



HOMELESSNESS INCREASES HEALTH RISKS TO STREET YOUTH

BACKGROUND & METHOD

- More than a quarter of a million Canadians are homeless, and one-third of them are young people.
- A person who has no adequate housing obviously faces numerous health challenges.
- Researchers looked at the problem of homelessness among a group of street-involved youth in Vancouver to see how extensive the problem is and to document the risks that go along with being young and homeless.
- They interviewed 478 street-involved youth between the ages of 14 and 26.

QUICK FACT

MORE THAN THREE-QUARTERS OF THE YOUTH INTERVIEWED REPORTED HOMELESSNESS AT SOME POINT IN THE PAST SIX MONTHS.

FINDINGS

- More than three-quarters of the youth either were homeless at the time of the interview or had been homeless at some point in the previous six months.
- 'Homeless' was defined as having no fixed address, living on the street, staying in a shelter or hostel, or 'couch surfing'.
- Compared to their peers who were not homeless, these homeless young people were more likely to smoke crack every day, to inject drugs in public, and to have experienced physical violence.
- They were also less likely to have a high-school education or to have received any type of addiction treatment.

IMPLICATIONS

- Previous studies have linked youth homelessness, crack smoking, and having less than a high-school education with initiation into injection drug use. That blood-borne diseases and other health problems are associated with injection drug use is well known, and these risks are compounded when injection takes place in public.
- In addition to living with the ever-present threat of violence, the homeless youth in this study, and thousands more like them across the country, are greatly at risk of contracting HIV, hepatitis C, and other very serious, costly, avoidable diseases.
- Evidence-based interventions, such as supportive housing and increased availability of residential addiction treatment programs, could reduce the risks faced by this vulnerable population.

Rachlis BS, Wood E, Zhang R, Montaner JSG, Kerr T. **High rates of homelessness among a cohort of street-involved youth.** *Health & Place*, 2009; 15(1): 10-17.

