



E-SYS QUICK FACTS



Who Are Canada's Street Youth? A Socio-demographic Snapshot from E-SYS

Introduction

Street youth are a hard-to-reach population. They are often excluded from residence- or school-based surveys due to their unstable living conditions and their limited interaction with the education system. They are economically and socially marginalized because of their age, homeless status and lack of education and job skills.¹ Street youth may be more preoccupied with meeting their basic daily needs than with health risks. Their lifestyle may also predispose them to engage in high-risk behaviours¹ such as unprotected sex, sex with high-risk partners and injecting drug use – behaviours that increase their risk of contracting and transmitting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and blood-borne infections (BBIs).

The information presented in this overview is based on data from Enhanced Surveillance of Canadian Street Youth (E-SYS). E-SYS is a sentinel surveillance system that monitors rates of STIs and BBIs, risk behaviours and health determinants in the Canadian street youth population. The data presented below are from the 1999, 2001, and 2003 cycles of E-SYS data collection.

The majority of street youth in E-SYS were male; approximately one-third were Aboriginal

As depicted in Table 1,

- ♦ A greater proportion of E-SYS participants were male, with a ratio of about 2 males to 1 female in all survey years.
- ♦ The age of street youth ranged from 15 to 24 years, with an average of 19 years across all survey years.
- ♦ Most E-SYS participants were born in Canada, and nearly 60% reported their ethnic origin as Caucasian.
- ♦ Aboriginals are over-represented among street youth. Although Aboriginals represent only 3% of the Canadian population, approximately one-third of E-SYS participants identified themselves in this ethnic category.

“E-SYS is a collaboration between the Public Health Agency of Canada’s Surveillance and Epidemiology Section (Community Acquired Infections Division, Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control), participating surveillance sites and the youth who provide the data and samples collected.”

Street youth reported high drop-out rates and high rates of expulsion from school

- ◆ In 2003, only 25% of street youth over 18 years of age had completed grade 12.
- ◆ In 2003, 40% of street youth aged 15 to 24 years reported that they had dropped out of school permanently, and 37% reported that they had been permanently expelled from school.
- ◆ Males were more likely to have been permanently expelled from school, while females were more likely to have permanently dropped out on their own.

More than half of street youth in E-SYS had been in jail

Table 2 shows that

- ◆ More than half of the street youth surveyed reported having been in jail. Similarly, about half also reported having had a probation or parole officer.

- ◆ Having spent time in jail and/or having been assigned to a probation officer were mainly the result of participation in illegal activities, such as breaking and entering, fighting or assault, and selling and buying drugs.
- ◆ Older youth (20–24 years) were more likely to report having had a probation/parole officer or having been in jail than were younger youth (15–19 years). This may be a consequence of exposure to street life; older youth were likely to have been street-involved for a longer period of time than were younger youth.
- ◆ About 70% of street youth reported having had a social worker. Family problems were the main reason given for seeing a social worker.
- ◆ Social assistance or welfare emerged as the main source of income for street youth in all survey cycles. Other commonly reported sources of income included regular and occasional work and family. A small but significant minority of street youth identified panhandling or prostitution as their main income source.

Table 1. Demographic profile of street youth

	1999	2001	2003
Gender (%)			
Male	61.7	56.6	62.9
Female	38.3	43.4	37.1
Age group (years)			
15–19	63.5	68.0	56.9
20–24	36.5	32.0	43.1
Mean age (years)	18.9	19.0	19.7
Place of birth (%)			
In Canada	92.2	92.9	91.9
Outside Canada	7.8	7.1	8.1
Ethnic origin* (%)			
Aboriginal	27.7	33.6	36.3
Caucasian	63.3	60.1	59.5
African /Black	4.3	4.2	5.3
Other	8.5	8.5	7.0

* Youth were allowed to report more than one ethnic origin; therefore, percentages may total more than 100.

Table 2. Social profile of street youth

	1999	2001	2003
Interaction with the legal system (%)			
Ever been in jail/detention			
Yes	55.5	54.3	61.9
No	44.5	45.7	38.1
Ever had a probation officer			
Yes	49.4	47.7	56.0
No	50.6	52.3	44.0
Interaction with the social service system (%)			
Ever had a social worker			
Yes	64.8	70.4	70.4
No	35.2	29.6	29.6
Ever been in foster care			
Yes	35.7	39.5	42.2
No	64.3	60.5	57.8
Ever been in a group home			
Yes	39.8	44.4	46.7
No	60.2	55.6	53.3
Sources of income (%)			
Social welfare	21.8	22.0	25.0
Regular work	15.2	18.1	13.9
Family	14.5	14.3	13.3
Occasional work	7.9	8.3	11.0
Selling drugs	5.6	5.4	7.7
Panhandling	8.0	7.8	7.6
Youth centre	7.8	6.9	7.5
Stealing	3.0	3.2	4.6
Friends	3.5	3.1	4.5
Prostitution	4.3	2.9	2.4
Squeegee	4.7	1.0	2.4

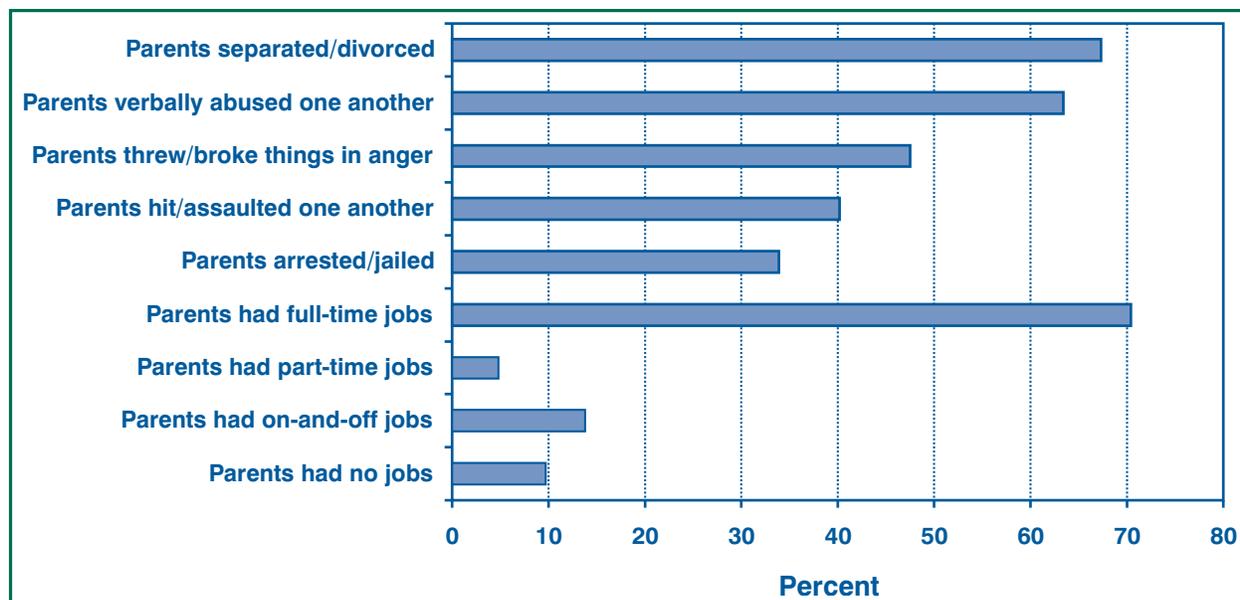
Nearly one-quarter of street youth had experienced homelessness while living with their family

- ◆ In the 2001 and 2003 cycles, 13% and 15% of street youth respectively had experienced homelessness while living with their family (data not shown).
- ◆ As seen in Figure 1, more than 65% of street youth surveyed in 2003 reported that their parents were divorced.
- ◆ Over one-third of street youth surveyed in 2003 reported that their parents had been in jail.

- ◆ More than one-half of street youth surveyed in 2003 reported that their parents abused each other, either verbally or physically, and displayed fits of anger.

Figure 1 presents circumstances that surveyed youth faced before they began living on the streets. These situations are not conducive to their well-being and may have predisposed them to take to the streets or influenced their decision to do so. Several studies on street youth have highlighted the fact that family violence and unstable conditions are major contributing factors to youth leaving home.²

Figure 1. Characteristics of street youth's families in 2003



Conclusions

Findings from E-SYS have significant implications for intervention in the street youth population. Street youth require both basic care and ongoing support if they are to remove themselves from their current situation and to have a chance of fulfilling life goals. Intervening in schools or partnering with the education system and youth-connected organizations to identify youth at risk of becoming street-involved may be a step in the right direction. A comprehensive approach involving foster care agencies, social workers, homeless youth services, the juvenile justice system, and integrating health programs and interventions are needed to improve the quality of life of street youth in Canada.

References

1. Roy E, et al. *Mortality in a Cohort of Street Youth in Montreal*. Journal of the American Medical Association. 2004; 292(5): 569-574.
2. Johnson KD, et al. *Predictors of Social Network Composition among Homeless and Runaway Adolescents*. Journal of Adolescence. 2005; 28(2) 231-248.

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