

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 151-155
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. Halifax: Fernwood.

Reviewed by: Marianna Pandeva, MacEwan University

Karabanow, Carson, and Clement's book, "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth" explains reasons why youth live on the street and reasons why youth choose to leave the street. The book itself follows a progressive outline with main topics being reasons why youth live on the street, what experiences youth face on the street, steps towards moving away from street life and ends with successful transitions and factors which contributed to a youth's success. What makes this book so interesting and unique is the way in which the authors incorporated quotes from youth who are living on the street or who have transitioned through. What is even more unique is that all statements included in this book contain blunt and honest opinions of these youth with no censorship to profanity and in a way reality. This gives the reader a true idea of what these youth are feeling and how blunt and serious their circumstances really were.

The first part of the book is focused around reasons why youth may leave their families/homes and end up on the street. Entering street life is described in this book as being composed of many different factors that could play a role in a youth's life. These factors could be related to personal trauma such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse experienced by youth in their homes or in their surroundings (such as school). Another major factor for entering street life that seems to be prevalent among youth in Canada is family dysfunction. Dysfunctional family life could be caused by drug misuse, violence, separation/divorce of parents and it could also be foster care and unstable location of home (such as moving too many times). The youth in

Book Reviews

the book describe stories of being sexually abused by their family/foster parents and being physically abused as well. Many youth interviewed in this book talk about how they chose to enter street life instead of calling themselves victims or saying that they had no choice. Along with this, many youth admit that their problems that they had with their families/guardians were caused by both parties. This perspective is one that is not often shared in literature and was found to be different since it changes the way the reader perceives these young individuals. Often times, youth are seen as kids who are egocentric however this types of rationalization allows for the reader to take their opinions more seriously.

Youth were then interviewed to describe how they knew that it was time for them to leave the streets. Many youth noted that they could pin-point a specific time/moment where it caused them to realize that they needed to move away from street life. A majority of these moments seemed to be in times of great stress and trauma. One youth in particular named Heidi described her experience and her breaking point:

I was in Montreal and a lot of really bad stuff happened I went insane, like my five days in Montreal, I stayed at the Bunker [youth service], walked around, [no] drugs, just weed and lost my mind It was either I'm going to let this guy take control ... go do smack and just die on Mont Royal [area in Montreal] or go home [to Halifax]. I went home and I think it's the best decision I've ever made. (p. 26)

The main reasons why youth exit the street mostly relate to trauma caused by drug use, prostitution, death and the justice system. In Heidi's case prostitution and drug use caused enough trauma that her breaking point made her reconsider her lifestyle. As with many youth, drug addiction and street life tend to go hand in hand which also means that deciding to leave the street would for the most part indicates that youth want to leave behind or slow down their drug

Book Reviews

use. Another two main reasons why youth leave the street is boredom and being worn down by that lifestyle. Although youth may indicate one specific reason why they might think about leaving the street, it is common that all factors indicated above are experienced and go hand in hand on a daily basis.

Motivation to leave is also crucial and it is addressed in this book by describing four main factors that could motivate a youth to try and move away from street life. The first factor is increased responsibility which is gender specific. For female youth, being pregnant or having a child is a major motivator. For a male youth, it is usually being in love or in a serious relationship. The second factor identified is sense of self. Many youth coming from unstable homes have low self-esteem and might even believe that street life is all that they can manage/deserve. Once youth start to realize that they have the potential to achieve more, this becomes a motivator to leave. The third factor is finding a passion which the authors indicate can give you a boost of self-esteem. The last factor is family support which in some cases is hard to establish for a youth who might come from an unstable home or from foster care.

Thinking about options and being motivated is progress, however according to the authors of this book, acting upon those ideas and being committed to that new way of living takes many factors in order for it to be successful. Some of the ideas the authors of this book indicate are addressing personal issues and mental health. Personal issues usually take a backseat to other more imminent dangers and problems youth face daily and so transitioning from street life to stable accommodations requires youth to address personal issues that normally get neglected. Although moving away from that lifestyle and establishing a foundation for stability is possible for youth to succeed with on their own, most youth require social help and self-help before they are successful in their transition from street life to stable independence. Many youth

Book Reviews

lack basic skills due to lack of education and proper parenting however if youth are taught skills in goal setting, responsibility and budgeting, youth are more likely to succeed once they make their transition.

The last part of the book addresses strategies that can further help youth once their transition is complete. The main focus of this part is not returning to their old lifestyle. In this book, returning to street life is in a way, a relapse. What the authors recommend is for youth to change how they view the street, disengage from negative peers who might still be on the street and also to utilize social service and how youth see social service when they might feel like they are in a crisis. In other words, self help and depending on pro-social support instead of drugs or prostituting is emphasized as being beneficial for reducing the risk of relapse (returning to street life).

The authors of this book emphasized important moments and problems youth face in different stages of street life and the transition from it. The points made and the suggestions provided are backed up by personal experiences of youth interviewed which add to the ability of the reader to understand why certain factors worked for one youth and not for the other. Due to the clear points and simplicity of arguments made, this book was intended for a wider variety of readers including teachers (junior high, high school who deal with troubled youth), social workers, individuals in the criminal justice field who may work with these individuals and also youth who may have questions or need suggestions on how to escape from street life. Recommendation for improvement would be to do a follow-up with youth mentioned in the book who were still living on the street in order to see if they had completed their transition or if they did not. Another aspect that should be further looked into is why some youth didn't get off the street. It is ideal to explain to youth or anyone interested in this topic about what helps youth

Book Reviews

successfully transition, however I believe it is equally crucial to analyze why some youth do not make it. Due to the broad spectrum of problems, risks and street lifestyles, this book serves as a general understanding of the issues and solutions for youth living on the street.