Teen Homelessness and Diversity: Dissemination of the Youth Pathways Project

SUMMARY
Street-involved adolescents represent a significant vulnerable population for whom relatively little is known, especially over time. In general, studies of homeless youth find a multi-problem, high stress environment, with violent victimization, poly-drug use, and mental health problems frequently co-occurring. Our Youth Pathways Project (YPP) was built on funding from SSHRC for our “Homelessness and Diversity in High-Risk Youth” (2004 – 2006), which focused on young women. We leveraged this grant to acquire CIHR-funding (in 2005) in order to extend the study to include a male sample (“Pathways in and out of Homelessness in High-risk Young Men”). The result is a total sample of 185 teens. Besides gender, we included several diversity indicators including sexual orientation, ethnicity (language spoken at home) and immigrant status (place of birth and current citizenship). Youth were interviewed at up to three subsequent time points, at approximately 4-month intervals, over the course of one year. The YPP study is unique in its longitudinal aspects, multi-source sample of high-risk youth, and its focus on diversity. The YPP has brought together a multidisciplinary research team and front-line partners serving homeless youth to create new knowledge about the characteristics of homeless youth and the factors that influence their pathways and outcomes.

In conducting the study, our youth participants pointed the way to an innovative dissemination strategy based on their stories. During the open-ended, qualitative interview that was conducted with youth at the end of the study we became aware of how highly articulate and insightful they were in speaking about the numerous issues we captured in our data, and how effectively their stories portrayed the nuances of our results. Accordingly, the dissemination activity we are currently seeking funding for is a web-based story-telling project where results from the study will be presented, in part, in the words of street-involved and homeless youth. We aim to target dissemination around the following two central themes that emerged from our study: (1) childhood maltreatment, street time, and maladjustment; (2) sexually diverse homeless and street-involved youth. In relation to each theme, reports will be included as PDF files on the website, written to be accessible to youth, service providers, and the general public. Thus we intend to expand the dissemination beyond the audiences specified in our original application to a broader based network of service providers, policy makers, educators, and both youthful and older members of the general public. We consider this an important step to raise awareness of the problems faced by homeless youth, and to reduce the stigma and discrimination they face in their daily lives.

The website will be aimed at several audiences including youth, other researchers, policy makers, and service agencies. In addition to stories, press coverage, and media releases arising directly from the project, information will be included that will be aimed directly to street involved youth, that draws attention to risks experienced by marginalized youth living on the street, and most importantly, provides information targeted to help youth make informed decisions about their health and safety, and promote awareness of resources for support and assistance. The goal will be to provide needed information in a way that youth can access and use and in a mode that will empower them to identify resources available to them. Through the website launch, as well as through the website itself, promotional material, and the eventual book manuscript, we will also target novel and hard to reach audiences in the interests of creating new and original networks to further knowledge mobilization. The broader target audience includes dissemination to the general public, local media outlets and street youth themselves. Reaching a broader audience will draw attention to the need for affordable housing for youth, and raise awareness about issues affecting youth including child maltreatment, sexual orientation, substance use and mental health issues, from both a personalized and evidence-based perspective.