

Youth Pathways Project: Histories of Maltreatment and Substance Use Patterns among Street-Involved Youth

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What you need to know

Street-involved youth are a vulnerable population facing significant barriers to forming positive and healthy relationships. Many young women and men who are street-involved have troubling histories of maltreatment and previous involvement with child welfare services. To deal with their past experiences and to fit into the culture of the street, many youth use a variety of licit and illicit substances. Some feel that they are dependent on the substances they use. The connection between traumatic pasts and various forms of substance use is complex. This research explores the associations between several forms of childhood maltreatment and various patterns of current substance use. The findings indicate that maltreatment histories are associated with specific patterns of substance use. With respect to gender, there are several similarities, with a few notable differences. Effective practice should focus on housing, youth perspectives, and harm reduction based treatment and counselling.

What is the issue?

Many youth on the street have histories of maltreatment. Though maltreatment can be perpetrated and experienced in many different forms, this research focuses on specific forms of physical and sexual abuse experienced before the age of 16 at the hands of caregivers and adults. These traumatic experiences are often associated with a greater risk of using multiple different substances and substance dependence. However, few studies examine the relative effect of different forms of maltreatment on different patterns of substance use, including different types of substances. This research aims to better understand substance use patterns amongst street-involved young men and women with histories of physical or sexual maltreatment.

Why is this important?

Maltreatment experiences are common among street-involved youth, which is partially evident through their disproportionate involvement with child welfare services compared to the general population of youth. Disconnected from their families or other supports, many youth on the street lack stable and healthy social relationships. Moreover, traumatic histories of physical and sexual abuse may negatively impact an individual's capacity to form positive relationships while on the street and as they transition into adulthood.

Substance use in different durations, quantities and types may indicate strategic forms of coping are being employed by youth with maltreatment histories. These distinctions are important, as we know there are different physiological effects of different substances and different risks when multiple substances are being combined. In addition to the physical risks, some patterns of substance use are likely to result in problems establishing and maintaining healthy relationships.

In addition to experiences with maltreatment and substance use, many street-involved youth experience multiple, overlapping challenges including mental illness, inadequate life skills, unsafe or no housing, and unemployment. Given these complexities, we need to offer multiple forms of interventions and supports to street-

involved youth rather than assume that traditional, fragmented approaches will be effective for this population.

What did the researchers do?

Using the quantitative data from the first wave of the Youth Pathways Project (YPP) this research examines the maltreatment histories and substance use patterns of 150 street-involved youth living in Toronto, Ontario. The sample consists of 75 females and 75 males, ranging in age from 16 to 21 years old. The analysis is descriptive and exploratory, focusing on the statistically significant relationships between maltreatment histories and current substance use patterns. The study examines this connection through multiple types of maltreatment and several potential substance use measures, including different durations, amounts, feelings of dependence and various types of substances. Throughout, gender differences and similarities are highlighted.

What did the researchers find?

The exploratory evidence from the Youth Pathways Project indicate that different patterns of substance use may be related to different types of maltreatment. Poly-drug use, or use of more than one substance, and feeling dependent on multiple different substances is particularly prominent for young women with maltreatment histories. Hallucinogen, amphetamine, and injection drug use findings suggest that certain substances may be used to cope with different types of abuse experiences. Moreover, there is a clear message that the associations between maltreatment and substance use patterns may be different for men and women. The preliminary evidence from this study suggests that sexual abuse appears to be particularly problematic when examining young men's substance use patterns, while various forms of maltreatment are associated with substance use for the young women. These findings suggest that effective treatment options need to address the complexities of young people's maltreatment histories, their varied substance use patterns and potentially their gender.

Tips for effective practice

Safe and stable housing should be a top priority for government and community agencies seeking to alleviate the complex struggles of street-involved youth. Youth cannot focus on making changes to their substance use choices when their basic needs are not being addressed.

We need to focus on hearing youth perspectives and providing options that are based on youth feedback and experiences. More specifically, we need to identify youth invested, non-judgmental ways of addressing substance use problems. Indeed, many traditional treatment and counselling options are viewed negatively by youth, so they are underutilized or ineffective. Actively involving youth in decisions that affect their lives may be an effective strategy for encouraging street-involved youth to seek out treatment and social support services that make sense for them.

We need to recognize that many young people are going to use substances while on the street. They may use substances as a coping strategy, as a means of survival or to fit into the culture of the street. Excessive use can cause great individual and social harm. Teaching alternative coping strategies may help promote healthier life and relationship choices.

Street-involved youth need to be recognized as members of the community, not as burdens to society. We should make every effort to involve youth in programmatic

and policy decisions that affect their lives. We cannot continue to make moral judgments about street-involved youth and their substance use, rather we need to set realistic goals for success and resilience by providing meaningful support for them. This can only be achieved through actively involving young people in the conversation.

Resources

The Homeless Hub: homelesshub.ca

Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange: youthrex.com

Toronto Youth Street Stories: tyss.org

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