

Homeless “Squeegee Kids”: Food Insecurity and Daily Survival

A study of food habits among homeless youth in Toronto

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1. Food insecurity and homelessness

Food insecurity has been defined as the “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson, 1990). In the 1990s, food insecurity among low-income households in affluent Western countries became an increasing concern, and considerable research was conducted on the causes and effects of food insecurity among low-income households and families.

Little research has been done, however, on the relationship between homelessness and food insecurity. In an attempt to fill this gap, the authors undertook a study of homeless youth who frequented a downtown Toronto drop-in. What does food mean to teenagers and young adults in the chaotic world of life on the street? Where, how and what do they eat? How does their precarious access to food affect their health?

The answers to these questions have implications for agencies and organizations that work with street youth.

2. The study approach

Research was conducted at a downtown Toronto drop-in centre that is open on weekday afternoons, and is visited by 80 to 100 people a day. Although the drop-in was used mostly by adults, at any time there were usually 5 to 15 youth present, clustered around one or two tables. The drop-in provided cooking facilities, but no food, although coffee and tea were available.

Over the course of six months in 1998, Naomi Dachner regularly visited the drop-in centre for periods of three or four hours, with the permission of the coordinator. She would sit at the tables with the young people, chatting with them informally, asking questions, and recording their comments about food and meals. She also conducted six in-depth confidential interviews, each lasting up to two hours, in which the young people were encouraged to provide more details about their eating habits, living situation, educational background, length of time on the street, and coping strategies. The youth she interviewed were all over the age of 16 and none of them lived in hostels or shelters that provided regular meals.

During the analytical phase of the research, Ms. Dachner's field notes were organized into the following categories: income, shelter, health, and food acquisition.

3. *Life on the street*

In order to understand the place of food in the lives of homeless youth, it is important to know something about the context of their lives, including employment, shelter, and health.

Earning money

The most common source of money for the youth was "squeegeeing" – washing car windows at busy intersections and asking for a donation in return. Some young people also panhandled passersby while they worked at squeegeeing. A few did odd jobs such as painting and casual construction work, and some worked for ticket-brokers, buying tickets to concerts and sports events on the street.

Work was sporadic, and the youth were often exploited by employers. For example, a group that agreed to do clean-up work on a construction site was paid less than the amount that the employer had originally promised.

Finding work is difficult for homeless youth, most of whom lack skills and education. Without a stable home, they had no reliable access to a telephone line where they could receive calls about job prospects, and no regular sleeping or washing facilities where they could get rested and ready for work. Some felt that they faced discrimination because of their tattered clothing, or because of tattoos, hairstyles, or body piercings.

Given their limited options, some youth had engaged in criminal activity, such as delivering drugs or stealing small items. Squeegeeing offered them an opportunity to make money legally (the study was conducted before laws were passed to prevent this activity), yet outside the conventional labour market. However, the money they earned was insufficient to meet their needs. During 1998, public hostility to squeegeeing increased, and a police crackdown made it even harder to earn money this way.

Finding shelter

For many homeless youth, finding shelter was as much a daily effort as the struggle to earn some money. Some were able to stay with friends temporarily, and occasionally a group would pool their resources to rent a small apartment. However, few landlords were willing to rent to such groups, and such arrangements rarely lasted, because of the stress of overcrowding or the inability of every member of the group to continue contributing rent money.

Some youth at the drop-in also stayed at overnight shelters run by volunteer or social service agencies.

These included shelters run during the winter at local churches and synagogues, most of which also provided supper and breakfast. Most of the youth avoided the year-round hostels and shelters, because they did not feel safe in these places – they felt that they risked losing their possessions or getting hurt when a fight broke out.

In the absence of better options, the young people slept in parks, abandoned buildings, garages, subway stations, or makeshift shelters under bridges, or on rooftops, particularly during the summer months. Sometimes they would be woken by police officers and told to move. In some cases, the young people would stay awake all night because they could not find anywhere safe to sleep.

Coping with health problems

During the winter, many of the young people suffered from respiratory infections and influenza. A few caught scabies or lice; most assumed that these problems were transmitted at shelters. Foot problems were common, including fungus, blisters and sores, because of the amount of time the young people spent walking from place to place.

Those who squeegeed often complained of sore backs, necks, and arms from the work, and during the six months of the study, three were hit by cars. One was badly bruised, another broke an arm, the third fractured a knee.

The daily struggle

The overall picture that emerges from the research is of a daily struggle to find safe, secure shelter, generate income, and obtain food.

Many of the young people also had to cope with health problems. Their lives were chaotic and insecure, and their access to food precarious. As a result, adequate food was a precious resource, not to be squandered, and only to be shared with the utmost care.

Sleep deprivation and infections made the young people feel listless and ill. Some napped on the floor of the drop-in. However, because they had no stable shelter where they could recuperate from an infection, simple colds often developed into more serious illnesses. A few of the young people at the drop-in struggled with drug and alcohol addictions. Their ability to conquer these addictions was hampered by their homeless condition.

4. Food in the lives of homeless youth

Buying food

Young people who bought food tended to choose inexpensive, portable, ready-to-eat foods such as sandwiches, hamburgers, and pizza slices from restaurants, snack foods from variety stores, and hotdogs and ice cream from street vendors. Some bought easy-to-make foods that they could prepare in the drop-in kitchen.

A few frequented inexpensive “street youth friendly” restaurants. However, over the course of the study, two inexpensive restaurants in the area barred street youth, one because of a fight that had occurred, the other because of the bad publicity surrounding squeegee kids.

Sometimes, the young people would pool their money to buy food. On occasion, a group of young people would buy packaged macaroni and cheese and prepare it in the kitchen of the drop-in.

None of the young people was able to subsist on purchased food. Money was scarce, and some of the money had to be spent on other items.

Using charitable food programs

An alternative to buying food was eating snacks and meals offered through a social service agency or charitable organization. Most of the young people were familiar with the names, locations, and hours of operation of various food programs, and structured their day around them.

The quality and quantity of food available through these food programs varied. Some were known to serve good food, others were considered questionable. Many young people reported experiences of food poisoning after eating meals offered through certain charitable food programs, and as much as possible avoided using those programs. A few described the environment in which food was served as “dirty.”

Charitable food programs seldom offer a choice of food and some programs required those who attended to listen to sermons or prayers before, during or after the meal. Most young people spent as little time as possible at these places, and were forced there only by sheer hunger and the lack of other options.

“We have a choice of eating or not...I mean, there’s been nights where it looks like vomit on your plate, OK. And you’re going to eat it anyway. If you’re hungry enough, you’re gonna eat it.”

(Steve, 21 years old)

Many preferred the mobile services that offered snacks to people living on the street. These services did not require them to eat in surroundings that they found uncomfortable, but only a few programs operated in this way.

Occasionally, a food program that depended on donated food would run short. Young people would walk some distance to a meal program, only to find that there was no food or that only snack foods were available.

Foraging for food

A few young people obtained food by rummaging through garbage cans, getting day-old goods from donut and pizza shop employees, stealing from grocery stores, or tricking fast-food outlets to replace a meal they claimed to have bought and lost.

Going without

Even though free food was available through the charitable food programs, young people would sometimes forgo a meal because of competing demands on their time. For example, if the hours of a meal program conflicted with the hours of a medical clinic open to street youth, an individual might choose to go to the clinic instead. The hours spent earning money squeegeeing also meant less time to seek out free food.

Getting to food programs could be a problem for a young person suffering from ill health. When it came to a choice between walking five kilometres in the rain to get a meal or staying put and trying to get over flu, many young people skipped the meal.

“When you’re sick, you don’t feel like going anywhere...it’s not like you have food in your squat to eat. You have to go out and walk sometimes five, six kilometres just to go get a [free] meal.”

Kyle, 18 years old

The precious nature of food

Young people at the drop-in hoarded, guarded, coveted, and fought over food. When one person had to leave some food on the table for a short time at the drop-in, someone would be delegated to guard it. Accusations of stealing food sometimes led to arguments and even fistfights.

Sharing was a highly selective process. Food might be offered in return for a favour, or as a gift for a close friend. When a group prepared a meal together, dividing the portions was done very carefully and some recipients were likely to complain if they felt their portion was too small.

5. A hand-to-mouth existence

This study can be compared to two earlier studies of street youth in Toronto and Vancouver (Antoniades and Tarasuk, 1998; Hagan and McCarthy, 1997), in which street youth reported experiencing hunger and food deprivation. The likelihood of experiencing hunger was greatest for those who were squeegeeing and those who slept on the street or in makeshift shelters.

Neither these studies nor the present study analyzed the nutritional adequacy of the young people’s diet, but their precarious access to food certainly suggests an unbalanced diet that may affect their health. This study does, however, provide a perspective on certain health problems related to life on the street.

The vulnerability of the young people in the study is disturbing. Rates of unemployment and poverty for youth are higher than the national average. Current trends in public policy do not suggest any change in this statistic. In 1995, the government of Ontario enacted legislation that made it more difficult for young people under 18 to qualify for welfare benefits. The provincial and federal governments have withdrawn support for social housing, and as of 1999, there were 100,000 people on the waiting list for social housing in Toronto. The passage of the *Tenant Protection Act* in Ontario, which allows landlords to raise the rent on vacant apartments, has reduced the amount of affordable housing available.

Although an attempt by the City of Toronto to pass an anti-squeegeeing bylaw in 1998 was defeated, the province passed the *Safe Streets Act* in 1999, which outlawed squeegeeing and restricted panhandling, and gave the police greater powers to act against people engaged in these activities.

At present, homeless youth are caught in a holding pattern, in which the search for money, shelter, and food are a daily preoccupation. Without policies to increase the supply of affordable housing, added social supports for street youth, and programs to train young people for steady work, getting out of this holding pattern will be extremely difficult for the youth in the study.

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