

Book Reviews

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

Reviewed by: Kim Wagner, MacEwan University

Jeff Karabanow, Alexa Carson, and Philip Clement's book, "Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth," is a collection of stories from 128 homeless Canadian youth and fifty service providers, combined with qualitative research findings from six Canadian cities pertaining to the many struggles associated with exiting street life. In their writing, Karabanow et al. incorporate the voices of individual street youth, as well as the front line workers that attempt to support them in their day-to-day struggles. Perspectives from the youth vary from appreciation and positive experiences with the social supports provided to them through shelters and support programs, to those that describe these very same resources as nothing more than additional obstacles in their path to getting off the streets. Rather than placing the blame solely on the youth themselves, Karabanow et al. take into account the roles played in these young people's lives by mental health issues, drug use, social assistance, housing, and employment services. By bringing this web of interrelated issues under examination, Karabanow et al. set out to demonstrate the factors involved in why many youth enter street life, as well as the motivation, challenges, supports, and barriers they must face and overcome if they have any chance at successfully becoming "ex-street youth" (p. 111).

Karabanow et al. describe youth aged sixteen to twenty-four as "the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in Canada" (p. 9) and explains that despite the popular belief that all of these kids are "punks with spiked hair and ... prostitutes," many of them are typical

Book Reviews

“regular [looking] people” (p. 10). Due to this highly heterogeneous population, the definition given by Karabanow et al. of the term “street youth” encompasses a large variety of individuals 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). The varying distinct backgrounds each of these young people come from plays a significant role in the experiences they have on the street, making each of their exiting processes equally as unique as they are. This transient group of the population, moving in constant search of supportive services and basic needs, are characterized as having to experience multiple attempts of obtaining housing and gaining employment before becoming successful in maintaining either for extended periods of time. Such attempts are expressed by a service provider in Halifax as “a process ... recognizing that there’s a cycle but every time in that cycle, hoping that the hoop of that cycle take a bit of a move forward instead of spinning backwards” (p. 11).

When examining what caused these youth to enter street life, many participants described abuse of the physical, sexual and/or emotional nature, as well as substance abuse inside the home, instability within the family, and an overall feeling of neglect from caregivers (p. 20). Karabanow et al. make the assertion from these admissions that it is no wonder street life becomes a place of safety in comparison for these troubled youth (p. 20). Another common important component brought forth by Karabanow et al. as a “push factor” for entering street life, as expressed by over half of the youth participants, included “problematic child welfare placements” (p. 21), each of which having lived in group homes or foster homes prior to making their decision to move to the streets.

Multiple factors came into play when youth were asked what made them decide to take the initial steps in removing themselves from street life and many were “able to trace their decisions to ... a particular moment, event or cause” (p. 25). Events that were especially traumatic, extreme feelings of boredom and fatigue, as well as both mental and physical burn out from their lives on the street particularly stood out in the responses given. Ultimately, these experiences and feelings lead many of these young people to a moment of mental clarity that “enough was enough!” (p. 30), deciding that something needed to be done to get them off the streets. Karabanow et al. make sure to point out throughout the book that just as unique and complex as each of these young individuals’ backgrounds and stories are, so are their decisions to and experiences of, exiting street life.

Karabanow et al. found that above all else support was essential in the motivation of these young individuals to want to change their lives and remove themselves from street culture and living, regardless the type (p. 49). Largely impacting the youth’s self-confidence was the awareness that “somebody cares for [them] and wants to see [them] succeed” (p. 51). This sense of self-worth is seen to be fundamental in their continued belief and success in bettering their lives by disengaging from street life.

Once a young person has made the decision to exit street life, they are faced with numerous barriers including those of a personal level such as neglected “emotional and spiritual needs” (p. 59), mental health and/or drug issues, as well as employment and housing limitations. Karabanow et al. found that youth provided with social assistance were “more likely to fall back into street life than those with secure employment” (p. 74) because the amount of money they were receiving simply was not enough to meet their basic needs, especially for those with children. Furthermore, the individuals that were able to obtain employment, had difficulty

finding a place to live that was both “affordable and adequate” (p. 75), with many facing treatment of discrimination from landlords denying them from renting or providing them with “poor quality accommodations at higher costs” (p. 77). Employment and education left many street youth in a “Catch-22” (p. 96) situation unable to obtain employment due to their lack of a high school diploma, but with no financial support backing them, studying to achieve a diploma becomes impossible.

For those unable to secure enough money to pay for their first and last month’s rent in an apartment of their own, Karabanow et al. noted options such as sharing a place with others, living in hotels, or receiving subsidized housing. However, each of these options pose risks including having to put trust into strangers when sharing a place, and living in hotels described as “depressing, dangerous and unsanitary, making street life a more enticing option to some” (p. 83). Despite the positive feelings youth expressed towards experiences with subsidized housing, the wait lists to receive this option can reach “up to five years in some regions” (p. 86), a timeframe too long for many of these homeless youth to wait.

Karabanow et al. also explored the ending of friendships with what many street youth consider their “surrogate families” that must occur in their transition away from the downtown core and associated street culture. The data of the study revealed, “a strong relationship between the length of time on the street and the level of difficulty involved in dissociating with friends and street culture” (p. 99). This disassociation from friendships coincided with an equally important separation from drugs, as the two were found to be “highly intertwined”. However, once accomplished, high levels of “achievement of personal satisfaction and inner pride” (p. 101) were reported, contributing exponentially to the success of those individuals disengagement from the street lifestyle.

For homeless youth to continue to be successful in exiting street life, Karabanow et al. acknowledge a “system comprised of a variety of agencies and programs to support [them]” (p. 117) is required. Data collected from multiple Canadian street youth program case studies noted the importance of support services in these youth’s lives. Included in these support services was an emphasis on a “continuum of care that begins with access to services aimed at fulfilling [street youths] basic needs” (p. 118), shelters and drop-in services that provide “food, shelter and safety,” medical services including “programs to reduce high-risk health behaviours,” intervention programs, as well as therapy and counselling services (p. 119). Feelings of comfort and safety within such organizations, as well as services “responsive to their needs” (pp. 119-120) were expressed as extremely important by the majority of youth interviewed.

The intention of Karabanow et al.’s qualitative research study and this resulting book was to give a voice to homeless youth, bringing to attention the many struggles and barriers they face in their day-to-day lives. By exploring the current support systems available to these young people, as well as the ones that should be, it enhances all readers understanding of how truly difficult it is for these young people to obtain housing, employment and income, while at the same time maintaining the courage and strength to better their lives.

Karabanow et al.’s intended readership, namely professors and students in the discipline of social sciences including political science and sociology, as well as children’s studies, will find this book useful. I believe it would also be of great benefit and a reference resource to individuals working in areas of public policy, social services, and welfare.

Though Karabanow et al.’s aim is to spread the voice of the street youth involved in their study, opening the eyes of readers to the harsh realities these young people must face when the right social supports are not always in place or accessible to them, I worry their voices will

Book Reviews

simply be heard but not listened to. For real positive change to occur, what these young people are saying needs to be taken seriously and recognized as a problem to be solved, not an issue that we continue to stand by and watch further deteriorate. This includes more money being invested and more resources provided in the way of support programs, as well as workers. Each of these homeless youth have a bright future ahead of them, they just need someone to help them find their light and keep it shining through all the darkness that may surround them. I found “Leaving the Streets: Stories of Canadian Youth” an informative yet touching book to read. It was easy to follow as it smoothly transitioned between facts revealed by the authors study and stories told by the youth and support workers themselves. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the topic of youth, street culture, addictions, or social sciences and/or services.