

research snapshot

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Street Youth Are Among the Most Victimized Populations in Canada

What is this research about?

During public debates, homeless youth are often characterized as perpetrators of crime. But this focus on street youth as offenders overlooks the fact that many street youth are also victims of crime. Traditional thinking suggests that people become victims of crime when they frequent dangerous places or take part in risky behaviors. Such thinking, though, doesn't explain why people, especially street youth, take part in risky behaviors in the first place. The concept of social exclusion, however, provides one answer. Youth who are shut out from the rest of society – who have little or no access to shelter, jobs, and public spaces – are often pushed into situations that force them to be more aggressive and violent as a way of survival. Criminal behaviors, then, aren't solely a matter of choice. The number of street youth who are victims of crime, however, is not well reported and remains a special concern of researchers at York University.

What you need to know:

Compared to youth who have homes, street youth are much more likely to be victims of crime. Young homeless women are particularly vulnerable.

What did the researcher do?

York researchers talked to 208 homeless youth, between 15 and 24 years of age, living in Toronto. The research team included current and former street youth. They conducted their research at eight Toronto agencies serving street youth, in the fall of 2001. Surveys and interviews were used.

What did the researcher find?

While 25% of Canadians are victims of crime in any given year, York researchers found that 81.9% of street youth reported having been victims of crime in the previous year. 79.4% of street youth reported two or more crimes, and 31.9% said that they were victims of sexual

assault. Young homeless women seem to be particularly vulnerable to crime. Compared to the rest of the Canadian public, then, street youth are much more likely to be victims of a broad range of crimes.

How can you use this research?

Evidence suggests that the criminal behavior of street youth isn't simply a matter of choice. It's often the result of difficult situations that they can't always control, which shut them off from the rest of society. Public policy debates, then, should view street youth as victims of crime – not simply as perpetrators of crime. Policy-makers should keep in mind that street youth are a part of the community and need to be protected.

About the Researcher

Dr. Stephen Gaetz is Associate Dean, Research and Field Development in the Faculty of Education, York University.

sgaetz@edu.yorku.ca

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

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