

**HOUSING STREET YOUTH: A VANCOUVER CASE STUDY**

by

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B.E.S. (Honours, Co-op) The University of Waterloo, 1992

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF**

**THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF ARTS (PLANNING)**

in

**THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**School of Community and Regional Planning**

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

September 1994

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Date SEPTEMBER 30/94

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the housing environment faced by street youth in the City of Vancouver. It seeks to understand the housing needs of street youth, to identify the barriers encountered in accessing housing, to identify and evaluate their housing options, and to examine the provincial and municipal government roles in providing housing for street youth.

This thesis defines a street youth as an individual between the ages of 12 and 18 who has either chosen to leave or been thrown out of their family home for a minimum of two days, is involved in street related activities, and sleeps in inappropriate accommodations or has no shelter at all. The terms street youth and homeless youth are used interchangeably because the qualities which are absent from an individual's living environment - privacy, security, stability and access to support services - are also absent from the various living situations in which street youth find themselves.

The methodology undertaken to complete this thesis is a literature review and a case study of Vancouver's street youth. The literature review provides background information on the general subject of homelessness, and specifically, the reasons why youth choose to live a life on the street and the lifestyle they lead once on the street. The empirical component of the research consists of interviews with service providers and street youth.

The interview results clearly reveal that two interrelated problem areas exist in the broad issue of street youth and housing. These areas are first, the state care system, both its form and manner of service provision, and second, accessibility to market housing - social, economic and political

factors which affect a youth's ability to secure housing. An issue common to both problem areas, and perpetuating the problems in each, is the lack of value and respect society gives to youth.

A 'continuum of housing' model is proposed which takes into account the family backgrounds common to many street youth, the types of lifestyle they lead while on the street, and the problems associated with state-provided and market housing. In addition, recommendations are provided which centre on advocacy and service-coordinating bodies, attitude changes, additional housing facilities, landlord-tenant relationships, government assistance eligibility criteria, and funding.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began this thesis out of a feeling that young people should not be living on the street, and I now end this work with a much fuller understanding of the myriad of struggles street youth face in their every day lives. I am indebted to all the people who shared with me their knowledge and experiences, and provided guidance and encouragement along the way, for without their help, this thesis could not have been completed.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Jill Davidson, a planner with the City of Vancouver, who from the beginning provided me with research materials, guidance, insightful comments, and most importantly, her time. I would also like to thank Dr. Penny Gurstein, my thesis supervisor, for her guidance and reassurance that I was on the right track.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Christopher Graham who shared with me his experiences with street youth, and helped me understand all of what it means to be a street youth.

I also owe a sincere thank you to all the service providers and youth I interviewed for the time they gave me talking about an issue close to their heart. Finally, I would like to thank my family, long time friend Huyen Nguyen, and fellow planning students for the support and encouragement they provided during the undertaking of my thesis.

## PREFACE

They sleep in stairwells or abandoned buildings, huddle on hot air vents or cram together in tiny hotel rooms.

They eat poorly, suffer colds and flu, and turn to theft, panhandling and prostitution to survive.

Some of them are fleeing sexual and physical abuse at home, some are running away from foster or group homes and some are just drawn to the freedom and bright lights of the street.

They're homeless kids and they have no place to go.

(Kines, Lindsay. "Plight of street kids: no safety net to save them."  
*Vancouver Sun*. January 29, 1993, p. B1, B7.)

This is the plight of many street entrenched youth. There are as many reasons for their existence on the street as there are street youth. For these youth, the fear of living on the street is less threatening than the fear of living in their home. It is this population group and their struggle to locate and secure housing that provides the focus of this thesis.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the housing environment faced by street youth in the City of Vancouver. It seeks to understand the housing needs of street youth, to identify the barriers encountered in accessing housing, to identify and evaluate their housing options, and to examine the provincial and municipal government roles in providing housing for street youth.

Homelessness is a global problem. It affects both young and old, singles and families, and people of all races. An accurate enumeration of homeless people does not exist either at a global, national or local level. The various definitions given to the term homeless, the transient nature of homeless people, and their ability to remain hidden create difficulties in determining population counts.

Researchers note that the issue of homelessness becomes more of a public problem when the homeless become more visible (Harris, 1991). When the numbers of homeless are reduced, or when 'solutions' are found to keep them out of sight, society is less bothered by them, although the lives of the homeless are still as difficult or poverty-stricken as before. It is only when society sees the homeless on a daily basis that mainstream society becomes much more aghast and concerned about the problem of homelessness.

In Canada, homelessness is a concern to both economic and social planners. From an economic standpoint, the support services provided to the homeless create a financial strain on the nation's social system. The cost of providing band-aid services (e.g. Income Assistance) which attempt to fix an existing social problem far exceeds the cost of providing preventative measures (e.g. educating school children about the reality of street life) which reduce the potential of an event

occurring. In a special report produced by the *Vancouver Sun* focusing on child poverty, it was stated that although a “cost-benefit analysis of poverty is an iffy exercise” because too many variables exist to properly forecast how a child who begins life with disadvantages will fare later in life, “to ignore the causes of the problem is just false economy” (Pynn and Sarti, 1994: B12). Emphasizing the need for preventative planning programs, Statistics Canada figures are provided which state that:

- “every dollar spent on pre-school programs saves more than \$4 in later costs;
- one male high school dropout will earn \$149,000 less in his lifetime and collect more than \$10,000 extra in welfare and unemployment benefits. Over a 20-year period, from 1990 to 2010, the cost of dropouts to Canadian society will be an estimated \$14 billion in lost income and \$620 million in more unemployment insurance benefits; and
- federal subsidies for programs for low-income children in foster care, group homes and residential treatment centres came to \$800 million in one recent study, or \$16,000 per child per year” (Pynn and Sarti, 1994: B12).

Although this article centres on child poverty, the statistics provided can be applied to support the premise that reactive measures to solving homelessness are much more costly than preventative measures. Unfortunately, governments use short-term budgetary constraints as a rationale for eliminating preventative programs for children and youth.

Recognizing Canada’s social orientation and the need to assist those who are less fortunate, homelessness is a concern to social planners. To maintain a healthy nation, there is a need to ensure that all members of society have access to the basics - shelter, food and clothing. It can be argued that youth deserve special attention because they are tomorrow’s leaders and family role models.

In the last decade, the number of homeless persons on North American metropolitan streets has visibly increased. Among researchers studying specifically the phenomenon of homeless youth,

and service providers who work with street youth on a daily basis, there is a growing awareness that the numbers of street youth are increasing, and the ages of these youth are becoming younger. As noted by service providers in Vancouver, these two trends have also been observed within the City's street youth population.

Concurrent with the visible increase in homeless persons has been the increase in research on homelessness. However, it appears that only within the past five years has research begun to focus on street youth. The body of literature on street youth is centred around two research areas - the reasons leading youth to the street and their lifestyle once on the street. Very little research examines the issue of street youth and housing. In answering the research question, this thesis examines the pertinent pieces of legislation which affect youth in their search for housing, the adequacy of state-provided and market housing, and the appropriateness of state-provided facilities.

In literature discussing homelessness, the terms 'street youth' and 'homeless youth' are often used interchangeably. However, their correct usage and desired synonymy is dependent upon the definitions applied to each term. This thesis defines a street youth as a person between the ages of 12 and 18 who has either chosen to leave or been thrown out of their family home for a minimum of two days, is involved in street related activities, and sleeps in inappropriate accommodations or has no shelter at all. The terms street youth and homeless youth are used synonymously in this thesis because the qualities which are absent from an individual's living environment - privacy, security, stability and access to support services - are also absent from the various living situations in which street youth find themselves.

The continued and increasing existence of homeless youth on metropolitan downtown streets implicitly demonstrates that a problem exists in mainstream society such that adolescents are choosing to leave their family home to seek out a life on the street. While it is critical to examine the home environment of these youth, and to implement preventative measures such that the youth's departure from the family home can be averted, reactive steps must be taken to help those youth who have fled their home and are struggling to survive on the street. Although this thesis focuses directly on the issue of housing, it is recognized that the lives of street youth are varied and complex, and to create truly effective solutions integrated measures are required.

## **1.2 Method**

The methodology applied to complete this thesis is a literature review and a case study of Vancouver's street youth. The literature review includes a general discussion on who are the homeless and the extent of homelessness. It then looks specifically at street youth and discusses how they have come to arrive at their present situation, why youth choose to live a street lifestyle, and the lifestyle they lead once on the street.

The case study is an empirical study of the housing environment faced by street youth in the City of Vancouver. To understand the reasons why youth are on the street and not utilizing existing state-provided or market housing, a series of interviews were undertaken. The housing issue was examined from two perspectives - the service provider and the youth. It was anticipated that by examining the issue from both perspectives, a complete and unbiased understanding of the housing issue could be achieved.

The service providers perspective was achieved through interviews with government employees involved in various capacities with youth in care, front-line outreach workers, municipal planners, and individuals involved in organizations concerned with serving the needs of youth. In addition to discussing the barriers facing youth in securing housing, service providers also commented on an 'ideal' continuum of housing.

With the help of municipal planners and front-line service providers, interviews were held with street youth currently experiencing difficulties in securing housing and youth who had extricated themselves from street life.

The conclusions of this thesis are based upon an analysis of the qualitative data obtained through the two sets of interviews.

### **1.3 Limitations**

The findings of this thesis are specific to Vancouver. However, the findings may be useful to other North American cities possessing a street youth population and a housing environment characterized by state-provided and market accommodations.

The views expressed by the youth interviewed in this thesis are not characteristic of all street youth in Vancouver. The youth perspective obtained in this thesis is typical of some Downtown Eastside street youth. While these youth form only one sub-group of Vancouver's street youth population, their opinions and experiences provide valuable insight into the issue of street youth and housing.

#### **1.4 Organization**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the issue of homelessness and street youth, and outlines the purpose, relevance of the research, and research methodology.

Chapter 2 provides background information regarding both the larger issue of homelessness and the specific sub-group of street youth. It defines the broad terms of ‘homelessness’ and ‘street youth’, outlines the extent of homelessness in North America, and examines in depth the reasons why youth turn to the street and the lifestyle they lead once on the street.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion on the growth of research focusing on street youth. It examines three recent reports which centre specifically on street youth in Vancouver. The roles of the Provincial and Municipal governments in providing housing for street youth and a recent history of the City’s involvement in the issue of housing for street youth are outlined. The various housing services available to street youth in Vancouver are described.

A summary of the interviews with the service providers and youth is presented in Chapter 4. The problems inherent in legislation, the inappropriateness of the services provided, and the manner of service provision are discussed from both perspectives.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by providing a brief summary of the struggles faced by youth in accessing housing. Recommendations are provided which centre on advocacy and service-coordinating bodies, attitude changes, additional housing facilities, landlord-tenant relationships, government assistance eligibility criteria, and funding. In addition, a 'continuum of housing' model is presented.

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## **CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING WHO ARE THE HOMELESS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides background information on both the general issue of homelessness and specifically the family histories and lifestyles of street youth - a sub-group of the larger homeless population. It is crucial to develop this base knowledge as it enables one to recognize and understand the underlying factors affecting youth in their struggle to secure housing.

### **2.2 What is Homelessness?**

It is imperative to look beyond their presence on the street and to understand the how and why they have arrived at their present situation. To understand who are the homeless, it is critical to first define homelessness. There has been little consensus among decision-makers, researchers, government agencies, and housing organizations as to a specific definition of homeless, yet the definition given to the word has a significant impact on research, enumeration, and policy creation.

No single causal factor exists which exclusively or successfully explains why people have become homeless. Rather, homelessness is linked to a complex set of conditions which are affecting a growing spectrum of society. Oberlander and Fallick (1987: 11) state that homelessness “appears to be a predominantly urban centred, socio-economic and physical shelter problem, deeply rooted in regional disparities, and closely related to opportunities for meaningful economic participation.”

In various regions across Canada, the severity of the homeless situation has ranged from being traditionally chronic to “spatially and temporally episodic” (Oberlander and Fallick, 1987: 11).

Even during periods of economic prosperity and social reform, homelessness has continued to be a strong element in our urban environment.

Homelessness results from the convergence of social, economic, political and physical factors which combine in different ways, and in different spatial and temporal scales (Oberlander and Fallick, 1987). Oberlander and Fallick (1987:11) state that the main precipitants of homelessness in Canada are:

- “unemployment, underemployment and unemployability,
- poverty,
- lack of affordable housing,
- the breakdown of the traditional family structure,
- inadequacies and inequities in the provision of social welfare,
- lack of diversified community support systems for the deinstitutionalized, and
- displacement occasioned by urban revitalization.”

The concept of homelessness is more complex than individuals living on the street. It has a range of meanings stretching from encountering accommodation difficulties, living in a hostel or shelter, having no permanent address, to complete shelterlessness. It includes individuals using makeshift quarters such as sleeping on a friend’s floor, tripling up in someone’s apartment until evicted, and moving from emergency shelter to emergency shelter.

Watson and Austerberry (1986) note that a problem with the concept of homelessness is the notion of a home. A house is synonymous with a dwelling or a physical structure, where as a home implies certain social relationships and activities within a physical building. The home as a social concept is strongly linked with the notion of family, conjuring images of warmth, comfort, stability, and security; it carries a meaning beyond the simple notion of shelter.

In an attempt to incorporate the notion of a home and the diverse causes of homelessness, Oberlander and Fallick (1988: 11) have broadly defined homelessness as “[t]he absence of a

continuing or permanent home over which individuals and families have personal control and which provides the essential needs of shelter, privacy and security at an affordable cost, together with ready access to social, economic and cultural public services.”

### **2.3 Who is a Street Youth?**

While a ‘typical street youth’ does not exist, there are patterns and characteristics which apply in varying degrees to most street youth. Sub-groups of street youth have been distinguished by the pathways which have led them into a street lifestyle, the length of time they have survived on the street, and the types(s) of income generating activities they participate in while on the street. Commonly, researchers have interchangeably used the terms ‘street youth’, ‘street kids’, ‘street involved’, ‘runaways’, ‘homeless’, and ‘youth involved in prostitution’ to refer to the same population cohort (McCullagh and Greco, 1990; Rothman, 1991). Rothman (1991: 1) explicitly states that the term ‘street kids’ is used in various pieces of literature as a pseudonym for ‘homeless’. However, in applying these various labels to this population group confusion is created. Street youth are not a homogeneous group, rather they are a varied and multi-faceted group of individuals. Street youth form one population group, and individually, they possess different characteristics such as being runaways, homeless, and/or street involved (e.g. participating in prostitution, drug trafficking, petty theft).

Some definitions do exist which attempt to describe a street youth. In a City of Vancouver Administrative Report (January 29, 1993: 2), street kids are defined as ‘male or female youth living on the streets in Vancouver’s urban core and who are deeply involved in street related activities such as prostitution, drugs and/or alcohol abuse, street crime and the general street scene.’ A definition of street kid used by the Downtown South Area Services Team/Youth

Housing Subcommittee (February 10, 1993: 1) is a youth “16 years of age and older, and not in need of child protective services.”

In a recent report completed by Tonkin et al. (1994: 3) which examined and compared the health status and risk behaviours of Vancouver’s street youth to mainstream youth, the researchers surveyed 110 Vancouver street youth. The criteria applied which determined the youth’s eligibility to participate in the study were the following: the youth had to be under the age of 19, and was using or had used a street youth agency, or satisfied two of the following conditions: 1) had run away or been thrown out of their home for at least a two day period; 2) had dropped out of school; or 3) had ‘hung out’ on the street and participated in a street lifestyle within the past year (e.g. was homeless, panhandled, prostituted, sold or used drugs, engaged in illegal activities). These criteria can be regarded as the Society’s definition of a street youth.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines a homeless youth as “one who has no place of shelter and is in need of services and a shelter where he or she can receive supervision and care” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989, cited in Bass, 1992: 2).

In work completed by Kurtz, Jarvis and Kurtz, homeless youth are defined according to the pathways which have led them to a street lifestyle. These five types include:

1. “Youth who already are members of homeless families and become separated from those families;
2. Youth who leave home to escape physical and sexual abuse;
3. Youth who are thrown out of their homes by parents or guardians;
4. Youth who were removed from or thrown out of their family homes and then ran away from intolerable placements; and
5. Minority youth who immigrated unaccompanied to the United States” (Kurtz, Jarvis and Kurtz, 1991, cited in Bass, 1992: 2).

In addition to being labeled as street youth, this population subgroup has also been referred to as 'street entrenched'. A street entrenched youth is an individual who has more of their needs met on the street than elsewhere (e.g. income through prostitution, drug dealing, and/or theft; personal 'happiness' through substance abuse; shelter through using abandoned buildings).

Under the *Family and Child Service Act*, the British Columbia Ministry of Social Services provides services to youth 18 years of age and under. This Act requires the Ministry to receive either parental permission or a court order to take an individual under the age of 19 into care. An individual who is 19 years of age is legally considered an adult.

Utilizing the above mentioned definitions, recognizing the age limits in which youth can potentially receive support from the Ministry of Social Services, and considering the nature of this thesis, a street youth shall be defined as 'an individual between the ages of 12 and 18 (inclusively), has either chosen to leave or been thrown out of their home for a minimum of two days, is involved in street related activities, and sleeps in substandard accommodations or has no shelter at all.'

Are street youth homeless or simply shelterless? Are youth sleeping in Single-Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels, on the floor of a friend's house, or in an abandoned building considered homeless? Is a youth seeking refuge in a safe house or temporary shelter homeless? In defining the term homelessness, it must mean more than simply the lack of a 'roof over one's head'. As discussed earlier regarding the views of Watson and Austerberry (1986), a home means more than simply shelter. It is critical to incorporate the social relationships and notions attached to a family - warmth, comfort, stability and security - into the definition of homelessness. This paper shall utilize the definition developed by Oberlander and Fallick (1988) as the definition of homelessness.

Restated, homelessness is “[t]he absence of a continuing or permanent home over which individuals and families have personal control and which provides the essential needs of shelter, privacy and security at an affordable cost, together with ready access to social, economic and cultural public services.” Therefore, applying this definition to street youth, it is concluded that street youth are homeless. While a street youth may have a roof over their head, commonly their living environment does not provide the essential needs of privacy, security, stability nor immediate access to support services. A youth in care shall not be referred to as homeless unless their living environment lacks one of the four essential needs (i.e. privacy, security, stability or access to support services).

#### 2.4 The Extent of Homelessness

In terms of general numbers, a reliable and accurate enumeration of homeless people in Canada does not currently exist. Because the homeless are a constantly moving and shifting population, changing with the season, economy, and time of month, it is both difficult and complex to establish reliable estimates (Oberlander and Fallick, 1988). Many homeless are hidden, living in abandoned buildings or sleeping in parks and doorways, while others will not even admit to being homeless.

Traditionally, enumeration has been based upon an address, but the homeless have no address. In addition, enumeration faces the issue of who should be included. If only those who have no shelter are counted, then a low number results, but if individuals who use shelters are included, then a larger estimate results. In 1987, the *National Inquiry on Homelessness* was released estimating the number of homeless in Canada to be between 100,000 and 250,000 (based on those who did not have secure housing and/or whose housing was severely inadequate) (Oberlander and Fallick, 1988: 12-13).

Conclusive information on the numbers and ages of youth on Canadian streets is close to non-existent due to the inherent difficulty in tracking these individuals. Collecting hard data is further complicated when attempts are made to aggregate the data on youth who are runaway, are thrown out, participate in drug use, are involved in prostitution, etc.

Reasons cited for the difficulty in determining a valid enumeration of runaway youth include:

- research is commonly dependent upon incidents being reported to police under a Missing Persons Report procedure. However, this information is not always accurate as often parents/guardians do not inform police when a youth runs away. This situation is particularly true in cases of repeat runners or youth who have been thrown out;
- the absence of a consistent definition of a runaway youth;
- samples are commonly taken of youth who utilize different social services; however, these samples do not include youth who do not use the service(s) provided;
- the majority of surveys undertaken depend upon voluntary participation by the youth. As a result, youth who do not wish to participate are not included in the survey's results;
- researchers alter the definition of a 'street youth' based upon the focus of the study; and
- the underground characteristics of this population. Street youth tend to be highly transient, do not carry identification, and may lie about their true identity for reasons of eluding the law and/or their parents, avoiding unwanted Children's Aid involvement, and the possibility of not receiving social services because they are either too young or too old (McCullagh and Greco, 1990).

Recognizing these factors, it is clear that any enumeration of street youth will underestimate the true situation. In terms of a Canadian estimate, a study undertaken in 1989 found that the number of street youth ranged between 100,000 and 200,000 (Radford et al., cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 25). It was estimated in 1990, that the number of street youth in Vancouver ranged between 300 to 400 at any given time. From this value, it was projected that the number of youth involved in the street over the year was approximately 1000 (City of Vancouver Social Planning Dept., 1990). Based on the nationwide estimate of street youth, the numbers given for Vancouver are approximately 1/10<sup>th</sup> to 1/20<sup>th</sup> of what should be expected. This inconsistency in estimates

either a) illustrates the related problems of definition and enumeration or b) throws the national estimate into doubt.

Based upon the information contained in the literature, it is difficult to conclusively determine if the numbers of street youth are actually greater in 1994 than they were in any previous decade. Although service providers in Vancouver and elsewhere state that the numbers of street youth are increasing, there are three possible explanations which could account for this visible growth in numbers. These include the number of street youth are increasing relative to population growth, street youth are more visible today than they were in the past, and definitions of homelessness are changing to be more inclusive.

## **2.5 Why they turn to the Street**

The pathways leading youth to the street are often indirect, multiple and complex. For many, the decision to enter street life is not intentional; the move to a street lifestyle begins as a run from home, but within a short period of time they become entrenched in the street culture. While not all youth who run become street involved, it is often their 'first rite of passage' into street life (McCullagh and Greco, 1990). The more times a youth runs, the longer they remain away from home, and the farther they travel, all function to increase the youth's risk of severing their family ties and becoming entrenched in the street culture.

McCullagh and Greco (1991: 9) have developed five broad categories to examine the pathways leading to homeless youth. These categories include: 'Runners from' ... intolerable home environments, 'Runners to' ... adventure, Throwaways, Absconders from Children's Aid Society (CAS) care, and Curb-kids. Rothman (1991) notes that the Youth Development Bureau, a branch

of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has established four categories of runaway and homeless youth. The categories created are: *runaways*, those who leave home without parental permission; *push-outs*, those who leave home with parental encouragement; *throwaways*, those who leave home with parental approval and the desire to leave home; and *non-crisis youth*, those who live in a problematic environment, but do not intend to leave. These categories provide a partially different grouping of reasons explaining why youth leave their family home than those developed by McCullagh and Greco. The five categories established by McCullagh and Greco appear to provide a greater range and inclusive set of categories. For this reason, the McCullagh and Greco categories are used for the purposes of this paper. In addition, it is this author's opinion that the Bureau's category of non-crisis youth does not constitute an appropriate category explaining why youth run because the Bureau describes these youth as remaining in their intolerable home environment. Lastly, a sixth category is included - *Ins and outs*. This category has been created in response to a discussion with a City of Vancouver staff member in an attempt to incorporate a newly emerging trend among runaway youth.

The following discussion describes in detail the six categories explaining why youth escape to the street.

*a. Runners from ... intolerable home environments*

A significant amount of research undertaken in the eighties and early nineties indicates that the majority of 'runners from' intolerable home environments come from extremely disturbed and dysfunctional homes. In many situations physical, sexual, and emotional/psychological abuse, and/or neglect is present. Often the parents themselves are experiencing conflict and violence, and are alcohol or drug abusers.

Research which indicates that a very high incidence of physical and sexual abuse exists in families of runaway youth includes Price's (1989) Boston based study in which 65% of the youth surveyed reported experiencing physical abuse. In a study undertaken by Farber et al. (1984), it was reported that 78% of the youth surveyed cited physical violence directed toward them by a parent in the one year previous to their flight from home (McCullagh and Greco, 1990:10).

Although the premise that family instability and abuse greatly contribute to a runaway's behaviour, it has not been empirically proven. It is believed that a complex set of inter-related factors exist which lead a youth away from the family home. A number of studies support this view. Undertaken in 1985, a study of Calgary runaway and homeless youth produced results in which 52.6% of the sample felt that poor family communication was a primary factor, and 49.9% cited the presence of some form of abuse as a second factor leading to running (Nimmo, 1985, cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 9). In a study of adolescent prostitutes (male and female), it was found that 67% of the respondents cited family discord and/or abuse as having contributed to their decision to run (Weisberg, 1987, cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 10). In a Vancouver based study, it was found that 89% of the youth surveyed left home because of a range of difficulties, but in aggregate, the reason could be characterized as a home life that was intolerable (CS/RESORS, 1989: 14). Within this group, 24% of the responses specifically cited sexual or physical abuse which made it impossible to stay, and 3% mentioned apprehension by the Ministry for their protection. Additionally, 11% of the respondents left foster homes for reasons identical to those cited by youth who left family homes.

Through a study of 'The Back Door' - a program which helps youth get off the street if they so desire - it was found that many of the program's participants witnessed arguments and violence

between their parents. In addition, as young children all were psychologically neglected, and the majority were either physically or sexually abused - sometimes both. From discussions with the youth concerning family life, it was found that: 100% of the youth came from severely dysfunctional homes (37% cited that either one or both parents were alcoholics or drank excessively); 100% were neglected and psychologically abused as children; 100% of the females and 7% of the males were sexually abused; and 50% of the females and 36% of the males reported physical abuse (Kariel, 1993: 57-8). This study provides strong evidence that an extremely high incidence level of physical and sexual abuse exists in the family backgrounds of street youth.

As these studies clearly indicate, the majority of youth escape from extremely intolerable and abusive environments. Unable to stop the abuse and believing there is no other alternative, these youth run to the street to escape their dysfunctional family. However, for many, the decision is impulsive and rarely planned. Recognizing that these young individuals possess few resources, once on the street, the likelihood of being drawn into the culture is very strong.

If an intact social support network exists, the new runaway may approach a friend or relative for a place to stay. However, this alternative is often only temporary. If a social support network does not exist, the youth is unaware or rejects the protective services of CAS, or the youth is unable or unwilling to reveal the abuse, only two choices exist - return to the abusive home environment, or survive on the street. Often abusive families maintain a tight reign on their members to ensure the 'family secrets' are never disclosed. For this reason, these families have a strong interest in having the runaway youth return home.

*b. Runners to ... adventure*

Youth who fall into this category choose to leave home without parental permission in search of adventure, excitement and/or independence. These youth are highly peer oriented. Runners to adventure have friends who share similar world views; often they take flight to a place where their values and actions are accepted. For these youth, their run is either alone or with a friend.

‘Runners to adventure’ have been described as being attracted to the glamour of the street seeking ‘limitless pleasure and instant gratification in response to the parents new attempts to set limits on the child’ (Green and Esselstyn, 1972, cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 12). In a Vancouver study (CS/RESORS, 1989), it was found that a small percentage of the youth surveyed were attracted to the street through the persuasion of a friend (however, the study noted that for persuasion to occur, it is typically more effective when the youth’s home life is already difficult). While these youth are rebelling against reasonable limits set by their parents, the family and social backgrounds of these youth do not reveal any significant impairment on either the part of the parent or the youth (McCullagh and Greco, 1990). In sharp contrast to ‘runners from intolerable home environments’, there is a lack of abuse in the families of ‘runners to adventure’. These youth always have the option to return home. Their run to the street is usually for a temporary period of time. Once tired of street life, satisfied, or disenchanted, they return home. However, like all youth on the street, they are ‘at risk of gravitating toward the addictive qualities of street life by virtue of being ‘limitless’ in their quest for adventure and by virtue of being unsupervised’ (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 12).

Despite this group’s existence, research clearly shows that these youth comprise a very small percentage of street youth. McCullagh and Greco (1990) cite work by Kufeldt and Nimmo (1987)

in which only 6% of the runaway youth studied ran in search of excitement. McCullagh and Greco (1990) also reference a study carried out by Farber et al. (1984) which estimates that 20% of the youth surveyed ran for excitement.

*c. Throwaways*

In contrast to the first two categories of youth where there is an absence of parental permission, throwaways are openly rejected by their parents. The parents of these youth commonly agree to the youth's premature exit from the family home and in many cases, the youth is encouraged to leave the home because they no longer 'fit into' the newly formed (i.e. remarried) family. In some situations, youth are 'pushed-out' of the home by continued abuse, parental neglect of the youth's well-being, and the parent's desire to give up their responsibility for the youth (McCullagh and Greco, 1990).

A typology of runaway youth created by researcher E.H. Pakes (1984) includes two subgroups that fit the classification of throwaway youth. The first subgroup, 'the hood', is described as a child who 'is experienced by his parents as an unwanted encumbrance to their own desires and pleasures. At the earliest possible age, [the youth] is forced to fend for [them]self and meet [their] own needs in any way that does not require the parents' time and attention" (Pakes, 1984, cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 14). In turn, the youth unconsciously reads his parent's cues and leaves the home. The second subgroup, the 'emissary', is "subtly encouraged to leave home in order to engage in activities which indirectly benefit one or both of their parents, the child acts out the impulses which are present within the parents but which the parents' superego forbid them to express directly" (Pakes, 1984, cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 14). In this latter situation, the youth does maintain some contact with the home.

Recent research is revealing that this category of runaway youth is rising in numbers. For youth who are throwaways, the risk of entering the street culture is significant because the option to return home, even in a crisis situation, is not possible. Among social service professionals, these youth are becoming known as 'homeless youth' because they are being denied their family home.

*d. Absconders from care*

A fourth pathway from which youth run and may eventually drift into street life is that of absconding from CAS/Ministry of Social Services care. McCullagh and Greco (1990) identify various pieces of research which provide statistics revealing that approximately 30 - 45% of all street youth have run from either institutional or state care, a treatment home, or a group/foster home. From these statistics, it is clear that youth who are absconders from care constitute a significant percentage of street youth.

The reasons youth run from the various types of care facilities are numerous. Possible explanations include:

- the current care system does not provide positive support services for youth to aid them in dealing with their abusive backgrounds;
- running is the hidden expression of a fear of intimacy, and an anxiety about relationships within the residential environment. The act of running is the ultimate method of ending treatment which the youth may view as too threatening;
- multiple placements function to compound the fears of attachment. For a youth who has previously been rejected by their family, multiple placements intensify feelings of alienation;
- youth find it very difficult to function in structured care settings because they perceive the rules as being extremely rigid and controlling;
- youth experience a feeling of isolation when placed in foster/group homes distant from familiar environs and away from family, friends, school and community;
- youth are often not involved in the selection process of their placement and therefore perceive this lack of involvement as over controlling;

- an inadequate matching process of youth and setting cause youth to commonly conform to the expectations associated with the setting and denounce their own needs. Feeling powerless, youth demonstrate their discontent by running;
- when feelings of control and privacy are compromised, youth run to assert their independence and reject authority;
- foster or group homes present an abusive setting; and
- youth perceive a lack of support for their gay/lesbian orientation.

*e. Curb-kids*

As evident in their name - *curb-kids* - these youth have a periphery relationship with the street. Although these youth are not always runaways, they remain at risk of becoming entrenched in the street culture because of their strong attachment and involvement in street activities. Curb-kids frequently travel to the downtown core where street youth typically 'hang out', have friendships with street youth, and participate in high-risk activities (e.g. substance abuse, prostitution).

These youth live at home with their parents/guardians or in an institutional residence, but on occasion may run for a short period of time. Curb-kids sometimes provide meals or the use of a bed/shower to youth who are entrenched in the street culture and possess few resources. In a sense, curb-kids provide for the survival of other youth. Little research exists on the family history of these youth and on the proportion of the total street youth population they constitute.

*f. Ins and outs*

This last category is similar to curb-kids in that they are not necessarily runaways. These youth leave the family home when they feel that the home environment is intolerable or unsafe to live in. They take flight to the street for a few days at a time, returning only when they feel it is safe to do so. These youth have a home to return to, however the quality of the home environment is always

changing. In Vancouver, this group of youth is growing in number and causing concern among social planning professionals.

As the above discussion of the various pathways to street life illustrate, there is no one single reason influencing a youth's decision to leave the family home. It is a combination of family conflict, abuse, neglect, stress, and personal conflict. Understanding the complexity of their home life, it is critical that street youth are viewed as victims - symptoms of the failings of our changing family structure and social systems.

## **2.6 Where do they come from?**

The youth who arrive on Vancouver's downtown streets come from across the province, the nation, and internationally, with the majority arriving from outside of Vancouver. In the Vancouver based CS/RESORS study (1989), it was found that only one-third of the respondents originated from the Lower Mainland and of this one-third, only 17% of the youth were from the City of Vancouver. Just over 25% of the respondents came from areas within the province, but outside of the Lower Mainland. The greatest number of youth (39%) arrived from communities outside of British Columbia.

The results of the Tonkin et al. (1994) study mirror those of the CS/RESORS (1989) study. The breakdown of results regarding the youth's previous community are the following: Greater Vancouver including the Fraser Valley - 43%; elsewhere in British Columbia - 19%; elsewhere in Canada - 38%; United States - 1%. Tonkin et al. (1994) found that there was a correlation between age and a youth's previous community. It was found among the younger youth (i.e. 12 to 16 year olds) that they were more likely to travel shorter distances, as 54% of those surveyed came

from areas within Greater Vancouver. Older youth were more apt to have arrived from distant communities, as 43% of the 17 and 18 year olds surveyed arrived from elsewhere in Canada.

The CS/RESORS (1989) study attempted to determine why youth chose Vancouver as their 'runaway destination point.' The largest single response (42.1%) was that the youth had at least one contact person in the city prior to arriving. This high result signifies the importance youth place on associations with family and friends. The second most frequent response (19.7%) was the 'pull of the Vancouver lifestyle' - the excitement and interest of the city, and the curiosity surrounding the Vancouver way of life. A third reason frequently cited was the attraction of the area's scenery and weather.

## **2.7 Where do they go?**

Once on the streets of Vancouver, the youth congregate in three main areas - Downtown Eastside (several blocks around the intersection of Main and Hastings Streets), Downtown South (several blocks around Seymour and Davie Streets) and Mount Pleasant (on the east and west sides of Fraser Street along East Broadway). Although there is some movement between the areas, each area retains its own unique character of street youth. The Downtown Eastside street youth are predominantly native. In addition, there is a large contingent of young Latin American males involved in street activities. Young male prostitutes and 'experienced' young women characterize the Downtown South. This area is also considered the entry point into street life for 'suburban curb-kids'. The Mount Pleasant area is frequented by new runaways and young female prostitutes. A significant percentage of street youth participating in the Mount Pleasant area live within the community. While these youth have not yet permanently left their home to survive on the street,

they come from home environments which are intolerable and provide the necessary ingredients for them to leave.

## **2.8 Life on the Street**

The majority of street youth do not move directly from home to living a street entrenched lifestyle. Many initially stay with friends or relatives upon leaving home, and when they can no longer stay, they move on to seek the services provided by outreach and social service agencies. Other youth temporarily leave the family home for the street and return home after a period of time. Although their stay may be short, they maintain their ties with the street, only to become further entrenched the next time the home environment becomes intolerable.

In these uncertain transition stages between life at home and life on the street, youth become quickly indoctrinated into the street lifestyle. Feelings of alienation and disconnection from their families, friends, schools and other institutions cause youth to perceive life on the street as more attractive than life at home. The street possesses a strong 'pull' effect as it presents a false sense of freedom, belonging and excitement, and the perception that there is easy money to be made. Personal and supportive relationships form quickly on the street as a feeling of camaraderie exists among street youth.

During this period of movement between living at home and living on the street, youth also tend to fall behind in school and eventually either drop out or are expelled. In addition, if previous to their short experiences on the street a youth has not experimented with alcohol or drugs, the street provides a prime opportunity to become involved in such activities. Through time, youth develop

stronger connections with the street such that it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate themselves from the culture.

Once the definite move has been made to live on the street, survival needs quickly emerge. Often too young or lacking the necessary skills to be legally employed, a youth is forced into participating in other street activities to 'earn an income'. For both sexes, prostitution becomes a form of employment and thus a source of income. Further, by 'turning a trick', prostitution provides a source of temporary shelter. Panhandling and petty theft are other means that youth turn to to earn money. Experimenting with alcohol and/or drugs often lead youth into developing an addiction to the substance. Youth also take to substance abuse to forget their past or their current state of affairs. It becomes a vicious downward spiral - in consuming more alcohol or drugs to forget their problems, they continue to feed their habit, functioning to only worsen the situation.

A youth's involvement in specific street activities defines how the youth financially supports themselves, who their peers are, the geographic areas they frequent, and the service agencies, if any, they use. Income producing activities youth participate in include: prostitution, criminal activities (i.e. breaking and entering, shoplifting, assault, robbery, drug dealing), and panhandling. A youth who is involved in these activities, may work exclusively in one activity, alternate between two or more activities, or participate in more than one simultaneously.

The following discussion provides a characteristic profile of a street youth. It outlines the variety of skills youth commonly do not possess, the difficulties they encounter in everyday life, and the income producing activities they participate in.

*a. Lack of Education*

For most youth, the decision to run is made between the ages of 13 and 15; as a result, their education is disrupted at the grade 8, 9, or 10 level. It is commonly stated among the literature that the majority of street youth have not completed more than one year of secondary education. Social service providers believe that a significant percentage of street youth are functionally illiterate.

Researchers note that a street youth's poor school history, lack of education, and illiteracy, should not be interpreted as a lack of intellectual potential or ability. Rather, it is a function of their personal problems impacting on their school performance. Often the conflicts and disturbances at home are reflected in their difficulties at school. Failure in the classroom only serves to augment the youth's loss of self-esteem and self-worth. In turn, feelings of isolation and being different are experienced - first from their families, then from their schools and school peers.

Once on the street, the youth's struggle to survive takes precedence over their ability to continue their education. Without a dependable means of income, youth are unable to support themselves and attend school simultaneously. Despite the fact that many street youth do not attend school, they possess aspirations of one day completing their secondary education. In applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to street youth, the fulfilling of primary/immediate needs, such as food, shelter and clothing, must be satisfied prior to one pursuing the fulfillment of less urgent needs such as education (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 28).

*b. Lack of Traditional Employment Skills*

Recognizing the two main qualities of a street youth - their lack of education and young age - it is clear that youth are restricted to low skill, minimum wage paying jobs. Even to qualify for a low paying position, a youth would require:

- an address;
- a telephone number;
- identification;
- the literacy ability to fill out an application form;
- knowledge of how to undertake a job search;
- an employment history;
- references;
- no criminal record;
- suitable clothing; and
- minimal schooling.

The majority of street youth do not possess many of the above. Facing the fact that they are unemployable by conventional standards, yet requiring an income to support themselves, many youth turn to more lucrative activities such as prostitution, theft, drug dealing and panhandling. For these types of employment, a place of residence and references are not required, and one learns the skills of the trade while on the job.

*c. High Incidence of Transiency*

Street youth are a highly mobile group. Rarely is a youth's place of residence permanent or secure. In the Tonkin et al. (1994) study, it was found that at the time of the interview, 24% of the youth had no current address, and more than half (52%) had been at their current address for less than three months. Less than 15% of the youth surveyed had been at their present address for more than six months. On the street, they stay for short periods of time:

- at friends homes;
- at hostels;
- at hotels, motels, rooming houses, co-operatives, apartments (however, these breakdown quickly due to the youth's inability to pay the rent, communication with roommates, an eviction due to excessive noise, or the youth's inability to follow the rules of the landlord/establishment);
- at squats constructed in parks, stairwells, abandoned buildings (however, these breakdown when they are discovered by the police or they become too dangerous);
- at the homes of strangers, tricks or pimps (youth are taken advantage of by adults who are able to offer them a place to stay, alcohol, or companionship to ease the loneliness); and
- some have no place to stay - they wander the streets during the night, frequent coffee shops during the night for shelter, warmth and safety, and they may sleep in drop-in centres during the day.

The most common form of accommodation for youth are hotel rooms or apartments. However, this characterization can be misleading. As noted earlier, many youth who participate in prostitution use hotel rooms paid for by 'johns'.

The Tonkin et al. study (1994) found that the majority of street youth live independently - 62% live with other street friends and 16% live on their own. In addition, 17% of the youth interviewed reside with either one or both parents, and 10% reside in foster or group homes. In the CS/RESORS (1989) study, it was found that approximately 40% of the youth interviewed stayed with friends, and about one-quarter of the youth physically slept on the street.

Runaway youth from rural areas tend to gravitate toward urban settings. In this environment, they are better able to maintain their anonymity. Those youth who travel often do so in search of adventure or to evade the law. Youth involved in the drug business occasionally move to more profitable markets if pressures from the police or street peers become too intense. Young prostitutes have been noted to travel to avoid detection from the police, social service providers, or family members.

Most North American street youth move within major cities in Canada and the United States. They are able to travel relatively freely because the income producing activities they engage in are reproducible anywhere.

*d. Lack of Living Skills*

The transiency of youth, as discussed above, is also commonly due to their lack of living skills. Often youth are evicted from a number of different apartments before they actually settle into one. Their immaturity is evident in that upon receiving their first apartment, they either have a large party or are taken advantage of by their 'street friends'; in either case, the result is usually an eviction. Although older youth are able to receive a minimal amount of income from the government (e.g. Income Assistance), they lack the skills to manage this money.

A support network does not exist for street youth - continued supervision and guidance to help these youth through their troubled period is not available. Many of these youth have moved from childhood to adulthood, bypassing the learning stages of adolescence.

*e. Physical Health Problems*

For mainstream youth, adolescence is a time of healthy physical development. However, for street youth, this developmental stage is fatigued by poor nutrition, insufficient sleep, poor hygiene, stress, and the lack of preventative medical care, treatment and follow-up. In general, the quality of a street youth's physical health is inversely related to the length of time they spend on the street.

Poor nutrition often results from a lack of money to buy nutritious food, the lack of a place to cook, and the lack of knowledge regarding the value of eating for health. When funds are available, street youth commonly buy high calorie fast foods. The remainder of the time youth eat at the homes of curbed-kids, hostels, soup-kitchens, and/or drop-in centres, or obtain food through food banks, theft, and garbage bins behind stores and restaurants. However, for many youth, food is not a priority as alcohol and drug use function to suppress their appetite.

Street youth commonly experience insufficient and erratic sleep patterns. A factor which determines whether a youth will sleep on any particular day is whether the youth has a place to stay. As the dark hours of a day are usually the most dangerous for a street person, a typical day for a street youth begins in the late afternoon and ends in the early morning. In addition, it is the evening hours when many income producing activities take place.

Poor hygiene is common among many street youth. The lack of proper accommodation causes many youth to rely on public bathrooms and showers or the use of a shower at a friend's home. Some youth wait until they have secured enough money to rent a hotel/motel or stay in a hostel to use bathing facilities. Laundering also creates problems for youth. In their many moves, youth tend to lose or leave their clothes behind, or have them stolen. For some youth who have left home

at an early age, they lack the teachings of proper hygiene habits. In general, poor hygiene is a factor leading to one's increased risk of bacterial infection.

Street youth are prone to sickness. They experience prolonged periods of exposure to the elements due to inadequate clothing and sleeping in unheated accommodations. In particular, female prostitutes do not wear sufficient clothing for fear of losing potential clients. Combined with unhealthy eating habits, these two factors place a strain on a youth's immune system. In addition, their mental state of depression and anxiety reduces their body's ability to fight off illness. Street youth often lack the necessary knowledge regarding preventative medical care, treatment, and follow-up examinations. This naiveté only adds to their unhealthy situation. Reasons cited in the literature for their inaction to acquire proper treatment range from inaccessible street sensitive health care to a lack of health education.

Street youth have recently been identified as being the highest at-risk population of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Factors explaining their high degree of susceptibility to these diseases include their poor physical health, repeated sickness and infection, substance abuse, misinformation and lack of information regarding STDs and HIV, lack of protective devices, and lack of consistency in practicing protective behaviours (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 33; Bass, 1991: 39).

McCullagh and Greco (1990: 33) cite research which found that 94% of the youth surveyed were sexually active; however, almost one-third of the respondents stated they never use condoms when engaging in sexual intercourse. It is clear that the risk of this population group contracting and

spreading STD and HIV is tremendously high since many street youth, in particular prostitutes, have numerous partners and approximately one-third of the population does not practice 'safe sex'.

*f. Substance Abuse*

The use of alcohol and drugs, and commonly in tandem, is practically universal among street youth. McCullagh and Greco (1990: 34) cite a study undertaken on street youth and aids in which 75% of the youth were using drugs at the time of the interview, and approximately 60% were using drugs and/or alcohol on a weekly or daily basis. In addition, the study found that of the different types of street involved youth, prostitutes were the heaviest users of intravenous drugs. However, most prostitutes do not engage in substance use while prostituting in order to be fully alert and able to protect themselves in threatening situations. Reasons cited for a high substance use among street youth include:

- the enjoyment of being high;
- to lessen the depressing and frightening nature of prostituting and to make the work more bearable;
- to cope with the loneliness; and
- to conform to peer pressure and expectations.

*g. Mental Health Problems*

The childhood histories of street youth are scarred with family dysfunction, parental rejection, and physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Youth attempt to dull and repress their feelings through escape mechanisms such as running and alcohol/drug use. While their running episodes may physically remove them from their childhood abusive pasts, they ultimately carry with them "the unresolved baggage of abuse" (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 35).

It is commonly stated in the literature that street youth exhibit high levels of low self-esteem, self-worth, and feelings of powerlessness. They are often described as 'in trouble emotionally', 'alienated', 'distressed', and 'disoriented'. These qualities are evident in many studies which cite a high incidence of self-mutilation and attempted suicides among street youth. Social service agencies have attributed their suicidal tendencies to the fact they come from dysfunctional families and are predisposed to depression. The cause and effect relationship between a negative home environment and a street youth's poor mental health, significantly contributes to their inability to trust and be intimate with others, and their capability to abuse others (Rothman, 1991: 76). It is believed by some social service workers that youth have a poor state of mental well-being due to external factors. Often mainstream society functions to ostracize youth, label them as social deviants, and hold them responsible for their predicament (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 35-36).

#### *h. Involvement in Criminal Activities*

The majority of street entrenched youth experience conflict with the law. However, considering their involvement in prostitution, drug dealing, panhandling, etc. this consequence seems inevitable. McCullagh and Greco (1990: 36) note research which estimates that at least 50% of all street youth involve themselves in criminal activities. Further, the length of time youth spend on the street and the number of runs from home correspond to the number of different types of illegal activities youth participate in.

#### *i. Violence*

All street youth are targets of violent exploitation. This abuse takes one of two forms: personal assault, for the purpose of stealing their belongings (e.g. earnings, welfare cheques), or physical/sexual assault. Street youth are assaulted by both outsiders (e.g. pimps, 'tricks') and

other street youth. While at times street youth are instigators of violence, they have falsely been accused of being gang members. Rather, the contrary is true. Street youth are often the target of teasing, ridicule, assault, and robbery by middle-class youth gangs. As a result of their fear of not being believed and general distrust in the law, many crimes against street youth go unreported. Some youth passively accept the violence against them “as part and parcel of a culture they are unable to escape from” (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 37).

*j. Peer Relationships*

Relationships made on the street are vitally important to street youth as they provide a sense of belonging. For many, these relationships are their first sense of belonging after being rejected by their families, schools, and school peers. The importance of relationships is crucial to survival on the street. Often street smart youth teach the ‘new kid’ the who’s who on the street, how to dress, how to evade the police, how to work the streets, and which social service agencies to use (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 39). Despite the importance of peer relationships, the friendships formed on the street are not always safe and trusting friendships. As noted by one social service provider, the only safe friends a street youth has are paid professionals. Excluded and shut-off from mainstream society, youth tend to socialize amongst themselves. Commonly, the income producing activities youth engage in determine their network of friends.

The male/female relationship on the street commonly exists along sexist lines. The female is expected to submit to the wants and needs of the dominant male. Often girls are treated as the property of their partner to whom they rely upon for protection and shelter.

## INCOME PRODUCING ACTIVITIES

### *k. Prostitution*

Lacking adequate financial resources to meet their basic needs, street youth are prime targets for recruitment into the illicit economy of drug dealing, hustling, and prostituting. Research has found that youth tend to enter into prostitution, or any other incoming producing street activity, for the reasons that the activity is financially profitable, is a quick source of income, and no other alternative appears to exist. A youth's involvement in prostitution is reactive to their situation and not "an informed choice of weighed alternatives" (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 43).

As the length of time increases that a youth is on the street, so too does the probability of the youth's involvement in prostitution. The typical time it takes for a female youth to become indoctrinated into the sex trade can be as short as a few days. For males on the other hand, it may take up to several weeks. McCullagh and Greco (1990) cite one study in which approximately one-fifth of the street youth population was engaged in the sex trade. While both sexes are involved in the activity, it is reported that females outnumber the males by three or four to one. In most cities, the various sub-groups of prostitutes work within their own geographic areas.

Although the majority of female prostitutes work as independents and not for a pimp, many have at one point in time had a pimp. It is very common among juvenile females to work for a pimp (McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 41). For females who have a partner, this individual plays a 'pimping role' and the female works to support him. One researcher notes that pimps "are perhaps the most notorious exploiters of runaway youth," (Barak, 1991:88) typically using charm, flattery, the lure of money, protection, and companionship to attract young girls into the trade. Frequently the juvenile-pimp relationship is abusive and psychologically straining, particularly if the young

girl does not perform according to her pimp's expectations. In general, female prostitutes experience greater victimization, abuse and violence than male prostitutes.

Females typically use their bodies more as a means to obtain shelter than do males. Females either develop a love relationship, where they reside at their boyfriend's home, or they remain in the hotel/motel room for the night after 'turning a trick' since the room has already been paid for by the 'john'. To a lesser degree, males sell their bodies to secure shelter, but this is more prevalent among homosexual male prostitutes.

Unlike female prostitutes, male prostitutes seldom work for pimps. Although they are not subject to abusive pimps, they are often victimized by homophobic people and suffer pain from the violent acts they are required to perform. The majority of male prostitutes are in their teenage years or early twenties and the length of time they prostitute commonly does not extend past the age of 30. A male prostitute has a shorter career because there is a low demand for older male prostitutes.

There are two groups of male prostitutes - heterosexuals and homosexuals. Heterosexual prostitutes view their clients with disgust (Benjamin, 1985, cited in McCullagh and Greco, 1990: 42). The trick is characterized as emotionless and business-like. If affection is expressed on the part of the trick, it may be met with a violent response by the prostitute. It is common among these youth to experience gender identity problems.

For a homosexual prostitute, it has been hypothesized that prostitution serves as a way for the youth to enter the gay community. Fleeing from homes which shunned homosexuality, or feeling confusion regarding their sexual orientation, prostitution allows these males to secretly explore

their sexual identity. A significant number of gay males come from rural communities where often a gay community is not established and the necessary support services are neither available nor adequate. Unlike heterosexual male prostitutes, the potential for violence to erupt is less likely since these youth view their clients with respect. On occasion, tricks offer financial support and a place to stay to the youth. Dependent upon the youth's predicament, this may be an attractive proposition.

Regardless of the length of time a youth (male or female) is involved in prostitution, this form of income producing activity has a destructive affect on the youth. Through time, a youth prostitute becomes depressed, alienated, lonely, and frightened - later experiencing feelings of guilt and shame because of their involvement in the activity, and disgust and anger toward their customers. In addition to simply participating in prostitution, there exists the added risks of being raped, murdered, assaulted, imprisoned, harassed, and subjected to other degrading experiences.

#### *l. Criminal Activity*

Street youth involved in criminal activity are typically male and support themselves through petty crimes such as assault, robbery, shoplifting, and breaking and entering. Many youth who perform these activities carry a weapon. These youth are heavily involved in the criminal court system and as they near adulthood, the potential for the severity of the crimes they commit increases.

#### *m. Drug Dealing*

In the drug trade, street youth are commonly employed as "small time drug runners, small time dealers, and drug associates" (McCullagh, Greco, 1990: 44). Because drug dealing is

characterized by the transaction of large sums of money, major drug dealers do not entrust street youth with responsible roles.

*n. Panhandling*

Street youth who attempt to financially support themselves through panhandling are barely able to sustain themselves. They are commonly viewed as the 'hard-core' street youth - the youth who literally sleep on the street. Panhandling is performed on an individual basis, but at the end of the day, street youth gather and decide how to use their collective earnings. When the situation becomes too desperate, these youth often turn to other activities for a source of income.

Despite the fact that some activities, such as prostitution, may be extremely lucrative, street youth typically live in poverty. On the street, money is earned and spent quickly. Money is spent on drugs/alcohol, accommodation, clothes, taxi cabs, dining out/fast-food, dry cleaning, entertainment, and helping friends.

*o. Summary*

As Gregg Barak (1991: 82) notes in *Gimme Shelter*, "the condition of homelessness is not only fraught with all kinds of victimization [psychological, emotional, physical] and criminalization, but that the very condition itself is criminogenic or crime-producing." For many youth, the fear of living on the street is less threatening than the fear of living at home. Lacking conventional employment skills, education, and experiencing feelings of inadequacy and personal disgrace, street youth take to income producing activities which yield 'easy money' yet require few skills. However, these activities, in particular prostitution, only further degrade a youth's feelings of self-worth and increase their feelings of loneliness.

## **CHAPTER 3: BACKGROUND RESEARCH, GOVERNING BODIES AND AVAILABLE HOUSING OPTIONS**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter has three purposes. First, it provides background information on the history of street youth research, and discusses Canadian literature focusing on street youth and research specific to street youth in Vancouver. Second, it outlines both the Provincial and Municipal roles in providing housing and related services to street youth, and a recent history of the City's involvement in housing street youth. Lastly, it presents a summary of the various housing options available to street youth in Vancouver, the accessibility of outside support services to youth, and the influence past housing experiences have had on recent initiatives concerning street youth housing.

### **3.2 A History of Research on Street Youth**

Prior to 1987, there existed a very limited amount of detailed information on homeless youth. This in part can be attributed to the fact that the homeless are not a homogeneous population - "their social, economic and demographic diversity make them difficult to quantify or classify" (Oberlander and Fallick, 1988: 13). On a nationally televised American news program it was reported that there was an increasing public hostility towards the homeless. While the newscast focused primarily on homeless men, their prevalence in public areas, and their 'offensiveness to the public', there was no mention of the severe problem of "homeless, 'throwaway' and runaway" youth struggling to survive in both urban and rural areas across the United States (Rothman, 1991: vii). It was the hope expressed by Jack Rothman, an American researcher, that the omission of these youth from the report did not reflect the public's indifference to their situation. Rather, it was hoped their non-mention was a result of the fact they do not stand out as strikingly different from others their age.

The lack of information regarding street youth is also due in part to the fact youth are a forgotten part of today's society. There is much discrimination against youth. Often their opinions are not valued by the adult decision-making world, and in many instances, they are not even heard. Because youth lack the ability to organize themselves, they form a segment of society whose needs are not advocated for.

The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH) took place in 1987. It functioned to focus attention on the plight of the homeless both within Canada and internationally. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation served as the Canadian focal point and actively supported a diversity of initiatives to "identify and highlight the best means of aiding the homeless and alleviating homelessness" (Oberlander and Fallick, 1988: 1). The objective of this specially designated year was to improve the shelter and neighbourhoods of some of the poor and disadvantaged by 1987, and by the year 2000, to demonstrate ways and means of improving the shelter and neighbourhoods of all the poor and disadvantaged. The IYSH served as a means of consciousness raising and brought to the forefront "questions that run to the heart of the human condition" (Oberlander and Fallick, 1988: 2).

From the workshops, reports and conferences held prior to and during the IYSH, evidence was found which supported the observation that there was a significant increase in homelessness among disaffected youth (many of whom were only entering their teens). The phenomenon of increasing numbers of youth on the street was further highlighted in 1992 as a result of the Ministry of Social Services commissioning a community panel to review child protection legislation in British Columbia. The work of the Commission also uncovered the fact that the youth on the street were younger than those in the past, and their numbers were growing. Elsewhere in Canada and the

United States, similar findings and trends were being reported by researchers (McCullagh and Greco, 1990; Rothman, 1991).

The body of literature focusing specifically on the issue of street youth has been growing since the late eighties. Although the majority of research appears to be based in American settings, the reasons leading youth to the street and their life while on the street are similar regardless of the city youth choose to seek refuge. However, while these two research areas - pathways to the street and street lifestyle - form the bulk of the literature, little research looks specifically at the housing aspect. This can be attributed to the fact that housing for street youth is context specific. Government-provided care systems vary from country to country and province to province. The accessibility, availability, and form of housing for street youth is significantly affected by the political environment (i.e. governing policies and legislation, government action) in which it exists.

*a. Canadian Literature*

There are four excellent pieces of work which focus specifically on Canadian street youth. While each piece varies in purpose, all four clearly describe the multitude of reasons why youth are attracted to the street and how they carry out their daily lives in that environment. Co-authored by John McCullagh and Mary Greco, *Servicing Street Youth: A Feasibility Study* was developed in response to concerns expressed by front line Children's Aid Society (CAS) workers regarding the number of youth on the street and their resistance to CAS intervention. The project examined both the issues related to street youth and the social services in place to meet the needs of these youth for the purpose of providing recommendations to programs and policy.

*Street Kids: The Tragedy of Canada's Runaways*, written by Marlene Webber, draws extensively on interviews with street kids from across the nation to discover the realities of street life, its drawing power, and its consequences. To illustrate the harshness of their situation, Webber provides many anecdotes as told by the youth themselves.

'The Back Door' - a Calgary based program helping self-motivated youth get off the street and guiding mainstream individuals to help youth through this process - provides the context in which street issues are explored in Pat Kariel's work entitled *New Directions: Stepping out of street life*. Based upon her learnings regarding the critical issues in the lives of street youth, Kariel provides generalizations on the interrelationships among the issues and suggests improvements.

Lastly, Evelyn Lau provides a personal account of her two-year physical and emotional struggle living on the streets of Vancouver in *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*. Lau succinctly describes her childhood and the forces leading her to a life on the street, her experiences and feelings while on the street, and the emotions she now experiences as she looks both back on her past life, and forward to her new life.

#### ***b. Reports on Vancouver's Street Youth***

In the past five years, Vancouver's street youth have been the focus of three reports. Of these three reports, two have been completed in 1994. These reports include "A Study of the Vancouver Reconnect Program and Vancouver Street Youth" (1989), "Adolescent Health Survey: Street Youth in Vancouver" (1994), and "The Granville Mall Youth Project" (1994). The fact that only three reports exist to date on street youth in Vancouver further illuminates the fact that street youth

are an under studied and under recognized segment of our society. Only recently has more attention been given to the current life situation and life histories of these young people.

“A Study of the Vancouver Reconnect Program and Vancouver Street Youth” (1989) was commissioned by the British Columbia Ministry of Social Services and Housing (now Ministry of Social Services). The Study forms part of the Ministry’s commitment to helping street youth escape their entrenchment on the street and directing them on a path “towards a more secure and productive mainstream life” (CS\RESORS, 1989: i). The study consists of two types of information. First, it includes data and an analysis of this data, on the various characteristics of Vancouver’s street youth. Second, the study provides a review and description of the Reconnect Program’s recent history, and a review of the services available to street youth. While the emphasis of the study is upon examining the program’s provision of services to street youth, the report provides a number of recommendations which are both general in nature, and specific to the program. The recommendations address the following issues:

- prevention through education programs to service providers on the impact of sexual and physical abuse and the indicators of an abusive situation, and the development of a strategy to target youth who are still at home regarding the danger of street life;
- the provision of treatment and programs to street youth who have been and/or are victims of abuse, are substance abusers, are in need of innovative alternative housing, and are seeking employment training;
- establishment of effective communication channels between all service providers;
- development of a defined set of goals and responsibilities for the Reconnect Program;
- coordination of services on a province-wide basis to improve the effectiveness of repatriation; and
- evaluation of potential service gaps to repatriated youth and ensuring service providers understand the life of a street youth.

The second study which focuses on Vancouver street youth is “Adolescent Health Survey: Street Youth in Vancouver” (1994). Produced by Tonkin et al., under the direction of the McCreary

Centre Society, this study is a follow-up survey to complement an earlier survey completed in 1993 which focused on the health status and risk behaviour of mainstream youth in British Columbia. The 1993 survey was administered only to youth enrolled in public and independent schools (grades 7 - 12). However, many youth were missed by this original survey as they had either left school permanently for the labour force, resided in care or correctional facilities, or were surviving on the street. The 1994 street youth survey, one of many special group surveys, is an attempt to correct the original omission.

The Society believes that relatively little information exists on the health status and habits of adolescents in British Columbia and with respect to street youth, even less information is available. The Society's survey on the health of Vancouver's street youth provides direct comparisons between street youth and mainstream youth. In so doing, it provides a "context for understanding the qualities and experiences which make street youth unique and different from mainstream youth" (Tonkin et al., 1994: 2). It is their opinion that services and programs are developed for youth based on the characteristics, needs and/or problems as determined by adults rather than upon the actual behaviours and attitudes of youth. While the report does not provide recommendations, the findings provide a base from which one can be enlightened regarding the health status and risk factors among street youth, and develop effective disease prevention and health promotion initiatives.

"The Granville Mall Youth Research Project" (1994) is the third report which focuses specifically on street youth in Vancouver. It was completed under contract for the Greater Vancouver Mental Health Services Society (GVMHSS) and the Ministry of Social Services. The purpose of the

project was twofold: to develop a socio-demographic profile of street youth who congregate in the Granville Mall area, and determine the service needs of these youth.

The youth interviewed for this project were not representative of Vancouver's street youth population. The target group were youth aged 13 to 18 years who refused the services provided by the Ministry of Social Services and the GVMHSS offered out of the Adolescent Street Unit office located at 575 Drake Street. Although never officially stated, the majority of these youth interviewed can be described as 'punks' or 'skinheads'. It was noted that the youth who participated in this study were possibly less affected by their backgrounds, and that their street status was more a result of choice rather than necessity.

The report identifies six needs and for each need provides a recommendation. Two of the recommendations relate specifically to housing. The first is the provision of a safe house for youth under the age of 16 who do not wish the authorities to contact their parents nor want to be placed in care. The second recommendation is that greater consideration should be given to placing youth in 'medium-term' residential facilities in lieu of providing youth with Income Assistance. It is the belief of the project's author that Income Assistance only functions to deteriorate an already bad situation, as youth resort to living in inappropriate and poor quality accommodations (e.g. hotels).

These three research reports provide an excellent source of information regarding the characteristics of a street youth's family past, educational background, and lifestyle while on the street. Of the two reports which provide recommendations, the recommendations of the Reconnect Study are both specific to the program and general in terms of the method of service provision. While "The Granville Mall Youth Project" provides recommendations, of which two are targeted at

housing, it must be remembered that this survey was undertaken on only a specific sub-population of street youth and is not representative of the entire street youth population. In addition, it appears that the project based its recommendations solely on the views of the youth interviewed. A professional/service provider viewpoint was not included in the report.

### **3.3 Provincial Involvement in Housing for Street Youth**

The two primary provincial ministries involved in the issue of housing for street youth are the Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Services and the Ministry of Social Services. Traditionally, the role of providing housing has been a federal responsibility - originally being mandated under the *BNA Act, 1867* and later the *Constitution Act, 1987*. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation was the federal agency responsible for developing programs and providing funding to create affordable and subsidized housing. However, in the 1980s the federal government began to withdraw from its role of providing housing giving more responsibility to provincial governments. The increase in provincial responsibility for housing in British Columbia led to the growth of the British Columbia Housing and Management Commission and this body's greater role in determining project funding.

In the provision of housing, the roles of these two ministries are very different. The Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Services provides a source of funding for street youth housing projects, and the Ministry of Social Services provides and manages the various housing and support services.

*a. The Role of the Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Services*

Previous to the withdrawal of the Federal government from the provision of housing, joint Federal/Provincial housing policies were more exclusive than inclusive regarding the groups that were eligible to receive funding. The narrow scope of previous policies caused street youth to be one group not eligible to receive Federal funding. Street youth who were no longer under 19 years of age fell through the cracks in terms of receiving housing. These individuals were no longer able to receive housing support (e.g. group/foster homes) from the Ministry of Social Services, and were not considered disabled enough to be classified as a special needs group to receive funding for the development of subsidized housing projects.

The movement of the Federal government out of the realm of providing housing to special needs groups has allowed the Provincial government to develop its own policies and programs. As the sole funding source, the Province began in the 1990s to create flexible programs and policies. Unlike the policies of old, the policies created by the Province are relative to the current social structure and are able to address the changing needs of society. The Ministry works closely with other support ministries to identify other target groups, and street youth are now one such newly identified special needs group.

In the fiscal year 1992/93, the Ministry began a pilot housing program entitled *Homeless/At Risk Housing*. The intent of the program was to target groups that had fallen through the gaps. In the pilot program's Call for Expressions of Interest, street youth were identified as a special needs group. Street youth the Ministry were attempting to target were those youth who had no other alternative than a life on the street. The *Homeless/At Risk Housing* program operated as a pilot

project in the fiscal years 1992/93 and 1993/94, and has become a full program for the fiscal year 1994/95.

In February 1993, the first year of the *Homeless/At Risk* pilot housing program, the Ministry of Social Services and the Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Services were responsible for providing funding for the safe house. On March 23, 1993, in response to the Ministry of Social Service's request for street youth housing, the once Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Housing announced that \$2.8 million was available for the creation of 25 self-contained units for street youth desiring to graduate from the street environment.

**b. *The Role of the Ministry of Social Services***

In its capacity of providing housing, the Ministry of Social Services performs two roles and in so doing, is governed by two provincial statutes. First, it provides child protection services as legislated under the *Family and Child Service Act (F & CS)*. This provincial statute affords the Ministry the legal ability to 'apprehend' a youth at risk and to offer the youth a safe place in a Ministry-approved child care resource. Second, through the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act (GAIN)*, the Ministry is able to provide Underage Income Assistance to youth aged 17 and 18 years who are eligible to receive such support.

These two provincial statutes are the primary pieces of legislation which affect a youth's ability to access housing or shelter. As mentioned above, the *F & CS Act* allows youth to receive state provided/operated housing through their apprehension by the Ministry. However, the Ministry cannot place any youth in state care without either parental/guardian consent or a court order. Upon being taken into care, the Ministry becomes the youth's guardian.

The *GAIN Act* is a discretionary type of legislation. Although written for adults, through various interpretations of its regulations and policy, it allows older youth the opportunity to apply and receive financial aid and thus the ability to find their own housing. On rare occasion, youth who are 16 years of age are able to receive Income Assistance however, they must first receive a recommendation by their social worker.

The process a 17 or 18 year old youth must follow to receive Income Assistance is to first apply to a financial aid worker, who then assesses their eligibility. Upon a successful application, the financial aid worker must notify the parent that the youth will be receiving Income Assistance. This step must be completed prior to the youth receiving any money. In addition, prior to receiving financial aid a youth must prove to the Ministry that s/he has found an accommodation (through an 'Intent to Rent' form completed by the future landlord), and is actively seeking employment. A youth who is entitled to Income Assistance is able to receive up to \$546/month. This value consists of two components - a shelter (i.e. rent) component valuing up to \$325/month and a support component of \$221/month. If the total of the youth's rent plus utilities exceeds the \$325 Ministry-provided rent allowance, then the excess amount must be paid out of the youth's support component. On the other hand, if the cost of the unit is less than \$325/month, the youth receives a shelter allowance equal to the exact value of the rental price.

*c. Recent Legislative Changes*

The current *Family and Child Service Act* has recently undergone reform. The two alterations to the Act - Bills 45 and 46 - were originally introduced into the legislature on May 18, 1994, and received Royal Assent on June 30, 1994. However, they will not be implemented by the Ministry of Social Services until the fall of 1994. Bill 45, the *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act*, is a

newly created Act. Bill 46, the *Child, Family and Community Service Act*, will repeal and replace the current *Family and Child Service Act*.

Bills 45 and 46 are in response to the current legislation's inability to effectively deal with children and youth living in, and escaping from, dysfunctional families. The existing *F & CS Act* was developed in 1981 at a time when society was first becoming aware of the disturbing problems of physical and sexual child abuse. The present legislation has not changed along side with society's enlightenment of the needs of children and families living in these stressful conditions. The emphasis of the current Act is upon apprehension and removal of children from troubled families. Further, the *F & CS Act* does not provide support services to families. Considering the abundance of child development research and other pieces of legislation, the current Act is no longer appropriate.

In November 1991, the Minister of Social Services appointed a Community Panel, consisting of individuals from the private and public sector, to review the Province's existing child protection legislation, and to develop recommendations that would better serve children, families and communities. In response to the recommendations of the Community Panel, the Ministry of Social Services produced a white paper for public discussion in July 1993 entitled "Making Changes: Next Steps". This paper stimulated another 160 submissions. The *Child, Family and Community Service Act* and the *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act* are the result of this two year consultation process.

The *Child, Family and Community Service Act* (Bill 46) contains improvements to six key areas which will positively affect children, youth and families. The first area is 'services to youth'. The

new legislation allows youth, who as of their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday are wards of the state, to continue to receive services (e.g. counselling, housing, health care, educational assistance) for any two year period up until their 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In terms of the 'rights of children in care', Bill 46 functions to make these rights explicitly known to all. Important fundamental changes include youth are to be informed about their plans of care, youth are to be consulted and encouraged to express their views about significant decisions which affect them, youth are to be informed of the standard of behaviour expected by their caregivers and the consequences of not meeting their caregivers' expectations, and youth are to be informed of their rights under the new Act and the procedures available to enforce them.

The importance of involving the community in reviewing the needs of youth in care is recognized by the Act in the establishment of a 'Child and Family Review Board'. The role of this Board will be to review and remedy complaints regarding the breach of the rights of youth in care. Previously, support services were not always available in lieu of the removal of a child from the family home. Bill 46 will allow families, through agreement, to access a variety of support and prevention programs and services.

The fourth key issue concerns 'aboriginal families and children'. The new legislation recognizes a broader definition of aboriginal children than is currently the case. It seeks to resolve problems within the family and to ensure that community members will be involved when judicial proceedings are required. Strong attempts will be made to place children within the child's extended family or community of origin, and if not possible, with another aboriginal family. The new Act also enables First Nations to reassume jurisdiction and authority in the area of child and

family services. The Act allows the Minister of Social Services to enter into agreements with aboriginal communities to provide them with full administrative authority to implement the Act.

‘Child Protection’ is the fifth key issue. In the *Family and Child Service Act*, it has been common practice to remove a child from an unsafe environment. In the new Act, provisions are made such that if there is reason to believe a child may require protection from another person, that individual may be removed from the premises and prevented from contacting the child. However, in all cases, the director, the parents and the child are given alternatives to removal. Lastly, in terms of child protection, the Ministry will have the authority to take a youth into care for a 72 hour period prior to contacting the youth’s parents or guardian.

The final key issue is the ‘powers of the court’. The new legislation provides greater flexibility regarding the orders which can be made by a court. In addition, the Act imposes time limits on temporary custody orders recognizing the need to reduce delays in the planning of a youth’s permanent placement.

The importance of the new *Child, Youth and Family Advocacy Act* (Bill 45) is that it establishes an independent officer of the Legislature whose purpose is to provide advocacy for children, youth and families receiving services under the new *Child, Family and Community Service Act*. This new Act will provide an avenue in which youth can be heard.

*d. Vancouver Based Initiatives of the Provincial Ministries*

Resulting from the CS/RESORS study of the Ministry of Social Services and Housing’s (now Ministry of Social Services) Reconnect Program, the Ministry developed a three-year plan to deal

with street youth in British Columbia. This plan has led to the creation and implementation of 39 new programs across the province.

The expansion of the Reconnect Program is an attempt by the Ministry to provide more street/child care workers to youth in their home communities. The program is striving to achieve two goals: 1) to provide services throughout British Columbia such that youth are better able to access services in their own communities and thus prevented from migrating to Vancouver, and 2) to repatriate youth to their home communities as the necessary services will be available upon the youth's return.

In Vancouver, the effects of the plan are visible at the Adolescent Street Unit (ASU) office. Through expanding the services available at ASU, the Ministry is attempting to provide 'one stop shopping.' By increasing service accessibility, it is hoped that youth will become familiar with the faces of the personnel, and develop a rapport and sense of community with the service providers. In addition, youth will face less stress as they will need to visit only one building for the various services they require, and the confusion of traveling from service to service or building to building will be avoided.

Presently, the Ministry of Social Services is considering providing funding for a second safe house to be located in Vancouver. There is uncertainty however, as to the target group the safe house would serve. The two possible client groups are youth under the age of 16 and aboriginal youth of all ages. Youth under the age of 16 have been identified because the present safe house is targeted to serve youth between the ages of 16 and 18, and there have been increasing reports by service providers that the number of younger aged street youth is increasing. The aboriginal focus was

identified because service providers note that a significant portion of aboriginal youth only want to access aboriginal services. As stated by one interviewee (Taylor, 1994), if this group was selected as the focus of the safe house, it would fit with government initiatives regarding self-government for aboriginal people.

Considering the Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Service's 1994/95 Call for Expressions of Interest for its *Homeless/At Risk Housing* program, the potential exists for funding to become available to develop housing for street youth. Projects to house street youth, if selected, will become known on October 31, 1994 when the Ministry awards Conditional Allocations.

#### **3.4 Municipal Involvement in Housing for Street Youth**

In the City of Vancouver, housing is considered a major social right of all citizens (Parry, 1994). However, it is not the responsibility of the City to construct housing. The City's primary role in dealing with the issue of housing for street youth is one of facilitator. The City functions to bring together the various agencies and societies involved in providing services to street youth. Specifically, the role of the Social Planning Department is to be aware of the issues, to promote awareness of the issues, and to assist groups in resolving the issues. The Housing and Properties Department is responsible for locating and leasing real estate to the provincial government for the development of affordable and subsidized housing projects, and aiding in the development approval process.

#### **3.5 City of Vancouver's Recent History in Servicing Street Youth**

In Vancouver, the year 1990 marked a turning point in the provision of services to street youth. Prior to this year, there existed significant gaps in the services provided to this segment of the

population. However, the lack of adequate service provision was clearly recognized by the Director of Social Planning (City of Vancouver Social Planning Dept., March 21, 1990). These service inadequacies were addressed through improvements to the coordination of existing services, the creation of new services, and a redirection and re-allocation of resources. Much of the success in closing the various service gaps was the result of work undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Street Children's Committee (IMSCC).<sup>1</sup> Through the identification of key issues, and full communication and cooperation between committee members, the IMSCC was able to initiate and/or assist in the implementation of many recommendations.

Despite this progress, in the eyes of the Social Planning Department four significant gaps continued to exist in 1990. These service gaps included: 1) the lack of a combined Alcohol and Drug Detox and Intermediate Residential Care Facility; 2) insufficient health care (i.e. inadequate time allotted to street nurse activities in the Granville Mall area, inadequate resources for substance abuse and mental health treatment, and insufficient counselling for AIDS victims); 3) the absence of an integrated response centre for sexual abuse victims; and 4) the absence of both a 'safe house' and housing targeted to serve the needs of specific sub-populations of street youth (i.e. native youth, pregnant street youth (in particular, substance addicted youth)).

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<sup>1</sup> The Vancouver Inter-Ministerial Street Children's Committee was established in January 1986 in an effort to identify and coordinate existing services to street youth. The aim of the Inter-Ministerial Street Children's Committee is to prevent children who are experimenting with street life from becoming entrenched in the street lifestyle and to help children who have become immersed in the street culture to extricate themselves by ensuring that there are accessible health, social and educational services appropriate to the needs of street children and that these services are working in a coordinated manner.

The IMSCC consists of representatives from the Ministry of Social Services and Housing, Ministry of Health, Solicitor General, Provincial Alcohol and Drug Program, City of Vancouver Social Planning and Health Departments, City of Vancouver Police Dept., and Vancouver School Board.

Of the four identified service gaps, only the last 'gap' spoke specifically to the issue of street youth and housing. While the absence of a safe house (a short stay facility for youth wanting to make the initial steps away from the street) had been identified as a service gap, it was not the first time it had been mentioned. The need for a safe house had been recognized prior to 1990. However, when it was initially mentioned, Provincial Ministries faced problems regarding the legal complexities of housing underage children, and private agencies expressed concerns regarding risk and insurance. At the time, under the *Residential Tenancy Act* any person under the age of 19 who entered into a residential agreement was not liable for their actions. This fact resulted in many landlords not accepting underage persons as tenants.

At the municipal level, it was the opinion of the Social Planning Department that the City lacked an analysis which prioritized the need for providing the various types of housing. In turn, the priority of providing a safe house within the spectrum of all housing forms had not been established. However, in contrast to the opinion of Social Planning, it was the viewpoint of Housing and Properties that the construction of youth housing was not a municipal responsibility. Historically, the role of municipal government was to assist senior government(s) in the implementation of their housing program(s). In facilitating senior government projects, Vancouver's role has been limited to that of providing land.

Further, the City of Vancouver has no explicit responsibility to underage persons. The responsibility of providing a safe house (i.e. housing for persons under the age of 19) was, and is, the responsibility of the provincial Ministry of Social Services.

Considering the opposing viewpoints of Social Planning and Housing and Properties, and the Provincial responsibility of providing housing for underage persons, it was determined by Social Planning that the City's potential role in providing a safe house could vary from moral support for a private developer to actual development and management of the facility. At the end of the day, it was decided by Social Planning that a response could only be determined after a feasibility study of operating the facility was completed and priorities were established.

It is believed by this author that a third factor which indirectly influenced the City's history of inaction regarding prioritizing the need for a safe house was the failure of the 'Senator'. The 'Senator', a facility similar to a safe house, was opened in March 1981 as a result of work completed by a Task Force on Juvenile Prostitution. The goal of the Task Force was to bring together senior representatives of public agencies to facilitate a modification and coordination of youth services. Of the more than 20 recommendations provided, one was for a multi-service residential facility to be developed as a resource for children from the downtown area. It was specifically recommended that the Ministry of Human Resources establish a short-stay on-street hostel serving older teens who appeared ready to leave street life.

The 'Senator' provided accommodation to youth aged 17 to 19 years and the necessary support services required by these youth. Although the 'Senator' provided a variety of services other than housing, it suffered from a number of problems culminating in its closure on December 31, 1983. As a result of Social Planning's identified need to determine the feasibility of a safe house and city-wide priorities with respect to providing various types of housing, in March 1990, Social Planning asked Housing and Properties to work together to address the issue of a safe house. The Departments had two goals - first, to coordinate activities to determine how the particular housing

needs of street youth could be prioritized within the context of all housing needs and second, to determine which housing programs and strategies should be employed to ensure that the highest priority forms of housing were developed.

In early April 1990, work began between municipal staff and the IMSCC. Soon after, recommendations were put forward to the Standing Committee of Council on Planning and Neighbourhoods and were unanimously approved. One recommendation specifically addressed the housing needs of street youth and was stated as follows: "That Council instruct the Manager of Properties to locate a 'safe house' for youth ..." (Standing Committee of Council on Planning and Neighbourhoods, April 5, 1990). The recommendations were revised by the Standing Committee and put forward to City Council who then approved the final recommendations. In following Council's instruction to locate a safe house, it was the responsibility of Housing and Properties to locate either a house for the Province to rent, or land which the Province could purchase.

During this same time period, Vancouver City Council approved in principle a proposal to rezone the Downtown South area to allow and encourage redevelopment to high density residential and commercial activity. It was predicted by the Social Planning Department that if and when such redevelopment did occur, it would have a significant impact on the area's street youth population and the services provided to them. As a result, the Downtown South Area Services Team (DSAST) was established to deal with the problems arising from the changing nature of the Downtown South area, and the impacts change would have on the present population. The team was comprised of representatives from municipal/provincial government and non-government agencies.

Beginning in the early part of 1992, the society SKID<sup>2</sup> (Street Kids In Distress Association) began to receive a significant amount of media attention. In the eight month period prior to October 1992, several attempts were made by existing social service agencies and committees to meet with the Director of the Association to provide information concerning the current network of services. While some attempts were successful, the majority were not. Difficulties were encountered by existing service agencies in developing an ongoing, cooperative working relationship with SKID. In the eyes of some organizations, it appeared that SKID was attempting to receive funds only to duplicate existing services.

The City of Vancouver became involved in the issue as a result of staffs' participation on various committees attempting to make contact with SKID. In addition, the Permits and Licenses Department became involved for two reasons - first, because the Association was operating out of a warehouse without the necessary permits and second, from a health and safety perspective, it was a potential hazard.

As a result of media attention given to SKID, the City reassessed its involvement in the provision of services to street youth. By the end of 1992, the Social Planning Department and individuals from the community were preparing a proposal for a Downtown South 'Gathering Place'. This facility would provide low-cost food, showers, lockers, books, information and a place to socialize. Arising out of Council's approval of the April 1990 recommendation regarding a safe house for youth and the knowledge that the Ministry of Social Services was going to receive funding for such

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<sup>2</sup> Street Kids in Distress Association (SKID) was an organization formed in December 1991 to help street kids achieve basic human needs such as food, clothing and shelter. In addition to satisfying their immediate needs, the organization attempted to provide access to long term rehabilitation needs.

a facility, City staff began working with the Ministry and a group of young male prostitutes to develop a 'safe house' for youth aged 16-18 years. The involvement of Housing and Properties in this work consisted of searching for an appropriate site. Lastly, staff were preparing to approach the Ministry to offer the lease of a City-owned house to accommodate youth desiring to move away from the street environment.

Much of the above stated activity had also been a result of Council policy regarding social housing. On May 16, 1991 Council endorsed "the principle of developing in Downtown South new social housing, constructing unsubsidized SRO replacement projects and retaining and upgrading the existing SRO stock as required in the absence of new replacement housing, with priority given to housing the existing long-term Downtown South residents" (City of Vancouver Housing and Properties and Social Planning Depts., January 29, 1993). While the intended target group of this policy was older single persons in the Downtown South area, the attention raised by SKID forced the City to re-examine its policy regarding who was a 'long-term resident'. Questions the City needed to address included 'should an age limit define who was a long-term resident?', 'should such a person be defined by their receipt of an income supplement?' or 'should such a person be defined based upon their length of time in the area?'

In January 1993, the Street Youth Housing Committee was formed as a subcommittee of the Downtown South Area Services Team. Its purpose was to address the issue of youth and housing in the Downtown South area. The target population was youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who did not require child protection services, and demonstrated some degree of independence. The rationale in selecting this subgroup was that they were excluded from Federal-Provincial housing programs, tended not to access traditional emergency housing resources, and remained highly

susceptible to involvement in crime, sex trade exploitation, substance abuse, and sickness and potential death due to dangerous and unhealthy living conditions.

Also in January 1993, the Departments of Housing and Properties and Social Planning prepared an Administrative Report to City Council. The report identified three service gaps. The first was a Gathering Place - a shelter for youth aged 16 to 18. Although this facility was mentioned as an area requiring attention, it was one issue currently being addressed by the City.

The second service gap reported was an emergency shelter for youth aged 16-18 years. In previous years the City had focused its resources on long-term secure housing rather than developing short-term shelters. A major problem cited by the City in developing shelters was that while they address short-term problems, the buildings often become long-term housing. In addition, individuals who use shelters often require various support services - services which are the responsibility of the Provincial Government. Lastly, the City had not participated in the provision of shelters because it was felt that non-profit societies, who commonly operate these facilities, have developed an expertise in the various service areas. While the City has been involved in providing emergency shelter, this housing provision has only been made available on an 'as-needed basis'. Upon the opening of a shelter, arrangements are immediately made through the Tenant Assistance Program to find permanent housing for the temporary residents. In the past, individuals who have received emergency shelter from the City have been both young and old, and have faced eviction from their hotels for reasons of redevelopment, fire, or closure.

The last service gap concerned housing for young adults (individuals aged 19-30 years). It was the City's position that these people were typically working or receiving either Unemployment

Insurance or Income Assistance, and therefore able to afford market rental SRO accommodations (approx. \$325/month). Further, Council had previously approved housing policy in 1991 to focus municipal efforts on providing housing for long-term Downtown South residents. It was noted that a problem in housing street youth is that the Provincial and Federal governments do not view single people as a priority. The only exception to date had been housing for disabled singles and downtown seniors where eligibility began at age 40. It was stated that Housing and Properties would begin to work with the Province to review the possibility of the Province reconsidering its eligibility criteria for social housing projects in the Downtown South area.

The report provided a number of recommendations of which one specifically addressed housing for street youth. It was stated as follows: "That the Director of Housing and Properties, in consultation with the Director of Social Planning, be instructed to work with the Ministry of Social Services and service agencies to help develop workable housing options for eligible street involved youth" (City of Vancouver Housing and Properties and Social Planning Depts., January 29, 1993).

On January 26, 1993, the City of Vancouver issued an eviction notice to the SKID Association requiring them to vacate the building they were occupying. As a result, the youth staged a sit-in - sleeping on the streets during the night and using the premises during the day. In addition, youth who were not members of SKID were being drawn to the situation and beginning to participate in the sit-in. To alleviate the problem and avoid the potential of trouble arising, a six person team was created to evaluate the needs of each SKID member and to provide a solution for each youth. However, such an individualized needs assessment never occurred as a result of a lack of interest on the part of the youth, and in its place a general meeting took place. On January 28, 1993 the SKID Association vacated the building.

The Ministry of Government Services suspended the powers of the Street Kids in Distress Association on February 24, 1993 for reasons of violations against the Society Act and other public interest concerns. In this same announcement, the Ministers of Social Services and Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Housing officially stated that provincial funding was available for the creation of a safe house. The facility was to provide six beds for temporary emergency shelter to street youth in crisis between the ages of 16 and 18. Although the original task of locating a site was a joint effort between the City of Vancouver Housing and Properties Department and the Province, it was the Province who found a site for the safe house in the end.

In response to a request by the Ministry of Social Housing for street youth housing, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Housing announced on March 23, 1993 a provincial housing plan to aid homeless, street youth, and individuals at-risk. Approximately 166 units of special needs housing was intended to be developed in Victoria, Vancouver, Surrey, Langley, and Powell River. The initiative included \$7.52 million in one time capital expenditures and \$3.03 million in annual operating costs. Of the funds allocated to projects in Vancouver, \$2.8 million was allocated for the creation of 25 units to serve the needs of street youth aged 18 to 25 years. Future tenants were expected to participate in existing community programs and services including life skills and employment counselling and training, drug and alcohol counselling, mental health outreach counselling, and street youth counselling.

While housing and youth advocates were pleased that the needs of street youth were being recognized, concern was expressed regarding the feasibility of creating a single large project. To alleviate this concern, the Province and the Departments of Social Planning and Housing and Properties initiated a community-based process to develop a plan for street youth housing. Other

groups/agencies involved in the process included the IMSCC, the Street Youth Housing Subcommittee of the DSAST, BC Housing Management Committee and the Downtown Granville Tenants Association. A series of workshops were held in May 1993 to develop a plan which would outline a suitable location(s) for the housing, the number of building sites, the number of units per site, and the management structure of the project(s). A criteria of the service plan was that it had to be supported by existing community agencies and existing budgets, as additional program operational dollars were not available. As a result of the work undertaken by the community representatives and youth advocates, it was recommended that three projects be developed, each with 8 self-contained units, to serve the needs of youth in the Downtown Eastside and Downtown South areas. The projects were targeted to serve the needs of youth who had demonstrated an interest in moving away from their street-oriented lifestyle.

Evolving out of the consultation process between the Province, service providers and the community, and the criteria that sponsors needed to be experienced in dealing with street youth, three sponsors were given conditional approval. The selected sponsors were United Nations (UNN), Vancouver Native Health Society (VNHS) and First Baptist Church. The British Columbia Housing and Management Commission provided funding for the projects.

In acquiring property for social housing, it was Council policy that Council "purchase privately-held parcels for social housing and lease them to non-profit sponsors for 60 years at a prepaid rent equal to 75 % of market value" (City of Vancouver Housing and Properties Dept., September 21, 1993). Therefore, recognizing the need to acquire three sites for the provision of 8-unit developments for street youth housing, on September 21, 1993, it was recommended "That Council instruct the Director of Housing and Properties to negotiate offers to purchase three sites, subject

to Council approval, to be leased for 60 years at a prepaid rent equal to 75 % of market value to United Native Nations, First Baptist Church and Vancouver Native Health Society for street youth social housing” (City of Vancouver Housing and Properties Dept., September 21, 1993).

On February 15, 1994 Vancouver City Council approved the City Manager’s recommendation that “City Council approve the acquisition of the property at 1818 East Pender Street ... for lease to United Native Nations” (City of Vancouver Housing and Properties Dept., February 3, 1994). On February 25, 1994 the City Manager recommended to Council that “council approve in principle the leasing of the City-owned site at 600 Vernon [Old Kiwassa Neighbourhood House] ... to Vancouver Native Health Society” (City of Vancouver Housing and Properties Dept., February 25, 1994). A third property was not found because First Baptist Church withdrew their sponsorship in the middle of February 1994.

As a result of the withdrawal of sponsorship by First Baptist Church, three issues needed to then be addressed: should a third sponsor be found, should the units be distributed between the other two projects, and should they reinitiate the original planning process? At a meeting held on February 24, 1994 between Housing and Properties and IMSCC, these three issues were discussed and a decision was reached on each issue. It was concluded that the process continue ahead with only two sites, since sufficient time did not exist to find a third sponsor, and on the condition that Downtown South street youth be accommodated within the two projects. VNHS agreed to a project size of 15 units and UNN agreed to develop a 10-unit project. It was also decided that the communities affected needed to be involved in discussing and approving the expansions of the projects. The individuals in attendance ensured that the original people involved in the projects’ planning would be notified of the day’s decisions.

In April 1994, a meeting was held involving all the individuals participating in the housing process. The agencies and societies in attendance were Ministry of Social Services, Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, City of Vancouver staff, UNN, VNHS, YWCA, Gordon House Youth Works, and Family Services of Greater Vancouver. The discussion centered on the issues of eligibility, length of time a youth is entitled to remain at the facility, support services, and funding for on-site management. At the conclusion of the meeting, it was decided that each sponsor society was to individually grapple with these issues. In addition, each sponsor was to work in conjunction with their respective youth advisory committee to receive input on both physical planning matters and management issues. It was decided that the individuals involved in the April meeting would meet again in September 1994 to discuss how each society sees itself operating.

In the period between April and September 1994, the City of Vancouver has and will continue to work with the two sponsor societies and their architects to develop building plans and aid them through the development approval process. It is anticipated by City staff that development approval will be achieved in early 1995 and building construction will soon follow. Presently, there are no other initiatives being planned for street youth housing in the City of Vancouver.

### **3.6 Housing Options to Street Youth**

In Vancouver there exists three types of housing for youth. These include Ministry-provided housing, self-financed market housing, and non-paid housing.

#### ***a. Ministry-provided Housing***

A variety of ministry-provided housing services are available to Vancouver's street youth population. For youth to access the majority of these services, they must be under the care of the

Ministry of Social Services. The types and forms of housing range from short-term accommodation, where a variety of support services are available to help youth make decisions regarding their first steps away from the street, to independent living, where youth are residing in their own accommodations and possibly receiving support services. In the middle lie shelters or hostels, temporary facilities in which older youth live until they are able to secure permanent accommodation, and group and foster homes, where a diversity of structured environments exist to serve the varied needs of the youth.

*b. Short-term Accommodation*

*Safe House*

Currently, there is only one safe house in Vancouver. The purpose of the facility is to provide a safe, stress-free, and non-pressured environment in which youth can come to and learn of the various services and options available to them. In providing such an environment, it enables youth to make informed decisions. It is the youth's own decision to arrive at the safe house, and the facility does not require the youth to be a ward of the state in order to receive shelter and support services

The length of stay at the safe house is 7 calendar days. The first 48 hours that a youth is at the facility a parent, legal guardian, or social worker is not contacted. However, after this 'grace' or 'cooling out' period, a staff member must attempt to contact one of the above three mentioned individuals. The majority of youth remain for the full 7 days.

The safe house attempts to target curbed-kids - youth who are starting to become entrenched in street life. Although the facility is intended to serve youth 16 to 18 years of age, no youth will ever be

turned away. Youth aged 13 to 15 years are able to stay at the safe house one night and then staff must contact Emergency Services. The number of younger youth that arrive at the facility is being documented by staff. The data being collected appears to resemble data being collected by other service agencies in Vancouver regarding the ages of street youth, and supports the statement that the number of younger youth on the street is increasing.

The concept of the safe house evolved out of a process in which a group of young male prostitutes from Boys Town were discussing their housing needs. They suggested that a housing continuum was needed - a continuum that was based upon a resident's level of independence. Individuals would move from dependent living environments, where they would receive high levels of support services, to independent situations, where they would receive very little or no support services.

From developing this continuum, it was identified that a safe house was greatly needed by street youth desiring to extricate themselves from the street environment. Planning for the safe house began in February 1993 and was a cooperative effort undertaken by the young males from Boys Town, Christopher Graham (the current supervisor/manager of the facility), and municipal planning staff. The planning involved everything from the facility's operation, available services, to building layout. Even though a youth's state at the facility is directly funded by the Ministry of Social Services, the safe house is operated under contract by Family Services of Greater Vancouver.

The facility officially began operation on December 17, 1993. Since its opening, the facility has provided a safe and secure shelter to 115 youth. Twenty of these youth have had repeat stays at the safe house. While there is always a turnover of youth, the beds have never been empty. The

majority of youth have been referred to the facility by the Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society (DEYAS), Street Youth Services (SYS), and ASU. However, the greatest advocates of the safe house are the youth themselves; on the street, information travels quickly via word of mouth.

The staff at the safe house attempt to repatriate the youth to their home or home community, if possible. Staff believe there are always three sides to every conflict - the youth's story, the parent's story, and the truth of the situation. The majority of the time staff at the facility believe the youth's story. They believe that for a youth to be fleeing their family home and seeking refuge at the safe house, the family problem must be severe. In addition, because it is the youth's decision to arrive at the safe house, the youth is demonstrating they want to make a change.

Staff strive to create trust and a rapport with the youth. Staff work together with the youth to establish goals and pathways for the youth to leave the street. Because youth choose to be at the safe house, staff have realistic expectations of the youth, and many youth are able to fulfill their goals.

It was expressed by staff at the safe house that there are no such things as rules - everything is either negotiable or non-negotiable. Non-negotiable issues include no drugs or accessories, no alcohol, no sex, no discrimination, no verbal or physical abuse to either residents or staff, no weapons, and no curfew. Although there is no curfew, if a youth does not return by 12 noon the following day, they are then considered to be discharged as there is always a high demand for the 6 single bedrooms. It is the opinion of staff that by having no rules, there is less reason on the part of the youth to want to rebel or show defiance.

Even though it was stated that there are no 'rules', the question needs to be asked 'If certain issues are non-negotiable, then are they not rules?' Are the concepts and intentions remaining the same, and only the language and words being used changing? If this is the case, youth may be falling victim to 'doublespeak'.

Staff at the facility believe that the safe house is achieving its intended purpose. It is their opinion that the two most significant aspects of the facility which make it successful are its relatively unstructured environment and staff/youth relationships. The lack of traditional requirements and restrictions help foster stronger bonds and levels of trust between the staff and youth. The fact that youth are choosing to be at the safe house and that goals and expectations are self-imposed, illustrates that youth are wanting to make a change. By creating a stress-free environment, staff believe they are able to develop a close rapport with the youth and thus enhance the feeling of trust. In addition, they feel that the facility's environment creates strong staff-youth working relationships. In turn, youth are able to build self-esteem and self-confidence. Further, it is staff's opinion that the lack of a structured environment creates a sense of freedom, which in turn fosters greater cooperation from the youth. Lastly, the 48 hour grace period allows the youth to 'cool out' and collect their thoughts.

While not originally part of the facility's management structure, service restrictions have begun to be implemented. This provision arose because some youth began to come and go rather frequently from the safe house and did not express a genuine desire to change their situation. However, the restriction is not definite because a service provider can never be sure when a youth is genuine about altering their state of affairs. The one time a youth is not believed may be the time that the youth is serious about making a change. The restriction is such that on a youth's fourth visit to the

safe house, the youth will not be allowed to access the facility's services unless they are able to demonstrate their will to change; the youth must be able to identify a case plan for themselves and the support services they will require.

Staff are presently considering changing the length of stay to a maximum of 7 working days or 9 calendar days. This change is being considered because much of mainstream society operates on a 5-day work week and not all services are available every day of the calendar week.

### *Receiving Homes*

The Ministry of Social Services, through contracts to various societies and agencies, provides a variety of the more traditional forms of state-provided housing. At the emergency end of the housing spectrum are receiving homes (e.g. Watson House, Grace House). This is commonly the entry point for youth into the care system. These homes are a short stay resource where youth remain at the facility for a length of time ranging from one month to 6 weeks. These facilities are staffed 24 hours and typically have 5-6 beds. Staff provide a risk assessment of the youth and help plan the youth's future placement. A youth's stay at a receiving home is directly funded by the Ministry of Social Services.

### *c. Long-term Housing*

#### *Group Homes*

Resource group homes are the next form of housing in the spectrum of state-provided care. Typically, the most troubled and disturbed youth are placed in these settings. Group homes provide structured environments in which the youth live. In these environments, youth have access to a variety of support services such as substance abuse counselling, mental health counselling, and

peer support. Although the maximum number of youth in any group home is 5 and the norm is 3, the number of youth in a home depends upon the skill and experience of the care giver and the youth's level of need. In Vancouver, there are between 60 to 80 group home beds funded by the Ministry of Social Services Region B office.<sup>3</sup> A youth is not responsible for paying rent. Rather, the cost of their stay at a group home is directly paid by the Ministry of Social Services.

Group homes are often operated under contract by a non-profit society or individual, and in some homes support staff is available. In all situations, the service provider is paid to care for the youth.

#### *Foster Homes*

Foster homes are less structured environments compared to group homes and attempt to create a family setting. There are four types of foster care. The first is a restricted foster home. This form of care is the least expensive to fund. In this situation, the care giver knows the child/youth and when the youth leaves the home, the care giver does not receive another child/youth. The remaining types of care are referred to as Levels 1-3 - Level 1 being the least costly and Level 3 the most expensive. The level of skill and experience of the care giver increases as the level of care increases (1 being low and 3 being high).

In a foster home, the care provided to the youth is more specialized and individualized than the care provided in a group home setting. Attempts are made to match the youth to the care giver. Typically there are 1-2 beds per foster home. There are approximately 80 foster home beds funded

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<sup>3</sup> The geographical jurisdiction of Region B includes the Vancouver downtown core, North shore, Squamish, Sechelt, and east Vancouver. The geographical jurisdiction of Region A includes False Creek south to Richmond, UBC to Renfrew, and North and South Delta.

by the Region B office. Similar to group homes, a youth's stay at a foster home is directly paid by the Ministry of Social Services.

#### *Semi-Independent Living*

Semi-independent living is a form of permanent housing funded by the Ministry and operated under contract to outside agencies. In this situation, the youth who is typically 17 or 18 years of age, lives in a self-contained suite in a house and is provided with life-skills support (e.g. shopping, cooking, budgeting).

#### *Independent Living*

At the other end of the Ministry-provided housing spectrum is independent living. It is the intent of the Ministry that every youth in care shall develop life skills within a family unit, or if not possible, within an adult-supervised living arrangement. However, in situations where all the preferred alternatives are not possible, a youth may be placed into an independent living resource.

It is only youth who are eligible for Income Assistance that are able to obtain independent living; as such, it is predominantly 17 and 18 year olds that are able to enter into this type of housing arrangement. On rare occasion, a 16 year old may be placed into independent living. An eligible youth must also be a permanent or temporary ward of the state. Lastly, an eligible youth must be willing to enter into a written agreement with the Ministry. The agreement outlines the personal goals that will help the youth achieve independence and it covers matters such as school attendance, vocational training and skills development, employment, behavioural goals, budgeting, the youth's true identity, and the frequency of payments.

If a youth is eligible for this form of housing, it is the responsibility of the youth to find their own rental unit. Prior to receiving Income Assistance, the youth must show to the Ministry that they have located a unit to rent. This is the only situation in Ministry care where a youth is given financial assistance to seek out market-priced rental accommodation.

For a youth in independent living wanting to access support services, they must go to the services rather than the services coming to them. However, for youth requiring substance abuse help there exists an 'in-home' detox program.

*d. Temporary Accommodation*

Shelters and hostels are two forms of temporary housing which the Ministry of Social Services provides through contract to outside agencies. The difference between a shelter and a hostel is based upon the type of people they provide the services to - hostels provide room and board to transient single people, primarily males, while shelters provide room and board to single parents and families.

Admittance into a shelter can be achieved either through Ministry referral or self-referral. If an individual refers themselves to a hostel/shelter they are entitled to remain either one night, or over the weekend if they admit themselves on a Friday night. The following business day the hostel refers the individual to the Ministry office where s/he applies for Income Assistance and is assessed by Ministry staff. If an individual's application is accepted, they are entitled to either Income Assistance, which they receive after showing they have located an accommodation, or remain at the hostel/shelter. In the latter situation, the individual is allowed to remain at the facility up to one month, during which time they must be actively searching for permanent accommodation. While at

the facility, the individual's stay is directly funded by the Ministry of Social Services. Abused women and single mothers may remain at a second stage shelter for up to 6 months. While residing at the hostel/shelter, the individual's stay is paid for by the Ministry and food is provided either on-site, through an arrangement with a restaurant, or in the form of vouchers. Typically, a high level of support services is not associated with shelters or hostels.

It is primarily older youth aged 17 to 18 years who find shelter in hostels. Youth who are 16 years of age and younger are commonly placed by the Ministry into group or foster homes. There are eight shelters/hostels in the City of Vancouver. Of these eight shelters, youth are usually only referred by the Ministry to three of them - these include Catholic Charities, Dunsmuir House and Powell Place. Young males are referred to either Catholic Charities or Dunsmuir House and these individuals cannot be alcohol or drug users. Young female mothers are referred to Powell Place as this shelter accepts only women and children. The other five facilities are inappropriate for youth as they service men and women with severe mental and substance abuse problems.

*e. Self-Financed Market Housing*

Self-financed market housing includes all forms of market housing that a youth is able to secure using their own financial resources. For youth not in state care, there is a near non-existent supply of affordable, quality, secure and safe accommodations. The types of self-financed market housing youth are able to afford include hotels and apartments. However, most youth have difficulties remaining in these living situations for extended periods of time because of behavioural problems or lack of financial resources. Youth who seek shelter in hotels or apartments tend to live in groups so that they are able to pool their resources.

*f. Non-Paid Housing*

Non-paid accommodations include illegal squats/abandoned buildings, hotel/motel rooms paid for by 'johns', a friend's house, alcoves, hot-air vents and the street. While some youth are housed by their boyfriend or pimp, they earn their stay through the use of their body.

*g. Outside Services*

There is a variety of services available to all street youth. However, the level of accessibility to support services are greater for youth who are temporarily housed in the safe house or receiving homes, or live permanently in group homes, foster homes, or semi-independent living situations. In the majority of these housing situations, the services come to the youth. Youth who reside at shelters/hostels, in independent living, or in non-ministry provided housing do not experience the same level of accessibility. Rather, they must seek out the services.

The range of services available include mental health counselling, alcohol/drug abuse counselling, free medical clinics, needle exchange, STD counselling, pregnancy counselling, employment training, alternative schooling, and referral services. To access these services youth do not have to be referred by a Ministry worker.

*h. Learnings from Past Street Youth Housing Experiences*

Unsuccessful past experiences in providing housing for street youth produce an excellent source of reference for developing future housing. One such example is the 'Senator'. For less than a two year period between March 1981 and December 1983, this facility operated to provide housing and the necessary support services to street youth aged 17 to 19 years.

The shelter component of the facility was managed by the Alternate Shelter Society under contract from the Ministry of Human Resources, and access into the facility was achieved only through a street worker. After the maximum stay of 30 days, a youth was expected to be ready to move into either follow-up resources, continue their education, or obtain employment.

The 'Senator' provided a number of services other than housing including crisis intervention, job placement, health services, educational programs, life skills program, drop-in drug/alcohol counselling program, food, laundry, showers, outreach, and educational outings. Despite this extensive list of support services, the facility suffered from a number of service provision and physical problems which led to its closure on December 31, 1983.

Prior to its closure, a report produced by Ministry of Human Resources in August 1983 cited the facility's various problems. Service problems included a lack of effectiveness in the specific services provided, a lack of information regarding the facility's operation due to mistrust between staff and the outside professional community, the clustering of services within the housing facility, a lack of screening criteria, a lack of transition housing for youth leaving the facility, and youth over extending their stay (i.e. youth remaining in the housing for 3 months rather than one). Problems concerning the physical aspect of the complex included its proximity to the downtown, the building layout, and the large size of the facility.

The failure of the 'Senator' and the lessons learned from its short life are reflected in a City of Vancouver decision (January 29, 1993) that the Gresham and Old Continental Hotels, two City-owned hotels, were unsuitable facilities to house street youth. Reasons cited for the hotels' inappropriateness were their proximity to the heart of street activity along Granville Street and the

large number of rooms within each facility. In addition, past experiences in housing have shown that ‘ghettoizing’ one sub-population within a single facility generates a diversity of other problems.

A second recent incident in Vancouver which reflects the enlightenment from the ‘Senator’ experience is the location of the safe house. The safe house is situated in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood. This location is well removed from the focal points of street activity either in the Granville Mall or Downtown Eastside areas. Despite its distance from the heart of street life, youth are continually accessing the facility’s services and since its opening, the beds have never been empty. In addition, it is believed the small size of the facility enables trust to be developed between the youth and staff, thus enabling better working relationships to be formed. From other housing experiences, it has been found that in large facilities the needs of the individual often become lost in the crowd.

A third incident which illustrates that location is a critical factor when developing housing for street youth is the ‘non-implementation’ of a project that was to be developed at the intersection of Main and Hastings Streets. This intersection forms the centre of the Downtown Eastside area. Among people familiar with the area, it is known as ‘Cocaine Corner’. A significant amount of opposition was raised regarding the possible choice to utilize an existing building at this location to provide housing for street youth. As a result, the project was abandoned and currently there are no attempts being made to find an alternative location.

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## **CHAPTER 4: STREET YOUTH IN VANCOUVER: A STUDY OF THEIR HOUSING ENVIRONMENT**

### **4.1 Introduction and Methodology**

To understand the complex issue of street youth and housing as it exists in Vancouver, two sets of interviews were conducted. The first set of interviews were undertaken with service providers who work with or are knowledgeable about street youth. The second set of interviews were conducted with street youth. The list of all persons interviewed is in Appendix A.

With the assistance of a City of Vancouver planner, an initial contact list of service providers was developed. During the process of interviewing the original persons on the contact list, other names were provided - individuals the interviewees thought were knowledgeable regarding the plight of youth and the struggles they face in securing housing. In total, 11 service providers were interviewed. Their involvement with youth ranged from everyday face-to-face contact to occasional contact.

The service provider interviews served two purposes. First, to gain insight into the various pieces of legislation which affect youth and their ability to access housing, the variety and quality of housing available, and other social barriers preventing youth from securing housing. Second, to learn how service providers envisioned an 'ideal' continuum of housing. The questions asked of the service providers are listed in Appendix B.

Two types of youth were interviewed - youth who currently live a life on the street, and youth who have successfully extricated themselves from a street environment and now lead a 'mainstream' life. The ages of the youth interviewed ranged between 15 years and late twenties. Although part

of the definition of youth used in this thesis is a person between the ages of 12 and 18, individuals 19 years of age and over were interviewed because these individuals had once led a street life and were able to provide valuable insights into the many problems faced by street youth in their attempt to secure housing.

Contact was made with street involved youth through the DEYAS Detox Centre located at 432 E. Hastings Street. Approval to talk to the youth was first sought and achieved from one of the Centre's front-line service providers. A 2.5 hour time period was spent at the Centre talking to youth who were using the Centre's services. Youth were asked about the problems they faced in trying to secure housing, and the types and quality of the accommodations they were able to secure.

The second group of youth interviewed were staff members of the Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Networks. Appendix C lists the questions posed to both groups of youth. These questions provided only the skeleton to the discussions which took place.

This Chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the results of the interviews with the service providers. The second section is a discussion of the current housing environment as experienced and expressed by youth themselves. The last section provides an overview of the interview responses, and reflects upon the types of responses provided by the youth.

## 4.2 The Service Provider's Perspective

From the interviews conducted with the service providers a myriad of issues were outlined which directly affect or indirectly influence a youth's ability to secure housing. The issues have been categorized into four general problem areas - legislative policy, the current market housing environment, the state-provided care system, and the social development of youth.

### a. *Legislative Policy*

The two pieces of current legislation which affect youth and their ability to secure housing are the *Family and Child Service Act (F & CS)* and the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act (GAIN)*. The *F & CS Act* allows the Ministry of Social Services to bring an individual under the age of 19 into care and become their guardian. The *GAIN Act* allows youth aged 17 and 18 years to receive financial assistance for either securing housing, day to day living expenses, or both.

#### *Family and Child Service Act*

There are numerous problems associated with the *F & CS Act*. The language used in the Act carries with it many negative connotations. Youth who are receiving state care are referred to as 'wards of the state' and the process of bringing a youth into care is termed 'apprehension'. Although these are only two examples of the terminology used in the Act, they clearly illustrate that the terms being applied function to create a mindset that youth in care are deviants and criminals.

The *F & CS Act* allows anyone under the age of 19 to safe housing. For the Ministry to apprehend a youth, they must prove that the youth is at risk (i.e. in personal mental and/or physical danger) in their present situation. There are two avenues the Ministry may follow to bring a youth into care.

The Ministry can either achieve parental agreement or if not possible, a court order. To successfully proceed forward, the Ministry requires the trust and cooperation of the youth, but often, youth neither trust nor cooperate with the Ministry. As a result, the efforts of the Ministry are commonly thwarted.

The youth's lack of trust and cooperation is a result of a feeling characteristic among many youth - that their parents, schools, and police have done them wrong and let them down. Often, it has been adults in a position of trust who have caused youth much pain. In addition, there is a negative stigma attached to state care and youth are leery of trusting government staff. Many youth who have taken flight from group or foster homes have had bad experiences in these environments.

The implementation of Bill 46 will allow the Ministry to enter into voluntary agreements with youth 16 years and older. It is anticipated that this change will alleviate problems of uncooperative parents, the youth's fear of state care, the youth's apprehension to trust adults, and time delays associated with the court system.

A third problem with the current Act is that support services cease to exist for youth once they reach the age of 19. At age 19, the individual is considered an adult by government legal standards and must seek services in the adult world of service provision. In the eyes of one service provider, a youth is any individual between the age of 13 and 24. Although a street youth may be physically 24 years of age, their cognizant, social, and mental level may be similar to that of a mainstream 16 year old. When an individual turns from 18 to 19 years of age, their social development level does not change simultaneously. However, the Act as it exists today, causes a youth's 'mental body' to be denied the needed support services they were once entitled to. It is anticipated that when

implemented, Bill 46 will address the issue of cessation of support services at age 19, as it will allow any individual in care on their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday to continue to receive services for any 2 year period up until the age of 24.

In providing residential care to youth, it was noted by a few front-line service providers that the Ministry primarily provides state housing to youth 15 years and under. Although it is legislated that the Ministry shall provide safe housing to youth under 19 years, 16 to 18 years olds are commonly left to find their own housing. One service provider was of the opinion that there is resistance within the Ministry to apprehend youth aged 16 years and older.

#### *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act (GAIN)*

It was noted by some of the interviewees that there are two significant inconsistencies associated with the Underage Income Assistance policy in the *GAIN Act*. These inconsistencies are the value of the financial aid and the nature of the policy.

Youth turn to Income Assistance because they are either not accepted by the Ministry to receive state-provided care, are leery of group and foster homes, or lack their own financial resources to secure housing. What little money a youth may have is never enough to rent a quality market unit. Through Income Assistance, a youth is able to receive a maximum of \$325 per month for housing. To secure a quality one-bedroom residence in downtown Vancouver without sharing, this amount of money is terribly insufficient. As a result, youth end up renting degrading and unsafe residences.

It is the discretionary nature of the policy which creates an even greater problem for youth in accessing Income Assistance, and in turn, housing. The manner in which the policy is implemented, that is the determination of eligibility, is based upon the policy's interpretation, and the interpretation of the policy is the responsibility of the managers of the individual financial aid workers. Allowing each individual to interpret policy creates wild variations across the province. Workers with less experience often do not possess the ability to manipulate the policy, and thus are more rigid and inflexible in their interpretation. It is only the youth who suffer, as they are the victims of inconsistent decision-making and thus experience confusion and uncertainty regarding their eligibility.

It was stated by one service provider that they have been instructed to deal with one specific financial aid worker because that individual's manager has interpreted policy such that 17 and 18 year olds are able to receive Income Assistance. On rare occasion, a 16 year old may be eligible for Income Assistance, but they must demonstrate a unique and extreme condition and receive a recommendation by an Adolescent Street Unit staff person.

The stipulation that a youth, eligible to receive the housing component of Income Assistance, prior to receiving any dollars must prove to the Ministry that an apartment has been found through providing an 'Intent to Rent' form does not create a full proof system. As mentioned by one government employee, many youth have begun to produce fake forms in order to feed their alcohol or drug addictions. For these youth, housing is never secured - only their addiction.

It was noted by two interviewees that the specific regulations of Income Assistance create disincentives for two people, both receiving Income Assistance, to live as a dependent couple. If

two individual people are receiving Income Assistance the maximum shelter component each person can receive is \$325/month. If these two people were to live together as two independent persons, their total shelter component would value \$650/month. However, if these same two people were to live together in a dependent situation, their total shelter component would value \$520/month. In addition, the total support component they could receive is \$383/month as compared to \$442/month for two independent persons pooling their money.

Recognizing the fact that this regulation causes dependent couples to receive less total Income Assistance than two people living independently, many youth choose to live independently. However, searching for a one-bedroom unit with only \$325 available for rent is more difficult than searching for the same size unit with \$520 available for rent.

A second aspect of the regulations, which occurs in conjunction with the first, and creates a disincentive for two people to live together is that the Ministry of Social Services provides a shelter component equal to the value of the rent or a maximum of \$325 (\$520 for a couple) - which ever is the lesser of the two. Therefore, if a couple living dependently finds an apartment for \$400/month, the Ministry will provide them with \$400/month and *not* \$520/month. This regulation prevents two people from living together and being innovative in the housing they secure. If the regulation did not exist, two people could receive housing for an amount lower than their combined shelter components and use the remainder of the shelter component to help pay for their everyday living expenses.

*Bills 45 and 46*

It was asked of some interviewees if Bills 45 and 46 will make any improvements to the current system. While some people noted the positive changes that the new legislation intends to create, others noted that its success will be very much dependent upon interpretation and the determination to change. As evident in the current system, there is a difference between policy intent and the reality of the situation. This difference was also applied to Bill 46. It was a strong belief of one interviewee that unless there are major changes, in particular attitude changes regarding youth, within the Ministry and at the front-line (social workers, financial aid workers) - the latter being the more crucial - the impacts of the new legislation will never reach their potential. Further, the success of Bill 46 is limited to the degree individuals alter their method of practice.

A second uncertainty regarding the new legislation was its ability to be financially implemented. Although the legislation allows the Ministry to perform more creative support services prior to a youth's apprehension, it was the hope expressed by one interviewee that the financial resources will be available for the Ministry to follow through with its intentions.

Third, it was noted that a difference exists between supporting families and family preservation. Bill 46 should not be interpreted as family preservation at any cost. In some settings, separating family members temporarily to deal with their individual problems is more effective and fosters better family futures.

Bill 45 was described as having tremendous potential. However, much of its success is dependent upon who gets the job. It was stated that whoever receives the position must possess the ability to plan and continue with a phased plan of implementation as there will be great pressure to

demonstrate change within a short period of time. A second major challenge will be bringing youth to the forefront. It is often wrongly assumed that 'consumers' are easily able to fit into a foreign environment and be productive. To be truly involved, youth will need support services. It was noted that the Youth Advocate must possess the ability to find ways (e.g. time to adjust, access to information) of making youth feel comfortable in their new role.

*b. The Market Housing Environment*

*Housing Resources*

The most blatant issue facing youth is the lack of housing resources. The existing housing environment does not contain subsidized housing for youth, and the quality market housing which is available is not affordable. Up until 1992, the Federal and Provincial governments did not consider street youth a priority group in need of subsidized housing - the funding emphasis was targeted at seniors and families. For street youth with children, in attempting to access the current supply of subsidized housing, they face two key barriers - long waiting lists and the discretion used by housing managers in selecting and placing future tenants.

The inability to access affordable housing goes hand in hand with a youth's inability to access quality housing. Most youth who have the financial ability to secure their own housing typically access Vancouver's downtown single-room occupancy hotels. These rundown and filthy rooms are the only form of housing youth are either able to afford or are accepted into as tenants. Youth living in these situations are often exploited and not respected as a person paying rent.

*Equitable Access*

Equitable access to housing is a second issue affecting street youth. This issue consists of two sub-components - access to information and discrimination. The majority of street youth do not know the various sources from which they can access housing information. In addition, much information on available housing is only targeted at specific renter groups, yet street youth are not one of those target groups.

Discrimination against street youth exists on two levels - systemic and personal. Systemic discrimination is the absence of any individual or group who advocates on the behalf of youth. The lack of advocacy for youth was cited by many of the interviewees as a major issue affecting youth and their ability to access housing. Lacking both the ability to organize themselves and an outside advocate, youth form a voiceless and forgotten group in society. In the opinion of one service provider, if there is no one to fight on their behalf and have their voices heard, no one will ever recognize them and 'make a place for' their needs. Further, the current political system does not allow youth to become a heard group. Their lack of power is strengthened by their inability to vote. Lacking political clout, youth are an easy group for politicians to not listen to or acknowledge.

Discrimination against the person was a major issue noted by many service providers. It is a key reason explaining why youth are unable to secure quality housing. Landlords are the primary individuals who discriminate against street youth. Youth are discriminated against for reasons of age, physical appearance, race, and being an Income Assistance recipient. The majority of landlords possess a poor attitude toward youth and among many there is the perception that youth are bad tenants. Landlords commonly formulate wrong assumptions about street youth based

solely on their appearance. Lastly, it is common among landlords to discriminate against single parents, as landlords are not receptive to renting to individuals with children. The more a person is perceived as special needs (e.g. Native, female, handicapped), the more difficult it is for that individual to obtain housing.

*c. The State-Provided Care System*

Problems associated with the current system of care include the form of service delivery and the quantity of residential services. To a degree, the form of service delivery is affected by the quantity of available facilities. The form of service delivery includes not only the way in which services are provided, but also the mindset of the care system regarding youth and their rights.

*The Lack of a Universal Definition*

The current care system is not organized in a manner to deal effectively with the needs of youth. To begin with, there is no universal definition of youth. The definition of youth varies from agency to agency, from province to province, and from one piece of legislation to another. The lack of a consistent definition creates problems when discussing and planning services for youth. If the service providers developing the services and programs do not have a common definition of a youth, the services and programs created will not adequately address the needs of the youth, as youth from different backgrounds, street lifestyles, and ages all have very different needs.

*Form and Method of State Care and Services*

The existing types of care facilities are not designed nor operated in a manner which recognizes the many struggles street youth have faced. The majority of state care facilities have high expectations for conformity. Coming from a street environment in which they have had complete control over

their daily activities, it is difficult for street youth to conform to the rules and regulations in state facilities and often experience a feeling of loss of control. A street youth's non-conformity to state care rules is not always a conscious effort; many times it is an unconscious reaction ingrained from a life on the street.

A problem cited by one interviewee was that often the personality of the social worker affects the outcome of what happens to the youth. The scenario was created such that if a social worker does not want to apprehend a youth because it was stated by the parents that a problem does not exist at home, when the youth approaches the financial aid worker to receive Income Assistance, it is common among financial aid workers to also refuse the youth's request. It was the opinion of the interviewee that when the youth is asked by the financial aid worker why the youth was not apprehended, and the response was that the social worker wanted the youth to return to the family home, but the youth refused this option, in the eyes of the financial aid worker the youth is behaving rebelliously. It was believed that the fate of a youth who is not apprehended, not able to receive Income Assistance, and does not want to return home, will be life on the street. It was stated that the attitudes of front-line workers must change to become more believing of youth. As stated by many interviewees, if a youth's home environment was tolerable, the youth would not be seeking social assistance or refuge on the street. While the frequency of this scenario occurring is unknown to this author, the potential for it to occur does exist.

The method of program funding was stated by one interviewee as a system problem. Programs are developed to help deeply entrenched street youth, and the continued funding for these programs is based upon the success rate of placing these youth into the community. However, when working with deeply entrenched street youth the success rate is generally lower because the process takes

longer to help these youth. Since programs with low success rates do not receive the same amount of funding as highly successful programs, programs designed for street youth do not always accept the youth most in need of their services.

The manner in which service-providing agencies behave indirectly creates difficulties for youth. One interviewee stated that there exists territorialism of services; each service agency is protective of their own service area. In addition, it was noted that there is a lack of communication and cooperation between Ministries; this observation can be extended to apply to non-government service agencies as well. The current system also lacks a single body which oversees all programs. Taken together, these four factors cause agencies to work within their own bubble - only vaguely aware of what others are doing. As a result, duplication of services occur and this only serves to make inefficient use of available funding. The intense competition for the all important, yet limited, financial support, and the resulting fragmentation of youth services has also been noted by other researchers studying the issue of street youth (Rothman, 1991; Treanor, 1988). Lastly, it was expressed by many interviewees that a need exists for a coordination of service providers so that everyone involved (i.e. all levels of government, non-government organizations, private sector) can work toward the same end.

The present method of service delivery is inappropriate for street youth. It has been labeled by one service provider as 'destination servicing'. Currently, youth are required to go to the service location in order to access the service(s). However, many youth fear the social system and police, and therefore do not go to these locations to access the needed supports. It was stated that a change must occur in our present manner of providing services in order to target those street youth

who do not go to the service location(s) for support. It was expressed that more outreach services are required to help improve the flow of information to street youth.

Lastly, within the realm of a quality care system and method of service delivery, a major issue affecting youth and their ability to access housing and support services is the availability of information. It was stated that the system does not market itself to youth. The Ministry does not provide any document which explicitly outlines the services available and the guidelines/regulations associated with each service. In addition, largely due to their lack of power and the fact they become a forgotten part of society, youth are not educated about their rights. It was expressed by many interviewees that youth are both not informed and misinformed as to what they are entitled to.

However, not all interviewees were of the same opinion. Some service providers believe that the majority of youth are made aware of programs and services by other street friends and outreach workers. It was stated that street youth are resourceful individuals and when things get bad, they are able to find the necessary information and appropriate resources.

The inappropriateness of foster and group homes was mentioned by a few service providers. One interviewee strongly expressed the opinion that these types of care facilities are unacceptable ways for youth to live. Youth are provided with no freedom and are treated as if they are young criminals. It was a major concern expressed by a few interviewees that when discussing care facilities for youth, the question of empowerment regarding who is being served needs to be asked. It was noted that it is often the case in state care facilities that youth are powerless; it is an adult run system that receives no input from youth - the group they are serving.

*Inadequate Supply of Facilities*

Regarding the quantity of various types of state-provided residences, it was noted by a few interviewees that there was an insufficient number of group homes, foster homes and semi-independent living situations. The lack of facilities causes a continuity of movement - a beginning, middle and end of treatment and programs available to youth - to not exist.

Also attributed to the inadequate number of facilities was the fact that the current system lacks a differentiation of services. As a result, there are insufficient residential care choices in which to place youth and the services provided are generalized. Service providers are not afforded the ability to match service staff and type of residence to the individual needs of the youth.

*The Inappropriateness of Mainstream Society's Social System*

Commonly stated by many of the interviewees was the inappropriateness of our social system for street youth and the general lack of support services. The present education system is not suitable to serve the needs of street youth since it does not consider the type of lifestyle led by these youth (e.g. the difficulty for street youth to adhere to strict time schedules). Second, existing drug and alcohol programs are not appropriate for street youth. Historically these programs have been developed to serve an adult clientele however, the lifestyles and needs of adults are extremely different from those of street youth. Third, there is a lack of housing and support workers - individuals whose responsibility would be to help youth through the housing-search process and assist them in maintaining their housing. The inadequacy of support workers was demonstrated by the fact that in the Greater Vancouver Region, there are only two mental health workers providing counselling services to the Region's street youth.

*d. The Level of Social Development*

The level of social development of street youth creates great difficulties for them in securing and maintaining housing. It was often stated during the interviews that even if a youth did have adequate financial resources and was initially able to secure housing, the youth would not be able to maintain it. Street youth lack the necessary productive life skills and common sense needed to manage money and be a good tenant. Having left home at an early age for a life on the street, these youth have not had the opportunity for an adult figure to teach them the necessary skills (e.g. managing/budgeting money, opening a bank account, preparing a shopping list, responsibilities of a good tenant, being assertive, laundry, general house cleaning). It is common among street youth to have been evicted from a number of apartments before finally settling into one. Their immaturity reveals itself in their first few times of securing housing. Soon after a youth moves into a new accommodation they hold a party which is loud and disruptive, or are quickly taken advantage of by their street friends who are in need of shelter. In either situation, after a short period of time the youth is evicted. Presently, programs or courses in which street youth could attend to learn the necessary skills do not exist.

**4.3 The Street Youth's Perspective**

From the interviews conducted with the youth it became clear that the issue of housing was much larger than simply the lack, or quality, of available housing. It expanded to include the mindset of the current care system and the manner in which society as a whole treats youth.

The youth were asked about the types of accommodation they sought, the quality of the housing they were able to secure, difficulties they encountered in attempting to secure housing, and improvements to the current system which would help them secure safe, affordable, and quality

housing. The results of the interviews have been divided into two parts. The first part describes how youth live - the physical and social aspects of the accommodations they have lived in. The second part is comprised of the problems street youth experience in both the market housing environment and the state care system.

*a. How Youth Live*

The types of accommodation the youth have lived in range from squats, sharing a house, living with a boyfriend, hotels, to Ministry-provided care (i.e. group and foster homes). The majority of time the youth lived with other people, some of whom they knew and others they did not.

Not including Ministry-provided care, the longest time any street youth had resided in one location was one year. Common among three individuals was the fact that the minimum amount of time spent in any one place was between one and two weeks. For the youth who lived in single-room occupancy hotels, they lived there on a month to month basis. Their length of stay was dependent upon their ability to pay the next months rent.

Personal safety was an issue mentioned by some of the female youth. They stated that there existed a constant threat of drugs being forced upon them. In addition, there was always the fear that other people living in the house, in their drugged and incoherent state, might unconsciously hurt one of these individuals.

Through talking to the youth, the deplorable quality of the hotels in the Downtown Eastside area became real. The size of the rooms were described as extremely small with only enough room for a bed and a dresser. Many of the rooms lacked cooking facilities - even a hot plate, the bare

minimum, was absent from the majority of rooms. The individual units were without private baths and tenants were required to share a common bathroom. In addition, many hotels lacked laundry facilities. For this reason, some of the youth stated that they tried to stay as clean as possible.

The infestation of the rooms with cockroaches, silverfish and other insects was noted by all the youth. One youth stated that the problem was so bad that when he went to bed at night, he would pull his bed out from beside the wall because if he did not, the cockroaches would climb up the wall and onto his bed sheets. A youth originally from Montreal stated that he chose to sleep on the street since it was cleaner and safer than any hotel room. Some of the youth stated that the rooms 'smelled like death'. The youth were able to tell through the smell of a room that someone had died from a drug overdose. One youth reported that in his hotel an older man had died, but his body was not discovered until a week after his death when the smell began to leave his room.

When asked about the average rent of the hotel rooms, it was stated that the rent ranged from \$325 to \$345 per month.

***b. The Housing Environment***

A major shortcoming youth saw in the current housing environment was the lack of subsidized housing specifically for youth. The youth recognized the fact that they have not been a priority group selected to receive subsidized housing. A problem inherent in the existing subsidized housing program is that for a youth to be an eligible tenant, the youth must be a parent and cannot be in care. However, the waiting lists are long and it is a minimum two year wait before a unit becomes available. Therefore, while waiting for a subsidized unit and not able to receive Ministry

support, either financial assistance or state-provided housing, the question was asked ‘What does a single-parent youth do in the meantime?’

The behaviour of landlords toward youth was mentioned by many of the youth as a significant problem. Specifically, the discriminatory behaviour of landlords towards youth was frequently stated. While discrimination takes all forms (e.g. age, recipients of Income Assistance, physical appearance), racism was cited as the greatest factor in preventing many youth from renting hotels or apartments. The problem was expressed as being most acute among youth of a Native background. One Native stated that landlords often have a fixed idea of who a Native is - a person who is dirty, smelly, and drunk. This preconceived notion generalized to represent all native youth, further compounds the difficulties experienced by Native youth.

It was stated that even when landlords do rent to youth, they always assume the worst. They are extremely untrusting of youth and are constantly watching their actions. Landlords take full advantage of the youth’s vulnerable position. Cognizant that youth are in search of housing and unable to secure better quality accommodations in other areas, hotel landlords in the Downtown Eastside area charge a rent which is equal to the maximum amount that the Income Assistance shelter component provides to an individual.

In addition to charging exorbitant rents, landlords charge guest fees. This fee, which ranges between \$20 and \$25, is charged every time a tenant has a visitor in their room past a certain hour in the evening (e.g. 8 p.m.). This fee not only limits a youth’s freedom, it also functions to prevent youth who want to reduce their rent payments from sharing their room.

The problem of hotel quality was often mentioned. It was noted by one youth, who currently resides in a hotel, that landlords are able to let the quality of the hotel decline because health officials only inspect the building once a year. In addition, landlords know they do not have to exert the effort to continually upgrade the building because they have a captive market.

*c. The State Care System*

A problem of great magnitude to the youth concerning the current child welfare system was the manner in which youth are treated. In the present system, youth have no control over their life and are not treated with respect and dignity. They believe it is wrong for strangers to have complete control over their future. Further, recognizing the fact that many street youth come from a background filled with abuse, the youth believe it is ignorant on the part of adults to assume that youth will go with just anyone who will provide them with a home.

The youth stated that the manner in which they are placed into care facilities illustrates their lack of control. When a youth is first brought into care an assessment is carried out on the youth by a social worker, yet the youth is unable to view their assessment. Even youth who have been in the care system for a period of time are unable to view their own file. Their lack of control was also noted at the stage in the process following their assessment and prior to their placement into a care facility. At this point, a negotiation process between the youth and the social worker, potentially outlining what the youth will receive and can expect, does not exist. A problem cited regarding the assessment process was that assessments are based upon a one-time visit. It was a concern expressed by a few youth that often a one-time incident can plague a youth's future placement(s). It was stated by one individual that social workers are seldom able to put a specific incident in the

past and allow the youth to move forward. On the whole, it was expressed that very little communication occurs between a youth and their social worker.

It was the strong opinion of some youth that they should not have to live with other families in group or foster homes. These settings do not provide a caring environment. Youth believe that there is no time provided in the present placement process for youth to establish a trusting relationship with the new 'home provider'. Regarding foster homes, youth stated that they are made to feel like they are a burden on the family, and that they should be grateful to the family for providing them with housing. While experiencing a feeling of not being wanted by the family, youth do not want to be with the family either. It was a strong feeling of some youth that in foster care, the home is not their home, the family is not their family, and the community is not their community. It was stated that group homes are made to sound like wonderful living environments by service providers, but this is hardly the case. These environments are structured by curfews and regulations and youth receive very little freedom and respect.

A major problem for youth concerning the state care system is the negative stigma attached to being in care. Youth do not want to be regarded as recipients of a service. They do not want to be thought of as 'just another number' or 'just another case file'. It was stated by one interviewee that for youth who are choosing between the three options: living in an abusive and intolerable family environment, living in care, or living on the street, the majority would choose the street. A home on the street provides the youth with freedom, the ability to control their future, and respect which they receive from their street peers.

The youth expressed feelings of frustration and anger concerning the Income Assistance Program. They stated that they are often treated in a demeaning manner. In addition, the very success or failure in receiving Income Assistance depends completely upon the financial aid worker. Some youth expressed the opinion that there should be an open consultation/negotiation process between the financial aid worker and the youth, in which the youth's eligibility for Income Assistance is discussed. One youth suggested that eligibility for Income Assistance should be based upon one's maturity level rather than age.

Age was also mentioned as a factor affecting a youth's ability to access housing. It was stated that for youth 17 years and under it is almost impossible to secure safe and affordable housing. The two key reasons are that these individuals have extreme difficulties in both receiving Income Assistance and obtaining high paying jobs.

When asked how the current system could improve, the youth provided three recommendations. All three targeted the attitudes and mindset of the adult-developed system. The recommendations stated were service providers must listen to youth, service providers must understand where youth are coming from, and service providers must not base assumptions solely upon a youth's appearance or past actions.

In securing safe housing, the youth stated there were endless hurdles they had to face. A great amount of stamina was needed to keep fighting the battles, whether it was Income Assistance, employment, housing, school or daycare. To continue to move forward and survive each day, youth require a great amount of strength and persistency. However, some youth become tired of dealing with the constant battle (e.g. the appeal process for Income Assistance) and become

trapped in a street life. It was stated that the concept of spirit does not exist when living in a hotel environment. This makes it very difficult for a struggling youth to continue with their personal battle to survive and succeed. The ambition and morale to move forward is quickly deteriorated in a hotel environment. For single people or single-parent youth attempting to survive on their own in an environment other than a hotel, the places they can afford are not safe for either them or their children.

#### **4.4 Overview of the Interviews**

The two sets of interviews were extremely enlightening and provided much insight into the issue of street youth and housing. This thesis began by asking three questions: are there problems in legislation which create barriers to street youth accessing housing, is the supply of housing, both state-provided and market, inadequate, and are the forms of housing currently being provided inappropriate for youth? From the interviews undertaken, it was found that 'yes' was the answer to all three questions. However, the responses provided during the interviews made clear the fact that the barriers facing youth in their ability to access housing extend past the tangible barriers such as the quantity of housing or the form of service provision. It includes intangible social issues such as maturity, social development levels, and attitudes.

The service providers brought to light the issue that youth lack the basic living skills necessary to live on one's own. Lacking these skills, youth are perceived as bad and irresponsible tenants by landlords. However, street youth have never been afforded the opportunity to learn how to be a good tenant. For the majority of youth, street life began at an early age and they passed from childhood to adulthood without ever being taught these skills by a parent or guardian.

For street youth and youth in care, while the issue of safe, secure and affordable housing is important, the issue of respect is paramount. Youth believe they are not treated like human beings; they feel as if the rights of a youth do not exist. In the eyes of the youth, the issue of respect is the basis of many problems. If an individual does not receive respect, they will not give it in return.

The youth also expressed the view that society has lost much of its 'community quality'. Often when people no longer fit into mainstream society and society does not have time to care for them, these individuals are put somewhere else. If a person is too old, society puts them in a senior citizen home, if a person is handicapped, we institutionalize them, and if a person is young and creates trouble, society places them in group homes or correctional facilities. The youth interviewed concluded that street kids and kids in care are the throwaways of society. This statement strongly demonstrates that youth are neither valued nor a priority in today's adult-oriented society.

Reflecting upon the interviews with the service providers, despite their varying levels of contact with the youth, they all made reference to the need for the system to alter its form and method of service provision. The importance of youth empowerment was recognized by all.

Upon completing the interviews with the youth, it became clear that the two groups of youth provided two very different types of information. The interview with the Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Networks staff members provided better insight into the variety of factors affecting street youth in their struggle to find housing. Now leading productive mainstream lives, these individuals were able to reflect back upon their street lives and be critical of the system they were trapped in.

The main focus of the youth interviewed at the DEYAS Detox Centre was on the here and now. Their responses centred upon the quality of housing and the problem of discrimination. For these youth, currently involved in street life and the struggle to find housing, it was difficult for them to see out of their present situation and provide recommendations regarding the present system.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Summary**

The current state care system is successful at trapping and creating street entrenched youth. Youth are fleeing from intolerable home situations to an environment where they want control over their own life. While the Ministry of Social Services exists to provide care to underage persons who for whatever reason are unable to live at home, the management forms of the care facilities provided are inappropriate for youth seeking control over their disrupted lives. It appears that the mindset of the state care system regarding youth is that youth are immature, irresponsible and rebellious. Their very age causes others to believe they lack the ability to be responsible for their future. Further, the fact that youth are choosing to leave their family home reinforces the views others have regarding their irresponsible and rebellious nature.

Based on these assumptions, youth in care are provided with almost no respect and no input into determining their future. This is clear in the fact that neither a consultation nor negotiation process occurs between a youth and their social worker during the youth's initial assessment, the determination of their future placement, and their eligibility assessment for Income Assistance. In addition, secrecy appears to fill the Ministry as demonstrated by the fact that youth are unable to view their initial assessment or case file. The lack of freedom and control in state care facilities is visible in the many curfews and rules that structure how youth must behave in group home environments.

Not being respected, believed, or treated as a human being in Ministry-provided care, youth seek other alternatives. Their first option is market housing. However, most youth do not possess large financial resources and their sources of legal income are inadequate to obtain quality housing.

Although legal employment is one avenue to earn an income, for those youth who do have a job, typically they do not receive high enough paying wages to survive on their own. Income Assistance provides the second legal source of income for youth. However, amongst the youth interviewed, there was a strong disfavor expressed regarding the Income Assistance application process. Commonly, they experience uncertainty as to their eligibility, are treated in a demeaning manner, and dislike being referred to as 'welfare recipients'.

If a youth is able to acquire enough funds to secure housing, they are limited to the horrid hotel rooms in the downtown area of Vancouver. Further, the inadequacy of Income Assistance restricts youth to living in these rundown and insect infested accommodations.

Even in receipt of Income Assistance, they are limited to the downtown area. In their attempts to secure quality housing in other areas, they either face discrimination by landlords or do not have sufficient funds to afford the better quality housing.

In the event that a youth is able to secure housing, in most instances the housing only lasts for a short period of time. Lacking the basic living skills, youth behave in inappropriate ways and are quickly evicted from their new place of residence.

Exhausting all options, youth turn to the street. On the street, youth are treated with respect by their peers, find companionship with fellow street youth, are taught street survival by other experienced youth, and experience a feeling of control. However, the street carries with it many evils - the lure of drugs and alcohol is ever present; the ability to make quick money is possible through prostitution and drug trafficking; and violence abounds on the street as youth are the

targets of middle-class youth gangs or others who desire their possessions. The initial glamour of the street soon fades and the battle to survive and return to a mainstream lifestyle is all uphill.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

The results of the interviews clearly reveal that two interrelated problem areas exist in the broad issue of street youth and housing. These areas are 1. the state care system - both its form and manner of service provision, and 2. accessibility to market housing - social, economic and political factors which affect a youth's ability to secure housing. An issue common to both problem areas, and perpetuating the problems in each, is the lack of value society places in youth.

In providing recommendations to address the problem areas affecting street youth in Vancouver, it must be remembered that street youth are only one segment of the larger homeless population. As discussed in Chapter 2, homelessness is the result of the merging of various social, economic, political and physical factors in various spatial and temporal scales. If the causes of homelessness can be addressed and rectified, then the need for reactive measures to provide for those individuals already on the street can be reduced. Specific to street youth, if policies can be created which target the factors which influence the breakdown of the traditional family structure or reduce the stresses faced by many non-traditional families (i.e. single-parent families), home environments may no longer be filled with physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse, or parental alcohol/drug abuse, and many youth may no longer feel compelled to take flight to the street. However, it must be recognized that policy recommendations which address the broader issue of homelessness and target the precipitants of homelessness (e.g. unemployment, poverty, affordable housing, health care) create the potential for available government funding directed at street youth to be reduced.

Despite the fact that policies which address the causes of homelessness are more beneficial and cost-effective in the long-term than policies which speak to the needs of the existing homeless population, measures must be taken to assist those individuals already in a homeless state. The recommendations provided in this thesis focus on addressing the problems faced by youth currently struggling on Vancouver's streets.

*a. The State Care System*

The current state care system is inappropriate for street youth. Both the types and structures of housing facilities, and the manner of service provision do not recognize the backgrounds, needs and rights of street youth and youth in general. In addition, as mentioned by many service providers during the interviews, the state care system does not provide an adequate supply of housing facilities and support counsellors. Research undertaken by other academics has found that youth under the care of the child welfare system have not been adequately prepared for independent living nor given the essential resources to support themselves (Rothman, 1991; Raychaba, 1988, cited in Bass, 1992).

Traditional foster homes are not suitable for street youth. These young people have already taken flight from a family environment and do not want to be placed back into a situation which involves 'parental authority'. As expressed in the interviews with youth, foster homes are not the youth's home and a foster family can never replace their own family. In research examining the experiences of youth after leaving foster care, it has been found that many youth struggle with poor health, poor education, housing difficulties, substance abuse, and illegal activities (Barth, 1990).

Group homes are also an inappropriate form of housing for street youth. Younger youth (i.e. 12-16 year olds), the youth most often housed in group homes, are at a stage in their life where they are testing the limits of authority. A lack of nurturing characterizes the general body of group homes. The institutional structure of group homes cause them to be managed through rules and regulations and thus lack any feelings of warmth or compassion. As made clear through the interviews, in these institutional settings youth are neither treated with respect nor provided with personal freedom.

While independent living is a form of housing that is most appropriate for the majority of street youth and is what most youth strive to obtain, there are two related shortcomings in the present system regarding this type of housing. First, youth lack the necessary living skills to succeed in this type of living situation. Second, recognizing the youths lack of living skills, the present system continues to neither provide enough support counsellors to assist youth in these environments, nor offer courses or programs to teach youth basic life skills.

Significant changes need to occur in the current state care system so that it may better provide for the needs of youth. First and foremost, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the way youth are valued, treated and regarded by service providers. Further, this shift must extend to all of mainstream society. There needs to be a shift away from rigidity and adult-controlled decision-making to one of community-guided growth and youth empowerment. Community-guided growth must be defined as service providers working alongside youth providing guidance so that youth can become their own decision-makers. To achieve genuine youth empowerment, it is critical that service providers listen to and hear the ideas, dreams, concerns and feelings expressed by the youth.

The potential exists for Bill 46 to create effective change both within the Ministry of Social Services and with front-line service providers, but this change rests upon the will of all Ministry and front-line staff. It is recommended that the Youth Advocate, created through Bill 45, actively work with service providers to ensure change. Further, it is recommended that the role of the Advocate extend to include educating landlords, and individuals who either fund or organize housing to recognize the needs of street youth as one of the many groups requiring housing.

Crucial to bringing about a successful paradigm shift is that both parties treat one another with equal respect. However, youth will never receive the respect they are desiring until they begin to act responsibly, and earn the respect they are longing for. Yet behaving in immature and rebellious ways is all part of being a youth. Adolescence is characterized as a time of feeling indestructible, of learning and growing through trial and error, and of testing the limits of adult/authority figures. In particular, it is part of the nature of a street youth to constantly test the sincerity of those who are trying to help them. As a result of feeling abandoned by those who care for them (e.g. parents), and possessing low self-esteem and self-worth, street youth are uncertain as to how genuine service providers are in the care they are offering. As much as they want someone to care for them, they believe that others truly do not care - the help being offered is only part of the service provider's job. For this reason, street youth continue to rebel in order to test the 'level of genuinity' in the help being offered.

A vicious circle appears to exist - as youth continue to act irresponsibly they continue to not be respected by service providers and in turn, not being respected, youth continue to behave in rebellious ways. Recognizing the nature of adolescence and the psychological battles faced by street youth, the system must become more accommodating of a youth's playing out of

rebelliousness. Presently, the scales of respect are tipped such that youth are given very little or no respect at all. If service providers can take the first step and provide youth with respect, then youth may help to balance the scale by giving in return respect to service providers. However, from this point onward, youth must earn additional respect; if achieved, the potential exists for youth to be empowered to develop greater responsibility and independence.

It was noted within both the literature review and the interviews that the number of younger aged street youth is increasing. Recognizing that existing policies and/or programs are not successfully addressing the needs of children and youth in the family home, and thus preventing the flight of young people to the street, reactive steps are required to meet the needs of youth just arriving on the street. For this reason, it is recommended that the Ministry of Social Services consider providing a second safe house for youth aged 12 to 15 years. By providing a facility for younger youth, the facility would behave as a form of early intervention potentially decreasing the number of youth becoming entrenched in street life. In turn, the cost of service provision would be decreased as hypothetically fewer youth would be requiring the various support services (e.g. mental health counselling, detox programs). In addition, these youth are at a different social and mental development level than older youth and thus possess different service needs. Lastly, creating a target group based on age rather than ethnicity forces people of all backgrounds to live and work together - a quality vital to living in today's cultural mosaic.

Fourth, it is recommended that a continuum of housing be developed. A continuum would allow for a differentiation of services, as well as a beginning, middle and end of programs and treatment to be available to youth. As not all street youth of the same age exhibit similar levels of social development or require similar support services, a housing continuum would provide youth with

appropriate and individualized care. In the end, a higher success rate of street youth making the transition from street life to mainstream society would be achieved.

A housing continuum was originally developed in March 1990, cooperatively between service providers, a municipal planner, and male street youth from Boys Town. This thesis attempts to build upon and further develop the original continuum utilizing the information gathered from the service provider interviews.

#### *A Model for a Continuum of Housing*

The proposed housing continuum is based upon a resident's level of independence. It consists of five stages which include a Safe House, Supportive Living-Level 1, Supportive Living-Level 2, Semi-Independent Living, and Independent Living. As individuals progress through the continuum, their level of independence would increase - moving from dependent living environments, where they would receive high levels of support services, to independent situations, where they would receive very little or no support services.

#### *Stage 1 - Safe house*

The safe house forms the entry point into the continuum and marks the youth's initial step to extricate themselves from a street life. The intent of the safe house is to provide a stress-free and non-pressured environment where youth learn of the various options available to them and are provided the opportunity to make informed decisions. The initial decision to arrive at the safe house to receive shelter and support is made by the youth.

The safe house would be a short-stay facility and 7 calendar days would constitute the maximum length of stay. The first 72 hours at the safe house would constitute a 'grace period', after which time the youth's parents or legal guardian would be contacted.

The focus of the facility would centre on crisis intervention and youth would receive a high level of support. To achieve this desired level of support the facility should remain small, and it is encouraged that the maximum number of beds in any safe house not exceed six. By keeping the staff to youth ratio low (e.g. 1:2 ratio), the opportunity exists to develop trusting staff/youth relationships. Staff would work one-on-one with the youth to establish goals and objectives to enable the youth to leave the street. Support services would be available to youth and would include drug and alcohol detox, mental health counselling, health counselling, and peer support. In addition, youth would be provided with all their meals while at the facility. By alleviating the environmental stresses (i.e. need for food, shelter, personal hygiene) from a youth's life, the youth would be provided the opportunity to focus on their goal(s).

The living environment would be based upon negotiable issues. The absence of rules and regulations in the safe house would create a more productive environment for the youth.

The location of the safe house should be removed from the downtown core or areas characterized by street life, yet also be accessible to the youth.

A number of safe houses should be located throughout an urban area. Each safe house should focus on serving a different sub-group of street youth. It is recommended that the focus of the safe house be based upon age (e.g. youth aged 12-15 years, 16-18 years). This breakdown recognizes

that younger youth, not as experienced as the older youth, have different needs and require different services. By not focusing the safe house on a specific culture, it forces youth to be open to and accepting of all cultures.

### *Stage 2 - Supportive Living-Level 1*

In Supportive Living-Level 1 a commitment has been made by the youth to leave the street and energy is now targeted toward achieving personal goals. At this stage, it is recognized that family reunification is not possible or desired by the youth.

The length of stay at a supportive living-level 1 facility would be dependent upon the youth's need for the various support services offered. However, it is suggested that the minimum length of stay be three months so that the youth is able to establish a sense of stability.

In this environment, recognizing the fact that youth still have strong dependencies upon the various support services, youth would have access to support staff. Further, the staff to youth ratio would remain low (e.g. 1:3 ratio). To ensure youth receive a high level of support, it is recommended that the maximum number of beds not exceed four. In addition, by keeping the number of beds to four (or fewer), youth would be reintegrated back into living in a 'family-type' environment.

The emphasis of the services provided would be upon the psychological and physical self - the mind and body. Services provided would include drug and alcohol counselling, mental health counselling, health counselling (e.g. HIV+, AIDS victims), and peer support. The services would be available in both individual and group settings. Staff would work cooperatively with the youth

to expand upon the youth's personal goals previously established during their stay at the safe house, and develop new goals relating to their psychological and physical development.

The living environment would be structured by negotiable issues. Residing in every house on a 24-hour basis would be a 'house mother' or 'father'. This individual would not play a parent role, but rather would behave in a big brother/sister capacity providing support, guidance and advice to the youth.

Supportive living homes should be located in residential areas. Situated away from the street environment, youth would face less distractions during their path to mainstream life.

Although not all youth are the same, supportive living homes should be focused toward serving youth of the same age group, social development level, and primary support service need (i.e. alcohol counselling). Recognizing this criteria, a variety of supportive living environments would be required.

### *Stage 3 - Supportive Living-Level 2*

In Supportive Living-Level 2 the emphasis turns outward and social-interaction/self development becomes the focus. Although the youth have primarily achieved their psychological/physical rehabilitative goals (i.e. overcome drug addictions), minimal support in these areas is still required and would be provided.

Similar to Level 1, the length of time a youth would remain at a Level 2 home is dependent upon the youth's need for the various support services provided.

The emphasis of the services provided are on life skills development, education programs, employment programs, family counselling, community resources, and peer training for the more advanced youth. The focus of this stage is upon developing skills that are essential for maintaining self-sufficiency - a quality necessary to succeed at independent living. Once again, support staff would work with the youth to establish new goals relating to the focus of this stage of development.

During their time in Stage 3, youth would be expected to enroll in an academic or vocational education program. Further, all youth would be encouraged to participate in family counselling to promote improved youth-parent communication even if the desired goal is not family reunification. In developing life skills, youth would attend weekly group meetings where topics such as nutrition, food preparation, health care, sexuality, apartment hunting, demands and responsibilities of being a tenant, budgeting, opening a bank account, income tax preparation, and employment skills would be covered.

While living in their supervised homes, the youth would have the opportunity to practice some of the skills they are learning. They would have the ability to prepare monthly budgets for food, rent, and clothing, the opportunity to plan and cook nutritious meals, and to clean house.

The location of Level 2 facilities should be in residential neighbourhoods. Similar to Level 1, a house mother or father would live permanently with the youth, but function in a big brother/sister role providing support, guidance and advice to the youth, and the environment would be structured by negotiable issues. Although these youth are moving toward independence, the ideal number of youth per house would be 3 to 4 as the youth still require peer support and companionship.

Supportive living - level 2 homes should be designed to have one primary focus with all other support services being secondary. By individualizing the services of each home, the individual needs of the youth would be better addressed and served.

#### *Stage 4 - Semi-Independent Living*

Semi-Independent Living is a type of housing for youth who have acquired the basic life skills and are serious about the education or employment program they are involved in. However, these youth still require some additional life skills training and/or rehabilitative counselling (e.g. drug addiction counselling, mental health counselling) and are not quite ready to take the step to independent living.

The length of time a youth would remain in semi-independent living would depend upon their certainty as to when they would be able to live independently. It may range anywhere from three months to one year. Time spent in semi-independent living would help a youth develop confidence in their ability to live without many supports, and be responsible for their own decisions and actions.

The forms of housing could range from a youth living in a self-contained suite in a single-family house, to youth living in a small walk-up style apartment with an apartment manager. In the first situation, the youth would live their life independently, but an adult figure would be nearby if guidance or support is needed. In the latter example, youth would either have their own apartment unit or share a unit with 1 to 3 other housemates. The tenant composition of the walk-up apartments should include both 'all youth apartments' and 'mixed apartments' (e.g. seniors, families, youth). It is important to begin to reintegrate youth into mainstream society and create

housing environments with a variety of tenant types. In apartment living, youth would be able to learn the appropriate behaviour when living with housemates and amongst neighbours.

Cooperative forms of housing are possible within this stage of the continuum. In cooperative youth housing, youth would be able to effectively utilize peer support and deal with their problems together.

The size of the apartment-type housing should be no larger than 12-unit buildings. Although these youth are almost at the end of the continuum, it is important to keep the housing small so that these youth can redevelop a sense of community. In addition, it would not lend itself to the problems associated with housing one type of tenant group.

It is recommended that in both housing environments the 'adult figure' and the 'apartment manager' be an ex-street youth. This individual could provide peer support to the youth when needed, while at the same time behave as a figure of authority familiarizing youth to the landlords they will eventually face in the real world. In all of the various living situations, it is recommended that the youth and the adult figure participate in weekly 'get-togethers' to discuss either personal or housing problems, or the general happenings of the week. In addition, it is encouraged that family counselling continue as a support service for all youth.

#### *Stage 5 - Independent Living*

Independent living is the final stage in the continuum of housing. At this end stage, a youth would possess all the necessary life skills to successfully live independently, is confident in themselves, and is involved in an education program, full-time employment or a combination of the two.

Since many youth require long-term support to overcome serious problems, aftercare services are a critical component of the process. Upon leaving semi-independent living, a youth should be encouraged to maintain ties to various counselling services, even if it is on a bi-weekly or monthly basis.

#### *Strategies and Processes for Developing a Continuum of Housing*

To create a successful continuum, it is crucial that certain strategies and processes be employed. Similar strategies and processes to those outlined below have been identified by researchers Rothman (1991) and Treanor (1988) in research examining the provision of services to street youth.

First, youth empowerment must be the foundation of all housing resources. Youth must be involved in the planning, organization, implementation, and programming of all resources. Youth must be the primary planners and designers, with involvement from the experts when and where necessary. Youth often have a keen understanding of their needs - needs which are often invisible to adults. In addition, through youth involvement in resource planning, cultural openness will be achieved in all housing environments. The success of grass roots planning by and for street youth is demonstrated by Vancouver's existing safe house.

Youth empowerment must also occur in the process of determining the youth's goals, objectives, and overall pathway back to mainstream life. While it is crucial that service providers validate the dreams and aspirations of a youth, they must without being authoritative, bring the 'grand ideas' of the youth down to a realistic vision. Service providers must help youth to recognize and understand the necessary steps needed to be taken between moving from the present to achieving

their dream. Youth need to be enlightened about how the real world operates, and be given responsibility for determining their future. If youth are not empowered to make their own decisions, their role as a victim will be perpetuated.

Second, it is paramount to establish a balance in staff and structure. Support staff must be extremely understanding and patient with the youth. They must possess both the necessary counselling and support skills that street youth require and have experience with street life. The resources must be able to provide for the youth's needs yet not be overly structured, functioning to alienate the youth. Staff must establish the fine line between teaching youth and being intrusive or judgmental.

Third, all housing resources must be community based. It is important to liaise with the local neighbourhood association to ensure community support and acceptance.

Fourth, in a return to community support, recognizing the importance of peer support and counselling, and cognizant of the decreasing trend in government financial assistance to health care, 'ex-street youth' must be trained to provide peer counselling in the more supportive living environments and trained as apartment managers for the more independent housing arrangements. The potential exists for these youth to provide better insight to those youth struggling to leave the street environment. It has been stated by some service providers that youth currently on the street relate better to youth who were once in their situation.

Central to a successful housing continuum is a diversity in programs and levels of support. At each stage in the continuum a range of services and support levels are necessary. No single

package of services specifically suits each stage in the continuum nor addresses the needs of all youth. The type of services required varies more with the individual than where the individual is along the continuum of movement away from street life. The services provided must be flexible so that they can both accommodate the variety of youth who require the services, and adjust to future changes in clientele.

As youth progress toward the end of the continuum, housing environments must begin to include a mix of tenant groups. Housing youth together must be the first stage in housing and not an end in itself. Variety leads to healthy environments.

*b. Benefits and Complexities of State Care Change*

For the state care system to be truly effective and provide for the needs of youth, two changes must occur concurrently. There must be both the development of a housing continuum and a sincere change in attitude and behaviour among service providers regarding youth. The achievement of a housing continuum, and thus a differentiation of services, would enable the state care system to provide appropriate services to youth of all ages. Presently, older youth seeking greater freedom and independence are not housed within state-provided facilities. A continuum would be able to accommodate these youth and provide them with the support services they require. Further, fundamental to a successful continuum is a change in attitude. No matter how many changes or additions are made to create a continuum, if youth are not treated with respect they will continue to refuse state-provided care and live a life on the street.

In improving the quality of state-provided housing, the potential is being created that youth who do not truly require the services will be attracted to the facilities provided. A dilemma exists in

providing housing which attracts youth whose best interest is to leave home, or who have been thrown out, and those youth whose best interest is to remain at home. State-provided housing can not come to be viewed as 'an easy way out' for those youth who are unable to resolve minor disputes (e.g. smoking in the house, use of the family car) with their parents. Despite whatever level state-provided care may achieve, there is no substitute for parental teaching.

While the housing continuum model is intended to better serve the needs of street youth who have no other alternative than to live on the street, consideration needs to be given to the effect improved housing services may have on curbed-kids or youth who seek street life as a form of adventure. It could be argued that improved housing will not attract more 'adventure-seekers' for the reason that living in state-provided facilities would not result in the excitement they are searching for. On the other hand, it could function to attract more curbed-kids and 'ins and outs'. However, for these youth, the services provided within the continuum of housing are very likely to be the types of services they are in need of. If the home environment is intolerable enough that a youth feels they must flee to the street, then a facility such as a safe house would help to eliminate the possibility of the youth becoming entrenched in street life. Therefore, service providers and youth, when designing housing facilities and support services for street youth, must be cognizant of the importance of establishing a balance between developing appropriate services which serve youth deserving of the housing and support, and services which do not attract youth who are looking for an easy answer to their problems.

c. *Factors Affecting a Youth's Ability to Access Market Housing*

Considering the housing environment as it currently exists, recommendations have been developed to address the problem areas affecting youth in their struggle to secure housing.

The discretionary nature of Income Assistance policy creates confusion and uncertainty among youth who are applying for this support. It is recommended that clear guidelines for eligibility be established. These guidelines must be based upon factual criteria rather than judgmental criteria. Although not all youth of the same age exhibit similar levels of social development, it is suggested that a minimum age be established for eligibility as age is a clearly defined criteria. One youth stated that eligibility should be based upon an individual's maturity level. However, this criteria would only perpetuate the problem since maturity is also a discretionary measure, and the determination of one's maturity level would be based upon another's assessment.

A major barrier to youth accessing market housing is discrimination by landlords. However, when landlords refuse housing to an individual on the basis of age, landlords are often justified in their decision. In the past, many youth have behaved in immature ways, thus creating the stereotype that all young people are irresponsible tenants. However, until this stereotype is altered, landlords will continue to protect their investments against damage.

Earlier in 1994 Bill 50, the *Residential Tenancy Amendment Act*, was implemented. The intent of the Act is to alleviate the problem of discrimination based on age. However, on its own, Bill 50 will not be able to rectify the problem. Street youth will continue to lack the basic living skills to maintain their own housing and act as responsible tenants. Presently, the system does not provide opportunities for youth to learn these skills. Therefore, additional changes are necessary and it is

recommended that the Ministry of Social Services develop programs or courses in which street youth could enroll in, and learn the essential skills to live independently. The possibility exists for youth to receive a certificate upon successful completion of the program/course with which they could present to potential landlords when searching for housing.

Even if success is achieved in alleviating, or at least reducing, the problem of discrimination based on age, other forms of discrimination will continue to exist. Landlords should no longer be afforded the opportunity to 'just say no' to youth, or to any other segment of society. Discrimination is a problem which has the potential to affect all members in society, not just youth. Therefore, to address the broad reaching nature of discrimination, it is recommended that the Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Services in partnership with the YMCA Housing Registry develop a set of guidelines that landlords must abide by when determining an individual's acceptance or non-acceptance as a tenant. If non-acceptance is the result, then a rationale must be provided by the landlord to the tenant. If acceptance is the result, it is recommended that both parties enter into a contract which outlines each parties rights, responsibilities, and expectations of the other party. However, for the contract to be effective, both parties must be aware of their own and the other party's rights and responsibilities. For this reason, it is recommended that the YMCA Housing Registry extend its services to that of facilitator, providing information on the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved in a housing agreement.

To address the issue of housing supply, it must be recognized that the provincial government is experiencing financial constraint and can no longer be relied upon for increased funding. Therefore, funding for the development of street youth housing must come from other sources. The potential exists to use private developers as a source of funding (i.e. through the construction of

housing). However, to successfully tap into this source, municipal governments must begin to actively utilize the tools provided to them in Bill 57, *Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Housing Statutes Amendment Act*. This Bill allows municipalities to facilitate the provision of housing for special needs groups through tools such as density bonusing in exchange for meeting specified conditions, comprehensive development zoning, housing agreements, the leasing of land at below market values, establishing housing reserve funds, and borrowing powers. In addition, governments should examine the potential of providing incentives to developers, such as the relaxation of development cost charges or taxes, if housing for street youth is constructed.

Lastly, it is recommended that a central planning agency be established. In its role of overseeing the provision of services to youth, it would function to alleviate problems of inconsistency, coordination, territorialism, and a lack of communication amongst service providers. Further, it would prevent duplication of services therefore allowing funding to service agencies to be better allocated and used. While the jurisdiction of this body should be the Lower Mainland, it should actively be involved in other provincial initiatives and knowledgeable of activities in other provinces. The composition of this agency should include both municipal and provincial levels of government and non-government organizations. While the problem of street youth exists at the local level, it is also a national problem, as street youth travel across the country from province to province. Lastly, street youth are also a provincial issue since the province is the primary funding source for housing and other social services. It is suggested that the IMSCC take on the role of a central planning agency as this body already exists, and its membership includes individuals from municipal and provincial levels of government, and non-government service-providing agencies.

This thesis has undertaken exploratory research into the broad issue of street youth and housing. It is encouraged that further research be undertaken in the areas of housing for specific groups of street youth (i.e. native youth, HIV+ and AIDS infected youth, teenage parents). In addition, while this thesis has discussed some of the problems associated with group and foster homes, it is recommended that further study be undertaken into these two forms of housing.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This thesis has examined a number of issues which explain why youth are living on Vancouver's downtown streets rather than in state-provided care facilities or market housing. The various issues included the forms and method of service provision, the attitude of society toward youth, the lack of subsidized housing, and the quality and affordability of market housing. In addition, this thesis has built upon the original housing continuum developed in 1990. The model continuum attempts to recognize the struggles faced by street youth, both in their previous family environments and on the street, and provide a form of service provision which addresses their individual needs.

To successfully get youth off the street it takes more than simply providing additional group or foster homes, increasing the supply of subsidized housing, or changing legislation. Fundamental to alleviating the social problem of youth surviving on the street is a change in attitude. Mainstream society must begin to value and respect youth. The introduction of Bill 46 recognizes youth as an entity and makes clear within the legislation the rights of a youth. However, Bill 45, the creation of a Youth Advocate, is critical to the success of Bill 46 as part of the Advocate's role is achieving a true change among service providers. The Advocate must take responsibility to ensure that a change in attitude occurs along side a change in practice.

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Enabling youth with the ability to access quality housing, whether that be state-provided or market housing, which provides the essential needs of privacy, security, stability and access to support services, youth are afforded the opportunity to branch out and participate in programs that will enable them to leave street life. Further, youth will be able to redevelop feelings of self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence.

Housing is a costly endeavour, both in human and economic terms. For this reason, it is crucial to ensure that housing creations are successful - they must be appropriate and well-planned. Yet no matter how appropriate the housing may be, it must be recognized that housing is only one small part of the solution. Planners must recognize that in providing housing and the necessary support services, only the symptoms of the problem are being addressed and not the root cause. However, until such a time when problems are addressed at their source - the family home - planners must strive to provide appropriate housing and support services to youth.

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**APPENDIX A: LIST OF PERSONS INTERVIEWED**

**Service Providers**

Jeff Brooks  
City of Vancouver, Social Planning Dept.

Sandy Cooke (District Supervisor)  
Ministry of Social Services  
Adolescent Street Unit

Jill Davidson  
City of Vancouver, Housing and Properties Dept.

Christopher Graham  
Family Services of Greater Vancouver

Kim Heibert  
Street Youth Services

Ron Strong (District Supervisor)  
Ministry of Social Services  
Adolescent Street Unit

Bev Taylor (Area Manager)  
Ministry of Social Services  
Adolescent Street Unit

John Turvey  
DEYAS  
Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society

Susan Viminitz  
Gordon House Youth Works

**Youth**

Cherry Kingsley  
Sheila Sharma  
Tina Riley  
Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Networks

Youth at DEYAS Detox Centre (432 E.  
Hastings St.)

**Telephone Interviews**

Gerry Mignault  
Ministry of Social Services

Penny Parry  
City of Vancouver, Social Planning Dept.

Jeanine Ratcliffe  
Ministry of Recreation, Housing and  
Consumer Services

**APPENDIX B: SERVICE PROVIDER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

*The set of questions listed below include all the questions asked during the interviews. However, not all questions were posed to every interviewee. The questions asked of each service provider were customized to suit the individual's focus or area of interest within the issue of street youth and housing.*

***Legislative Policy***

1. What provincial legislation is in effect which impacts a youth's ability to access housing?
2. When people talk about youth, in particular 16 to 18 year olds, and that these youth fall through the gaps, what legislation or shortcomings are they referring to?
3. Do you think Bills 45 and 46 will make any improvements to the *Family and Child Service Act*? If yes, how?

***Government Services and Ministry-Provided Housing***

1. What actions/programs has the City of Vancouver undertaken with respect to street youth and housing?
2. What is the role of the Social Planning/Housing and Properties Departments in the provision of housing for street youth?
3. What is the role of the Ministry of Social Services in providing housing for street youth?
4. What actions/programs has the Ministry recently initiated with respect to housing for street youth?
5. Are there any future plans/actions/announcements to be made regarding street youth and housing?
6. Have any actions been taken as a result of the 'Reconnect Program' study?
7. What are the various types of housing operated through the Ministry of Social Services?
8. How does a group home operate? How many group home beds are there in Vancouver? Is this enough? Should there be more?
9. Do you think group homes are an appropriate form of housing street youth? Why or why not?
10. How does a foster home operate? How many foster home beds are there in Vancouver? Is this enough? Should there be more?
11. Do you think foster homes are an appropriate form of housing street youth? Why or why not?
12. When did the safe house open? How long can a youth stay? Are regulations/rules enforced on the youth? How many youth do you see a day/week/month? When a youth comes to the safe house, what legal steps must be followed?
13. Do you believe the safe house is working? What aspects make it/don't make it work? What do you think needs improvement in terms of services and/or the manner of service provision?

***Access to Housing***

1. In general, what shortcomings/problems/barriers do you see in the current system regarding youth and their ability to access and secure housing?

***A Model Housing Continuum***

1. If there was to be a continuum of housing, how would you see it developed? Would there be anything specific you would want implemented?
2. When planning for street youth, what factors do you see as critical?

***Access to Information***

1. Do you think there is a lack of knowledge on the part of street youth regarding the various services available?
2. Do you think the necessary information is reaching street youth?

***Services Provided by the Agency***

1. What services does your agency provide?
2. Is there any one particular group of street youth you provide services to more than others?

***General Information***

1. What are the different geographical areas street youth 'hang out' in?

**APPENDIX C: YOUTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

*For the two different groups of youth interviewed, two different sets of questions were asked. The questions are outlined below.*

***Staff at the Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Networks***

1. For how many years have you been away from your family home or foster/group home?
2. How many times had you left home before living on the street?
3. When you left home, for how long did you remain away?
4. Where did you normally stay? What types of housing did you live in?
5. Did you live by yourself or with others?
6. Did you use any services provided by ASU, SYS, or DEYAS?
7. How long did you stay in your different accommodations?
8. Did you feel safe?
9. Did you have access to cooking or laundry facilities?
10. Did anyone receive Income Assistance? Did you experience any problems when trying to receive it? If yes, what?
11. In general, how have landlords treated you?
12. When you secured housing were the necessary services available to you?
13. What were some of the major difficulties you experienced in trying to secure housing?
14. Looking back, is there anything you wish had been in place that would have helped you find or secure housing?
15. What recommendations would you make to improve the current system?

***Youth at the DEYAS Detox Centre***

1. Where do you normally sleep at night? What types of housing have you live in?
2. Can you describe the physical condition of the housing you have lived in, and/or live in at the present?
3. What problems do you see in the current system regarding housing for youth?
4. What difficulties do you experience when trying to secure housing?
5. How have you been treated by landlords?
6. Do you receive Income Assistance?
7. Have you ever had any problems in receiving Income Assistance?