

Our communities, our youth

New report looks at the health of homeless and street-involved youth across BC

McCreary Centre Society has today published the results of a survey looking at the health of 12 to 19 year olds who are homeless, precariously housed, or involved in a street lifestyle.

As in 2006 when the survey was last conducted, Aboriginal youth were over-represented among homeless and street-involved youth in BC (53% of survey respondents). Other marginalized groups of youth who were over-represented included sexual minority youth, youth with a mental health condition, and youth who had been through the government care system.

The report shows that youth most commonly first became homeless or street-involved when they were 13 or 14 years old, although more than a quarter (28%) first became homeless at a younger age.

The most common reasons youth gave for becoming homeless or street-involved were not getting along with their parents and/or being kicked out of home. The rates of both of these increased from when the survey was last conducted, as did the percentage who left home because of violence or abuse within the home (15% in 2006 vs. 24% in 2014).

Youth who were surveyed were dealing with enormous challenges in their lives, yet more than two thirds (68%) were currently in school and over half (51%) of these youth planned to go into post-secondary education. In addition, over a third of males (35%) and 26% of females worked at a legal job, and 12% worked at least 21 hours a week. As well, 37% volunteered in their community since becoming homeless.

"I think the results speak to the resilience we see among this group of youth who have dealt with some incredible systemic and personal challenges in their lives and continue to do so, yet they are engaging in their school and community and looking for opportunities to help others." Annie Smith, Executive Director, McCreary Centre Society.

As in 2006 when the survey was last conducted, the most common services or programs youth reported needing more of in their community were safe and affordable housing, job training or work experience, safe houses, shelters or transitional housing, and youth centres.

McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to the health of BC youth through research, evaluation and community-based projects.

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BACKGROUNDER

The 2014 *Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey (HSIYS)* captured information from 681 youth living in 13 diverse communities across British Columbia between October 2014 and January 2015. The communities were Abbotsford/Mission, Burnaby, Chilliwack, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo, Nelson, North Shore, Prince George, Prince Rupert, Surrey, Vancouver, and Victoria.

This is the third time McCreary has conducted this survey. Previous surveys were conducted in 2000 and 2006. The results provide important information about risk and protective factors among BC youth who are homeless, precariously housed, or involved in a street lifestyle.

As in previous years, experiential youth were involved throughout the process, from survey development and delivery to interpretation of the findings. When asked what people should do with the survey results, these youth hoped the report would be used to:

- Improve the lives of youth, and particularly Aboriginal youth, at risk of homelessness or currently homeless
- Help raise awareness about youth homelessness and the challenges young people face
- Improve youth's knowledge of and access to services
- Ensure services can identify gaps and places they can improve
- Highlight what is working

One said "*I hope the results let people know not all homeless youth use drugs or alcohol, and that the number who do is dropping.*"

A selection of key findings

Females were more likely to report being homeless because they had experienced violence or abuse at home (29% vs. 18% of males), whereas males were more likely to be homeless because they could not find a job (16% vs. 10% of females).

There were no changes in rates of physical and/or sexual abuse victimization between 2006 and 2014. When asked specifically if they had ever been sexually abused, 13% of males and 56% of females recognized that they had been.

Youth reported high incidences of family challenges including a family history of government care, mental health challenges, substance use problems, and among Aboriginal youth an intergenerational history of residential school placements. The percentage of youth reporting that both of their parents had a mental illness was five times higher than in 2006 (15% vs. 3%).

Sixty-eight percent of youth (62% of males vs. 72% of females) reported having at least one mental health condition, 42% had seriously considered suicide in the past year, and almost a third (31%) had attempted suicide.

Youth with mental health challenges were more likely to come in contact with the police. For example, 40% of youth with a mental health condition had been searched by police in the past

year (compared to 31% without a mental health condition). In addition, youth with FASD were more likely to have been arrested (51% vs. 29% of those without the condition).

In the past year, 26% of youth missed out on needed medical care, and a third (26% of males vs. 38% of females) had not accessed needed mental health services. Youth who had stayed in the most precarious housing situations were more likely to report missing out on care.

There were some improvements in substance use in comparison to 2006, with youth more likely to have waited until they were 15 or older to try alcohol or marijuana, and less likely to have used tobacco and other substances (including ecstasy, heroin, and crystal meth). However, almost 1 in 10 youth (9%) had been refused substance use treatment, most commonly because the program they were trying to access was full.

Not all health risk behaviours improved. For example, the percentage of youth who used a condom or other barrier the last time they had sex decreased (43% vs. 61% in 2006; among youth who ever had intercourse).

More than half of youth (55%) reported having a pet. Caring for a pet was linked to youth being in school and not experimenting with a number of substances.

Among youth who were currently attending school, the majority felt connected to school. These youth were more likely than their peers who did not feel connected to rate their mental health and/or current life circumstances as good or excellent.

Other protective factors were also identified. For example, youth who felt connected to their community were less likely than their peers to have missed out on accessing needed mental health care in the past year (20% vs. 39% who did not feel connected) and were more likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent (64% vs. 42%).

A copy of the report which is titled "*Our communities, our youth: The health of homeless and street-involved youth in BC*" can be obtained at www.mcs.bc.ca. Webinar presentations of the findings are scheduled for Thursday, July 23rd at 9 am and 2 pm; Friday, July 24th at 8:30 am; Tuesday, July 28th at 10 am and 3 pm; and Thursday, July 30th at noon. Details are available at www.mcs.bc.ca.

Claymation videos made by youth researchers as part of the project can be found on our YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/mccrearycentre.