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## Youth Experience of Trying to Get off the Street: What has Helped and Hindered L'expérience de jeunes essayant de ne plus vivre dans la rue : ce qui a aidé, ce qui a nui

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study involved 20 youth (18 male, 1 female, 1 transgender, ages 19–24) living in Vancouver, British Columbia, who reported 259 critical incidents of what helped or hindered their experiences as they tried to get off the street. What helped included (a) taking responsibility, (b) engaging in constructive activities, (c) friends and family support, (d) changing drug and alcohol use, (e) support from professional organizations, (f) disillusionment with street life, (g) dreams and hope for a different future, (h) income assistance, and (i) leaving negative influences behind. What hindered included (a) drugs and alcohol; (b) emotional struggles; (c) lack of support; (d) enjoyment of homelessness; (e) limited formal education, life skills, and employment; and (f) income assistance difficulties. The results are discussed in relation to implications and recommendations for practice, limitations, and future research.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative porte sur 20 jeunes (18 hommes, 1 femme, et 1 transgendériste, âgés de 19 à 24 ans) habitant Vancouver en Colombie-Britannique. Les participants ont rapporté 259 incidents critiques relative à ce qui a aidé et nui à leurs expériences pendant qu'ils essayaient de ne plus vivre dans la rue. Ce qui a aidé inclut : (a) assumer ses responsabilités, (b) participer à des activités constructives, (c) soutien des amis et de membres de la famille, (d) modifier sa consommation de drogues et d'alcool, (e) appui d'organismes professionnels, (f) désillusion à l'égard de la vie dans la rue, (g) rêves et espoir d'un avenir différent, (h) soutien au revenu, et (i) délaissier les influences négatives. Ce qui a nui inclut : (a) drogues et alcool; (b) difficultés émotionnelles; (c) manque de soutien; (d) plaisir d'être sans abri; (e) limites au plan de l'éducation formelle, des compétences de vie, et de l'emploi; et (f) difficultés à obtenir du soutien au revenu. Les résultats sont discutés en relation avec les conséquences et les recommandations touchant la pratique, les limites, et la recherche future.

Youth homelessness is prevalent in major cities of North America. According to Rotheram-Borus (1991), youth are the most understudied segment within the homeless population. Recent homeless counts in Vancouver, British Columbia (Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 2005) confirmed that youth homelessness seems to be rising. Before the street became their home, these youth often came from abusive, violent, conflict-ridden, and neglectful environments; leaving

these situations was one way to escape their maltreatment (MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997).

Tyler, Hoyt, and Whitbeck (2000) found that 33% of homeless youth suffered from sexual abuse. Moreover, according to Tyler and Cauce (2002), more than 50% have experienced physical abuse and/or neglect. In their study, Mallett, Rosenthal, and Keys (2005) found several pathways to homelessness, and, in all situations, intense family conflict was present. Given these circumstances within their homes, youth either go directly to the street ("runaway" youth) or are removed from the home by a government agency due to the harm they are perceived to be experiencing ("systems" youth). Sometimes youth make the street their home because their family demands they leave ("throwaway" youth) (MacLean et al., 1999).

Given these backgrounds, homeless youth have higher than usual rates of mental health issues and behavioural problems such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic reactions, drug and alcohol abuse, and aggressive deviant behaviours (Cauce, 2000). Once on the street, the youth find it difficult to meet their basic needs and rarely have enough food or shelter. They will often engage in prostitution or crime to fulfill their basic needs (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). According to Whitbeck et al. (1997), victimization of youth on the street can be directly related to their abusive family backgrounds.

Homeless youth do use significantly more drugs and alcohol than non-homeless youth (Smart & Adlaf, 1991). However, Smart and Adlaf found that the drug and alcohol use among street youth is a response to their dysfunctional and hazardous environment and not directly related to their familial backgrounds. The use of drugs and alcohol to cope with stressful environments has also been shown to increase depression levels, thereby increasing the youth's stress (Ayerst, 1999). With this increased depression, Kidd (2004) found the youth had feelings of worthlessness and loneliness leading to feelings of being trapped and often suicidal thoughts and attempts.

According to Karabanow and Clement (2004), most of the literature examining street youth focuses on the reasons and causes for being on the street. The research that is available does not have long-term outcome evaluations of interventions for street youth due to the transient nature of this population. Not only is research scant on viable interventions to provide to homeless youth, but a need exists to generate more information about exiting street life. To specifically address this need, this author's research purpose was to explore, through the voices of the youth, actual experiences of what has helped youth have successful transitions from homelessness.

## METHOD

### *Sampling*

The purpose of this study was to understand through the youths' perceptions of their experiences what helped and what hindered them in leaving the street. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 24 years and self-reported homelessness or were currently homeless. To participate, they additionally had to be

willing to reflect back on their experiences of becoming homeless and to discuss the experiences that helped and hindered them in leaving the street, and had to have the capacity to make free and informed decisions.

### *Participants*

Twenty participants living in the Vancouver area were involved in this study. At the time of the interviews, 11 were staying in a youth shelter, 7 had their own place, and 2 were on the street. All participants had left the street and lived on their own at least twice, and on average the youth were on and off the street six times. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 ( $M = 22$ ). Thirteen was the youngest age at which a participant became homeless, and the common age of entering homelessness was 18. Of the 18 male participants, 8 identified as Caucasian, 4 as Aboriginal, 5 stated a mixed identity, and 1 male chose not to provide his ethnicity. The 1 female participant was Caucasian, and the 1 transgender youth was Aboriginal. The participants' ethnic and gender involvement ratio was reflective of the youth served at the crisis centre where there are 22 beds; these are generally occupied by 20 males and 2 females.

### *Critical Incident Techniques*

To explore the experiences of these youth, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) developed by Flanagan (1954) was used. CIT is a method that follows a set of procedures to observe and record human behaviour (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). The observations are then used to answer practical problems or questions such as the research question: *How have youth experienced trying to get off the street: What has helped and what has hindered?*

Flanagan (1954) defined the word *incident* as “any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act” (p. 327). He defined *critical* in reference to an incident that takes place in a situation “where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects” (p. 327).

According to Flanagan (1954), there are five steps or procedures for collecting the data: (a) aim of the study, (b) plans and specifications, (c) collecting the data, (d) analyzing the data, and (e) interpreting and reporting. The following paragraphs explain the steps used in this project focusing on the experiences of homeless youth transitioning from the street.

The first step is to state the general objectives of the study. For this project, the focus was to explore the participants' experiences of trying to get off the street. Specifically, the aim was to investigate what helped and hindered the youth as they tried to get off the street. The second step—plans and specifications—details who can participate in the study and what would be considered a critical incident. The participants in this investigation were recruited through posters placed at a youth drop-in and crisis centre in downtown Vancouver. All interested participants were

given details about the study in person and then asked a series of questions to confirm their eligibility. If the interested participant met the criteria, an interview time was arranged.

Collecting the data was the third step, which involved the author conducting semi-structured interviews with the youth in a Vancouver crisis centre private office. In the first interview, the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and then asked to speak about themselves and describe how they came to be on the street. They were asked what helped and what hindered them when trying to leave the street. Immediately following the first interview, the researcher transcribed the interview in its entirety from the audiotape. Due to the transient lifestyle of the youth, a second interview was scheduled within a week of the first interview. Of the 20 participants, 19 were given a typed summary of their first interview. The 1 participant who did not cross-check his interview decided to travel to Ontario to deal with his legal matters rather than run from the law and hide in British Columbia.

Each summary detailed the critical incidents from the individual's interview and were put into two broad categories: either helping or hindering. The participants read through the summary and determined whether the critical incidents were interpreted appropriately and placed in the correct category. All participants were given the opportunity to omit, correct, add, or change their critical incidents. All 19 participants made minor corrections to their summarization. When they were satisfied that the critical incidents were articulated accurately, each participant gave final approval.

After the two interviews, the data were analyzed in order to "summarize and describe the data in an efficient manner so that it can be effectively used for many practical purposes" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 344). The researcher worked directly from the transcripts derived from the tapes and noted each critical incident on a cue card. Several categories were formulated by grouping the critical incidents into similar themes. This was an inductive process that involved insight, experience, and judgement. The first author tracked when new categories stopped emerging, a sign that exhaustiveness had been met (Butterfield et al., 2005).

During this process a participation rate was also calculated. It was determined by calculating the percentage of participants responding to each category. For a category to be considered valid, a 25% participation rate needed to be achieved (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009). A Master's student in the Counselling Psychology Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) familiar with the critical incident technique served as an independent judge during this process. This judge was asked to place 25% of the critical incidents, randomly chosen, into categories that had already been formed. The higher the agreement rate between the researcher's placement of incidents into categories and the independent judge's placement, the more trustworthy the categories are thought to be (Butterfield et al., 2005). Lastly, after the interview, data collection, and analysis, the categories that emerged were described and defined and sample quotes from each category were transcribed verbatim from the taped interviews.

The final step was interpreting and reporting the findings. A total of 259 incidents were derived based on what helps and what hinders the 20 youth attempting to leave the street. Categories with self-explanatory titles and definitions were given. Reliability and validity were established using eight credibility checks derived from the work of Butterfield et al. (2005) as they reviewed the origin and evolution of the CIT method over the past 50 years. During this time, they identified credibility checks that have been instituted when using the CIT.

Credibility checks have evolved along the way that seem to be consistent with Flanagan's intent while also improving the rigour of the findings in studies using the CIT (Butterfield et al., 2005). From their findings, Butterfield et al. (2005) have suggested nine credibility checks when using CIT. This investigation followed eight of the nine suggested credibility checks. These were

1. A UBC professor in the Counselling Psychology Program, familiar with CIT, listened to an interview and extracted critical incidents from the taped interview. His extracted incidents were then compared with the researcher's extracted critical incidents and deemed to be corresponding.
2. Participant cross-checking took place during the second interview.
3. For this investigation, an independent judge, mentioned previously, randomly chose 120 critical incidents and was then asked to sort the incidents into the defined helping and hindering categories. Each category, with its definition, was on a cue card as were the critical incidents. Two sorting sessions took place with the independent judge: one for the helping categories and one for the hindering categories. Of the 120 critical incidents, the independent judge placed 115 of the 120 critical incidents in the same categories as the researcher, achieving 96% agreement. Categories were considered valid if an agreement of 80% was accomplished.
4. The researcher tracked when new categories stopped emerging. Four critical incidents originally were unclassified and put aside as they did not immediately or instinctually appear to fit into any of the categories until the definitions were more formalized. However, later during the analysis process, they were re-evaluated and subsequently classified into existing categories. Therefore, no new categories needed to be formed, and exhaustiveness was considered met.
5. Participation rate was calculated. In this study the participation rates varied from a low of 30% in two categories (income assistance and leaving negative influences behind) to a high of 90% in one category (drugs and alcohol).
6. Descriptive validity took place by tape-recording all the interviews and then working directly from the typed transcripts and tapes.
7. A CIT expert was asked to listen to an interview tape to ensure the researcher was following the CIT method appropriately. The expert works at UBC in the Counselling Psychology Program and has studied the CIT method and used the method on several occasions.
8. Lastly, theoretical validity of the helping and hindering categories was compared to the results found in this investigation with existing literature to

determine whether support existed for the categories defined in the present study. This has become known as theoretical agreement (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 488).

## RESULTS

From the 20 semi-structured interviews and 13 follow-up interviews, a total of 259 critical incidents emerged. At the time of their interviews, 13 of the 20 participants were homeless; however, all participants had left the street at one point and were housed since first becoming homeless. The critical incidents were initially identified by the researcher in the analysis of the interviews and then confirmed by the youths in follow-up interviews. These critical incidents, taken from the interviews, determined what helped and hindered these youth when trying to leave the street.

Nine helping and six hindering categories emerged after the data analysis. An independent judge also agreed with these helping and hindering categories, illustrated in Tables 1 and 2. The final question the participants were asked was "What do you think would have helped?" All of the youth answered the question with specific ideas and examples about what they would have liked to have happened in their lives. Their responses to this question are detailed at the end of the results section as a "Wish List," as they are what the youth wished to have happened.

### *Helping Categories*

Of the 259 critical incidents, 159 were placed into nine helping categories: (a) taking responsibility, (b) engaging in constructive activities, (c) friends and family support, (d) changing drug and alcohol use, (e) support from professional organizations, (f) disillusionment with street life, (g) dreams and hope for a different future, (h) income assistance, and (i) leaving negative influences behind (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Helping Categories, Frequency of Critical Incidents, and Participation Rate*

Category	Frequency (# of critical incidents for each category)	Participation rate (% of participation in each category)
Helping categories		
1. Taking responsibility	33	70
2. Engaging in constructive activities	17	70
3. Friends and family support	24	60
4. Changing drug and alcohol use	21	60
5. Support from professional organizations	17	60
6. Disillusionment of street life	16	55
7. Dreams and hope for a different future	17	35
8. Income assistance	8	35
9. Leaving negative influences behind	6	30

*Taking responsibility (33 incidents, 70% participation rate).* This category emphasizes the participants' desire and motivation to take responsibility for and control of themselves and their lives. Taking responsibility regarding drugs and alcohol is a separate category. The participants in this study were not willing to give up, and they spoke about using their internal grit and determination to make changes, exit street life, and enter mainstream society. RS1, a 22-year-old Caucasian male, questions the role of taking responsibility:

I didn't understand why I had to live the life that I lived, and it wasn't until just recently, in the last year or so, that I've realized that I basically, we control our own destinies and everything and all things are controlled by perspective.

This youth continues to reflect on how he is determined to make changes:

It's easy, easier in some cases done than said. It's an amazing power that I'm just recently discovering that I'm trying to play with and see how I can really determine the outlook of my day.

RS1 was not willing to give up, and he spoke about his internal grit to take responsibility and to leave the street:

Wanting more for myself, I always knew that I was capable, and I couldn't see myself just sleeping on the street or just living that kind of lifestyle.

*Engaging in constructive activities (17 incidents, 70% participation rate).* In this category, participants stated that having constructive activities to partake in, such as volunteering, working, or job training, kept them busy, motivated, and occupied in positive ways. LG7, a 23-year-old Aboriginal transgendered youth, speaks about volunteering:

Changing my habits of how I would occupy my time. I volunteer now at the Carnegie Centre. I also volunteer with *Out on Screen*. So I try to find ways to keep myself busy and keep myself motivated.

*Friends and family support (24 incidents, 60% participation rate).* Category 3 refers to the youth receiving positive support and generosity from friends and family. TC14, a 24-year-old male of mixed ethnicity, describes receiving support from his mother after many years of not getting support from her. Her help assisted his stability in remaining drug free and off the street:

Since moving back with my mom for the first time in so many years, you know it really helped me to be stable. 'Cause I'm still there and it's what? October?

TC14 had been on the street since he was 18 and had been on and off the street 12 times. His mother's support has given him stability to stay off the street.

*Changing drug and alcohol use (21 incidents, 60% participation rate).* This category captures participants' drug and alcohol use, misuse, and abuse. Moreover, the individuals acknowledged their realization that their drug and alcohol use had to change. Some youth stopped the use of all drugs and alcohol completely; others

reduced their use of drugs and alcohol or changed the drugs they used. Category 4 also reflects the participants' recognition for the need for drug and alcohol supports in their lives such as detox, treatment, and recovery. LG7 quit hard drugs:

I'm clean, I don't drink as much. My drinking is down to a bare minimum now. And I just cut back on all my bad habits like smoking and using. And now I'm just, I'm just happy. Happy for myself.

*Support from professional organizations (17 incidents, 60% participation rate).* In this category, participants spoke about the various supports and services that were provided from organizations such as schools, employment programs, and community agencies. Youth also reflected on the supportive relationships they developed with staff at these organizations. CF4, a 20-year-old Caucasian male, describes support from a community agency:

Organization X, this has been a really good support system for me. They were just the basic. The basics they provide like food, shelter, and the opportunity to be able to go out and get a job and not have to worry about, you know, where are you going to stay at night, where are you getting food, what are you going to do, how are you going to tell your boss you're homeless, and stuff like that. It's as simple as that, you know, basically providing me with everything I need to live right now 'cause without Organization X I'd be nowhere.

*Disillusionment with street life (16 incidents, 55% participation rate).* Youth in the category of disillusionment with street life spoke about their desire to no longer be homeless. This came from not wanting to engage in the game of surviving homelessness, the threats of violence on the street, and the monotony and weariness of being homeless. It also related to the participants' recognition that they did not want to be on the streets, as evidenced through their comparison to others on the streets. RM19, the only female in the study, explains her disillusionment with street life:

When you first hit the street it is OK but then after a while it is so tiring. First, when you are staying at people's houses it is OK, you spend your day trying to get money to get drunk or high. But then something clicked in my head, and I said I gotta do something, this is getting really old. I want to get my shit together and get a home.

*Dreams and hope for a different future (17 incidents, 35% participation rate).* Participants spoke about their dreams and hope for a different future. They desired something different than homelessness for themselves. This category is different than *Taking Responsibility* as the critical incidents for *Taking Responsibility* were more action- and determination-focused. However, this later changed in that the critical incidents were more vision-oriented, as RS1, who is male, Caucasian, and 22, describes:

I remember when I was younger, I watched *What the Bleep Do We Know*. I watched a few other amazing documentaries; *Boracca*, which has very little commentary but just visuals of certain parts of the world—dreaming and ...

and having a dream, ambition, that's what encourages me, that's what's kept me going. It's the fact that I do have hope for the future.

*Income assistance (8 incidents, 35% participation rate).* Category 8 encompasses youth speaking about the importance of receiving funds from income assistance on a monthly basis. These funds allowed youth to have access to food and shelter. Some participants noted that once they had an address, they could start looking for work. RM20 states:

Income assistance, once you get on, allows you to get housing. At least then, you have an address, can rest up, and start looking for work.

*Leaving negative influences behind (6 incidents, 30% participation rate).* Youth in this category referred to their decision to no longer associate with family and friends who were involved in negative activities such as drug dealing, using drugs and alcohol, and illegal activities. It also reflected the participants' decision to stop drug trafficking themselves. CF3 speaks about his decision to stop dealing drugs:

Like it's really not cool to sell drugs. How many people because of you screw up royally? Look at Hastings; we don't have anything like that in Hamilton. It really brings light on the situation. I'm responsible for putting kids in detox. I'm responsible for kids getting kicked out of their house, for bringing drugs home. I'm responsible for people getting arrested, just because of what I did, and, you know, I don't like that. I don't think that's nothing to brag about. So that's where I decided to stay back, sometimes you have to take a break, like coming out here did for me and look at it from a different view. You know, I am better off not doing what I did before then.

*Hindering Categories*

The remaining 100 critical incidents were placed into six hindering categories: (a) drugs and alcohol; (b) emotional struggles; (c) lack of support; (d) enjoyment of homelessness; (e) limited formal education, life skills, and employment; and (f) income assistance difficulties (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*List of Hindering Categories, Frequency of Critical Incidents, and Participation Rate*

Category	Frequency (# of critical incidents for each category)	Participation Rate (% of participation in each category)
Hindering categories		
1. Drugs and alcohol	31	90
2. Emotional struggles	19	50
3. Lack of support	13	45
4. Enjoyment of homelessness	17	40
5. Limited formal education, life skills, and employment	11	35
6. Income assistance difficulties	9	30

*Drugs and alcohol (31 incidents, 90% participation rate).* In this category the participants' use, misuse, and abuse of drugs and alcohol hindered them from leaving the streets. Drugs and alcohol also led some youth to participate in illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, to support their own drug and alcohol use. Participants also spoke about the economics of trafficking, which required less time and education than mainstream jobs that pay far less to someone with limited formal education and employment. CS5, a 22-year-old Aboriginal male, describes how drugs and alcohol hindered him from leaving the streets:

My lifestyle, I've just done it for so long. I don't know, just thinking about it, the summer time. It's not that hard on the street; it's so warm. But the rain, that's the only thing that's keeping me off right now. My lifestyle gets in my way, drugs, alcohol, and the violence. I have no idea how to live life other than partying or fights or trafficking. Everything that has to do with drugs or alcohol, I don't know anything else.

*Emotional struggles (19 incidents, 50% participation rate).* This category refers to the emotional struggles such as self-doubt, hate, feelings of injustice, disappointment, fear, sadness, loss of hope, anger, and rage. Sometimes these emotional struggles led outwardly to behaviours of violence or lack of trust and pessimism. CS5 equates the abuse he received to something being wrong with his mind:

I've been through so much abusive things and just led me to be a complete nut-job in my mind like—I don't really understand what's wrong with me.

*Lack of support (13 incidents, 45% participation rate).* In the category of lack of support, these youth expressed that support was not available for them when they were looking for it. Often, when they did receive support, it was unhealthy, negative, peer and family influences. TT11, a male of mixed ethnicity, describes his experience when looking for government support:

Um, it was couch surfing here and there, but ah, for like two years of it, I was sleeping outside. When I didn't know where to go, I went to the government for help. They sent me to this office, and they told me this office isn't for you. You have to go to this office and blahblahblah. I went oh my god, so I just gave up. I was like, well, screw it; they're not going to help me.

*Enjoyment of homelessness (17 incidents, 40% participation rate).* This category represents enjoyment of homelessness and refers to the game of surviving on the street and the freedom that homelessness allowed. It also reflected being constantly surrounded by other homeless people and the utopian view of homelessness and the fact that one is not alone. JR8, the only participant who did not want to identify his ethnicity, enjoys the fun of the street:

Like it's a lot of fun sometimes, and it's what stops you from leaving, and there is also memories that hinder me on the other foot. Like I remember when I was in Barrie, or when I was spending six months in Sudbury. You know? Just sitting in my apartment all by myself. I'm never by myself when I'm out here.

That's the only thing—like when I'm always with people always surrounded, but when I have a place I'm always alone.

*Limited formal education, life skills, and employment (11 incidents, 35% participation rate).* In this category, participants referred to their limited formal education and life skills and lack of employment as a barrier to leaving homelessness. WC16, a 23-year-old Caucasian male, has little formal education or life skills:

Lack of life skills and experiences plus I have little formal education. It is hard to get a job and get out of homelessness especially being a young offender.

*Income assistance difficulties (9 incidents, 30% participation rate).* Category 6 refers to youth who spoke about being refused income assistance or the long waiting period to receive funds. Those who were allocated funds described the difficulty of living on \$610 a month and the vicious circle of not being able to work to supplement the assistance as they would then be cut off. JR8 describes being refused:

I say, yeah, I just need a month, and I'll find some work, and then I'm planning on going to school. And they said, "Well, you're going to have to look for work for a month, and then ah, you know, now, that you've applied, look for work for a month, and come back and see us." Ah, I was like fuck that, I need money now.

### *Wish List*

To conclude each interview, the youth were asked the hypothetical question, "What do you think would have helped?" From this question we derived a wish list containing several items the youth wished would have happened for them, in addition to the 259 critical incidents that helped them in and hindered them from leaving the street. When hearing what the youth thought would have helped, many powerful moments emerged as this question gave them an opportunity to express their desires. The youth were very clear and introspective about what they felt would have helped.

Three broad themes emerged from their wish list: (a) home life, (b) self, and (c) services. Many youth wished for a better family with a "normal life" that was surrounded with parental love, for understanding, and to have been listened to as a child. They desired a home without abuse and drugs and alcohol, and they wished their parents would have accepted them for who they were as children.

The second theme of self was in reference to the youth wishing they had made different choices for themselves. Many wished they did not use drugs and alcohol, desired a better education, and dreamt about getting a better job but realized that, without the education, it probably would not happen. Some youth spoke about their wish to have chosen different friends, which might have taken them down a different road.

Lastly, a number of youth spoke about the services they had received; they wished for the services to be relationship-based, not goal-oriented. Some youth

who had been referred to the foster care system felt that if the Ministry of Children and Family Development had done more in terms of family break-up prevention, perhaps they would not have been taken into foster care. Once in care, two youth wished for fewer moves from home to home and for a better transition out of foster care to independence. Income assistance was also a theme within services, and several youth wished the dollar amount provided was greater to make ends meet.

#### DISCUSSION

The original purpose of this study was to explore what helped and what hindered youth as they tried to get off the street. According to Karabanow and Clement (2004), most of the literature focusing on street youth highlights causes of being on the street. Furthermore, the research that is available does not offer long-term outcome evaluations of interventions to provide to street youth because of the transient nature of the street youth population. Specifically, in this study, even though the researcher transcribed the first interview, summarized the critical incidents, and presented it to the youth within one week of the interview, one youth (CF3) had already moved on in this short turnaround time and was not heard from for over a year.

At the time the research was conducted, this study was the only one to consider the relative importance of the various categories via the participation rate (the percentage of youth participation in each category). To date, very few studies have investigated existing street life, and the ones that have found similar themes. However, the current study adds richness as it prioritizes the identified helping and hindering categories based on the number of youth who had critical incidents in each category. It illustrates how prevalent the various themes are to youth as they consider leaving the street.

When all the factors are considered, what stands out is that both internal and external factors contributed to the youth in this study staying on or leaving the street. Internal factors—such as taking responsibility, engaging in constructive activities, changing alcohol and drug use, disillusionment with homelessness, dreams and hopes for a better future, and a desire to leave negative influences behind—all contribute to a positive push towards leaving the street. These suggest that the youth themselves play an active role in deciding how they are going to respond to being homeless. External factors are also important. These include support from family and friends, support from professional organizations, and income assistance. In designing interventions for youth, it is important to consider and to address both sets of factors.

Of note would be the five helping categories that correspond to their opposite number in four hindering categories. Friends and family support and support from professional organizations are set off by lack of support in those areas. The helping category of changing drug and alcohol use corresponds to the hindrance of drug and alcohol use, and disillusionment with street life is counter to enjoyment of street life.

Lastly, income assistance and income assistance difficulties both help and hinder, as they can aid or impede the youth's experience in leaving the street. It should also be noted that even though income assistance difficulties was the lowest hindering category, the anger, despair, and frustration was palpable in the voices of the youth who identified income assistance as a hindrance. This was the only category that the youth did not seem to understand the reasons that it could be a barrier. In all the other categories the youth could identify where the help and hindrance came from, but income assistance as a barrier seemed unfathomable to them, since the purpose of income assistance is to provide them with a means to survive.

The findings in this study suggest a number of ways youth have found helpful in getting off the street. The identification of these factors and how they affect the youth and their exiting process provides a greater understanding of what are the most influential factors in allowing the youth to leave the street. Since few studies have identified what is helpful in exiting the street, the findings in this investigation can be considered significant. To know what assists the youth to leave the street will be useful in counselling, education, policy reform, and service provision.

#### *Implications and Recommendations for Counsellor Education*

This current study offers valuable information for counsellors in a number of areas. First, it will help practitioners understand and be aware of the factors that exist for youth who have lived on the street and for those who are still on the street. Second, the categories can be used by counsellors when working with youth who are trying to leave the street and with those who have left the street but are still vulnerable from their experiences of street life and living in mainstream society. Counsellors will have to keep in mind that it may be very difficult for youth to participate in group or individual therapy without being somewhat stable. In particular, the counsellors can help support the youth in the following ways:

1. Help youth identify, validate, and strengthen their personal attributes.
2. Create awareness and identify strategies for the youth to develop support systems such as peers, family, and community resources.
3. Assist youth in identifying their patterns of drug and alcohol use, misuse, and abuse, and determine what they feel is necessary to assist with changing their patterns of use.
4. Encourage the youth to explore their dreams and hopes for a different future.
5. Help the youth explore and examine areas in which they have internalized negative experiences from their past.
6. Generate psycho-educational and peer support groups using the helping and hindering categories identified by the youth to initiate group discussion and stimulate thinking. These groups can help normalize the youth's experiences and provide peer support for the youth.

Findings from this research can be used in the development and design of a supportive program for youth who have experienced trying to get off the street. As well, the findings can help professional organizations continue to understand,

through the youths' experiences, what helps them to and what hinders them from leaving the streets. Policy makers and government systems might do well to consider what the youth are saying about income assistance, foster care, and the youths' desire to have a better home life that includes family intervention as prevention to entering foster care.

### *Future Research*

Future research ought to focus on a number of areas. First, a longitudinal study looking at youth who have experienced leaving the street is necessary. With the availability of web-based technology this type of study may be easier than in past years. More qualitative research is also required to further understand and support the specific themes youth identify as helpful in their exiting process from the street. This would allow a more complete picture of how exiting street life actually occurs, what the processes are, and the impact it has on the youth.

Second, it is essential to determine what the youth consider helped them change their drug and alcohol use. In this study, and in others, youth point out that drugs and alcohol are a problem, and they must change that if they are to leave the streets. This research found drugs and alcohol to be the greatest hindrance to leaving the street. If future research can determine what helped youth change their drug and alcohol use, maybe a link can be uncovered and drugs and alcohol can be lessened as a hindrance to leaving the street.

The female and transgender experience of leaving street life needs to be explored in much more depth. Even though more male youth are represented in this study, there are also homeless female and transgendered youth trying to exit street life. Determining what would be helpful to females and transgender youth when leaving the street is equally important and requires further investigation.

A study comparing successful family intervention programs implemented around the world with what happens here in British Columbia, and the rest of Canada, would be beneficial. Many youth who are or have been homeless have spent time in foster care. If appropriate family intervention programs can avoid this, it ought to be considered in order to understand what role, if any, foster care plays in homeless youths' experiences.

Since youth spend inordinate amounts of time in classes, it is important to realize how schools can help with the prevention of homelessness in conjunction with other supportive systems. Information needs to be generated to help understand the impact school has on youth who are at risk and what the school system can do to help avoid further risk to the youth.

Lastly, prevention of homelessness and the actual reasons and conditions as to why it exists need to be investigated. Many studies have illustrated why youth are on the street. However, what needs to be investigated is not why youth are on the street but what is causing the abuse, neglect, and violence at home that send these youth to seek refuge on the street. Is it poverty, lack of parenting skills, family distress, violence, or child welfare failures? In order to end youth homelessness, we need to know where the road to homelessness truly begins.

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