Why do Young People Become Homeless?

Young people who become homeless are depicted in the media in different ways. Sometimes they are portrayed as coming from families and homes that are characterized by violence. Other times they are portrayed as young adventurers, who leave home to explore the world and seek out the bright lights of the big city. Yet other times, they are seen as 'rebellious' teens who leave home for fairly frivolous reasons; as troublemakers tired of doing the dishes, who don't want to stay in school or get a job, but rather want to experiment with the 'bohemian' lifestyle. From this perspective, the streets are seen to 'pull' young people towards excitement and freedom. As Karabanow has convincingly argued, however, the perspective that sees becoming homeless as a “choice” is inaccurate, and “has been denigrated by many researchers and service providers as insensitive, inaccurate, and lacking real understanding of the individual.” (Karabanow, 2006).

While it may be true that some homeless youth leave home for fairly insignificant reasons, for most young people who become homeless, the reality is much different. Those merely attracted to the "excitement" of life on the streets do not last long; the harsh reality of sexual and physical assault, hunger and sickness is usually enough to dissuade even the most adventurous of teenagers. Thus, this romanticized notion of street youth is inadequate. This suggests the need to better understand what leads youth to the streets and what keeps them there.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

So, what do we really know about the causes of youth homelessness? Actually, we know quite a lot. The research on youth homelessness in Canada and the United States is pretty consistent. The main causes include:

- **Physical, Sexual and Emotional Abuse** - Most homeless youth come from homes characterized by high levels of physical, sexual and / or emotional abuse and neglect, compared to youth with homes. It is estimated that street youth are five times more likely to report being victims of sexual abuse as children. For young people who have experienced such abuse, there is an increased likelihood of negative developmental outcomes including low self-esteem, an impaired ability to form
affective and trusting relationships with adults, higher rates of depression and suicide attempts, running away or being kicked out of the home

• **Involvement with the child welfare system** – A considerable amount of research demonstrates the relationship between youth homelessness and previous involvement with the child welfare system. This includes foster care, group homes, interventions by the Children’s Aid Society. While involvement in the child welfare system doesn’t necessarily cause homelessness (in fact, many interventions may prevent homelessness), such involvement does reflect the degree to which young people come from troubled families. In addition, we do know that depending on the jurisdiction, many teenagers may lose the support of the child welfare system as they get older, or if they opt out.

• **Discrimination** – When young people experience racial discrimination, this limits their access to employment, their educational success, and their ability to access the services they need. All of these factors can lead to extreme poverty, and when combined with other challenges (in the home, with the legal system), can lead to homelessness.

• **Homophobia** - Research consistently shows that between 20-30 percent of homeless youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered, which suggests that homophobia is a leading cause of homelessness. In Canada, many young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered continue to experience discrimination in their homes, neighbourhoods, at school and in their communities. This discrimination, which is often coupled with violence, may make staying at home intolerable, and hence, many young people in this situation hit the streets.

• **Poverty** - Many young people who become homeless come from families living in poverty. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the families are not caring and supportive. However, we do know that living in poverty can have an impact on educational and health outcomes and on one’s ability to get a job. In addition, as teenagers get older, it may be more difficult for families to continue to support them financially. Many young people become homeless not because they are chased from home, but because their poverty means they can no longer stay there. Young people then look to live with friends, or go to new places to seek new economic opportunities. However, if the jobs are not there, they may become homeless.

When one considers the causes of youth homelessness, it is clear that for the vast majority, involvement in the street youth lifestyle is not about choice. It is also important to remember that for any particular young person who becomes homeless, the causes may be complex, and not reducable to a single event or issue. That is, poverty may be linked with discrimination. Other factors, such as a parent’s addictions, or a disruptive family event (like the death of a parent), may create additional problems. Any combination of factors can then contribute to problems at school, involvement in crime, or addictions, which may make life at home problematic.

In the end, young people become homeless for many complex reasons, but only rarely is it to seek excitement. This suggests that solutions to youth homelessness must address this complexity, and must also include a consideration of programs, services and supports that might prevent or reduce youth homelessness in the first place.