

**“A place to call my own”:
Sexual Exploitation in Northern BC**

**A Report on the Research Project
*In search of a place called Home:
Homelessness and Homecoming***

Submitted by the Research team

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To our knowledge, our research did not include young men who had experienced sexual exploitation. However, we want to state clearly that we believe it as damaging an experience for young men as it is for women, and to acknowledge that many young men in our community carry this burden in isolation. The experiences of young men who are sexually exploited are often diminished or dismissed under the rubric of the ‘search for sexual identity’. As our participants pointed out “a predator is a predator is a predator.” Sexual exploitation is no more about sexual identity or sexuality for young men than it is for young women; it is about children and youth using what ever tools they have to survive. Calling it anything else for young men is not only disrespectful, but profoundly damaging.

Abstract

“It’s just sickening. It’s all one to me. If you’re homeless you are going to be exploited. Whether it be sexually or some other way, like used as a mule to deliver drugs, you’re going to be exploited.” (SP # 04)

This research report presents the results of a year long participatory action research project. The intention of the project was to work with youth who had successfully exited sexual exploitation and who were ready to learn new skills and help make a difference to the friends they had left behind. This combination of employment preparedness and real life meaning meant the research was not only heartfelt and well grounded, but also secondary at times to the support and education of the young women who made up the research team.

The research was designed, carried out and the data collected and analysed by the peer researchers with the support and mentorship of two academically trained but community based researchers. The conduct of the research was guided by a Community Advisory Committee well established in the social support networks that youth in Prince George who are sexually exploited rely upon, in lieu of family.

This research process produced sets of rich data from two sets of key informants: sexually exploited youth and the service providers who work with them. From their information we have been able to develop a template for understanding the profile of sexually exploited youth in a northern British Columbia community, including the “catchment area” of the region surrounding it. This work has implications for understanding sexual exploitation outside of the major urban centres of Canadian cities. Clearly, geography, ethnicity and informal sexual exploitation are key determinants in the formalized sexual exploitation of our youth.

Select Literature Review

Given the lack of national data on homelessness or systematic measurement across the country, it is not possible to establish the level of homelessness among young women (or other sub-groups) in Canada. However, analyses of shelter use data in Toronto showed that by the late 1990s, youth and families were the fastest growing groups of homeless (Springer et al. 1998).¹

There is widespread consensus that youth homeless is a significant and growing problem in Canada, as elsewhere and there is a growing body of literature on youth homelessness. (see Appendix A for a select bibliography.)

There is however, little consensus of the exact nature of the factors causing homeless among youth or any accurate numbers that would describe the extent and severity of the problem. As the Canadian Government's web site for youth states: "Homelessness is a visible problem in Canada. However, to date, no reliable method for counting the number of people who are homeless can be identified, thus Canada does not have any accurate national statistics."² Counting shelter use, for example, is "considered a "useful tool for estimating the number of homeless" however, as many of 75% of homeless youth in Toronto do not access the shelters.³ Yet, according to Covenant House, on any given night, approximately 33,000 Canadians are homeless, of which about 8,000 to 11,000—nearly one third—are youth. Most studies show that over 50 per cent of homeless people are under the age of 25.⁴ The invisibility of homeless youth is also a gender issue as the majority of runaways are female.⁵ Further, much of the research does not situate youth homelessness within the context of the societal factors (or what we would call the social and cultural indicators) surrounding homeless youth.

A further limitation to much of the research has been the absence of the voices of young homeless people themselves, particularly regarding the potential solutions or recommendations for addressing the problem.

While researchers may differ on definitions of homelessness, and tend to study particular factors affecting youth homelessness in isolation from each other and from the larger

¹ *On Her Own: Young Women and Homelessness in Canada*, accessed at http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/pubspr/0662318986/200203_0662318986_8_e.html

² Services Canada, "Homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless" *youth.gc.ca*, found at: <http://www.youth.gc.ca/yoaux.jsp?contentpageid=652&lang=en&flash=1&ta=1>

³ See, Hwang, "Homelessness and health" *CMAJ*, January 23, 2001; 164 (2)

⁴ Covenant house stats (www.covenanthouse.on.ca/web/facts_and_stats.html) quoted in Youth and Homelessness, *Shared Learnings, Raising the Roof News Bulletin*, Oct 2005, found at: http://www.sharedlearnings.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=News.FA_dsp_news&ym=2005-10#199

⁵ Novac et al report that the limited research that does exist indicates that young women make up a third to a half of the homeless youth population in Canada. See: Janet le Camp, *Adolescent Women's perspectives of Homelessness in the Canadian North*, MA thesis, forthcoming.

contextual issues of homeless youth, the value of understanding youth homelessness from the perspective of youth has been overlooked.

Some research has addressed the larger contextual issues, some research has included youth voices and some research has done both. It is with this last body of research work that this literature review is primarily concerned.

Contextual issues: Gender, abuse and poverty

There is a gendered experience to sexual exploitation.

Thousands of children run away from home each year in Canada. In 1995, for example, 75% of the 56,749 missing children who were reported to the police were runaways. Police departments say that, although 90% of these runaway children return home within 60 days of leaving, the others never go back. Alarming as these figures are, runaways account for only a portion of the homeless youth population, which also includes young people living in shelters with their mother or both parents. The 1987 CCSD survey found that 11.5% of the people in the shelters documented were under the age of 16. Street or homeless youth tend to range in age between 12 and 24, the girls being generally younger and the boys older. Canadian Government Report on Homelessness

The violence and sexual abuse perpetrated on girls and young women in the home, including informal sexual exploitation, is a major factor in their homelessness:

Violence against girls and young women plays a significant role in the dynamics of their homelessness. While most homeless youth have histories of family instability, conflict and abuse, more young women than young men have experienced sexual and physical abuse within their families. Young women who have been abused, especially sexually abused, are more vulnerable to re-victimization. There is evidence of a cycle of child abuse, pregnancy and homelessness among young women.⁶

This finding has been confirmed in other studies:

Mistreatment is often cited as a factor in youth homelessness. A number of studies have confirmed that many homeless young people have been victims of sexual, physical or psychological abuse. A 1992 study by social service agencies in the Ottawa-Carleton region indicated that 75% of the street children interviewed had left home because of sexual assaults or physical and/or psycho-emotional abuse.⁷

⁶ *On Her Own: Young Women and Homelessness in Canada,*

⁷ *Canadian Government Report on Homelessness*

The responses that youth “choose”, of particular interest is taking to the streets, is often in response to the conditions they experience at home. However most researchers see this choice as no choice:

However, living on the street is no protection; although street life is a violent environment for anyone, it is even more violent for homeless young people and women, and is often accompanied by multiple risks.⁸

Unfortunately, the options for youth escaping abuse and violence are limited:

Throughout the country, homeless youth have the same general characteristics: exposure to physical violence, mental health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual abuse and conflicts with the law. They are often isolated with no family ties and few friends. Many have been raised in foster homes, have a lack of education and skills, and suffer from poor physical health. While the majority of homeless youth are male, the number of young women who are homeless is growing. Homelessness is a significant problem among Aboriginal youth. ...[G]ay and lesbian youth are also at risk of ending up on the street because their families often reject them. Like Aboriginal youth, they avoid using some of the shelters because they fear discrimination. In some cities, youth avoid adult shelters, feeling unsafe around adults with behavioural or mental health problems.⁹

While there is agreement on the nature of the precipitating factors, the realities of children’s lives in homes that have failed them, the preference young people see for the street is perceived as a negative response. However, one study that did listen to the voices of youth was the pilot study to investigate the link between the child welfare system and subsequent homelessness. The unanimity of views regarding the significance of at least one “important person” in the lives of youth was highlighted and the researchers noted that not one of the 35 youth interviewed identified a biological parent as that important person. They also recognized the failing role of the system in building the capacity of youth to transition from care into independence rather than homelessness:

It is clear from the study that while some youth have stabilised their lives; independence at 18 or even 21 is premature. The youth interviewed for this study who left care at an earlier age were less successful in avoiding homelessness than those who left later. That does not suggest that youth, including those who are "successful", don't struggle. They struggle with finances, some having to delay studies because they don't have the means or others strive to combine school and work. Affordable housing is clearly an element of this struggle. Furthermore, it would appear that youth with difficult backgrounds may need to begin to come to terms with their pasts at some point in their lives, perhaps when they are older

⁸ Canadian Government Report on Homelessness.

⁹ Environmental Scan on Youth Homelessness Research Highlights: Socio-Economic Series 86 (July 2001) Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

and capable of dealing with this. However, the means to undertake this work with psychological support, long after they have become "emancipated" does not seem to be available.¹⁰

By embarking upon this research, we hope to begin to understand more clearly the structural and systemic issues in our community that place youth at risk and contribute to their experiences of homelessness. Additionally, we hope this research will bring forward new information that will begin to illuminate the needs of youth experiencing homelessness and how these experiences relate to sexual exploitation. It is through sharing this information that we hope to move towards more effective responses as well as innovative approaches incorporating emerging promising practices and a comprehensive understanding of how these issues shape our community.

¹⁰ Pilot Study: The Child Welfare System and Homelessness among Canadian Youth. This research was funded by the National Homelessness Initiative and accessed at: http://www.homelessness.gc.ca/research/projects/rp04/execsum2_e.asp

Methodology

Let's face it. Researchers aren't much better than the johns. We show up, and offer an honorarium; only in this case we take your information not your body, for our own purposes. We can't do that. We have to be different. That's why this is taking so long. That's why we haven't got to the research yet. That's why their needs have to come first. That's why your instinct to cancel the meeting and have a "time out" was absolutely the right thing to do. Lead investigator to research coordinator who had made a judgement call, cancelled a research meeting and substituted a chocolate and conversation session instead, to help members of the group debrief triggering episodes. September 2005

Research questions

Given the link we believed existed in our community between homelessness and sexual exploitation, like the research agenda for the National Homelessness Initiative itself,¹¹ we wanted to explore the differences in structural/systemic issues that contribute to sexual exploitation and homelessness and what changes could lead to the long term reduction and prevention of homelessness in communities that do not have the same resources and options available as the larger urban centres. In particular, we needed to be able to describe the population of homeless youth in a northern context, and more specifically to understand the possible facilitating role that homelessness played in precipitating their entry into sexual exploitation. We also hoped to be able to identify what youth saw as needed to aid them in exiting and preventing other youth from falling into homelessness and sexual exploitation in the long term.

Research process

Our community based research approach adopted an activist stance: that is, the research had to produce positive outcomes as a result of its presence in the community. Further, given the sensitive and delicate nature of the subject area and the complex and troubled past of the "research subjects", the primary concern of the researchers was to ensure that we did NOT replicate, in any way, the exploitation that the young people had experienced. Thus, the research was guided by an advisory committee with strong grounding in the community and governed by the youth who were nominated but ultimately self selected as the peer researcher team. This group meet at least twice a week, to learn how to develop relationships, how to communicate effectively, resolve conflict in healthy ways and to participate in training workshops on research tools and techniques.

The training included supporting the youth in actually designing the research. The group learnt about focus groups surveys and interviews and decided on interviews and focus

¹¹ See: Evaluation of the National Homelessness Initiative: Implementation and Early Outcomes of the HRDC-based Components, March 2003

groups as most effective for the experiential youth who would be approached to participate. They designed the code of ethics, the schedule of questions and the protocols for the conduct of the research interviews and focus groups. They decided that they did not want to do the focus groups alone; there were always at least two of them present. Further, they decided they did not want to do the interviews with experiential youth alone; in these situations, one of the two community-based researchers was present.

All the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, stripped of identifying characteristics and collated.

Research Activity	Completed
Research Team Meetings	73 +
Researcher Debriefing	38 +
Focus Group – Experiential youth	4
Focus Group – Service provider	3
Interviews – Experiential youth	6
Interviews – Service provider	9

Finally, several analysis sessions were held. This consisted of the team sitting together and reading the transcripts for themes. The themes, when agreed upon were written on the top of poster boards and hung up around the room. The team then returned to the transcripts and began cutting out from the transcripts the stories events and statements that they considered significant, meaningful or important, and using repositionable glue, stuck the extract to the appropriate theme board.

Once this was complete the group then read the theme posters. Because of the repositionable glue it was possible to relocate quotes if the team felt it necessary. Finally, the group were able to stand back and “shuffle” the theme poster boards to make sense of the theme sets.

The group then began the process of writing the report together. This was most important to the team because most research, even when it does include the voices of youth does not make the space for the youth to be involved in the analysis stage. Our team actually leant the power of collectively “making meaning” from the large quantity of data we had gathered.

The final report was returned to the group for verification and review and a plan for the distribution of the report was designed. Thus, the primary and unique characteristic of

this research methodology was the involvement of the team, supported and trained at every stage of the research project.

Background and Context

I was scared shitless I was really scared and I didn't know what to do. They were mentoring me I guess you could say, but it was really really hard because I was embarrassed and I felt stupid and cars were going by looking at me and I wanted to hide. I didn't want to be so naked. Like that's how I felt, totally exposed and vulnerable. The first date that I had, or a trick we would call them, it was two guys that picked me up and they wanted me to give them a blow job and I didn't even know what a blow job was. All my years of being promiscuous, I didn't know. I mean girls would talk about it all the time but nobody would say what it was. And then with the guys - I mean I was drunk, I couldn't remember the next day - you just have sex with them, you just lay there and let them fuck you right? So anyways so after this date, they were like "Oh my god, that was the best blow job I've ever had" and I was, I can't believe it because it was, the whole time it was like "oh my god, they're going to get mad, I'm not doing it right" but after that I was like "oooooh I was made for this" and I felt because they were praising me and telling me how good I was, I felt that I could do this, this could work for me and then after that I had the power and I was beautiful and men wanted me and that's what it was all about. I felt on top of the world. I felt like I belonged. (Exp Youth Interview # 05)

We have learned there are many forms of exploitation for youth. In northern communities we see many of them. In this study we focus primarily on sexual exploitation. Due to the nature of our communities much of this is invisible, particularly the sexual exploitation of young men and boys. The increasing intrusion of organized crime and the drug trade also contributes to the secrecy and silence surrounding what has been identified by others as a "dirty little secret."¹²

Prince George is often spoken of as British Columbia's Northern capital. The population of the city is approximately 75-80,000 people and it is largely resource based. It is said that this city is on the grounds of an area long considered to be a gathering place for the Carrier and other Aboriginal peoples of Northern BC and Northern Alberta.

¹² "A dirty little secret" was the title of a *Vancouver Sun* article on the investigation of misconduct of two RCMP officers for "allegedly having sex with under age girls." *Vancouver Sun*, May 28th, 2005, p. B5.



Source: Government of British Columbia: First Nations and Tribal Councils in the Treaty process. Found at:
http://www.gov.bc.ca/tno/negotiation/First_Nations_in_the_process/Carrier_Sekani_Tribal_Council.htm

Situated along Highway 16 West, also known as the *Highway of Tears* based on the numerous women who have gone missing or who have been murdered along this highway that reaches from Edmonton Alberta to the northwest coast and the city of Prince Rupert, Prince George has a reputation of being a rough town that is not very progressive or socially conscious. As the only urban centre in the North, many people who come to Prince George are shocked at the visible poverty, substance abuse issues and homeless people in the downtown core.

Although not visible at first glance, those living and working in Prince George are well aware of the strong current of social justice that unites many of the local social service agencies, municipal leaders, and advocacy groups. Communities Against Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CASEY) Prince George is a community action team that has been working to build collaborative responses to sexual exploitation since 1997. Our purpose is to develop locally and regionally based strategies to address the sexual exploitation of children and youth as well as the emergent issues they face as a specific population. CASEY works collaboratively to develop and promote coordinated integrated early intervention services and resources for youth and children who are actively exploited or who are at risk of becoming sexually exploited. Our mandate is to create community awareness, to implement activities that will increase understanding within the community regarding the issue of sexual exploitation and to build community- based and region wide proactive responses. CASEY membership currently includes over 20 local agencies

representing key areas of direct service delivery for at risk youth, policy development, law enforcement, research, social justice, and experiential youth.

CASEY Prince George is housed at the Central Interior Native Health Society (CINHS) clinic which is a Primary Health Care clinic located in the downtown core. CINHS provides primary healthcare services to vulnerable populations in our community with a particular focus on Aboriginal people.

For the past 4 years CASEY has undertaken various levels of research ranging from community consultations to large scale projects such as this one. The need to examine the role of homelessness in the creation of risk for children and youth in our community came out of anecdotal accounts of children and youth engaging in survival sex to meet their needs for shelter and accounts of children and youth coming into Prince George from outlying communities searching for something better.

Although we are aware of male exploitation, it does not yet have a visible, street level presence in our community. Without discounting the seriousness of male exploitation, our community consistently identifies young Aboriginal women as the group facing the greatest risk. As such, we are well aware of the need for the utmost consideration for historical, cultural, and both societal and systemic factors and how they shape how sexual exploitation looks in our community.

Findings

“I keep getting this image when I talk about the social changes, and thinking about people in positions in power supporting strategies to assist sexually exploited and homeless youth, and these very same politicians are the ones doing the exploiting, I have a really hard time with that” (SP # 01)

A place of beginning

When we began this project we were interested in the role of homelessness as a pathway to the sexual exploitation of youth. We hypothesised that young people were trading their bodies for shelter. What we were not prepared for was how the young people themselves define home and homelessness. In the way they define it, it becomes something they are prepared to sell their soul, spirits and bodies to find. Within this understanding sexual exploitation becomes, for the young people concerned, not a place of vulnerability or victimization but a place of empowerment that allows them to find what they are looking for: a sense of belonging and community that they have never known or experienced. Within this context, the skills they develop to survive keep them alive and connected to the supports they have found on the streets. However, these same skills also become barriers to exiting.

At the same time that we heard stories about the sense of empowerment experienced by the youth, we also heard that long term involvement led from empowerment into entrapment: drug addiction, escalation of violence, increased disconnection, and loss of freedom:

I would never have got addicted to the heroin even though I did it all the time, I would never, my body never got addicted to it for about a year it took so which is unusual because usually you do it three days in a row and you're hooked but I'd do it for three days in a row then I wouldn't do it for three then I would do it for a week in a row and then I wouldn't do it for week. It was so sporadic right, my body never got hooked on the heroin for about a year then one day I woke up and I felt really shitty and I didn't know what was going on and then I knew. “Oh my god, I'm heroin sick. This is what heroin sick feels like” and then after that it was like - it wasn't the same because then I had to be out there. That's when things started just falling apart and I really started fucking because then I didn't really have any power, even though I needed the crack. I mean in my mind I could do whatever I wanted to do, I could sleep in, I didn't have to get up and go to work only when I wanted it right (Exp youth- interview # 05)

Life for young people involved now includes poverty, oppression, addiction and ill-health, all of which combine to ensure the young people become entrenched. The

survival skills that promised so much become an impediment to exiting: The young people and the service providers who work with them see this very clearly:

“It’s those old survival skills, those old coping mechanisms, they get in the way. Overcoming the addiction and the lifestyle, requires a whole different level...”(SP-interview #05)

Defining home and homelessness

“Homelessness is when your parents don’t want you anymore.” (Exp Youth- focus group # 01)

Our views of homelessness changed at the very beginning of the research. Defining homelessness was always the question we began with, allowing young people to tell us how they defined these key issues. We learned it is more than “houselessness;” as we heard from one young woman in our very first focus group: *“homelessness is more than houselessness. Home is a place where someone worries about you when you don’t come home at night, and they miss you when you are not there.” (Exp Youth Focus Group #02)*

We found that this question provoked immediate and profound responses. In some cases, the participants would not even let the speaker finish the question before they began responding. In every case, the responses were heartbreaking: *“homelessness is when there is nowhere safe to live.” (Exp Youth- focus group # 03)*

Looking into other people’s homes and seeing the families. Well, not actually looking into the windows, but being at friends’ houses where there was stability and there was love and you could feel it, because the brothers and sisters would hug each other and tell each other that they love them. It was that sort of closeness in the family. My family didn’t have that, when we were out with people we would have this façade that everything is ok. (ExpYouth- interview # 04)

For some youth, securing a home means involving the Ministry and the youth do not want the Ministry involved or their parents exposed, even when they have fled abuse and neglect. So homelessness becomes a strategy that protects not only themselves but their family.

“It is so profound, that despite the amount of abuse they have suffered, the youth do not want anything to happen to their families. And no matter how badly their family treats them, they keep hoping.” Researcher observations

Case study #1

when youth become homeless and when they’re feeling a sense of not belonging, of isolation, not being understood, not being listened to, and on a larger level I mean we can talk about family situations and neglect, abuse, abandonment, and we can talk about uh, poverty, all those things which for me are more symptoms as apposed to what’s really going on and what’s not being met, so, I think youth are looking for alternatives and that’s why they end up being homeless and then are not supported or mentored or loved or guided or any of those things and they also I think homeless doesn’t mean being necessary with out connection and without family, that quite frequently its been my experience that it a move to find other family an other way of belonging sometimes its to make a statement too, to society about our lack of awareness and understanding and care and compassion and all those things. (SP- interview # 01)

In some cases, the structures that are supposed to address homelessness for youth, actually create more risk for them. Putting youth into shelters or group homes with youth who are already being sexually exploited, or into foster homes where the abuse of home is replicated does not constitute an answer to homelessness. Unintentionally, the youth are now exposed to, and acquire, sets of coping skills that put them at risk and ensure that victimization continues. Many youth still felt lost and disconnected even when sheltered:

“I still felt really homeless at the shelter, even though I had a bed of my own and a fridge...” (Exp Youth- interview # 05)

“Just look at this place here. You’ve got six different kids with all different issues and it all just gets mixed together. They [the staff] don’t know about how to work specifically with what I have been through.” (Exp Youth- Focus Group # 01)

If you’re the ministry of ward and if all you know that you’re quote “family” is your social worker and your group home worker and at the age of nineteen it’s all gone that’s one huge huge consequence. I see it destroy youth when they been cut off at the age of nineteen like you know the grief and loss it just [gets] magnified (SP- interview # 08)

In some cases the shelters that have become “home” have policies that send the youth elsewhere.

I think probably that the majority of the youth that we see become homeless usually because of their home situation whether it’s their biological parents or their foster parents, ministry, their home environment or family of origin becomes unsafe for them. And they start a process of going into other homes that are probably not so much their biological family maybe ministry care. And different kinds of housing arrangements that are whether not safe or not for that kid meeting their needs as they see it at the time. So I think by being not safe I think probably we’re talking about substance abuse, addictions you know, care providers that have you know drug and alcohol addictions, violence. I think sexual violence is a big part but I think physical violence is pretty big as well. Or parents that are unstable enough that they are actually losing their homes because they aren’t keeping up on rent or whatever. And the parent becomes so transient that the child just kind of gets left behind. I think a lot of kids that we see or youth that we see have a long involvement in the ministry. And all kinds of disrupted living situations I don’t know if the ministry is still doing it, but a lot of times, historically what they have done is place children in multiple families where they can’t connect and they don’t have the opportunity to form lasting, bonding relationships, even with foster parents that would have been safe and appropriate for them, So I think ministry has a place in their as well.(SP- interview # 03)

The youth were very clear on what home meant to them:

I never really, like in those times, I never felt sorry for myself. Or thought that it was as bad as it could have been, I never thought it was that bad. I guess that’s

another survival skill, the rationalization and justification. “ It’s not that bad, I’m eating, I have a roof over my head.” Lowering it to make it not that bad, is that rationalization? [Minimizing?] Yeah minimizing....I always had a roof over my head, but it wasn’t home. I remember sitting in my room and having that hope for something more, and for that home and for that love and to have that family and everything of my own. That was something that I always dreamed about, having a home and making it mine. (Exp youth- interview # 04)

[What would it mean] like for me to have a home? A place that I can call my own, pay rent every month, have a bedroom set up for my kids (low volume, missed) a place where friends and family can come and I am on my own (Exp youth- interview # 06)

While there are many practical losses that youth identified: “no place to call your own” “no bed, no place to sleep” “couch surfing” “no safe place”, the underlying issues that emerged ran much deeper and spoke to histories of abuse and neglect and a search for safety and belonging. Experiences of the past, of violation and betrayal are clearly implicit in some young women’s definitions of home:

I feel, really, I can only handle people in my house for a certain amount of time and then they have to go because I need my place to be my place. So it will be a place where I feel safe; where I have control; I have authority. A place where I can do whatever I want and a place that’s safe for my child. A place where I can feel comfortable and it’s where I can retreat and lay in my little cocoon and then not to worry about anybody invading that space unless I invite them. (Exp youth- interview # 05)

Home is about “sanctuary and a sense of belonging. (Exp youth- Focus group # 01)

One intended outcome of this research was the “profile” of the northern exploited youth. We found that the profile of the sexually exploited youth is, in fact, a template for multiple forms of youth exploitation and that it was in the past histories of abuse that the seeds of sexual exploitation could be found.

Histories of Abuse

“It’s just the way it was.” (Exp youth- interview # 04)

Almost every youth we spoke to shared stories of abuse and neglect, but they did not always correlate these situations to the

Case Study #3

Did I feel I had a choice? No, I never had any choice. It didn’t matter what I did, I knew I would be abused.... I could choose between one family where I would get beat all the time or another where I would be sexually abused. I knew that if I went to the home where I would be sexually abused at least I would get drugs out of it. At least that way I could deal with the pain. So I chose the drugs. (Exp youth- interview #04)

circumstances of homelessness and sexual exploitation. For some youth, there was an understanding that this was “normal.” Service providers clearly saw the path into addictions, sexual exploitation and violence, as originating in the home. Although the youth did articulate this easily, once their stories were explored it became clear that their journey into homelessness and exploitation began early on.

It became clear that a major factor was the different forms that abuse had taken in the lives of young people. We found that the commonalities and vulnerabilities were found in personal, familial and cultural histories. These vulnerabilities culminate in profound risk for multiple forms of exploitation. Most of the young people caught in up in sexual exploitation are of Aboriginal ancestry. A particular form of abuse that puts Aboriginal youth at increased risk are the legacies of colonization:

...[speaking of commonalities creating risk] a lot of it was some sort of abuse, physical/sexual abuse to a youth while they're young, or a family breakdown, some poverty issues, past oppression issues. If we're dealing with First Nations people, I have to go back to the multi-generational effects of the residential school system, the Indian act, racism, and things like that. Racism is a big one for First Nations people because there's structural racism right through our whole system and within this country. So youth face that everyday, as do their parents. Internalized racism, racism of every flavour, causes a lot of family breakdowns and makes the youth leave their communities. Some of the patterns I've seen most of the youth are involved in unhealthy support systems, like drugs, drug trafficking, prostitution. Many of the youth I've seen end up going to the Prince George Youth Containment Center, out, then back in there, back out here, so there's a, a pattern in there quite a bit... a lot of the youth are referred to as high risk, because there are so many risk factors, for their safety. (SP- interview #02)

Case Study #04

I just thought that if I said that I lied to the police then everything would be normal and that I would go back home and we would just forget about everything and just move on because I do remember happy times when I was a kid -like at Christmas and holidays. We went camping almost every weekend. We had a cabin on a lake you know, we'd always do things together as a family and as long I had my mom and my sister right there, most of the time I was ok, he wouldn't touch me right except for at home, my mom would do the dishes in the kitchen and the living room is right beside the kitchen and if I would be on the couch with him and he would be doing whatever right? I couldn't say anything but I remember feeling just like, oh my god, my mom is going to walk in here and I'm going to get in trouble. But other times when we went camping and stuff we were just to close that nothing could happen and then I felt comfortable and safe ...I thought [if I said I lied] things would be normal again and go back to that way but when I think of it now, I was still thinking like a child and I was 16. I should have been a little bit more emotionally developed then where I was. (Exp youth- interview # 05)

While we heard about common experiences and situations that created risk for youth to become homeless and sexually exploited, at the same time, the young people themselves pointed out that “It can happen to anybody no matter where you come from. I'm a mom, I'm a sister, I'm an auntie, and I'm a daughter.” (Exp youth- interview# 06)

The attempt to end the abuse within the home oftentimes was the catalyst that precipitated homelessness. For many youth then, the reality of abuse within the home was so inescapable that sexual exploitation on the streets became preferable. It became something they could “choose” and as , youth said over and over “it was going to happen anyway, so you might as well get paid for it.” The youth came to understand that life was about abuse and exploitation that you could not get away from. The question for them became how to control it, and how to survive it.

The thing that really stands out for me is that [these kids] from a very young age learned the pay offs of sex. Even though [they were] not wanting or liking the sexual abuse that was happening they saw ways that they benefited. Whether they were treated differently or getting presents, its not that they liked it or wanted it, because of the shame and embarrassment, but they learned that at a very young age. For some of those women that was a way of getting their power back. Some of them end up in the sex trade because they recognize what they got out of it. (SP- interview # 06)

Exploitation as a place of empowerment.

“If it didn’t work, they wouldn’t do it.”

In listening to the stories of youth it was clear that the majority of them have a history of trauma, and many of them have been exploited in many ways with sexual exploitation as only a piece of that. Being sexually exploited and engaged in survival sex, contradictorily, becomes a place of freedom and control. They learn to use the tools they have been trained to use. In deciding to leave the abuse, they now exercise what they see a power and a choice.

... you know I had been selling my body for years already. First to my step-dad then to you know any guy who would take me. That this, like I was finally doing it because I wanted to do it and I was getting something out of it even though it might not have been always good ‘cause I mean who wants to have some old fricking 50 year old man touching you right? But at least if it was happening, it was because I was allowing it to happen, I had control. (Exp youth-interview # 05)

Case study #05

I mean these men are picking me up and they’re picking me, you know you think your special, you have what they want you know like, it makes you feel good especially if you have a low self esteem “Hey he picked me, He likes me” you know so like with women with low self-esteem like most of have, so. Intr: Do you think that that’s part of the going back, part of the returning? It’s appealing in the way that you can be sexy you know this man picked you (low volume, missed) you may weigh 250 pounds but “He still picked me” (Exp youth-interview # 06)

Within the research team, we had fierce discussions about the term “Sexually Exploited.” The youth themselves reject this term, and the sense of victimization that went along with it. Others on the team saw the “choice and power” youth were exercising as illusory. It took some time to come to an understanding how sexual exploitation could be a place of empowerment. That it was, in fact, about youth, exercising what control and power they had given the context within which lived. And as one youth said: *“If you are looking for*

an escape, anything is better. And it makes you feel like someone cares about you” (Exp youth- Focus group # 01). It was from these discussions we adopted the term “survival sex.”

“The kids I see have remarkable survival skills, they may be harmful but they want to survive.” (SP- interview # 04)

Survival Skills

While addictions and survival sex go hand in hand, we did hear stories of entry into sexual exploitation that were precipitated by other reasons: *“I was fourteen and I had to feed my little brother.” (Exp youth- focus group #03)*

Survival skills may not be what we immediately see when we see the youth out on the streets. But the sex work is just one of a range of skills. Youth become very adept at figuring out how to use their limited resources to produce the maximum results.

I remember just working so I could get a hotel room. Sometimes it was just so cold out and you don't want to go do this and you don't know whether you're going to make enough money. Me and some girls here go half on a hotel room so that we have somewhere to go and so we don't to have to go to a John's, or to their place either. It could be dangerous there too. At least in a hotel room there's people around and she could wait outside or whatever and I think it goes hand in hand because if you need to eat too and if you have a drug addiction you need to paid for your drugs too and a place to stay. (Exp youth- interview # 02)

Survival skills? You know there's something that I dislike about that [term]. I don't know why - it has a negative connotation because what I see is an incredible resiliency and adaptability and resourcefulness in the youth that I have known over the years and those to me are such amazing skills to have; independency and interdependency... There's manoeuvrability and also an awareness and sensitivity which I think is, I mean they're all admirable. Those are probably the main skills that I think of when I think of homeless youth. And there's probably a level of disassociation that occurs, there's quite frequently self medication, and I speak of those as skills to separate from the pain, the hurt, the discomfort, on whatever level those things are taking place because there's a lot of elements that could be involved with

Case study #6

I think about this little girl that I particularly carry with me. She was trying to stay really straight and safe by staying with friends' parents, at their homes but it wasn't working because the parents didn't want to get involved. More and more she was being forced to either go back and live in a drug dealing house where her mother was a heroin addict or go out onto the street. I would think that is the pattern with most of them. They can't go back home. If they do they are going to be exploited without any kind of say in it. (SP- interview # 04)

homelessness. Feeling rejection, to feeling hunger, to feeling compromised, to feeling both power and powerlessness, as well as capable and incapable. (SP-interview # 01)

In some cases, the addiction and the capacity to buy drugs is a place of power and helps provide the ability to survive on the streets without a home or to be able to buy temporary sanctuary:

I couldn't give up the dope (low volume, missed) I was too scared to be sick (low volume, missed) and I didn't know anything about detox really at the time I didn't really know that there was any shelters or there was any places that I could go, I didn't know anything. I didn't know where anything was except for where I sold drugs and that's what I did. I first started working the street when I was here ... I would have to sell drugs to support my habit. I kept surviving. The amount of dope I was doing, I didn't have to sleep so I didn't have to worry about finding a place to stay every night because I would stay out and sell drugs all night long and go on for four or five days. And then I would have a friend's house to stay at because if I had dope, they'd let me stay there because they knew I would give the dope to stay there. (Exp youth- interview # 01)

Oh I thought I belonged when I had money and dope. You know I thought I was the number one person. I thought everybody was my friend, you know and, once the money's gone and the dopes gone, you're gone. Didn't take long to have new friends again though once you had money. (Exp youth- interview # 03)

The Ministry actually plays a role in some youth strategies. For example, when youth elect to be taken into care. In this case, the youth chooses what the ministry can offer:

Well, we'd just get in contact with our social workers and go back into a group home when we were done our running around. We would just go back to the home and then when we wanted to take off again, we would. When I say "we" it was usually me and a girlfriend, you know some people or friends that I had made at the group home. (Exp youth- interview # 06)

In some cases Ministry policies precipitate youth into homelessness and the subsequent use of survival skills:

Youth are in care till they are 19. After that they have to fend for themselves and most don't know where to go or what to do after that so they turn to the streets. (Exp youth- Focus group # 04)

Youth were very candid about the other skills they used to survive. The list generated through the research included: thinking for the moment, doing whatever it is that gets

through, selling your stuff and other people's stuff, stealing, deception, ruthlessness, manipulation and sex.

The selling of one's self is seen as an attraction:
"You see other sex workers and they have money and nice clothes. You think you could have that." This is where the damage of the past histories plays out; your body never belonged to you and you never had any say in what happened to it, you have been conditioned to view both your body and your sexuality as a tool. Another legacy of the abuse is the lack of value you ascribe to your own self; the nice clothes have more value than your own skin.

It is most important to understand that in sexual exploitation the difference becomes who is exercising the tool: the other or you. The youth are often seen as deceptive, manipulative and violent when they are simply exercising the only skills they own to protect themselves and acquire what they need to survive.

This can best be exemplified by the words of a former sexually exploited youth shared during an earlier CASEY project; "nobody ever talks about how kids are using because they are hungry. When I was high I didn't feel hunger pains. I knew what to do with \$20 to buy drugs, but I didn't know what to do with \$20 to buy food."¹³

In working with experiential youth to conduct this research what became evident was that what we see as risky behaviour or risk behaviour, i.e. drug use, addiction, sexual exploitation, was a place of familiarity for them. Vulnerability in the past had always been a threat and a source of danger and fear. Having relationships, having and showing vulnerability, for them, was the real risk.¹⁴

Honestly what I thought was like ok so xxx is going to do this interview with me and I'm going to tell her my life and she is going to turn around and think "She is just fucked up" and that you just wouldn't understand what I've been through, what I've done... . [but] you are not pressuring me to tell you what (low volume, missed) and I'm just glad (low volume, missed) and just know that you're not looking at me where as I am being judged ... I just know that, I knew you would accept it ... I thought at first, I thought ok I don't know how xxx is going to look at me after this and so that's probably why I didn't want to do it at first... (Exp youth- interview # 01)

Case Study #2 Survival Skills Manipulation

Disassociation, I go to self harming, and using that as an escape, so that I don't have to feel the feelings and stuff that was going on at home.

Emotional detachment, even of friends, anyone who was around. I always put on a façade so no one could get close.

Drugs and alcohol, I used that so people would visit me. I would have parties so that people would be over at my house. I would just have people around and I would have drugs so that people would use with me.

Sex was another one, to feel something and looking for love. (Exp youth- interview # 04)

¹³ Addressing The Sexual Exploitation Of Our Youth: Building Community Capacity For Effective Response, April 2004

¹⁴ This central learning confirms the thesis in progress to be submitted by Jody Stuart in partial completion of other master's degree at UNBC.

Belonging and Community

In addition to meeting immediate survival needs, young people engaged in sexual exploitation find what has been missing in their lives in the sense of family, community, and belonging they build on the streets.

Given that the adult world has betrayed, violated and disappointed many of these youth, it is not surprising that their capacity to trust is damaged and they turn to each other for what the adult world has denied them.

Intr: you said you are staying at the shelter now so you have experienced homelessness yourself. What has that experience been like for you?

Inte: I've learned a lot (laughter) I don't know. I guess I've met a lot of people, you know people that are in the same situation as me and doing the same... you know there is kind of like a bond there between people you know. There is a closeness that you can't, that I wouldn't have known. (Exp youth- interview # 06)

Case study #7

We wanted to move back to the big city, big city life so that was the first time that I actually stayed at a shelter; she had stayed there previously so and I just started chatting with, seeing the girls at the shelter, the working girls and the money they made and the nice clothes and stuff and I thought well and I was denied Welfare, so they wouldn't give me Welfare, so I thought well I have to make money somehow so I just started working the streets with some other girls and they kind of shoved me along and told me what to do and stuff like that you know after asking them "How am I supposed to do it? What do I ask for? (Exp youth- interview # 06)

The sense of belonging is more than individual attachment; it is the creation of community, a specific sub culture with its own values, language and customs. Embedded in this and surrounded by it, it is what people do – it is a real life, real time, real world option. This is the culmination of the histories that youth carry with them. For some youth, sex work, addictions and the drug trade were their sense of community as was found in the stories of intergenerational involvement of their families. For example, we heard of children growing up with grandparents, parents, cousins and siblings involved at various levels and that this normalized sexual exploitation and sex work as real life options.

Traditionally I think that most of the kids that we see down here, do have the similarities that they have histories of trauma and quickly enter into addictions cycles and violence and that their power is often through -or what they see looks like their power - is more based in an exploitive process by other adults or other youth that prey on them. They think that they're in control. (SP- interview # 03)

Another factor further influencing the pathway to exploitation and survival sex work was personal histories of sexual abuse. Most young people gain many of the basic life skills in the home and family. When the family is dysfunctional and children are subjected to sexual abuse the search for love belonging and acceptance becomes wrapped up in abuse and using their bodies as a survival tool.

[on the connection between a history of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation] Does a child know what love is? Does a child know that love isn't sex that sex is sex and love is something else? I mean adults don't even know that, and they figure intimacy is having sex. They don't know intimacy is what we're doing right now [this interview], we're communicating at a deep level. And so a child, if somebody hugged them and held them and took advantage of their need for safety and whatever love is to them, what they've seen of love, then they're going to be exploited in many different ways... When a child is out there and on their own without any tools then they're going to turn to an adult because adults are supposed to take care of children and protect them, not exploit them but that's what happens.(SP- interview # 04)

The creation of, and the entry into, this subculture comes from their own realization that some of the things they would like to have aren't available or real for them. In some ways, this subculture mimics the "real world" where other youth can acquire education and skills training in trades and professions, so too, the youth in the sub culture find their apprenticeships and training in the ways of survival. The same hierarchies, discriminations, power differentials and gendered experiences are replicated in this microcosm. They do not always have the resources, particularly the people, who can help them achieve more mainstream goals like going to university.

Youth have been one of the hardest hit groups, which has crossed the homelessness and other things such as youth unemployment, its like 3 or 4 times higher than any other group. The world's become high tech, people need high school or university education nowadays to get work. It seems that we need a lot more programs. Funding to those programs have been slowly taken away and I don't hear a lot of advocacy for the youth. Once again, provincially speaking services to youth were cut by, I forget, by millions of dollars for youth services so, and that all has a damaging effect when it plays out onto the streets. (SP- interview # 02)

Thus, the adoption into and acceptance of the sub culture is an exercise in trying to acquire what is denied in the outside world and is a powerful source of connection and belonging. Services providers in focus groups named the reasons behind this desperate search for connection. They see "loss of identity, no caring adults in the home, psychological and physical abuse, feeling like there is no place for you", and that the youth are "desperate and destitute and that there is nothing else for them." They see the streets as a haven where "they sense they belong."

"The friendships with the women, when you've been on the street and you suffered and they are in the same situation as you, yet they would give anything for each other. Like the old saying 'they would give you the shirt of their back' to keep you warm. There is a sense of real caring. They have nothing to give yet they will give you what they have. I've never experienced anything like that, that deep in my life with friends willing to do that for you and they have nothing." (Exp youth- interview # 06)

Youth also identified what they saw as significant factors influencing their experiences of homelessness: “not feeling safe at home, no sense of family belonging, loss of connection, family issues, financial issues, meeting the wrong people, disconnection from community.” The youth went on to say that, in addition to these issues that sexual abuse and neglect played a big role. They also named the media, and the “pressure they felt to become something they can’t.” They also identified the way they are marginalized within the mainstream such as at school: “kids are mean and it is a way out” and that turning to the street and street life was a way to find status and belonging. The sense of community youth find is so powerful that it draws them in and keeps them in sexual exploitation long after the initial benefits have been exchanged for negative and detrimental outcomes.

Well, when you have them, when they’re coming in you know they have to resort to selling their bodies, selling drugs, stealing, lying and survival skills. I’m not saying it in a judgmental or a critical way I mean this is their reality. You have no money coming in you have no place to stay you do whatever you can. I’ve seen youth exploit other [I’ve seen them] have to role people. Yeah, everything and anything rip their friends off, rip dealers off all of the above. (SP- interview # 08)

Addictions

All of the experiential youth we connected with identified that initially they felt a sense of power and belonging, and they were making money. However, this initial sense of power was short lived as addictions quickly took hold.

Inside of the research we heard two major reasons for drug use, both connected with self medication: one is self medicating from previous traumas, and one is self medicating while engaged in survival sex work.

It was just survival, what I had to do, just to get back on my feet. I hadn’t done the dope. I usually drank and it wasn’t a big deal to me. I thought because I didn’t do the dope I could make good money and I could get back on my feet again. I worked for about a month and a half and then I started doing dope....It kind of numbs you from the shit that is happening around you and what you are doing to yourself and that guilty feeling of what am I doing. (Exp youth- interview # 06)

You forget about everything, you forget about the pain, you don’t care and it makes you feel like [you are] someone. (Exp youth- Focus Group # 02)

Case study #09

I remember I was going to my room and there’s three girls in a room and the door was open and they were smoking something I can’t even remember if it was a glass pipe or what but there was a pipe that they were using and I was just curious, because I thought maybe they were smoking hash or something I had t curious look I guess because they called me into the room and asked me if I wanted to try some. I asked them what it was and they had said it was number 7 and I said “Number 7?” because I didn’t know what number 7 was and it was like crack but it had heroin cooked into it. So anyway so I said “Ok” so I tried it and oh my god I will never ever forget that feeling. It was like amazing totally amazing. I never ever got that same feeling again throughout the whole time that I used except for the first time that I used the needle. I was trying to get that same high again. It was like the most best feeling that you could ever have in your whole entire life, it was amazing. I mean words just can’t describe it And I still feel that way to this day because I haven’t had anything that’s ever felt so euphoric. But that same night I was standing on the corner working, selling my body, that very same night within like an hour or so, it was a really short time because I needed some more. I needed it and it hooked me so fast. (Exp youth- interview # 05)

You can be addicted to sex and drugs, the drugs can lead into sex, you can be addicted to the lifestyle and you can use the drugs as a way to gain acceptance, you've used them to make a connection. You can also be using the drugs because you're self destructive. (Exp youth- Focus Group # 02)

The first experiences with drugs also created euphoric feelings of power and control. However, when the addiction takes over, the sense of power and control that the youth enjoyed when initially using the drugs is gone.

Being sold out there, being out on the street... when I came here I met some guys and they got me into drugs right away. I ended up going out with this guy who ended up dying. I owed money that he died owing [because] I was his bitch. They said so. I just feel this part of me was put out there to pay off his debt... just having to go out there, it's either that or I get beat up, or what ever happens. It's too scary to even think about what might happen. (Exp youth- interview # 02)

The youth, having been drawn in by a sense of freedom, control and belonging now find a trap where they are owned and directed by others, and the drugs become a tool that both keep them entrenched and make the entrenchment bearable. What once seemed voluntary and a choice that had positive associations now becomes the driving force behind everything they do. The positive outcomes – the good feelings, the sense of connection are now undermined by more serious health and social consequences.

Intr: what we have seen here is that young people sort of run away from home because of abuse and they come to Prince George and thinking that it will be different.

Intw: yeah [chuckle] it is different here. I think it more so out here more so. I didn't get sick and everything until I came here to Prince George. I got Hep C and I got HIV when I came here, the drugs are massive and people are shady here. They will be sharing of needles and stuff; they switch on you; anything to get their drugs into them it just it a sad little town here I think. (Exp youth-interview # 02)

I didn't know anything about it. I never knew anything about like getting sick I didn't know anything about that...and you felt good and I started using more and more and I remember when I met xxx, I had tried down and I didn't know what it was. xxx offered me some dope I asked "What is it?" and he said "Heroin" I said "Fuck that, I don't do the heroin, I just do the down. He said that it's the same thing and I just remember holy shit, but I liked it and so I did it and he did not want me to use everyday and I didn't believe him so I did it the whole time we were together and I hid it. (Exp youth- interview # 01)

Drug Trade/ Health and Disease / Poverty and Oppression

“Suicide on the instalment plan”

... people are still suffering and dying from the residential school effects. I work with a First Nations community and many of my friends have died on these street. I work with survivors, I work with their children that are the multigenerational effect, they end up homeless on the streets here. I work with kids from my village that are over at AWAC right now. They are in the sex trade to survive. I work with people that are the survivors that are still dieing, suicide on the instalment plan, it's the effects. So, we as society we know what's going on and we have to start getting more proactive ... (SP- interview # 02)

The consequences of longer term entrenchment as a result of being sexually exploited and engaging in survival sex are clear. Not only do we see the creation of community and a sense of belonging established among the youth, we also see that the lifestyle keeps them away from other community supports and options. As the role of organized crime factions expand and law enforcement officials attempt to curb illegal street level trade, the youth are driven into isolation. The connection to a specific community and the activities that come with that lifestyle act as mutually reinforcing cyclical factors and there are other longer term complications:

Something that I have seen in the last few years is the RCMP, the city, and other folks who would like to see Prince George's streets quote “cleaned up”. I don't know about what other people are seeing, but I am seeing less youth on the street and that doesn't mean that the youth aren't being sexually exploited. A lot of them have gone underground so the youth aren't as visible as what they were before. That worries me because that's how some of us service providers can keep track of where these youth are and by cleaning up the street so to speak we put youth at risk because we don't see them. (SP- interview # 08)

In addition to the invisibility created by various influences, a second emerging issue was the changing nature of drugs and addiction and how this is impacting perceptions of risk.

[on emerging issues] I think [its] the patterns are around histories of trauma that I don't usually see. I mean I think with some of the drugs now, like crystal meth, we see kids here that, and down around the streets, who may not necessarily have had that kind of traumatic background, I wouldn't make the same assumption with some of the youths that I'm seeing [that are] involved with crystal meth, because, it just doesn't seem to be appropriate and part of some of their history (SP- interview # 03)

Case study #8

...they've [organized crime] taken over the drug trade and by virtue of controlling the drug trade they control the sex trade. So we've got young girls, and we do have young girls, that are regularly working in shacks to pay off debts. They are afraid not to and with good. People being beat and, all kinds of things because they owe a hundred two hundred dollars. For two hundred dollars you could lose a limb. We have those three unsolved shootings that were all involved in the drug trade from last fall. You know that doesn't escape the attention of all of these youth. That nothing has yet, nobody has been charged, nobody will talk, I don't think its anybody's fault, but I mean, those are very useful tools to lever over a youth never mind anybody's head that owes drug money. (SP- interview # 03)

Involvement with sexual exploitation has health impacts also:

I don't look at homelessness meaning that you don't have your own home I'm talking about not being able stay because I'm sure that you know of people who are not allowed at certain places because they have been banned. They are banned from detox, they are banned from certain shelters and these this happen because they are just so caught up in their addiction and mental health issues. They are not able to make good choices about behaviour and they are falling through [the cracks]. I just recently heard of a young woman who been ban from detox and as far as I'm concerned that was shelter for her because she is banned from other places. If I was looking at it on another level, they don't have their own home or shared accommodation or whatever like whether it be living in a group home, once they get caught up in that cycle of sexual exploitation, addiction, violence you know they coming from a background of trauma, they suffer more trauma, they have some serious mental health issues that aren't being address because they can't be assessed if they are not clean for a certain amount of time so they have medical issues. It's a big big picture and the just fall into this huge pit of hopelessness and despair um and they just not in a place where they can maintain a home. (SP- interview # 08)

I think a lot of kids leave home because of sexual abuse issues and even if it's witnessing violence both of those things have really tremendous negative effects on the brain. I mean the heart the soul too, but it does do chemical things to the brain so that post traumatic stress disorder is diagnosed. You know we learn more as we go on about cortisol which is a chemical in the body that for young people can really do damage to brains and alcohol abuse drug use can remove serotonin ... So its not just about the sexual exploitation its about what happens to your body and that. And so homelessness the child is terrorized, terrified and something is happening to the child's brain through all of this and their body and they're running and sexually exploited (SP- interview # 04).

Recommendations

I always say when we're working with at risk youth, exploited youth, that you have to work outside of the box. What I mean by that is that it's not a 9 to 5 job, it's not an office job. You can't sit on your butt in your office and expect it come to you. You have to go to them and you have to be in a position where you are prepared to really aggressively advocate for them because the system doesn't support them. Working with these youth requires a huge amount of patience and tolerance and it's a lot of hard work a lot of hours but it's worth it. They are such a special a special group of kids and they have really nobody in their lives who are prepared to help them besides service providers. Lots of the time, its sad to say, they were raised by service providers, literally. And it's very very different work from most other jobs in terms of boundaries because I'm

constantly challenged on maintaining certain boundaries and it can't work the same with this group of youth as with anybody else. It's just different. (SP- interview # 08)

We know from the research we conducted with experiential youth and the local service providers that there is hope. Both groups were able to identify the barriers and the opportunities for making positive change possible for the youth in ways that would honour and build on their strengths and amazing resiliencies. These recommendations are drawn from the words of those who are most closely connected to this issue: the youth living with poverty, homelessness and sexual exploitation and those who work with them.

In our original proposal we had planned to develop a profile of sexual exploitation in Northern BC. As the research progressed it became clear that the more pressing need was to understand the particular risks and vulnerabilities that Northern Youth experience.

We observed a magnet in operation. The “push” is their need to escape abuse and violence which propels youth from their homes and communities. The “pull” is the dream of a better life, the belief that freedom, excitement and a place to be yourself was on the street. The fulcrum balancing these two forces was safety, the search for and the desire for safety.

Once the magnet is exerting its influences, there are barriers to preventing entry into and hindering exit strategies. Of primary concern is a concept we call “Cultural Violation”. It seems the services that have the most successful impact are those *which understand and enter into the cultural reality of the young people who need their help*. We are asking the youth to enter into a new world when we ask them to leave behind the world of sexual exploitation, with new expectations of behaviour and codes of conduct. As we ask them to step into this “grey” area of unknown and untried behaviours we need to be able to match the courage and readiness we ask of them, by stepping into that grey area and being able to comprehend and interpret the worked they are leaving behind. We have to be able to see the value and strengths and resiliencies that were fostered in that world and understand the sense of profound grief and loss as they leave behind the only care and family they have known. We see, sadly, service providers devalue and overlook these attributes and characteristics. This blindness is a huge barrier to exiting.

Case study #10

Children have simple truths: “Santa doesn’t come because I am not a good kid no matter how hard I try to be good.” They don’t understand Santa doesn’t come because your family is poor. So, the youth living with abuse live with contradictions. They believe the happy family and the “be in your bed at 10 so I know you’re safe” but they live the reality that bed at home is not safe. On the street it is very concrete, there’s no contradictions. If you piss somebody off, if you don’t Pay your drug debt, or what ever, you are going to get beat, or shot. Something bad is going to happen. But there is a logical consequence for your behaviour, it makes sense. BUT THERE IS NO LOGIC BEHIND CHILD ABUSE.

Social and Cultural indicators for Sexual Exploitation and Homelessness

These factors must be included in policy and programme development. Depending which factors are predominant in the life of a youth will determine which strategies are more likely to succeed.

1. Precipitating factors

The role of history and geography

In the north the outlying communities have become feeders, routes to sexual exploitation in the larger communities. The harsh climate also impacts the experience of homelessness, increasing desperation and the willingness to take risks. The high percentage of Aboriginal youth involved in sex work speaks to the loss of structures such as cultural connection, healthy families and role models. Abuse and neglect within the family point to the disruption of traditional family child rearing practices. The intrusion of institutional care as a substitute, however well intentioned, for too many youth has impacts similar to residential school on earlier generations. Being in ministry care, too many foster homes, or one foster home that is abusive becomes another stepping stone that increases the sense of hopelessness and despair

2. Enabling factors

Homelessness, whether as a strategy to avoid being in care frequently leads to drug use, and sexual exploitation. Youth then are trapped in a vicious cycle where dropping out of school means a low education level and lower chances for employment and improvement. Ironically, many of the young people trapped in this cycle are bright and have potential but have learned to carry negative pictures of themselves and their capacity.

3. Paralyzing factors

Once introduced to the street life and the sense of belonging, it does not take long for entrapment to develop: addictions, involvement in the drug trade and other crime and experiences of violence interact to keep the youth trapped.

Case Study # 11

This is the second research project I am being asked to participate in and I think it's really positive that there's research being done to find out what the connections are and what the factors are, about why youth end up in sexual exploitation and homelessness and addiction and all that kind of stuff, but I would really really like to see this information, not just your research information, actually make a difference. Because what's it going to take is funding we need more programs less barriers to effectively help these youth and hopefully because these things happen that they exit from the sex trade and that their success continues ... There needs to be dollars put into it and I see nothing but cuts. So I'm hoping somebody will listen and build some of these resources back up again so that youth do have hope about getting on with their lives moving forward. It's a little sore spot with me (SP- interview # 08)

Conclusion

“It’s not just money and drugs they want.”

Sexual Exploitation is no longer a symptom only of big city life. It is real and apparent in our rural communities. It is happening to children who are subjected to informal sexual exploitation in their homes and communities in ways that condition them for lives on the street in more visible and formal sexual exploitation.

If we can come to understand how children come to be on the street and the needs that this is meeting for them, then we will be able to truly respond. The money, the drugs, the crime and violence that surround the children’s presence on the streets are only physical manifestations of their deeper need for safety, belonging and community. They flee their homes in search of safety; they find immediate connection, shared history and drugs that help them feel better about themselves or no longer care.

The predators that use and abuse our children are adept at recognizing the needs of the children and youth and have no bureaucracy or waiting periods to inhibit them from immediately entering into the lives of the youth and meeting those deep needs in order to satisfy their own ends. We need to be able to respond with as much timely efficiency as the criminals. We think we know what the children need, and we build more shelters, but what we think isn’t helping.

In carrying out this research we worked side by side with a small team of youth who have successfully exited. It was in the clarity and honesty of their voices that we learned what does work and what does make the difference. All that is asked is so very small – to make a commitment to be there, in their lives, through the tough time and the acting out. To be ready to listen, care and understand that they are doing the best they can. This simple act is the first paving stone on the path to reclaiming our youth from sexual exploitation and to let them know that they are a part of our community and that we care for them and about them and what happens to them. To those who continue to exploit children in our community, you are not invisible and you do not pass unseen. We want to say to you very clearly that we see you, and we will not be silent.

We dedicate this work to the young ones who did not make it out.

Appendix A: Select bibliography

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