that it is essential to picture a different identity, being in a different place spatially and emotionally. That’s the first step to moving away from street life. This book is about the young people on the streets and about hope. The stories of these kids show their struggles, their need for acceptance, and their need for stability and care. Karabanow, Carson, and Clement discuss how this is “...a story about two interrelated concepts” (p.15). The first being social exclusion and the second being social capital. Feeling excluded, the authors say, causes a “disconnection” from society and you can feel as if you are living as an “other.” Exiting street life means a renewed sense of identity, a shift away from being excluded towards being included.

As discussed in the book, there are common ideas about why youth are on the streets in the first place. There are particular notions about causes and consequences of street life, from dysfunctional families and home life, abuse and trauma, mistreatment and isolation, poverty,

addiction, mental health, and child welfare inadequacies. The authors define street youth “...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...” (p. 20). The majority of youth perceived street life as a “safer and more stable environment” than their previous home life (p. 20). These participants’ family life was characterized as unstable and chaotic and had feelings of loneliness and neglect within their family, driving them towards a life on the streets. Another factor driving these adolescents to the street involves child welfare placements, such as group homes or foster care; these places were described as a type of “prison” and instability rather than home-like or loving. Street life became a choice and a better option for some youth as opposed to their current home life.

The authors explore why young people begin to exit the streets and how they go about doing so, as well as how they begin to build new identities for themselves. There are many given reasons provided throughout the book as to why youth decided or contemplated leaving the street. Some street youth had mentioned that they “were often able to trace their decisions to get off the street to a particular moment, event, or cause” (p. 25). Numerous youth remembered a specific event that was traumatic that led them in their choice to attempt exiting the street. Some said they saw the physical and psychological effects of trying to survive on the streets, which motivated them to attempt at a better life off of the streets. Sometimes, even events in their personal lives caused them to question their life on the street. It was not a specific event for some youth; it was the boredom or fatigue of what it meant to live on the streets. As described as the most interesting reason in the book, some people just decided “enough was enough!” They had just “arrived” at a point where they didn’t think it made sense anymore without any particular reason. Lastly, age was a significant reason because it meant that many of their friends had also

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left the streets, motivating them to do the same. Exiting street life is beyond challenging and typically takes a few attempts in order for it to stick. Many young people face barriers to becoming an “ex-street youth.” It is a courageous act.

In addition to exiting street life, there has to be motivation in order for the youth to successfully move away from the streets. The book stresses there are many obstacles that must be overcome in order to successfully leave. For example, personal barriers, lack of motivation, a bruised sense of self, and so on. It is possible for the youth to overcome these difficulties on their own; however, the majority that were successful in leaving had help or guidance. An emphasis is put on moving away from street culture and re-entering civil society, like finding a place to live, school, and/or a job. They must adapt to new personal routines in day-to-day life in order, participants said there were multiple benefits of changing these routines. “...it doesn’t matter what you’re doing as long as you’re doing something positive with your life and your time” (p. 115).

This book and the authors thoroughly demonstrate an understanding of exiting street life. It portrayed hardships and discussed ways in which we can understand youth street life. It is important to note and to discuss some key insights. This book does not claim that trauma suffered by street dwellers is a positive reason for leaving the streets; it claims street life itself is traumatizing. Many young people emphasized the long term impacts of alarming and abusive situations they suffered on the streets. The authors stress that the youth cycle back and forth from exiting and returning to the streets and that those who are more successful exiting permanently have help and a sense of belonging. The aim of this book was to explore in depth the complexity and detail within each component of exiting street life. The authors’ purpose was to show views and perspectives of the street youth and to portray them as just wanting to be accepted as

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citizens, and even more so, just as human beings. It shows how they go through the process of having to redefine themselves and how they have to reconnect to society. This book shows personal and structural barriers to exiting street life and provides the details of the services that are available to help street youth find housing, income, and the ability to start a brand new life.

“Leaving the Streets Stories of Canadian Youth,” is filled with numerous references, illustrative examples, relative quotes, and meaningful drawings, all detailing the significance of the book and how extremely challenging it is for one to permanently exit street life. The authors provided a book that was educational and insightful about Canadian youth. This book could be useful for social workers and especially for teachers who deal with youth at risk. This book was very well written and kept me engaged and interested throughout the whole course of the book. I found “Leaving the Streets Stories of Canadian Youth” a pleasure to read. It was easy to read, interesting to follow, engaging, and very much informative. I would recommend it to anyone interested in youth and homelessness.