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## The Economics of Being Young and Poor: How Homeless Youth Survive in Neo-liberal Times

Jeff Karabanow  
*Dalhousie University*

Jean Hughes  
*Dalhousie University*

Jann Ticknor  
*Dalhousie University*

Sean Kidd  
*Centre for Addiction and Mental Health*

Dorothy Patterson  
*ARK Outreach*

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The Economics of Being Young and Poor:  
How Homeless Youth Survive  
in Neo-liberal Times

JEFF KARABANOW

Dalhousie University  
School of Social Work

JEAN HUGHES

Dalhousie University  
School of Nursing

JANN TICKNOR

Dalhousie University  
School of Health and Human Performance

SEAN KIDD

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

DOROTHY PATTERSON

ARK Outreach

*Based upon in-depth interviews with 34 youth in Halifax and seven service providers in St. John's, Montreal, Hamilton, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Calgary, the findings of this study suggest that labor occurs within a particular street context and street culture. Formal and informal work can be inter-related, and despite*

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*the hardships they experience, young people who are homeless or who are at-risk of homelessness can respond to their circumstances with ingenuity, resilience and hope. Often street-involved and homeless young people are straddling formal and informal work economies while mediating layers of external and internal motivations and tensions. The reality is that the participants in this study cannot very easily engage in formal work. There is a dearth of meaningful formal work available, and when living homeless there are many challenges to overcome to maintain this work. In addition, there are few employers willing to risk hiring an individual who is without stable housing, previous employment experiences and, most likely, limited formal education. Therefore, street youth are left with informal work that provides them with survival money, basic needs, and a sense of citizenship, but which also invites belittlement, harassment, and mockery.*

**Key words:** *youth resilience, hope, livelihood strategies, homelessness*

Throughout the globe, neo-liberalism as a political and economic philosophy has gained widespread acceptance (Muncie, 2005). As a result, there is a renewed faith in the market economy, less involvement from governments in terms of economic and social stewardship, diminished social and economic safety net structures, and an increase in part-time, casual and temporary employment. Politically, there has been a drastic movement throughout developed and developing nations towards individualism, self help, and tough-on-crime punishment portfolios. As such, an increasing number of people are struggling to sustain their livelihoods, preserve a sense of social citizenship and remain politically, economically and socially viable.

There is a dearth of understanding concerning the relationship between homelessness and the formal (regulated) and informal (unregulated) economy. While much scholarship has focused upon illegal and criminal street activities, there has been little attention paid to formal and informal economies. To begin to address this knowledge gap, this study explored the linkage between homeless young people and their labor within these economic sectors.

Homeless youth across Canada often report family violence, poverty, instability and trauma during childhood and adolescence (Coates, 2000; Hughes, et al., in press; Karabanow, 2004a, 2006, 2008; Novac, Serge, Eberle, & Brown, 2002). There

are widespread stories of problematic and dehumanizing experiences within group home and foster care systems, and a large majority of youth arrive on the street out of desperation or with the sense that even life on the street is safer or more acceptable than the life that they are fleeing (Allewa, 1988; Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Karabanow, 2004a). Once on the street, many youth resort to risky and often illegal activities for making money, finding shelter and food, and defending themselves against the threats of violence and further alienation (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Karabanow, 2004a). These activities cause further marginalization for these youth, and create additional barriers to “success,” including addictions, physical and mental illness, and criminal justice involvement (Durham, 2003; Karabanow, 2006, 2008; Karabanow, Clement, Carson, & Crane, 2005; Karabanow et al., 2007; Novac et al., 2002).

This study took place in Halifax, Nova Scotia—a medium size urban city (population roughly 373,000) and the largest city in the Atlantic Provinces. Nova Scotia, an eastern maritime province of Canada, is not insulated from these global trends, neither are street youth. Street youth are not only increasing in numbers throughout Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006), but their predicaments are worsening due to economic recession trends, greater restrictions on social assistance and employment insurance, and weakening social safety net supports (Karabanow, 2004b; Krauss, Eberle, & Serge, 2001). Generally, this leaves young people in precarious economic circumstances.

### Formal and Informal Economies

Formal and informal economies exist in every country. Formal economies are comprised of legal and lawful work which is documented and taxed in an economy. For the young people interviewed, the formal sector included unskilled, short-term, and temporary labor within the service sector (e.g., restaurants, call centers, fast food, cleaning/janitorial, and child care) or the industrial sector (e.g., construction, roofing, bricklaying, yard work, and snow removal/landscaping). Informal work tends to be differentiated by the nature of how the work takes place and the nature of goods and services

being exchanged (Losby, Else, Kingslow, Edgcomb, Malm, & Kao, 2002; Schneider, 2002). For example, providing childcare services and receiving cash rather than check payments, and not filing taxes would be considered informal work. However, such forms of work are unlawful, as formal regulations are not being followed (i.e., reporting income for taxation purposes), yet, they are still legal. Similarly, panhandling is legal in Canada, but is unlawful if the earnings are unreported. Squeegeeing and median panhandling, on the other hand, are illegal work activities in most communities since bylaw legislation has been enacted in most major Canadian cities banning 'working in a roadway' (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). The illegal side of informal economies, beyond squeegeeing and median panhandling, includes criminal activities (such as selling drugs, sex work, sale of stolen goods, and theft) which are otherwise jobs for a majority of people in the informal economy (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Losby et al., 2002; Schneider, 2002). Informal work activities are often the only way to survive for street youth, and they are usually involved in both unlawful and illegal labor (Baron, 2004; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Schneider, 2002).

While informal economies were once treated as a phenomenon seen in developing countries, they are now emerging in the industrialized nations (Schneider, 2002; Vogel, 2006). Since the 1980s, the trend of neo-liberalism has resulted in various challenges for low-skilled workers in North America (Crow & Albo, 2005). The shifts from manufacturing industries to services, as well as changes in the organization of work, including demand for more qualified workers, play a key role in the emergence of informal economies. Manufacturing and low wage industries are often the only option to earn a living for workers with low education levels. While exports have significantly grown, benefitting some in the nation, there have also been significant employment cut backs in low-wage industries, greatly affecting low-income families. In addition to free trade and globalization, economic restructuring is another factor leading to increased unemployment and the rise of precarious employment in Canada (Baron, 2001; Economic Policy Institute [EPI], 2006). As jobs were cut back, household incomes fell drastically. Accompanying these neo-liberal trends is the

diminution of the Canadian government's role in providing social services intended to offset economic downtrends (EPI, 2006). Further, the federal government's role in providing social services intended to offset economic downtrends has diminished (EPI, 2006) along with affordable housing for low-income people, which has resulted in marginalized populations having little choice but to live on the street and engage in the informal economy (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

Informal economies emerge in response to desperate times; individuals, communities, or populations who need money create ways of acquiring what they need. Informal economies are often referred to as underground, shadow, invisible and/or black market economies and have been developing as economic survival strategies for many workers who cannot find employment in the formal economy (Losby et al., 2002; Vogel, 2006). The majority of people engaged in the informal economy are there not by choice, but by circumstance (Vogel, 2006).

Informal economies are comprised of a very diverse labor force. Participants of the informal economy are usually the ones who cannot find or engage in employment in the formal economy. These include illegal immigrants, workers who cannot work legally for a variety of reasons (e.g. criminal record), workers who are unemployed due to structural/systemic unemployment, and people, including youth, who cannot engage in formal work due to a lack of permanent housing or low levels of education. This is especially the case for street youth who have much difficulty engaging in formal employment as a result of their homeless status, lack of proper housing, age and education, and often a lack of legal documentation (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004b). Clearly, the neo-liberal shift, the decrease in meaningful, livable work opportunities, and the changing demographic landscape in Canada is placing young people in difficult economic circumstances—before they have even entered the labor force in an adult capacity.

### The Informal Economy and the Lives of Street Youth in Canada

Street youth are defined as young people (typically between

16-25 years of age) who do not have a permanent place to call home, and who instead spend a significant amount of time and energy on the street (such as in alleyways, parks, storefronts, and dumpsters), in squats (usually located in abandoned buildings), at youth shelters and centers, and/or with friends (typically referred to as "couch surfers") [Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Halifax Regional Municipality, 2005; Karabanow, 2004a].

Street youth engagement with informal economies is often only discussed in relation to economies of criminal activities (Baron, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). This is misleading. Although street-involved young people are more likely to be engaged in illegal work, less is known about the choice of work—legal or illegal—available to them (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Karabanow, 2004a, 2006). While some of these youth depend on social assistance and support from family/friends for food, shelter and money, finding the means or money to meet their basic necessities of survival is an everyday struggle for a large number of them (Karabanow, 2008). Most North American criminology research on street youths' informal money-making is almost always situated in the context of crime instead of work (a way to earn money), whereas earning a living in the formal sector—where income is reported and tax paid—is considered as work or employment (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). This means that most of the research is focused on understanding how street youth become 'criminally involved' rather than understanding what street-involved young people need to become self-sufficient without criminal involvement. Further, the contextualization of street activities (e.g. squeegeeing cars, panhandling) as crimes does nothing to address the motivation (i.e., survival) driving the pursuit of these entrepreneurial activities. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) suggest that a majority of street youth do *not* prefer to engage in certain (illegal) money-making strategies, like prostitution and drug selling. Indeed, in cases where street youth can choose their work, it has been noted that the work selected not only signifies a way they choose to earn money, but also reflects the contexts of where they are (such as background factors and social networks) and represents their perspective towards society in general. Such action demonstrates that these so-called "deviant" and "delinquent" young people are actually

reflective and rational thinkers who desire meaningful work—contrary to much public discourse (Baron, 2001; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Karabanow, 2006, 2008).

In the present study we have examined the narratives of homeless youth regarding their involvement in informal and formal economies. Much of the research to date has generally involved recording the frequencies of the various means through which homeless youth generate income. We have not, however, been able to find any in depth examinations of the experience of youths engaged in these forms of labor that are not framed within the context of criminal involvement. This exploratory, qualitative examination of youth experiences provided an opportunity to examine the intersections between work-related identity, the meanings youths ascribe to various forms of work, and their socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, we sought to triangulate youth perspectives by examining the narratives of experienced service providers regarding their efforts to facilitate employment for their clients.

### Methodology

This study was developed and implemented in collaboration with a community based drop-in centre called ARK Outreach in Halifax, NS. The research issue reflects a need identified by ARK; the organization collaborated on how best to explore the issues, and participated in proposal development, recruitment and data analysis. The community–research partnership is the cornerstone of this project and was integral to community buy-in, in particular for the youth participants. To further ensure our project was grounded in the lived experiences of young people, three youth who frequent ARK were invited to be involved in the project as an advisory committee. These street youth facilitated participant recruitment, contributed to the analysis of data, write-up of findings, and both academic and community presentations of our work.

This paper is based upon the findings emerging from in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 34 youth in Halifax and seven service providers in St. John’s, Montreal, Hamilton, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Calgary.



One-on-one interviews were used to collect narratives from youth aged 16-24 years who identified as street or homeless youth, and to elicit understanding of the issues from service providers. The average age of youth participants was 21 years old; 39% of the sample were females; 16% identified as either gay, lesbian or bisexual; 44% defined their ethnicity as Caucasian and 18% as Aboriginal; 82% were Canadian; 50% were currently sleeping rough (i.e., outdoors); and the vast majority engaged in panhandling and squeegeeing as primary income sources.

Interview guides were drafted by the research team to shape the narratives collected around key aspects of employment and labor—including daily routine, preferences, school and mentors, benefits and challenges, and 'dream jobs.' Using grounded theory to guide the process, the research design was community-based and naturalistic, endeavoring to build understandings based on emerging data trends which form the foundation of our arguments. Grounded theory analysis involves the process of identifying common and dissimilar themes while building conceptual narratives from the data through open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process facilitates the fracturing of the data into conceptually-specific themes and categories—rebuilding the data in new ways by linking primary categories and auxiliary themes into a path analysis, and constructing a theoretical narrative shaped by data integration and category construction.

Purposive sampling was employed for both youth and service providers. Using community networks and the relationships of our community partner to the young people they serve, youth were recruited relatively easily. Youth were invited to participate based on the study criteria: young people 16 to 24 years of age (most common age range when considering youth on the street) who identified as homeless or street youth. During the summer months (July–August) youth who were 'traveling' or moving around and likely pursuing informal work were recruited for the first round of data collection; in the fall, youth who were more 'settled,' and likely pursuing or engaged in more formalized work, were recruited. This strategy was suggested by ARK as a way of diversifying our sample. Youth participants were interviewed at ARK or a

nearby café and the conversations were audio-recorded.

To complement the voices of street youth, service providers were recruited from across Canada through professional networks (of the research team) and according to a list of organizations youth participants mentioned in their interviews as being particularly helpful. The research team invited key service providers from across Canada to share their observations, opinions, and ideas about supporting homeless youth in exploring work and employment options, and to share practitioner wisdom and insight into the relationship between homeless youth and formal and informal work. All aspects of this study were reviewed and approved by an institutional research ethics board.

## Results

Participants in this study demonstrated a clear rationale for engaging in both formal and informal employment—it is a way to survive the poverty of street life. The majority of young people interviewed had both formal and informal work experiences; however, informal labors such as squeegeeing and panhandling are by far the most common forms of work. Such work fits the circumstances of being young, poorly housed, poorly educated, poorly fed, poorly clothed and generally socially, politically and economically excluded from mainstream culture. With much reflection and thoughtfulness, the majority of participants chose informal work over formal work (panhandling, squeegeeing, flying a sign, and/or busking). Informal labor is both accessible and congruent with the life circumstances that attend homelessness. It allows for immediate payment, a sense of control over one's work, and it can lead to a 'real job' and an increased sense of self-worth. In the following discussions, we highlight three grand narratives from the data: street life is work; informal and formal work are highly intertwined; and, work provides a sense of identity for those on the street.

### *Street Life as Work*

The daily work of street youth often involves the least desirable work available, with no job security, and is conducted in

public, leaving these youth at the mercy of public opinion and scrutiny. Images of panhandling and squeegeeing, among the other menial tasks street-involved youth perform to survive, are often considered deviant or criminal. These assertions fail to acknowledge the physical and social conditions that these young people endure in an effort to sustain their survival each day and which keep them at arms-length from mainstream culture:

When you are on display, everybody's poking and clawing at you ... a lot of people always give squeegeers a hard time because "we don't want to be part of society," which is not true. We are really part of society; we're out there every day. Like you know what I mean? We are a major part of society.

Homeless youth spend a large portion of their day seeking out ways to make money in order to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and companionship. Money is central in planning or scheduling their day, however making large amounts of money is not the objective—they tend to make approximately \$20 - 40 per work stretch (3-5 hours). Rather, they work to make 'their goal,' enough to meet their needs for the day (e.g., buy some food, buy necessary gear, pay for travel, go to a show, etc.). Their work is intentional and purposeful:

I have a goal in my head of what I'm trying to make, you know. Whether it be for a drink, whether it be for a meal, whether it be for you know, a ticket out of town, something like that.

The daily routine of homelessness and informal work is not significantly different from the routine required to maintain formal work. The difference is in who controls its structure. Informal work scheduling tends to be determined primarily by the individual whereas in formal work it is determined by the employer. For the youth interviewed, this was a significant difference between working informally and formally.

There are many derogatory references to street-level informal work activities; very rarely are they considered work. However, for street youth, informal work provides

opportunities for expressions of autonomy (e.g., creativity, entrepreneurship) that buffer the controlling forces associated with other activities of daily life (e.g., appointments with agency workers, making it to scheduled drop-in meals or programs, and finding shelter). For example, if they were having a 'low' day or were in a bad mood, youth would opt for activities that required less public engagement (e.g., flying a sign in a median) or would choose more passive means of working (e.g., put out a cup and read a book rather than converse with passersby). As in most business enterprises, the type of informal work chosen and its location must be consistent with the community in which they find themselves:

Depends what, depends where I am. I don't really feel comfortable squeegeeing in small towns, I feel like I'm going to get the cops called on me real quick. Um, flying a sign usually works pretty well but again, some towns you get the cops called on you real quick. So a lot of small towns, it's easier to just sit down with a little cup and smile.

Other factors taken into consideration include which days of the week are best for work: "Like, if it's a Sunday, maybe it won't be so busy downtown, so I would probably be better off [squeegeeing]." Time of day is also a consideration.

Before people are going to work, if you're out really early ... or like lunch time when they're out, like in lunch or whatever, like in busy towns. ... And then there's like the dinner rush and like when people are going home.

Inclement weather can significantly affect income. While Canadian winters are particularly harsh, almost everyone agreed that rain was the most challenging weather in which to work. Not only is it cold, wet, and uncomfortable to be outside and exposed as a 'worker,' generally the public mood is less than pleasant when it is raining, which means it is more difficult to make enough money for the day.

Informal work positions homeless young people very much in the public realm and at the mercy of their charity which can

be either lucrative or can expose them to the wrath of an often misunderstanding civil society:

I've had people just go off on rants, like "fuck you, you stupid worthless piece of shit, blah, blah, blah, get a fucking job, why don't you just go fucking die," and like, try to spit on me. I've been kicked and stuff ... I've had people throw stuff at me out of cars and shit. Like just, people get pissed off, man.

In particular, young women shared stories of harassment (mostly of a sexual nature) and the need to strategize for protection:

If I was a male I probably would [fly a sign for work] but I'm a girl and if you're holding a cardboard sign "will work" usually people get the wrong idea. I'd feel weird holding a sign like that, especially with perverts and stuff.

Combating the negativity associated with street level work is all 'part of the job' and challenges youth to find ways of maintaining a positive stance and hope: "You're just like, you've just got to be like on top of the world kind of. You just like, no matter what [people are saying to you]. Like something will come through and you'll just be happy." Equally frustrating to youth was the degree to which the public is uninformed about the realities of homelessness, in particular for youth, and about how hard they *do* work when engaged in informal activities. A number of the youth participants explained that being ignored, misunderstood, and accused of being delinquents or criminals was hardest to reconcile. They wished that the public would try to understand how and why they are on the street, engage in a conversation, and be part of the solution, rather than simply criminalizing and ignoring their 'public' existence.

In response, many young people on the street create their own community structures (called tribes or crews), which are group-centered and focused on need: "... we're very communal people, very contributing to each other, very aware of each other's needs." Working and living in groups is purposeful—it is about feeling safer (especially for young women)

and also about feeling connected:

You know, you don't feel so confident when you're there by yourself and everybody's yelling at you. You're walking the line on every [traffic light] ... nine out of ten people are giving you like you know, the fuck eye or like, you know, it's kind of embarrassing almost. But when you're with somebody else, you're more confident and it's kind of okay, you know. Especially if somebody will attack you, like it's happened, you know. You have somebody there to protect you almost or help you out.

As they try to make sense of their lives and their homelessness, youth create their own community (or 'family') on the street in response to the shared difficulty and hardship they face. In some ways, youth participants characterized their culture as 'collective'; people use their gifts or talents to make money throughout the day, and when they are done they return to an agreed upon location and determine what they can do with the money they have acquired. Sometimes individuals work for themselves, but 'crews' often pool their resources to ensure that everyone (dogs included) is fed, watered, and taken care of (e.g., has necessary medical supplies, able to get new footwear, etc.).

Within these collectives, there appears to be a strong street etiquette concerning work arrangements. Contrary to the common perception of the streets having 'no rules,' there was indeed a clear structure/honor code to engaging in informal work, consisting of, first and foremost, respect:

Like a lot of people think when kids are living on the street that "oh, they just don't want to listen to rules." There is a lot of rules within living on the street. ... If you don't respect another person, they won't respect you and it all goes down the line. You know, so there's a lot of ... the unspoken rules, I guess. ... And just respect, respect, respect. That's the number one rule, to have respect.

Part of having respect is honoring the fact that other people also need to make money. This means negotiating space or 'spots' to work:

Well, if someone is panning, you don't pan right beside, like you move down a few blocks or if someone is flying a sign, you know, ask them "how long are you going to be here or do you mind if I [work here too]." Yeah, you just respect people's space and respect their need to make money. Just wait your turn.

In addition to honoring the 'spot,' it is important not to 'burn out' a particular location. 'Burning out' a work location refers to overstaying one's welcome. Work spots that become too popular or over used can be problematic—the public will often notice if someone is in the same place day after day, and usually respond by limiting their 'drops' when they may have freely given previously. Most youth participants also described the unspoken rules such as: "Like you don't ever ask anybody with a child for spare change. You don't ask the elderly, you don't you know, you just have to have, it's common sense. You just have to have respect, you know ..."

While street life and street communities are most often portrayed as violent, unsafe, unstructured, unhealthy and exploitative, there needs to be recognition of the strong collective and ritualistic bonds that can form between those living on the street and which provide companionship, structure, support, and survival (see Karabanow, 2006, 2008).

#### *The Intersection of Formal and Informal Work*

The vast majority of young people on the street are engaged in informal work. Yet, street youth are also involved in formal work in different ways—looking for a job, leaving a job, having a job to go back to, or currently working in the formal sector. In some cases, youth held trades certificates or had previous training and were working in unskilled labor or service industry jobs, demonstrating that these youth were not necessarily disinterested in having formal employment. Participants often related having a formal job to feeling better about themselves and the money they earned when it came from an 'honest day's toil.' However, young marginalized people face a variety of challenges in securing gainful employment. Indeed, the two realities—homelessness and formal work—are highly incompatible:

I've worked sometimes being homeless but like, it's just extremely hard. You work [a full shift] and then you've got to go and look for shelter and then while you're sleeping you've got cops and other people waking you up and kicking you out. So you're walking around the city for another twelve hours and then you've got to go back to work. You're not going to do it ... it's harder to keep a job when you're on the street ... it's almost impossible, like unless you can get a house, but you can't get a house without a job, you can't get a job without a house. So that's when you're kind of stuck in the bind of things.

Despite the challenges of being homeless, most of the youth participants in the study managed to acquire formal jobs at some point in their homeless careers, had resumes prepared or had used a resume in the past. In many cases youth used online services (e.g., government job banks, Kijiji.com, or other internet-based employment services), word-of-mouth, 'cold calls,' or having a friend already employed at a place would lead to formal employment.

Needing affordable, adequate, and safe housing was identified as a key reason why youth did not pursue or retain formal work. In some cases, youth participants tried to maintain a formal job without stable shelter and had learned how difficult it was to manage: "Yeah, it's better to have a home if you're going to work, that's for sure ... and then as soon as you take away the home, the working becomes way too much to handle." Housing also provides a space for preparing to work. Being able to eat, rest, and wash-up are important aspects of maintaining employment and employability.

Also, youth relationships with employers can be temperamental. It was not uncommon for participants to share stories of employers or coworkers who 'asked too many questions.' Youth tended to negotiate these interactions by responding with as little information as possible to halt the questioning. Yet, managing these conversations, deciding whether or not to disclose one's current circumstances, and balancing life needs with work needs can be too much for some young people. There is an element of risk in disclosing (or being put in a



position to disclose) homelessness at work—stigma and discrimination are rampant.

Importantly, for many of the youth participants who identified as travelers, working formally meant ‘settling down.’ Herein lies much of the tension between formal and informal work structures, between systemic difficulties and inequities that keep them from gainful employment, and personal resistance to conventional mainstream lifestyles.

Work—whether formal or informal—is critical to economic survival and as a means of ‘bridge funding’ to support entry into formal work. Further, informal work provides a safety net of sorts; if the formal job does not work out, informal work can be used to top up earnings or for sustaining themselves while waiting for a first paycheck. The challenge of this circumstance is obvious and frustrating:

A lot of times when I first start at a [job], I usually end up having to panhandle until I get my first paycheck anyway. So after work, yeah, it kind of sucks because after doing a full day’s work, I have to go and ask people for change and have them tell me to go get a job. You know, it’s like it’s a little more aggravating when you are working, hearing that.

As such, formal and informal work continually intersect. It is often the only work that is available to youth and is less a choice than a necessity for survival when formal work is simply unattainable. Their motivations for working informally are the same as why they work formally—to make money to survive, even if they consider work like panhandling as ‘de-meaning’ and ‘having no dignity.’ “Well, see, panhandling’s not for everybody. It’s not a job that’s for everybody. You have to, um, you have to not have dignity.” The vast majority of participants acknowledge that informal work is often unpleasant, but at the same time the youth argue that informal work is still work. For some of them, informal work becomes the only work available to them, depending on their age, where they are from, how they are involved with the justice system, and whether they have identification and other necessary papers to be eligible for formal employment.

*The Meaning of Work: A Sense of Identity/Citizenship*

The participants are very aware of how they are positioned 'in society.' Some view themselves living outside of society, but others argue that they must be part of society because their work is consistently situated within the public realm. This tension around citizenship is a key theme of what work means to youth:

You feel bad because you're on the streets, so you go out and make money. While you're making the money you feel bad about taking other people's money but you have to come back and do it again the next day. So you've just got to do it.

In contrast, other youth comment on how their informal work brings them into contact with the public in a positive way. The street-level exchanges and conversations they have with passersby present learning opportunities and time for developing new perspectives on life and the world. These moments can facilitate a sense of belonging, even as outsiders. Although much of the psychological processing of social experiences and the consequences of doing informal work is personal and internal, many of the youth feel that working informally is no different than working formally in terms of the effort, dedication, and motivation required. Part of working informally is presenting themselves as hard-working citizens, as one youth noted: "[I work] about as much as a regular work day. I'm out there every day, trying to keep it consistent so that people don't think I'm a slacker or something." Work activity provides a sense of belonging and contributing to society, and allows for choices and possibilities that otherwise would be unavailable:

Stuff like squeegeeing just helps me like feel more like, I don't know, like a member of society I guess, even though it's not really like formal. I'm not paying taxes but I still feel like I'm like doing something, you know. You know, like working you know, then I get money and then I like got the choice to like ride the bus instead of walking or like, you know, go buy some food and eat something, or you know, just like, I don't

know, just having money, man, it just opens up certain possibilities.

Earned money also strengthens self-esteem and feelings of autonomy (personal choice): "I don't feel like [I should feel bad] when I've worked for it, that's *my* money. Hell no, you can't tell me what to do with it, I worked for this."

Most youth worked to create a future for themselves. When asked about 'living a good life' and what it would look like, most youth reflected traditional ideas of stability, sustainability, security, and belonging: "A place to wake up that's mine, with food in my fridge and no worries. ... Basically, needs are taken care of—when I wake up I don't have to do the menial tasks that give me what I need." Some had very middle class dreams "Money, you know, bank account, nice house, cars, you know. Wife on my arm, you know, 2.3 kids, little dog or something, you know, the normal lifestyle." Others spoke more about sustainable and meaningful living that reflected a philosophy of alternative, non-mainstream, back-to-the-land orientations—a more communitarian way of life:

My dream circumstance would be to work, get enough money to get a plot of land and like materials to like build a farm or something. Start off small with just a couple of livestock, then work my way up, plant shit, just sustain it that way and then just like, have a family there. That would be what I'd want it to look like.

Engaging in work—even informal work—can provide these otherwise excluded youth with a sense of accomplishment and, depending on the activity, meaningful work. Engaging with the public and sharing particular life stories can be a way for street youth to reflect on their experiences, and in some cases, feel pride in how they have managed to survive and get by with much less than most. Living homeless and working informally for most youth participants demonstrates a willingness to be productive and organized, and prove to mainstream culture that they are far from a common perception of being lazy: "Like I said, I'm not a lazy person. When I go work, I work my ass off." In many ways, informal work

is also about feeling “human” and purposeful—providing a means to protect their health and well-being: “I’ll still do it the next day because I need to, to survive. Survival of the fittest—you can’t be lazy. If you are, then you’ll probably not last out here [on the street].”

For many of the youth participants, being able to work informally was a strategy to combat negative self-perceptions and to feel more in control of their circumstances and emotionally and psychologically stronger when engaged in some form of work:

If I’m not doing something, like I just feel like crap because like, I’m feeling like I can’t support myself or like, you kind of get depressed after a while because like you’re not doing anything. Like you just feel useless.

In particular, those young people who identified as ‘squeegeers’ reflected on their work as providing a service—a service which the public could choose to use—and was more honorable than “just panhandling.” Other youth reflected on their informal work and described it as “providing entertainment” (e.g., a song by a busker, a poem from a writer, a piece of artwork from an artist, a joke from a comedian, etc.) for money. Regardless of the type of work, youth participants referred to engaging the public as their job: “Panhandling isn’t just sitting there and doing nothing, you need to keep up conversations with people. I like to say ... my job is entertaining drunk people.”

While many of the youth participants argued that they were able to be independent and “free” because they worked informally, most would also agree that informal work very much reflects a last option for making money in the face of hunger, extreme poverty, and marginalization: “I ended up in this big city. I couldn’t get a job there ... So I had to find other ways to make money. I wanted to work, I just couldn’t. So panhandling was my last option.” The current reality is that informal work is often more readily accessible for young homeless people, and it provides a means of making money when there are few options. Further, it provides youth with some control of their day and the freedom

to work as little or as much as they like. Informal work also provides a way of earning money that can assist street youth in surviving without engaging in illegal or criminal activities:

Most of the kids I know, they're not like bad, they're not like, they don't rob people, you know. Like they just, you know it's like, they're not the people that like, you know, they don't really steal, you know, they don't sell drugs, they don't, you know, they're not prostitutes. They're doing it because that's how they make money. ... I remember this kid, he had this line, "Keep it real; it's better to beg than steal."

For the vast majority, being in the public denotes a sense of anomie (social exclusion), alienation amid aggressive judgments, and persistent harassments, including being followed or being asked about how the money earned will be spent, and other intrusions into private lives with nowhere to go to escape the daily onslaught of street life, as this young person notes:

When you do that [public work], there's no privacy in your life at all, you know. Like people will, like I used to be followed to see where I was going after I would leave a corner, to see what I was spending my money on and stuff. And like, it's that sort of like violation. ... It's like it's none of your business and there's just no privacy on the street and you know, like yeah, I always used to think like man, it's bad that I'm standing out here crying but it's like, if I had an apartment or a room, I would go there and cry. ... So it's like, there's nothing, just yeah ... I cried because I just had no shelter and privacy or nothing.

Dealing with the general public and their hostilities is one risk of informal work, however, as more cities have enacted legislation against street-level activities like squeegeeing, panhandling, and flying signs in medians, negative interactions with law enforcement agencies (e.g., municipal police, RCMP, contracted security companies, etc.) have increased. The youth participants are very aware of how their informal work is criminalized, and they acknowledge the risk of getting

caught. Yet, as this youth explains, they persist and create strategies for avoiding ticketing, despite the very public nature of the work:

For me, when you're working in the public, you're also in the eye of like the cops, right, that's ... their whole thing. So you just, like most kids now, they say "six up." Like they always have eyes out for like cops and they always watch each other. I think that is the biggest thing when you're out, because if [the public] can see you, the cops can see you.

Some youth explained how they had ceased a particular work activity (usually squeegeeing) due to ticketing (bylaw legislation). Nevertheless, most youth participants indicated that if they needed money, the possibility of being ticketed would not deter them from "doing what they needed to do to get what they needed [if desperate]." As more visible work like squeegeeing is criminalized, young people find other, less visible and riskier, ways to make what they need. In this way, ticketing may in fact be pushing some youth into rougher aspects of the street economy, such as the drug trade, organized crime, sex work, and theft. In most cases, such alternatives are undesirable:

They're trying to take out squeegeeing you know, like the way people make their money. If we don't have this, where would we be? You know, stealing stuff, doing like robbing cars, like robbing houses? No. We don't want to do that. At least we're doing this instead of that.

Further, youth describe the futility of criminalizing informal work as a means to address homelessness and poverty:

They give you a two hundred dollar ticket while you're trying to make, you know, a couple of bucks for food. You're not going to be paying back that ticket any time soon, you know. It's like yeah, in order for me to pay off that ticket, I'm going to have to squeegee even more and I'm just going to rack them up; it just doesn't make any sense.

Participants captured the tension of being labeled and stereotyped based on informal work activities when using informal work as a strategy to survive: "It's currently a good source of money. It may be illegal but it still pays the bills." Despite the realities of street work, the conditions under which they informally work (e.g., public response, weather, location), and balancing the challenges of surviving on the street (e.g., finding food, shelter, keeping safe, etc.) the youth participants still find meaning in their work.

Our findings suggest that informal economies play a very important role in their everyday survival strategies on the streets, from earning money to acquiring other necessities like food, clothing and shelter. Informal economies, whether legal or illegal, provide work for street youth. Being primarily excluded from the formal economy, street youth may rely on flexible money-making strategies for their survival, including odd jobs, panhandling, and squeegee cleaning, among other activities. Their engagement in informal economies and the process of finding and engaging in different types of work can be interconnected and contingent upon two major factors: their circumstances on the streets and what they need to survive. In some cases, youth who are panhandling, squeegeeing, or busking, for example, might be using these activities as a way to generate income, but they have also created a money-making enterprise that allows them to stay away from more criminal money-making pursuits.

## Conclusion

While the experiences and insights of young people living on the street and those who support and care for them describe the complexities and nuances of the intersections between homelessness and labor, the grand narrative seems less complicated and intricate. Popular public myths suggest that street youth are unintelligent, lazy and delinquent. In fact, these young people appear thoughtful and reflective with a strong work ethic that is steeped within civil society, not outside of it. Rather than deviant and criminal in nature, youth participants increasingly seek out employment that is deemed legal and lawful within their contexts. This seems to be the core finding

from our work and is largely absent from the street youth literature—these young people cannot very easily engage in formal work. There is not much available, nor is there much economic incentive to engage. As such, they are left with informal labor that provides them with survival money, pride, self-worth and accomplishment, despite the belittlement, harassment and mockery that comes with such activities. It is a rational survivalist decision on their part. For some it fits a lifestyle of travel and independence, for others it provides the daily support to exist within street culture. What is troubling is that this labor continues to maintain street youths' status of marginality and social exclusion at the same time as it allows them a means to survive.

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