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Article

## Education Aspirations and Barriers to Achievement for Street-Involved Youth in Victoria, Canada

Laura Vetrone<sup>1,2</sup>, Cecilia Benoit<sup>2,3,\*</sup>, Doug Magnuson<sup>1,2</sup>, Sven Mikael Jansson<sup>2,3</sup>, Priscilla Healey<sup>1,2</sup>, and Michaela Smith<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, University of Victoria, Canada

<sup>3</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Victoria, Canada

\* Corresponding author (cbenoit@uvic.ca)

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### Abstract

Much of the literature on street-involved youth focuses on their deficits, including their high risk of withdrawing before completing high school, which is often interpreted as a rejection of formal education. Missing from the literature is an understanding of street-involved youth's educational aspirations. We employed thematic analysis of qualitative data from in-person interviews with a purposive sample of street-involved youth (N = 69) residing in one city in Canada, who were partly or fully disengaged from school at the time of the interview. We asked the youth to talk about their opinions of formal education, its importance for young people, whether learning was important for them, and whether they imagined returning to school/continuing with school. We discovered that the majority of youth had a positive view of school/formal education and stated they liked learning new things and recognized the benefits of continuing/completing their education. At the same time, the youth identified material hardship and other barriers to achieving their educational goals. We discuss these findings in light of the relevant literature and make policy recommendations to improve educational success for youth struggling with poverty and homelessness in Canada.

### Keywords

Canada; education; educational aspirations; homelessness; social inclusion; street-involved youth

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Researchers have recently called for attention to the influence of formal education on health and well-being (The Lancet Public Health, 2020) and social inclusion in society (Smith et al., 2015; Tilbury et al., 2014). Formal education in Canada is the full-time continuous participation in educational institutions from age five until around 17–18 years of age (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). Formal education ranges from regular schooling, vocational learning, instruction for those with special needs, and some areas of adult education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). Equitable and inclusive education is currently a major goal for

education policy globally (Gidley et al., 2010; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). People without high school diplomas are more likely to experience unemployment or underemployment and be at risk of poverty throughout their adult lives (Levin et al., 2007; Liljedahl et al., 2013; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Other costs of limited formal education include a reduced sense of life control and lower personal satisfaction and self-esteem (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). In brief, education is one of the most modifiable social influences on health and well-being and has the potential to mitigate structural risks (McGill, 2016).

Yet education remains out of reach for many people experiencing marginalization. The marginalization

of people in education is rooted in social exclusion, which disadvantages certain groups or individuals based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic or housing status (Benoit et al., 2009; Duchak, 2014). Canadian research shows that only two-thirds of Indigenous students in British Columbia (BC) finish high school compared to over 80% of comparable age non-Indigenous students (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015). Even more disconcerting, the graduation rate for youth in the care of the government of BC (henceforth referred to as “government care”) was just 53% in 2014 (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2016).

Youth who are street-involved—the focus of this article—are over-represented in the numbers of young people not holding a high school diploma and are commonly depicted in the media and other channels as not interested in going to school (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2013). Street-involved youth—also referred to as “street youth,” “homeless youth,” “runaway youth,” or “system youth” (Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015)—are young people with loose or no attachment to their family, who are “absolutely, periodically or temporarily without shelter, as well as those who are at a substantial risk of being in the street in their immediate future” (Daly, 1996, p. 24). In this article, we seek to understand if early withdrawal should be interpreted as a rejection of the formal education system by gaining a deeper understanding of the educational aspirations of street-involved youth.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework draws on human rights and strength-based approaches. Education is a foundational human right that is written into law in Canada and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948, art. 26.1). This includes the right to an education that is free from discrimination based on “race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (United Nations, 1948, art. 2). While Canada is regarded as having a world-class education system (“A quality education in Canada,” 2018), structural inequalities continue to exclude marginalized youth from achieving their future career goals and maximizing their health across the life course (Sohn & Gaetz, 2020; The Lancet Public Health, 2020). We also draw upon a strengths-based perspective (Harvey, 2014) to center the voices of street-involved youth in improving our understanding of the impact of social forces on their educational success and the structural changes needed to improve educational access and opportunities.

## 3. Literature Review

Attending high school in Canada is considered a normative stage in adolescence and it is a legislated

requirement for youth to attend school until the age of 16 (Hyman et al., 2011; Liljedahl et al., 2013; Queen’s Printer for British Columbia, 1996). Canada ranks higher than most OECD countries regarding educational achievement, with 86.3% of Canadians holding a high school diploma or an equivalent and 50.4% have some post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2017). Canada strives for educational policies targeted at raising the average performance in schools with measurable standards to assess achievement in core subject areas (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021; Klasen, 2001). The delivery of education varies slightly across Canada as each province and territory is responsible for its own implementation and oversight (“A quality education in Canada,” 2018).

Public schools are where adolescents occupy the most time outside of their homes (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Adolescence is a time of rapid development for young people of high school age (12–18), where there is a range of changes in their bodies, sexual interests, relationships, identity, and orientation towards the future (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Eccles and Roeser’s (2009, p. 226) review of the developmental aspects of schools posits that “declines in adolescents’ motivation during the transition to secondary school in part reflects academic work that lacks challenges and meaning” that is in line with their developmental needs. In a study of street-involved girls in Canada, Dhillon (2011, p. 113) asserts that the formal curriculum within schools can “become inextricably linked with the successes of certain students and the failures of others.”

In BC, where the present study is situated, the majority of young people are educated through public schools which receive a combination of funding from the province and fundraising from individual schools (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021; Society for Children and Youth of BC, 2020). The province has policies to provide additional funding for the inclusion of young people with disabilities, for rural youth, and for youth who are of Indigenous background and who have been/currently are in government care (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020). There are no explicit policies to provide funding for or to support the inclusion of street-involved youth in education in the province or Canada wide (Hyman et al., 2011; Liljedahl et al., 2013). An examination of child rights in BC report shows as well that public schools in Canada are chronically underfunded (Society for Children and Youth of BC, 2020).

In Canada street-involved youth is estimated to make up 20% of the country’s unhoused population (Gaetz, 2014). These marginalized youth are also less likely than their housed peers to participate in the formal education system, complete high school, and attain post-secondary credentials (Smith et al., 2007). Findings from the Canadian National Youth Homeless Survey in 2016 found that street-involved youth drop out of school at a rate of 53.2% compared to a rate of 9% for all Canadian youth (Gaetz et al., 2016).

Some street-involved or “at-risk” youth find successful learning environments in alternative education programs. However, these alternatives are often short-term, experimental, plagued by changing policy agendas, and lack continuous funding (McGregor, 2017; Peled et al., 2010). While a small body of literature shows that some street-involved youth value education and try to access supports that help them to remain in school (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Julianelle, 2008; Smith et al., 2015), the common discourse on street-involved youth characterizes them as “unintelligent, lazy and delinquent” (Karabanow et al., 2010, p. 61) and choose to withdraw from the educational system (Curtis, 2019; McGregor, 2017; Pendergast et al., 2018; Robinson, 2015). Some investigators find that these youth adopt an alternative definition of education (Tierney & Hallett, 2012). In a study conducted with street-involved youth in Vancouver, Rogers et al. (2014, p. 65) found that young people redefined their experiences of living on the street “as a way to access new spaces of learning, new talents and abilities, and to develop new social skills.”

There is a wide breadth of research highlighting the barriers that these street-involved youth face in obtaining their education (Ferguson & Xie, 2012; Jones et al., 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Magnuson et al., 2021; Solomon, 2013). Young people who are able to remain in school while being street-involved contend with frequent absences and lack the space to complete homework (Dhillon, 2011; Jones et al., 2018; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). Additionally, schools are often experienced as unsafe spaces for street-involved youth, where they fear discrimination from peers and are sometimes subjected to harsh disciplinary action (Jones et al., 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Robinson, 2015; Smith et al., 2015; Society for Children and Youth of BC, 2020; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). While having a caring mentor/support person is a reason street-involved youth remain in school, the absence of one is a prominent reason they disengage from formal education (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Dhillon, 2011; Jones et al., 2018; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Rew, 2008; Robinson, 2015).

Building on this body of research, in this study we aim to answer these research questions: Do street-involved youth reject formal education? What challenges do they face re-engaging with school? And what are their opinions and attitudes about learning in general?

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Risky Business Study

Our data comprise interviews and surveys from a five-wave panel study called “Risky Business? Experiences of Street Youth.” The purpose of the study was to understand the impact of street life on the health and well-being of a diverse sample of street-involved youth in Victoria, BC, Canada.

### 4.2. Sample and Procedure

To be eligible for this study, the participants had to be between the ages of 14–18 years at first contact, with loose or no attachment to family and school. Different sampling techniques were used to recruit participants. The principal investigators had relationships with four community partner organizations in downtown Victoria that provide services to street-involved youth in the area. The organizations were able to assist in establishing recruitment protocols and coordinating access to youth who were living on the street, either part- or full-time. Participants were also recruited through contacts with the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Ministry of Health Services, and through front-line services, such as the Victoria Youth Clinic, a local community health and social care resource that plays an important role in these young people’s lives. In addition, ads for the study were posted in local spots where street-involved youth were known to congregate.

A portion of the youth was recruited through “respondent-driven sampling” (Heckathorn, 1997, p. 177), a technique employed to recruit hidden populations when no sampling frame exists, who experience stigma by the general population and when acknowledging membership with the group can be threatening. All youth who participated in the study were given cards with information about the study to hand out to their peers. If the young people who distributed the cards recruited peers to participate, they were given ten dollars per recruited participant. Close to half of all participants were recruited for the project through this sampling method (Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson et al., 2017).

Described at length elsewhere are the research protocol and ethical considerations that were undertaken throughout the study (Benoit et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2017; Magnuson et al., 2017, 2021). Briefly, during each wave, the participants completed an interviewer-administered questionnaire that included open and closed-ended questions. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length. Interviews and open-ended questions were transcribed by trained research assistants and the principal investigators. All participants provided verbal consent prior to completing the interviews. For the first interview, participants were offered a \$20 honorarium and received \$25 for subsequent interviews. The research protocol for this study was approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board. Gender neutral pseudonyms have been applied and identifiers have been removed from the responses presented in the results to protect participants’ identities.

The findings below are from the 69 participants who took part in wave four of data collection and provided answers to the qualitative questions analyzed herein. In addition to the repeated questions asked across all six waves, questions in the fourth wave focused on youth’s

educational experience, attitudes, and perception of the education system and what they need to reengage with formal education. The mean age of these 69 youth at the time of the first interview was 16.7 years, 64% identified as cis women, and half of them had experienced foster care. Almost one-third identified as Indigenous and almost all declared multiple ethnicities, among those who provided information on their ethnic background other than Indigenous. The most common ethnicities were North European (52%), Canadian, and Latino (9% each). At wave 4 of the study the mean age of participants was 18.5 years and 60% of them had worked for a salary or wage in the last two months. Nevertheless, the living situation of most participants continued to be precarious, with only a quarter of them sleeping every night in their own rented house or apartment during the last month or sleeping in the home of a parent or guardian. Pertinent to this article, only 35% were enrolled in the regular school system in the first wave of the study, compared to 97% of 15-year-old youths in the general population (Statistics Canada, 2018). At wave 4, 36% said they had been enrolled in the regular school system at any point during the last two months.

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

Answers to the following open-ended question about participants' views of education were analyzed: What are your opinions about formal education? Probes included: Do you think getting an education is important for young people? Is learning important to you? Do you imagine yourself going back to school or continuing with school? Qualitative analyses were conducted using NVIVO-12.

The data analysis followed the procedures for thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006) by employing a non-linear process beginning with the first author getting familiar with all transcribed responses to the education questions from the 69 participants. A combination of an inductive and deductive approach to generating an initial coding structure was used to identify the broader themes, then review and refine the identified themes, and finally define and name themes. The next steps in the analysis were taken to achieve validity and reliability in the coding process (Guest et al., 2012). The tentative themes generated by the first author were presented, described in detail, and justified to the other authors. After revisions to the themes, two authors independently coded five randomly selected transcripts and this coding was presented to all authors to achieve inter-coder reliability (Guest et al., 2012; Morse, 2015). After minor revisions, the coding was applied to the entire data set by the first author. The analysis thus consisted of collaborative, iterative cycles of coding the data, considering themes, reviewing the relevant literature, auditing coding, re-considering themes, and re-coding conducted by multiple authors until consensus was achieved on the final codes.

## 5. Results

Participants' responses showed both formal education and informal education/learning were important in their lives, that they struggle to engage with the formal education process, and that they face formidable barriers to re-engaging, continuing, and completing their schooling.

Three core themes are highlighted below:

1. importance of formal education;
2. barriers to returning/continuing formal education;
3. importance of informal education.

### 5.1. Importance of Formal Education

Formal education "takes place in educational institutions that are designed to provide full time education for students in a system designed as a continuous educational pathway" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012, p. 11). When reflecting on the value they see in having a formal education, many participants had a different perspective now that they were out of school. Some wished they had continued. Other participants spoke about their changing perception of the formal education system and how the time away from school helped them to realize their goals and how learning is needed to get them there.

#### 5.1.1. New Perspective on Formal Education After Leaving

For some participants reflecting on their educational experiences they expressed regret for not continuing. Archer said: "I regret not having my education." There was some self-critique for the choices they had made to disengage. Campbell put it like this: "Yeah. I think it was stupid for me to drop out halfway through grade ten." Other participants channeled that new perspective to take advantage of an opportunity they missed out on. Lennon stated:

If I had a chance to go back [to school] and do it again, I would. And I'd stick to it. You know, I wouldn't like it, I'd hate it just as much, but now I know that, you know, how much I actually missed out on.

For Yael, taking time away from school helped him figure out what he wants to do:

It also depends [on] what you want to do later in life. Um, not necessarily do many people know what they want, not many teenagers know what they want to do. I didn't really know what I wanted to do till [a] couple [of] weeks ago.

This was reinforced by Salem's response: "It is [important] now that I have a goal for myself. Because now I'm taking school for myself."

### 5.1.2. Recognition of the Benefits an Education Can Provide

Youth who were engaged with the formal education system at the time of the interview mentioned that the most important change associated with their current engagement was a recognition of the opportunities it could connect them to and why schooling was needed to succeed in our society. Jordan described how education is important not only for learning the standard curriculum but also for socio-emotional development:

I think it gives us a certain confidence that everyone deserves. It makes us feel, I hope, comfortable in our own skin and, you know, able to handle everyday situations. And unfortunately, whether we like it or not, it is the gateway to any job we could ever, ever want or have.

Casey concurred:

It's more the fact that, our society has progressed to a level where you need some form of education to be able to survive comfortably, and, like, support yourself and support other people, like children and stuff like that. So I definitely think that an education is an asset, yeah, it's definitely important.

For Brady "education is one of the more important things a youth should have. Without proper education, there are most jobs in this world that a youth cannot get." Taylor shared this practical view: "Yeah, because you need to be able to make money and [learning] that's [school] the only way you can do it." Lennon framed his perspective on formal education this way: "It's not about listening to adults and your parents and stuff. It's about setting yourself up for your future." Salem stated "Now that I have goals for myself, I think. That's the whole difference, and I know that school is just one step that I need to take to get there." Kelly put it this way: "I think that it [education] is the most important thing for any person."

### 5.1.3. Future Goals

The recognition of the benefits that an education could provide extended beyond just getting a high school diploma to increase employability. For some participants, their future plans also involved post-secondary education, including Skyler's: "Yeah, well, I already figured out what I want to be: I'm going to become a vet. And if that falls through, I'll have like—my political science course. So if that falls through I could become a lawyer." Other participants spoke about how they learned from their experiences on the street and wanted to use that experience to help others after attaining a college/university social work degree. Salem stated: "Basically, I want to become a youth outreach worker. So, I want to work with

kids on the street. And I want to take my social worker's degree and, yeah, and see what happens from there, pretty much."

### 5.2. Barriers to Returning/Continuing Formal Education

When asked if they imagined going back to school or continuing with school, some participants spoke about barriers that had to be overcome. These barriers were individual—changes within themselves—and also structural—changes related to access to crucial resources and changes in the school system.

#### 5.2.1. Individual Barriers

Some participants relayed that they needed to change their attitude and personal habits. Lee said that, while attending school, he "was lazy." Reese named the barrier to overcome as "motivation [and] self-control." Other participants spoke about how they needed to figure out what they wanted to do with their life. As Arya put it: "I know I'm gonna go; I just don't know what I want to take."

#### 5.2.2. Structural Barriers

Getting to school was difficult for many of the participants in our study. Carmen stated: "Can't really get up every morning at seven o'clock when you live on the streets." Reilly explained school would be easier by "not having to bus across town every day to get there." For other participants, the challenge was about completing the homework they needed to do outside of school to meet curriculum expectations. As West discussed: "It's difficult [to do schoolwork] because I don't have a computer so I need to be able to go and ask to borrow my friend's library card so I can go to the library." Others mentioned that when you do not have a stable residence, it's hard to have a place to do your work. Charlie needed "more space": "That way I can bring home my work and it doesn't get wrecked." For Archer, the problem was the inflexible school scheduling, which was difficult to balance with employment and other responsibilities: "I want to do some night schooling, because I know I can do night school. Or I can even just get my school paper stuff and bring it home to do."

Youths also voiced discontent about the hurdles they had to face in schools and engaging in learning that they felt was valuable or inspiring. Winter found the classrooms to be uninspiring: "I love learning on my own, and I love reading, and I hate [the] classroom." Winter continued: "When you're sitting there surrounded by your friends and everyone's kind of hypnotized by their paper. That just doesn't work for me." For Flynn, the struggle was not being taught "life skills....Maybe in high school make it more specialized." Lane said that "a lot of the stuff that you learn in school isn't completely necessary."

Education was also costly for some of the youth who struggled to hold down a job to pay for school and other



bills while attending classes. Campbell posited: “If I could go to school, not have to pay anything, just go to school, have it already paid for, I’d go, no problem.” Landry discussed their outlook: “‘Cause school is a job but, you’re not getting paid for it, you’re paying for it.” Having to pay for an apartment, work, and go to school can be very difficult to manage. Avery expressed their exasperation: “It’s just so hard for me ‘cause working and then rent and then school and all that is just too much.”

### 5.2.3. Knowledge of the Support Available

Many of the participants were knowledgeable about the support they could access to attending and completing their formal education. When asked where or how they were going to find support, Flynn spoke about getting assistance from a “social worker” to apply for funding for disability benefits. Salem spoke about applying for an Indigenous status card and hoped that it would “help out somewhere along the way [to further education].” Youths who had been in the government care system and “aged out” when they became 19 were eligible for a government program (Agreements With a Young Adult) to help cover housing, child care, tuition, and health care costs (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, n.d.). Yet even this program was challenging for street-involved youth like Ramsey, who said the program required them to be either employed or enrolled in school for three months before receiving funding. Ramsey said they were in an impossible place: “I cannot go to school for three months while I’m sleeping outside.”

### 5.3. Role of Informal Education

Informal education is characterized by the absence of an institution, authority figure, or material structure and is contextualized through “learning activities that occur in the family, workplace, local community and daily life, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially-directed basis” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012, p. 12). Participants said learning occurred through everyday experiences, impersonal interactions, when taking responsibility, or tapping into community resources to acquire skills. These opportunities to learn were often not recognized in formal education.

#### 5.3.1. Importance of Learning

Participants were probed during their interviews to see the role that learning played in their lives while being street-involved. Learning was important to all participants. Archer said: “I learn every day...Yeah, there’s always stuff I’d like to learn how to do.” The learning they wanted to engage in often connected to their future goals: Carmen wanted to learn “skills that [could] get [her] a job.” While other participants were able to access community resources outside the formal edu-

cation system to expand their learning opportunities. Harley described an opportunity to acquire skills in his local community: “I’m learning about permaculture and agriculture and sustainable, um, practices, food, farming, and all of that.” Kennedy argued that learning was important to her even though she was not getting an education in the formal education, as she pointed to her child and declared: “I learned to take care of her, so.” To Harper, learning is a life-long process: “I believe that you learn all through our lives, like, you never stop learning.” For Hayden, “expansion of knowledge is [the] utmost—it’s awesome....If you can expand your perspective on the world then you can understand it better.”

#### 5.3.2. Life Experience as Education

While learning was important for the majority of the participants, they spoke about the learning they had from life experiences as being more expansive and beneficial than anything gained through formal education. Jesse stated:

I’ve learned lots like from life. I’ll look at somebody who’s like gone through school and like gotten straight As. Done like so well in school and is like going to college now. And then I look at me, and I’m like look at her maturity level and stuff like that and it’s completely different.

The foundational academic skills were discussed by some participants as being important. Skyler shared:

To tell you the honest truth, education doesn’t really matter—well, it does, like, you know, I mean, you need to know the essentials like reading, writing, you know, all the skills of typing or whatever, right, that’s, that’s easy to learn on your own. But you don’t learn as much as you could in school than you would not going to school, because you need life experiences.

For Winter, “the academics are just as easy to learn outside of school”: “Like I learned more history being a part of a bookstore for a year than I have probably all my life in school.” The learning that occurs within formal education is often standardized to meet the needs of all students. Some youth said that in school you are “just learning what they think you should learn,” as Hayden put it. Classroom teaching was described by Alex as being “just writing down stuff that you might use in the future but it’s just hard. You learn more stuff just by living on the streets.” For Val, “school is not really important...and the things they teach isn’t really, totally, relevant [in their life].”

Marley put it this way: “Depending on what you want to do with your life. Um, for me, it’s not important, because what I’m doing with my life only really involves common knowledge, and not like specific school stuff.” Even if formal education was not valuable for them right now, some participants did not entirely dismiss it.

Carmen saw formal education as a future plan: “You don’t have to be a young person to get an education. You can do it when you’re thirty years old...You can only be a kid once. So you might as well just be a kid while you want, and then when you’re twenty or whatever, you can go back to school.”

## 6. Discussion

The results of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of education for street-involved youth in Canada that extends beyond just the barriers that they face. Our article also challenges the societal stigma that they choose to withdraw from school (Curtis, 2019; McGregor, 2017; Pendergast et al., 2018; Robinson, 2015). The life aspirations of street-involved youth are remarkably mainstream, even if their current circumstances are unusual compared to their peers (Magnuson et al., 2021). The participants valued the benefits that a formal education provides, they talked about future goals that often involved completing their high school diploma and moving on to post-secondary education. These aspirations can be enhanced and reinforced into capabilities through an education system that works to redress injustice by prioritizing equitable opportunities, participation, and empowerment for all students beyond performance standards (Hart & Brando, 2018; Klasen, 2001; Sen, 2005).

The learning gained in the participants’ lives through everyday experiences, interactions, and responsibilities were also recognized and valued. The majority of these participants reported a positive attitude towards learning and found meaningful ways to learn through everyday activities. Yet educational policies prioritize attendance and the meeting of measurable standards in order to be deemed successful enough to graduate (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021; Klasen, 2001; Tierney & Hallett, 2012).

The positive attitude towards education and the search for meaningful learning opportunities despite being disengaged from school is not unique to street-involved youth. High schools are often developmentally mismatched to the needs of adolescents (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Most students have high expectations of the classes they are taking and expect what they are learning to apply to the real world, yet that connection is often opaque to street-involved youth (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). For many street-involved youths in our study, the classroom learning environment did not meet their needs and was not immediately found to be related to their future goals. What is needed is a shift from performance measures to a capability-driven approach to education (Hart & Brando, 2018). Failure to do so means further excluding street-involved students from receiving the benefits that a formal education can provide (Klasen, 2001).

Several youths identified their own culpability for educational barriers, including their lack of motivation.

It is important to remember that these problems are not unique to homeless youth. The youth in our study also had knowledge of the supports that they could access but they faced barriers in retrieving them. These supports include housing, disability and income support, making it possible to participate in formal education without having to worry about earning an income, an ongoing concern for many of the participants in our study. Among other barriers, rent subsidies and income supports are inaccessible to street-involved youth in BC because multiple barriers exist including a lack of affordable housing and landlord discrimination (McParland, 2020; Millar, 2009).

Canada has no current national policy providing oversight and funding to support street-involved students in schools (Hyman et al., 2011; Liljedahl et al., 2013). One program intending to fill the gap is Upstream Canada, a program adapted from the Geelong Project in Australia (Sohn & Gaetz, 2020), which connects students in need to community organizations to access support. An interim report on the project showed a 20% reduction in early school leaving of at-risk students in participating schools (MacKenzie, 2018). With education being the most modifiable social determinant of health, the educational aspirations and goals of street-involved youth can be meaningfully incorporated into planning support that are actually needed to achieve their goals (Edgerton et al., 2012; McGill, 2016; The Lancet Public Health, 2020).

Future research should ask questions about the educational programs street-involved youth are engaged in to inform how funding is allocated, the educational spaces they interact within, and the practices of teachers, staff, or other mentors. Exploring early school experiences while collecting accurate data around the time of disengagement for street-involved youth could better direct prevention and intervention services. Learning outside of schools was important for the young people in our study. Exploring the spaces or people street-involved youth learn from would inform educational programs looking to make learning more applicable to the real world of marginalized youth. Additionally, studies of alternative educational programs that take a diverse approach to learning could shed light on how to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to education and develop a comprehensive framework for educational programs for disadvantaged youth.

The qualitative results presented in this article are not without limitations. First, the article presents findings from a purposive sample of street-involved youth in one geographical location only. Thus, the findings may not be generalized to the greater population of street-involved youth in the metropolitan area or other urban regions of Canada. Second, responses to the interview questions were based on self-report and the probes used (outlined in the data analysis section of the article) reflect forced-choice questions. When addressing the forced-choice probes, even though participants did



not have to answer, they may not have had the freedom to answer the questions if they were asked in an open-ended way. The questions in our study focused on the participants' perception of learning and their educational experiences. None of their accounts were confirmed, and due to the time elapsed since the final wave of the study, member checks were not used. There is also the potential for reporting bias from the young people in the study, choosing what information they share. Additionally, the authors did not ask participants about the type of school they were enrolled in when they answered the questions and who their key teachers or mentors were when street-involved. About 95% of students in Canada attend public schools with relatively homogenous programs. Nevertheless, questions about their particular school(s) could have provided more context to the educational experiences of the young people in our study, and we have recommended this be accounted for in future research.

## 7. Conclusion

In this study, we reported what a sample of street-involved youth in one Canadian city have to say about the importance of learning and formal education in their lives and their experiences to (re)engage with the institutions within their reach. The approach to data analysis employed in this study was used to reflect street-involved youth's views of education. Their diverse perspectives on education directly challenge misperceptions of this population and provide a catalyst for future research using a human rights and strength-based perspective. For a group of young people who are often characterized as willfully disengaged from school, they remain positive in their outlook about learning new things and have plans to re-engage with formal education (Curtis, 2019; McGregor, 2017; Pendergast et al., 2018). Labeling these students as being "at-risk" or in need of intervention fails to consider their lived realities and the protective factors they call attention to that can increase their engagement within the education system (McGregor, 2017).

Several implications for policy and program development are evident. First, our results reinforce the notion that the housing and economic needs of marginalized young people need to be meaningfully addressed for them to be successful in high school and other formal educational institutions (Hyman et al., 2011; Julianelle, 2008; Liljedahl et al., 2013). Second, there is a need for a multi-level response in Canada, including legislation that governs the delivery of public education to better support street-involved students in their attempts to engage with education (Hyman et al., 2011; Liljedahl et al., 2013). Third, learning opportunities should build upon the lived and living experiences of street-involved youth, helping them to connect to the knowledge they want and the support they need in achieving their future educational goals.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## About the Authors



**Laura Vetrone** (MA) is a current PhD student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and a research assistant at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. Her doctoral research stems from her experience working in residential care with children and youth in the care of child welfare. Her research interests include street-involved youth, residential care, evidence-based practices, and education.



**Cecilia Benoit** (PhD) is a sociologist and health social scientist at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. Her scholarship sheds light on the forces that create social inequities for a variety of marginalized groups, all of who are overrepresented by Indigenous peoples and those of lower-class background, including street-involved youth. Her findings have practical policy implications for improving the quality of life of the people she studies, including increasing their educational opportunities.



**Doug Magnuson** (PhD) is a professor in the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Canada. His research includes professional practice in various contexts, including child welfare, street-involved youth, group care, and youth in higher education. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in data analysis and research methods.



**Sven Mikael Jansson** (PhD) is a scientist at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, University of Victoria, Canada. His current research uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand marginalized populations and low-prestige occupations. His current research focus is on intimate partnerships. He has recently completed a longitudinal study of street-involved youth to see how their lives, and in particular their health status, change as a result of their street involvement.



**Priscilla Healey** (MA) is a PhD student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. Her doctoral research focuses on the pathways and progression of street-involved youth. Her research interests include marginalized populations, foster care, interpersonal trauma, resilience, and emerging adulthood. Her research informs her practice as a child, youth, and family counselor. As a sessional instructor, she teaches undergraduate courses in research methods, lifespan development, and mental health.





**Michaela Smith** (BA) is a fourth-year midwifery student in the University of British Columbia's Midwifery Program, Vancouver, BC. Her research focuses on the organization of maternity care systems, the social determinants of pregnant women's health, and the determinants of social inequities in other marginalized groups.