

A Survey of Homeless Youth in Edmonton

A Report Prepared for Boyle Street Community Services
By Carlee Crerar
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ABSTRACT

The idea for the youth homelessness research survey came from the Shelter Subcommittee of Edmonton Youth Community Engagement Governance. The Subcommittee includes the membership of the Edmonton Inter-Agency Youth Services Association. The purpose of the youth homelessness survey was to discover how many youth are absolutely homeless and what type of housing they prefer. Funding was provided by the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Homelessness.

Homeless youth know where and how to obtain their basic needs for survival. However, these youth are just getting by and it is clear that better solutions are needed. The feedback obtained in the survey will help youth agencies to better understand the homeless youth populations' housing situation as well as their housing preferences so that they can make recommendations to start intervening and addressing homeless youths' housing needs.

This research project was two months long. The first month was used to research, construct, and conduct the survey and the other month to analyze data and compose a final report based on the findings in the survey.

It should be noted that not all of the youth agencies contacted wanted to partake in this survey. Specifically, Youth Emergency Shelter Society and iHuman opted out. Also, due to the two month time constraint, a survey was the only plausible option. Most of the agencies involved wanted to see more of an in-depth interview style versus a survey but time did not allow this. However, the results obtained from the survey answer the main focus of the project because they identify what housing is needed and what housing the youth prefer.

This report contains only a small representation of the statistics that could be extracted from the large amount of data collected. Researchers interested in querying the survey results are invited to contact Boyle Street Community Services.

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- ◆ Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Homelessness
- ◆ Boyle Street Community Services
- ◆ Boyle Street Education Center
- ◆ Inner City Youth Housing Project
- ◆ George Spady Center
- ◆ Bissell Center
- ◆ Chimo Association
- ◆ YMCA
- ◆ Bruce Campbell Learning Center / Boys and Girls Club– West Edmonton Mall
- ◆ Peter Smyth
- ◆ Mustard Seed Church
- ◆ Herb Jamieson Centre
- ◆ Hope Mission – youth trailers
- ◆ Old Strathcona Youth Co-op

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Study Rationale

From January 16 until February 15, 2006, I researched the issues surrounding youth homelessness. The youth I researched were aged 12 to 24. Part of my research entailed talking with youth in the youth unit at Boyle Street Community Services as well as other various drop-in centers through out Edmonton. I also interviewed key informants in the field of youth service providers – namely Tess Slavik, Peter Smyth, Irene Kerr, Karen Bruno and Michael Jewers. I asked these key informants their perspective on the current situation surrounding youth homelessness and the type and amount of housing needed. They generally agreed on the causes of youth homelessness and the need for a substantial amount of new housing. There were some differences of opinion on the type of housing that should be provided.

Another important issue was to see how many of the homeless youth actually had child welfare status opposed to those who do not have any status. For those who do not have status, the concern lies in how the youth provide for themselves in regard to housing and financial assistance. As the report will show, it is clear that homeless youth without child welfare status need safer housing and more assistance. A concern voiced by the youth during the survey distribution was the common complaint that they would not see any results from this survey and furthermore, they would like the agencies to have a copy of the final report on hand so that they can access the final outcome. All of the youth, though skeptical, hoped that the report would lead to new housing.

This research is not about gathering academic evidence that supports theory on youth homelessness. Rather, the data gathered is used for the purpose of acting as a voice for both the youth and the youth agencies to advocate for change in the youth housing facilities.

Voluntary Participation and Confidentiality

All participants were informed that the survey was confidential and voluntary. Participants were given a \$5.00 gift certificate from Tim Horton's for taking the time to fill out the survey. It should be noted that without the gift certificates the survey would not have been as successful, as the youth were more eager to take part if they were given something in return. Also, the youth proved to be more truthful in their responses when they knew they were getting a gift for their time. Therefore it is recommended that future researchers and surveyors to come armed with some kind of compensation.

Study Design and Methodology

A five-page survey with 40 questions was administered at various youth agencies through out Edmonton. Some of the questions were open-ended, some yes/no, and some multiple choice. Important questions that were asked were

- What type of housing would you prefer?
- Do you have child welfare status?
- Where do you shower, get food, get clothing, do your laundry?
- What main features would you like to see in a housing facility?
- What helps you cope to get through an average day?
- Do you have a day program?
- What is the most positive and the most negative influence you have had in your life?

The survey, on average, took 10 to 15 minutes per person. The agencies chosen to execute the survey were those that experience a high volume of homeless youth through out the day. The survey was given out to the agencies at the start of the week, with a sweep designed for a Thursday in which four hired youth peer surveyors and two supervisors went to various youth shelters to give out the survey with in shifts from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 4 to 8 p.m. All of the surveys that were given out at the start of the week were collected that following Monday. A total of 106 surveys were filled out. While 106 surveys is not a close representation of the actual number of youth that are homeless, the population captured during the week is a representation of the core of the homeless youth population.

FINDINGS

A. Demographic Data

The responses that the youth provided in the survey were personal and very particular, and therefore provided deeper insight into the issues that they are struggling with. Over the course of the survey, 106 youth participated with ages ranging from 14 to 22 years old, the mean age being 19. Out of these youth, 48% were female while 51% were male. Furthermore, 51% of were Aboriginal. While 67% of the population surveyed did not have child welfare status, 57% reported having previous involvement with child welfare.

B. Housing Available For Youth

As it stands, the following list contains all of the emergency housing in Edmonton available to youth without child welfare status. The following beds are available to all adults aged 18 and over:

- ◆ YMCA: 18+ and families: 106 rooms with **112** beds.
- ◆ George Spady Centre for intoxicated individuals: 80 beds + 21 beds in detox = **101** beds
- ◆ Herb Jamieson Centre: men 18+: **255** mats at capacity
- ◆ Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre, 18+: **75** beds

Total beds available for adults aged 18+: 442

The following youth beds have an upper age limit of 21 or lower:

- ◆ Hope Mission Youth Shelter for under 21 years: **30** mats
- ◆ Inner City Youth Housing Project: 12-18: **29** beds
- ◆ Y.E.S.S: under 21 years: **54** beds
- ◆ Catholic Social Services: Safe house: 13-19yrs.: **7** beds

Total beds restricted to youth under 21: 221

C. Shelters Being Utilized

55% of the youth surveyed are absolutely homeless, meaning they have no fixed address. Out of the housing options available to them, the largest group (34%) sleep in the youth trailers operated by Hope Mission, while the rest of the population that was surveyed reported sleeping at:

- ◆ Friend's place: 17%
- ◆ Own apartment: 16%
- ◆ Street: 15%
- ◆ Group Home: 10%
- ◆ Inner City Youth Housing Project (ICYHP): 9.5%
- ◆ Family member's place: 8%
- ◆ Hostel: 5.6%
- ◆ Girlfriend's place: 4.7%
- ◆ Youth Emergency Shelter Society (Y.E.S.S): 4.7%
- ◆ Herb Jamieson: 4.4%
- ◆ George Spady Centre: 2.83%
- ◆ CSS safe house: 2.3%
- ◆ WEAC: 2.17%
- ◆ Other: 1.89%
- ◆ Supported Independent Living (S.I.L): 1.89%
- ◆ Boyfriend's place: 1.89%

The average duration of stay at any of these housing facilities is approximately one month. When asked if the youth had to pay anything to stay where they are, 75% reported that they pay nothing. Other forms of payment reported were: paying with money (16%), hustling (10%), boosting (6%), other (5%), welfare (3%), trading room and board for sex (3%), or babysitting (1%).

D. Facility Restrictions

Nearly half (45%) of the youth surveyed stated that their housing is very likely to change. The youth reported that the shelters available are unable to provide desired facilities like showers, laundry, and storage, but that they do provide a warm place to sleep. Moreover, most of the youth reported that cleanliness is an issue in the facilities, with the highest amount of complaints about the youth trailers and WEAC.

A few youth also stated that the majority of shelters available cause their allergies and asthma to flare up. They feel that making showers and laundry facilities available could help reduce this problem. Most of the youth do have a place to shower, with the majority going to the Bissell and Y.E.S.S. because these two venues also provide laundry facilities. However, some reported that tokens are required and that they have to book at least one day in advance for these facilities, which serves as an inconvenience as their schedules are not that structured.

E. Facilities Meeting Basic Needs

Four questions were asked in regard to where the youth shower, do their laundry, obtain food, and obtain clothing. The answers were as follows:

Where do you shower?

106 youth surveyed answered:

- Own apartment: 18
- ICYHP/Group Home/CSS safe house: 16
- Friend's place: 13
- Hope Mission: 12
- Family member's place: 11
- Bissell center: 9
- Various Shelters: 7
- Nowhere: 7
- Herb Jamieson: 4
- Boyfriend's place: 4
- YMCA: 3
- WEAC: 2
- Intox center: 1

Where do you do your laundry?

97 of the youth surveyed answered:

- ICYHP/Group Home/CSS safe house: 17
- Bissell Center: 15
- Family member's place: 12
- Own apartment: 9
- Friend's place: 9
- Various Shelters: 7
- Nowhere: 7
- Laundromat: 6
- Boyfriend's/Girlfriend's place: 4
- George Spady: 3
- WEAC: 2
- YMCA: 2
- Herb Jamieson: 1

Where do you get your food?

106 youth surveyed responded:

- ICYHP/Group Home/CSS safe house: 18
- Store: 17
- Mustard Seed: 13

- Anywhere I can: 10
- Hope Mission: 8
- Boyle Street: 8
- Family: 6
- Steal: 4
- Friends: 4
- WEAC: 2
- Cunningham: 1

Where do you get your clothing from?

86 youth surveyed responded:

- Store/buy it: 21
- Steal: 12
- Anywhere I can: 12
- Friends: 10
- ICYHP/Group Home/CSS safe house: 8
- Family: 5
- Shelters: 4
- Bissell: 3
- Strathcona Youth Co-op: 3
- Boyle Street co-op: 3
- Mustard Seed: 2
- Social Worker: 2

F. Desired Housing

The desired housing of choice was private/own home (52%) while the second highest desired housing was Supported Independent Living (S.I.L) (20%). The complaint about S.I.L was that the criteria for living was too strict and that if the criteria were adjusted to more lenient terms, then the number of youth wanting S.I.L would increase.

Analysis of the results shows an apparent correlation between the type of housing desired by youth and their current housing situation: see Appendix 2. For example, the only youth who expressed a preference for staying in a shelter or hostel were those who were already doing so.

G. Safety

Surprisingly, out of the youth surveyed, 54% of the youth said that they feel absolutely safe where they are staying. 23% reported that they felt somewhat safe, 15% reported that they felt somewhat unsafe and 6% reported that they felt absolutely unsafe. The majority reported feeling safe where they are staying. 42% stated that controlled entrances are needed in any housing facility for safety.

H. Desired Features in Housing

The following desired features were chosen from a list of possible features:

- ◆ Laundry – 84%
- ◆ Showers – 83%
- ◆ Refrigerators – 60%
- ◆ Private Rooms – 58%
- ◆ Meals provided – 58%
- ◆ Transportation help – 54%
- ◆ Recreation center – 52%
- ◆ Cooking facilities – 52%
- ◆ Relaxed curfews – 52%
- ◆ Tolerance and understanding – 50%
- ◆ Computers – 50%
- ◆ Staff that have experience with street life – 48%
- ◆ Someone to talk to – 48%
- ◆ Storage facility – 45%
- ◆ Safety/controlled entrances – 43%
- ◆ Youth Worker on site – 41%
- ◆ Employment Center – 40%
- ◆ No pressure/expectations – 40%
- ◆ Counseling available on site – 40%
- ◆ Information on assistance available – 39%
- ◆ Learning center – 39%
- ◆ Dorm Style Beds – 38%
- ◆ Allowed to come in drunk/high – 38%
- ◆ Detox services – 38%
- ◆ Social Worker on site – 36%
- ◆ On site caretaker/manager – 34%
- ◆ Mental Health Worker on site – 31%
- ◆ Shared Bedrooms – 23%
- ◆ No programs – 17%

I. Relationships

When asked about the most positive and negative influences the youth reported having in their life, the majority (75%) reported some type of relationship. The most positive influence that the majority of youth reported having in their life was a family member and “new, non-street” friends. The most negative influence that the majority reported having in their life was drugs and “old street friends.” When asked if they were hopeful/positive about their future, 80% responded that they were.

J. Coping

Youth were asked what helps them to cope through an average day. They reported the following:

- ◆ Friends – 60%
- ◆ Music – 60%
- ◆ Drugs – 41%
- ◆ Family – 32%
- ◆ Community Services such as Boyle Street Community Services, Old Strathcona Youth Co-op etc. – 23%
- ◆ Other (responses consisted of faith, school, work, exercise, and reading) 22%
- ◆ Alcohol - 19%
- ◆ Prayer – 14%
- ◆ Social Worker – 5%

K. Main Causes of Homelessness

The main causes of homelessness reported consisted of the following:

- ◆ Poor personal choices (46%)
- ◆ Drugs/alcohol (30%)
- ◆ Family members (25%)
- ◆ Family environment (24%)
- ◆ Criminal activity (24%)

The majority of the youth stated that they turn to drugs, alcohol, and criminal activity to “make it on the street” and provide for themselves given the lack of available assistance. The majority also commented that assistance programs that do not require child welfare status are needed. Also of importance was the number of young mothers who attributed their heavy involvement in drugs as the direct result of their children being taken away from them. They stated that they would like to be given more of a chance in the “system” and be given the opportunity to work with services available for mothers as well as families before their children are taken away.

L. Other Issues

An interview with four of the youth hired to help administer the survey resulted in the following issues being presented by them.

1. A reason stated for why a large number stay in the youth trailers was the low level of commitment required in the trailers. The youth stated that all they have to do to stay in a trailer is to be there by 2 a.m., as opposed to other housing facilities that have

much more strict criteria. However, they also suggested that they would like to see a 2:30 a.m. curfew instead of 2.

2. Another concern voiced by these youth in regard to the trailers was the age criteria. They stated that a few times they have seen someone who is older than the rest of the patrons in the trailer get kicked out when a younger individual comes to the trailer in need of shelter. They felt this was discrimination, and also stated that because that type of situation happens often, a larger shelter is needed.
3. The youth also stated that they do not want to see any more room and board housing. They dislike this housing the most and find it very impersonal. They stated that this type of housing caters to the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of a street kid.
4. They expressed a desire for a larger housing facility. The four youth hired stated that they all sleep in the youth trailers. They suggested a housing facility that has at least 60 beds. It must be remembered that these young people’s expectations are related directly to their experiences. Whether this number of beds in a single facility is realistic or not, they feel it is important to understand the need for a much greater supply of acceptable housing.
5. They suggested that the Hope Mission be cleaned more regularly, and that in general, all of the housing facilities should be cleaned and inspected for cleanliness.
6. The stereotype of being a “street kid” follows them to the shelters. Therefore they request that staff who are in the shelters be less judgmental and more “on their team.” For instance, they stated that if they go into the Herb Jamieson, they get patted down and asked what they have on them. This makes them feel resentful of the staff and feel that these staff members are scrutinizing them as opposed to understanding them and genuinely caring.
7. With regard to barriers that exist within the homeless youth community, the common complaint was that there is a lack of transportation. The youth raised the idea of a “buddy system.” They suggested that if they got hired at a job but had no way of getting to the location, then a system by which someone can pick them up along with other workers who have a problem getting to work should be provided. This would provide them with a guaranteed way of getting to work and showing that they are responsible. They stated that it is hard to feel inspired to find work when they know that transportation will be a problem. The males also stated that there is a lot of work available in Nisku right now, but it is a waste of time to try to apply because even if they get hired, there is no way of getting to work and thus they feel helpless.
8. Another major concern was that lack of identification makes it difficult to obtain a job. The youth felt that their legal issues prevented them from getting both a job and identification. The majority of employers and employment agencies require government-issued identification, which they frequently cannot obtain.

CONCLUSIONS

Almost all of the youth surveyed agreed that better youth housing is needed in Edmonton. It is clear from the results that not all youth are able to meet their basic hygiene needs, due to lack of knowledge of available facilities as well as the lack of facilities available. However, this population is resourceful, and therefore the majority are able to get by living on the street.

It is apparent that multi-faceted facilities are needed for youth housing. The current facilities are working, but are not providing a place where the youth can find food, clothing, shower facilities, laundry facilities and a safe place to stay all in one. That is the type of facility that is desired.

What is also apparent throughout the youth population is their sense of community as well as pride. I went into the research with the expectation that these youth must feel sadness and despair on a daily basis because their needs are not being met. In fact that was not that case at all. These youth are resourceful and independent and will not let much stand in their way.

For those youth who want help, they take the initiative to try to obtain it. For those who do not want help, it is about falling into the right group and observing how that group survives on a day-to-day basis. They help themselves by integrating into street culture and learning the skills that they need to survive day to day from other youth who have been surviving on the streets for some time.

Appendix 1: Population Size and Sample Composition

The agencies involved in the survey gave me an estimate of how many youth they see in a day. The use of cluster sampling means that survey respondents do not represent a random sample of the population, so tests of statistical significance cannot be used. However, the following figures suggest that a substantial portion of the population was surveyed and a varied sample was obtained.

- ◆ Boyle Street Community Services: 40-60 youth/day: 12 surveyed
- ◆ Boyle Street Education Center: 120: 12 surveyed
- ◆ Inner City Youth Housing Project: 29: 20 surveyed
- ◆ George Spady Center: 3: 2 surveyed
- ◆ Bissell Center: 7 youth/day : 9 youth surveyed
- ◆ Chimo Association: 3/week: 3 surveyed
- ◆ YMCA: average 60 staying: 8 surveyed
- ◆ Bruce Campbell Learning Center / Boys and Girls Club– West Edmonton Mall: 60 youth average: 11 surveyed
- ◆ Mustard Seed Church: 20 youth/ night
- ◆ Herb Jamieson- surveyed the youth in the trailers: youth 18+/day: 20.
- ◆ Hope Mission – youth trailers: 30 youth average: 15 surveyed
- ◆ Old Strathcona Youth Co-op: 40 youth average: 10 surveyed
- ◆ iHuman: 65 kids average: none surveyed
- ◆ Y.E.S.S: 30 youth average: none surveyed
- ◆ Public Library: 30 youth average/evening: 7 surveyed

Total surveyed: 106

Total population (estimated from information supplied by agencies): 561

Appendix 2: Type of Housing Wanted by Current Housing Situation

Current Housing Situation	Type of Housing Wanted								Grand Total
	Housing with programs	Parental home	Private/ own home	Room and board	Shared housing	Shelter/ Hostel	Supported Independent Living	Not Sure	
Group Home	1		4		1		4		10
ICYHP		2	2				4	1	9
Own Apartment			12	1			1	1	15
Supported Independent Living			2						2
Multiple/no fixed address	3	1	11	4		1	3	7	30
Shelter/Hostel	1		13	2	2	8	3		29
Friend/Relative			8		1		2		11
Grand Total	5	3	52	7	4	9	17	9	106