

Book Reviews

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

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“Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth” written by Jeff Karabanow, Alexa Carson, and Philip Clement is an in-depth exploration of the intricate and multifaceted lives of Canadian youth who have fallen into the vicious cycle of living on the streets. This ethnographic study included qualitative interviews with one hundred and twenty-eight street youth. The homeless population aged eighteen to twenty-four were from six Canadian cities including Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver. Researchers set out to hear the stories of youth on the streets, youth moving through the exiting process, those who have achieved success in leaving street life, and the service providers working closely alongside the troubled juveniles. Through these stories, researchers and readers gain insight into the extreme adversity this select population physically, psychologically and emotionally endures. Karabanow, Carson, and Clement expose the culture and realities of homelessness, bringing forth two main, interrelated themes: social exclusion and social capital. These two pillars further illustrate parallels within the six-step disengagement process of escaping the street.

The concept of social exclusion is characterized as alienation from the mainstream culture and society (p. 15). Street youth can be 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” (p. 20). Street youth are often labeled as “other” because they do not fit the accepted societal norm. This disconnection from society in turn limits their access to opportunities and

resources politically, economically and socially. This demographic is severely traumatized, having experienced unimaginable neglect, abuse and suffering at the hands of both caregivers and society (p. 13). The failure of nurturance, which coincides with the lack of support from primary caregivers, has pushed these misguided youth into a downward spiral straight onto the streets. Ironically, once entrenched in the dark and dangerous streets, for the first time these youth felt part of a community, a family and safe environment. Feelings of social exclusion force youth to find a form of inclusion in the depths of the street.

Karabanow, Carson, and Clement refer to social capital as “notions of trust, reciprocity, social support and social ties embedded within networks” (p. 15). These connections bring about a sense of social inclusion and as individuals we put our trust into and rely on these relationships, even if collectively, the group is considered excluded by society. The authors’ further sub-divide social capital into: (1) bonding and (2) bridging.

Social capital bonding exists within homogenous groups with similar values, beliefs, and ideals. Homeless youth across Canada experience social capital bonding within internalized communities alongside their new “supportive” families with which they share street culture and ideals. Unfortunately, new connections formed are that of an illusion. The majority of youth, highly disturbed and broken would rather, “stay on the street than move back [home]” (p. 21). Consciously they recognize that for the first time, they are cared for and even loved within the new “home” they have found. Lack of confidence, self-esteem and self-worth perpetuate street youth into pseudo relationships. They often fail to recognize the negativity they surround themselves with. Their newfound family members, much like themselves, have a complex array of personal issues that remain unaddressed, which in turn perpetuate them into a physically exhausting routine of daily survival on the street. Street mentality has been engrained in their

minds as an “antithesis of hope” (p. 36), discouraging disembarkment amongst the young adults. As long as social capital bonding remains intact, youth will remain on the streets with no desire for change. These youth are constantly bombarded with the negative street environment surrounding them, making it difficult for them to escape. The choice to leave is one only each particular individual can make.

Social capital bridging is a cultural construct that refers to the interactions between the externalized, heterogeneous communities outside of one’s own environment (p. 15). Social bridging is essential to the disengagement of youth from the street, embarking on their new journey to a better life. This idea coincides with the six-step process commonly followed by street youth. The term “bridge” is a metaphor describing how youth “walk” back over to the inclusion of mainstream society, allowing them to form new, positive and healthy bonds. The first step towards social bridging includes questioning life on the streets, which may further initiate an attempt at breaking the social bonds that have been formed.

Social bridging requires youth to overcome their negative stereotype in order to be ascribed their new, positive label of ex-street youth. The most challenging barrier involves accepting and securing help from the externalized community in which these youth feel rejected. Service providers and social workers are two resources that can be the supportive, nurturing “helping hand” youth need. There are two important stages that must be achieved in succession with their self-acquired help. The first entails finding a passion external to the streets to devote time and energy towards. The second stage involves overcoming obstacles related to personal issues, as well as forming new life skills, which assist youth in succeeding off the streets and avoiding relapse.

Researchers highlight the importance of finding a passion during and after the exiting process, which gives youth an outlet to focus their attention. Pursuing a passion also functions to rebuild their self-esteem and confidence. Their new found passion helps youth recognize positive aspects of life outside the toxic and tumultuous relationships the street offers. Addressing deep-rooted personal issues such as mental health and addictions is another crucial step in successful disengagement. As one Montreal service provider explains, “you can’t deal with certain things until you’ve dealt with the past” (p. 60). The underlying problems that originally forced the youth to street life must be reconciled in addition to the newly acquired street-related ones. This step focuses on solving fundamental issues instead of simply applying “band-aid” solutions, that many youth have already attempted to escape through aids such as substance abuse. Overcoming these hindrances are the building blocks to the latter steps in the process framework. Learning life skills gives youth a chance too succeed in their attempt at securing living accommodations, schooling and/or employment, which are essential to inclusion in mainstream society. Through reintegration of street youth, new social bonds begin to form while old ones continue to crumble, a pivotal transformation from social capital bonding to bridging.

All social capital bonding must be broken including complete severance from street life’s community and friendships. Often ex-street youth feel emotions of guilt for abandoning a community they once considered family and have now disowned for their own betterment. The importance of finding a passion is crucial at this point because it reminds youth of the plethora of opportunities their new life holds. It also helps youth realize their street relationships were part of the illusion they were trapped within. They now consciously recognize breaking their internal bonds within their “adopted family” is essential to moving forward. Youth arrive at success when they complete these key steps and feel in control for the first time in their young lives.

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Increased sense of self and restored sense of hope are signs of a successfully reintegrated youth into mainstream society.

Karabanow, Carson, and Clement strategically organize the chapters according to the six-step process of becoming an ex-street youth, while incorporating the themes of social exclusion and social capital. The three authors inevitably set out to give readers a personal glance into who these youth are, how they got onto the street and the inspiring motivation propelling them into a more secure life. This book was an enjoyable read; however, in terms of advancing the reader's knowledge of homelessness, it lacked the depth and complexity I would expect from an ongoing, multifaceted issue such as homelessness. I question if the interviews conducted were an effective means at giving the audience an intricate understanding of street youth. While analyzing the study, repetitiveness and surface level exploration became an ongoing drawback. Had researchers asked youth a series of questions that involved the different stakeholders with vested interests in the problem itself, including the economic, political and social sectors, conclusions could be drawn as to how society as a whole could avoid social capital and social exclusion in their entirety.

Sociologists and anthropologists will find that the qualitative interviews delve into the despairs this population faces, although at a surface and introductory level. However, the six-step model created for exiting homelessness could be modified and applied to other alienated populations around the world for greater understanding. These academic disciplines could address questions with the help of prominent stakeholders including government, healthcare and the economic sector to create lasting solutions to youth homelessness.