

**The Experiences of Street Involved Youth Living in the North**

by

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### **Abstract**

This research explored the experiences of eight street involved youth living in north central, British Columbia using a narrative approach. The analysis was carried out using a three phase analysis based on the approach developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998). The narratives represented the holistic experiences of the youth and the meanings they attached to their experiences. The themes that emerged from the data were organized into five main categories that represented the participants' experiences prior to street life, the challenges associated with being on the streets, supports, personal qualities, and moving on. Three metathemes were interpreted from the narratives: *Trauma*, *Coping*, and *the Essence of Living*.

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### **Dedication**

This research is dedicated to all the youth who have challenged, motivated, and inspired me over the years.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

There are many individual and social realities embedded in the homeless experience. Homelessness, in its various forms is commonly perceived as a “bleak, unsafe, and unfulfilling existence” (Rew & Horner, 2003, p. 92). Yet, for some it may be exciting, unpredictable, and perhaps a safer alternative to their home life. Views of homelessness are often influenced by societal values that are historically and culturally situated through relationships, traditions, and the media. Thus, homelessness can be considered a socially constructed phenomenon that individuals navigate through personal qualities and external resources. For individuals lacking personal or social resources, the struggle to survive life on the streets may be more challenging. Youth who choose a homeless lifestyle have often suffered difficult early life experiences. For these youth, personal or family difficulties become so intense that they run away or leave home (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000).

Life on the streets may be more problematic for youth living in smaller, northern communities. Extreme weather conditions and remote geographical areas can create additional difficulties for youth living on the streets. Exposure to cold temperatures as well as snow or rain may have negative effects on the health and development of youth, making them more susceptible to illness and accidents. It is likely that isolated communities have limited resources, and services to assist the youth to transition off the streets. Furthermore, the perceived lack of support or limited options for youth may lead to feelings of loneliness or depression, directly affecting their mental health and well-being.

Due to a lack of social support and available resources, youth may be forced to leave their home region. While on the streets, youth are exposed to a host of physical and mental health problems (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). The risks associated with street life may put them in

immediate danger; however, many youth are able to survive and overcome these negative experiences. It is possible they have personal qualities and external sources of support that give them the ability and motivation to survive street life.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood is a time in life marked by increased autonomy and a search for identity (Arnett, 2000; Kidd, 2007; Rutter, 1999). Youth typically identify with their peers, relying less on their guardians for support. Many social experiences occur within the peer group. Issues such as sexuality, love, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and continuation in education are common (Arnett, 2000; Rutter, 1999). Youth begin to form their own identities as they encounter new life experiences and learn from past mistakes, which can create times of uncertainty and confusion for these young people. Both adolescents and young adults are particularly sensitive to social influences, increasing their vulnerability to the dangers of street life through involvement with older and often more street-entrenched individuals.

### **Significance of the Study**

Recent homeless counts in British Columbia verify that youth homeless rates are increasing, yet they remain the most understudied group within the homeless population (Brown & Amundson, 2010). There are a plethora of risks involved with a homeless lifestyle that no young person should have to endure. Further research is necessary to better understand the experiences of youth living on the streets and the issues they are faced with, and to inform practice by improving prevention and early intervention programming. Research has primarily focused on the pathways to homelessness and the risk factors associated with being on the streets. However, little is known about how some homeless youth overcome adversity and make successful transitions into adulthood (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004).

The existing literature has centered on homeless youth living in large metropolitan areas (Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2007). In Canada, research with this population is limited to cities in southern regions including Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. The issues specific to youth living in these areas may be very different from street involved youth living in smaller communities. For example, it is likely that additional resources and services are available in populated cities, providing more opportunities for employment or support in exiting the streets. Furthermore, the issues specific to street involved youth living in southern communities likely do not fit a northern context. The street experiences of homeless youth living in smaller northern cities or isolated communities are unknown. The specific challenges or issues that these young individuals face have not been extensively studied.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Youth living on the streets are vulnerable to a multitude of risks, creating a greater need for prevention and intervention programs that work to enhance positive transitions off the streets. A common assumption is the bleak outlook for high-risk adolescents, and research often focuses on the pathology of these individuals (Kidd, 2003). More attention towards the strengths of high-risk youth is critical because there is evidence that some children raised in negative environments develop into well-functioning adults (Prevatt, 2003).

The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to understand the experiences of youth living in the North who are homeless, and (2) to discover the personal qualities and external resources that help them survive living on the streets. Through individual stories, the intent was to gain a deeper understanding of homelessness within the youth population. I have worked to convey the meanings of the youths' experiences as they perceive them. Additionally, I have attempted to

define some of the personal qualities demonstrated by homeless youth, focusing on possibilities rather than pathology.

The principle research question was: What is the experience of street involved youth living in north central, British Columbia? Secondary questions included: What specific challenges do youth face in being street involved in this geographical context? What resources, both personal and community-based, assist them in living without a permanent home?

Increased knowledge about these youths' experiences will hopefully assist community agencies that provide services to this population, including counselling services, and inform parents or guardians of more proactive measures to take with their children to keep them safe and off of the streets. This research attempts to provide a deeper understanding of the contributing factors that may lead to homelessness for youth living in north central, British Columbia, including their familial context and personal qualities that both helped and hindered them. I am hopeful that the findings will provide insight and understanding about the issues specific to these youth.

### **Researcher Context**

My interest in carrying out research with street involved youth began over three years ago through my work at a youth homeless shelter in Edmonton. I had an opportunity to meet many young people and hear their stories of survival. Based on those experiences, I became aware of and sensitive to the numerous social barriers homeless youth face, such as access to health care, social services, and affordable housing. Not only are these young people marginalized and often stigmatized by society, many are alienated and isolated from their families. I was drawn to the stories the youth shared with me and I became curious about what it was that kept them going in

life. I was intrigued by their abilities to survive as many of the youth had encountered so many hardships at such young ages.

Approaching their situation from a strength-based approach, it appeared that many of the youth I worked with showed resilience, so I began to look at research on resiliency and how it fit for street involved youth. Coming from an applied psychology undergraduate program, I had limited understanding of the different research methodologies. In my quest to gain more research experience, I volunteered as a research assistant doing only quantitative analysis.

Prior to my acceptance into graduate school, I received funding from the Social Sciences Research Humanities Committee based on a research proposal I submitted measuring resilience in homeless youth using a quantitative methodology. Through my experiences in graduate school, I began to notice a shift in my thinking. I was still passionate to carry out thesis research with street involved youth, but it seemed that a qualitative research approach would be a better fit for me because I was interested in exploring youths' homeless experiences in a northern context.

One of my assumptions is that youth living on the streets display positive personal qualities and many are just trying to do the best they can with what they have. My interest in exploring the personal qualities of street involved youth is guided by my existential worldview and my humanistic approach as a helper. I believe that people try to understand the tragic aspects of life and find meaning in those experiences. Not only are people resourceful, but they have the capability to find solutions to their problems. When working with individuals in a therapeutic setting, I strive to establish genuine relationships through respectful interactions. By moving into another's subjective world, I can begin to understand and accept his or her reality. Interestingly, I wasn't able to fully articulate these ideas until I gained the knowledge and the terminology in

graduate school. I prefer to work from a strength-based, holistic approach that is focused on individual strengths rather than deficits. It is my hope that research on this topic will present opportunities for street involved youths' voices to be heard and their unique situations understood.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The postmodern tradition of social constructionism assumes that reality is based on individual beliefs that are historically and culturally constructed. Thus, the world is understood in terms of social artifacts, with reality constituted through language (Gergen, 1985, 1999). There are multiple understandings or realities that are linguistically constructed within relationships. People use language to communicate their inner thoughts and interpret meaning from the world in which they live. It is through traditions and shared language that meanings arise (Gergen, 1985, 1999, 2001). These assumptions reflect my beliefs about the world (ontology) and how it should be understood (epistemology) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Together, these concepts provide the basis for this study using the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry with social constructionism as the overarching theoretical framework.

Many individuals are influenced by western culture and tradition, often accepting society's values as universal truths (Gergen, 1999). This worldview has serious implications for social activity, often resulting in oppression and marginalization of those individuals who have alternate lifestyles or worldviews. Ungar (2004) suggests that society ignores youths' alternate constructions because many societal members lack insight. He speculates that there is a lack of recognition that young lives are distinct; therefore, youths' voices are largely silenced. Moreover, youth who are homeless are one of the most disadvantaged populations who have minimal opportunities to share the meanings they make from their experiences.



## **Research as an Evolving Process**

Through this experience, I have gained insight into the historical and cultural influences that have affected my beliefs about social issues. My assumptions regarding homelessness have been shaped by the values and traditions of society, but my perspective has shifted through my experiences of working with homeless communities. In particular, I have gained awareness of the differences in values between street communities and mainstream society. This research experience has taught me that aspects of culture and language are also unique for different street communities, which was illustrated to me through community advisors and front-line workers who are immersed in the culture of the streets. Through community advisement, I learned that the label “homeless” does not accurately reflect the youth in the community as many of them do not identify as being homeless. To better represent the youth who agreed to participate in this research, the term “street involved” seemed to be more appropriate than homeless. This new understanding influenced me to change the language in my thesis to reflect the street culture in this community. This experience led me to understand that new meanings emerge through dialogue and are linguistically constructed within relationships.

## **Terminology**

Language is “the means of conveying the content of mind to others” (Gergen, 2001, p. 804). In my attempt to communicate the meaning of key terms used throughout this thesis, descriptions for the central concepts found within this study are provided.

**Street involved/homeless.** The terms “street involved” and “homeless” are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. For the purpose of this study, street involved and homeless youth were defined as individuals lacking access to safe, permanent, and affordable housing, which included any youth who left home prematurely, ran away, or were kicked out of

their homes. These individuals may or may not have had a permanent fixed address. Youth were classified as street involved or homeless if they accessed emergency shelters, slept in any public place, temporarily stayed with friends or acquaintances, or resided in temporary transitional housing for a minimum of two months.

**Youth.** In Canada, statistics pertaining to youth are based on individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (Statistics Canada, 2006). However, some of the literature addresses youth as individuals up to age 30 (Arnett, 2000). The term has been loosely defined as, “a period in life between childhood and maturity, an early period of development, and the quality of being young” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2009). The youth included for this study were individuals between the ages of 16 and 29, which encompassed individuals considered to be adolescents and emerging adults.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature to set the context for the study, and highlights many relevant issues to youth living on the streets. The chapter begins with an overview of homelessness, followed by a summary of the different pathways to homelessness and key factors that affect youths’ homeless experiences. The concepts of psychological hardiness and coping as personality dispositions are also introduced. The remainder of the chapter is focused on the personal qualities and external resources that assist youth to navigate life on the streets.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the research process using a narrative approach. The interviewing approach and phases of analysis are presented as well as key ethical considerations relevant to the study. My reflections and understandings of the research process are included as

part of the analysis. The chapter concludes with the evaluative criteria used in assessing qualitative validity in this research study.

Chapter Four presents the co-constructed stories of eight street involved youth living in the North. The stories reflect my interpretations of the meanings the youth attached to their experiences in the context of a research interview. These narratives are the result of Phase One of analysis, and represent the holistic and contextual experiences of the participants.

Chapter Five includes the categorical-content analysis from Phase Two and the meta-analysis in Phase Three of analysis. The categories and themes are discussed in relationship to the participants' experiences presented in the stories. Summaries of the three overarching metathemes that emerged as connections across all the participants' narratives are presented.

Chapter Six presents a summary and discussion of the research findings. My interpretations of the participants' experiences are integrated with existing literature. The limitations to the study are included followed by a personal reflection of the research process. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and implications for practice that emerged from the research process.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The problem of homelessness remains a serious social issue that affects all communities and age groups. Youth are leaving home at earlier ages and remaining on the streets longer, increasing their risk of long-term homelessness (Hyde, 2005). Chronic street involvement may negatively affect youths' quality of life, compromising their health and well-being. Youths' homeless experiences are often very different from adults' experiences. Specifically, the dangers involved in street life may be greater for young people because of their ages and limited life experiences. Further challenges may arise for homeless youth living in northern areas because of the geographical and climatic context.

In my attempt to adequately reflect the existing literature, the term "homeless" will appear throughout this chapter. With the exception of a few recent studies, researchers have consistently labelled youth living on the streets as homeless. However, a shift in the language to the term "street involved" may be more inclusive and a better representation of the youth homeless population according to front-line workers. As evidenced in the literature, the conceptualization of the term "homeless" is varied and may take on very different meanings for individuals who self identify as homeless or street involved. Summaries of the existing literature have been integrated to set the context for the study, and reflect the issues that are relevant to youth living on the streets.

This chapter considers homelessness from a broad perspective, then moves to a more narrowed focus looking at the different pathways to youth homelessness and the protective and risk factors that affect their homeless experiences. Some of the geographical characteristics that are unique to northern communities are highlighted to provide further insight into the challenges experienced by homeless youth living in these areas. The remainder of the chapter explores

possible inner qualities of youth, specifically the concepts of psychological hardiness and coping that may have relevance to the participants in this study. The final section presents a summary of the literature on the external resources and supports that assist youth in navigating life on the streets.

### **An Overview of Homelessness**

Rates of poverty and homelessness are on the rise across Canada. Homelessness is thought to occur on a continuum, where absolute homelessness is defined as individuals who lack access to safe, affordable housing; living on the streets or in emergency shelters (Condon & Newton, 2007). Hidden homelessness is more difficult to identify because individuals use their social networks instead of public agencies, often staying with friends or “couch surfing”. These individuals do not have housing, and are often not recognized as homeless to most people (Condon & Newton, 2007; Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005). Individuals considered to be “at risk” of becoming homeless have insecure accommodations due to unaffordable housing costs (Condon & Newton, 2007).

The homeless population is under-represented in research because of the difficulty with reaching individuals who do not access public agencies (Sleegers, Spilker, van Limbeek, & van Engeland, 1998). Ardilly and Le Blanc (2001) identify two fundamental biases in conducting research with homeless individuals. First, the entire population cannot be included, and second, individuals who access community services may not actually be homeless. According to the 2006 Census, 19,630 people stayed in shelters across Canada. In British Columbia, it was reported that 2,215 individuals relied on shelters for temporary accommodations (Statistics Canada, 2006). These statistics do not include individuals who sleep on the streets, in abandoned buildings, recovery centers, hotels, or with friends or family. The 2005 Greater Vancouver

Homeless Count, found that the number of homeless people almost doubled from 2002, with an increase of approximately 800 homeless people living on the streets (Condon & Newton, 2007).

A recent homeless count carried out in Prince George in the spring of 2010 included 361 participants, which was down from 375 participants in 2008. Of those interviewed, 66% were of Aboriginal descent and 60% reported staying in safe houses, shelters, or transitional housing. Furthermore, 27% of the participants described living in a state of absolute homelessness, which was defined as having no housing or sleeping in locations that were not fit for people to live in (Community Partners Addressing Homelessness, 2010).

**Youth homelessness.** It is difficult to estimate the actual number of youth who are homeless due to their hidden, transient lifestyles (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). Youth increasingly report “couch surfing” at the homes of friends and family or engage in “survival sex” for temporary shelter (Rew, 2008; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001). Therefore, these individuals may not be visible in the street community or likely to utilize emergency services. It is possible that underage youth may not access services out of fear of being reported to child protection services (Derosa, Montgomery, Kipke, Iverson, & Unger, 1999).

The 2006 Canadian Census identified 210 youth, living in British Columbia between the ages of 15-24, to have accessed emergency shelters (Statistics Canada, 2006). These statistics reflect an under-representation of the actual youth homeless population because in British Columbia’s capital region alone, it was estimated that in 2008, approximately 220 adolescents (aged 13-18) and 323 emerging adults (aged 19-24) were without safe, stable housing (Community Council, 2008). Based on the data obtained from the 2007 Urban Poverty Project, it was found that British Columbia was the only province in Canada that had steadily increasing

rates of child and youth poverty. It was reported that Victoria had the highest youth poverty rate in all of Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2007).

In 2001, a youth forum was held in Prince George which looked at specific issues relating to youth homelessness. Being homeless was defined by the youth as sleeping outside on park benches, under bridges, or downtown. They described walking around town during the night or finding a party to go to when they had nowhere else to sleep. The youth believed it was important for the community to address the underlying issues of why people are homeless. Several suggestions were made for improvements to services: increased access to subsidized housing, more beds at safe houses and detox, access to resource information, services away from downtown, follow up services, networking across agencies, nutritious food, and hot meals. It was suggested that a mobile van would be helpful in emergency situations and for rides to access services. The youth believed that field trips and positive role models would help increase awareness of healthy lifestyle options. Furthermore, helpers who were understanding and had personal experiences of street life were viewed as most beneficial (Community Partners Addressing Homelessness, 2003).

**Pathways to youth homelessness.** Numerous studies suggest that the reasons for youth homelessness are complex and, therefore, difficult to isolate. Zide and Cherry (1992) propose a typology of homeless youth, identifying four specific categories that include: running from, thrown out, running to, and forsaken. Youth who leave home to escape difficult family experiences are classified as the “running from” group. Family conflict and histories of physical or sexual abuse are consistently reported among homeless youth (Hyde, 2005; Williams et al., 2001). Family dysfunction is characterized as poor family attachments, conflict, and parental substance abuse (Zide & Cherry, 1992). Parent-child conflict occurs in the home for several

reasons including: parental disapproval of sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and personal style (i.e. clothing, body piercing, etc). Additionally, changes in family structure such as divorce, re-marriage, or the death of a parent may influence youth to leave home prematurely (Hyde, 2005).

Youth who are “thrown out” by their guardians typically have higher levels of assertiveness and chronic problem behaviours. Problem behaviours are classified as getting into trouble with the law, school difficulties, and acting out in the home or the community (Zide & Cherry, 1992). One study found that 89% of youth were taken into care because of behavioural problems. However, among those 62% reported being treated violently by their caregivers (Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005). Substance use and mental health issues are also found to be causes for problematic behaviours in youth (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004).

Some youth leave home in search of adventure; these individuals are identified as “running to” or “positive runaways” (Zide & Cherry, 1992). While some experience difficulties at home or school, they generally leave home to travel and explore the world. They have been considered high functioning street youth who can access multiple resources. Typically these individuals remain connected with their families and can return home at their convenience (Zide & Cherry, 1992).

The “forsaken” homeless youth are classified as individuals whose families can no longer afford to financially support them. Youth from marginalized, single parent homes, large families, and low income families fit this prototype. They are considered the most vulnerable street youth, often victims of exploitation and manipulation. Additionally, they may be at an increased risk of feeling isolated and alienated from others (Zide & Cherry, 1992).

Youth in foster care represent a large portion of the youth homeless population. Many of these individuals have experienced unstable living arrangements, lacking a sense of attachment



or belonging (Garmezy, 1993). One study found that foster youth who have transitioned out of the child welfare system were at high-risk for homelessness, low educational attainment, and health-related problems (Osterling & Hines, 2006).

**Protective and risk factors.** There is a considerable amount of research on protective and risk factors focused at the individual, familial, and environmental levels. Protective factors are identified as those that mediate life stressors such as: positive self-concept, healthy peer/family relationships, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Unger, 2005; Brooks, 1994; Everall, Altrow, & Paulson, 2006). Personal factors including cognitive functioning, positive disposition, and activity level are thought to buffer the effects of negative life events. Families that are characterized by warmth, support, and cohesiveness can help individuals overcome stressful situations. Sources of external support may include the school setting or positive role models in the community (Garmezy, 1993). Many homeless youth lack strong family connections, and are often not attending school or participating in healthy extracurricular activities, which leads one to question what other protective factors assist them to overcome stressful life events.

Risk factors negatively affect the physical, emotional, and social development of individuals generally leading to problematic behaviours (Middlemiss, 2005). There are a host of personal and environmental risk factors that commonly threaten healthy development. The literature indicates that temperament, sensory-motor deficits, attention disorders, and decreased self-esteem are personal risks, whereas family conflict, rejection by peers, and low socioeconomic status are considered environmental risks (Middlemiss, 2005; Ungar, 2004). It is likely that youth with poor coping strategies are at an increased risk of being negatively affected by difficult life

situations. Alternatively, some youth who are faced with multiple risk factors in their lives may not be negatively affected (Ungar, 2004).

The risk factors associated with street life are extremely alarming. Youth who are homeless are vulnerable to a multitude of dangers on a daily basis. Sexual exploitation and violent victimization are sober realities for many of the youth. The struggle to find food and shelter, threats to safety, crime, mental health problems, addictions, and suicide are all negative outcomes (Kidd, 2003). Due to a limited network of social supports, youth are at an increased risk of social isolation and alienation (Boydell, Goering, & Morrell-Bellai, 2000). Furthermore, youth are often marginalized by discriminatory actions and the social stigma associated with homelessness (Kidd, 2007). There is no doubt that the risks involved with a homeless lifestyle can create high levels of stress for youth. It is unclear whether homeless youth living in northern communities would face additional challenges.

### **Northern Communities**

The majority of Canada's land mass is considered rural, remote, and northern. In 2001, it was estimated that approximately 30.4% of Canada's population lived in rural, remote, and northern areas, yet there is still limited research involving these communities (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). There is a lack of awareness and understanding about the daily struggles for northern Canadians. Some characteristics specific to Canada's north include: remote geographical areas, harsh climate, a small population base, and inadequate access to services (Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council, 2007).

Northern communities are challenged by numerous social concerns. Issues of addiction, domestic violence, poverty, and intergenerational trauma are some of the challenges faced by community members. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of services and resources available in

these communities. Residents may be required to travel for medical care and social services. Often there is limited or no public transportation available, making it difficult for individuals to commute to service providers. The lack of social support networks can compromise individuals physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological well-being (Brannen, Emberly, & McGrath, 2009; Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council, 2007).

In looking for research specific to homelessness in the North, I found one large scale study conducted on women's experiences of homelessness in Nunavut. Several issues relating to homelessness and living in the North were identified. The women commonly reported a high cost of living and limited employment and housing options. Housing remains a central concern in the North and few realize the effect it has on women and children. Due to extreme weather conditions, homelessness is not highly visible in the communities. Many women who were homeless in this study engaged in survival sex as a way to live. Additional barriers that women in the North may face include a lack of emotional and financial support, abuse, low wages, and limited social services (Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council, 2007). Practitioners are concerned about how these social problems affect the well-being of children and youth living in these isolated communities.

### **Personal Qualities**

Ungar (2004) describes how youth are often marginalized and stigmatized by society when their behaviours do not follow the social expectations placed on them. Consequently, youth who are homeless are generally classified as deviant individuals who do not fit the profile for healthy functioning. Some youth believe that their deviant patterns of behaviour have purpose, and provide meaning and stability in their lives on the streets. Stealing, lying, and fighting may be necessary for their survival. Youth may be doing better than most adults expect; therefore,

deviant behaviours can be viewed as coping strategies that help youth to survive unhealthy conditions.

Rowe (as cited in Bender et al., 2007) suggests that homeless youth require remarkable coping skills to survive the dangers and stress inherent in street life. Youth who have left home to escape unhealthy and dangerous environments may display positive decision-making skills as they search for a healthier life and self-preservation (Rew, 2003), suggesting they have personal qualities that help them manage chronic stressors. It is possible that homeless youth have personality dispositions, such as psychological hardiness and coping skills that contribute to their survival on the streets.

**Psychological hardiness.** Psychological hardiness, originally derived from existential psychology, is a personality trait that is a promising resource for maintaining wellness (Maddi & Hightower, 1999; Maddi, Kahn, & Maddi, 1998). Hardiness is defined as a source of resistance against the negative effects from stressful life events (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983). It buffers the relationship between stress and illness. Individuals find resolutions to their problems by turning stressful situations into opportunities for growth (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983; Maddi, 2008). Hardiness may encourage effective coping and produce successful outcomes (Maddi & Hightower, 1999).

Hardy attitudes construct how individuals perceive their interactions with the world and motivate them to overcome adversity (Maddi, 2002). There are three personality characteristics central to hardiness: challenge, commitment, and control (Maddi & Hightower, 1999). Individuals who have the characteristic of challenge view stress as a normal part of life that is essential for growth. Both positive and negative experiences can provide learning opportunities. Individuals with strong characteristics of commitment find meaning in stressful situations and

remain connected with the events and people in their lives, avoiding denial or isolation. People operating with characteristics of control maintain the belief that they can influence outcomes through their effort and generally do not feel powerless in situations, assuming control over their experiences (Maddi, 2008; Maddi & Hightower, 1999). Together these hardy attitudes can facilitate awareness about the meaning in life and they constitute courage in facing life's challenges (Maddi, 2002).

Hardy coping can be characterized as patterns of problem solving strategies, which provide opportunities for personal development (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983). Individuals are able to put stressful events in perspective, making them more tolerable. Hardy coping involves deepening one's understanding about life circumstances and taking actions that can create opportunities (Maddi, 2008). Individuals with hardy coping styles believe in their efficacy and ability to utilize social supports and resources. Hardiness is thought to develop in individuals who are encouraged and helped by others to turn adversity into opportunity, providing pathways to development and resilience (Maddi, 2002, 2008).

**Coping.** Lazarus and his colleagues developed a cognitive phenomenological theory of psychological stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986) using the term "coping". According to this theoretical framework, coping is conceptualized as a transactional process. There is an ongoing reciprocal interaction between the individual and the environment; the individual and environment mutually influence one another. This transactional relationship is mediated by two processes: appraisal and coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman et al., 1986).

Cognitive appraisal is a process where an individual assesses whether an encounter with the environment is relevant to his or her well-being. In primary appraisal, an event is evaluated in

terms of what is at stake or significant for an individual. There are three types of primary appraisals to stress which include: (1) harm or loss that has already occurred, (2) threat of anticipated harm and, (3) challenge for potential gain or mastery (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Often, stress is associated with negative cognitive appraisals or emotional responses such as guilt, shame, anger, or fear. These negative appraisals can be influenced by personal, situational, or contextual factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). In secondary appraisal individuals assess coping options, evaluating whether actions can improve or change a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) and coping efforts are then made in response to these stress appraisals (Folkman et al., 1986).

The cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage the external and/or internal demands and the conflicts among them are defined as coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman et al., 1986). Folkman and Lazarus (1980) identify two main functions of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused.

Problem-focused (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) or approach forms of coping (Ebata & Moos, 1994) are the cognitive or behavioural efforts to manage or resolve problems. Cognitive problem solving efforts and behavioural strategies are used to alter the source of the problem (Folkman et al., 1986). Puskar and Grabiak (2008) discuss four approach coping strategies: (1) in logical analysis one attempts to understand and prepare for a stressor and its consequences, (2) positive reappraisal is a cognitive attempt to restructure a problem positively, while accepting the reality of the situation, (3) seeking guidance or support from others and, (4) problem solving involves taking action and directly dealing with the problem (Puskar & Grabiak, 2008).

Emotion-focused (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) or avoidance (Ebata & Moos, 1994) forms of coping involve the regulation of stressful emotions. Cognitive and behavioural efforts are made

to ameliorate emotional distress (Folkman et al., 1986) in the following ways: (1) the acceptance of a problem, (2) attempts to avoid thinking realistically about a problem (cognitive avoidance), (3) attempts to manage tension by expressing negative feelings (emotional discharge) and, (4) to seek alternate rewards through substitute activities that create new sources of satisfaction (Puskar & Grabiak, 2008). Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found that both problem-focused and emotion-focused forms of coping were used in stressful encounters. However, the use of problem-focused strategies has been associated with better adjustment (Ebata & Moos, 1994).

Coping is viewed as a personality disposition that is a shifting process where individuals use different styles of coping in different situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Coping responses are influenced by three sets of factors: personal, situational, and contextual. Personal factors are individual differences in temperament, age, and sex. Situational factors involve the appraisal of the conditions of the problem, and contextual factors include life circumstances such as resources, chronic stressors, and negative life events (Ebata & Moos, 1994).

**Personal strengths.** Previous studies have found that youth identify a number of personal strengths that foster their survival on the streets. Personal strengths include a range of individual characteristics that buffer the negative aspects of street life. To adapt to street culture, youth must quickly learn street smarts, such as avoiding dangerous situations, locating resources, and determining who to trust. With experience, they become skilled at adapting to new communities and social cultures (Bender et al., 2007). Youth have identified common sense and intelligence as qualities they possess, which help them handle situations on the streets. Kidd and Davidson (2007) found that youth take pride in their knowledge and skills to survive the dangers associated with street life.

Maintaining a positive attitude and an optimistic outlook for the future enables many youth to overcome the hardships they are faced with (Bender et al., 2007; Boydell et al., 2000; Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Additionally, many youth attribute inner strengths such as motivation, determination, and hope as core to their survival. For example, some youth speak about being motivated to help others, reconnect with children, or to get off the streets (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Miller, Donahue, Este, and Hofer (2004) found that youth not only believed their homelessness was temporary, but that they had the capability to change their situation. In another study, both new and chronic homeless individuals reported a future that did not include a homeless identity (Boydell et al., 2000).

*Living on the streets may foster independence and freedom which bring varying degrees of responsibility.* Some youth take comfort in having control over their environments (Bender et al., 2007). One study found that youth identified independence as the primary contributing factor to their homelessness. Due to difficult home situations, some youth learned independence out of necessity at an early age (Miller et al., 2004). Youth are forced to grow up fast when living on the streets, both learning how to take care of themselves and transitioning to adulthood. This level of independence may assist youth in forming their identity and find meaning in their lives (Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000).

Spirituality and self-worth are viewed as personal strengths for youth who are homeless. Studies have found that having faith in a higher spirit or power provided some youth with a sense of comfort and support. Spirituality was considered a source of strength that was important in creating success in some of the youths' lives (Bender et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000). Additionally, self-worth, pride, and self-respect were identified by youth as important qualities (Kidd, 2003; Osborne, 2002). Some youth recognized that their sense of self-worth improved



through the process of learning from past mistakes and life experiences (Kidd, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2000).

### **External Resources**

In addition to personal strengths commonly identified by youth, there are several external resources that youth rely on for support in their lives. The literature reports mixed findings on the role of the peer group and intimate partners. The peer group appears to positively and negatively affect youths' experiences on the street. Some youth have identified their peer network as a support system, which promotes a sense of belonging. For these youth, street friends provide protection, increasing one's safety and survival. Additionally, other youth provide access to resources in the community (Bender et al., 2007). These youth referred to their peers as positively improving their self-esteem, which decreased their feelings of loneliness (Kidd, 2003). Youth who are homeless often view their peers and other homeless adults as their street family and rely on these individuals for emotional support (Bender et al., 2007; Osborne, 2002). One study acknowledged the positive influence of non-homeless friends who provided temporary housing and basic necessities for homeless youth (Bender et al., 2007).

In contrast, some studies have found youth who identify their peer group negatively, often referring to street friends as disloyal and manipulative. Additionally, some youth recognize their intimate relationships as unhealthy. Other street youth have been labeled by homeless youth as abusive, manipulative, and predatory. Many youth report being exposed to the sex trade and drug culture by other street friends, which creates increased feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, and distrust (Kidd, 2003).

Other sources of support for youth living on the streets include siblings, extended family, and pets. Remaining connected with siblings or grandparents positively influenced youth who

were disconnected from their guardians (Bender et al., 2007). Interestingly, research has found that youth regard their pets as important sources of external strength. Some youth referred to their pets as a companion, protector, and source of comfort. Being able to care for an animal improved their sense of self-worth (Bender et al., 2007; Rew, 2003).

The literature highlights differences in youths' perceptions of the influence of professionals and youth organizations. One study examined factors that influenced youth to leave the streets. Lindsey et al. (2000) found that youth viewed help from various staff and service providers as integral in transitioning off the streets. In other studies, youth have reported service agencies and professionals negatively (Kidd, 2003; Miller et al., 2004). Although they felt their basic needs were met, some found the experiences in these environments to be among their most negative experiences. Feelings of dissatisfaction with the services increased some youths' fears about not getting the help they were in need of influencing them not to use the services of agencies more than once (Miller et al., 2004).

## **Summary**

Through this review of the literature, it is evident that the issues specific to youth living on the streets are complex and interconnected. It can be challenging to carry out research with homeless youth because of their hidden and unconventional lifestyles. The pathways to homelessness are multifaceted; most often the youth leave conflict-ridden or abusive homes to escape unsafe situations. While on the streets youth are faced with instability, chronic stress, and multiple risks that may threaten their well-being.

However, it is evident in the research that street involved youth have personal qualities that help them manage the homeless experience. It is possible that these youth have personality dispositions, such as psychological hardiness and coping skills that contribute to their survival on

the streets. The literature reveals the influence of relationships and community support on youths' homeless experiences. After immersing myself in the literature, it became clear that further research with street involved youth in northern communities is necessary; the present study begins to fill this gap. The foregoing literature raised some interesting questions for me. What do street involved youth perceive as important factors to their survival on the streets? What meanings do they attach to their experiences of being on the streets? Are there any differences for street involved youth living in smaller northern communities? Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the research process and my attempt to provide answers to these questions.

### **Chapter Three: Research Process**

A goal in research is to achieve consistency between the method of inquiry, and the researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions (Firestone, 1987). The research process in this study reflects my assumptions that multiple realities exist. It also reflects my quest to carry out and present research that is ethical and personally meaningful. The process of this inquiry is grounded in social epistemology, in that knowledge is considered to be time and culture specific, constructed through social processes (Gergen, 2001). Working within a social constructionist framework, a narrative approach was chosen as it advocates for pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity. This choice of method portrays individual realities, and provides a means of understanding the identity, lifestyle, and historical world of individuals (Lieblich et al., 1998). The researcher is invited to become immersed in the process, integrating the self as the instrument of research (Firestone, 1987; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003) allowing for collaboration, relationships, and ongoing self-reflection, all of which provided meaning and purpose for me in carrying out this study. This chapter provides a summary of the process of inquiry and the approach to analysis using a narrative framework. The method of inquiry appropriately fits with the broad research question of street involved youths' experiences, allowing space for the participants to speak freely about their lives. There is opportunity for knowledge and insight to be gained about what one has not personally experienced (Garro & Mattingly, 2000) through the stories presented by street involved youth and their experiences of reality. The approach to analysis specifies how I will address issues of interpretation and representation in my attempt to adequately portray the youths' voices and the meanings they attach to their experiences.

### **Process of Inquiry: A Qualitative Approach**

The purpose of the research was to explore the personal experiences of street involved youth living in the North, through interpreting the meanings they attach to their stories. To represent the holistic experiences of the youth in a caring and respectful way, a qualitative paradigm was chosen. In qualitative research, a particular phenomenon is explored through detailed accounts of personal experience (Creswell, 2008). The uniqueness of the human situation is valued (Krefting, 1990), which falls in line with the focus of this study. The search for meaning and truth of the lived experiences of street involved youth provides an enriched understanding about what one has not personally experienced (Lincoln, 1995). The goal of this study was to capture the richness and diversity of the experiences of street involved youth, and present the complexity of each youth's story.

A qualitative paradigm is appropriate for describing the lives and experiences of vulnerable or marginalized populations (Ensign, 2003). According to Frosh (2007), qualitative research aims to empower and restore personal agency, helping participants regain ownership of their stories. The rediscovery of voice may be significant for individuals who feel misunderstood or voiceless (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000) and may be a form of healing as they share their stories. I hold the belief that street involved youth are a vulnerable and marginalized group whose stories need to be shared with the academic community, helping professionals, and society as a whole to increase awareness and understanding, leading to an improvement in services.

In the qualitative tradition, value is placed on the quality of the researcher-participant relationship. There is regard for interpersonal respect and dignity as the researcher and participants work together to co-construct new realities. Efforts are made to develop a collaborative and egalitarian relationship that is built on trust and mutual respect (Lincoln, 1995).

I have high regard for these relational qualities both professionally and personally, so I was immediately drawn to a qualitative design that would allow for authentic and meaningful interactions.

**Narrative inquiry.** Narrative research focuses on the meanings individuals attach to their experiences through the stories they share (Moen, 2006). People are natural storytellers, revealing their identities and personalities to others through narrative accounts. Meaningful and significant life experiences are organized into stories based on values, past experiences, and present knowledge (Garro & Mattingly, 2000; Moen, 2006). These stories provide coherence and continuity to one's experience, restoring connection and unity (Lieblich et al., 1998). Individuals can make sense of life events, including difficult transitions or trauma, by sharing their experiences in a narrative form (Riessman, 1993). The exploration of inner, subjective experiences reveals past actions and how individuals understand those actions (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993). Stories capture both the individual and the context (Moen, 2006).

Life stories are subjective, yet they contain a narrative truth that is located in time, space, and personal experience (Riessman, 1993). No narrative can ever stand for the ultimate truth or reality (Cottle, 2002). Instead, there are numerous realities that are constructed through dialogue and interactions (Moen, 2006). Meaning is fluid and contextual rather than fixed or universal (Riessman, 1993). This ideology falls in line with the social constructionist perspective in that multiple realities exist.

Narratives are culturally and historically situated, focusing on individual actions and social interactions (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). Stories are deeply embedded in society and cultural settings (Moen, 2006). Thus, the multilayered meanings of historical and personal events are

revealed through narratives (Josselson & Lieblich, 2000) providing connection between people and their social and cultural world (Lieblich et al., 1998; Moen, 2006).

Storytelling can increase awareness, promote self-discovery, and assign new meaning to experience (Lieblich et al., 1998; Moen, 2006). There is an inevitable gap between lived experiences and how those experiences are communicated to others, suggesting that meaning shifts in the process of interactions (Riessman, 1993). People relive their past through the stories they communicate to others. Often the audience and context influences how the story is told (Lieblich et al., 1998; Moen, 2006). The narrative may take a different shape if someone else was the listener (Riessman, 1993). Stories naturally contain a beginning, middle, and end, yet the meaning or form of a narrative can be completely altered depending on where an individual begins and ends the story (Lieblich et al., 1998; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000; Riessman, 1993). As stories are told, revised, and reconstructed, new understandings may arise (Lieblich et al., 1998). The participant and researcher work together to co-construct an accurate interpretation of the individual's life through re-storying (Barton, 2003). A multitude of voices are present within an individual's story as the written form of a narrative is shared with a larger audience and becomes relevant in different contexts making it open to several interpretations (Moen, 2006).

**The beginning.** After ethics approval was granted by the University of Northern British Columbia, several community agencies that provide services for street involved youth were contacted. Being a new member to the community, and having limited knowledge of or connections to service providers, it was necessary to have ongoing discussions with colleagues and community members. Emergency shelters, youth resource and drop-in centers, as well as relevant government agencies were contacted to inquire if they were interested in receiving further information about the research study. Introductory letters (Appendix A), consent forms

(Appendix B), and sample interview questions (Appendix C) were submitted to all interested agencies.

The evolving nature of qualitative research became evident in the early stages of the research process. Working alongside a supervisor, thesis committee, and community agencies required me to be flexible and open to making changes to the study. The initial stage of data collection was met with certain challenges. The level of community involvement and difficulty in connecting with specific youth organizations had a direct effect on the research project. However, the support received from a select number of agencies was integral in the recruitment of participants and the completion of interviews. My appreciation goes out to the service providers that offered guidance, and the opportunity to conduct interviews in a familiar and safe location for the participants.

Based on responses from service providers and the recommendations of a community advisor, amendments were made to the original proposal that were approved by the Research Ethics Board before moving forward with the data collection. A community advisor offered meaningful suggestions for working with youth and he was integral in connecting me with other supports in the community. His input directly influenced the essence of the research study as it was his recommendation that the term “street involved” would better represent the youth living in the community because many do not identify themselves as being homeless. Further suggestions were offered about recruitment strategies and forms of compensation for the participants.

The process of recruiting the participants was guided by the following boundaries of the study:



1. The study included individuals who currently are or have been street involved for at least two months. The participants may have stayed at emergency shelters, slept in any public places, temporarily resided at transitional houses, or couch surfed with friends or acquaintances.
2. The study included males and females between the ages of 16 and 29.
3. The study included individuals that voluntarily agreed to participate in the research study and to have the interview audio tape recorded.

### **Ethical Considerations**

**Vulnerable population.** Street involved youth represent a vulnerable population because of their age, socioeconomic disadvantage, and stigmatized status. They are prone to having diminished power and voice in an adult centered system. Many street involved youth are disconnected from their families and may be distrusting of adults based on early experiences of trauma (Ensign, 2003; Meade & Slesnick, 2002). Therefore, creating safety for the participants was a priority in the research process. My experience working with high-risk youth, combined with my training as a counsellor, increased my awareness of the sensitivity required for approaching participants.

Based on recommendations from community advisors who work directly with street involved youth, the most appropriate recruitment strategy was to make myself present in the youth community. To establish safety for the potential participants, it was necessary to be available to explain the research study and answer questions. Several afternoons were spent at a drop-in center building rapport with staff and the youth who accessed services. An important part of the initial research process was forming relationships with the youth, working to build trust, and learning about street culture specific to the community from the youth and advisors.

Meaning was created for me through those interactions, which appropriately fits within the guiding theoretical framework of social constructionism. I felt welcome in their community and every interaction held significance as I met new people and became familiar with the services available for street involved youth. I assumed a non-directive approach throughout the recruitment phase, allowing the youth to approach me if they were interested in the study. This strategy was more time consuming, yet necessary to avoid pressuring the youth in any way. Care was taken to avoid disrupting the daily activities of the drop-in center through ongoing communication with staff.

Due to the unstructured and exploratory nature of the interviews, I anticipated that sensitive topics would surface in the conversations, increasing the risk of vulnerability for the youth. Based on my experiences as a helper, I expected to hear stories of trauma, grief and loss, mental health and addictions, ministry involvement, and criminal activity. It was my role to recognize signs of distress or discomfort during the interviews and to be sensitive to the participants' vulnerability from sharing personal experiences (Haverkamp, 2005). Intense emotional experiences came up as some of the youth shared their stories. My concern for the participants' safety resulted in my offering additional support services based on the emotional content of the conversations. A list of resources (Appendix D) was offered to the youth if they were interested in further support. At the completion of each interview, time was taken to debrief with the participants to ensure they were in a safe emotional place before leaving.

**Informed consent.** In research, efforts are made to minimize the vulnerability of participants while increasing their autonomy, through the process of informed consent. It is an ongoing and mutually negotiated process that protects the rights of individuals (Matthews, 2001). At the onset of this research, considerable attention and care went into the process of informed

consent with minors, as research with street involved youth creates ethical challenges in terms of autonomy and safety. Specifically, allowing youth to provide consent to participate in research can enhance their freedom or independence, but may also compromise their well-being.

Street involved youth live independently from their guardians and are often estranged from their families, which makes it difficult to include their guardians as part of the consent process (Meade & Slesnick, 2002). Many youth do not want to get in touch or do not know how to get in with their guardians. Requiring street involved youth to obtain guardian consent may be seen as a protective measure, but it may also violate the privacy or autonomy of youth who are responsible for themselves on a daily basis (English, 1995). Furthermore, it is questionable that guardians who are unable or unwilling to care for their children can make decisions in the best interest of their children (Meade & Slesnick, 2002). Requesting guardian permission as part of the consent process may alienate street involved youth further, infringing on their rights to self-determination and autonomy.

The prevalence of reported sexual and physical abuse among homeless youth is concerning. Thus, the requirement for guardian consent with this population is often waived because many have suffered abuse or neglect by their caregivers (English, 1995; Rew et al., 2000). Enforcing guardian permission may jeopardize the safety and well-being of the youth and discourage their participation in research (Ensign, 2003; Rew et al., 2000). The researcher must act in the best interest of the participant (beneficence) and refrain from actions that may risk harm (nonmaleficence) (Sheppard & Schulz, 2007). Based on an extensive literature review, and ongoing discussions with colleagues and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, it was determined that it would be appropriate for the youth to give consent.

**Competence.** Controversy exists about youths' abilities to provide consent to participate in research. Issues of competency, such as understanding the risks and benefits of participating in research are commonly disputed. Many argue that it is difficult to determine whether adolescents can consent to make decisions in their best interest. However, the literature suggests that older adolescents are as capable as adults in making competent decisions (Bruzze & Fisher, 2003; Meade & Slesnick, 2002). In British Columbia, the *Infants Act* states that individuals under the age of 19 are able to give consent to health-related services without a guardian. It is the discretion of the professional to determine whether the service is in the best interest of the young person, and to assess the young person's maturity and ability to understand what consent is (Infants Act, 1996). These same standards are often applied to research practice.

Ensign (2003) speculates that street involved youth may have more wisdom and an earlier capacity to give consent than other minors because they have suffered difficult early life experiences. Based on my research experiences, I support the argument that street involved youth may be the most equipped to make decisions in their best interest. The individuals I interviewed showed maturity and competency in their decision making skills. They asked questions about the study and offered meaningful suggestions for the research process. For example, the youth asked for clarification about confidentiality issues and gave suggestions for compensation. These youth have been responsible for making difficult and important decisions from an early age in life that have been core to their survival. My diligence in selecting the most appropriate process of informed consent with minors was not relevant for the study because no youth under the age of 19 volunteered to participate in the research.

Informed consent was presented to the participants at a level they could understand and was revisited throughout the research process. The participants received an information letter

(Appendix E) outlining the nature of the research study along with the risks and benefits associated with participating in the study. It was made explicit that participation was voluntary and the youth could withdraw at any time. The participants were advised that they could ask to turn off the audio recorder during the interview and they could request that their data not be used for the study at a later date. The information on the consent form (Appendix F) was verbally explained to the participants to ensure they understood what they were giving consent to, and to be sensitive to any literacy difficulties that the youth may have had. The participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study.

The youths' level of competence was assessed as part of the informed consent process. To accomplish this, an informal screening for mental health and substance use issues was completed with all of the potential participants. As part of the initial screening the participants were asked: have you been hospitalized for any mental health concerns in the last month? Have you attempted suicide in the last month? It is likely that many of the youth living on the streets are exposed to alcohol and drugs, and some may use substances on a regular basis. Individuals that are under the influence of alcohol or drugs may not be able to give informed consent. Based on my experiences of working in youth mental health and addictions, I assessed whether the youth appeared to be under the influence. The participants were asked if they had consumed alcohol or drugs prior to the meeting. The youths' responses were accepted as the truth because there were no overt behavioural indications suggesting intoxication. To the best of my knowledge the participants understood what they were consenting to.

The study was guided by my moral practice along with ethical codes of conduct to promote the best interest of the participants. Care was taken to ensure the risks involved in participating in the research were reasonable to the anticipated benefits for the youth (Haverkamp, 2005). It was

my hope that participation in the interviews would be an empowering and rewarding experience for the youth. In debriefing with the participants, some expressed their satisfaction in contributing to research and providing knowledge to the community. The youth shared their experiences with others and encouraged their friends to participate in the study, suggesting that the interview was an empowering and satisfying experience.

**Confidentiality and anonymity.** Qualitative research is unique in that it focuses on rich, detailed personal accounts. However, these descriptive life stories create difficulties in ensuring the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the nature of the sensitive topics disclosed in the interviews and the small street community, only broad descriptions of the participants were included to protect their anonymity. Identifying characteristics, including names and locations were not included in the findings. Documents were labeled with code numbers to protect the participants' identities (Creswell, 2008). All documents, including consent forms, recorded interviews, and additional researcher notes were stored in a secured cabinet. The information will be destroyed five years after publication of the thesis material.

The limits to confidentiality, including reports of child abuse or neglect, and harm to self or others were addressed, which was important in adhering to ethical standards and creating safety in the research interviews. Meade and Slesknick (2002) suggest the limits to confidentiality be stated explicitly to youth by providing them with specific examples of situations where reporting would be required. Based on the content disclosed during one of the interviews, additional precautions were followed to assess the youth's safety. An informal suicide risk assessment was completed with one of the youth and he was provided with a list of community resources and supports. Additional follow up was carried out with the program coordinator at the drop-in centre as well as consultation with my thesis supervisor to ensure that appropriate steps were taken.

**Quest for participants.** Posters (Appendix G) outlining the nature of the study and providing contact information for myself were left at shelters and youth drop-in centers. Interestingly, this form of recruitment was not effective in gaining participants who accessed the drop-in centres. I spent several afternoons at a drop-in centre, so the youth could speak with me in person to receive more information about the study. Interested youth approached me because they heard about the study through a friend or a staff member at the drop-in centre. Other individuals contacted me by telephone to get more information about the study and to arrange an interview.

Compensation in the form of gift certificates was given to the participants for their time and effort. The youth received a \$30 honorarium for their participation in the study and an additional \$15 gift certificate was offered to those who met for a follow up interview. Based on a conversation with the first participant in the study, it was more appropriate to offer gift certificates on an individual basis. The participants could select a gift certificate from a mall, or two grocery stores based on their needs. The youth who agreed to meet for a short interview after the data was analyzed, received an additional \$15 gift certificate to the mall. The initial plan was to provide the youth with bus tickets or taxi vouchers as an honorarium for the follow up interviews, but those forms of compensation were not viewed as useful. This feedback resulted in a gift certificate to a mall as the only option available.

I was honored by the youths' eagerness to participate in the study and their willingness to share their stories. Four potential participants communicated with me by telephone; however, two of them did not fall within the boundaries of the study. The other two potential participants chose not to arrange an interview after they received more information about the research. Over a

period of four months, eight participants who met the criteria of the research volunteered to be a part of the study.

The range of participants who volunteered for the research was surprising and has left lasting impressions with me. Based on the broad nature of my research questions, the participants were not asked to share any demographic information beyond their ages. The youth that volunteered to be a part of the study were between the ages of 20 and 27, which added a retrospective component to the research. The participants were older than I originally expected; however, most of their street experiences dated back to their adolescent years. During the initial stage of data collection, the age criterion for the study was extended to be inclusive of the population that accessed the youth drop-in center where the interviews were being carried out. I was surprised that the study did not attract a younger population; however, this may have been affected by community involvement as the youth were recruited from a select number of agencies. The participants were limited to those who access community agencies that gave me permission to advertise the study or those who learned about the research from people they knew.

There were four male and four female participants who volunteered for the study. Interestingly, the male participants were the first to express interest in the research study, leading me to question whether there was a higher rate of male street involved youth in the community or whether males were more likely to access community services. I also questioned if my age or gender had any effect on the participants who volunteered. Although I did not ask the participants to identify their cultural background, several of the youth self-identified as being First Nations. This emergent pattern has significant implications that will be discussed in Chapter Six.



**Gathering the stories.** To ensure the participants confidentiality and anonymity, all of the research interviews were carried out in a private office at a local youth drop-in centre. Both verbal and written consent were obtained prior to each interview. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 to 75 minutes. The conversations were recorded with two digital audio recorders and additional notes were taken at the end of each interview based on my observations during the conversations. My reflexive journal was used to record my thoughts about the interview process as well as key ideas that stood out for me.

The interviews were unstructured and conversational. I opened each interview as I would a counselling session taking time to build rapport with the participants. The purpose of the research was explained and relevant background information about myself was shared with the youth. Keeping in line with narrative inquiry, broad, open-ended questions were asked. It was important for the youth to be given the space to allow their stories to naturally unfold. Additional questions emerged as I progressed through the interviews. A list of preliminary interview questions is included in Appendix C. These questions were used as a guideline for the interviews.

**Social constructionist interview.** From a social constructionist perspective, meaning is created through interactions. New realities are evoked through conversations that are shared between individuals and society. The social constructionist interview signifies a negotiation of meaning between the participant and the researcher; this negotiation is a product of history and culture (Gubrium & Koro-Ljunberg, 2005). New understandings were created in the interview setting that evolved as the spoken language moved to written form. It is inevitable that new meanings will continue to surface as the document is shared with a larger audience in various contexts (Riessman, 1993).

Stories are co-constructed through the lived experiences of the participants and the goals of the researcher. Therefore, the perceptions constructed during the interview are viewed as partial and biased because of the personal agendas of the researcher and the participant (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). As I reflected on each interview, I became aware of my biases and expectations that were based on my values and past experiences. I questioned the intent of some of my responses and I wondered how my questions influenced the direction of the interviews. It was apparent that my personal agenda shaped the interview; however, I was also influenced by the participants' interactions during the interviews. In particular, my responses were often guided by the participants' non-verbal behaviours as well as their resistance to certain topics. The following entry in my reflexive journal illustrates how I was affected by one of the youth.

*Early in the interview, the youth indicated he couldn't remember much of his childhood which alerted me that there may have been a history of trauma. This disclosure made me more cautious and sensitive about the questions I asked. I found myself tuned into his non-verbal behaviours and I knew to leave certain topics alone based on those indicators.*

Gubrium and Koro-Ljungberg (2005) propose that the space of the interview is actively shared by the researcher and participant. In reality, the shared space and power relations between the interviewer and interviewee are often unequal. Because of the difference in age and status in society there was a power imbalance in the researcher-participant relationship (Matthews, 2001). I was particularly sensitive of my role during the interviews and I was aware of my influence throughout the process. As the researcher, I determined the structure of the interview; I guided the conversation with reflections and questions; and I configured the final analysis. The participants shared the space in the interview by controlling what was narrated and the context

they used to frame their realities. The youth were the experts on their experiences, so I integrated a not-knowing position to honor and respect their stories. Furthermore, the participants had power over their level of engagement and resistance in the interview. Together, we shared the responsibility to allow the conversation to naturally unfold, which required a certain degree of flexibility and openness to engage in unexpected talk (Gubrium & Koro-Ljunberg, 2005).

Gergen (2001) describes language as the expression of one's interpretation of the world that is inherently a social process. Accordingly, the "words acquire meaning through social use, in context, and within the rules of any discourse" (Gubrium & Koro-Ljunberg, 2005, p. 704). The researcher recognizes the structural and linguistic constraints of the interview process and considers how language is used within specific cultural perspectives (Gubrium & Koro-Ljunberg, 2005). In listening to each youth's story, I was drawn to the jargon that reflected their unique street culture. To adequately capture the essence of each individual's speech, the raw and at times profane language, has remained in the stories.

**Narrative interview.** The narrative interview is a conversation with a purpose that is relational and interactional. The researcher and participant are conversational partners who monitor and influence one another. The goal of the narrative interview is to discover the participants' subjective truth through collaboration and co-construction. The what (content) and the how (context of the meaning) are necessary components of the interview. Meanings are actively negotiated throughout the interview process and a version of reality is constructed through the interactions between the researcher and the participants (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005).

The narrative interview is facilitated to reveal multiple layers of the participants' stories. My role was to actively listen and to allow the interviewees to talk freely about their experiences.

Because the youth had the power to determine the content of their narratives, I drew out the stories by asking participants to describe certain events in detail (Enosh & Buckbinder, 2005; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). Knowledge and meanings were negotiated as the participants described their realities, and I responded with reflections and questions to clarify the meaning. Notes in my reflexive journal highlighted my uncertainties during the first interview.

*I did several member checks throughout the interview to clarify things I wasn't sure about. The youth told his story in pieces, so I found myself asking questions to ensure my understanding. While I thought that I was present in the interview, I was left feeling unsure whether I had a clear picture of his life story or that I fully understood the meanings he attached to his experiences.*

The multiple layers in each narrative revealed that individual meaning was deeply embedded in the larger social context. The participants' experiences were focused at the individual, familial, and societal level. Each story uncovered aspects of the street community, which reflected a unique and separate culture within mainstream society.

As a narrative interviewer, I found myself tuned into how the participants told their stories. The youth were invited to begin their stories based on their level of comfort and how it made sense for them. The youths' values, past experiences, and present knowledge shaped the way they told their stories. Some of my thoughts about the diversity in which the stories were shared included the participants perceived level of safety in the interview setting, cognitive functioning, gender, cultural factors, mental health concerns, as well as the stage of their addiction.

My curiosity about the different ways the stories were told prompted several entries in my reflexive journal. However, there were two experiences that stood out significantly for me. In one instance, the youth did not offer many details of her life and often answered my questions

with short responses. I noticed that this participant appeared to be in a negative head space as she told her story, which made sense to me because of all her current struggles. Another participant who was completely entrenched in street life appeared to be disconnected or emotionless as she recalled difficult moments from her past. Both of those experiences led me to question the effect of past trauma on current functioning: Was it too painful or unsafe to go there? Has the trauma been dealt with? Was one of the youth dissociating during the interview? I also questioned whether their chronic and heavy use of alcohol and drugs left them numb from emotion or affected their ability to communicate or reflect on their experiences.

Mattingly and Lawlor (2000) suggest that narrative interviews may provide a rediscovery of voice and a form of healing for some individuals. As the participants told their stories, they re-entered “a rich emotional landscape of powerful experiences” (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000, p.5). With the sensitive topics that were shared in the interviews, I found myself questioning whether it was a healing or painful experience for the youth. It was difficult to truly understand the effect the interviews had on the participants. I had to rely on their nonverbal communication and the information they shared when we debriefed at the end of the interview. I found it was difficult to separate the role of researcher from that of a counsellor.

As the participants relived their experiences, I entered a rich emotional landscape alongside them. From my experience as a counsellor, I felt prepared to handle the emotional content of the interviews. However, I struggled with the limits for follow up and closure. I felt unsettled at the end of the interviews knowing that I could not follow up with the youth as I normally would with clients in a counselling setting. I was acutely aware of how sharing sensitive or painful experiences can leave one feeling exposed and vulnerable. My concern for the youths’ emotional well-being coupled with my uncertainty of their available supports deeply affected me.

Fortunately, I was able to process and reflect on these experiences through ongoing supervision and the use of my research journal.

All of the participants' stories evoked emotional responses for me. However, there was one particular experience that I reflected on in my journal, *"I sat there in silence, my heart sank, and I didn't know what to say or do"*. At the end of that interview, I struggled with my own emotions about the effect of the interview on the youth. I was worried that I asked him questions that he had never put much thought into and I was concerned that I opened up past issues that left him feeling unsafe. After debriefing with my supervisor and reflection in my journal, I came to a new understanding that the youth was not fragile or helpless and he took steps to ensure his safety in the interview by only sharing what was safe for him.

**The transcription process.** The transformation of language into written text is an interpretive process that is incomplete, partial, and selective (Riessman, 1993). The initial stage of interpretation began as I listened to each audio taped interview from the beginning to end, reflecting on the conversations, and processing my thoughts and feelings about the exchanges. It became clear to me that the intensity felt during the interviews could not be reproduced in the audio recordings. The meaning was not lost in the words; however, the emotional landscapes in the interviews were not fully represented in the audio files. It was the difficult moments of silence; the non-verbal signs of quivering lips and tears that stood out most for me. As I reflected on the audio recordings, I realized the relational component of each interview could not be fully portrayed in the transcriptions. The following reflection from my research journal illustrates one of my experiences.

*I thought rapport was easily established with the youth. He was able to openly communicate that it was difficult for him to relive certain memories. Although he*

*appeared to struggle through some parts of his story, he willingly shared very personal experiences. There was an unspoken vulnerability for both of us, but through respectful and genuine exchanges we gained trust in one another in a short amount of time. It was a very powerful experience for me. I can't imagine how the same meaning will be captured in the audio recording or the written form.*

I began the process of transcription by listening to each interview to refresh my memory of the individual stories. As I worked through the first interview, I became aware that the interpretive process had begun. It was challenging to appropriately insert punctuation, pauses, and capitalization so that the meaning of the text was not lost. The interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible with contextual pieces added. Once I completed the initial draft of each transcription, I listened to the interviews on three separate occasions checking the accuracy of the text and making any necessary revisions. I continued to revisit the transcripts until I felt I had represented the text to the best of my abilities. The process of transcription allowed me to become immersed in the narratives and connected to each unique story.

Due to scheduling issues and the timing of the interviews, a transcriptionist was hired to complete four of the interviews. It was necessary to complete the transcriptions and the initial stage of analysis in a timely manner to improve the chances of connecting with the participants for follow up interviews. My assumptions that street involved youth lead transient lifestyles and would be difficult to reach influenced my decision to seek outside help. Employing a professional transcriptionist proved to be a very valuable learning experience as a new researcher. As I worked through each transcription to verify the text, I found myself making changes in punctuation, revising errors in the content, and adding contextual information. It became obvious that my presence in the interviews influenced my interpretations of the

transcriptions. This experience reinforced my understanding of the subjectivity in qualitative analysis, providing support for Riessman's (1993) contention "there is no one, true representation of spoken language" (p. 13).

### **Approach to Analysis**

In narrative analysis, representations of experience are expressed through dialogue, text, interaction, and interpretation. Yet, all forms of representation are limited as there is no direct access to primary experience (Riessman, 1993). Reconstructions of the past are selective and varied because individuals exclude experiences that do not fit with the current identities they wish to present (Riessman, 1993). Moen (2006) identifies three recurring issues in narrative research: (a) the relationship between the researcher and the participants; (b) the movement of story into text; and (c) the interpretive nature of research. The transparency and authenticity conveyed by the researcher is the primary instrument in creating research that is of quality and rigor.

For the analysis, the interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible and analyzed following a narrative approach. I adapted Lieblich's et al. (1998) model for narrative analysis, specifically focusing on the *holistic-content* and *categorical-content* approaches of narrative analysis. The reading, analysis, and interpretation of the interviews were carried out in three distinct phases: holistic-content, categorical-content, and meta-analysis. This approach to analysis allowed me to present each life story as a whole, and search for patterns across the stories to provide a more global understanding of the experiences of street involved youth.



Table 1

*Overview of Research Process*

Research Question	Interview Question	Narrative Analysis	Presentation
Primary: What is the experience of street involved youth in north central BC?	Please tell me your story of life on the streets.	Holistic-Content	First-person narrative summaries
Secondary: What specific challenges do street involved youth face in being street involved in this geographical context?	What challenges do you face in being street involved in this community?	Categorical-Content	Themes and meta-analysis
What resources, both personal and community-based assist street-involved youth in living without a permanent home?	What skills do you have to help you live this way? What community resources help you?	Categorical-Content	Themes and meta-analysis

**Phase one: Holistic-content.** In Phase One, the analysis was focused on the whole story of the individual to provide an in-depth understanding of the youth in the context of his or her world. The holistic-content perspective includes the complete story for analysis, specifically concentrating on the content that is presented within it (Lieblich et al., 1998). To begin, I listened to each interview while I followed along reading the transcript to familiarize myself with the story. The transcripts were read through several times looking for global impressions. I searched for the essence of the story by paying attention to the pieces that stood out for me, drafting preliminary lists in my research journal and recording my interpretation of the participants' words that I believed had the most informative substance and meaning.

Stories are often retold in a disjointed and fragmented manner. It is through the co-construction of the story between the participant and the researcher that the text is presented in a more coherent and convincing way (Frosh, 2007). My goal in the first stage of analysis was to organize the transcripts and compile the ideas from the interviews in a logical manner. I read through each transcript multiple times highlighting the text that was related to the timeline of the story, including any references to age, location, as well as past and present experiences. As a way to visually map out each individual story, I organized the main ideas from each transcript to form a timeline. Most of the stories were told in a fragmented way, so it was important to piece the transcripts together chronologically to form a more coherent and holistic understanding. I found myself constantly referring back to the timelines as I worked through each transcript, which helped me to organize the ideas in the interviews into a beginning, middle, and end.

The main ideas and phrases from the transcriptions that were the most relevant to the principle research question were color coded. These sections were rearranged and combined to form the initial draft of the story. The stories were written in the first person, and at this stage in the analysis, I did not omit any identifying information or make changes to the participants' language. Next, I cross referenced the transcripts and stories to ensure that I did not miss any meaningful ideas that stood out in the participants' stories. During this stage, I found myself making changes to the order of events as well as adding contextual pieces that I missed on previous readings. I read through the stories several times, checking the organization and content. Once I felt that I had compiled each story to the best of my understanding, care was taken to remove or change any identifying information that would compromise the anonymity of the participants including specific names, locations, and sensitive information. My concern for protecting the youths' anonymity resulted in the loss of some rich detail found in the interviews.

I continued to work with the stories, making minor changes in the wording, editing sentence structure, and rearranging the order of events. To present the stories, a key phrase or word that was representative of the story was selected by me or the participants as the title of their story.

***Participant feedback.*** Member checks were important for analysis to ensure that the participants' stories were accurately portrayed (Krefting, 1991). Taking the stories back to the participants was the most rewarding experience throughout the research process. At the end of the research interviews, the participants gave verbal consent to be contacted for a follow up interview to review their stories. Arrangements were made to leave messages for the youth at the drop-in center or a shelter they were staying at. I hoped to include the youth throughout the process, but it was difficult due to their transient lifestyles. Once the initial phase of analysis was completed, messages were left for seven of the participants to contact me to arrange a meeting. It was not possible to leave a message for one participant because she was not connected with any community agencies and she had no contact information. Four of the participants did not respond and one participant declined meeting for the follow up interview. This youth expressed that he was not interested in reading his story; however, he still gave consent to have his story included in the research study. In checking the analysis with the remaining two participants, one requested that I read the story out loud to her and the other preferred to read the story herself.

In checking the analysis with the two participants, I could fully appreciate the idea of co-constructing knowledge and meaning. As I read the story out loud to *I Refuse To Be A Victim*, she was completely engaged in the process. The youth stopped me part way through her story to make corrections and clarify meaning. As we debriefed the process, the youth indicated that she felt the story was an accurate representation of her life. Her comments revealed that she felt empowered and validated by the experience, as she suggested that her story be shared with

community agencies that support street involved youth, with the hopes that her story would inspire or motivate others to turn their lives around. The youth appeared to be proud of her accomplishments and reached new understandings about some of her struggles. I reflected on this experience in my research journal.

*I felt emotionally drained at the end of our meeting, partly because I was so nervous about how she would react to hearing her story, but also because it was important to me that I had accurately portrayed her life. Her positive response evoked feelings of relief, accomplishment, and excitement for me. I felt honored to be able to share this experience with her and to witness her reaction has made this whole research process worth it.*

My meeting with *Struggling And Unsure* was a very different experience. She quietly read through her story and made minor revisions to the content. Her quiet and calm nature suggested that she was processing the experience and needed time to collect her thoughts. The youth shared that the story was a truthful representation of her life, but it saddened her to read it. We debriefed her experience as a research participant as well as some of her current life struggles. It was difficult to maintain the researcher role because of my training as a counsellor and my caring nature for others. This experience evoked a lot of thoughts and emotions that I reflected on in my journal.

*I struggled with knowing that she was dealing with several challenges in her life without any supports and it was hard for me not to be able to offer much help. For whatever reason she chose to participate in the research study, it appeared as a way to reach out for support and there wasn't much I could do to help. I knew that she had the capacity or personal resources to work through her challenges, but it was still difficult for me to see someone suffering and in so much pain.*

**Phase two: Categorical-content.** In the second phase of analysis, a categorical-content approach was used with the stories to divide the text into smaller units and analyze these units independently from the context of the whole story (Lieblich et al., 1998). For analysis, the individual stories that resulted from the first stage of the analysis were used instead of the transcripts because identifying information had been removed and the participants' stories had been clarified. After multiple readings of the narratives, I found myself starting to think about the data in a systematic and organized way, noticing several themes emerging from the stories. Ely, Vinz, Dawning and Azul (1997) describe themes as "threads or patterns that emerge throughout the text" (p. 206). The themes represent the essence of the meaning as perceived by the researcher. Phrases and words that were related to the principle research question as well as secondary questions were selected, color coded, and grouped conceptually. A theme was named when phrases or words from four or more participants were identified across the stories.

Categories provide a means of classifying relevant information, and include various themes that extend across the text (Lieblich et al., 1998). A few broad categories were defined as they appeared in the stories and they represent the structure of how the stories were presented. Commonly occurring words or sentences were sorted into categories maintaining the richness and variation of the text (Lieblich et al., 1998). The similarities in how each story was told did not emerge until later in the analysis. Interestingly, the categories were identified after a tentative list of themes was compiled and the stories were organized into a beginning, middle, and end.

**Phase three: Meta-analysis.** The final phase of analysis was focused on identifying metathemes that occur across the stories. Metathemes are the main constructs that highlight the overarching issues drawn from all of the text (Ely et al., 1997). The metathemes emerged as connections and patterns that had significance between all the participants' stories. All the

material in the stories was considered and the strongest statements were selected to represent the meanings and commonalities among the stories.

Figure 1

*Model of Analysis adapted from Lieblich et al. (1998) Narrative Approach*



**Supervisor feedback.** In all three phases of analysis, my thesis supervisor reviewed my work as an impartial source, and offered suggestions based on her expertise in narrative research. The participants' stories were compared to the transcripts to verify that the youths' voices were portrayed. Minor revisions were made to the organization and structure of the stories. Further suggestions were offered for the removal of identifying information while maintaining the essence of the stories. My supervisor checked the groupings of the categories and themes for relevance to the research questions and was in agreement with the final groupings.

### Evaluative Criteria

The interpretive and evolving nature of studying the human realm of experience presents difficulties in establishing quality and authenticity in qualitative research. Lincoln (1995) proposes a set of criteria, premised on honesty, fairness, and justice, to enhance the

trustworthiness and rigor of qualitative studies. These criteria are viewed as relational, fluid, and emerging. Value is given to the quality of the researcher-participant relationship with emphasis on mutual learning and the open sharing of knowledge. The emerging criteria include: authenticity, voice, reciprocity, sacredness, and reflexivity.

Narrative researchers aim to convey the meaning of life experiences for the participants by presenting personally reflective descriptions of their stories (Polkinghorne, 2007). Narratives are not accepted as complete, accurate portrayals of reality; instead the storied texts represent personal meaning. Validity is measured in terms of the accurate descriptions of individual experiences and the meanings attributed to life events. Validity is viewed as an intersubjective judgment, which depends on the consensus of the community. It is the community who judges the quality of the collected evidence and the interpretations offered by the researcher (Lincoln, 1995; Polkinghorne, 2007). In this study, the community consisted of the participants who met for follow up interviews, myself, and my thesis supervisory committee. The community will continue to grow as the document is shared with a larger audience.

According to Polkinghorne (2007) the participants' ability or willingness to communicate the meaning of their experiences can affect the validity in narrative research. Due to the complex and ever changing context of human experience, individuals may omit details or alter the meaning of their stories. Polkinghorne identified four sources that may threaten the validity of storied texts in narrative inquiry: (a) the limits of language to express meaning, (b) reflections of meaning that are out of one's awareness, (c) resistance from individuals to reveal the meanings of their experiences, and (d) the co-construction of storied texts between the researcher and participant that are not transparent. In order to work towards ameliorating the effects of these

sources, I have made the process transparent by locating myself in the research, and through ongoing reflections and detailed documentation in my research journal.

**Authenticity.** In the qualitative tradition it is assumed that texts are biased, incomplete, and cannot make claims about universal truths (Lincoln, 1995). Little value is placed on generalizing the results to other settings (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). However, the findings may have relevance to a wider population. The stories portray the subjective experiences of the participants, which are acknowledged in the context of the research. The authenticity or honesty of the research is judged on the personal, professional, and political stance that is communicated by the researcher. This transparency of the researcher's position is critical for interpretive work (Lincoln, 1995). To achieve authenticity in my research, my personal and professional stance was shared throughout the thesis. I reflected on how my background experiences produced understandings through interaction with the text (Polkinghorne, 2007). Furthermore, I disclosed my position during the interviews and invited the participants to take an active role in the research process by reviewing their stories and learning about the research process. I have documented my process in my reflexive journal.

**Voice.** The attention to voice in research refers to who is speaking, for whom, and for what purposes. Qualitative researchers seek out the silenced and present opportunities for multiple voices to be heard. Everyone has a voice, but some lack access or opportunity to be heard. Voice is the resistance against detachment, disconnect, and marginalization (Lincoln, 1995). My research involved a group that can be difficult to recruit by the academic community. The goal of the study was to listen and hear the voices of street involved youth and communicate their stories to a wider audience. The research reflected a "chorus of voices" (Riessman, 1993, p. 16) that have been recorded and interpreted through ongoing collaboration.



**Reciprocity.** Reciprocity is based on factors of interdependence and respectful interaction (Salois, Holkup, Tripp-Reimer, & Weinert, 2006). It refers to the quality of the relationship between the participants and the researcher. Through mutual sharing, a sense of trust and caring develops between the researcher and the participants (Lincoln, 1995). There is an understanding of how one influences, and is influenced by the research (Salois et al., 2006). Reciprocity was established by being honest and transparent with participants about the research process and sharing professional and appropriate personal knowledge when it was necessary.

**Sacredness.** A collaborative, egalitarian researcher-participant relationship promotes a sacred or spiritual aspect to science. Sacredness is established in the relationship through a genuine concern for human dignity, mutual respect, justice, and equality (Lincoln, 1995). The researcher is actively involved in the research process, striving to develop rapport and trust in the relationship through face-to-face encounters. The sacredness of this research was strengthened through the respect and honor I conveyed to the participants for sharing their stories. The respectful interactions between the participants and myself suggested a spiritual connection. I was mindful of every interaction and took responsibility for my role in the relationship (Lincoln, 1995). The participants were invited to collaboratively participate in the research process with member checks.

**Reflexivity.** Reflexivity is high quality awareness of one's influence and role in the research process. It involves understanding the personal states of the participants, the researcher, and their relationship in the co-construction of knowledge. The research process is monitored through critical reflection by the researcher before, during, and after the research (Finlay, 2002; Lincoln, 1995). My background shaped the framework in which I interviewed, organized, and analyzed the findings. I kept a journal for the reflexivity requirement of narrative inquiry. The journal was

a reflection of my thoughts, feelings, and biases throughout the process to offer further insight and interpretation (Creswell, 2008, Finlay, 2002).

Time was taken after each interview to process my interactions with the participants. Considerable attention was focused on my understandings of the participants' experiences and the meanings they conveyed through the stories they shared. The reflexive journal was used as an ongoing self-evaluation of my influence, intentions, and biases. It also served as an outlet to record any questions, problems, or frustrations concerning the research process. Key ideas that stood out for me were recorded and have been included as part of the analysis. Ongoing self-exploration and reflection was paramount to the research process because it allowed me to attach meaning to my experiences. The reflexive journal was integral for my learning because I needed time and space to process my experiences. As I referred back to previous entries, I was able to gain clarity and perspective which allowed for new understandings to emerge. I have included some of these experiences below.

My notes reflect my uncertainty of co-constructing meaning with the participants during the interview process. Going into the first interview, I had no idea what to expect. I planned to follow the participant's lead and allow him to talk freely about his experiences. Surprisingly, I took on much more of an active role than I anticipated. It appeared that he wasn't always sure where to take his story, so I was asking questions and reflecting back my understanding of his words. I question how my responses influenced what he decided to share and I'm unsure that it remains his narrative with all the questions I asked. I questioned whether this experience reflected an example of the co-construction of knowledge.

The role of a researcher is different than that of a counsellor, so I needed to reflect and work through issues this brought up for me throughout the research process. The following journal entry illustrates my thoughts about this issue:

*Today I interviewed two youth, and I had very little time in between to process or make sense of my experiences. I have some uncertainties about separating the role of a researcher from a counsellor because I'm not even sure what this would look like. I felt confused about my role during the interviews, in particular, I questioned if I should disclose personal information; what was the intent of my questions; was I too leading in the conversations?*

These are the same types of questions I ask myself after a counselling session. It was clear that my biases influenced the way I structured the interviews. Specifically, my education and training as a counsellor was reflected in the interviews as I responded with reflections and probes. Further, my sensitivity and knowledge of difficult topics influenced my interactions with the youth. It wasn't until later in the research process that there was a shift in my thinking. I let go of my insecurities about my role during the interviews and accepted the benefits of my past experiences as a helper. Building rapport with the youth through genuine encounters provided safety and allowed the conversations to go to deeper levels.

There was no way that I could fully appreciate or understand the multiple layers of the youths' experiences at the onset of this process. One of my biases going into the research was that being street involved or homeless would emerge as the biggest piece; however, I learned that it was only one of many layers in the youths' experiences. What was viewed as personally meaningful or significant was different for each participant and the homeless experience was not necessarily the essence of each story. As I reflected on one interview in particular, I realized that

the youth's addiction to drugs and the struggle to change her life had more meaning for her than not having a place to call home. This reflection was a valuable learning piece as it influenced my thinking, and challenged me to reconsider previous assumptions.

**Sharing the perquisites.** Lincoln (1995) acknowledges the indebtedness of researchers to the individuals who lives they portray in research. The prestige, respect, and honor that researchers gain academically or professionally from their work does not offer the same privileges to those that the research is written about. My research would have not been possible without the youths' willingness and commitment to be active members in the process. I expressed my gratitude to the youth at the completion of each interview. Their roles are acknowledged in the final writing of my thesis and will be in any future writing or presentations. This research undoubtedly benefits me; however, the youth shared some portion of ownership and power in reclaiming their histories and creating a living document about their lives. I will take this information forward to the academic and professional communities with hopes of providing education and advocacy for street involved youth.

## **Summary**

This research allowed me to become immersed in the process, integrating myself as the instrument of research. Through dialogue and interaction, representations of the participants' experiences were expressed in the research interviews. For analysis, the text was recreated as a working interpretive document in my attempt to respectfully convey the youths' voices and present what I learned through this process. The research design reflects my efforts to carry out quality research that is ethical, respectful, and representative of the participants' experiences of reality. Chapter Four will allow the reader to experience the stories of eight youth shared in the context of a research interview. The stories reflect my interpretations of the meanings attached to

the participants' experiences at one particular moment in time. However, new meanings continue to emerge with every reading of the stories.

## Chapter Four: The Stories

In Phase One, a holistic-content analysis, based on Lieblich et al. (1998) model was used with the participants' transcripts to answer the principle research question: What is the experience of street involved youth living in north central British Columbia? To form a holistic picture of the youths' experiences as presented in their interviews, the transcripts were read several times looking for global impressions. The content from the interviews was grouped, rearranged, and organized to provide a cohesive representation of each youth's life story. As part of the co-constructive process in narrative analysis, the youth were invited to actively participate in the research by offering feedback about the presentation of their stories.

The participants included both male and female youth who were or had previously been street involved. All of the youth had been on the streets in various capacities for at least two months and some as long as 12 years. At the time of the interviews, the youth resided in a north central community in British Columbia but for half of the participants, their home communities were spread across the province. The reader is invited to share in the experience of eight inspiring stories of survival of life on the streets. It is with honour and respect that I present the stories: *Willing, Struggling And Unsure, Alone, Not Giving Up, Motivation, Nothing But Me, I Refuse To Be A Victim, and Wisdom.*

### Willing

I grew up in a small northern community until the end of the second grade when my family moved to the Reserve. It was alright growing up because we always had food in the cupboards. My dad mostly raised us kids because my mom was always at bingo. I hardly remember her being around when I was a kid. I dropped out of school in grade 9 because I wanted to hang out with my friends, but I didn't start drinking or smoking weed until I was about 15 years old.

I lived on the Reserve for most of my life, but I haven't been back there since I left a couple of years ago. I won't move back to the Reserve because it has changed a lot. It's not like it used to be when I was young. I don't want to see kids running around drinking and doing drugs at their ages. It makes me sick because I was never like that at that age. I was always at home or visiting with friends. My friends and I used to find things to do or to go to the movies. We weren't having sex and doing hard drugs when we were that young. It made me sick to see that. Why aren't their parents doing anything about it?

I moved to a nearby town when I left the Reserve and I have been bouncing around since then. I lived in this community a couple of years ago with my old man. We stayed at a rooming house downtown for awhile. It was hard because we were always drinking and doing drugs after he got paid, so we had no money for food. It was pretty crazy because I always had to scam around for food. I would eat at the woman's shelter and sometimes I would take food from there for my old man. We ate at the drop-in centre most of the time. It was hard because I was sick and I could barely eat. I remember I didn't eat for four days because I couldn't handle the pain. It was so bad that I ended up in the hospital.

We lived in this community for almost half a year. While my old man was working we got kicked out of the boarding house. The landlord was a weirdo and he kicked us out for nothing, so we stayed at a community shelter for men and women. They used to chase us up at 8:00 in the morning and we would have to leave for the day. When it was cold out, we wouldn't have to go out if we didn't want to.

Some nights we got back to the shelter late, so there wasn't any room left. We had to sleep outside, but we were lucky because it was the summertime. The staff gave us some blankets and we made up our beds on the cement bleachers downtown. It was pretty warm when we would

wake up the next day. We only slept on the bleachers every once in awhile when there was no room at the shelter. My old man didn't want to stay at the men's shelter and I didn't want to go anywhere without him.

I have bounced around since I lived here a few years ago. Last summer I would hitchhike back and forth between this community and home. Most of the people that picked me up thought I was crazy to be hitchhiking alone because it's the Highway of Tears. I didn't really care though because I was always drinking and doing drugs. I get tired of my boyfriend and the people back home so I run away to this community. There is too much drama for me back home. There's as much drugs there as here, but I just get sick of everyone. My old man always lies to me. He tells me that he is going to bring my son around more often, but he never does. I never get to see my son because he lives with his grandma so that's the main reason why I run away.

The streets are rough. Most people I have met in this community know how to survive and I'm just learning that right now. It's hard because I always worry if I should stay at the shelter or go back to my friend's house. She offered to let me stay with her, but she has kids. I don't want to stay at her place and eat her food because I know it's just taking more food out of her kid's mouths. I stayed with her for a couple of days, but then I took off without telling her where I was going. I didn't feel right staying there, but I left most of my clothes at her place. I have been staying at the woman's shelter since.

I feel safe at the shelter, but I used to worry about staying there. I was worried that I would get jumped while I was sleeping or that people would go through my things. Nothing has ever happened, but I was always worried about it. It used to be a struggle for me because I didn't know about the woman's shelter and I hardly knew anyone in town. It's starting to get easier for me because I'm getting to know the other women. Once in awhile they argue around in the



shelter, but it's usually over dumb little things. I get along with people well, so that helps me out. I'm not mouthy like some of the other women that get into trouble.

I feel safer in the shelter than roaming the streets. You can get into a lot of trouble saying the wrong thing downtown. I've never seen anything happen, but I've heard about what happens if you get into trouble with the wrong people. I don't want to get into the sex trade because I heard that a few girls went missing last year and their bodies were found. I scam around for what I need. I scam people when they are looking for something; I tell them I can get it for them.

Right now I'm struggling with what I am going to do. I don't know if I should stay or go back home because I don't want to deal with all the drama. I usually take off from home every few months and I stay in this community until my boyfriend comes to get me. I came back here on welfare day and I was planning to stay until I get back on my feet. I am supposed to go back home to do a work skills program, but I don't know if I am going to go because I have nowhere to stay. I could stay with my friends, but they all have kids and I don't want to take their food.

I want to move to Alberta because my brothers live there, but I don't think I'm ready for that yet. My brothers used to run shacks when they lived in this community. Now they are working and all they do is smoke weed. I need to get stable before I move there, so I have to get enough money to catch the bus and I need to get off of the drugs. Crack is my struggle, but I haven't been doing it as much lately. My brothers are doing really well and that's what I want. I don't want to live this way for all of my life. I want something else.

### **Struggling And Unsure**

I was living on the streets in this community a few years ago, but I found a job and a place to live after I got back with my ex-boyfriend. I was with him for 10 years and we split up a year and a half ago. Everything just went to shit. My mom passed away and my kids went to live with

their grandparents again. I never get to see my kids because I don't get along with my ex's parents. They liked me in the beginning, but my ex told them stories about what I have done and never what he did.

I haven't been back to my hometown since my mom passed away. I moved back to this community a year ago because there was no housing back home and things didn't work out when I lived down south with my sister. I tried everywhere, so I came back here to find a place to live. I had to pay for everything because I was all by myself. I had my oldest son with me for a few months and I was on social assistance with him. I ended up drinking because I was so stressed out. I was trying for so long and I couldn't get anywhere. I sent my son to live with my dad and he just stayed. I haven't seen him for a year now.

I met my current boyfriend when he was working in a crack shack and we have been together for about a year. He has worked all of his life, but he started doing drugs this past year. He was laid off from a pub and he hasn't worked since. There's nothing out there. We were staying at a rooming house downtown, but we got kicked out of there. We are back in the shelters again, so I've been moving from shelter to shelter for the past few months.

I was pregnant last summer, but I lost my baby because of stress from my boyfriend. He treated me like shit and he started hitting me when I was pregnant. My boyfriend judged me while he was sitting in the crack shack fucking high all day. I was still doing drugs every once in awhile and drinking, so he blamed me for killing the baby. He cheated on me a couple of weeks after I lost the baby. I would have had a baby boy last month. My boyfriend isn't a support for me right now because all he wants to do is drink and he keeps on leaving me. There is no stability. He's actually in court today, so he might go to jail.

For the past few months, I have just been drinking and doing drugs. I haven't really been trying to do anything with my life. I always drink because I'm depressed; I never get to see my kids, I have no home, and my boyfriend hits me. When I drink and do drugs, I don't think about my problems. I have never dealt with anything; I just bury it. I was working the streets for awhile last year, but I quit when I got together with my boyfriend. I started working the streets again last month and my boyfriend doesn't know. The only time I ever do it is when I'm drinking. I won't get into a vehicle if I'm sober. I do it for alcohol and drugs.

I have a long-term bed at the woman's shelter and they provide everything. It's alright staying there because I get along with the staff and pretty much everyone. The biggest challenge is the women in the shelters because there is always influence. Everyday someone wants to go for a drink or a hoot. Just yesterday my auntie showed up looking for me to go drinking with her. There are some days that I don't want to be a part of it.

I have no supports in my life. Everyone in my family is an alcoholic and all my friends are too. It's a struggle to stay clean and sober because everyone I know on the streets uses alcohol and drugs. I went to treatment when I was younger, but it didn't work because I was still too young for treatment. I went to family treatment with my ex and he left me there with my son a week before we were done the program.

I got cut off of welfare a couple of weeks ago, so I've been trying to find a job. I used to work in restaurants, but I've been looking for work and there's nothing. I was hoping to find a part-time job or do an employment program. The last time I did job skills training I found a job right away. I can't do the employment program now because I was cut off of welfare and I just found out that I'm pregnant, so no one is going to hire me.

I'm not sure if I'm going to keep the baby. I have a couple of months to decide whether I should have an abortion. My sister was going to take care of the baby I lost last year, so I'm thinking of giving her the baby to raise. She has a steady job and kids of her own. We are not very close and I actually saw her for the first time in a year. She was drinking and I don't like being around her when she's drunk. I am thinking about going to school to upgrade while I'm pregnant. My boyfriend says he wants to get a job so I'll see how that plays out. Right now my biggest struggle is finding housing. I want to have a home and get my boys back.

### **Alone**

I have lived on the streets since I was 14 years old. My parents kicked me out of the house because I was drinking too much. I started drinking alcohol when I was 12 years old because I was sexually abused for ten years of my life. Alcohol made me forget about the abuse for a little while. I grew up in a small northern community so I was always on the streets. I didn't even know about shelters when I was that young. I stayed anywhere that I could and I moved around from town to town. I used to stay with friends that I would just meet, but I have also slept in the bush, in cubbyholes, and on the streets.

It was harsh sleeping on the streets because it was so cold. It was also embarrassing when someone would wake me up, but I was so tired that I didn't even care where I would sleep. I walked a lot of nights because I had nowhere to go. I wouldn't sleep for a couple of days, but then I would just fall asleep and not wake up for awhile.

I started working the streets when I was about 18 years old because a so-called friend of mine told me that I would make a lot of money doing it. It's harsh and I don't like working the streets, but I do it for the money. It feels normal now because I have been doing it for most of my life. It's hard because there are all these fucking weirdos that fuck you around. When I was down

south, this one guy tried to hurt me but I stabbed him in the arm. I haven't had any bad dates here.

I make a lot of money working the streets in this community. It's way better here than anywhere else I have been. I don't have a problem finding work, but I find it hard around here because there are a lot of honourable people on the streets. The other street workers think they are all that. The older workers try to kick me off of the street, so I just walk away or punch them out. I've been holding my own for a long time; I had to learn to be tough.

I got into the drugs after I started working the streets. I was about 19 years old when I started smoking crack to keep me sober. I didn't want to be drunk anymore. I work the streets because I use alcohol and drugs; I need the money and I'm used to it. It's the only easy way I know how to make money fast. I worked at a store and as a chambermaid for a few years, but it's just hard for me. People judge me for working the streets, but I don't care. It is the only way I know how to make my money.

I'm all over the place right now. I work the streets all day and all night. I do it for about four days at a time and then I just fall asleep. I have been staying at motels that the guys buy for me. I walk a lot too. I go into hotels to warm up and then I start walking again. It's hard right now because they don't like me being in the hotels.

I stay at the shelters once in awhile, but I don't like staying in them because there are too many people. I'm not a people person; I just like to be alone because I have been alone all my life. There are a lot of ignorant people at the shelters. The staff are snobby and there are a lot of drunks. I don't depend on services because I grew up too fast and it's all I've known. I make my own money to survive on my own. Sometimes I struggle to get food, but I work the streets so I

can usually buy my own food. I will eat at drop-in centres when I have no money or I haven't made any money in a couple of days.

I dropped out of school in grade 7, but I actually went back a couple of years ago and finished up to grade 11. I go home once in awhile to smarten up. I will straighten my life out for a little while, but then my family starts calling me down so I take off. I can't handle it because I have been alone for so long. I have been on the streets on my own for 12 years now. I don't like family responsibilities because I have never had to deal with it. My brothers and sisters expect me to be somebody that I ain't. I am the baby in the family, so people at home are always telling me what to do. Since I was young, my siblings told me to grow up really quick. I had to grow up too fast because I was molested by some of my family members. I feel like I'm an old person right now.

I don't have many supports in my life. I have a lot of family here that I see almost every day, but most of them are on the streets too. My strength is me. I just live day by day. I have also learned to stand up for myself.

I am trying to quit the drugs. It's been a couple of weeks since I smoked crack. It's not worth it anymore because it's only a couple minute high and then I'm broke. At least when I drink I get drunk and I will have money in my pocket in the morning. It's really hard staying off of the crack, but the alcohol is keeping me off of the drugs. I am also taking a lot of pills: Gabapentin and Tylenol 3s. I take anything that I can get my hands on as a way to stay high, but not high on drugs.

I was piss eyed drunk last night. My cousin said I was crying my eyes out, but I don't remember anything. I was that messed up. I always cry when I'm drunk; I cry out my feelings about what happened to me when I was young. I don't even know how I got back to where I was

staying last night and that worries me because I'm starting to black out. I have blacked out a lot of times before, but I blacked out last night because I am trying to get off of the crack.

I am looking to settle down with someone. I would like to find a relationship, stability, and a home. I don't want to be on the streets anymore because I am getting old enough to know. It's the drugs that are keeping me on the streets. I know I could move on in life, but I just need to kick the drugs.

### **Not Giving Up**

I was in care until I was 12 years old, so I stayed in different group homes. I don't really remember much because I blacked out a lot of my childhood. I stayed in one really good group home for a couple of years and I remember a lot of things from there. I was just a little kid going to school, but it was different at that group home because they treated me like a human being. When I got out of care my mom was harsh drunk and then she turned to crack, so I left her when I was 16 years old. I stayed with my uncle for about a year and then I moved down south. I was doing fine in this community, but I wanted to experience new things.

When I was down south, I stayed out on the streets for the first month. It was a lot harder than here; much scarier. The first thing I saw was some guy shooting up in the neck in the middle of the street. I couldn't believe it. The streets are very different in the south because there is more bullshit that goes on. I stayed in a shelter for a couple of months, but then I got a job and a place to stay.

I was planning to join the army when I first went down south. I was going to do the camps and training right away, but I chickened out. I met a few people who were in the army and they told me some crazy stories. I was partying with a few of them and they just didn't care. They

were out killing people or watching others do it and it hardened my heart. I didn't want bullets flying over my head.

I met some pretty cool people on the streets, but there was also the other side of it. I met this one guy who was from another country and he couldn't call his dad because he was getting beat. He was the black sheep of the family and was doing stuff that he shouldn't have been doing. His brothers were all in the army and their army is extreme compared to here. My buddy told me some crazy stories. He tried to help me get into school, but I was doing my own thing.

It was getting pretty bad living down south because of the gangs and bullshit. I was done with that, so I had to leave. I moved back north because this is home and my mom and my uncle live here. My mom is getting off of the drugs now so that's good; she's not really doing them anymore. I used to treat my mom really bad when she was doing drugs and she seen how I was treating her back then.

I've had a place to stay most of the time I've been back in this community. I had money when I came back, so it's been alright. There is the same old bullshit here, but I don't really want to talk about it. I was on a youth agreement for a couple of months, but I got kicked off of it so I got a job. I needed something because I can't survive on nothing. I actually won some money awhile ago, so I've just been living off of that.

Some days all I do is smoke a lot of weed. It mellows me out and makes the day go by. I have never been a part of the drug scene in this community. I haven't sold drugs or used them. I smoke weed, but that's not really a drug. I mostly hang out with my girlfriend and I have a PS3 so I like to game out a lot.



It was never my choice to go on the streets, but its life and you can't control it. It's pretty dumb if you want that lifestyle. I was never willing to be on the streets, so I always had a plan to make money. I didn't 'want to be street involved; I wanted something more, much more.

I've helped myself out really. I don't use a lot of services, but I usually eat at the youth drop-in centre for breakfast because the meals are pretty decent. There is an open fridge, so I can make my own food. I can also use the phone and do my laundry. I remember going to this one therapist who told me that I should never be sad. Everyone is sad, so I thought what are you going to do keep me drugged forever? That's just impossible. She wanted me to take pills to make me happy.

There are a lot of things that are hard about being on the streets. When I was younger, I sometimes worried about my safety. I used to be fat when I was young, but I lost some weight and I started working out. I tried to get big so no one would mess with me; I didn't want to get jumped. When you are on the streets people try to get you to sell drugs or rob someone and I don't want to do that. I'm not one of those pawns. I can see when people are trying to get you to do something really stupid, but they can't manipulate me. It's sad to see the younger ones down here because they're not working for the future anymore. The main reason they are going to stay on the streets is because they don't try; you have to try.

I don't like being around people with negative attitudes. A lot of the people on the street have given up and their attitudes are just shit. I don't want to be around people that have given up. You can't give up and I have tried to help some of my buddies, but you just can't help some people. They just bitch and complain, but they don't want to do anything to change, so quit bitching then.

I've worked a bit since I've been back, but it's hard to find a job. I'm going to call up my Band because I want to get some certificates in heavy mechanical or cooking. I'm not sure what I

want to do yet, but you got to do it. You got to have goals. I am planning to move down south because I hate the winters. I was hoping to move in the next year, but I don't know because my girlfriend lives here. I will see how it plays out.

### **Motivation**

I was put into foster care and group homes at a young age, so I started getting street involved back then. I was 16 years old when I first moved out and it wasn't really a hard time because I had older friends who had their own places. I was still going to school so I had things going for me. But not having the strict rules that my parents put in place, it wasn't a big deal drinking first thing in the morning. Not being in my parent's house hindered me, but it also helped me out in a lot of ways. It made me very independent and I learned that I need to do my own thing to survive.

My hometown was very small, so there were no shelters to stay at. There was low income housing, but I was still in high school and I wasn't making any money. I stole a tent out of the back of someone's truck and camped out on the river bank for six months. It was alright because I had a lot of friends that would come by to visit in the mornings before they went out fishing. I didn't mind my little camp, but after awhile I was like I can't do this because winter was coming and it was getting too cold.

I didn't leave my dad's house because I was a rebelling teen; I was getting abused. My father had a problem with alcohol so it was hard to deal with. I'd get beat up for coming home fifteen minutes late and after awhile I had enough. My dad agreed to put me into care and he kept signing three month temporary custody orders. I tried moving back home, but the abuse started up again. There was just no way that I could stick around.

I was lucky because the foster family that took me in were lifelong friends of my parents. I already knew them, which made the transition a little bit easier. I was 17 years old, and there wasn't really any self-improvement while I lived there because they were waiting on me hand and foot. I got used to that and thought that I could continue my life like that, but it doesn't happen that way. I didn't get the skills most people do today.

Foster care was kind of a permanent placement, but I was going up on some charges. I got sentenced to a couple of months in jail followed by some time in camp, which kept me off the streets. It was my choice to go to camp and it taught me a lot. I was 18 years old at the time and I learned that you have to work to get where you are. I was one of the older students so the other guys looked up to me. Fights broke out, so I scarred up my hand pretty good and I had to work that off. After I got out of camp, I realized that life may be hard, but if you work at it, you'll get through it. It's not just going to come to you.

I was only supposed to come to this community for a weekend but I ended up sticking around. I realized that street life had to be the way for awhile because I dropped out of school young and it was all I really knew. For me, it was about trying to survive – what could I do to feed myself and find a place to stay? I was selling drugs and other stuff to get whatever I needed. I got in with the wrong crowd, which is so easy to do when you're already street involved and on the drugs.

It was hard to stay out of the crack shacks here in town. Once you're in there for a couple of days, it's very hard to get out. I usually went to the shacks to pick up what I needed and then left because I didn't want to stick around. I had enough balls to say that I was going to do it on my own. I understood that they would give me a place to live, but that wasn't the lifestyle I wanted. I wanted something more. I never knew if I was going to get jumped when I was leaving the shack

because someone couldn't afford their own rock. When I was selling drugs, there was a big fear that I was stepping on another dealer's toes and that he was going to come find me.

Things got a bit hairy when I was drug involved in this community, so I had to leave when I owed a little bit of money that I couldn't pay back. I moved back to a small northern community for a little while, but it was the same road down there. I was already hooked on drugs so it was a struggle for me. While I lived there, I met a girl who helped me get my act together and I actually started working. Everything was going well with her but things changed. I had to move out and the only place I could stay was with friends. When I found out she was breaking up with me, there wasn't anything else in the town for me. I came back here because I needed a place to stay and there were more services available.

I have stayed at shelters, but I had to sleep in an overflow room with 18 other people on bunk beds. It was really unpredictable because people were under the influence of drugs and alcohol. I didn't want to stay in shelters because I was trying to get away from the harder drugs. I knew that people at the shelters would have drugs on them and I didn't want to be around that because I was trying to get my life back together. I was able to get off the drugs because of my daughter. I wanted her to be proud of me and be able to say that her father has done good things. I also got support from a lot of places. I wasn't able to access certain services if I was under the influence, which meant that I couldn't have lunch or use the phone.

In the summertime, I could pretty much sleep anywhere because it was so warm, but as soon as winter hit, I set up a little shack in the bush that was totally secluded. I stayed out there from November until January and then I finally went to the shelter. It was really cold, but I was able to get through it because of the people and the services in the community. No one knew I was there, but I was given blankets and clothes. I was a little more prepared because I had a fishing rod. I

was fishing illegally, but it was all I had. It was hard because I wasn't the type to go out begging for money for food because I know what people think. If you ask for money on the streets, people think you are an alcoholic and I didn't want to support that.

I learned a lot about survival when I was at camp, so I knew which berries and mushrooms I could eat. Staying in the bush was a different experience. There were a lot of lonely nights, but I got through it writing poetry. I never really had a problem with the wildlife because I was always aware of my surroundings. I've had bears come up to me when I was fishing and I'd either throw one of my fish to them or go upriver to get out of their territory. I had one bad experience when I got treed by a moose. It was a big bull moose that was walking through my camp. I didn't want to be stuck in my tent and I guess I got too close to him. The moose got mad and started running after me. As he was chasing me, there were some trees that were busting down like they weren't even there. I climbed up the biggest tree I could find and sat up there for a good hour while he hung around below snorting at me.

I go in spurts. I'll find a place and it will work out for awhile and then something happens. I've had to start fresh a number of times. I can't even count how many times I have left with my backpack full of stuff and the clothes on my back. One time I was doing renovations in return for free rent, but after awhile the landlord wanted rent money. I didn't have a job because I was working on her house, so I lost all my stuff. After something like that happens it is harder to put yourself back up in that position. It would take me a couple of weeks of lazing around and feeling like my life wasn't worth it, but something else would come up and then I would think maybe there is hope. There's always opportunity around; it's just a matter of taking it.

My friends have helped me out by letting me stay at their places, but I have had to help myself. Some of my friends that have helped me out before now want nothing to do with me. I

just figure that they weren't worth it in the first place because I have gotten along fine with other friends after they kicked me out. It all depends on the person and the circumstances.

I learned how to fight from growing up and being on the streets. If you can't defend yourself, good luck being on the streets because you will never make it. I made sure I knew what I was doing and I had the training I needed. In my first two weeks of high school I was involved in a lot of fights, so I had experience fighting as well as three years of kung fu and a year of karate training. A lot of people in my hometown knew my training, but when I moved to other communities no one knew who I was. They thought I was some little kid they could pick on, but they were wrong. I'm not a violent person. I will talk to someone before I swing, but if they hit me first then its self defence. I was actually bear maced once here in town when someone said something to my girlfriend. I didn't realize it was bear mace until it was too late and I couldn't breathe. I also got jumped once for no reason by some guy that pretty much jumped everybody.

The hardest thing about being street involved is getting up every morning and being able to do it all over again. As much as I wanted to sleep the day away, I realized that I had to get up and do something. I didn't have the energy or motivation to get up because I was lazing around. I got used to a lifestyle and I didn't want to get up every day to work for a paycheque when I could live how I wanted, but I was starving and homeless. For me, I have to get up every day and tell myself to do something because if you lose the motivation to get up, then you are not going to make it anymore. You are going to be street involved for the rest of your life and I didn't want that. I don't want to see that happen for the other youth around, so I try to help them out as much as possible.

I am motivated to be a better person. I couldn't have done it if I was just sitting around. I need to be able to get up, go out and do stuff. When I was on the streets it was hard for me to get

the motivation to do stuff because I felt gross and I would have greasy hair. It was easy to tell myself I can't do this; I can't go find a job. There are resources here that have helped me out a lot. I have had people help me with job skills and there are places to have a shower, eat, and get clothes. You just don't get those services in smaller communities.

There has been support from my family, but not on the level that most people would think. My parents would tell me what not to do, but it was hard to get up and change in just one day, especially because I had been in that life for so long. It did take some time. I would make myself get up earlier and earlier until I got into a routine. There was a lot of pressure from the family, but it was also my pride getting hurt everyday that I was out there. I didn't want to be there anymore; I wanted to do something with my life.

It's hard for me to accept money from my family because of everything they have already done for me. My dad put me up in a hotel for a few months just to get me by. I've already gotten too much from them and being the black sheep in the family, it's hard for me to ask them for a few bucks. I hate asking them because it's just another shot to my pride. My grandparents just offered to pay for schooling for me. As much as I would like to take that, I don't want to be a charity case where I constantly need to get money from my parents or grandparents. It's hard because I want to do it on my own, but I can't.

Karma is a big thing for me. I want to do as much as I can because hopefully one day it will come back and it has with my friends that have helped me out by letting me stay with them. I help people out and eventually it will come back to me in some way, so it makes me feel better.

It has been a hard struggle for me, so I am willing to help other street involved youth when they ask for advice or need my help. A couple of years ago I had a friend who was very street involved. She was hooked on meth for a few years and one day she came to my house asking for

help. Just the other day, there was a stranger passed out drunk on the street. A couple of guys started rooting through his pockets and I felt I had to say something to get them out of there. With help from some other business members we were able to get them away from him. I do what I can, but there's times when I'm in the hood that I will not get involved in a fight because it's most likely gang related. I would step in if someone was on the ground getting kicked in the head, but otherwise I'll just stay out of it.

I've had experience in all types of situations. It's not like I just worked one type of job and I'm only good at one thing. I am good at multiple things, but just not certified. I have run my own business doing renovations. It was just cash under the table, but it was money and I was good at what I did. I have also worked in offices and done construction. When I was on the streets the executive director from camp asked me to hand in a resume, but I wasn't ready to be a counsellor or mentor yet. It took me a couple of years to get to that point, but I did a few months of work out there.

I have been looking for work for almost a year now. If you don't have the experience you are not going to get hired. For me, they see gaps in my resume, asking what I have done for the years not on my resume. When I tell them I have been living on the streets they have nothing for me. When most people hear street involved or drug involved it's an automatic no or go somewhere else. There are a lot of barriers, which I am regretting. If I could go back and change it I would.

Even though I didn't graduate from high school, I have held down some fairly good positions for work. It's not like I can't go out and get a job, but with the recession it's hard to find work. Now that winter is coming, there is a lot of work that is shutting down for the year. I volunteer whenever I can. I have been involved with a youth theatre company for seven years



now and I help people out with peer counselling. I like to give back to the community and try to make a difference in the world.

I owe my roommates some money and I actually need it tonight. I'm not going to be able to get the money so I have to find somewhere else to live. It's constantly like that, but I'm looking into a new place with a friend and he's going to help me through it. He's a good friend. One of my best friends and I are in the middle of business proposals. I want to go through with schooling and get a business management degree.

I am planning to move to the coast to live off the land and grow my own veggies. It has been a hard choice for me because my daughter lives here. I can't take her with me and I don't want to be away from her because I did that for enough years. It's going to be different being away from my friends, but I have already met a few people from the island. I'm not too worried about it because it isn't hard for me to make new friends. I also have family that live there so it will be a chance for me to connect with the other side of my family.

I see myself being involved with the streets in any way I can. I want to help others and show them support. I am a caring person and I understand what street involved youth are going through because I was in their position. I want to see people succeed, not just myself.

### **Nothing But Me**

I used to live down south with my ma. She was always busy working three jobs trying to support us kids. One day she found a man and she started talking to him on the phone for a few months. They fell in love, so my family moved up north. On the trip here there was a silver thaw and all the trees fell over the road so we couldn't go that way. We drove up another route, but it was the worst windstorm in like 75 years. The muffler flew off and our car was breaking down.

As we drove further north, there was a blizzard and we couldn't see anything. It was really dangerous because we didn't know what side of the road we were on.

We moved into a big house with three levels. Within a week of being there, my stepfather started throwing me around and I wasn't allowed to eat sometimes. It turned out we had to move to a new place a few weeks later. It was winter and things weren't going good for my family at that time. I got caught with a bunch of weed at school so I got suspended. One day I was at home talking to my friend on the phone when my step dad told me to shovel the driveway. I didn't do it so he took me outside and started throwing me around and gouging my eyes. I ran away and used a phone to call for help. At that point, I went back down south for awhile.

While I was down south my family got a new place in a rural area. I came back here to live with them again, but I was only there for two days when I got into a big fight with my ma over a stereo. I was only 15 years old at the time, so I ended up in the youth shelter for a few days and then I got put in a group home. I lived in that group home with five other kids and we got along most of the time. We gave the staff a hard time though. One time the group home got so out of hand that the cops came and arrested all of us. I was just sitting there throwing my popcorn into a bucket while everyone was going crazy around me. People were coming in with snow and throwing it at the camera. Some of them were dumping milk and ripping the pictures off of the wall. We got signed out of the city cells the next day and they dropped the mischief charge so that was good. God knows I didn't need that.

I stayed at that group home for a year. I was originally there for six months but they extended the contract. When I was 16 years old, I moved back with my family. That place was kind of like a farm. We drank well water and we had chickens and a dog. There was a shed on the side of the house that was about 15 feet long and 7 feet wide that had lights. After about a

week and a half my parents turned the power off in the shed and they locked me out of the house. I wasn't allowed to eat, drink water, or shower. I would get food rations and sometimes my mom would give me some porridge. The rations went on for a couple of weeks, but then they just stopped feeding me altogether. It must have been for five or six days. There were frozen berries that I could eat, but I got really hungry because I still had to wake up every morning and pluck the chickens. My parents would tell me that they we would get pizza if I did good that day. I would try my best all day, but when they ordered pizza everyone was allowed to eat except for me. Even the dog was treated better than I was.

My mom told me to get a job so I figured I could work at McDonalds. I walked to town which was about 10 km away. I was really hungry so I stopped at the gas station and I stole some chocolate bars. I got the application from McDonalds and I walked all the way back home. When I was walking home my mom drove by with my brothers, but she didn't stop. My feet were hurting so much that I took my shoes off and I walked bare foot. When I got home my mom told me that she would make the same deal with me as my sister. If I cleaned out the chicken shed then I would get some pizza. I told her I wasn't going to do it because that's what she said the last time, so I didn't eat any pizza or watch the movies. It was a struggle because I wanted to survive, but also I wanted to be a part of the family.

The next day my sister decided she wanted a job at McDonalds too. I have a really big heart so I told her that I would give her my application if she promised to bring me a new one. It turned out she didn't bring me an application so we got into an argument. I was kind of an angry guy when I was young. I actually kept it to myself pretty well, but sometimes it would come out. My mom called a social worker or at least what I thought was a social worker and I explained everything that happened over the past few weeks. The social worker told me it was my fault and

there was nothing that she could do about it. I knew what I was going through at the time, but it really hurt knowing that my brothers and sisters had to watch me go through that.

Later that day my step dad started to threaten me. He kicked a bucket at me and sprayed me with the hose. I think he might have slapped me, but I can't even remember. I was laying in the shed listening to my discman. I didn't have much, but I had a discman that I could listen to whenever I wanted to escape. It was the only freedom I had and they never tried to take that from me which was good. My step dad started to drill a padlock on the shed and I thought that he was going to lock me in there, so I just left at that point.

A youth worker picked me up and took me down to the shelter. The first thing they did when I got there was feed me. They treated me like gold for a long time. It felt really good to have people there. Some of my old friends that I hadn't seen in a long time were staying at the shelter too. I had a lot of friends that were so close to me. Things went good there until September. The staff wanted me to go to school, but the principal at the junior high told me that I couldn't go to school if I didn't have a home. I didn't think he could do that, so I went back to the shelter which was like my home and I talked to them about it. They phoned the principal and told him that everyone in this country has a right to an education. I went to school for awhile, but I stopped going because I got into the scene.

The people around me were going through the same thing as me, so we drank and smoked weed together. When you smoke weed it makes your worries go away for awhile. It makes your pain dissolve. I did whatever I could to get my weed and liquor. I was really good at shoplifting when I was younger, so I never got caught.

I stayed at the shelter for about two months. There were a lot of rules there, so I was constantly getting kicked out. My girlfriend was also staying at the shelter and they would make

us leave if they saw us hugging. I would go ride the bus, go to the university, go to the library and read or use the Internet. I had a good mind, so I was always writing lyrics. One day I was playing pool at the shelter and they were always getting mad about people putting holes in the roof. I put the pool cue in a pre-existing hole and they kicked me out for a month. It was November and I didn't even have a jacket, so I was just wandering around in the freezing cold all day. When it was -30, they would let me sit on the stairs inside to keep warm but if it was -15, I had to go out. I was still allowed to sleep there, but I couldn't stay in the shelter during the day.

The staff at the youth shelter were really awesome people. They were there to do more than a job and it seemed like they really cared. They would do their best to help you with whatever you wanted to do in life. It was about the end of November when they told me that I couldn't stay in the shelter because I had a family who loved me. I was like "a family who loves me"? I had a meeting with my parents and the workers tried to convince me that it was okay to go home when that was really the worst thing. I was really upset at the meeting and I was saying things like "you don't love me, how could you even say you love me"? They let me stay in the shelter, so it must have been something I said at the meeting.

I was feeling down around Christmas when they found me a group home. I was still with my girlfriend at that time, so I stayed with her because she had her own place. One day we had no food, so I went to the grocery store to get her some food. I put a big box of pizza pops under my jacket and when I was walking out the cashier was looking at me right in my eyes. I thought to myself if I don't break eye contact she won't notice. When I got back my girlfriend said "I love you, you're my saviour". The next day she got hungry again so I went and stole some chicken pot pies. I started to get really sad, so I went back to the group home after we split up.

I was 16 years old at the time and there were some older kids living at the group home. One of my friends who had just got out of jail was living there, so I was kind of in my element. It was good to have people around that I knew and I also met some new people. Some of the kids I met in that group home are my best friends to this day. My ex-girlfriend got evicted from her house so they moved her into the group home too. I wasn't really happy about it, but we still got along. We would chit chat, play chess, and smoke weed together, but we didn't care for each other that way.

When I was in that group home, I read all the encyclopedias and I started to get really paranoid. I could only sleep during the day and not for very long. I would stay up all night because I thought people were going to kill me. It was paranoia and after a month of not sleeping I started to get suicidal. I was starting fires in my room and burning things. I burnt the ceiling, so they did an investigation on me but they didn't press charges. Later that day, I was breaking all of my possessions and I started to feel suicidal. They asked me if I wanted to go see a mind doctor and I agreed to go as long as I could leave at any time. Sure enough when I talked to the doctors they threw me in a room which was like solitary. They gave me some pills and I just passed out. I was told that I had substance induced psychosis so I stayed in the psych ward for a few weeks.

After that I was moved into another group home in town where I stayed for over a year. I just listened to music all the time. One day I woke up and I became very spiritual. I would meditate every day and I read as many books as I could. I had my own shrine because one of the rights of being in a group home is to have any religion that you believe in. My religion involved a lot of prayer and meditation.

One day the staff made me mad because they were picking on another youth. I punched a wall so they called the cops on me and they threw me in the psych ward again. It felt like they were taking away my freedom just because they had the power to. It was something they could control me with. I had stopped taking my medications because I was doing really well. I had quit drinking and smoking weed for about half a year. I even stopped smoking cigarettes because I had meditation and God.

I was discharged from that group home just before I turned 19 years old and I got put on semi-independent living. They paid for my food and a place to stay. I got a weekly cheque for food, so I was eating good at that time. I ate a lot of rice and fish because I was on a spiritual diet. I was betrayed by one of my best friends so I started smoking weed and drinking again. It was like emotional, physical, and spiritual torture. It got so bad that I wanted to get mad at the world sometimes, but I never did. I just filled myself with holiness through prayer and meditation.

I was getting mad and I got into a fight with this guy, so he and his friend called the cops on me and they threw me into the psych ward again. They only let me out on the condition that I would take potent anti-psychotic needles. I took one needle, but refused to take any more. I also stopped taking my pills because I couldn't visualize very well and I would become zombified. I got my own place after I got out of the psych ward and I had a new girlfriend. I really liked her, but her father was dying so she had to move back east and she hasn't come back.

I was meditating every day, but I was also smoking weed. I started to get voices in my head and that was the first time that really happened. The voices were saying really bad things to me. It was like I was going through hell because everything was demon-like. I would just sit and read my Bible. I was having psychosomatic moments and I actually felt like I was on fire. I was really

anxious and parts of my body felt light and really weak. I just kept reading my Bible, but at some point I could admit to myself that I needed some medicine. I walked with my Bible to the psych ward and I stayed there for a couple of weeks.

I was moved into a mental health house and I would read my Bible and play video games to keep my mind off it; it was like therapy for me. I would play video games whenever I started to feel really weak and it made me feel better. I had a shrine and an alter with rice and candles. It was weird because I was reading my Bible one day and I felt everything go out of me. I immediately felt better and the voices have not come back since. The staff discharged me within a couple of days and I went back to my house. I was like I'm never smoking weed again, but I just slipped back into it. It's a vicious cycle and I don't recommend it.

When I was back at my place, I let some of my friends who are like brothers stay with me for free. They had families who lived on Reserves far away, but I didn't want them to hitchhike because it was cold out. We got along really good for about four months, but then we got into a fight. I let my friends stay at my place for the rest of the month, while I stayed with another friend. I focused on making music; I have been making rap music my whole life.

After that I stayed with another friend and then I moved in with my ma because she wanted to see me doing better. I had only talked to her a few times since I had left home. It was my New Year's resolution to quit drinking and smoking pot, so I did that for about a month when I was staying with my ma. One of my friends passed away and the first thing I did was buy a pack of smokes, which led to weed. I went to stay at a men's shelter and there were really dangerous people that wanted to hurt me.

I was at the shelter for about a month and then I stayed with other friends. I finally got my own place in 2008 and I lived with my friend who has schizophrenia. I really respect him



because he lives with that every day. It makes me sad thinking about it. I lived with him for a year and I didn't mind what he did. He would play his beats until five in the morning when I was trying to sleep. I have the patience of a saint because he would always make a mess and I would tidy up after him.

While I was living there, I let some of my younger friends stay with me. One time, my friend brought a Texas Mickey over and we drank the whole thing between five of us. I went outside and I passed out in the snow bank. It was like -30, so I was purple and I had frostbite on my hands when the ambulance found me. I woke up in the hospital the next day and I didn't even know why or what happened. I was trying to recuperate that day, but there was a party going on while I was sleeping. The landlord threw everyone out and roughed some of us up. I got evicted on Christmas and I had nowhere to go. I was struggling to find a place, so a friend let me stay with him for awhile. I had fallen into that state of mind that my life was already as bad as it could be, so I might as well smoke my life away; not drugs, just weed. I only did cocaine once or twice. I was getting suicidal again, but someone helped me. The night I was going to do it, I ran into someone who I hadn't seen in almost two years and he asked me to stay with him.

On Christmas, I walked to the bridge going south. When I looked down, I thought that it wasn't even high enough to kill me. I didn't jump; I just went on with my life. After that, I stayed with some friends and this girl that I knew. It was Valentine's Day and the girl I liked didn't want to be with me, so I was really sad. I went to see her on my birthday thinking that maybe she wanted to hang out with me, but she didn't. I was feeling really down because I was fighting with some of my best friends and I had nothing. I went to the shelter and I laid there for awhile. I decided to go see my friend because I was mad that I got evicted and he was allowed to stay. He had some money so he bought me a couple of drinks for my birthday. I chilled with him

and another friend I hadn't seen in a long time. My friend let me stay with him for the next month, but I was tired of hearing beats every morning. When I got my social assistance cheque, I decided that I was going to leave and not come back. I went to the bus station and got a one-way ticket to the island.

I phoned up my dad when I got to the island. For years, my dad would screen my calls because he didn't want to talk to me. No one answered at first but my stepmom picked up the second time I called. They picked me up and bought me some cigarettes and clothes because all I had was the clothes on my back. They let me stay with them for a couple of weeks, but my stepmom and I got into an argument about rent. My stepmom's infamous for arguing. It's like whatever she says goes and she has to win every argument. I threw a couple of my rent forms on the ground and she told me that I could pick up the forms or go live on the streets, so I picked up the papers, got my backpack, and I went to live on the streets. I took some rosemary to protect me. I used the internet at the library and reconnected with an old friend who asked me to stay with her.

I was on the streets for a couple of days. I went to Skid Row at first and there were all these crack heads. They were all tattered up and it was like they were trying to scare me. It was just terrible, but I kept walking. The shelters in the city were full, but I found this one youth shelter and I stayed there. When I woke up the next day I put a sign on my chest that I will rap for spare change and I made about ten bucks doing that. I thought not everyone likes rap music, but everyone likes back flips, so I did a back flip for a buck. I made like another ten bucks doing that and as soon as I got enough money I caught the bus to the ferry. My friend picked me up and I lived with her for about three weeks. I was just struggling, doing what I could. I didn't do much.

I moved around down south for awhile and I stayed with my sister in my hometown for a few months. I cleaned up when I was there and I just focused on making music.

I came back to this community a couple of months ago and I lived at this one place for about a week or two. I got evicted because some of the neighbours were complaining that I was smoking weed with their kids. It didn't make sense because I wasn't even home. I didn't know where that came from, but I agreed to leave. I was staying with my friend and I've just been struggling along ever since. It's really hard for me to get a place and it's hard for me to find jobs too. I have places to sleep sometimes. I slept outside at the church last month. It's a big challenge because it's really cold. I feel safe walking the streets, but I don't like staying in shelters.

It's hard because I don't really have anything at all. It makes me want to cry man. I came back to this community because I wanted to do music. I made music for everyone's albums, but it doesn't even matter anymore. My music is supposed to make some big time labels. This might sound frivolous, but if I make a lot of money from my music I am going to donate it to UNICEF.

One of the best things about being in this community is there is some kind of music that you have access to. I have access to be able to express myself in healthy ways rather than falling in with the mainstream. I like it here because I think it's culturally diverse in a lot of ways. I haven't really found racists in this community. It's like everyone can get along at the same time. Over here is everyone that gets along and over here is everyone who's at each other's throats. I also like that there's resources if I'm hungry and there's shelters to sleep in.

I have always been different. People don't look at me the same because I talk and act different than everyone else. I think differently, so a lot of people really respected me. I have never been involved in gangsterism. One of the first things my friend told me when I got on the

street was never to sell crack because I would end up in one of two places; jail or shot. He told me that if he found out I was selling drugs he would shoot me himself, so he showed me the way.

It is my inner strength, my spirit, my ashay that keeps me going. My faith and my hope have got me through it; by believing and staying true to myself despite what anyone else thinks. Love too. I would be nothing without love. I want to get back to my real life; meditating and praying. I can still pray and I meditate sometimes, but I can never get too deep because I don't have any privacy. I have nothing and I'm pretty much happy with it. As long as I still have me.

### **I Refuse To Be A Victim**

When I was growing up, I lived in a household where my parents were very emotionally abusive. It was extreme emotional abuse and they made me cry on a regular basis. My mom would call me names and beat me. She wouldn't punch me, but she would slap me and hit me with little things around the house like a wooden spoon or a beanpole out of the garden. She even told my school that she thought I was retarded. I tried to report the abuse because it was so bad, but in Social Service's eyes it didn't count as a beating back then. The only way they could take me out of my house was if my parents were hitting with me closed fists and I had bruises all over my body, but I didn't. The abuse happened every day, so I would do self-harm because it hurt so much. It was so horrible living with my parents that I actually lied and said I was getting molested to get out of the house.

I was put into a group home when I was 12 years old. All the other girls living in the group home were working as prostitutes and they used IV drugs. I started hanging around with them downtown and I began working the streets when I was 13 years old. You used to be able to get a lot of money for prostitution, so I thought I would work the streets so I could buy clothes, buy weed, and buy booze. The first time I did it, I felt so disgusted that an old man had touched me.

I took two showers, but I still felt dirty. I went back to my friend's hotel room because I wanted to get high. I needed something that would make me forget about it. My friend and I went into a public bathroom in the hotel and I snorted a few lines while she fixed herself. I really liked cocaine, so I kept doing it and I continued working the streets to get money for it.

I stopped working the streets for a few months and they transferred me to another group home. I was sexually assaulted by one of the older kids that lived there and at that time they didn't make your abusers leave if you were in care. It wasn't my fault and I actually had to live with my abuser. I didn't want to, so I ran away to a small northern community with this girl I knew from the streets and I stayed with her for about six months. She was into prostitution and heroin, but I didn't start doing heroin when I was staying with her.

I moved back into my group home and I was having a hard time being there. I was planning to meet up with my friend again and head down south, but I ended up getting restrained. I hitchhiked to meet her the next day, but she had left town without me. I ended up hitchhiking back home. A couple of weeks later an outreach worker came to my group home to tell me that she had died. I freaked out and I ran away. I went back to working the streets and that's when I started smoking crack.

I lived on the streets down south for a few months. It was so hard to be in a shelter and get booted out first thing in the morning, especially when it was cold outside. It was frustrating and I hated it so much that I'd always come back to my group home. I would be able to tough it out for a month or two at the most and then I'd be like "screw this, I can't do it". I was on the streets a lot. I stayed away from my group homes for months at a time and I would couch surf at friends' places. I basically hung out downtown on the streets during the day and usually all night. I'd go

out and make about a thousand dollars and do it all up in drugs. You used to be able to make \$100 a date working the street, but the drugs were more expensive then too.

I used to get bullied a lot in the group home and strangely enough the people on the streets were the most accepting of me. It wasn't like they were trying to use me because a lot of people out there felt sorry for me. They would try to get me to stay off the drugs, but I couldn't be working the streets and not be doing drugs. It usually goes hand in hand. I don't know anyone that works as a prostitute just for the money because it's horrible, disgusting, and dirty.

For street life in this community, I had it easy because I was really pretty when I was younger and I had no trouble making money or getting drugs. The biggest problem that I faced was being sick from withdrawal when I chose not to go out and work. I was in Ministry care and I was on independent living, so they would take me shopping because they knew I wouldn't buy food. If I didn't have food and I was hungry I would sell my ass to go buy food. I was pretty self-sufficient, even though I was all fucked up. I didn't even know about the Food Bank when I was on the streets. I went to the sandwich line once in awhile, but I usually had to be resourceful and make my own resources. When I was down south, I used to eat at a drop-in centre for women on the streets, but there weren't a lot of resources in this community like there is now.

I smoked crack for about a year and then I became curious, so one of my friends who did needles introduced me to them. It just seemed easier to put it in a needle, shake it, and shoot up, so I did that for a couple of years. One night these guys and I did over two 8-balls of coke and I started to get chest pains. I felt extremely anxious and I probably could've died, but I didn't really care back then. They got me some heroin to bring me down and I really liked the high, so I started doing heroin. I did that on and off for a year because I was in juvie most of the time for breaches of probation. I never really got into it that bad because I was always in jail.

I got thrown in jail for a robbery, so I was clean for two years. The time I spent in juvie was the most horrible experience in my life. It was co-ed, so there were guys trying to get sexual favours from me. I was like “hell no” because I wasn’t a slut; I was a ho. I did it for money, but I wasn’t a slut and I hated people disrespecting me because of what I went through with my parents. I used to scrap it out with guys and get locked in my cell for a couple of days. It was bad. The rest of the time was horrible because they fed me really fattening food and I got fatter than I was. I did learn how to clean when I was in juvie because they make you do it every day. I went to adult jail for the end of my sentence, which wasn’t as bad as it is now because you could smoke and wear your own clothes. It was easier being in an adult facility than in juvie.

When I got out of jail, I wanted to stay clean but I didn’t fit in with anyone so I went back to using. The methadone clinic had just opened and I heard from people that you could get free dope from there. All you had to do was use once and whine about how bad your habit was and they would hook you up. I got on the program and they gave me 30ml to start out with and it almost killed me. I got violently sick and I was throwing up for a whole day from drinking the methadone. I was staying at a group home then, so one of the workers took me to the clinic and they lowered my dose to 15ml. It still made me sick every day and I lost a lot of weight. I have struggled with my weight since I was a little girl so I thought it was great that the methadone was making me lose weight. I did that for about two years, but then I started seeing a guy and he wanted me to get off of it. I was able to wean down a bit but I ended up getting pregnant before I got off the methadone. The doctor had told me that my baby wouldn’t get that sick, so they kept me on it.

I didn’t have many supports when I was pregnant with my first child. I had social workers meet with me and try to get me to give my son up for adoption. I wasn’t using any illegal drugs

and I was doing the best that I could. I didn't know what I was doing wrong and I didn't think they had the right to take away my child and put him into an environment like the one I grew up in. I didn't want my kids to be in care or get raped. The Ministry had people take me out for coffee, but nobody taught me a damn thing because they were just going to take my baby. I went shopping for basic household goods and got everything I needed for my baby on my own. The plan was to take my baby at birth, so nobody helped me at all. I had to do it all by myself.

When my son was born, he went through some pretty bad withdrawal. The doctor lied to me because my son was very sick and he went through a rough time. He was in a special care nursery for about a month. After that I decided I was going to leave town to kick the methadone cold turkey. I didn't get to do that until my son was almost a year old because the Ministry knew about my past and they thought that would start using illegal drugs around my kid. I was on a supervision order and as soon as that order was over, I was down to 10ml of methadone. I moved to a smaller community and I disassociated myself from street people.

I stayed with a guy that was a major alcoholic, but he wasn't on the streets. He didn't do drugs every day, so I hung out with him and his friends. I disassociated myself from everyone else and I got off the methadone by myself. The doctors told me if you get off of this you're going to use. I said "fuck you, I'm not going to use". I had to do it all by myself. I had people trying to keep me down or just not believing in me, thinking I was a lost cause. But I did it myself and I kicked it cold turkey. I've been off of methadone for six years now, but the stigma of being an addict was still there. I had the Ministry in my life for a long time after that making many assumptions about me.

After I cleaned up and I was thinking with a clear head, I had to face all the stereotypes. I wasn't willing to let those people be right. I wanted to prove everyone wrong about the horrible



things they thought about me. When I get mad, I get really motivated to change. I was so angry and disgusted at myself, that I told myself that I couldn't do it anymore. Why did I ever think it was cool? Why did I ever want to be like this? I'm not one of those people that like to brag about being on the streets. I'm not like "Hi, I used to be a prostitute". I just try to keep that under wraps. I don't want to talk about it because it's embarrassing that I was there at one time in my life.

I had a really hard time. I cried a lot because it felt horrible being judged and having people think that I couldn't change; once an addict, always an addict. I don't believe that at all because I have a few beers once in awhile and it doesn't make me want to start doing heroin. It doesn't lead to me being drunk every single day; I don't crave alcohol. I was stressed out because I wasn't allowed to have a few drinks with my friends. I just wanted to chill and try to relax.

I decided not to use drugs when I was pregnant. The only drug I used was methadone with my first baby. I didn't even smoke when I was pregnant with my other three kids. I didn't drink or take drugs when I was pregnant with them because I think that it's important to give your children the best chance they can have in life. I've always tried to be good to my kids because I don't want them to grow up like I did. I think it was my kids that got me off the streets.

I had anger issues with people my age, so the Ministry thought I would have anger issues with my children. I love my kids. I have never been able to get mad at any of my children and I would divorce my husband if he ever treated my kids bad. That's another reason why being misjudged as a bad parent hurts even more. I have strong values about how I treat my children and it's completely opposite of what some people would think of me.

I've had a lot of emotional abuse in my life. When I got picked on by other people I felt like my mom and dad were right and I just hated myself. People have said that there's something

wrong with me or no one will ever like me. I've been called lazy, incompetent, and told that I would never get a job. It feels the same when I'm being judged by social workers and they think I'm not going to be a good parent because of my past. Being judged or bullied in any way is just really hard for me.

My oldest kid's dad used to beat the fuck out of me. He is a big guy and he used to beat me up so bad. Regardless of whether I could hold my own in a fight; kids shouldn't have to grow up around physical fighting. It is wrong. I couldn't stay with him because he thought it was okay for kids to see adults hitting one another. I left him because I didn't want the kids to see it. I have never fought in front of my children and the reason why I left my two abusive relationships was because they hit me in front of my kids. I had such a low opinion of myself back then that I didn't care if guys hit me. It was fine for them to beat me up, just don't do it in front of my kids or we're done. I care about my kids a lot and I don't want them to grow up like that.

It's hard because my two oldest children are in care of my parents. I started talking to my parents again because I wanted my kids to have family. I wanted them to have grandparents. My children didn't have any family on their dad's side because his family disowned me after I left him. I didn't have family growing up because of my parents. My mom was a well off crazy loon with a college degree so no one cared how she treated me. My parents both had good jobs and they own their house, but they were mean, crazy people so no one wanted to associate with them. I didn't live with my parents at the time and I was willing to get over how they treated me as a kid because it was in the past.

I had a roommate that ended up stealing from me. She stole two hundred bucks out of my wallet so we got into an argument that led to a fist fight. My kids were in their beds sleeping when the cops showed up. My roommate jumped off the balcony and charged me with assault, so

the cops took my kids to my parent's house. When I was in jail, my parents went to the courthouse and got custody of my kids. No one would help me. I went to the Ministry but there was no proof that my kids were being emotionally abused, so they left them with my parents.

*I'm done with my parents. They broke my trust for the last time when they took my two oldest kids when I was in jail. They're just not trustworthy. I'm trying to get my sons from them, so I'm fighting them in Court. I can't even believe I forgave them for the way they treated me when I was a kid and that I let them back into my life. My two youngest children live with my husband and me, but because of my past people assume I'm a terrible mother and I'm not.*

I had social workers think I was a complete loser for so many years. They would try to find every excuse in the book to take my kids from me. I know that they take kids out of bad situations, but other times they pick on people because of their past. For the past six years I've had to work my ass off just to prove things to people and it's exhausting to have to fight that much. I'd like to be able to let my guard down and relax. My house is spotless and I cook all my own food. When I have to work, I cook meals and freeze them. Now I have the freedom to do what I want so it's better. I have had to face a lot of judgment because of my life on the streets. It's just horrible because I got out. I wish it never happened and that I never met those people when I was 12 years old.

I still push myself to extremes. I go above and beyond to be a good parent. I have to take the bus to get my kids to daycare because I don't have a working vehicle. I got my Grade 12 a little while ago and I've had jobs off and on since I had my first child. I push myself so hard to not fit into those stigmas and stereotypes because of the emotional abuse I went through as a kid.

There's always room for improvement in people's lives and I want to move forward. I'm thinking about going to college in the future and taking social work. I want to get my diploma

and work with youth or homeless adults. I would like to teach them life skills that they never learned when they were growing up. I want to teach people how to get off the streets or how to get jobs after they get out of rehab because I went through it all alone. No one taught me how to be a good parent or how to find a place to live.

I do not want to be a frontline social worker because I don't want to take people's kids away from them even if they deserve it. I don't want to split families up or deny them welfare money. I want to help people who were in my situation at one time and make a difference. If I get paid less money to help people then it's totally worth it. I don't want to do what everyone else is doing. I'm sure people do a lot of good things in the system, but it's just not what I think people need. People need more than a toothbrush and a list of numbers to call. I would like to start my own business helping people. If it all backfires and doesn't work I can always go flip burgers at McDonalds, just as long as I don't have to go stand in the welfare line again.

### **Wisdom**

Life was good with my mom, but she was at home sick all the time. She had Hep C from a blood transfusion and she was all crippled up from fibromyalgia, so I felt like I had to support her. I didn't understand that she was sick and I took it the wrong way. I wouldn't listen and I would always mess things up by calling my mom names. I had a mom who cared for me, but I didn't respect her. I don't know why. It was probably the drugs talking. I started drinking and doing drugs at a young age, but I didn't feel comfortable being under the influence in front of my mom. It wasn't that I didn't have a place to go, but I felt that I had no place to go so I stayed out on the streets a lot of nights. I would mess things up with my mom and I would run to the streets for help. I thought that was where I had to be, so I had a lot of lonely nights out there.

It was pretty rough on the streets. It's not a place for kids even though a lot of kids are out there. Some people want to be gangsters, but others have no choice. I felt like I didn't have a choice and being a gangster was all I knew. Panhandling wasn't a big thing for me. I only did it a couple of times because I knew that I had to do something to get money. I wasn't involved in gang activity; it was my own activity. I had to sell drugs but it wasn't something I wanted to do. Sometimes you have no choice at all. It was like, do I starve today or do I find something to make money today? By the time I was 12 or 13 years old, I had a cell phone, a pager, and I was making my own drug money.

It's a rough life out there and people don't understand that sometimes that's all they know. That's all I knew at the time was to sell drugs, do drugs, drink, fight, and steal. I did what I had to do to survive. I'm not saying it's okay, but it was so hard because I didn't have the education or anyone to look up to but the streets. I had no food, no clothes, and I had support from a few people but after 5:00 they went home and I was still on the streets. People told me to be tough, but it was hard to be tough when you're on the streets by yourself and it's a dark, lonely path. The only thing I could do was start to drink to drown out the pain.

I used to smoke weed but I didn't get into hardcore drugs. When I was 13 years old, I overdosed on a cocopuff. I don't know if I'm allergic to cocaine or the mix, but it wasn't good. It must have been a bad trip because when I was in the hospital my heart rate was 195 beats per minute and I wasn't even moving. It was a harsh experience, so I tried to get off the weed after that. I overdosed twice on the streets and I still smoked.

It was very hard being on the streets in this community because it's north. The winters were hard for me because it was very cold and there was nowhere to go a lot of times. I would want to get clothes because it was so cold out. Even if it was warm during the day, as soon as night hit I

was cold again, especially if I was sitting around. The concrete is really cold, so you get cold. It wasn't as bad when I was walking around. I've seen people freeze to death on these streets because they had no place to go. It's very extreme.

I learned how to survive by watching other people that were on the streets. I saw that one guy used cardboard and paper to insulate himself, so sometimes I would get garbage out of the dumpster just to stay warm. Anything to keep warm was good. I would sometimes go to a store and steal a blanket. I slept in parkades and under stairs a lot of times. I would also sleep in laundromats, public buildings, and sheds to stay warm. One time when it was way too cold out, I stayed at my school and slept under the stairs. I stayed there for 18 hours, but I didn't care because I didn't want to sleep outside.

Back then there were no places for young kids to sleep. There were only shelters for older people. I had places to hang out at and eat during the day, but there was nothing at night. I was on my own. That's when the drugs came out. Starving wasn't the biggest issue for me. It was more about not having a place to sleep. If you were smart enough, you could find a soup line-up. I would get hungry, but I wasn't going to starve to death. In my situation, I would have rather had a place to sleep than a place to eat. I needed to get out of the cold or rain because I was sick a lot too.

When I was kid, my support was a cop telling me to go home because I was too young to be on the streets. My comeback was "fuck you, this is my house, get out of my house". I had an extremely bad attitude against cops because of my experiences with them. I was fitting the description all the time. It was like come on; I didn't rob an old lady for her purse because that wasn't my style. I would steal from stores, but I wouldn't rob an old lady even if I was hurting for money. I never had a style like that and I'm thankful because I wouldn't want to hurt anyone.

I always respected people when I was on the streets. If someone asked me to get off their steps, I wouldn't try to pick a fight with them. Respect was a big thing for me. A lot of my friends didn't have it, but I did because I was brought up that way. I was taught to have respect and you will get respected. When I was young, I would hear some really good advice, but I didn't take it. It didn't go in one ear and out the other; it went in one ear and I didn't know what to do with it. I couldn't comprehend it. I was beat with a silver spoon but I wasn't fed with it. I would sit and listen when people would talk. I wanted to hear what people had to say, especially my elders. If you really listen to what people have been through, you can hear them. Listening was definitely a support for me.

I got helped out a few times on the streets. I remember scrounging around outside the grocery store looking for some change. I didn't have any drugs to sell; I had nothing. I finally got about 60 cents so I went to buy a bun in the store. I didn't even steal because I didn't want to go to jail. I had some charges and I only had a couple of more chances left. When I was eating my bun outside of the store a guy pulled up in a car. I thought it was a cop, but it was just some guy being nice. He gave me a bunch of toonies so I could buy myself something to eat. I thought it was cool because I decided not to steal that day and I got something to eat. I went straight to McDonalds because it was the cheapest place to eat when you're starving. I remember that I got a full meal out of it and I was full. I didn't care about the price. I got to eat.

I lost touch with my mom for awhile. The only time I actually got to see her was when I was in trouble with the law or when I overdosed. I did a lot of couch surfing with friends and family. I stayed with anyone who had a couch that was comfortable. It was better than the concrete and a sweater for a pillow.

Sometimes it wasn't so bad being on the streets. It was fun to sleep outside in the summertime because it wasn't as cold. I liked that there were a lot of people on the streets. My siblings were a lot older than me, so I didn't have anyone to play with as a kid. I had a lot of friends on the streets and it was fun to get high, drunk, and get into trouble with my homies. I liked to hang out with a lot of people, have a lot of fun, and get in a lot of shit! It was an adrenaline rush when I did something bad. I was a daredevil as a kid and now I wouldn't try half the things I used to do. I remember going all the way across town when I was only five years old. I had to cross bridges and go up hills to get there. That was a far journey for me, but I have always been like that. I used to hitchhike to different towns because I needed a place to stay. I was picked up by some creepy people, but nothing ever happened. It was bad, especially around here because of the Highway of Tears. I could have been a part of that.

I was stable off and on for a few years. I had a daughter when I was 14 years old, so I knew that I had to try to be a man. I didn't want to make excuses not to be there for her. I didn't want to have the image that I was too messed up to raise my kid. My dad used to be an alcoholic so that may have had an effect on me. I remember how I felt when my dad wasn't there and I didn't want my kids to feel like that. I tried my hardest, but sometimes it didn't work out.

I went to jail when I was 16 years old because the charges had finally come up. I did a grab and run from a store and I got beat up by the cops. After that I was with one of my friends who was stealing and we got caught. I didn't know he was stealing, but the cops said I was an accessory. I had a big knife on me for protection from the streets, so I put it on the table before they accused me of trying to use it as a weapon. I was always smart that way. I wouldn't pull it out to threaten people because I knew it would be a harder sentence.



I was only in jail for one week, but that was the hardest week of my life because I had no freedom. I wasn't scared of people because everyone I knew in jail was my friend. I had been around murderers before and I had no problem fighting. My probation officer asked me to give him one good reason why he should let me out of jail and I was like because I have a kid. He let me out and I never went back.

I'm still confused about how I got off of the streets. I found my culture and I never looked back. I needed something because church wasn't working for me. I couldn't just pray and think that my life was going to be good, so I got into my culture. I went to sweats and did powwow dancing for awhile. It made me the person that I am now. Growing up in a private school, I was taught that Native culture was bad and sweats were evil. I didn't understand because I was so young. If it was so evil why did I quit being derogatory against women, raise my own kid, and quit drinking and doing drugs? Break dancing was also a big part of my life. It definitely helped me get off the streets because I started making money from it. I got to travel and perform at different events. I used hip hop as a way to help my life.

I really thought about it and I realized there were people out there to help me. All I did was ask for help. I wouldn't ask for help and then go screw up again because that's why people don't want to help you anymore. I had that one person and it was very powerful. One of my Elders helped me get off the streets and I look up to him as a dad now. He had rules that I hated and I had to do things that I dreaded all the time, but look at me now. Actually there have been a few father figures in my life story. They taught me how to be a man and to take responsibility.

When I was trying to change my life, I had the same people bringing me down. I was getting out of it and my buddies would still want me around because I was good at what I did. I kept doing that until someone told me "you have to lose the people that are keeping you down". I

didn't comprehend it back then because I thought they were my homies for life, but when I really thought about it I realized that my homies weren't around when I was broke. When you have money everyone is your friend, but when you're broke nobody cares. It's very true when you are on the streets.

Based on my experiences, people that have given up are going to keep you down. I was trying to do something with my life, so they made fun of me and said I was acting better than them. When I got off the streets and started to work with my Band my buddies turned on me. It was very hard to get off the streets because of my homies. They were like my real brothers and I felt like I was leaving them behind. They were suffering and I was doing better. The hardest thing was leaving my friends behind, but the easiest thing was not sleeping on the streets. No one wants to literally sleep on the streets; it sucks.

A couple of years ago life got crazy again because I lost five people in less than a year. My mom passed away and that busted up my heart because I'm a momma's boy. Shortly after that my girlfriend's mom passed away and I was so messed up. Then when life couldn't get any harder my buddy got shot in the neck and he got crippled up for life. I was going nuts and then I lost my brother and sister too. That kicked me right down to the ground. I was so messed up that I couldn't work for over a year. I was on the verge of going back to the streets because I had nothing. I had my kids, but I had gotten hit so hard. I cried two years of my life away over it and I just fought through it.

You have to fight and take challenges as they are. You have to fight to live and it's a harsh reality. I really don't know what keeps me going. Obviously my kids, but I totally felt like I could give up. Like where's my break? I bettered my life for this? I thought that maybe I healed that long just so I could deal with this now. I've dealt with it, but it still hurts and I'm not over it.

I think I'm a really strong person now. It's hard to stress me out and I think that's my problem sometimes. There was a drive-by shooting near our house and I wasn't scared. I don't stress about big things, so I don't know if it's a strength or weakness. I'm still trying to figure that out. The more you cry and pout about your life; it isn't going to make you better because I used to do it all the time. You have to strengthen up or you're going to stay homeless. Even if you only have one person in this world that loves you, you can get through it. I've done it.

### **Summary**

The stories provide a co-construction of the experiences of eight street involved youth living in north central British Columbia, reflecting my interpretations of what was presented in the interviews. The stories contain a narrative truth located in time, space, and personal experience. It is my hope that the participants' voices were portrayed in the stories in a way that was both honouring and respectful. Chapter Five will move to the next level of analysis, involving the content from the stories and answers to the secondary research questions. A categorical-content analysis in Phase Two focuses on patterns between the participants' stories, followed by a meta-analysis in Phase Three that connects the overarching issues found in all the participants' narratives.

### Chapter Five: Categories, Themes, and Metathemes

In Phase Two, a categorical-content analysis was used with the stories from the first stage of analysis to provide a more detailed understanding of the participants' experiences. Phrases or selections that conveyed meaning about the experiences of being street involved in the North were color coded and grouped conceptually. These categories were used to answer the secondary research questions: What specific challenges do youth face in being street involved in this geographical context? What resources, both personal and community-based, assist them in living without a permanent home?

After multiple readings of the narratives, a few broad content categories were defined with narrower themes assigned to each relevant category. A category was named when selections from seven or more of the participants' stories were included in the themes found within the categories. Five main categories were identified: *Life Before the Streets*, *Challenges Associated With Street Life*, *Supports*, *Personal Qualities*, and *Moving On*. Based on my understandings of the threads or patterns across the stories, sections that were most relevant to the secondary research questions were selected from the narratives and organized into themes. The themes consisted of phrases or words from four or more participants' narratives looking at the connections between their stories. The themes found within the categories are described in the following section and illustrated with participants' quotes that were most representative of each theme.

Table 2

*Overview of Categories and Themes*

Research Questions	Categories	Themes
Please tell me your story of being street involved.	Life Before The Streets	Trauma: It Hurt so Much Parental Instability: I Didn't Understand Ministry Care: The Extended Contract
What challenges do you face in being street involved in this community?	Challenges Associated With Street Life	Survival: Trying to Survive Facing Judgment Safety and Intimidation: It's Unpredictable Mental Health and Addictions: A Vicious Cycle Loneliness: A Dark Lonely Path Limited Experience: It's All I Knew Leaving the Streets: A Lot of Barriers
What resources, both personal and community-based, assist them in living without a permanent home?	Supports	Connection: I Had That One Person Community Resources Passions: Healthy Expressions
	Personal Qualities	Independent: On My Own Motivated: I Wanted Something More Inner Strength: My Strength is Me Respectful: Have It to Receive It Hopeful: Opportunity is Around Responsible: No Excuses Capacity to Learn Street Smarts: I'm Not a Pawn Confident: I Know I Can Empathic Caring: Willing to Help
	Moving On	Stability: Settling Down Education and Employment: Got to Have Goals Reconnection: Back to My Life

### **Life Before The Streets**

This category included environmental and contextual factors that had significance for the youth during their childhoods including personal struggles, family dynamics, and for some, the experiences of being raised in the care of the Ministry.

#### **Trauma: It Hurt so Much**

*After about a week and a half my parents turned the power off in the shed and they locked me out of the house ... I would get food rations ... but then they just stopped feeding me altogether. Even the dog was treated better than I was. It was a struggle because I wanted to survive, but I also wanted to be a part of the family. (Nothing but Me)*

In the category of life before the streets, the participants discussed early experiences of trauma that included neglect, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. The negative effects of childhood trauma were revealed in over half the of the youths' stories. Often, the abusers were the participants' primary caregivers, including biological or step parents, but also members of the extended family. Neglect was described as being deprived of basic human needs including food, shelter, and love. Ongoing threats and verbal insults left lasting emotional scars for one youth, "The abuse happened every day, so I would do self-harm because it hurt so much" (I Refuse To Be A Victim). She described how those early experiences affected her later in life:

*When I got picked on by other people I felt like my mom and dad were right and I just hated myself ... I had such a low opinion of myself back then that I didn't care if guys hit me. It was fine for them to beat me up. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

Past trauma has shaped the participants' belief systems with respect to their understandings of family and relationships as half of the youth described feelings of hurt and distrust of others based on previous physical or sexual violations. These participants also revealed how early experiences of abuse have influenced their present coping patterns. For example, one of the participants linked her current substance use to the sexual trauma she suffered in the past. She spoke about crying out her emotions whenever she was under the influence of alcohol.

Furthermore, she reflected how those experiences forced her to grow up too quickly. She explained, *“I feel like I’m an old person right now”* (Alone). The trauma the participants suffered at young ages has deeply affected each of them and has left lasting impressions in some way or another.

### **Parental Instability: I Didn’t Understand**

*When I got out of care my mom was harsh drunk and then she turned to crack, so I left her when I was 16 years old.* (Not Giving Up)

This theme addressed the effects of parental instability on the participants during their childhoods. Many of the youth recalled their parents being absent or unable to provide care for them, most often due to addictions, but also because of single-parent homes or health concerns. Parents struggling with substance use and gambling addictions did not provide the youth with a safe, stable home life. Parental addictions were often related to early experiences of trauma or abandonment for the participants. The ongoing chaos and unpredictability in the family of origin forced some of the youth into Ministry care for protection, while for others it encouraged them to turn to the streets as a safer alternative. One youth explained:

*I didn’t leave my dad’s house because I was a rebelling teen; I was getting abused. My father had a problem with alcohol so it was hard to deal with. I’d get beat up for coming home fifteen minutes late, so after awhile I had enough.* (Motivation)

Instability was also defined by some of the participants as limited supervision or structure that came with having a sole caregiver or minimal parental involvement. *“My dad mostly raised us kids because my mom was always at bingo. I hardly remember her being around when I was a kid”* (Willing). Parental health concerns created unstable home environments, blurring the lines between adult and child roles and responsibilities. One participant shared his struggle to understand his mother’s illness. At a young age, he didn’t comprehend her health concerns and felt that he had to support her.

### Ministry Care: The Extended Contract

*I was in care until I was 12 years old, so I stayed in different group homes. I don't remember much because I blacked out a lot of my childhood ... it was different at that group home because they treated me like a human being. (Not Giving Up)*

The theme of Ministry care included the participants' experiences in foster care and group homes. Issues of safety, peer influence, and instability were discussed by the youth who were in care of the Ministry. In group homes, threats to safety included being victim to bullying, assaulted by other residents, as well as negative experiences with staff, including the use of aggression and intimidation tactics. One participant disclosed:

*I was sexually assaulted by one of the older kids that lived there and at that time they didn't make your abusers leave if you were in care. It wasn't my fault and I actually had to live with my abuser. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

She recognized how this traumatic experience influenced her to run away from her group home and become further involved in street life.

Peer relationships were viewed in terms of positive and negative influences. One participant described a sense of belonging and comradeship from living with other youth dealing with similar hardships. He explained, "Some of the kids I met in that group home are my best friends to this day" (Nothing But Me). However, there was increased exposure to negative influences, resulting in mischief such as the destruction of property in the group home as well as initiation into the drug or sex trade.

*I was put into a group home when I was 12 years old. All the other girls living in the group home were working as prostitutes and they used IV drugs. I started hanging around with them downtown and I began working the streets when I was 13 years old. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

In addition to issues of safety and peer influence, feelings of uncertainty and instability were expressed by those who were placed on extended care agreements or were transferred to several group homes over the course of their involvement with the Ministry.



### Challenges Associated With Street Life

This category included a variety of personal and environmental challenges experienced by the youth while on the streets including their struggles for survival, safety, and overall health. There were additional challenges that made it difficult for the youth to permanently leave street life such as poverty, limited experience, and minimal resources or supports.

#### Survival: Trying to Survive

*I stayed anywhere that I could and I moved from town to town. I used to stay with friends that I would just meet, but I have also slept in the bush, in cubbyholes, and on the streets.*  
(Alone)

The theme of trying to survive was prevalent in all of the stories as the participants discussed their struggles to navigate life on the streets. Every day was a challenge to find the basic necessities - food, clothing, and shelter. Many of the youth described transient lifestyles where they had to move around in search of resources; this involved relocating to different communities.

The extreme climate was one of the biggest challenges of being street involved in the North. While sleeping outside during the summer months was described as fun by one of the participants, finding shelter to survive the cold harsh winters was often difficult. He explained, *“The winters were hard for me because it was very cold and there was nowhere to go a lot of the time ... I’ve seen people freeze to death on these streets because they had no place to go. It’s very extreme”* (Wisdom). Many of the participants couch surfed with friends or family and others slept at shelters to stay warm and dry. Despite the cold climate, the participants reported sleeping outside when they had no other options. Some slept on the concrete, under stairwells, in the bush, in sheds, outside churches, and in laundromats. Two of the youth described walking the streets at night as a way to warm up and remain safe.

While on the streets, all of the youth engaged in some form of criminal activity to make money to support themselves. Involvement in the drug or sex trade, violence, and theft were described as survival strategies to obtain money or possessions. *“I had to sell drugs but it wasn’t something I wanted to do. Sometimes you have no choice at all. It was like do I starve today or do I find something to make money today”* (Wisdom).

Two youth reported panhandling for money, but it wasn’t a common form of income for either of them. The various survival tactics chosen by the youth provided them with money to buy food, personal hygiene products, transportation, accommodations, and often supported their substance use.

### **Facing Judgment**

*The staff wanted me to go to school, but the principal at the junior high told me that I couldn’t go to school if I didn’t have a home. I didn’t think he could do that, so I went back to the shelter which was like my home and I talked to them about it.* (Nothing But Me)

This theme addressed the stereotypes and stigma the youth faced because of their street status or lifestyle choices. In some way or another, all of the participants felt judged by friends, partners, family and society regarding their street involvement. Assumptions were made by family members and society about the youths’ reasons for being on the streets and there was limited acceptance of their way of life. Many of the youth shared experiences of being denied access to education or employment opportunities. One participant described his experience, *“For me, they see gaps in my resume, asking what I have done for the years not on my resume. When I tell them I have been living on the streets they have nothing for me”* (Motivation).

The judgment was perceived by participants as continuing as they tried to make changes in their lives and transition off of the streets. Several of the youth shared feelings of shame, embarrassment, and regret for some of their past choices; however, they also expressed

frustration toward others who continue to make assumptions about their integrity based on past behaviours. One participant shared her struggle:

*I've been off of methadone for six years now, but the stigma of being an addict was still there. I had the Ministry in my life for a long time after that making many assumptions about me ... I've had to work my ass off just to prove things to people. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

### **Safety and Intimidation: It's Unpredictable**

*I feel safer in the shelter than roaming the streets. You can get in a lot of trouble saying the wrong thing downtown ... I don't want to get in the sex trade because I heard that a few girls went missing last year and their bodies were found. (Willing)*

The participants addressed concerns for their safety that came with the unpredictable and unsafe nature of street life. While there were times when the youth were the aggressors, most of them identified being victims to threats, manipulation, and bullying. There was influence to sell drugs or steal from others. For example, *"When you are on the streets people try to get you to sell drugs or rob someone and I don't want to do that"* (Not Giving Up). For some of the participants there was fear for their safety at shelters, while for others it was perceived as more unsafe walking the streets. The likelihood of being robbed or assaulted was a harsh reality for many of the youth. One participant recalled being bear maced and getting jumped for no reason while on the streets.

Several of the youth reported being involved in verbal and physical altercations, *"If you can't defend yourself, good luck being on the streets because you'll never make it"* (Motivation). Involvement in the drug scene or sex trade increased the risk for violence and intimidation. The potential for bad dates, competition for business among the sex trade workers, and paying debts to drug dealers were discussed. In addition, two youth reflected on the dangers of hitchhiking along the Highway of Tears because of the people that have gone missing over the years.

## Mental Health and Addictions: A Vicious Cycle

*I ended up drinking because I was so stressed out. I was trying for so long and I couldn't get anywhere ... I always drink because I'm depressed; I never get to see my kids, I have no home, and my boyfriend hits me. When I drink and do drugs, I don't think about my problems. (Struggling And Unsure)*

This major theme was found in every participant story as all of the youth discussed the challenges associated with mental health or addictions. Three of the participants described a relationship between their substance use and mental health concerns. Two youth discussed using substances to deal with symptoms associated with depression. For another youth, he shared his struggles with suicidal ideation and drug induced psychosis. He recalled, *"I started to get voices in my head ... It was like I was going through hell because everything was demon-like"* (Nothing But Me). He struggled to comply with medications because, *"I couldn't visualize very well and I would become zombified"* (Nothing But Me) and returned to using substances despite not wanting to. These participants described the ongoing battle as they tried to manage mental health issues, environmental stressors, and their reliance on substances.

Substance use was described as a coping strategy to forget past trauma or to escape the current stressors associated with street life. One participant shared, *"I always cry when I'm drunk; I cry out my feelings about what happened to me when I was young"* (Alone). There was ongoing influence from others to use alcohol and drugs in shelters and within the street community. For example, *"It's a struggle to stay clean and sober because everyone I know on the streets uses alcohol and drugs"* (Struggling And Unsure). The exposure and pressure from others created additional difficulties for the youth to decrease or abstain from substance use. The negative health risks associated with substance use defined by the participants included overdose, addictions, and general health problems.

### **Loneliness: A Dark Lonely Path**

*I had no food, no clothes, and I had support from a few people but after 5:00 they went home and I was still on the streets ... people told me to be tough, but it was hard to be tough when you're on the streets by yourself. (Wisdom)*

This theme addressed feelings of loneliness that stemmed from early life experiences and intensified as the youth struggled to survive on the streets. The perceived lack of support from loved ones or professionals led to increased feelings of isolation. One participant described:

*It wasn't that I didn't have a place to go, but I felt that I had no place to go ... I would mess things up with my mom and I would run to the streets for help. I thought that was where I had to be, so I had a lot of lonely nights out there. (Wisdom)*

Unhealthy relationships with family members or partners plagued by abuse, substance use, or infidelity intensified feelings of loneliness and the ability to trust others.

*He treated me like shit and started hitting me when I was pregnant ... he cheated on me a couple of weeks after I lost the baby. My boyfriend isn't a support for me right now because all he wants to do is drink and he keeps on leaving me. (Struggling And Unsure)*

While on the streets, participants spoke about their reliance on friends or a street family for protection, companionship, and connection. However, betrayal and manipulation were common for the participants who were introduced to the drug and sex trade by individuals they considered friends. One youth described street people as being untrustworthy based on some of his experiences, “*When you have money everyone is your friend, but when you're broke nobody cares. It's very true when you are on the streets*” (Wisdom). Many of the youth did not to rely on services and were less likely to seek help while they were on the streets due to feelings of mistrust towards others. This situation added to increased feelings of isolation, alienation, and perceived lack of support.

### **Limited Experience: It's all I Knew**

*That's all I knew at the time was to sell drugs, do drugs, drink, fight, and steal. I did what I had to do to survive. I'm not saying it's okay, but it was so hard because I didn't have the education or anyone to look up to but the streets. (Wisdom)*

The youth addressed limited knowledge and life experience as being a challenge on the streets. The majority of the participants first became street involved as adolescents, some as young as 12 years old. Some of the youth described entering street life at a time in their lives when they lacked maturity, education, and life experience. Due to their young ages and socioeconomic status, they had limited employment opportunities and supportive housing options. The youth did not have access to the same financial supports as street involved adults.

One participant shared his struggles:

*There was low income housing, but I was still in high school and I wasn't making any money ... I have been looking for work for almost a year now. If you don't have the experience you are not going to get hired" (Motivation).*

Some of the participants moved from their home towns to a larger community so they could access resources for food and shelter, which presented further struggles as they had limited knowledge and awareness of the services available or how to locate specific resources. For example, *"It used to be a struggle for me because I didn't know about the woman's shelter and I hardly knew anyone in town"* (Willing). Furthermore, these participants left the familiarity of their home communities and the few support systems they had.

### **Leaving the Streets: A lot of Barriers**

*I just got cut off of welfare a couple of weeks ago so I've been trying to find a job ... but there's nothing out there ... I just found out I'm pregnant so no one is going to hire me. (Struggling And Unsure)*

The challenge of leaving the streets was a theme found in all of the participants' stories. There were several obstacles that the youth described as making it difficult to transition off of the

streets. Both poverty and addictions were concerns for many of the participants. Limited employment opportunities and affordable housing made it challenging for many of the youth to permanently leave street life. The youth from smaller communities who had migrated to larger centres in search of employment and housing found themselves on the streets because of limited resources. While there were more emergency resources available in larger communities, opportunities for stable housing and work were described as very limited. One youth shared:

*I moved back to this community a year ago because there was no housing back home ... I tried everywhere, so I came back here to find a place to live ... I've been moving from shelter to shelter for the past few months. (Struggling And Unsure)*

Two youth discussed having little or no support from loved ones to help them transition off the streets. Family members and friends were described as unstable because of their street involvement or substance abuse problems. The youth struggling with addictions and those deeply entrenched in street life were faced with further challenges. Some described street life as all they knew, which made it difficult for them to leave the familiarity and comfort of the street community. The struggle of leaving street friends or family behind was linked to expressed concerns regarding a loss of connection, safety, and belonging. One youth shared his experience:

*When I got off the streets and started to work with my Band my buddies turned on me. It was very hard to get off the streets because of my homies. They were like my real brothers and I felt like I was leaving them behind. They were suffering and I was doing better. (Wisdom)*

### **Supports**

This category included a range of supports that helped the youth manage difficult experiences as they navigated life on the streets and attempted to permanently exit street life. These supports included positive relationships with others, community resources and services, as well as the integration of healthy activities.

### **Connection: I Had that One Person**

*I really thought about it and I realized that there were people out there to help me. All I did was ask for help. I had that one person and it was very powerful. One of my Elders helped me get off the streets and I look up to him as a dad now. (Wisdom)*

The need for connection was a common theme addressed by the youth. Connection referred to emotional support, acceptance, and a sense of belonging received through relationships. One youth shared:

*Strangely enough the people on the streets were the most accepting of me. It wasn't like they were trying to use me because a lot of people out there felt sorry for me. They would try to get me to stay off the drugs, but I couldn't be working the streets and not be doing drugs. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

The participants described the positive influence of meaningful relationships with individuals they trusted and who have helped them out. Many relied on friends or their street family for protection, understanding, and comfort while on the streets. “*One of the first things my friend told me when I got on the street was never to sell crack because I would end up in one of two places; jail or shot ... so he showed me the way*” (Nothing But Me).

Children were also identified as sources of support as some of the participants found the strength and motivation to transition off of the streets so they could be involved in their children's lives. Other supports that were identified by the youth included elders, staff at community agencies, and sometimes strangers. “*The staff at the youth shelter were really awesome people. They would do their best to help you with whatever you wanted to do in life*” (Nothing But Me). One of the youth acknowledged how the transition from street life was easier because of the guidance he received from a few father figures in his life.

### **Community Resources**

*There are resources here that have helped me out a lot. I have had people help me with job skills and there are places to have a shower, eat, and get clothes. You just don't get those services in smaller communities. (Motivation)*



This theme addressed the community agencies and services that the participants accessed for support while on the street. The youth typically relied on emergency services that provided food and shelter. Free meals offered at shelters, various drop-in centres, and churches in the community were the main sources of food for some of the youth. Shelters were accessed for temporary accommodations as well as long-term housing. The youth could access laundry and cooking facilities at various community agencies as explained by one of the participants, *“I usually eat at the youth drop-in centre for breakfast because the meals are pretty decent. There is an open fridge, so I can make my own food”* (Not Giving Up). Community agencies offered personal hygiene products and clothing to those that were in need of resources. Other community services utilized by the youth included employment training and supportive housing programs.

While there were community agencies for street involved youth, some of the participants rarely accessed these services for support. Participants described shelters as being overcrowded, and at times, unsafe due to the unpredictability of other residents under the influence of substances. Some of the youth avoided community agencies because of problems with staff or other street involved people. For example, *“I stay in the shelters once in awhile, but I don’t like staying in them because there are too many people ... the staff are snobby and there are a lot of drunks”* (Alone). The limited availability of services after business hours presented further challenges as there were few options at night.

Three participants reflected on the lack of resources for youth when they first became street involved ten years ago. Specifically, there were no emergency youth shelters to sleep in, so they were forced to stay on the streets or couch surf. One youth recalled, *“I went to the sandwich line once in awhile, but I usually had to be resourceful and make my own resources ... there weren’t a lot of resources in this community like there is now”* (I Refuse To Be A Victim). These

participants acknowledged an improvement in services, and opportunities for street involved youth in recent years. However, one participant recognized a greater need for services to help youth transition off of the streets as she didn't find it useful to only be offered hygiene products and a list of phone numbers.

### **Passions: Healthy Expressions**

*I'm still confused about how I got off the streets. I found my culture and I never looked back ... I went to sweats and did pow wow dancing for awhile. It made me the person I am now. (Wisdom)*

This theme addressed different strategies the participants utilized as a way to manage the stress in their lives. Music, dance, spirituality, culture, and poetry were identified as outlets that helped the youth get through difficult times: “*There were a lot of lonely nights, but I got through it writing poetry*” (Motivation). These creative expressions were positive coping strategies that provided comfort and support. One youth explained, “*I didn't have much, but I had a discman that I could listen to whenever I wanted to escape*” (Nothing But Me). Some of the youth successfully integrated these types of healthy activities into their routines instead of relying on the more negative coping strategies of substance use and criminal activity. One of the participants reflected, “*One of the best things about being here is there is some kind of music that you have access to. I have access to be able to express myself in healthy ways rather than falling in with the mainstream*” (Nothing But Me). Involvement in prosocial activities was integral for those who have transitioned off of the streets. For example, one participant focused on break dancing and involvement in his Aboriginal culture to create positive change in his life.

### Personal Qualities

This category included several personal qualities the youth viewed as strengths that helped them to manage the challenges associated with being on the streets including motivation, hope, responsibility, and street smarts.

#### Independent: On My Own

*Not being in my parent's house hindered me, but it also helped me out in a lot of ways. It made me very independent and I learned that I need to do my own thing to survive.*  
(Motivation)

Several participants discussed difficult childhood experiences such as parental addiction issues, trauma, and ministry involvement, which forced some of the youth to take care of themselves and taught them not to rely on others for support. Many described being self-supporting at early ages as they made the decision to leave their homes for safety reasons. One youth recalled:

*I tried to report the abuse ... but in Social Services eyes it didn't count as a beating back then ... it was so horrible living with my parents that I actually lied and said I was getting molested to get out of the house.* (I Refuse To Be A Victim)

This youth perceived her home environment as unsafe, and when she did not receive the support she needed, she took steps to ensure her own safety.

When the participants transitioned to the streets, they believed that they had the freedom to make their own choices. With limited rules and structure, the youth attempted to function independently, working to keep safe and get their needs met. *"If I didn't have food and I was hungry, I'd sell my ass to go buy food. I was pretty self-sufficient even though I was all fucked up"* (I Refuse To Be A Victim). Many of the youth chose to work through difficult times without help from others. One youth explained, *"I've been holding my own for a long time; I had to learn to be tough ... I don't depend on services because I had to grow up too fast and it's all I've*

*known*” (Alone). There was a trend among the participants to be financially independent from their family of origin; to rely on themselves during tough emotional experiences; and many attempted to decrease or abstain from substance use without support from services.

### **Motivated: I Wanted Something More**

*I wasn't willing to let those people be right. I wanted to prove everyone wrong about the horrible things they thought about me. When I get mad, I get really motivated to change ... There's always room for improvement in people's lives and I want to move forward. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

This theme addressed several youths' willingness and commitment to move forward. Guided by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, the participants were motivated to carry on in life. Intrinsic motivation from within the participants included a desire to become a better person, to maintain an optimistic attitude, and to strive for congruence between their values and actions:

*I have to get up every day and tell myself to do something because if you lose the motivation to get up then you are not going to make it anymore. You are going to be street involved for the rest of your life and I didn't want that. I don't want to see that happen for the other youth around, so I try to help them out as much as possible. I am motivated to be a better person. (Motivated)*

Those participants motivated by extrinsic factors were driven to accomplish specific goals in education, employment, or recovery from addictions. Three participants were motivated to change their lives because of their children. For example, “*I was able to get off the drugs because of my daughter. I wanted her to be proud of me and be able to say that her father has done good things*” (Motivation). Another youth believed that it was her kids that got her off of the streets.

### **Inner Strength: My Strength is Me**

*It is my inner strength, my spirit, my ashay that keeps me going ... I have nothing and I'm pretty much happy with it. As long as I still have me. (Nothing But Me)*

The theme of inner strength encompassed the essence or spirit of the individual. For example, one youth stated, *“My strength is me. I just live day by day”* (Alone). It involved the willpower and commitment to stay true to themselves; having the self-discipline and strength to make decisions or pursue goals that were in line with the youths’ values and beliefs. One youth discussed his will to keep on living at a time when he wanted to give up. Another participant described inner strength as his determination and perseverance to work through and overcome the hardships in life. He defined inner strength as taking challenges as they came and not giving up. He explained:

*I was on the verge of going back to the streets because I had nothing ... I cried two years of my life away over it and I just fought through it. You have to fight and take challenges as they are. I think I am a really strong person now. (Wisdom)*

### **Respect: Have It to Receive It**

*I always respected people when I was on the streets ... I would sit and listen when people would talk. I wanted to hear what people had to say, especially my elders. If you really listen to what people have been through, you can hear them. (Wisdom)*

In this theme, the participants discussed respect which took on different meanings. For one youth, respect was viewed as a reciprocal relationship in that he believed that he had to have respect for others to be given it in return. Being respectful meant treating others in a way that he would like to be treated and by listening when people spoke and being considerate of boundaries. For example, he was never willing to steal from people when he had no money or he was hungry. Another participant described respect as being appreciative of help and not taking advantage of those who offer support. She explained, *“I don’t want to stay at her place and eat her food because I know it’s just taking more food out her kid’s mouths”* (Willing). The youth discussed being respectful in relationships, and for one youth that meant being patient and understanding of other peoples struggles.

### **Hopeful: Opportunity is Around**

*It would take me a couple of weeks of lazing around and feeling like my life wasn't worth it, but something else would come up and then I would think maybe there is hope. There's always opportunity around; it's just a matter of taking it. (Motivation)*

The need to be hopeful was a theme for many of the participants. Despite their bleak circumstances, hope was held by the youth as they described possibilities for the future. They expressed wants, ambitions, expectations, and the belief that the future would improve. One participant's hope for a different future came from other family members that turned their lives around. She explained, "*My brothers are doing well and that's what I want. I don't want to live this way for all of my life*" (Willing). Another participant spoke about his belief in karma, which guided him to do as much as he could to help others with the hope that his good actions would come back to him in some way.

Opportunities that had arrived in the past at times when some youth felt like giving up, provided optimism for new opportunities developing in the future. One participant shared his experience of being at the lowest point in his life and not giving up because of his belief that things would get better. Another youth shared a similar experience, "*It's hard because I don't really have anything at all. It makes me want to cry man. I came back here because I wanted to do music*" (Nothing But Me). Despite his belief of having nothing, he remained hopeful that his music would provide new opportunities for him. All of the participants envisioned a life off of the streets, which reflects a sense of hope that their situations will improve.

### **Responsible: No Excuses**

*I decided not to use drugs when I was pregnant ... I think it's important to give your children the best chance they can have in life. I've always tried to be good to my kids because I don't want them to grow up like I did. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

This theme addressed taking responsibility for oneself and being accountable for children. At young ages, the participants assumed a great deal of responsibility when they left the familiarity of their homes and transitioned to the streets. Not having guidance or protection from their caregivers, the participants were responsible to get their needs met and remain safe on the streets. One participant explained, *“I make my own money to survive on my own. Sometimes I struggle to get food, but I work the streets so I can usually buy my own food”* (Alone).

The impact of having children at young ages added greater responsibility, which some of the youth were able to use for positive change:

*I go above and beyond to be a good parent. I have to take the bus to get my kids to daycare because I don't have a working vehicle. I got my grade 12 a little while ago and I've had jobs on and off since I had my first child.* (I Refuse To Be A Victim)

Fulfilling the role of caregiver required different lifestyle choices that involved abstinence from alcohol or drugs and leaving the street life behind. Three youth reflected on the lifestyle changes they made as parents, specifically, getting off of drugs and ending their involvement in criminal activity. The commitment to provide and care for children at a time when the participants had limited stability of their own appeared to indicate a sense of trustworthiness and integrity that some of the participants believed they did not receive when they were children:

*I was stable on and off for a few years. I had a daughter when I was 14 years old, so I knew I had to try to be a man. I didn't want to make excuses not to be there for her ... I remember how I felt when my dad wasn't there and I didn't want my kids to feel like that.* (Wisdom)

### **Capacity to Learn**

*I learned how to survive by watching other people that were on the streets. I saw that one guy used cardboard and paper to insulate himself, so sometimes I would get garbage out of the dumpster just to stay warm.* (Wisdom)

This theme addressed the youths' capacity to learn from life experiences. Knowledge of how to survive was gained from individual choices of action and through observations of and

interactions with more experienced street involved people. One youth explained, *“Most people I have met in this community know how to survive and I’m just learning that right now”* (Willing). The negative consequences associated with ineffective coping skills, past criminal activity, and unhealthy relationships influenced some of the youth to make changes to their lifestyles. For example, *“It was getting pretty bad living down south because of the gangs and bullshit. I was done with that so I had to leave”* (Not Giving Up). Another youth described, *“I was only in jail for one week, but that was the hardest week of my life because I had no freedom ... [my probation officer] let me out and I never went back”* (Wisdom). Knowledge was obtained over time as the participants learned from past mistakes and through the guidance of others. Many attributed learning street survival skills from older, more experienced individuals.

### **Street Smarts: I’m Not a Pawn**

*I can see when people are trying to get you to do something really stupid, but they can’t manipulate me.* (Not Giving Up)

The need for street smarts was a theme for many of the youth. The ability to navigate life on the streets required creativity and adaptability in unpredictable situations. The risk of being manipulated, intimidated, robbed, or assaulted on the streets was extremely high. The youth discussed getting in fights, the dangers associated with hitch hiking, and the potential for bad dates when working the streets. Being street smart for the participants involved the avoidance of dangerous people or situations; using intuition and instinct to make decisions; and being alert and aware of the surroundings. One participant explained, *“I do what I can, but there’s times when I’m in the hood that I will not get involved in a fight because it’s most likely gang related”* (Motivation). Other important street skills found in the stories included locating resources, and using survival skills to obtain food and build shelter. For example:



*As soon as winter hit, I set up a little shack in the bush that was totally secluded ... I was a little more prepared because I had a fishing rod ... I never really had a problem with the wildlife because I was always aware of my surroundings. (Motivation)*

### **Confident: I Know I Can**

*I've had experience in all types of situations. It's not like I just worked one type of job and I'm only good at one thing. I'm good at multiple things. (Motivation)*

This theme centered on the participants' beliefs in their abilities, judgment, and resources. Several participants identified strengths about themselves, including previous accomplishments with respect to employment, street survival skills, and artistic talents such as writing lyrics or break dancing. Confidence in parenting skills as well as the ability to get along with others was discussed by over half of the youth. Most notably, the participants highlighted their capacities to overcome hardship and create change in their lives. Despite the challenges the youth endured early in life and while on the streets, there remained a sense of trust in what they could accomplish. For example, three participants believed in their abilities to transition off of the streets once they worked through their addiction issue: *"I know I could move on in life, but I just need to kick the drugs"* (Alone).

### **Empathic Caring: Willing to Help**

*It has been a hard struggle for me, so I am willing to help other street involved youth when they ask for advice or need my help ... I am a caring person and I understand what they are going through because I was in their position. I want to see people succeed, not just myself. (Motivation)*

The theme of empathic caring addressed the relational aspects of communication, empathy, and the willingness to help others that were expressed by several of the youth. The ability to get along with others or communicate effectively was a personal strength mentioned by two participants. Several youth shared stories of helping friends and even strangers through offering shelter to those who had nowhere else to go and protecting these people from the dangers of

street life, *“I let some of my friends who are like brothers stay with me for free. They had families that lived on Reserves far away, but I didn’t want them to hitchhike because it was cold out”*

(Nothing But Me). There was a willingness to help others in similar situations because the youth explained that they understood how it feels to be in need of guidance and support. For example, two participants discussed their commitment to help others because they did not receive help when they were in need of it. One participant now volunteers his time to provide peer support to other struggling youth and another participant works at a drop-in centre that provides services for street involved youth.

### **Moving On**

This category covered a range of wants, hopes, and ambitions for the future including economic stability, self-improvement, and connection. The youth discussed growth and change in different areas in their lives that reflected moving on.

#### **Stability: Settling Down**

*I am looking to settle down with someone. I would like to find a relationship, stability, and a home. I don’t want to be on the streets anymore because I am getting old enough to know.* (Alone)

The theme of stability addressed issues of sobriety and permanent housing. The participants that currently live on the streets viewed stability as being clean from alcohol or drugs and having their own home. In speaking of their addictions issues, harm reduction strategies to decrease or abstain from drug using behaviours were discussed. One participant explained, *“I am trying to quit the drugs ... it’s really hard staying off the crack, but the alcohol is keeping me off the drugs”* (Alone). Those struggling with addictions recognized that they need to get their substance use in control before they can begin to make other changes in their lives. Along with sobriety, affordable and permanent housing was described as necessary for a stable future. Having a place

to call home was defined as a need that would decrease several stressors in their lives and be an important step towards the future.

### **Education and Work: Got to Have Goals**

*I'm thinking about going to college in the future and taking social work. I want to get my diploma and work with youth or homeless adults ... I want to teach people how to get off the streets or how to get jobs after they get out of rehab because I went through it all alone. (I Refuse To Be A Victim)*

This theme addressed the participants' educational and employment aspirations. Several youth discussed goals for their futures that included vocational training, post-secondary education, or full-time employment. Some participants discussed concrete plans for the direction of their futures, while others were more in the exploratory phase. One youth planned to work with his Band to get assistance so he could pursue further education, while other participants shared their plans to complete additional education in business and social work. Several of the youth were in need of immediate employment, so their goals were centered on finding any work opportunities that were available.

### **Reconnection: Back to My Life**

*I am planning to move to the coast to live off the land and grow my own veggies. (Motivation)*

The theme of reconnection included spiritual and relational aspects. This theme signified the participants' desires for new beginnings, and included individual growth, improved relationships, as well as integration in the community. Two youth described their passion to become more connected on a spiritual level, which included being in tune with oneself, the land, or a higher being. One youth explained, "*I want to get back to my real life; meditating and praying*" (Nothing But Me). Several participants discussed repairing relationships with family members, most often through hoped-for reconciliations with siblings and reunification with children.

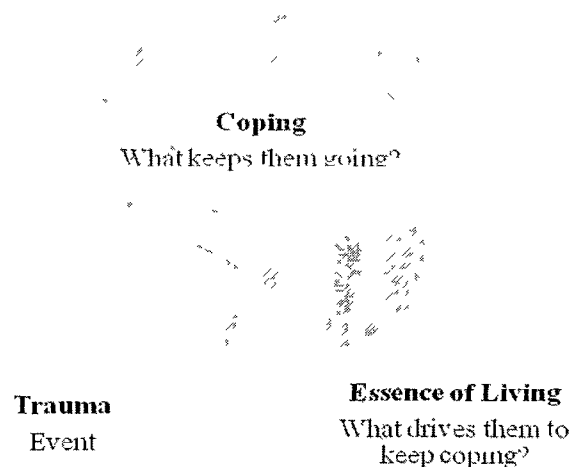
Reconnection was also defined as being involved in the community by helping others. One participant identified a connection to the street community as he helped other struggling youth through peer counselling, “*I like to give back to the community and try to make a difference in the world*” (Motivation).

### Phase Three: Metathemes

In Phase Three, a meta-analysis was used to identify patterns or connections across all of the participants’ stories. The metathemes were drawn from all of the data and highlight the major connections that emerged in the study (Ely et al., 1997). Time was taken to analyze the data globally and to articulate the broader issues that ran through all the stories that weren’t evident in the earlier phases of the data analysis. Three overarching metathemes were identified across the stories: *Trauma*, *Coping*, and *the Essence of Living*.

Figure 2

*Overview of Metathemes*



**Trauma: The Most Horrible Experience in My Life**

All of the participants interviewed had been affected by trauma to varying degrees. Whether the trauma occurred during childhood or later in life, the youth have been affected by those experiences in some way. An overwhelming sense of loss emerged as a common connection in the stories as the youth reflected on past abuse, broken or non-existent relationships, and being without a home. Five participants identified childhood trauma as a precipitating factor that led them to a life on the streets. Whether they were kicked out of the family home, in care of the Ministry, or they ran away for safety reasons, the participants experienced general losses including loss of connection, stability, and access to basic needs. While navigating life on the streets, there were periods of stability for the youth that included sobriety and stable housing; however, many of them returned to the streets after traumatic life events such as the death of a loved one or separation from their children. The long-term effects of trauma were revealed as some of the youth described negative self-images, difficulty in trusting others, and remaining in unhealthy or abusive relationships later in life. The effect of childhood trauma on present functioning was also noted by some of the youth in terms of relying on unhealthy coping strategies as a way to forget past abuse.

**Coping: It's Life and You Can't Control It**

In every story, coping was presented as multilayered, fluid, and contextual; it was what kept the participants going. The youth described a range of personal and environmental stressors that were difficult to manage. Both positive and negative coping strategies were used to deal with current life stressors, and manage or escape painful experiences from their pasts. Whether positive or negative, the coping strategies were functional in that the youth continued on in life no matter how difficult the circumstances. Maintaining an optimistic and hopeful attitude, the

integration of healthy activities, and the acceptance of support from agencies and others were identified as positive coping responses. Some of the common negative ways of coping included: violence, self-harm, crime, and most often substance abuse.

A pattern across every story was the participants' tendencies to distance themselves from others or leave situations as a way to manage the tension. This form of coping was illustrated by the youth who left home to escape dangerous circumstances or conflictual relationships and continued as they navigated life on the streets. For example, all of the youth described instances when they left communities, ran away from home, or distanced themselves from negative influences. Creating distance from others was especially prevalent for the participants who attempted to make changes in their lives, such as getting off alcohol or drugs; leaving a gang lifestyle or criminal activity; and transitioning off the streets. It appeared that many of the youth chose to work through their struggles alone or isolate themselves. While the youth acknowledged negative consequences that resulted from certain coping strategies, one youth explained, "*I was doing the best that I could*" (I Refuse to be a Victim).

### **Essence of Living: You Can't Give Up**

The participants' drive to keep coping was a powerful piece that emerged across the stories, yet the youth were unable to explicitly state what it was that kept them going in life. They recognized something within themselves that willed them to survive despite numerous hardships and setbacks in life. Perceptions of having nothing or being at their lowest point, and thoughts of suicide were presented in some of the stories; however, these participants did not give up or attempt to end their lives. There was a sense of self-preservation as they made ongoing efforts to cope with the challenges in life. Inner strength, motivation, hope, and love all factored in; yet, none of those characteristics alone appeared to truly capture the intrinsic drive that influenced the

youth to keep living. Because the participants couldn't provide a name for it, I cannot either. It may be something inherent, the essence of living. In every story trauma could be defined as the event; coping was what kept them alive, but there was something else that kept them finding ways to cope.

### **Summary**

In Phase Two, a content analysis was used with the narratives by selecting parts of the story out of the whole, to add depth and provide detailed descriptions of the experiences of the youth in this study. The categories and themes represent the integration of the participants' words and my interpretations of their experiences, in my attempt to express the meanings attached to those experiences. In Phase Three, a meta-analysis was carried out to assess the common threads and connections between all eight stories.

Chapter Six provides a discussion of the interpretations of the study, integrating the findings with existing literature. Also included are limitations of the study and my personal reflections on the research process. Suggestions for future research and implications for practice that emerged from the research process are also included.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and Reflections**

The subject of homelessness and street involvement with youth is a difficult one. There is such disconnect in writing sentences with the words “homelessness” and “youth” together. This situation suggests a call for increased understanding of preventative steps to take to reduce street involvement and homelessness for youth. The stories shared by the eight youth reflect information found in the existing literature but also provide details specific to northern communities and information on the contribution of placement in Ministry Care. The following sections will provide a discussion of the research findings and relevance to the existing literature under the headings of the principle research question and secondary questions.

### **What is the experience of street involved youth living in north central, British Columbia?**

This broad research question gave participants the space to tell their stories in a way that had meaning for them. The narratives started at different places for each of the youth, providing descriptions of how the participants first became street involved. The research included an older youth population, providing a retrospective description of their experiences of homelessness. The participants were slightly older than I anticipated, which reflects the evolving nature of qualitative research. The stories moved from the past to the present, highlighting both the struggles and accomplishments they experienced, often ending with a look towards a better, hoped-for future. The experiences of life on the streets described by the youth also reflected the unique experiences of being street involved in a northern community stemming from environmental conditions such as harsher winters.

Due to the retrospective nature provided by youth at the upper end of the age scale, this study offered rich information on how some of the youth transitioned off the streets. Support and resources from community, in addition to personal strengths, assisted some of the youth to



abstain from alcohol and drugs, find employment and stable housing, and ultimately leave the streets.

**Trauma.** Consistent with previous literature, childhood experiences of trauma and unstable home environments were identified by the youth as contributing factors that led them onto the streets. Unstable homes included parents facing addictions or health concerns, single parent homes, changes in family structure, and parent-child conflict, echoing previous research (Zide & Cherry, 1992). Traumatic experiences described by the youth resulted from pervasive patterns of neglect and abuse. The long-term effects of childhood trauma were revealed in several ways by the youth, including difficulty in trusting others, unhealthy relationships, and challenging coping strategies. An interesting finding in this study was the participants did not identify self-respect as an important personal quality, but valued having respect for others. Because of the high number of youth who experienced early trauma, I question whether those experiences affected their sense of self-respect. It is possible that the participants lacking self-respect were more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviours or remain in unhealthy relationships.

Research with street involved youth highlights the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse (Hyde, 2005; Williams et al., 2001), yet the damaging effects of emotional abuse or feelings of abandonment have yet to be extensively studied. This study revealed the profound effects of emotional abuse and neglect on the youth including negative views of self, feelings of loneliness, and interpersonal problems. These emotional and verbal abuse conditions are more difficult to document, resulting in increased feelings of distrust because the youth did not receive the help they needed from professionals when they required it.

For some of the participants, there was recognition of how their behaviours increased conflict in the family, sometimes resulting in them getting kicked out of the home. Problems at

school and some of the conflict in the home, including disrespect towards parents and disregard for rules, were linked to participants' substance abuse patterns, similar to other research findings (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Zide & Cherry, 1992). However, the root of problem behaviours was described by the youth as a way to manage the stressful home environments or forget traumatic experiences. It was unclear whether the youths' problem behaviours were reactions to stressful and chaotic home environments or more of precipitating factors combined with caregivers' inability to manage difficult behaviours.

**Ministry care.** The participants in care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development shared a range of positive and negative experiences that had a direct effect on their street involvement. The perceived lack of safety in group homes influenced some of the youth to move to the streets as a better alternative. While previous research indicates that a large portion of youth in foster care become street involved (Garnezy, 1993; Osterling & Hines, 2006), this study suggests that it is important to also consider youths' experiences of being in the care of the Ministry. Youths' experiences of staff aggression and intimidation, bullying, assault and peer influence for involvement in the drug or sex trade while in group homes are found in some of the stories. Garnezy (1993) contends that youth in care come from unstable living arrangements and may have attachment issues; this study also suggests that unsafe environments the youth in care experience may be detrimental to their development and well-being. The youth have to manage new situations, leave the familiarity of family whether it was unsafe or not, and negotiate being placed into a home that may contain a range of other challenges or dangers. The implications of some of the dangerous situations these participants found themselves in are concerning and suggest the need for major changes within the Ministry.

**What specific challenges do youth face in being street involved in this geographical context?**

The youth identified several challenges of being street involved that align with previous literature. Some of the common barriers associated with street life included: food and shelter resources, safety, mental health issues, addictions, the potential for crime, and lack of good judgment and support (Boydell et al., 2000; Kidd, 2003, 2007). The specific challenges of living in northern communities involved fewer resources, limited employment, and affordable housing options. These limited resources presented further challenges for the youth because they did not have access to the same financial supports as adults. Several of the youth discussed having to move to a larger community to access emergency resources such as shelters and food. These types of services weren't available in the smaller, isolated communities. The participants described further risks for their safety when hitchhiking to different towns because of the number of people that have gone missing along the Highway of Tears.

A unique aspect of being street involved in the North was that the youth could sleep in the bush and rely on their survival skills to build shelters and get food. They could eat berries and catch fish to eat; however, being in the bush potentially exposed them to wildlife and the harsh climates. The cold temperatures in the winter months and being outside in the snow or rain made it difficult for the youth to sleep outdoors. Several of the participants reported couch surfing or sleeping in the bush. Further, many of the participants indicated that they rarely accessed community services so the prevalence of youths' street involvement is difficult to discern when it is not highly visible. It is possible there is a higher rate of youth who are homeless who are not accessing community services for support.

All of the youth described periods of stability while being street involved, which included returning home with family, income assistance, or shared accommodations. They identified several challenges associated with transitioning off the streets, and the on-going struggle in permanently staying off the streets. According to the literature and the youth of this study, substance use, mental health issues, lack of support, and limited education and employment all factored in as barriers to leaving the streets (Brown & Amundson, 2010).

**What resources, both personal and community-based, assist them in living without a permanent home?**

**Personal strengths.** Individual characteristics that helped the youth manage the negative aspects of street life (Bender et al., 2007) complement and broaden what is found in the literature. The participants identified several personal qualities that assisted them in navigating life on the streets. Qualities of inner strength, hope, motivation (Kidd & Davidson, 2007), independence (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2004), confidence (Boydell et al., 2000), street smarts, and the capacity to learn (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007) were viewed as personal strengths. In addition, the youth believed they had interpersonal skills including: empathic caring for others, the ability to get along with people, and respect for others which made life on the streets and staying in shelters easier to manage.

**Hardiness and coping.** The participants were faced with a variety of challenges in their childhoods and while on the streets that created stress for them, one definition of stress being when the relationship between the person and the environment is perceived as exceeding an individual's resources and threatening his or her well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The youths' appraisals of these life events in terms of what was at stake (primary appraisal) and what

coping resources were available (secondary appraisal) influenced how they responded (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman et al., 1986).

The personality disposition of psychological hardiness is conceptualized as buffering negative effects from these stressful events (Maddi, 2000), whereas the construct of coping involves the various responses to manage the stressors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman et al., 1986). Hardiness is conceptualized as acting on individual appraisal and coping efforts, suggesting it plays a central role in the coping process and adaptation to stress (Florian, Mikulincer, & Taubman, 1995). Hardy individuals are thought to possess three characteristics or beliefs: commitment, challenge, and control, which motivate them to react to stressful events with effective coping strategies (Maddi & Hightower, 1999; Maddi, Wadhwa, & Haer, 1996). Personal qualities of the youth in this study reflect aspects of psychological hardiness and coping as described in the literature and explained in the following section.

***Commitment.*** Individuals with strong characteristics of commitment find meaning in stressful situations and they have a belief system that minimizes the perceived threats associated with stressful life events (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Hightower, 1999). There are aspects of this characteristic that align with some of the participants but not others. In particular, there were differences in the youths' perceptions of difficult experiences. Some of them described life threatening situations nonchalantly, while others appeared to be more distressed by past experiences. An interesting finding for one of the youth was a shift in his appraisal of stress after experiencing numerous tragedies. The youth in *Wisdom* described an absence of stress, which was reflected in his example of a drive-by-shooting near his house that appeared to have no effect on him. Interestingly, he questioned whether his indifference to stress was more of a negative personal quality than a positive one.

Crowley, Hayslip, and Hobdy (2003) suggest that individuals with higher commitment have a sense of purpose in life and understanding of who they are. In adolescence and early adulthood, individuals explore different directions in life and may experience changes in their worldviews and values as they begin to form their own identity (Arnett, 2000). Thus, the insight and awareness necessary to have reached a deep understanding of self could be affected by the youths' developmental stage and impeded by other factors such as cognitive difficulties, mental health issues, or the long-term effects of trauma.

**Challenge.** Individuals who have the characteristic of challenge view stress as a normal part of life that is essential for growth. Both positive and negative experiences can provide learning opportunities (Maddi & Hightower, 1999), which was captured in the theme "capacity to learn." The participants reflected on positive and negative experiences that influenced their personal growth. In particular, the consequences that resulted from ineffective coping skills, past criminal activity, or unhealthy relationships challenged previous beliefs and motivated some of the youth to make changes to their lifestyles. Reflections on past mistakes as well as successes appeared to have meaning for the participants. Accomplishments such as leaving the streets, sobriety, completing school, or providing care for children positively affected the youth, possibly increasing their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

**Control.** People operating with characteristics of control believe they can influence outcomes through their efforts. They do not generally feel powerless in situations; instead they assume control over their experiences (Maddi, 2008; Maddi & Hightower, 1999). This characteristic of hardiness fit well for the majority of the participants in this study. Aspects of control appear to tie in with the personal qualities of confidence, independence, and taking responsibility.

It appeared that several of the participants believed they had control over their situations, which is particularly interesting because of the high rate of youth in this study who disclosed trauma in their childhoods. Often, the effects of childhood trauma are described as including a diminished sense of self and the limited belief that one can control his or her environment (Williams, 2006). The effects of trauma were present for some of the youth; however, past abuse did not appear to affect the participants' sense of control as one might have expected. These youth left their abusive environments at young ages, suggesting they have high characteristics of control. Had the participants remained in abusive environments, it appears unlikely they would have the same beliefs in their abilities to assume control over their experiences. It is possible that the responsibility, independence, and freedom that came with being on the streets may have strengthened this characteristic for the participants.

The negative effect of multiple stressors on the characteristic of control was revealed by the youth in *Struggling And Unsure*. She appeared to express more of a defeated attitude than the others as she was dealing with numerous crises at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, there were parts of her story that suggested she felt powerless because of personal and environmental factors she believed were out of her control. Specifically, this youth was unemployed, had been cut off of welfare, and had just found out that she was pregnant. It did not appear that she had the hardy attitude of control, in particular, the belief that she could change her situation.

A final aspect of control that was revealed in the majority of the stories was the participants' belief in their abilities to create changes in their lives, which was reflected through the personal quality of confidence. The youth were confident that their efforts could influence outcomes in their lives. Specifically, several of the participants believed in their abilities to accomplish certain goals such as transitioning off the streets, obtaining further education, or employment.

Part of their confidence may have stemmed from past successes, such as gaining sobriety, locating resources, and staying safe on the streets.

Although these three hardy attitudes are not a perfect fit for all of the youth, there are certain connections that are reflected in their stories. There were differences in the way the youth appraised stressful life events (commitment), viewed stress as an opportunity for growth (challenge), and expressed optimism or confidence in their abilities to control the outcomes of their experiences (control). Together, these belief systems can encourage effective coping strategies, turning stressful events into opportunities for growth (Maddi, 2002; Maddi et al., 1996).

***Hardy coping.*** As evidenced in the literature in Chapter Two, there is overlap between the constructs of hardiness and coping. In particular, hardiness influences the choice of cognitive and behavioural coping strategies used to manage stressful events (Florian et al., 1995). Therefore, the following section includes aspects of the coping literature that are characteristic of hardy coping. Hardy individuals tend to use transformational coping processes that reduce the likelihood of wellness breakdown. The appraised stress attached to life events are decreased through deepened understanding of the circumstances, a broadened perspective, positive reinterpretation, and decisive action (Maddi & Hightower, 1999; Maddi, Kahn, & Maddi, 1998). Transformational coping changes stressful events into benign experiences through the use of problem-focused strategies (Florian et al., 1995).

Problem-focused or approach forms of coping to manage or resolve problems (Ebata & Moos, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) were often used in situations the participants perceived they could improve. For example, cognitive efforts such as positive reappraisal (Puskar & Grabiak, 2008) were used by some of the youth to reframe how they viewed certain stressful



events. The youth in *Wisdom* shifted his view on the multiple losses in his life, accepting the reality of the deaths of people he cared for. Similarly, the youth from *Motivation* chose to focus on the opportunities in his life instead of fixating on the negatives. A significant finding was the participants' optimistic attitudes, including hope for the future and that their situations would improve despite the numerous setbacks and challenges in their lives. It appeared that these beliefs helped them cope while on the streets and provided motivation to continue working towards the future. Independence, motivation, and confidence contributed to a positive frame of reference, which influenced some of the youth to use more transformational coping patterns.

Transformational coping provides relief from stress through direct involvement and problem solving strategies (Maddi & Hightower, 1999; Maddi et al., 1998). Hardiness is directly related to active coping, planning, and seeking support (Maddi & Hightower, 1999), which was revealed in the category of *Moving On* as the participants revealed plans, goals, and strategies for their futures. Aspects of the personal quality of "street smarts" found in this study ties in with Kobasa's (1979) description of hardy coping. In particular, the youth navigated life on the streets through various cognitive and behavioural strategies. They were required to be adaptable in situations, locate resources, and be aware of the threats in their environment.

The youth appeared to integrate problem solving strategies in unconventional ways that may be perceived as negative or deviant. The participants had to be resourceful and creative in getting their needs met. All of the youth engaged in criminal activity as a way to make money, buy food, or secure temporary shelter. Accordingly, the participants chose to sell drugs, steal from others, or engage in sex for money in order to survive on the streets. These problem solving strategies were viewed as functional and at times necessary as they struggled to find food and shelter on a daily basis. Some of the youth integrated problem solving strategies to abstain from substance

use and to permanently transition off the streets which resulted in positive consequences. This ties in with theme of “responsibility” in that being responsible for oneself involves taking action and dealing with the consequences of those actions. While the participants viewed taking responsibility as an important quality to manage life on the streets, it was not mentioned as key to their transition off the streets; differing from the findings by Brown and Amundson (2010) that street involved youth believed taking responsibility was a helping category in exiting the streets in Vancouver.

Crowley et al. (2003) suggest that hardy coping involves full engagement in activities. These individuals remain connected with the events and people in their lives (Maddi & Hightower, 1999). It is difficult to apply this hardy quality to the youth in this study because of the negative types of activities the youth engaged in as well as the described disconnect with their family of origin. The participants formed new connections and social networks after leaving home; however, those relationships weren’t always healthy or positive. Because of the limits associated with the participants’ socioeconomic status, it may be more appropriate to consider their willingness to engage if the potential was there.

**Coping.** Several cognitive and behavioural efforts were made by the participants to deal with stressful events that do not represent hardy coping. These different coping responses were attempts to change what was unpleasant or distressing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) through regressive (Maddi et al., 1998) or emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Ebata & Moos, 1994; Puskar & Grabiuk, 2008). Regressive forms of coping found within the hardiness literature are viewed as self-limiting because individuals protect themselves from stressful situations through denial, distraction, or avoidance (Maddi et al., 1998). Therefore, these types of coping responses are not characteristic of psychological hardiness.

As found in the coping literature, emotion-focused coping attempts are made to regulate stressful emotions through denial, avoidance, or emotional discharge, used more often in situations youth perceive as having limited possibilities for beneficial change (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). For example, the youth in *Struggling And Unsure* acknowledged that she has never dealt with any of her problems; instead she ignores her emotions as a way to protect herself. Similarly, the youth in *Alone* described crying out her negative feelings from past trauma as a way to manage the tension. These examples illustrate the youths' attempts at affect regulation through avoidance based strategies that provide relief from the stress without resolution of the stressor (Maddi & Hightower, 1999).

Substance use is considered to be a form of regressive coping in that it acts as a mental distraction and behavioural avoidance of dealing with one's problems (Maddi, Wadhwa, & Haier, 1996). All of the participants described their substance use as a way to manage or avoid dealing with the effects of past events or current stressors that were too overwhelming. With prolonged use it created more problems for some youth, leading to addiction and further involvement in street life. Furthermore, substance use appeared to be a way for some of the participants to manage their mental health issues. For example, the youth in *Nothing But Me* used substances to self-medicate because he didn't like the side effects from the prescription medication.

Seeking alternate rewards was a coping strategy commonly used by the participants where substitute activities created new sources of satisfaction (Puskar & Grabiak, 2008). Replacing behaviours with other pleasurable activities may provide relief, making it easier for the participants to manage ongoing stressors and problems that were out of their control. For example, the youth in *Nothing But Me* found comfort in listening to music as a way to escape the

emotional abuse and neglect he experienced as an adolescent. It is possible that if street involved youth had more calming or soothing activities to rely on, they would be better prepared to manage the chronic stressors in their lives. However, it was suggested by the youth in *Nothing But Me*, that it may be difficult for street involved youth to integrate these types of activities because they lack the privacy or space to engage in some of these healthier activities.

***Creative strategies.*** A unique finding in this study was that the male participants engaged in a variety of creative activities as a way to manage the stress in their lives. The males were able to relieve stress by writing poetry, listening to music, and playing video games. Other activities viewed as sources of support were spirituality (Bender et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000), making music, volunteering, and work. The youth in *Wisdom* attributed break dancing and involvement in his First Nations culture as integral to transitioning off the streets, which aligns with other research describing how engagement in constructive activities was helpful for youth who have exited the streets (Brown & Amundson, 2010). These positive coping strategies were useful in managing stress, and may replace other negative behaviours such as substance use, crime, or violence.

***Personal Factors.*** It appeared that the participants' coping responses were influenced by personal, situational, and contextual factors. The youth varied in age, gender, and temperament which most likely influenced their coping efforts. Other factors that would effect coping may include cognitive difficulties, mental health issues, or the long-term effects from trauma. Youth on the streets are often not diagnosed with mental health or cognitive problems, making it difficult for service providers to provide appropriate assistance and work with youths' potential for more positive coping. Alcohol and drugs are known to provide immediate, although temporary, relief and are the most accessible coping strategy for those without supports or

personal capacity or those suffering from trauma. The youth appeared to initially not to be able to develop more positive coping and instead relied on the addictive forms of coping. From these limited conversations, it is difficult to tease out mental health issues from the cognitive difficulties and affect issues that may have resulted from early trauma experiences.

Developmental elements may be related to coping responses. For example, the youth in *Wisdom* reflected on some of the risky behaviours he engaged in during his adolescent years that he would no longer partake in. During adolescence and emerging adulthood, individuals are more likely to engage in risky behaviours including unsafe sex, dangerous driving, and substance use (Arnett, 2000) suggesting that avoidance based coping strategies may be more common during these developmental life stages. As individuals gain experience, mature, and begin accepting responsibility for their decisions, they may be more inclined to use transformational coping strategies. It appeared that some of the youth in this study had outgrown the destructive behaviours they engaged in during their early years on the streets.

**Contextual factors.** The idea that coping is a shifting process where individuals use different styles of coping in different situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) was evident in the participants' stories. The sources of stress for the youth were multilayered, complex, and chronic. While common stressors among adolescents and young adults include: conflicts in family and peer relationships, physical or mental health concerns, academic performance, legal troubles, and death (Ebata & Moos, 1994; Puskar & Grabiak, 2008), the participants in this study were faced with additional stressors such as access to food and shelter, violence and intimidation, and minimal supports. The participants dealing with multiple negative life events or those who did not believe the outcome of their situation could be changed were more likely to slip into regressive coping behaviours including denial or avoidance.

According to the hardiness model, as acute and chronic stressors build up, the strain on an individual may become so overwhelming that the risk of illness, mental health concerns, or behavioural dysfunction increases (Maddi, 2002). In their efforts to manage ongoing problems many of the youth in this study engaged in destructive behaviours such as self-harm, violence, and stealing. As evidenced in other research, avoidance forms of coping were more frequent among adolescents who had higher rates of negative life events and chronic stressors (Ebata & Moos, 1994). This finding may hold true for the youth in this study, as there may be a link between the participants' use of avoidance coping strategies and their inability to integrate more effective coping because of an overwhelming number of chronic life stressors.

Previous coping may be an important predictor of later patterns of coping. Prior influences of personal, situational, or contextual factors along with preferences or tendencies may influence individuals to react to stressors in certain ways (Ebata & Moos, 1994). It appeared that the youth continued to use coping strategies that had worked for them in the past. For example, several of the participants left home prematurely to escape difficult or dangerous situations. This form of avoidance coping continued on the streets and they found themselves in other threatening situations or troubled relationships. It is possible the participants' transience is an effective coping strategy to manage life on the streets for longer periods of time. Their readiness to relocate to different communities and their ability to quickly adapt to new environments or situations may stem from early coping strategies. Clearly, the avoidance of unsafe or dangerous situations was an effective coping strategy when the youth perceived threats to their well-being. In these situations the environment was viewed as too risky or unsafe so avoidance from certain places or people was a coping response to remain emotionally and physically safe.

The youth appeared to use avoidance as a coping strategy to make positive lifestyle changes. For example, the participants that successfully quit using substances distanced themselves from drug-using peers or avoided certain places such as shelters because there was too much influence and pressure to use. The youth in *Not Giving Up* moved to a different community to escape the gang lifestyle. It appears that avoidance was necessary for the participants who permanently exited the streets. To make changes, they distanced themselves from people who were negative influences and still involved in street life. Although avoidance coping may not directly solve the problem, it appears to be a functional strategy for the youth in this study, keeping them safe in unpredictable situations and assisting them as they worked to make healthy changes.

An important finding in this study was the participants' tendencies to return to the streets after stressful events, which appears to provide further support for the idea that previous coping predicts later coping patterns. It is possible that the youth find support or comfort in being on the streets because of familiarity, safety, or perceived freedom. Thus, being on the streets may be another form of avoidance coping. The youth in *Wisdom* spoke about turning to the streets for help when he was a kid and the participant in *Alone* shared that street life was all she knew. Street life may be a way for these youth to avoid dealing with the other stressors in their lives. However, other important factors that influenced the participants to return to the streets may be linked to limited coping strategies, chronic stressors, few resources, and limited supports.

***Influence of relationships on coping.*** The idea of connection to other people was deeply woven in every story, highlighting the influence of relationships on coping. The literature and the interviews in this study present both positive and negative aspects of relationships with peers, family, and partners (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd, 2003; Osborne, 2002). Often, negative or unhealthy interpersonal relationships affected the youth, reinforcing regressive or avoidance

forms of coping. In particular, the participants described some peers as untrustworthy and unreliable contributing to feelings of loneliness. The negative influences on the streets were a major concern because the participants were introduced to the drug or sex trade by people they viewed as friends. Further, there was pressure and influence in the shelters to use alcohol or drugs perpetuating substance using behaviours. Some of the youth described their entire peer network as unhealthy or entrenched in street life which directly influenced coping strategies the youth chose to rely on.

With respect to intimate relationships, there were notable gender differences in this study that are not evident in previous literature. The female participants described unhealthy relationships that involved violence, emotional abuse, substance use, infidelity, and manipulation. These participants described their relationships as unsupportive, and at times unsafe, yet there was something keeping them in the relationship. The participants from *Struggling And Unsure* and *Willing* acknowledged how their relationships influenced their substance use and contributed to feelings of loneliness. In contrast, the male participants viewed intimate relationships as positive, referring to their partners as sources of support. These findings provide some evidence that relationships characterized by abuse may increase regressive coping strategies, whereas supportive relationships have the opposite effect and promote transformational coping.

The participants commonly perceived the relationships within their family of origin negatively. For some of the youth, their relationships with caregivers had completely dissolved, and other relationships were conflictual or distant. Some families were described as financially stable but emotionally unsupportive, whereas others were viewed as completely unsupportive. Interestingly, the youth from *Motivation* was offered financial support from his grandparents but



declined help because it was another blow to his pride. Family members living in poverty or struggling with their own addictions could not offer any support. The youth with minimal or no positive family support viewed this as an additional barrier to transitioning off the streets, which provides support for earlier findings. Brown and Amundson (2010) found that support from family or friends were viewed as a helping category for youth who successfully transitioned off the streets. A related finding in this study was the positive influence of family for the youth in *Willing*. She was motivated to make positive changes in her life after seeing her siblings move from lifestyles of crime and street involvement to having families and finding stable housing and employment.

A significant finding was some of the participants were not accessing the services that are available. The youth were less likely to seek out services because of problems with staff, suggesting the importance of interpersonal relationships with frontline workers and how those relationships affect the participants' willingness to utilize services they were in need of. This finding offers support for previous research by Brown and Amundson (2010) that youth were looking for services to be relationship based, not goal oriented.

Similar to previous research, the participants acknowledged that community agencies provided them with the basic necessities; however, some chose not to access services because of over crowdedness, unsafe environments, or interpersonal conflict with other clients (Kidd, 2003; Miller et al., 2004). The dissatisfaction with services deterred some of the youth from seeking out support, which may have reinforced regressive forms of coping. With limited supports or positive connections, the participants appeared to continue to rely on substance use or criminal activity as a way to manage the chaos and stress in their lives.

The youth who were on the streets for years acknowledged an improvement in the services available for street involved youth. Resources are more accessible and efforts have been made to better meet the needs of the street community. With that being said, one youth addressed the need for more support in transitioning off the streets. She struggled to exit the streets on her own because she believed there were not support services that could help her. As previous research suggests, help from staff and service providers is integral in assisting youth to permanently leave the streets (Lindsey et al., 2000). The importance of having supports available to youth when they were ready to transition off the streets was illustrated in the literature. Specifically, street involved youth believed it was a hindrance not receiving support from services at times when they wanted to leave off the streets. The youth were discouraged to seek out assistance from service providers after not receiving the help they were looking for (Brown & Amundson, 2010).

**Hardiness and support.** Kobasa (1979) suggests that individuals can develop hardiness under the guidance of a significant individual at any time in their lives. Through positive mentoring and ongoing support individuals can overcome negative life events, which was evident in one youth's story as he acknowledged the influence of others in helping him transition off the streets. The youth in *Wisdom* believed it was the guidance of an Elder and involvement in his culture that helped him to permanently leave a homeless lifestyle. Having a positive role model at a time when he was ready to accept help and make difficult changes in his life facilitated his transition.

Another interesting finding in this study was the positive effect of having children and taking steps to help others. Based on the youths' stories, it is clear that these individuals did not come from supportive or stable homes. Some of the participants may not have ever received positive mentoring or support. However, the youth who shared positive memories involving

significant people in their lives that have helped them in some way have shown that they can overcome negative life events.

Some of the youth described positive experiences with staff at shelters and drop-in centers. The youth in *Nothing But Me* felt supported by the staff at the youth shelter and believed that they really cared. For many of the participants, their sense of family or community did not include their family of origin. Instead, family or community was defined as friends or other street people who were living a similar lifestyle. The participants relied on others for support in their lives. For example, friends offered their homes for temporary housing and provided the youth with basic necessities. Several of the participants felt acceptance and support from others who had experienced similar difficult life experiences which aligns with previous literature (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd, 2003; Osborne, 2002),

Connection to others appeared to emerge as the motivating factor for the participants who permanently left the streets. Whether it was guidance from a positive figure or motivation to take care of children, it appeared that connection to others influenced the youth to make lifestyle changes. Conversely, the negative effects resulting from disconnection were also revealed in some of the participants' stories. For example, some of the youth who were separated from their children turned to the streets or became further involved in their addictions as a way to cope with the loss. These examples suggest that connectiveness may be important in promoting hardiness and effective coping strategies. Clearly, interpersonal relationships serve both as protective and risk factors, directly influencing coping responses and hardiness for the youth in this study.

### **Limitations**

The participants included in the study were limited to youth living in one geographical area. Because of the small street involved community in north central British Columbia, the

participants were recruited from a select number of agencies that provide services for street involved youth. The stories are rich in detail, but of course do not reflect the experiences of all youth living on the streets. Based on community consultation and my experiences working as a mental health and addictions youth counsellor, I was aware of the hidden homeless population of youth in the community. Youth dealing with troubled home situations, such as parent-child conflict tend to couch surf at the houses of friends with more stable families. These individuals may be seen as higher functioning or relatively stable, often still attending school and not having to access emergency shelters or other services. Because of their limited involvement at the street level, these youth were not included in the study.

A major concern in the community includes the large portion of youth staying in drug houses, more commonly referred to as “crack shacks”. In particular, young females are engaging in survival sex for temporary shelter or to support their drug habits. There is suspicion among community providers that some young female youth are held in the shacks once they have accumulated drug debts that need to be paid off. The street involved youth deeply entrenched in gang lifestyles, heavily drug involved or in the sex trade, may not readily use community services, so it is likely that this study did not portray the stories of youth who are deeply involved in gang life. This research study attracted an older population of street involved youth which was limiting in terms of younger youths’ experiences, but also added depth to understanding how some youth transition off the streets. The stories of younger youth may be quite different, highlighting unique challenges or developmental pieces that were not captured from those interviewed in this study.

The quality of my research was largely dependent on my skills as the researcher. My ability to recruit and establish rapport with the participants, along with my skills in analyzing and

presenting the data, directly affect the research findings. I entered each interview knowing that the participants' willingness to share details about their lives was in their control. They determined the breadth and the depth of the personal information they shared in our conversations. I understood the collaborative nature of a qualitative research approach and the difficulties in recruiting the participants for a second interview to provide feedback on my interpretations of their stories. Although only two of the participants met for follow up interviews, additional steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigor in the research findings. Several member checks were completed throughout the initial interviews to clarify meaning and to capture the essence of the youths' stories to the best of my abilities. New meanings were negotiated through the co-construction of knowledge in conversations with the participants and guidance from my thesis supervisor. She reviewed the participants' stories and was in agreement with the final groupings of the categories and themes.

### **Reflections on the Research Process**

My belief that homelessness is a socially constructed issue influenced me to carry out a qualitative research design with social constructionism as the guiding theoretical framework. I was interested in exploring the holistic experiences of street involved youth through storytelling which was best suited to a narrative approach. The broad research questions were meant to provide a global understanding of street experiences in the North. This methodology allowed me to become immersed in the process as the researcher. The connections made in the community, new relationships formed, and the knowledge I've gained has been personally meaningful and has shaped my identity as a new researcher. No claims were made about objectivity; instead my previous life experiences and beliefs shaped the way I carried out the interviews, configured the analysis, and set the tone for the thesis. The most helpful learning piece for me throughout this

process was the ongoing reflection and self-evaluation in my reflexive journal. I found myself constantly lost in thought, needing time to process my experiences. I quickly learned that the process couldn't be rushed, so patience is something that I will take away from this experience. I needed time to sit with the data, and challenge myself to go deeper until I was able to articulate the meanings that emerged.

At the start of this process, I didn't grasp the amount of work required to carry out a qualitative research approach. This experience has provided me with new insights about what is meaningful to me and what my values are as a researcher. I have grown and matured throughout this process. There has been a shift in my understanding of the world and how people negotiate meanings about their experiences. I've realized that I often find the most meaning out of personal struggles that I can work through and overcome. Some of my biggest challenges in this process have been around trusting myself. I was deeply affected by the stories the youth shared with me, so I was concerned about presenting their narratives in a way that was respectful and honouring. Being a new researcher, I questioned my role in the process of co-constructing knowledge. As I gain more research experience, I believe that my confidence in my skills as a researcher will improve.

The evolving nature of qualitative research is truly fascinating. As I reach the end of my thesis research, I find myself coming back to the very same question that initially motivated me to carry out research with street involved youth. What is it that drives them to keep going in life? I don't believe there is just one quality or aspect of the individual. There are contextual pieces, including connection and relationships. It is the essence of the individual - the whole being, the interactional process in finding meaning attached to experience. I believe it is different for every youth who shared his or her story.

### **Implications for Research**

The participants' demographic information was not collected for this research study because I was more interested in a global understanding of their life experiences. Through my past experiences of working with street involved youth, I was aware of the potential barriers that could result from asking identifying questions. Youth often become guarded or cautious about revealing demographic information. The research interviews required me to establish rapport and build trust with the youth in a short time frame, so I chose not to ask questions that could create suspicion or shut the participants down in any way. Although the youth were not asked to share their cultural backgrounds, several of them self-identified as being First Nations. This finding aligns with a recent homeless count in Prince George that found 66% of the homeless population to be of Aboriginal descent (Community Partners Addressing Homelessness, 2010). Based on these findings, it is important that future research be carried out in the North looking at the street involvement or homeless experiences of First Nations youth. It would be most appropriate for a First Nations researcher to carry out such research because of the cultural knowledge and sensitivity required to do such research.

A significant theme found in this study was the experiences of street involved youth who were in care of the Ministry. The perceived lack of safety in group homes influenced some of the youth to move to the streets as a better alternative. Further research is necessary to explore the experiences of children and youth that have been removed from their families and placed in care. The Ministry would benefit from looking at group homes and what is offered for youth in care, focusing on the services available for youth that will be aging out of the system. Research in this area may be useful for preventative measures and policy changes to foster healthier and positive experiences for individuals in care.

An important finding in this study was that some of the youth do not access community services. It would be valuable to look at what kind of supports street involved youth would find the most helpful. In particular, what exactly do they want or need for services? And, what changes would they like to see with the existing services offered? These are key questions that would give service providers valuable information to improve services so they can better meet the needs of street involved youth living in the North.

Aspects of psychological hardiness and coping were present in all of the youths' stories. Future research using quantitative measures for coping and hardiness with street involved youth may be useful for generalizable information. Furthermore, it may be valuable to implement hardiness training programs (Maddi et al., 1998) and measure the effectiveness of hardiness training with street involved youth.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

From these stories it is clear that street involved youth are one of the most difficult populations to track and provide services for, due to developmental issues in adolescence and young adulthood. Youth strive for autonomy during this life stage and being homeless is one of the clearest ways to show their autonomy. Prevention strategies including education on the effects of trauma, mental health issues, communication skill building, and support services for parents to better manage difficult behaviours before crises occur may decrease the number of youth leaving home at young ages.

The prevalence of trauma and undiagnosed mental health issues add further complexities to providing support services to street involved youth. Teasing out complex trauma or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from other underlying mental health concerns will be important for appropriate counselling interventions and psychiatric services. One of the biggest challenges



appears to be that street involved youth are not accessing long-term support services. Based on what we know about trauma work, it requires a long-term healing process. Research suggests that talk therapy isn't effective for dealing with trauma, particularly complex trauma (Courtois, 2008). How can practitioners reach this population to provide support? How do we foster or promote long-term relationships when dealing with youth who may not have developed attachment at younger ages? Street involved youth may require more time to establish relationships and build trust, so there needs to be long-term, consistent support. The development of creative strategies to increase awareness about the services available and make connections with the youth may improve their access to services, which is especially relevant for those individuals who are heavily entrenched in street life and disconnected from services. Helpers need to be active in the community and available to the youth on the streets. Outreach services such as a mobile van for counselling may be beneficial. Further, it may be more useful to offer services at night instead of the conventional daytime business hours when street involved youth may be sleeping. Based on the participants' stories, there appears to be a trend for the youth to access emergency services or seek out help in times of crises, so it may be helpful to have formal support services, including onsite counselling or drug and alcohol support, available at shelters and drop-in centers.

The youth identified several difficulties in transitioning off the streets, which suggests a greater need for more services aimed at that transition and long-term support. Helpers need to find creative strategies to build rapport with the youth to increase motivation and commitment to assist them to leave the streets. Furthermore, having consistent and long-term support staff in the agencies that work directly with street involved youth may create stability. Limited employment and affordable housing are struggles in the community, so advocacy for more training

opportunities and subsidized housing options for youth are necessary. Based on the participants' experiences at shelters, there appears to be a need for safer environments that can meet the needs of larger populations.

### **Summary**

This qualitative approach contributes to the literature on street involved youth by providing stories rich in detail on the experiences of the eight youth I interviewed. The narratives were powerful representations of the meanings the youth attached to their street experiences; each story was complex, multilayered, and deeply embedded in social processes. By capturing the subjective experiences of the youth who were interviewed, multiple realities were explored. This research contributes to our understanding of street involved youths' experiences in a northern context, highlighting the personal qualities and supports that assisted them in navigating life on streets.

Homelessness and street involvement is a serious social problem that receives attention in the media, often portraying the views of mainstream society. Thus, the ways in which we perceive, interact, and assist street involved youth reflects our socially constructed views of homelessness. Furthermore, the constructs of psychological hardiness and coping discussed in this study are the products of culture, tradition, and social processes. Assumptions about what represents hardy or regressive coping have been socially constructed and guided by the values of society.

The constructs that address personal qualities of youth who survive difficult situations are not a perfect fit. Coping is a multidimensional construct that is influenced by several factors including core beliefs, family, and culture. The youth in this study integrated various coping strategies to manage unhealthy conditions. Although avoidance forms of coping are not

characteristic of hardiness, they may have been effective as the youth navigated life on the streets. These findings have raised some interesting questions for me in terms of labeling avoidance forms of coping as dysfunctional. Is it ineffective coping to avoid or isolate oneself from others who are unhealthy or unsupportive?

The personality disposition of psychological hardiness is believed to be a pathway to resilience. In particular, hardiness enhances resilience in a range of stressful circumstances (Maddi, 2008). The youth in this study came from unstable home environments, contributing to disruptive behaviours and interpersonal problems. However, some of the participants were able to turn their lives around. These individuals went from being on the streets and deeply entrenched in criminal activities to raising children, maintaining employment and stable housing, and being involved in a supportive relationship. They appear to have reached average developmental markers despite the negative environments they were raised in, which leads me to question whether good outcomes are related to gaining life experience and moving through the stages of development. Is it within the developmental realm or is it resilience - a quality that not everyone has? Hannah and Morrissey (2001) suggest that hardiness develops from experience and as people experience success in different areas in life, their commitment, challenge, and control improves. It is likely that maturity, experience, and aspects of hardiness were all contributing factors for the youth who were able to turn their lives around and permanently leave the streets.

The participants' drive to keep coping was a powerful piece that emerged across the stories. Although there were times when some of the participants felt like giving up, there was some intrinsic drive that motivated them to keep living. The youth were unable to explain what exactly it was that kept them going in life. It may be something inherent; the essence or substance of

living. Perhaps it is the human instinct of survival or what Aristotle described as the “whole of the intrinsic being” (Hope, 1960, p. 141). Brown and Amundson (2010) label this inner drive or unwillingness to give up as “internal grit”. The youth in their study were not willing to give up and had determination to make changes in their lives, in particular, exiting street life and entering mainstream society.

The essence of living ties in with existential philosophy and the construct of psychological hardiness. Maddi (2002) links hardiness to existential courage, suggesting that hardy attitudes structure how individuals perceive interactions with the world and provide motivation to do difficult things in life. It may be that some of the youth in this study found meaning in stressful situations which motivated them to continue coping with the challenges in life. The participants’ inner drive to keep living may also have relevance to Frankl’s (1984) description of the essence of existence. He argues that the essence of life is responsibility. Although the meaning differs from person to person and is constantly changing, every individual is ultimately responsible for his or her life (Frankl, 1984). The participants viewed responsibility as an important personal quality that helped them survive life on the streets; however, this alone does not appear to fully capture the essence of what kept them going.

It appeared that many of the participants in this study were disconnected from culture, which directly ties in with belief systems and coping behaviours. It is likely that involvement in culture may influence individual beliefs and core values, thus promoting hardy coping. Based on the literature, hardiness develops in individuals who are encouraged and helped by others to turn adversity into opportunity, providing pathways to development and resilience (Maddi, 2002, 2008). The idea of developing hardiness through experience and support from others has

important implications for the youth in this study because many of them came from troubled homes that lacked support and stability.

This study revealed that connectiveness was significant for all of the youth as they navigated the homeless experience and looked towards the future. Although connection had different meanings for the participants, it appeared to be representative of change and growth. The participants' desires to reconnect with others, a higher being, or within themselves may have provided them with the motivation to keep going in life, which reflects the humanistic view that people are "beings in the process of becoming" (DeCarbalho, 1991, p. 68) and constantly striving to be connected and whole. I would like to end with a quote that has personal meaning for me and has relevance to the participants in this study:

*Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation ... may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph. (Frankl, 1984, p. 170)*

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## Appendix A

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Serena George and I am currently attending the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in the Masters of Education in Counselling program. I am planning to carry out thesis research under the direct supervision of Dr. Linda O'Neill. I am interested in exploring youths' experiences of being homeless in Prince George, British Columbia.

I originally became interested in conducting research in this area based on my personal experiences of working with youth who are homeless at the Youth Emergency Shelter Society in Edmonton, Alberta. I immediately became intrigued by the youths' abilities to survive and I began to question what motivated them to carry on. It appeared that many of these young people were marginalized by society and were isolated from stable support systems. It is my hope that research on this topic will present opportunities for homeless youths' voices to be heard.

I plan to interview youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are currently homeless. This may include individuals who access emergency shelters, temporarily reside in transitional housing, sleep in any public place, or "couch surf". The interviews will last about an hour and will be audio tape-recorded so the material can later be analyzed by myself. To protect the anonymity of the youth their names and identifying characteristics will not be included in the final results. Additionally, all their information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor's office. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to their information.

I realize the potential difficulty with recruiting youth who are homeless to participate in this research study. I hope to be able to work closely with community agencies that provide services to this population. I am asking for your help in suggesting appropriate ways to recruit youth who are homeless. I am also wondering if I might be able to interview the youth at a space within your agency.

I look forward to the opportunity to speak with you regarding my research. Thank you for your consideration of this matter. I can be reached via email or telephone for further discussion or the possible arrangement of a meeting.

Sincerely,

Serena George  
BA, MEd (Candidate)  
sgeorge@unbc.ca

**Appendix B****Agency Consent Form**

Form to be filled out by a representative of the agency

Have you read and received a copy of the community agency letter outlining the research study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you agreed to allow the researcher to display information posters at your agency?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you agreed to help the researcher determine appropriate ways to recruit participants?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you agreed to allow the researcher to conduct interviews at a space within your agency?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Professional: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Professional

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

- Please tell me your story of being street involved (life on the streets).
- What challenges do you face in being street involved in this community?
- What skills do you have to help you to live this way? What community resources help you?
- What are your future plans? Do you see yourself leaving the streets?

## **Appendix D**

### **Community Resource List**

#### **Counselling and Services**

Intersect Youth and Family Services Society – 250-562-6639

Youth Around Prince George (YAP) – 250-565-6215

Native Friendship Center – 250-564-3568

Surpassing Our Survival Society (SOS) – 250-564-8302

Future Cents – 250-565-6333

South Fort George Family Resource Centre – 250-614-9449

Active Support Against Poverty (ASAP) – 250-563-6112

St. Vincent De Paul – 250-564-7871

Emergency Assistance – 250-564-4000

#### **Peer Support**

Youth Support Line – 250-564-8336

Crisis Line – 250-563-1214

#### **Housing**

Reconnect Village – 250-562-2538

Association Advocating Women and Children (AWAC) – 250-562-6262

#### **Health**

Opt Youth Clinic – 250-565-7381

Crisis Pregnancy Centre – 250-562-4464

#### **Addictions**

Nechako Youth Treatment Program – 250-565-2881



## Appendix E

### Research Participant Information Letter

*The following letter will be read to the participants by the researcher*

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Experiences of Street Involved Youth in the North*. The research is being carried out by Serena George under the direction of Dr. Linda O'Neill through the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC).

#### **Why is this research being done?**

The reason for this research project is to better understand youths' experiences of being street involved. I am interested in your story of life on the streets. Your story could help others to better understand what it is like to be street involved.

#### **Why I was chosen?**

You are being asked to participate in this study because:

- You are or have been street involved for a minimum of two months
- You are between the ages of 16-29
- You are willing to participate in this study's research process voluntarily

#### **What is involved?**

If you agree to voluntarily take part in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview that will last about an hour. You will be asked to share your story and experiences of being street involved in this community. The interviews will be audio tape-recorded so the material can later be analyzed by the researcher. You may ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any time.
- After the interviews have been analyzed, you will be asked to help check the results. This will involve a short interview lasting about 30 minutes. You will be able to add any information and let the researcher know if the results make sense to you.

#### **What are the benefits and risks involved in taking part in the study?**

One potential benefit of participating in this research is you may feel rewarded by discussing your experiences of live on the streets. You may also feel satisfied in knowing that you are contributing to research and providing knowledge to the community. A potential risk is that it may be uncomfortable to talk about your experiences. You will be provided with a list of resources that you can access for additional support if you would like it.

You can refuse to answer any questions and you may stop the interviews at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study during the interview, the tape recordings and any information you provided will be destroyed.

### **How will my identity be protected? (Anonymity)**

Your interview will be transcribed (typed word for word) by the researcher. Transcripts will be identified by a code number and not your name. Any information that might identify you will be removed from the final research document.

### **How will my information be kept private? (Confidentiality)**

Everything you discuss during the interviews as well as the forms you fill out will be kept confidential. This means that your information will not be shared with others. There are instances where I would have to report certain types of information. For example, if you are in need of protection because you tell me that you are going to harm yourself or others, if you suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, or if you are involved in a legal court case and the court orders a release of information. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to your information. Any information that might identify you will be removed from the final research report. Your information and tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the supervisor's office for five years after publication and then will be destroyed.

### **How will I be compensated?**

As a way to show my appreciation for your time and effort, you will be given a \$30 gift certificate for food. If you decide to participate you can withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you agree to meet for a second interview to check the results you will receive an additional \$15 in bus transportation tickets or taxi vouchers.

### **What will be done with the results?**

The completed research will be presented for my thesis defence at UNBC. It is anticipated that the results will be presented at conferences, to community organizations, and published in professional journals or reports.

You can obtain a copy of the research results by contacting the researcher, Serena George at (250) 552-7307 or [sgeorge@unbc.ca](mailto:sgeorge@unbc.ca), or Dr. Linda O'Neill at [loneill@unbc.ca](mailto:loneill@unbc.ca).

### **How will my information be destroyed?**

Data from this study will be destroyed five years after publication. Any electronic data from the hard drive on my research computer will be deleted and erased. Audio tapes will be erased and all hardcopy data will be incinerated.

### **Who should I contact if I have more questions?**

Please feel free to contact the researcher, Serena George at (250) 552-7307 or [sgeorge@unbc.ca](mailto:sgeorge@unbc.ca) if you have any questions. Any concerns about the project should be directed to the Office of Research at the University of Northern British Columbia (250) 960-5820 or by email: [reb@unbc.ca](mailto:reb@unbc.ca).

## Appendix F

### Research Participant Consent Form

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you read and received a copy of the participant information letter?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research study at any time?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand the benefits and risks of participating in this research study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that the interviews will be audio recorded?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that some of your actual words may be published in written form?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you know what resources are available for additional support?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Are you currently under the influence of substances that would affect your ability to give informed consent?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of Research Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to participate in this research study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

*Experiences of Street Involved Youth in the North*

**\$30 for Food**

- Are you between the ages of 16 and 29?
- Are you street involved?
- Have you been living on the streets for a minimum of two months?

If you would like to volunteer to share your experiences of life on the streets, I would like to hear from you.

- A private audio-taped interview
- One check-in

**For further information please contact:  
Serena George at 250-552-7307 or [sgeorge@unbc.ca](mailto:sgeorge@unbc.ca)**

## Appendix H

### Oath of Confidentiality

I \_\_\_\_\_ the Transcriptionist, agree to:

- Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (eg. Disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the researcher.
- Keep all research information in any form or format secure while it is in my possession.
- Return all research information in any form or format to the researcher when I have completed the transcriptions.
- After consulting with the researcher, erase and destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the researcher (eg. Information stored on computer hard drive).

Transcriptionist:

_____ Print name	_____ Signature	_____ Date
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Researcher:

_____ Print name	_____ Signature	_____ Date
---------------------	--------------------	---------------

If you have any questions or concerns about this study please contact:

Serena George  
 University of Northern British Columbia  
 MEd (Candidate)  
 250-552-7307  
[sgeorge@unbc.ca](mailto:sgeorge@unbc.ca)