

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF HOMELESS YOUTH:
THE FOOD EXPERIENCES OF “SQUEEGEE KIDS”**

by

Naomi Dachner

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science
Graduate Department of Nutritional Sciences
University of Toronto**

© Copyright by Naomi Dachner 1999



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file *Votre référence*

Our file *Notre référence*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-46127-0

Canada

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF HOMELESS YOUTH:
THE FOOD EXPERIENCES OF “SQUEEGEE KIDS”**

**Master of Science, 1999
Naomi Dachner
Graduate Department of Nutritional Sciences
University of Toronto**

ABSTRACT

Current knowledge about food insecurity in North America is based on research with low-income households. The experiences of homeless people, a segment of the population who are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, have been largely ignored by nutrition researchers. In this study, the food experiences of street youth, one of the fastest growing segments of the urban homeless population, were explored. To gain an understanding of their context-driven food experiences a critical ethnography was conducted. Over a five month period, field notes from weekly participant observation sessions with street youth at an inner-city drop-in centre in Toronto were compiled, and interview data were collected from six of these youth. Results of this study revealed that food access was precarious amidst the instability and chaos of street life. Further, in the context of homelessness, food was inextricably linked to and contingent upon other survival needs such as income, health, and shelter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I am grateful to my supervisor, Valerie Tarasuk, for her support and wisdom over the past two years - for striking the perfect balance between giving me guidance and allowing me freedom. She encouraged me to reach my potential and respected my limits. Although this thesis could not have been written without her, I am mostly thankful to her for letting it be my own.

I am thankful to Barbara Davis and Blake Poland for their invaluable support and input as members of my thesis committee. Ideas provoked by the literature, feedback, and conversations they shared with me have found their way - in some shape or form - into this thesis.

I am thankful to family and friends who inspired me, encouraged me, and put up with me over the course of this research. I am grateful to Ann, Carey, Cynthia, Elaine, Esther, Joanne, and Ursula, for being my sounding boards, editors, and comic relief. The help that Tamara Sussman gave me during a low point in the writing process was invaluable. It would take too long to list all that I am indebted to Jonah Butovsky for. Once again, his unconditional support and faith in me have carried me through one of life's adventures.

I appreciate the insight and warmth offered to me by the people I had the privilege of meeting over the course of this study. I am thankful to the staff at the Meeting Place for making me feel welcome at the drop-in. Most of all, I am indebted to the homeless youth who shared their life stories, accomplishments, struggles, and aspirations with me. I hope that this thesis does justice to their words and experiences.

I gratefully acknowledge the support I received from the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training over the past two years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE.....	4
2.1 Poverty in Canada.....	4
2.2 Government policies affecting the poor.....	5
2.3 Homelessness in Canada and in Toronto.....	6
2.4 Responses to homelessness in Toronto.....	8
2.5 Street youth in Toronto.....	11
2.5.1 <u>Research issues</u>	11
2.5.2 <u>Defining street youth</u>	12
2.6 Why youth leave home.....	15
2.7 Life on the street.....	16
2.7.1 <u>Unemployment and poverty</u>	17
2.7.2 <u>Shelter</u>	20
2.7.3 <u>Crime</u>	22
2.7.4 <u>Health problems of street youth</u>	24
2.7.4.1 <u>Depression and suicide</u>	24
2.7.4.2 <u>Drug and alcohol use and HIV</u>	25
2.7.4.3 <u>Sexually transmitted diseases</u>	27
2.7.5 <u>Food and nutrition problems</u>	28
2.8 Research rationale, goals, and objectives.....	31
2.8.1 <u>Household food insecurity</u>	32
2.8.2 <u>Food insecurity and homelessness</u>	33
2.8.3 <u>Research objective</u>	34
3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS.....	35
3.1 Theoretical stance.....	35
3.2 Personal history.....	36
3.3 Critical ethnography.....	37
3.4 Emergent design.....	38
3.5 Setting and sample.....	40
3.6 Data collection.....	42
3.6.1 <u>Participant observation</u>	42
3.6.2 <u>Entry into the field</u>	45
3.6.3 <u>In-depth interviews</u>	49
3.7 Data analysis.....	53
3.8 Methodologic reflections.....	57
4. INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT PROFILES.....	61
4.1 Allison.....	61
4.2 Kyle.....	63
4.3 Lee.....	65

4.4 Steve.....	68
4.5 Robin.....	69
4.6 Will.....	71
5. THE CONTEXT IN WHICH FOOD EXPERIENCES OCCUR.....	75
5.1 Shelter.....	75
5.2 Employment.....	78
5.3 Health	86
5.4 Drugs and alcohol.....	89
5.5 Food implications.....	91
5.5.1 <u>Shelter</u>	91
5.5.2 <u>Employment</u>	91
5.5.3 <u>Health</u>	92
5.5.4 <u>Drugs</u>	93
6. THE FOOD EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESS YOUTH.....	95
6.1 Food as fuel.....	95
6.2 Food acquisition strategies	98
6.2.1 <u>Everyday strategies</u>	98
6.2.1.1 <u>Purchased food</u>	98
6.2.1.2 <u>Food aid</u>	102
6.2.2 <u>Less common strategies</u>	108
6.3 Coping with food insecurity.....	111
6.4 Summary of results.....	114
7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	115
7.1 The contingent nature of food access	115
7.1.1 <u>Generalizability of model</u>	119
7.2 Food insecurity: Households vs. homelessness	120
7.3 Food insecurity and street youth.....	122
7.4 Sociopolitical context.....	126
7.5 Crackdown on squeegee kids.....	128
7.6 Conclusion.....	131
8. REFERENCES.....	133
APPENDIX A.....	139
APPENDIX B.....	140
APPENDIX C.....	141

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 7.1 Model for understanding daily food experiences.....	117
--	-----

1. INTRODUCTION

Canada's current sociopolitical climate, characterized by restraint and government cut-backs, has been accompanied by reports of growing problems of hunger and homelessness in urban centres across the country including Toronto, Canada's largest city (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994; Report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force (hereafter referred to as *Report*), 1999). Provincial restrictions in eligibility criteria for social assistance, reductions in welfare provisions, and moratoria on non-profit housing have been cited among the important contributors to the increased demand for emergency food and shelter programs in Toronto (Report, 1999; City of Toronto Community Services, 1997). In the nutrition literature, the relationship between poverty and food insecurity¹ is well recognized (Davis et al. 1991; Radimer et al. 1992; Davis & Tarasuk, 1994). Research in this area has primarily focused on housed, low income women with children. Less is known about the food experiences of homeless people. Since homeless people lack household resources to draw upon, their food acquisition strategies, food selection and consumption characteristics, and experiences of hunger and food deprivation are likely different from housed people.

Street youth represent one of the fastest growing and vulnerable subgroups of the homeless population in Toronto (Report, 1999). While some research has documented homeless adults' vulnerability to hunger, food insecurity, and dietary inadequacy (Luder et al. 1990; Tarasuk & Woolcott, 1994), there has been little nutrition research on the food experiences of

¹ Food insecurity is defined as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (Anderson, 1990).

homeless youth in Canada. Evidence from community reports and the published literature on street youth indicates that life on the street is characterized by chaos and insecurity. Within this context, street youth have difficulties meeting basic needs, and the search for food and shelter occupies a significant proportion of their daily activities (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). While these findings are suggestive, an in-depth investigation of food insecurity, hunger, and food deprivation among street youth is absent from the literature. Although food insecurity is not the only or even the most important problem that street youth face, food is vital, and chronically poor nutrition may increase the risk of health related problems and heighten vulnerability to the dangers associated with street life.

In this thesis, the food experiences of homeless youth are explored using an ethnographic research approach. To gain an understanding of the daily context which shapes food insecurity among street youth, participant observation sessions at a downtown Toronto drop-in centre serving homeless and socially isolated people were undertaken. "Hanging out" with youth at the drop-in over a five month period provided the opportunity to develop ongoing relationships with street youth and to become privy to daily life experiences as they unfolded. To obtain more detailed information about food acquisition strategies, food sources, and consumption, in-depth interviews were conducted with six homeless youth from the drop-in.

In addition to offering insight into food insecurity among a group of street youth, this study provides an understanding of the daily life experiences of street youth because food acquisition and eating are regular and necessary activities. The empirical findings from this study and the conceptual understanding of food insecurity presented in this thesis offer

insight into community and government initiatives aimed at improving the situation of homeless people. Findings from this study are timely given the increased public concern - evidenced by recent media, community, and government activities - about the growing numbers of homeless people in Toronto and the current debate about “squeegee kids”.

2. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This review outlines the broader context within which youth homelessness in Toronto occurs, the factors precipitating leaving home, and experiences of street life. It provides the background for the research presented in this thesis and clarifies the research rationale, objectives, and goals.

2.1 Poverty in Canada

Poverty rates in Canada have grown steadily and consistently with unemployment rates in the past decade, despite modest economic growth (National Council of Welfare, 1998). In 1996, 5.2 million Canadians or 17.6 percent of the population were living in poverty¹ (National Council of Welfare, 1998). A demographic breakdown of poverty in Canada for the same year (National Council of Welfare, 1998) indicated that unattached individuals were 2.5 times more likely to be poor than families, with poverty rates for women higher than for men. Among poor families, single-parent mothers had poverty rates much higher than any of the other three family types that were categorized (61.4% for single-mother families compared to ~10% for the other family types). Single-parent mothers under the age of 25 had an astounding poverty rate of 91.3 percent. Poverty rates among youth (18-24 years old) were also very high (61%), reflecting high youth unemployment. Rates for Aboriginal and immigrant youth were highest in this group (CCSD, 1998).

¹ Families or individuals with total incomes below the Statistics Canada low income cut-off (LICO). Cut-offs are equivalent to the amount that the average Canadian family spends on food, shelter, and clothing in a year plus 20 percentage points. LICOs vary by family size and the area of residence (National Council of Welfare, 1998).

Clearly, the recent economic prosperity has not filtered down to Canada's poor. Instead, the income gap between Canada's richest and poorest families doubled between 1984 and 1996 - in the two years between 1994 and 1996, the average total income of the poorest 10 percent of Canadian families declined by 13 percent, while the average total income of Canada's richest families increased by two percent (CCSD, 1998). In Toronto, average family income fell by 12.5 percent between 1991 and 1996, while the income of 40 percent of the poorest families declined by more than 20 percent (Report, 1999).

2.2 Government policies affecting the poor

Federal and provincial reductions in spending on income and other social programs are worrisome given the increasing rate of poverty in Canada. Due to changes in federal legislation, the number of unemployed people who are eligible for Employment Insurance has decreased. In all but three jurisdictions, the provinces and territories have cut welfare benefits (CCSD, 1998). In Ontario, the Conservative government, elected in 1995, reduced social assistance rates to individuals by 21.6 percent and enacted legislation which restricted eligibility for benefits (National Council of Welfare, 1997). Further, both the federal and Ontario governments have withdrawn support for social housing, thus reducing the supply of affordable housing available to Ontario's poor (Report, 1999). Ontario also replaced the *Rent Control Act* with the *Tenant Protection Act* which allows for discretionary rent increases with new vacancies and introduces procedures which make it more difficult for individuals to respond effectively to notices of eviction (Report, 1999).

The growth in income inequality and poverty in Canada have been accompanied by reports of growing problems of hunger and homelessness in urban centres (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994; Report, 1999). In 1989, it was estimated that 1.4 million people in Canada used food banks (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994). Between 1989 and 1997, food bank use across Canada doubled, and in 1998, the number of people using food banks increased by an additional 5.4 percent (Canadian Association of Food banks, 1998). Over the past eight years, applications for social housing have increased, and more than 100,000 people were on the estimated five year waiting list for social housing in Toronto at the end of 1998 (Report, 1999). Reports across the country document longer-than-ever waiting lists for social and supportive housing, increases in the use of shelters, daytime drop-in centres, and food banks, and the appearance of more and more people living on the streets. These have become issues of increasing public concern.

2.3 Homelessness in Canada and in Toronto

The absolute size of the homeless population in Canada is unknown because traditional means of enumeration exclude people without homes¹. The Canadian Census collects data through the mail and thus only captures data from individuals with a mailing address.

Telephone polls, another common means of collecting data at the population-level, also miss

¹In 1990 Philip Giles and colleagues conducted research to explore ways to include homeless people in the census (Brannigan & Caputo, 1993). They attempted to enumerate individuals using soup kitchens in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Several problems were encountered by the researchers. The use of a standard set of procedures was found to be inappropriate because of the variation in physical layout and organization of soup kitchens. Overlap was a problem because data were collected in the same agencies on successive days. Questions about place of residence (where respondents slept most nights) were also problematic. The authors also noted that young people were not well captured by the enumeration.

homeless people. Consequently, the prevalence of homelessness has been extrapolated from data compiled by shelters, hostels, and other community agencies serving homeless people, and estimates of Canada's homeless population are imperfect since the true proportion of homeless people who do not use the shelter system is unknown. According to the *1998 Alternative Federal Budget Papers*, unofficial estimates of homeless people in Canada were between 130,000 to 260,000 (Kevin Lee, personal communication, May 18, 1999). In 1996, in Toronto alone, approximately 26,000 individuals used hostels or about 3,200 people each night (Report, 1999). Over two thirds of these people were male. Families represented 46 percent of the people using hostels in Toronto in 1996, and 37 percent of these were headed by single mothers (compared to 24 percent in 1988), reflecting the increase in the proportion of female single parents living in poverty. Nineteen percent (or 5,300) of hostel users were children. Further, youth and families with children are the fastest-growing segments of the homeless population in Toronto, challenging the stereotypical view of homelessness as a problem of the down-and-out, male alcoholic (Report, 1999).

Over the past year in Toronto, reports of unprecedented numbers of homeless people have captured political and public attention. Two of the major forces which often brought homelessness to the forefront of political and public debate during this time were the actions of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force and the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC). The municipal government created The Toronto Homelessness Action Task Force in January 1998 to investigate and recommend solutions to the growth of homelessness. The

Task Force built on homelessness data available from the numerous community-level reports compiled by social service providers working with homeless people in Toronto (see Ambrosio et al., 1992; City of Toronto Community Services, 1997; Metro Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons, 1997; Surbeck, 1997; Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness, 1996; United Way of Greater Toronto, 1997). The final Report (1999) offers strategies for coordinated involvement from municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government to end homelessness¹. The TDRC was formed in the fall of 1998 by a group of homeless advocates who were concerned about the worsening situation of homeless people in Toronto. The TDRC embarked on a campaign to declare homelessness a national state of disaster requiring the same magnitude of resources that are made available in cases of natural disasters. Throughout the year, the group, along with other community groups, organized protests, forums, and demonstrations advocating for shelter, housing, and income supports for homeless people.

2.4 Responses to homelessness in Toronto

Responses to homelessness in Toronto have primarily focused on providing emergency shelter. With the growing population of homeless people, an expanding network of hostels, shelters, satellite motel units, and drop-in centres has emerged. Currently in Toronto, there are an estimated 4,000 beds available to homeless people during the winter months (Report, 1999). The City of Toronto operates approximately half of these beds, while the rest of the

¹ Unlike other western industrialized countries such as Britain (i.e., Housing (Homeless Persons) Act of 1997) and the United States (i.e., Stewart McKinney Homeless Relief Act of 1987), Canada does not have national legislation on homelessness (Daly, 1996).

shelters are community, often volunteer run (Report, 1999). Shelters vary in the services they provide, however all are generally based on an emergency model with the aim of supplying basic accommodation, on a temporary basis. Many shelters do not offer meals, sleeping arrangements often require residents to sleep on floor mats, and personal space, privacy, and hygiene facilities are limited (Daly, 1996). Some shelters facilitate links to more permanent and secure housing, and others provide limited connections to supportive community services. The Out of the Cold Program, a network of faith communities (e.g., churches and synagogues), has grown since it began in the late 1980s and has become an important winter response to homelessness in Toronto. The program provides overnight shelter and meals to between 150-400 homeless people usually from October to April (Report, 1999). In addition to emergency night shelters, there are 27 drop-in centres in Toronto which provide daytime shelter and various services, depending on the site, to homeless and socially isolated people (Report, 1999). There are also a number of organizations (often volunteer-run) which offer outreach services to bring people to shelters during extreme weather conditions and to help people survive on the streets by providing some basic supports such as sleeping bags.

Although hostels and shelters are meant to be a short-term, emergency resource for people without homes, only a quarter of shelter users in 1996 used shelters for emergency purposes (i.e., a one or two night stay) (Report, 1999). As a result of a lack of housing alternatives, three-quarters of the people who used the Toronto shelter system in 1996 depended on it for extended periods of time (17 percent used the hostel system for one year or longer) (Report,

1999). Many of these people had to move around from shelter to shelter at the end of the maximum stay period - usually two to three months - at each shelter.

In addition to shelter responses to homelessness, there is also a growing recognition of the health risks associated with homelessness and the barriers to health care that homeless people face. In Canada, as in other developed countries, socioeconomic inequality translates into differences in mortality and health with those at the low end of the socioeconomic scale experiencing more health problems and death (Mustard et al, 1997). The Canadian Public Health Association has declared homelessness “a fundamental health issue for Canadians” in their *1997 Draft Position Paper and Resolutions*. Poverty and lack of shelter are associated with high prevalences of chronic infections, mental illness, and substance use and addiction, and homeless people often do not receive health care for many reasons including not having health cards (Ambrosio et al., 1992). In Toronto, there are health care services that cater to homeless people (Cheryl White, personal communication, May 14, 1998). Certain health clinics offer services such as free dental care, harm reduction services (e.g., needle exchanges), and treatment without health cards. Inner city outreach services offer emergency first aid, other medical treatment, and harm reduction services such as needle exchanges and free condoms. Health care professionals also provide health services to homeless people during clinic hours on certain days at shelters and drop-ins.

2.5 Street youth in Toronto

In all major urban centres in Canada, youth homelessness is on the rise (Report, 1999). Annual appraisals of the number of street youth in Toronto range from 10,000 to 20,000 (Brannigan & Caputo, 1993). Most urban centres in Canada have attempted to grapple with understanding the nature, scope, needs of, and responses to youth homelessness (see the Calgary Study, Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Hagan & McCarthy's study of street youth in Toronto and Vancouver, 1997; and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg Study, 1990), however there have been few rigorous and systematic examinations of street youth in Canada.

2.5.1 Research issues

Descriptive information on street youth must be interpreted with some caution because it is impossible to determine the generalizability of research findings. Like homeless adults, the absolute size of the population of street youth is unknown, and consequently, deriving a probability sample of street youth is unlikely. Further, front-line workers in social service agencies which target street youth report that the population is highly diverse and transitory (Surbeck, 1997). This makes it difficult to stratify youth into geographical clusters (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997 and Smart et al., 1992). Further, researchers have typically relied on social service agencies to gather data on street youth. Consequently, youth who avoid social service agencies (i.e., "hard-to-reach" youth) may be either excluded or underrepresented in research on street youth. Further, street youth may avoid contact with researchers because they are minors (i.e., under 16 years of age), wanted by the law, or reluctant to talk about sensitive

issues such as substance use, family abuse, and illegal activities (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

In spite of the methodologic challenges inherent in studying street youth, diverse sources of data on street youth have accumulated (e.g., community reports and a few studies by independent researchers). The following sections describing street youth integrate these data sources where appropriate, but will draw heavily on two of the more recent and extensive studies of street youth in Toronto. One of these is a study of youth homelessness and crime conducted by sociologists at the University of Toronto (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997) and the other is a study conducted by researchers at the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) in Toronto which focuses on drug and alcohol behaviour of street youth (Smart et al., 1992). Both of these studies employed sampling techniques which sought to enhance the representativeness of their samples. Hagan & McCarthy (1997) used a purposive sampling technique which relied on the knowledge of experts, and Smart et al. (1992) used a randomized selection strategy, involving systematic procedures when possible. Both studies included street youth from agency and non-agency settings.

2.5.2 Defining street youth

There are no clear conceptual boundaries defining street youth as the group does not represent a homogeneous community. For example, researchers may define street youth based on their age, reason for leaving home (i.e., runaways vs. throwaways), the length of time youth have been on the street, and shelter conditions (i.e., youth in hostels vs. youth living literally on the

street). In Toronto, hostels and other social service agencies generally consider homeless people between the ages of 16 and 24 to be youth (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Further, street youth may distinguish themselves by sexual orientation, ethnicity, length of time on the street, or membership into a particular subculture, and shared characteristics and interests cannot be assumed. The cleavages and distinctions that exist among this group are evident in Toronto, in part, by the various youth subcultures and the agencies that they frequent (Steve Gaetz, personal communication, February 5, 1998).

Demographic characteristics derived from Hagan & McCarthy's large sample of Toronto street youth (390) suggested that street youth were disproportionately male with about two-thirds male and one-third female, and on average males were older than females (1997). These findings are consistent with other studies of street youth in Toronto (see Janus et al., 1987 and Smart et al., 1992), Vancouver (see Hagan & McCarthy, 1997) and a study of Calgary street youth (see Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987). Over 50 percent of the youth in Hagan & McCarthy's Toronto sample had been on the street for more than a year, with 36 percent on the street for two or more years. And, while about 40 percent of youth had left home four or more times, 30 percent reported that it was their first time leaving home (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Smart et al. (1992) reported similar findings. In addition, the largest share of youth (about 50%) in the Smart et al. sample left home between the ages of 11 and 15.

Another salient characteristic of street youth, consistent across the literature, is that their

education has been interrupted. The modal youth in Hagan & McCarthy's study had a grade nine education, and about one in five left school after grade eight (1997). Findings from a recent report of the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC-T, 1998) on street youth were similar. In this survey of 71 street youth, almost a quarter reported that they had not completed high school, and 15 percent had grade eight or less. Smart et al.'s findings among a group of 145 street youth from agency and street setting indicated that 88 percent of youth left school before completing grade 12 (1992).

Although street youth come from a range of family backgrounds, certain background characteristics are common among them (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Surbeck, 1997).

Evidence suggests that the majority of street youth in Toronto come from disrupted families (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Smart et al., 1992). Less than a third of the youth in Hagan & McCarthy's sample reported living with both of their biological parents at the time that they left home, a quarter of these youth lived in reconstituted families (i.e., with a stepmother or stepfather), and the rest lived with a single mother or in a foster or group home (1997).

Hagan & McCarthy (1992) found differences in family class background and family structure which related to youth's chances of being on the street. The odds of youth being on the street were four times greater for youth of single parents who were unemployed or households where both parents were unemployed when compared to other (higher) class categories.

2.6 Why youth leave home

Up until recently, homeless youth were synonymous with runaways. Runaways were thought to leave home prematurely seeking freedom from parental authority and the thrill and adventure of street life (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). It was assumed that youth eventually returned home, after the excitement of independence wore off. Youth who defied this normal adolescent behaviour and did not return home, were thought to be unusual perhaps due to psychological or pathological personalities.

The false assumptions embedded in this “individual pathology perspective” of youth homelessness were initially exposed through research in the 1980s which revealed that the great majority of homeless youth were neither thrill seekers nor deranged. Instead, running away was an adaptive response to intolerable home situations. Janus and his colleagues’ study of juvenile runaways offered one of the earliest sources of data on street youth in Toronto (1987). Data collected from 149 adolescents revealed that the great majority of the youth left home because of physical and sexual abuse (73 and 51 percent respectively). Further, in many cases, youth were throwaways (i.e., kicked out of their family homes) rather than runaways.

Although the generalizability of the findings from Janus et al. (1987) was limited because the sample included only youth from Covenant House (a downtown Toronto youth shelter), other sources have reported similar accounts of abuse. Kufeldt & Nimmo’s study of Calgary street

youth also found that the vast majority of their sample of 489 runaways had experienced family abuse (1987). More recent studies of more diverse samples of street youth in Toronto also confirmed Janus et al.'s findings (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Smart et al., 1992). A Toronto public health report profiling youth and a report by a Toronto health clinic serving street youth reported that approximately 70 percent of street youth experience family physical and/or sexual abuse (Kendall, 1994; Surbeck, 1997).

In addition to abuse, street youth leave home (both running away and being thrown out) due to other family related problems, and often it is a blending of causes. These include conflicts with stepfamily members, heavy drug use and/or alcohol use by parents, disputes over youth's drug and/or alcohol use, sexual partners, and friends, and hostility and intolerance to youth because of sexual orientation (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Smart et al., 1992; Surbeck, 1997). Hagan & McCarthy (1997) found that family problems were associated with problems at school. It is possible that school problems exacerbate family problems and vice versa.

2.7 Life on the street

Evidence from studies of street youth in Canada (see McCarthy & Hagan, 1991; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987) suggest that while there are differences between homeless adults and youth (e.g., prevalence and types of mental illness), adolescents share the fundamental experiences of extreme poverty, lack of shelter, hunger, unemployment, trouble with the police, crime, and harassment with their adult counterparts. The majority of the youth in the Hagan &

McCarthy study (1997) often went without shelter, food, work, or money, and consequently, youth spent a large proportion of their time searching for ways to meet survival needs.

McCarthy & Hagan (1992) caution that the separation of homeless adults from adolescents may not only obscure the similarities between the two groups, but it may lead to the denial of the conditions of that lead youth to homelessness (i.e., reinforce the individual pathology perspective of runaway youth) and the conditions of homelessness.

Regardless of background, on the street the need for money, food, shelter, and clothing seems to be common to all homeless youth. For example, Kufeldt & Nimmo (1987) classified youth in their sample as either “true runaways” or “inners and outers”. “Inners and outers” reported leaving and returning home repeatedly and spending shorter periods of time on the street.

However, youth in both categories identified the need for financial services, food, shelter and clothing when on the street.

2.7.1 Unemployment and poverty

According to Statistics Canada, in 1998 the youth unemployment rate in Canada was 15.2 percent. Compounding the labour market conditions, street youth face barriers to employment related to their homelessness. Street youth’s educational qualifications are often insufficient, they lack a fixed address, telephone, access to appropriate clothing and hygiene facilities - all of which are important to securing a job (CPSC-T, 1998). Although the majority of the youth (70%) in the Hagan & McCarthy study had worked since leaving home,

most of the employment was part-time and temporary. At the time of the study, 30 percent of the youth reported that they had not worked since leaving home and of those who reported past employment since being on the street, 62 percent were not employed (1992). The youth who were employed reported temporary, odd jobs (e.g., painting) or minimum wage jobs in the service sector.

Given the bleak employment situation for street youth, they appear to be in need of government provided financial assistance. However, just over half (53%) of youth surveyed by Hagan & McCarthy (1992) had collected social assistance since leaving home, and 58 percent of youth interviewed by Smart et al. (1992) used welfare as an income source in the month prior to the study. Hagan & McCarthy (1992) further explain that in most cases the money received was in the form of a one-time Emergency Welfare provision designed for individuals who need assistance but who lack the requirements for standard welfare (e.g., proof of residency and proper identification). Youth in Hagan & McCarthy's study who did not apply for social assistance often did not know about the programs, lacked valid identification, and felt it was too much of a hassle. Agency workers also suggest that some street youth do not seek government support because they are minors or wanted by the law and they fear contact with authorities (Cheryl White, personal communication, May 14, 1998).

In 1995, the Ontario Government cut social assistance rates and tightened restrictions on

eligibility, as mentioned in the earlier discussion on poverty in Canada. These changes have resulted in excluding many homeless youth from welfare provisions (CSPC-T, 1998).

Eligibility for youth between 16 and 18 years old is now dependent on being in school and having an adult trustee, both unrealistic requirements for homeless youth (National Council of Welfare, 1997). At the same time, community education and employment programs, and other community service agencies which cater to street youth (e.g., Metro Youth Job Corps and KYTES), do not have stable, ongoing funding, and 40 percent of programs serving youth have lost paid staff as a result of funding cutbacks (CSPC-T, 1998).

Although increases in the age of eligibility for social assistance are part of a larger program of welfare reform, the action may also reflect policy makers' lack of understanding of the causes and conditions of youth homelessness. For example, Gill Jones (1997, 1995), a researcher who studied patterns of young people leaving home in Britain suggests that policy makers assume normative patterns of leaving home based on a model of economic rationality.

According to this perspective, it is taken for granted that youth ought to leave home only when they are financially able to do so (e.g., married and employed), and thus leaving home involves choice. Youth who leave home at times that are not financially responsible (i.e., do not choose the most appropriate time to leave home) are seen as deviant and undeserving of government support. Thus, governments might remove what they perceive as incentives to leaving home (e.g., welfare for youth between 16 and 18 years old). Jones asserts that policy directions based on the application of labels of deviancy and normality to patterns of leaving

home are misguided since evidence suggests that fewer young people leave home to form partnerships and for other traditional reasons. Further, this policy approach denies the fact homeless youth do not leave home in accordance with a model of economic rationality, and in fact, leaving home is most likely to occur when someone has had little choice about the time of leaving (e.g., youth who are kicked out of their homes).

In light of employment and social assistance constraints, recent studies of street youth in Toronto have reported a variety of alternative income generating activities. In efforts to meet survival needs, youth reported receiving money through criminal activity (e.g. drug running and prostitution), panhandling, and borrowing from relatives and friends (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991; Smart et al., 1992). In addition, squeegeeing¹ has emerged as relatively new street-based activity that street youth engage in to earn money (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998; CPSC-T, 1998). Despite these income generating activities, the majority of youth in these same studies indicated problems getting adequate food, money, and shelter.

2.7.2 Shelter

Homeless youth lack the income required for secure housing. In November 1998, the maximum welfare shelter allowance for a single person was \$350, while the average rent in Toronto for a bachelor apartment was \$555 (CPSC-T, 1998). Eligibility for this component

¹ Squeegeeing is the practice of washing the windows of passing motor vehicles when they are stopped at major intersections, and then soliciting donations.

of welfare requires first that proof of residency be demonstrated. In other words, homeless youth must first find a landlord who will agree to rent an apartment to them. This requirement plus the current one percent rental vacancy rate and the usual initial requirement of first and last month rents makes finding shelter in Toronto next to impossible. In addition to income, youth suggested that discrimination based on appearances, poverty, and age prevented them from renting apartments (CSPC-T, 1998).

Research and agency reports have documented a variety of living situations among street youth. They may literally live on the street (e.g. sleep on heat grates, under bridges, in parks or subway stations) or in “squats” (e.g., makeshift shelters or abandoned buildings), in shelters or hostels, or with friends. Characteristically, youth move back and forth between these types of accommodations, reflecting the insecurity, instability, and difficulties in finding shelter (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992 and Surbeck, 1997). According to the Toronto Hostel Division, about 325-340 youth use hostels nightly, and at least the same number seek shelter outside the hostel system (CSPC-T, 1998). This is likely a reflection of capacity as well as other limitations of city hostels and shelters. McCarthy & Hagan (1992) report that most youth who have stayed at hostels have also lost privileges to do so (e.g., for violating curfews). Youth who disliked staying at hostels commonly explained that they disagreed with rules and regulations of the hostel, they distrusted other hostel residents, they wanted to avoid the infringement of hostel workers, and they wanted to be with friends (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

2.7.3 Crime

It is thought that the potential for involvement in criminal activity is greater for street youth than their non-homeless counterparts because of their greater risk of contact with the alternative underground economies of prostitution, narcotics, and theft¹ (Brannigan & Caputo, 1993). Forty-six percent the street youth surveyed (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997) reported that they had been in jail at least once since they had left home. Breaking and entering homes or businesses was reported by 27 percent of the youth, 49 percent reported stealing goods valued up to \$50 and 42 percent reported stealing goods over \$50. Other criminal involvement that youth reported since leaving home included: stealing food (e.g., from convenience stores and supermarkets, and “dining and dashing” at restaurants) (46%); working in the sex trade (30%); and selling drugs (46%). Illegal drug use was also common: marijuana (80%), hallucinogens (55%), cocaine (42%), and speed (34%). These findings on drug use are consistent with the prevalence figures found in studies conducted by the Addiction Research Foundation (Smart et al., 1992). Compared to youth living at home, criminal involvement was significantly higher among street youth, both before and after leaving home, but a greater proportion of youth participated in illegal activities after they left home.

Hagan & McCarthy (1997) further the understanding of crime committed by street youth by exploring the relationship between situational adversity and street crime. The authors set out to explore foreground causes of delinquency and crime through the study of criminogenic

¹ It is also important to recognize that street youth are also the victims of crime; both males and females reported being the victims of theft, sexual harassment, attacks and beatings since leaving home (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

situations. The authors contend that this approach, once central to the study of crime, has been overlooked by contemporary sociological criminology in favour of a focus on background and developmental factors which are thought to generate delinquent and criminal behaviour. In other words, researchers have focused on the role of childhood and adolescent experiences in the home, school, and with peers in the propensity toward crime rather than the role of harsh conditions that are potentially criminogenic. Drawing on descriptive findings from their sample of street youth, delinquency and situational adversity were measured. Delinquency was explored in three ways: food theft, serious theft, and prostitution; and three measures of situational difficulties were included: employment, hunger, and shelter. Results from this analysis shed light on the importance of situational factors common to street life. They found that theft of food and serious theft increased with hunger, serious theft and prostitution increased with problems of shelter, and prostitution increased with unemployment. In addition, while gender differences were observed - for example, females were more likely to participate in the sex trade and males had greater involvement in theft and were more likely to be incarcerated - the length of time on the street and living conditions (i.e., being on the street for a long time and living on the street) were the most consistent predictors of hunger, theft, illicit drug use, and incarceration.

2.7.4 Health problems of street youth

2.7.4.1 Depression and suicide

Concerns about mental health, drug and alcohol use, and sexually transmitted diseases dominate the literature on health and street youth. Since deinstitutionalization of mental health patients in Canada in the late 1960s, mental health problems are commonly thought to be a central cause of homelessness among adults (CPHA, 1997; Daly, 1996; Report, 1999). However, among street youth, mental health problems seem to be treated as consequences of adolescence and homelessness. For example, research on mental health and street youth in Toronto focuses on depression, demoralization (i.e., sense of hopelessness and despair), and suicide (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Smart et al., 1992). These studies reveal disturbing findings on suicide. Since leaving home, 27 percent of youth in the Hagan & McCarthy study had tried to end their lives. Forty-three percent of the youth in the Smart et al. sample had attempted suicide at some point in their lives, and although there was no change in the overall percentage of suicide attempts from 1990 to 1992, significantly more females interviewed in 1992 had attempted suicide than those interviewed in 1990 (61% vs. 42% respectively). Interestingly, Smart & Walsh (1993) investigated the relationship between feelings of depression and drug and alcohol use, predicting that depression would be greatest among those who had problems with drugs and alcohol or reported heavy use. (Among college students and the general population, drug abuse and suicide have been found to be related.) However, the researchers found no relationships between depression and any of their alcohol or drug-use variables.

2.7.4.2 Drug and alcohol use and HIV

Research by investigators at the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) in Toronto (Smart et al., 1992; Smart & Adlaf, 1991) found that 46 percent of street youth interviewed reported clinically significant levels of alcohol problems (according to the CAGE diagnostic scale). Heavy drinking (frequency of consuming five or more drinks at a single sitting) was reported at least once in the prior four weeks by 63 percent of sample, while a quarter reported heavy drinking five or more times during the past four weeks. In a comparison sample of Toronto students, 33 percent reported drinking five or more drinks at a single sitting at least once, and only 3 percent reported this behaviour in the prior four weeks. Drug problems were reported among users of crack, inhalants, and cocaine. Along with cannabis, a share of youth reported daily use of these drugs (cannabis -15%, crack - 5%, cocaine - 3%, inhalants - 2%). Multiple drug use was the norm. Forty-five percent of street youth reported that they were concerned about their drug use, 43 percent felt that they were unable to stop using drugs, and 38 percent wished they used less drugs. Compared to the school sample, street youth reported rates of use at least ten times higher for most drugs. Half of the sample reported both alcohol and drug problems.

Drugs which are used intravenously (IV) are perhaps the greatest public health concern because of the potential to spread human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection through shared needles. In Toronto, 41 percent of the street youth who participated in the ARF study in 1990 reported IV drug use in their life; in 1992, the figure decreased to 28 percent (Smart

et al., 1992). Similar findings were evident in a more recent study of 919 street youth, 13-25 years old, in Montreal (Roy et al., 1998). Thirty-six percent of the participants in the Montreal study reported that they had used IV drugs in their lifetime; and the prevalence of HIV was 1.85 percent, 3.7 times higher than the rate estimated for the general population. These disturbing findings prompted Roy et al. to develop a prospective cohort study to investigate HIV and drug-related behaviour among street youth over time. Some of the data collected from 459 street youth who had completed the baseline and second interviews by January 1997 have been published (see Roy et al., 1998). At the six month period, 19 of the 277 youth who reported that they had never injected drugs in their initial interviews, reported that they had since begun injection drug use. More directly connected to HIV infection, 11 of the 19 new injectors had borrowed used needles and reported that they had also lent or given their own used needles; among "stable injectors" (youth who had injected in the six months prior to the initial interview and continued doing so at the second interview), 18 percent reported never sharing needles at the second interview and 10 percent reported that they had started to do so between the two interviews. Smart et al. (1992) reported that needle-sharing among IV drug users had declined from 27% in 1990 to 15% in 1992, however, they caution that the small sample size precluded an adequate statistical test for this change.

2.7.4.3 Sexually transmitted diseases

The sexual activity that street youth engage in, especially those who work in the sex trade, also raises public health concerns regarding the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Sex is a commodity that street youth can trade for food, shelter, money, clothing, drugs, and alcohol. The more desperate youth become (i.e., the longer that youth are on the street and the more street-based living conditions are), the more likely they are to be involved in the sex trade or “survival sex” (McCarthy & Hagan, 1991). This situation puts them at increased risk for HIV and other STDs. MacDonald et al. (1994) analyzed data from the *Canada Youth and AIDS Study* and *Street Youth and AIDS* reports (see Radford et al., 1989) to explore sexual activity and correlates of risk taking in sexual activity among street youth in Canada. They found that the majority of street youth (95% of males, 93% of females) were sexually active. Of these youth, almost half reported at least ten different sexual partners; and among sex trade workers, 71% of the females and 52% of the males reported sex with more than 100 different partners. Although sex trade workers reported more consistent condom use (55% of males and 58% of females) compared to street youth not working in the sex trade (between 10-25% consistent condom use), they reported the highest rates of STD diagnoses. Overall, 16 percent of the males and 30 percent of the females reported having a STD diagnosed at least once, while these figures were 45 and 68 percent respectively for sex trade workers. These rates are significantly higher than Canadian school drop-outs who lived at home (9%) and first year college students who were less than 21 years old (9%) who were surveyed during the same year.

In addition to mental health, drug, and alcohol problems, and high rates of STDs, extreme poverty and a lack of shelter exposes street youth to a host of diseases. In Canada and the United States, patterns of health care utilization and medical records indicate that street youth suffer from high rates of periodontal disease, dermatological problems (e.g., scabies, lice, and fungus), nutritional problems, hepatitis, respiratory infections, tuberculosis, and pregnancy (CPHA, 1997; Deisher & Rogers, 1991; Goldman, 1988; Reuler, 1991; Rew, 1996; Sherman, 1992; and Wang et al., 1991). It is not surprising then that Toronto street youth were more likely than a student sample to rate their health as fair or poor (2 vs. 38%, Smart et al., 1992).

2.7.5 Food and nutrition problems

In Canada, few studies have explored food problems and nutritional well-being among homeless people (see Bunston & Breton, 1990 and Tarasuk & Woolcott, 1994), and only one of these focused on street youth (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998). Antoniades & Tarasuk (1998) assessed the nature and extent of food scarcity among a sample of 88 Toronto street youth. The sample was drawn from three inner-city agencies specializing in services for street youth; interviews were conducted with adolescents, ages 16 to 25 years, whose housing was unstable or inadequate. Findings from this study indicate that almost two thirds of youth interviewed were having difficulties getting enough food to eat or were concerned about their ability to do so. The authors caution that results from the study likely underestimate the true level of food scarcity among Toronto street youth because they reflect only the experiences of street youth using community services. Data were not collected in non-agency settings and

consequently, youth who may have been more vulnerable to food problems were excluded from the study. Despite the limited size and composition of the sample, key results from this study echo findings from the larger and more representative sample of street youth in the Hagan & McCarthy study (1997).

Most of the youth (76%) in the Hagan & McCarthy sample had gone an entire day without eating at least on one occasion since leaving home, 46 percent reported that they went hungry a number of times, and nine percent reported that they were unable to find food most of the time (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). About half of the youth sampled in Antoniadou & Tarasuk's study reported some hunger and/or absolute food deprivation within 30 days prior to the time of interview (1998). Further, youth who were living on the street (i.e., sleeping on the street or in "squats") rather than in shelters, hostels, or with friends, and those relying on street-based activities (i.e., panhandling or squeegeeing) rather than welfare, hostel allowances, prostitution, or friends, as a main source of income, were especially vulnerable to food deprivation. These results are supported by Hagan & McCarthy's findings (1997) that hunger increased with street association (i.e., living condition and duration of time on the street).

Street youth in the Hagan & McCarthy study (1997) reported acquiring food from a variety of sources including grocery stores, friends, fast food restaurants, and meal services in hostels. Most youth relied on multiple sources of food with social service agencies (including meals

from hostels) being the most common single food source (58 percent reported using meals provided by social service agencies). Stealing from grocery stores for food, exchanging sex for food, scrounging through garbage for food, and picking up left-over lunches in school yards were also reported. Youth in Antoniadis & Tarasuk's study also reported that food from drop-in centres, hostels and shelters were the most common sources of food (1998). Only about one percent of youth in this sample reported using food banks, while about a quarter of the sample of street youth in the ARF study reported using food banks within 30 days prior to the time of interview (Smart et al., 1992). But, as Antoniadis & Tarasuk (1998) point out, it is likely that food from food banks were an indirect source of food for youth since food banks supplied at least some of the food served at charitable meal programs.

In spite of the range of food sources that street youth draw upon and the use of charitable meal programs in particular, food deprivation and hunger are common. Street youth identified food as one of the most important problems that they faced (Smart et al., 1992). These disturbing findings regarding food deprivation echo earlier findings from studies of street youth in the United States (e.g., Greenblatt & Roberston, 1993). Although no study has investigated the nutritional status of street youth, clearly there is reason for concern. Research and reports on homelessness invariably conclude that homeless people have difficulties meeting basic needs (i.e., food, clothing, and shelter). Medical records cite diagnoses of "malnutrition" and "nutritional deficiencies" among homeless patients (Goldman, 1988; Reuler, 1991; Sherman, 1992).

Street youth face many of the same barriers to adequate food and nutrition as homeless adults.

Homeless people lack access to cooking and food storage facilities and because they cannot afford to buy quality food regularly, they rely on cheaper fast-foods and the variable meal schedules of free sources of food such as shelters, hostels, drop-in centres, and meal programs (Gelberg, et al., 1995). Consequently, homeless people are at risk for nutritional problems. Food scarcity, hunger and nutritional inadequacies among homeless adults have been widely documented by nutrition researchers in the United States (see Cohen et al., 1992; Drake, 1992; Luder et al., 1989, 1990; Wiecha, 1993, 1991).

As with adults, chronically poor nutrition may increase the risk of health related problems and heighten vulnerability to the dangers associated with street life. Food is a basic requirement for day-to-day survival, and street youth may have additional requirements due to growth and pregnancy. Poor nutrition among street youth may also have a negative impact on lifelong health since the onset of nutrition-related chronic illnesses (e.g., osteoporosis) later in life may be influenced by nutrition during adolescence.

2.8 Research rationale, goals, and objectives

In urban centres across Canada, the growing population of street youth has received written attention from the media, journalists (see Weber, 1991), and the community of front-line workers. However, street youth have scarcely been studied by the academic/ research community. At the core of what is known about street youth is the worrisome fact that youth

are struggling to meet their basic food and shelter needs. One might expect to find nutrition research on street youth in the food security literature, however, to date, food insecurity has predominantly been conceptualized and studied at the household level (Campbell & Desjardins, 1989; Radimer et al., 1992; Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999).

2.8.1 Household food insecurity

Food security is a normative definition that is applicable in the context of food-rich, industrialized countries. The concepts of food access, nutritional adequacy, food safety, and social acceptability as it relates to acquiring food are embraced in the definition (see Davis et al., 1991). Theoretically, food security applies to all, however it has only emerged as a field of study due to a recognition that poorest people in society were not food secure. Research has focused on food insecurity at the household level where a range of severity in food insecurity has been documented. The least severe form takes place when uncertainty around obtaining food in socially acceptable ways is experienced, and the most severe form is the physical and psychological consequences of hunger that occurs when people do not eat enough because of insufficient resources (Campbell & Desjardins, 1989; Kendall et al., 1995 and Radimer et al., 1992). In food insecure households, food is an elastic resource whereby money to purchase food can be diverted to satisfy more urgent or inelastic needs (e.g., housing). The numerous coping techniques employed as households struggle to manage food situations have been documented. For example a recent study of very low income mothers found that in addition to the use of food banks, women delayed bill payments, gave up

services (e.g., telephone), sold household and personal possessions, sent children for meals outside of the home, and purchased food on credit to stretch the money available for food (Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999). This study found evidence of nutritional inadequacy among the participants despite the use of these resources.

2.8.2 Food insecurity and homelessness

Clearly, homeless youth lack even such scant resources to draw upon, and thus their food acquisition strategies are likely to be different. For example, while the impact of food banks on the nutritional needs among very low income domiciled families has been studied, food banks are not likely to be utilized by homeless youth since they lack facilities for storing and preparing food. Experiences of food insecurity appear to be shaped by the context within which they occur. Since the context of homelessness differs from that of housed people, experiences of food insecurity, hunger, and coping strategies at the household-level are not likely transferable to street youth.

In order to conceptualize food insecurity among street youth, and evaluate existing programs and services to ultimately develop appropriate and effective interventions, it is necessary to learn about their context-driven food experiences. Existing information about street youth suggests that street youth are a diverse population and their lives are characterized by instability and chaos. The continuous struggle that street youth engage in as they attempt to satisfy food needs is a central part of street life. While community reports, studies on crime

and substance abuse, and some medical records have touched upon the problematic nature of food and nutrition for street youth, the purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which the day-to-day lives of street youth both shape and are shaped by their food experiences. In other words, this study will explore the context-driven nature of food insecurity among street youth.

2.8.3 Research objective

The objective of this research project is to develop an understanding of food insecurity among a group of homeless youth living in downtown Toronto through an exploration of their experiences of food acquisition, selection, and consumption; food deprivation; and survival, well-being, and social interaction in relationship to food. Given the paucity of nutrition research in the area of street youth, this study is exploratory in nature. Research on the food experiences of this growing vulnerable population will provide data that can be used to improve interventions aimed at removing the barriers that constrain nutrition, health, and well-being among homeless youth.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.1 Theoretical stance

My theoretical stance is "critical", meaning that my understanding of the nature of society is rooted in the belief that individuals' lives are fundamentally shaped by their position in relationship to society's economic and social structures. These structures exist in ways which privilege certain groups over others and promote and perpetuate inequality (Grabb, 1990). For example, poor people, certain racial groups, and women exercise less social and economic power than wealthy, white men in society. In this study, homeless youth are disadvantaged socially due to their young age, severed family ties, and living circumstances and economically due to their extreme poverty. This stance is grounded empirically in differing rates of alcoholism, drug problems, crime victimization, stress, school dropout, unemployment, depression and suicide, and experiences of domestic violence among homeless youth as compared to youth in general (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Ker.dall et al., 1994; Smart & Adlaf, 1991; Smart & Walsh, 1993). From this standpoint, poverty and homelessness are the result of injustices characteristic of advanced capitalist societies like Canada.

A goal of critical research is to provide counter-hegemonic writings. This type of research provides an opportunity for marginalized groups to be heard and takes a small step toward having their interests met (Poland, 1997). This study explicitly aims to reveal and make public the forces (often hidden) that oppress and constrain homeless youth. Like "race" and

“gender”, “street youth” and “homeless youth” are social constructs imbued with meanings related to bodies of ideas, norms, and ideologies. A critical research approach looks for meaning beyond appearances with the assumption that “...beneath the surface world of accepted appearances...the darker, oppressive side of social life [will be revealed]” (Thomas, 1993, p. 34). Rather than merely describing the experiences of a group of street youth, this study will offer a critical interpretation of the data.

3.2 Personal history

I come to this research with a background in political studies and nutrition and dietetics. This educational mix led to an academic interest in issues related to the welfare state, social stratification, and health and well-being. The field of food insecurity, dealing with the social, political, and economic aspects of food and nutrition, was a sensible niche in which to pursue these interests. Throughout the course of my studies I have been involved with marginalized populations at the community level. I worked as a tenants-rights advocate and anti-discrimination worker at Project Genesis in Montreal, and in Toronto, I have volunteered as an intake worker at the Daily Bread Food Bank and as a food runner for Meals on Wheels. These experiences have fostered in me respect and compassion for individuals coping with food insecurity and have exposed me to the system of charitable food assistance. Through my experiences and studies, I began to question the meaning and appropriateness of the charitable response to food insecurity. With the election of a Conservative Ontario government whose deficit reduction agenda has come at the expense of social programs and

with reports of growing poverty and food bank use in Toronto (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994). I am increasingly concerned about the well-being of Toronto's poor.

The decision to focus on street youth was a pragmatic one. It seemed that because of my age, I might relate more easily and comfortably to street youth rather than homeless adults, whom according to my initial calculations were generally older adults. However, just prior to beginning my graduate studies, a family tragedy heightened my compassion for the plight of homeless youth. My mother was diagnosed with colon cancer, and after several months of ghastly deterioration, she passed away. With the loss of my mother, I experienced a profound sense of dislocation from this world which has manifested in me a bodily sensation of emptiness, awakening me to what my mother was in my life. This feeling leads me to think about the void and pain that street youth live with. Empathy for the emotional injustices that street youth live with and admiration for their capacity to endure permeate my concern for the social and material injustices that they face.

3.3 Critical ethnography

This study employed a qualitative research approach, relying on participant observation and in-depth interviews as the methods of collecting data. This approach was selected because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the food experiences of street youth at a drop-in facility. Because of the context-driven nature of food insecurity, it was important to be able to learn about food experiences within the everyday lives of these youth in a “natural” setting.

The specific methodologic approach taken in this study was critical ethnography. This approach has grown out of the more conventional ethnography, coming from a long tradition of social science including the disciplines of anthropology, history, philosophy, education, and sociology. Generally, in conventional ethnography, the researcher immerses him or herself in the culture of the research participants so that he or she may describe and interpret the culture in ways that “give voice” to the participants’ perspectives (Opie, 1992). In addition to analyzing and describing culture, critical ethnographers seek to call into question commonsense assumptions and “open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain” (Thomas, 1993, p.3). Homeless youth were the culture of interest in this study. Arguably, these youth comprise a distinct culture and share experiences which shape their food experiences.

3.4 Emergent design

This study involved an emergent design whereby I routinely adjusted my inquiry plans in response to what was learned in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995). Characteristic of critical ethnography, this approach recognizes that conceptualization of the research focus often occurs after data collection begins, after the researcher has begun to understand the cultural nuances being observed (Thomas, 1993). In this case, the original aim of the research was to explore food experiences among a *range* of street youth subcultures rather than focus on squeegee kids¹. At the outset of the study, I met with seven front-line workers from six different agencies that provided shelter, health, and drop-in services to street youth to forge links with several drop-ins for possible research sites and gain an understanding of the

different street youth subcultures - the features which define the group, where they congregate, and specific issues pertinent to food experiences. Yonge Street was suggested as an important geographical boundary, and during the first three months in the field. I spent time weekly at two drop-ins, one known to be used by “Yonge Street kids” and another where “Queen Street kids” hung out. Field notes from time spent at both the Yonge and Queen sites were recorded and interviews including two with street youth recruited from the Yonge site were conducted. After this time, an appreciation for the heterogeneity of the street youth population had been gained, and it was decided that an in-depth exploration of each of the various subcultures was beyond the scope of the research project. “Queen Street kids” at the Queen Street site, most of whom squeegeed for a living, became the focus of the study. Thus, the data collected from field notes and interviews at the Yonge Street site were not included in the formal data analysis.

The decision to focus on homeless youth at the Queen Street site was made because the youth at this site and I had developed an easy, ongoing relationship. Greater rapport was established with youth at this site than at the second site in part because youth at the Queen Street site were a more cohesive group, and we had more frequent and regular interaction. The youth at the Yonge Street site represented many distinct groups and our encounters were erratic. As well, the staff culture at the Queen site created an atmosphere that was conducive to the research needs. At the Yonge site, the supervisory role of staff (among whom I was included) was emphasized, and staff were asked not to speak to any youth for longer than 15-20 minutes at a time. These policies created and reinforced power dynamics that impeded the

¹Youth who squeegee.

development of rapport. The staff at the Queen site adopted a more laissez faire stance with me and their clients, and they were supportive of the relationships that we developed.

Although interviews and observations from the Yonge Street site have not been treated as data, the knowledge gained through experiences at this site was useful in illuminating relevant issues which were gleaned through the juxtaposition of observations and interviews from the two sites. For example, at the Yonge site I observed youth make choices between the free cold food (e.g., sandwiches) that was offered and the hot food (e.g., casserole) that could be purchased for ten cents; at the Queen site, there was no food offered, but the youth had open access to kitchen facilities. The differences in food access within the Yonge site and between the two sites, alerted me to some issues related to purchasing food as compared to food assistance. In the case of the Yonge site, staff believed it was important to charge a nominal fee for food to instill a sense of pride and self-sufficiency. While youth at this site did not express positive feelings about purchasing the onsite food and viewed this policy as petty, youth at the Queen site did express positive feelings about purchasing food. These feelings were related to accessing mainstream food rather than food assistance (see **6.2 Food acquisition strategies**), thus spending money did not seem to be responsible for positive feelings associated with eating purchased food.

3.5 Setting and sample

The Queen Street site is a downtown drop-in for homeless and socially isolated people. It provided the primary site for both participant observation and recruitment of interview

participants. The drop-in operates daily, Monday to Friday from 11:30 to 4:30 p.m., providing its users with safe daytime shelter including free access to a kitchen, laundry, bathroom and showering facilities, telephones, a computer, a photocopier, coffee and tea on a self-service basis, and a pool table. A communal area with tables and chairs comprises the main area of the drop-in. Employment opportunities and other community information is posted at the drop-in, and recreational programs such as a photography club and a community kitchen are available. In addition, staff members attempt to provide drop-in users with supportive links to health, legal, and other institutional resources.

The majority of the clientele at the drop-in were adults, however during my weekly visits, there were between five and 15 youth present, usually clustered around one or two tables. The observational data were based on the activity of youth at the drop-in which included hanging out, doing laundry, cooking in the kitchen, eating, smoking, playing pool, and conversations and interactions which accompanied these activities. An estimated 100 different youth, most of whom engaged in squeegeeing as a source of income, were encountered over the study period. Interactions with youth ranged from singular, very brief or purely observational encounters to multiple, in-depth conversations; significant rapport was developed over time with several youth with whom I regularly spoke. From this larger group of observed homeless youth, six (four males, two females) squeegee youth participated in in-depth interviews.

3.6 Data collection

The data in this study were comprised of field notes from participant observation sessions at the drop-in and in-depth interview transcripts, collected over a five month period beginning in February 1998 and ending in July 1998. The collection of data over time was essential to gaining insight into the day-to-day lives of street youth and their food experiences.

Participant observation allowed for the development of rapport which was fundamental to the recruitment of interview participants and the collection of observational and interview data.

As well, the participant observation data which reflect the daily life circumstances of youth in their natural setting, contributed a depth of understanding that was necessary for meaningful interpretation of the interview data.

3.6.1 Participant observation

After gaining ethical approval for the study and permission from the coordinator of the drop-in, I began weekly visits to the drop-in. The visits were usually three and a half hours in length but ranged from two and a half to five hours depending on the circumstances of the day. For example, on a couple of occasions when the few street youth that were at the drop-in left to squeegee, I also left. Other times, engaging conversations and activity kept me at the drop-in for prolonged periods.

I often sat at the tables in the drop-in where street youth were situated, each time asking people at the tables if they minded. When I encountered youth for the first time, either I introduced myself or an individual who knew me made the introductions. At this point, I

disclosed my student status and my interest in learning about the food experiences of street youth. Over time, as we got to know each other, youth began inviting me to join them at their table for coffee, for a game of pool, or for a cigarette in the smoking room or outside. I also spent time in the kitchen where people (youth and non-youth) prepared food which was usually eaten at the tables in the main room or in the smoking room. Hanging around the kitchen and sitting with youth while they ate allowed me to witness the interpersonal dynamics around food preparation and eating.

Although I was specifically interested in the activities of youth, I engaged in conversations with many of the older clientele at the drop-in. There were certain adults whom I got to know because they interacted extensively with the youth. Other adults approached me, curious about my role at the drop-in. Discussions with adults about the study provided insight into some of the differences between the outlooks of those who had experienced long-term poverty and insecure housing and those of the young people who were relatively new to the streets. Despite my explanations about my research, people often treated me as if I were a staff member. Over time, I became a familiar face, and even if people were unsure about my role at the drop-in, my presence seemed sanctioned.

During the time at the drop-in, I engaged in casual conversations with homeless youth and other people. Initial interactions often involved a brief discussion of food experiences since this became a topic of conversation as soon as I introduced myself and expressed my interests. Subsequent conversations over the five month period spanned a variety of subjects

as directed by the youth. These interactions were natural in that they arose out of the youth's desire to share news with me or engage in a discussion with a particular focus. These conversations tended to revolve around issues pertinent to youth's day-to-day lives such as relationships breaking up, experiences of police harassment, and appraisals of last night's shelter.

Data from encounters at the drop-in took the form of field notes that were completed shortly after each visit. Field notes were written in a journal format whereby I recorded the date of the corresponding entry and made detailed notes of observations, events and conversations of the day. For example, I recorded information on "food events" such as fights over food, discussions about where, when, and what youth planned to eat that day, stories of food sickness and hunger; and "non food events" which impacted youth's food situations such as sickness, fines youth received for squeegeeing, and ejections from shelters. My reflections and thoughts about the participant observation sessions, new understandings and ideas for exploration, issues that needed follow-up or clarification, and reminders for the next visit were also recorded. The reflective process was enhanced by regular, informal conversations about field experiences with my supervisor.

Field notes provided information about the daily lives of street youth. These contextual data (i.e., "non food events") were necessary for understanding the food and life experiences of street youth and were instrumental to a meaningful interpretation of interview data. The quality of the data collected through participant observation was dependent on the

development of rapport. This process represented a complex interaction between me and the youth and is difficult to put into words. However, since the establishment of rapport was so critical to this research, reflecting on the process of entering the field and endeavouring to describe the development of relationships with key informants is worthwhile.

3.6.2 Entry into the field

During the first visit to the drop-in, the coordinator introduced me to a gentleman who was a regular and long time client of the drop-in. He showed me around the site while we talked about my interest in learning about the food experiences of street youth and his recent AIDS diagnosis and troubles related to homelessness and drug addiction. When the tour was over, the gentleman led me to the table of youth that I had caught glimpses of as we walked around the building. Along with the first introductions, the gentlemen offered some advice: To me, “This is Steve¹. He’s a good guy and can help you out.... Treat people with respect and you’ll be fine.” To Steve, “She’s a student and she’s here to learn.... Be nice to her.”

The first conversation with Steve was a long and exciting experience for me, heightened by the anticipation I had felt about being in the field for the first time. Steve also seemed to enjoy the interaction. He expressed interest in my study and assured me that he would introduce me to other street youth and help provide me with all the information I needed. We spent a lot of time talking about Vancouver, where we were both from. As street youth passed by, Steve introduced me to them, and after they left, he briefed me about his

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

relationship with them and other particulars. Steve seemed to be well-respected among his peers and his testimonial - "she's cool" - which accompanied each introduction, seemed to put youth at ease.

On subsequent visits, I spent time with Steve and other street youth that he had introduced me to - especially his girlfriend and close friends. Much of my time was spent listening in a nonjudgmental way to what I was being told. During this early period in the field, I usually did not initiate conversations and mostly spoke only to ask questions for clarification. As my network of acquaintances grew, my credibility among the youth seemed to increase.

Eventually, I began to feel accepted by certain youth and ongoing, comfortable relationships with several key youth (i.e. street youth whom I met early on and who were often at the drop-in) were developed.

There were individuals (youth and adults) at the drop-in who, for whatever reasons, did not engage with me. In these cases, I made no attempts, apart from signals of recognition such as a nod or a smile, to approach these individuals. I respected people's privacy and space by sitting alone at tables when I was not invited to join anyone, reading rather than taking notes or gazing around the room while I sat alone, and trying to be sensitive and receptive to individuals' verbal and nonverbal cues. I was never confronted by anyone with negative feedback about any of my behaviour at the drop-in.

By the second month of participant observation, I was aware of the changed nature of the relationships between me and some of the youth. Youth distinguished me from “outsiders” who had incorrectly judged them to be bad and lazy people. The nature of our conversations shifted from educational to confidential. In the beginning, youth responded to my “outsider” interest in their lives by teaching me about life on the streets. After a certain point, youth began treating me like a confidante rather than a student, as if I were an “insider” or friend who understood their lives. I am not sure how this transformation occurred, but it manifested in events that signified the establishment of a level of trust and rapport. On one occasion, a squeegee kid who I became friendly with introduced me to another youth. He explained that I was a nutrition student and then went on to say that “she’s more like a counselor or friend though”. On another occasion, I was included in a good-bye message that was delivered by a street youth on behalf of a girl whom I met at the drop-in who had been taken home by her mother the day prior. Also, apart from one instance when a young man borrowed 25 cents from me and 15 minutes later, paid me back, no one ever asked me for money. This suggested to me that youth differentiated our relationship from their relationships with “outsiders” whom they might approach for money by panhandling and squeegeeing.

At times other than my weekly participant observation visits, I periodically ran into youth from the drop-in on the street. My insider status was evidenced during one of these encounters. One evening, I was walking near the drop-in and a man approached me for spare change. A squeegee kid from the drop-in who had spotted me from the intersection,

interrupted the exchange, calling out to the man. “Don’t ask her for money, man. She does more for the street kids than money could buy.”

Certain youth seemed to look forward to my arrival and sought me out during visits to share personal news such as last night’s upsetting experience of seeing a friend overdose on heroin, breakups, updates on apartment and job searches, outcomes of calls to family members, negotiations with welfare and Children’s Aid, invitations to upcoming events, etc. These youth seemed to take pleasure from our discussions. They inquired about my next visits to the drop-in; and during visits, when they left the drop-in for periods of time, an effort was made to secure time with me later in the day.

The time I spent at the drop-in may be compared to the process of cultural immersion. I sought to gain an understanding of the food and life experiences of homeless youth through observing, listening, and seeking clarification when necessary. I adopted an open, tentative, and respectful stance in my interactions with the youth, assuming that the youth knew more about the research area than I did. Early in the field, I experienced a kind of “culture shock” when my understandings and beliefs about daily life, based on my lived reality, were confronted by the homeless youth’s lived reality. At times, this process was overwhelming and disturbing as I tried to make sense of the commonalities that we shared as human beings and the injustices that permeated the youth’s lives. Although undeniably incomplete, the process of cultural immersion was one whereby over time I became a trusted listener for several youth at the drop-in, becoming privy to their personal life experiences. These key

relationships and weekly observations at the drop-in provided me with an insider's perspective on the day-to-day lives of homeless youth.

3.6.3 In-depth interviews

After two months in the field, between April and June 1998, in-depth, tape recorded interviews were conducted with six homeless squeegee kids (four males, two females) from the drop-in (see 4. **INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT PROFILES** for the backgrounds of these individuals). The sampling method that was used is known as purposive convenience sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) whereby I selected youth for interviews after we had developed a trusting relationship. The objective of conducting interviews was to gather information specifically related to food issues. The interview participants had to meet the following selection criteria: they had to be homeless, meaning that at the time of the interview, their shelter was inadequate or insecure (e.g. they were literally sleeping on the streets, in "squats", or temporarily at friends' or relatives'); and between the ages of 16-24. These criteria are consistent with how researchers and service providers have defined street youth. No youth under the age of majority in Ontario (16 years) were recruited, and residents of hostels or shelters which provided full board were also excluded since food acquisition and scarcity were not likely to be concerns for these youth. Youth participated in interviews on a voluntary basis.

In three cases, I asked the youth if he or she would be interested in participating in in-depth interviews, and in the other three cases, individuals offered to participate. No youth whom I

approached, refused to participate in interviews; and after the six interviews were completed, several additional youth volunteered to participate in further interviews, if necessary. No further interviews were conducted because after a preliminary analysis of the data (both interview transcripts and field notes), concepts and categories related to the food experiences of youth at the drop-in began to repeat. This stage of qualitative research - often referred to as saturation - indicates that data collection is complete (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995).

Each youth interviewed, expressed approval of the study. Some saw it as an opportunity to set the record straight amidst an apparent media onslaught against squeegee kids, and others wanted to help out with my project by providing me with important and relevant personal information. Youth were interested in the progress of the study and asked about it regularly. One youth requested and was given a copy of his interview transcript. Participation in interviews was by voluntary consent, and prior to the interview, the youth and I discussed the details of the consent form (Appendix A) which the youth was then asked to sign and given a copy of.

Interviews were in-depth and informal in style to elicit information that was detailed, emotionally rich, and meaningful. Prior to data collection, an interview guide (Appendix B) was developed to ensure that certain substantive areas relating to youth's food experiences were covered during interviews. The guide was informed by literature on homeless youth and food insecurity and included the following areas: eating patterns, food acquisition strategies, satisfaction with qualitative and quantitative aspects of food experiences, living

situation, length of time on the street, personal networks, and education. I used this guide as a checklist whereby at the end of each interview, the youth and I went through the list to ensure that all of the areas were covered. The checklist also served to prompt the youth to add any additional information he or she thought was relevant to the listed topics.

Each interview began with a reiteration of my interest in learning about the day-to-day lives of street youth, with a particular interest in food experiences. I suggested that the youth might begin either by recounting the details of their day yesterday or by bringing forward whatever he or she felt was an important or relevant place to start. Although most of the youth (four) explained that yesterday did not represent a typical day for them, in all cases, youth discussed “yesterday”. I asked youth to start off by telling me where and when they woke up, and as they went through their day, I sought details about food and other activities such as squeegeeing and partying, the locations where and with whom these events occurred, and how decisions about how to spend the day were made. Thus, the interviews generally contained information about the events and experiences of yesterday and what was usual or typical. The direction of the conversation depended primarily on the youth and what he or she chose to discuss. However, I often brought up information that the youth had shared during our time together at the drop-in to check my interpretations and to gain a greater understanding of issues that seemed to be important. I sought clarification when necessary, probed areas relevant to food experience, and encouraged youth to talk about their experiences.

The interviews took from one to two hours depending on the topics that youth introduced and the depth and detail that the youth relayed to me about his or her experiences. Each participant was formally interviewed only once, however, casual discussions relating to information addressed in interviews were often the subjects of conversations during visits to the drop-in after the interview event. The interviews occurred at a time and place that was convenient to the participants. Except in one case, interviews took place at a café-restaurant nearby the drop-in. As a result of events that occurred at the start of the first interview, I gave each participant five dollars for cigarettes at the beginning of each interview. I had planned to pick up the costs of snacks during the interview, however, when I asked the first interview participant if she wanted anything, the participant responded that she would like cigarettes. I obliged, and in an effort to be equitable, I continued to offer both snacks and money for cigarettes to each interview participant. Thus, each interview encounter began with a stop at a store to purchase a pack of cigarettes. All of the interview participants accepted cigarettes, soft drinks, and only one participant, accepted a snack.

One of the interview participants chose to have the interview at the drop-in; thus this interview took place in the smoking room at the drop-in. This interview was not tape recorded because the room was quite noisy, and I did not want to draw the attention of others to the interview process. Instead, extensive notes were taken during the interview. The interview was momentarily interrupted a few times by people asking for a cigarette, a light, or someone's whereabouts, however, each time, the interview was resumed with ease. While going through the checklist at the end of this interview, several youth gathered around and

asked about the study. Some of the youth present were familiar with the study and filled in the others. People then began to talk about their food experiences and related issues. I sensed that with the intrusion of the group of youth, the one-on-one, intimate interview dynamic had been altered. In order to respect the interview participant's confidentiality and since the interview was coming to a close, I suggested to the participant that we terminate the interview and follow up on a subsequent visit, if necessary. The participant agreed. At the next visit to the drop-in, the participant said that there was nothing that she wanted to add to her interview.

3.7 Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis was to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the food experiences of street youth grounded in the data that were collected. The activity of making sense of or interpreting the data was undertaken by means of a variety of procedures that facilitated working back and forth between data and ideas (e.g., writing, coding the data, comparing codes and incidents within a code, and discussing ideas with others). Thus, the term "grounded theory" may be used in a nonspecific way to refer to the analytic approach taken in this study. Data analysis was an interpretive and iterative process and included organizing, reducing, and describing data; drawing conclusions and interpretations from the data; and ultimately, the development of a conceptual framework for understanding the data. However, the highly systematic and rigorous set of data-collecting and analytic procedures that are delimited in grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were not strictly adhered to.

There were two main stages of data analysis in this study: 1) Analysis during fieldwork (i.e., the time I spent collecting data through participant observation and in-depth interviews) and 2) Analysis after fieldwork. Temporally, these stages were distinct, however, the analyses arising from each were overlapping and mutually informing. The first stage of analysis was informal and began almost at the outset of field work. Ongoing insights grounded in my field experiences were developed through a recursive process whereby I recorded my evolving understanding of the daily lives of street youth in field notes. I derived ideas and hypotheses about street life from events in the field (i.e., observations and conversations) which were continuously expanded, refined, and/or discarded via the processes of subsequent field visits, note taking, and discussions with others (e.g., front-line workers, my supervisor, and colleagues). For example, early in the field I learned that homeless youth squeegeed because it provided a source of income when income options were limited by homelessness and high youth unemployment. Through the recursive approach described above, this analysis of squeegeeing was expanded as I began to understand that squeegeeing provided the means for youth to purchase food that was more desirable than the food they received from food assistance programs.

Insights gained from the first stage of analysis were used to guide the more formal deconstruction of interview transcripts and field notes in the second stage of analysis. During this stage, transcribed (verbatim) interview data and participant observation data in the form of field notes were initially sorted and organized using The Ethnograph v4.0, a computer

program designed to facilitate the analysis of text-based data. I coded all of the data using both content codes (e.g. “SQUEEGEE” whenever squeegeeing was referred to) and conceptual codes (e.g. “WORK” whenever concepts relating to work ethic and independence connected to work were referred to) that were derived from the first stage of analysis. Additional codes were created when new content and concepts emerged. In general, content and conceptual codes emerged from participant observation data, whereas interview data were used to scrutinize the conceptual codes and flesh out content (see **3.8 Methodologic reflections**). Some of the codes used for the field notes were inappropriate, and therefore not used, for the interview transcripts (e.g., “ENTRANCE”, referring to gaining entrance into the field, was not used for interview transcripts). In total, 27 initial codes were created. The coding procedure differentiated the data, making it more manageable for theoretical interpretation.

Next, the contents of a general “food” code were reexamined in a more theoretical way since an understanding of the food experiences of homeless youth was a central goal of this study. For example, “food” coded data were organized into categories such as “food acquisition strategies” and “meaning of food”. These categories were then explored for relationships between and within categories. The researcher’s understanding of the data from earlier stages of analysis and theoretical concepts of food security relating to food access, dignity, food quality and safety, (Davis et al., 1991) guided this process of data interpretation.

Ideas about the interrelationships and relative significance of the contents of the food-related categories in understanding the individual youth's experiences were fleshed out through a comparative process. For example, I found that some youth relied more heavily on food assistance than others. By comparing youth who used food assistance in varying degrees, it was possible to discover that although the "minor" users asserted that they sought to avoid food assistance because it was unsafe and degrading, these factors did not explain the differential use of food assistance since the "major" users also identified these factors as undesirable and associated with food assistance. Instead, comparisons pointed to differences in food assistance use related to income and propensity to resistance or resignation.

The result of the theoretical analysis of the "food" coded data was an incomplete conceptual map of homeless youth's food experiences. However, as the remainder of the non-food or contextual codes (e.g. shelter, social networks, and work) were integrated into the analysis, a more coherent conceptual map emerged. Different ways of reassembling or interpreting contextual data were explored again using a comparative approach. The end result of this process yielded the results presented in the following chapters.

The combination of research methods (i.e. in-depth interviews and participant observation) allowed for a window into the day-to-day lives of squeegee kids *over time*. The interviews which reflected a particular point of time, were situated within the larger time-frame of the five month period of participant observation. The observations of changes over time,

contributed to my understanding of the chronic instability of street life and served as an important basis for the analysis of the study results.

3.8 Methodologic reflections

The critical ethnographic research approach taken in this study provided the means to gain an understanding of how the day-to-day lives of street youth shaped their food experiences. This exploration was conducted from a critical perspective, sensitive to the struggles of homeless youth and to the context-driven nature of food insecurity. The ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews provided a systematic way to discover and record the experiences of a group of street youth and how they made sense of them.

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the paucity of qualitative research on homeless youth and food experiences, an ethnographic approach was valuable in providing the flexibility needed to identify the best sources of data. Regular participant observation sessions at the drop-in were essential to gathering rich and meaningful data about the food experiences of homeless youth. Sometimes information that youth shared with me during our initial conversations in the field and during interviews, defied observed events at the drop-in. For example, after I revealed my interest in learning about food experiences of homeless youth, many of the street youth at the drop-in told me that food was not a problem, that it was impossible to starve to death in Toronto. A list of local food assistance programs – their names, locations, hours and days of operation – usually followed this declaration. And, although each participant recounted episodes of hunger and food deprivation during

interviews, these experiences were always presented as events of the past, with current food situations being managed and under their control.

Over the course of the study, hanging out at the drop-in with street youth allowed me to witness firsthand food events and conversations about food which were inconsistent with some of what I had been told about food. It became clear that much of the circumstances that youth had described as having led to past food problems (e.g. sickness and drug use) were not isolated incidents. Instead these circumstances were part of life (not necessarily daily) on the street, and could easily, and sometimes did recur.

Several factors may have underlined these apparent contradictions. Thomas' critical perspective (1993) suggests that marginalized individuals, lacking status, rewards, and opportunities, may cover-up, gloss over, or exaggerate as self-enhancing, coping strategies. The ability to survive seemed to be central to the identity of street youth in this study, and given the key role of food in survival, framing food experiences as non problematic may have indeed been a coping strategy. A constructivist approach (Charmaz, 1993), which seeks to understand meaning in the given reality, may also be instructive. In the context of homelessness, satisfying food needs may be no more problematic than other aspects of daily life, and successfully avoiding starvation may mean that food is not a problem. Finally, the protocol associated with the interview event including the tape recorder, the consent form, and removal from the drop-in, created an atmosphere in which youth presented themselves not only to me, but also to a more public other. Borrowing from Goffman (1959), interviews

tended to bring out superficial, “onstage” behaviour (rather than real, “backstage” action).

Perhaps repeated interviews would diminish this effect, as the youth and I became used to the method of inquiry.

The “onstage” rhetoric which unfolded in interviews did not occur during intimate conversations with street youth that arose over time at the drop-in. As we became familiar with each other, our interactions at the drop-in felt natural and authentic. The identification of a gap between interview and participant observation data had important methodologic implications. This research experience suggests that participant observation, over time may be an important research approach when conducting qualitative research with a group outside the researcher’s frame of reference (homeless youth, in this case). This research experience is reflected in the analyses of data in this study. Participant observation data were treated as more authentic and played a more central role in the development of analytic categories than interview data.

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the research instrument; interpretations, decisions, and analysis ultimately rely on the researcher. My presence, as both an interviewer and a participant observer at the drop-in, undoubtedly impacted on the research setting and the data that were collected. Youth responded not only to my presence and questions as a researcher interested in food experiences, but to me as a student, a woman, a certain age, and other personal characteristics. Thus, the findings in this study represent my “insider” perspective or partial knowledge that reflects interactions between me and homeless youth in a particular

time and place. The lack of a detached or “objective” stance on my part was inevitable due to my world view, beliefs, and life experiences. However, the findings presented in this thesis are grounded in extensive field experiences, detailed notes, and verbatim interview transcripts and do not merely represent my “opinions”.

4. INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The following is an introduction to six homeless youth from the drop-in. In addition to engaging in regular conversations with me over the course of the study, these individuals participated in tape recorded interviews. These brief biographies provide information about the youth's histories - where they come from, family and educational background, and when known, their reasons for leaving home, their current living situation and other current life struggles, and their future aspirations.

4.1 Allison

Allison is 20 years old. She came to Toronto from Moncton, New Brunswick three years ago. She left home because she and her mother could not get along.

She's hurt me all my life... I really hurt her [too]. I'd steal money from her.... [A]t the time I was really bad into drugs. ... I quit school in grade 11 and that was the first time in Toronto...I came here for two weeks and that's when I got really bad into the drugs - like crack and stuff like that. That's when I was hanging around with pimps and stuff like that and then I went back home. When I went back home, to reside there, I had a choice between either going back to school or work. I decided to work until August 96 and then I came back here.

In the past three years, Allison has returned to Moncton on four occasions to try, unsuccessfully, to live with her mother.

When Allison first moved to Toronto, she started hanging around with pimps and drug dealers, and that's when she "...got really bad into the drugs - like crack and stuff like that". Now she hangs around a different crowd and uses crack less often. Instead, she drinks beer and smokes pot, but still "it's not that easy to get off of [crack]".

Allison considers herself a “street kid” - “You know. I’m not a punk. I’m not a Nazi. I’m not a twinkie (street kid poser or newcomer) cuz I can’t go back home.” She has lived on the streets since she moved to Toronto, except for an eight month period when she lived with her baby’s father and boyfriend at the time. After raising her baby for seven months. she decided to put him up for adoption.

People say I gave my son up to smoke crack. And to be on the street. No. No. I love my son very much and that’s why I gave my son up for adoption because I wanted him to have better than what he had. Like I treated him good. I took care of him. He was always fed, always washed, always clean clothed, always taken care of, was always smiling, giggly.

After Allison had the baby, she and her mother began speaking.

During the time that I was pregnant, my mom didn’t want to talk to me. Like my mom didn’t want nothing to do with me - like you’re no daughter of mine. And then two weeks after Michael was born I finally decided to call her and then she started to talk to me bit by bit. But that’s only because I had Michael, you know. If it wasn’t for Michael, we still wouldn’t be talking.

At the time of our interview, Allison was staying at Ordnance shelter. During the winter she usually stays at a shelter, but sometimes she stays in squats (abandoned buildings or make-shift shelters). Many shelters close for the summer months and during this period, she sleeps outside - “...in the park, on benches, [I] sleep wherever, wherever I can you know. ...I get scared a lot. You know, sometimes I don’t go to sleep.”

Squeegeeing is Allison’s primary source of income. She also panhandles and occasionally delivers drugs for dealers. She often thinks about engaging in prostitution. A couple of years ago, she was involved in a residential robbery. Consequently, she has a charge for breaking and entering. She also has two “failure to appear” charges and thus has warrants out for her

arrest. Allison is optimistic about her future. "I will go back to school one day, I will get a real job, I will get my own apartment, I might get married, I might have kids, you know."

After our interview, I continued to see Allison at the drop-in nearly every week. As of our last contact, Allison has moved into an apartment with a new boyfriend and has initiated the welfare application process.

4.2 Kyle

Kyle is 18 years old and moved to Toronto from Peterborough when he was 17. He left home when he was 15 and in the middle of grade ten. Kyle finished school that year and started grade 11, but "never ended up finishing it". School was a problem for him. "I can't learn by writing notes off a chalkboard you know cuz I won't pay attention to it and the other half is in certain subjects, I already knew it."

In Peterborough, Kyle lived in a house "but it was more like a squat because [it] was really old and like, basically destroyed when we moved in, and the deal we had with the landlord was that we would live there for free if we fixed [it] up." After living there for six months, the landlord began charging rent, and Kyle had "no way of paying it". From there, he "crashed" at friends' homes and occasionally he would "crash in a park or wherever."

Kyle used to "steal stuff to sell to make money...there just wasn't really any other way [for him] to make money [in Peterborough]." He prefers squeegeeing for a living in Toronto and lives day-to-day. He also panhandles when it rains and does odd jobs. "It's just a lot easier

to survive you know. I have a much more comfortable life here.” When Kyle came to Toronto he lived in a squat that he built in the rafters underneath the Gardiner Expressway. In the past few months, Kyle began staying at shelters, mainly Ordnance.

More recently, he has been crashing on a friend’s floor to meet his bail conditions which specify that he must reside at a fixed address until his hearing for charges related to squeegeeing.

For half of the past year Kyle was on a “PCP bender”. He says PCP is a mentally rather than physically addictive drug, and during that time, all he would think about was getting high. He began selling drugs to support his habit until he went to detox and Narcotics Anonymous.

I just came to the realization one day that my life was completely fucked. I looked like the walking dead. I lost complete touch with reality and I’d lost 60 something pounds. I don’t know. It’s weird, this one night I just broke down and started crying and crying and I didn’t know why...then it just came to me that you know you’re crying because you’re scared shitless cuz you don’t know where you’re going. The only thing I knew for certain was that I had some lines left for the morning – that’s the only thing in the world I knew for certain. So, four in the morning, I was bawling my eyes out. I got up, went and crashed out on the front steps of a church and asked them to bring me to narcotics anonymous the next day.

Now he just smokes pot and drinks beer. He does not do any “chemicals”.

Kyle considers himself an anarchist and a “Queen Street punk”, meaning that he is anti-government, antiracist, and hangs out around Queen Street West.

Kyle keeps in touch with his parents and although they are disapproving of his lifestyle, he says they realize that they cannot live together in the same house because “...I don’t know, just had too many problems in the past you know, too much bad stuff to relive....”

I did not have a lot of contact with Kyle after our interview since his bail conditions also prohibited him from being in the area that encompassed the drop-in. I ran into him a few times on the street, and he told me that he was spending a lot of time traveling between Toronto and Montreal for some work he had just to tie him over until he could squeegee again. He hopes to go get a place to live and get back into a school program.

4.3 Lee

Lee is 22 years old and has been homeless for seven years. He grew up in Newfoundland with an abusive stepfather.

Mom remarried when I was about three years old. I was beat everyday, seven days a week by my stepfather.... I was put into a coma twice by him. Once by a hammer into the head which caused my skull to fracture... The second time I was put into a coma by him striking me across the back of the head and the back of the spine with a piece of two-by-four. ... Mom was too scared [to intervene] because if she would try to help, then he would beat her....

Lee's stepfather coaxed him to try marijuana when he was nine years old.

It was at my ninth birthday party actually. It was my [stepfather]. He rolled up a joint and threw it over to me. He said smoke it. I said no, so then he just beat me. So then afterwards I smoked so that I wouldn't get beaten no more. But yet it didn't work out that way.

At 14 years old, Lee smoked marijuana regularly and had tried cocaine a couple of times. He was also an alcoholic at the age of 12.

My first real drink I suppose was about the age of eight because mom and them were throwing a party and me I got at their home brew bucket. ... I used to go to school with a micky tucked in side my coat, out with a straw. Then I would sip on it through the class.

Children's Aid removed Lee from his home six times. Each time, he was put into foster care for one or two months, after which time, he was returned to his parents.

When Lee was 15, he returned home from a three day camping trip to find his belongings packed up in bags outside his house. There was a note on the door. "It was a note from mom saying that she and my stepfather had moved away, that she still loved me but I just had to take care by myself."

He left Newfoundland shortly after because "...back home...they don't take too kindly to panhandlers. They don't take kindly to the homeless, it's kinda looked down on." He spent time in Halifax, Montreal, Vancouver, and several cities across the United States, and then returned to Newfoundland to live with his grandparents. At that time he completed an adult basic education program and enrolled in college. "I went and I got a large student loan but with so much money and so many drug habits, I kinda spent it all."

Lee's grandmother passed away and he did not get along with his grandfather, so he moved to Toronto. He worked as a prostitute until one of his friends who worked "the strcll" with him went missing. "...He just got one trick one night and like nobody has seen him since. So like that kinda scared me out of doing it." At that time, he had a heavy drug habit to support. "I was doing coke, I was doing heroin, I was doing speed, I was doing crystal so, roughly my drug habit was about 80-90 bucks a day. But I kinda overdosed one day".

He has cut back on his drug use, but is addicted to heroin. "I'm still smoking some weed and ah trying to kick the heroin habit, but it's harder than what most people would think it would be."

Now, Lee squeegees and pans for money. However, at the time of our interview. Lee was not able to squeegee due to a knee injury. He was hit by a car while squeegeeing and as a result needed crutches to assist his walking. Since the accident Lee has been sleeping at the YMCA shelter. He prefers to sleep outside, in squats, or in subway stations because he does not feel safe staying in shelters.

Lee is tired of being addicted to drugs. "I'm sick of being sick with drugs and alcohol. I want to live a normal life. I can't live a normal life if the things I'm doing ain't normal to society." When Lee spoke about his life, he was despondent.

Well, truthfully right now I kinda feel too old to be on the streets because I've been out here now for almost eight years. I've seen more things in my life than I'd ever wanted to see (including a girlfriend die). I have been through more than what I'd ever wanted to been through. ...I just want a place where like I could crash...some place that I could really call home because like see when I'm with a crowd in the shelter, I will always fear my life...but yet if I got my own place, I can sleep there alone, maybe even have a dog.

I saw Lee several times after our interview. He was suffering from complications related to his knee injury and was in a wheel chair. A couple of months later, Lee was not around. I asked people if they had seen him, and no one had. They figured that he had moved on.

4.4 Steve

Steve is 21 years old. His parents kicked him out of the house when he was 15.

I knocked my dad down the stairs. Well, he took a swing at me and I said 'fuck this, you're never hitting me again', boom. Down he went, down the stairs. He got up. My mom came and grabbed me by the scruff of my neck saying 'get the fuck out and never come back'.

He returned home at his mother's request but only stayed for a week because he "couldn't deal with [his] dad." At the time, he was in school and had a part-time job.

I had a job and I was still in school and I had all my activities. But being on the streets, trying to keep a job and going to school is not easy. So I lost my job. I left school. ... Left school my grade 12 year you know. It was really depressing cuz I could be the one talking to you, you know....

Steve lived on the streets in Vancouver for five years and spent six months in jail there.

I used to break into houses to make my money. And I got caught, served my time, said I'll never do it again. I mean, I can go back to it anytime I want, but no thanks, it's not worth going back to jail. See I've had six years of living on the streets, I've had everything of mine stolen you know. And that's probably why I got into it because it pissed me off, pissed me off so much when I was younger that I wanted it back.

When he was living in Vancouver, he started using cocaine. "I didn't sleep. I didn't eat. I didn't exercise the way I [used to]...." Steve was disgusted with his life in Vancouver so he decided to join his friend and hitch hike to Toronto, where they hoped to find jobs. When he arrived in Toronto, a year ago, he got a job selling hot dogs at night clubs and outside Maple Leaf Gardens. His employer also provided him and the other couple of employees with an apartment. But the venture was short lived because his employer was operating without a licence.

Steve moved into a squat and began squeegeeing and panning for money. The squat was raided by the police. "I woke up with a gun in my face, cop saying get the hell out. The only reason was cuz a couple of idiots decided to shoot a security guard with a pellet gun." It was February, and Steve slept outside in Grange Park until he became really sick with a cold. At that time, he started staying at Ordnance Shelter.

At the time of our interview, Steve was planning on leaving for Vancouver in a few days. He did not leave, and for the next few weeks we continued to see each other at the drop-in. In the summer, Steve became addicted to crack. He stopped coming to the drop-in regularly and withdrew from a lot of his friends. As of my last contact with Steve on the street, he was trying to cut back on the crack and still had plans to return to Vancouver.

Steve and Robin were dating.

4.5 Robin

Robin is 17 years old. She is from Sault Ste. Marie and at the time of our interview had only been in Toronto for two and a half months. She was kicked out of her home by her stepmother because they could not get along. She comes "from a family of bikers". Her father is an "Outlaw", a biker gang rival of the "Hell's Angels".

"Growing up there was always drugs and shit around" so she started using drugs. "mostly pot" at a young age. In grades seven and eight, her parents sent her to a drug rehabilitation

school in Victoria, British Columbia. There, she lived with her uncle who was also a biker so "it was the same as being at home". She was into raves and did a lot of speed, acid, pot, and drinking. In grade nine, she returned to Sault Ste. Marie and enrolled in a co-op school where she worked at a drug store part-time. Three months into grade nine, "things got bad" with her stepmother, and she dropped out of school and went to live with her grandmother. "But that didn't work out so I stayed with friends". Robin and her friends would break into houses to "...steal money, drugs, and speakers or stuff to sell for money".

Robin hated Sault Ste. Marie so she decided to move to London, Ontario to live with her step-cousins who also lived on the street. "Operation Go Home" found her there. "They give anyone under 18 a bus pass to go home. ... They don't call your parents". She got off the bus in Toronto because she did not want to go home.

She met Steve after a couple of weeks, and they hit it off. Robin squeegees and pans for money, but she mostly relies on Steve. "He does most of the work and he hangs onto the money". The bus pass is valid for another couple of months, and "if things don't work out here, I might consider going back - well only because my dad really wants me to come back home". Robin has spoken to her father on the phone, a few times, since she left home. Recently, her father told her that he had moved into a place of his own, without the stepmother, in hopes that Robin would return home.

I saw Robin at the drop-in after our interview. She started using crack but did not want Steve to know because she was afraid that he would be angry with her. He found out, and they started to use together.

I last heard about Robin from Steve. He told me that Robin's stepmother came to Toronto, found her squeegeeing, and took her home one day. Steve missed Robin a lot.

4.6 Will

Will is 17 years old and is from Nova Scotia. He has lived on and off the streets for the past three years. During this time, he has moved back and forth between Nova Scotia and Toronto. At the time of our interview, he had not been back to Nova Scotia in ten months and had no plans to return.

Will lives "under the Gardiner Expressway, by a garbage pile where I built my own house out of the material that was around there - like sheets of wood and stuff...it's my shack. I stay there alone". He will not stay in shelters because they are not his own place, and he prefers being alone.

Since he's been living away from home, Will squeegees and pans for a living. He used to steal until he went to jail for 21 days for a breaking and entering charge.

I learned my lesson and I don't want to fuck with the law anymore...not bother anyone and not steal their shit because I don't want anyone stealing my shit right. I felt really bad because it was near Christmas and there was cash and I didn't know, like the cash was for a church you know like fuck. I felt really bad. So like after that

I knew it was gonna come back to me in some bad way, but it probably hasn't yet, but when it does, it's going to hit me hard. But that's OK because life sucks.

Will described himself as the smartest kid in grade school. "Like I was always getting good grades at school up until like grade 5 and then I started getting really bad and then they labeled me with conduct disorder. ...Like I threw a desk at a teacher...I almost got into a fight with [another] teacher." He was expelled from several schools, and in grade seven he was sent to a school for "kids with problems learning but they sent me there because of my conduct" At that school, "...if you don't go they don't give a fuck because they'll just keep on getting new students...." After being expelled from several schools, he dropped out in grade nine.

In his early teens he was diagnosed as psychotic with mood and emotional disorders. When he was 15 years old he had an incident with his mother that resulted in him being institutionalized.

So one time me and my mom were fighting verbally and she got right in my face. I was sitting on the chair and she was a pretty big lady. She's like almost 300 pounds right. And she jumped on me so I gave her a fucking punch in the chest - like in the solar plexus -and she got off and she was huffing and then she ran into the kitchen and was like blahh... 'let's fight!' She put her hands up and I got really like, just wow, boom and I blacked out and I don't remember but the cops told me that when they came I had a steak knife in my hand and I was like almost slicing her throat. They had to wrestle me around and throw me at the wall. And you know, I got like my elbow all fucked up from it and everything, but you know.

When Will left the hospital, he began collecting disability welfare/assistance. Soon after, he became appalled and frustrated with “the system” and his options within it.

Like I was totally labeled by the government...labeled mentally insane. I don't want to be labeled disabled. [If I'm labeled] I can't work. I can't...work heavy machinery, I can't drive you know, like I can't talk to people. I am not allowed to like work cashier or anything. ...Like I couldn't do anything so, even if I wanted to go out like and do like under the table for some guy and then my social worker or whatever found out, then I'd be fucked you know. They would take my money away from me and everything. So like I don't see the point in it. It's gross to me. Like the way they do it, the way they like process it, the qualifications for it. I mean like it's just fucking retarded.

He received a cheque and “booked it” for Toronto to change his situation. Immediately, he enrolled in the KYTES (Kensington Youth Theatre and Employment Skills) program.

I had the initiative to do it, I wanted to do it, but I just couldn't do it. Like I totally fucked that up. Like I asked for extra work. Plus I had a girlfriend...I was staying with her. She was 26, I was 16. My friend was with me. He was going there too but he didn't really want to go. And like fuck... And they would have given me an honourarium at the end and everything. You know, like shit happens. I know it's like one of the first things that I've ever regretted in my life.

Will calls himself a “pothead”. He loves to smoke pot and likes to drink beer. But he avoids hard drugs. He likes to read and plans on writing about his life. He wanted a copy of our interview transcript for this purpose.

I saw Will regularly after our interview, most often while he was squeegeeing outside of the drop-in.

While the life stories of Allison, Kyle, Lee, Steve, Robin, and Will are unique, they share certain past and present experiences. Their life stories include troubled family situations,

interrupted education, problems with alcohol and drugs, and current experiences of unstable living conditions. In the sections which follow, the narratives of these six youth will be used to illustrate the context of the lives of homeless youth and their food experiences.

5. THE CONTEXT IN WHICH FOOD EXPERIENCES OCCUR

The food insecurity experienced by youth in this study was part of the insecurity that existed in their daily lives. Extreme poverty undermined the often taken for granted stability and security in life that economically secure people enjoy. Thus, an appreciation for this context is fundamental to understanding food experiences that occur within it. This section will describe shelter, employment, health, and drug and alcohol use among youth in this study since these broad factors acted as powerful forces shaping their daily experiences. These contextual elements were not the focus per se of this study and thus, they were not explored in the same depth as youth's food experiences. Since food experiences were inextricably linked to these contextual factors, there is some overlap between this section and the next which focuses on youth's food experiences. The aim here is to provide a backdrop and perspective with which to situate food experiences.

5.1 Shelter

Street youth in this study lacked the income necessary to secure housing. "The biggest reason why most people are on the streets is cuz there's no affordable housing in Toronto. You pay like four or five hundred dollars and you get a tiny little bachelor apartment in some rundown roach infested crack house." (Kyle) In addition to income, youth suggested that discrimination based on appearances, poverty, and age prevented them from renting apartments. Lee described these two main barriers.

One of them is money because three and four hundred dollars a month to now pay out for rent, if not more, I don't really have that, and then the second barrier is the landlords. ...A lot of the landlords won't rent to street kids, actually usually they

won't rent to nobody living on the streets because they expect not to be paid. They expect to have to come down at four or five o'clock in the morning to tell them to cut out the noise.

Because they lacked secure living accommodations, youth were faced with the task of finding shelter on a daily basis. A variety of shelter situations were described. Most common among these were sleeping in squats (i.e. abandoned buildings or make-shift shelters), under bridges, in parks, and in shelters run by social service agencies. Youth also reported crashing at friends'; sleeping in garages, subway stations, and on rooftops.

During the winter, many of the youth at the drop-in stayed at Ordnance, a member-shelter of the Out of the Cold Program. The Out of the Cold Program is an emergency winter response to homelessness that developed in the late eighties, after a homeless man was found frozen to death. The shelters are housed in churches, synagogues, and community centres throughout the city and are run by interfaith communities and volunteers who oversee evening and morning meals and sleeping quarters. The Out of the Cold Program does not provide shelter during the day; clients must leave the shelters between 6:00 and 8:30 am, depending on the site. Currently, the program operates 27 shelters in the Greater Toronto Area from November until April.

Youth spoke favourably about Ordnance in comparison to other shelters in Toronto. Out of the Cold venues differ in their criteria for use (e.g., age and sex requirements), and youth appreciated that Ordnance was coed, had a mixture of adults and youth, and allowed for more freedom and flexibility than other shelters. For example, there was no curfew and people

were permitted entry and exit at anytime. Beds were had on a first come first serve basis while leaving the shelter (and one's bed) forfeited claims to that bed. Allison reported that she had been to every Out of the Cold in Toronto. "[Ordnance] is the only one that I like...[Why?] I guess [because] they have a TV in there, you can smoke in there You go to sleep when you want. They actually got real beds. You don't gotta sleep on the floor, they got real beds."

Before staying at the Out of the Cold, Kyle lived in a squat that he built from wood scraps, blankets, and abandoned couches in the rafters underneath the Gardiner Expressway. Until Ordnance, he preferred his squat to shelters.

A lot of shelters aren't that good just because you get a lot of problems. A lot of drunk people...fights...or a lot of them aren't that good living conditions. Like I'd actually say some squats are better. ...A lot of shelters you can't leave your stuff your know. I had to stay at Seaton House for some bail conditions. And when I slept there, I'd tie my boots to my squeegee and I'd sleep with all my stuff under my head and I'd hold onto my squeegee when I slept, cuz like, if not, people would steal. So I mean that's why a lot of times squats are preferable just cuz you know the people who are staying there and usually they're your friends so they won't steal your stuff.

When Ordnance closed for the season, Robin and Steve and a few of the other youth at the drop-in slept in a tent they had pitched near the railroad tracks at the Lakeshore until early one morning when they were awoken by the police who confiscated their squeegees and issued fines for trespassing. Other youth reported moving into squats under the bridge, sleeping on park benches, and periodically staying up all night after the shelter was closed. Youth routinely sought out public places to sleep where clashes with police would be least likely.

Regardless of the season, some youth at the drop-in avoided shelters. Some youth chose to sleep outside because they felt safer and more free outside than in the shelters. Lee had been beaten and robbed at shelters in the past which made him feel that shelters were unsafe and roused in him his “fear of confinement”.

I can sleep outside and then have a good sound sleep. I can hear sirens, and I just sleep all through it. But yet when you sleep inside, you hear a noise, you just like wake up because like when you're behind four walls if something happens, you've got nowhere to run, you know. You don't know who's your friend at hostels.... You know, like at least outside all that you can worry about is the cops, the rats, and then the crazy people. Inside you got one of the biggest fears alive: confinement.

Will preferred to sleep in his “shack under the bridge” rather in shelters because at shelters, he was unable to be alone and “think about stuff”. Above all, he preferred to stay in a place of his own. “I'm more self reliant, more independent... You know, I like to, if I can't find my own place to stay then, I don't really want to stay anywhere. That's my logic to it. I guess.”

Unable to afford secure housing, youth's shelter options were severely limited. Shelter comprised of make-shift shelters, temporary shelters and hostels, “crashing” at friends', and sleeping in “the rough”. Overall, the youth's shelter could be described as insecure, unsafe, chaotic, and transitory.

5.2 Employment

It was difficult for youth at the drop-in to secure regular employment. Beyond the current economic situation of high youth unemployment rates across the country, they faced additional barriers to entering the job market related specifically to their homelessness.

Youth lacked the resources necessary to secure a job including a telephone to set up

interviews or do “on-call” work and sleeping and washing facilities in order to be rested and clean for work. As well, some lacked experience, education, and skills that were necessary or expected for most jobs. Many of the youth at the drop-in had left high school early. Less tangible, but no less of a barrier to employment, youth reported discrimination based on poverty and appearance.

Squeegeeing was an important income strategy for youth in this study. This practice refers to the act of washing car windows and asking for donations. When the traffic stops, squeegeers usually approach a car at an intersection, exchange a few words or gestures with the driver who either accepts or refuses their services. According to youth at the drop-in, squeegeeing came to Canada about five years ago, beginning with street youth in Montreal and then spreading to other urban centres via youth who were fleeing police harassment in Montreal. Squeegeers in this study worked chiefly at the intersections of Bathurst and Queen Streets, Spadina and Queen Streets, and along Lakeshore Boulevard in between Spadina and Bathurst. Squeegeers reported that drivers were generally accepting of them. “Most people are like pretty cool. As long as we’re respectful of them, they’ll respect us. You know, you get the occasional asshole who’ll start freaking out on you, calling you names and shit.”

(Will)

Most youth squeegeed only during the daytime, but some youth described going on binges where they worked through the night. “I slept outside two nights in a row cuz I was squeegeeing till six o’clock in the morning... You know I was like working my ass off you know, but I made like 80 bucks both nights”. (Allison)

Youth reported that the amount of income generated through squeegeeing varied with the weather and from day to day. “On a nice sunny day like today, if I’m out all day I can make up to 50 bucks.... Usually I’ll only make 20 or 30 bucks during the day, but I mean that’s plenty. But some days - it all depends on just your luck that day I guess.” (Kyle)

Most youth also panhandled while they were squeegeeing. “While I’m squeegeeing, I panhandle, you know. I don’t ask everybody that I see on the street, just you know, if there’s not cars at that light and someone walks by I’ll go ‘spare change’ you know. Maybe one person every hour, I’ll ask. Maybe not even that.” (Steve) Squeegeeing was more lucrative than panning, except when rain made squeegeeing futile. Youth reported that they earned less on rainy days, generally. “...On rainy days you can’t squeegee and plus panning sucks on rainy days too just cuz no one wants to stop. They’re all rushing around trying to get out of the rain as quick as they can you know.” (Kyle)

Some youth washed windshields without seeking drivers’ consent with the understanding that they may not be paid. This was a deliberate strategy based on the presumption that drivers were more likely to pay for a service they had already received, solicited or not. In some cases, this angered drivers.

Like when we squeegee most them ask us not to touch their car and even if we do they don’t freak, they’ll still give us money. Some of them, like this guy yesterday, my friend went to go squeegee his car and the guy in the car hit his windshield and cracked it just because someone touched his car with a squeegee. He broke his own windshield! (Allison)

Will used humour to improve his returns when he squeegeed.

If I’m squeegeeing and I’m trying to convince them to pay me, I’ll be like ‘No money down, no interest, no payment till 1999, you’re automatically approved, no medical

exam or health questions. If you're between ten and 110 you're automatically approved.' You know what I mean, like shit like that. Like common knowledge and you know like catch lines, and I always go 'Hey!', you know just yell at people like that. They always turn around and look at me. I'm like 'spare change' you know and they find that pretty funny....

Despite the squeegeers' marketing strategies, they were commonly told to "get a job". Steve had a standard response to this comment: "Give me a job and then I'll work. I'll bust my ass, just like I'm busting my ass washing your window."

Squeegeers reported physical harassment by police that they felt was related to discrimination. Tattered clothing, hair styles, body piercing, tattoos, and the squeegee itself identified homeless youth as squeegee kids, a label which ignited negative connotations in the wake of a highly publicized, summer campaign by the city to get rid of squeegee kids. At the centre of all of the media coverage about squeegee kids was a proposed bylaw to restrict panhandling and essentially outlaw squeegeeing. As the debate became more polarized, youth at the drop-in reported that they experienced negative reactions more often on the street. Drivers were more confrontational with squeegee kids or as one youth at the drop-in suggested, all the negative media hype about squeegee kids had "empowered people to become assholes".

The police crackdown resulted in increases in the number of fines and tickets being levied against squeegee kids at the drop-in. For example, prior to the crackdown, obstructing traffic was the main violation associated with squeegeeing. After the crackdown, youth at the drop-in reported tickets for loitering, trespassing, possession of a deadly weapon, assault with a deadly weapon, soliciting, and others. Youth also reported increases in police brutality.

During this period, police grabbed Kyle by the shirt collar and threw him up against the side of a building as he was returning to the sidewalk after he had washed a man's windshield. Kyle was charged with assault with a deadly weapon, the deadly weapon being his squeegee. The police officers alleged that Kyle forced his squeegee on the man's windshield after he had refused Kyle's services. He was arrested and detained at the Don Jail over the weekend. He was released on bail with the conditions that he stayed at a fixed address, that he refrained from squeegeeing, and that he remained 50 metres from the Bathurst-Queen Streets intersection until his hearing. Unfortunately, his bail conditions made it impossible for him to continue to derive benefits from the drop-in because it was within the 50 meter prohibited zone. Consequently, Kyle was stripped of his livelihood and access to the drop-in where he showered, cooked his lunch, cleaned his clothes, and received support through interaction with friends and staff. At the same time, he was required to find a fixed address.

Friends of Kyle's were also affected by the crackdown on squeegee kids.

...Friends of mine have been pretty badly beaten. Like a guy I know right now, basically a cop broke his nose for no reason, just cuz I don't know, he just felt like beating the shit out of him. Honestly, I'd say like the police in Toronto suck. A lot of them are fascist. A lot of them are racist and...there's a lot of police brutality.

Squeegeeing represented an opportunity to earn a living through lawful means. (At the time of writing, squeegeeing is not a directly punishable offense in Toronto). Unlike illegal activities which force people underground, squeegeeing brings homeless youth into daily, face-to-face contact with other citizens. Like those in mainstream society, squeegee kids felt good about rejecting a life of crime for a more legitimate form of participation in society.

Street youth felt that by squeegeeing, they were embracing society's entrepreneurial spirit which holds hard work, independence, productivity, and creativity in high esteem.

Like one thing I always say to people is would you rather me washing cars or stealing them. You know. Which is true cuz I'd make a hell of a lot more money stealing them you know. And sure it's got that added risk but just, I mean, there's a whole bunch of different ways legally and illegally that you can make money you know. Illegally is usually a lot quicker, a lot faster, a lot more risky you know... I mean hell I could mug people too but I don't because I have very strong moral beliefs you know, like I think of myself as a good person. You know, I mean I'm not gonna say I've never stolen and I'm not gonna say that I've never dealt drugs but still I'd never hurt someone.... Since I've been in Toronto, I've never stolen anything, like not even like a chocolate bar or nothing. And I don't know, I just always figure, hey I can squeegee or I can make enough money to get myself by you know, so there's no reason, no legitimate reason for me to steal anything so why should I. You know, I'd say like I feel like a much better person because of that. (Kyle)

Among many squeegee youth was a mainstream work ethic that placed hard-earned income ahead of panhandling.

At least squeegeeing, I'm doing something. You know, I'm like cleaning windows whether they pay me or not, you know, that's fine. At least I'm out there doing something not just like begging on a street corner, you know. Cuz I don't really like to think of myself as a beggar. You know, I like to think, I may not have the best job, but it still - cuz I mean I've had people, like business men and stuff come up to me and say 'why don't you work? Why don't you do this?' You know, and what I said to this one guy anyway, I said 'hey bud, show me your hands.' He was this pencil pushing type guy, you know. Showed me his hands. They're all smooth and stuff like that. I show him mine, all covered in calluses and stuff like that, you know, and I'm like, 'look at my hands and you tell me I don't work.' (Kyle)

Squeegeeing also offered anonymity from the law because it provided a legal means of earning money. This was particularly important to street youth with outstanding arrest warrants and those who were otherwise wanted by the law such as runaways under age 16. These youth were often unable to meet the qualifications for mainstream employment and welfare and feared that the pursuit of these risked involvement with authorities - arrest, detention, or being returned to unfit guardians. Allison tried to keep out of trouble because

there was a warrant out for her arrest.

I have like, it's not big warrants, but I mean, if I were to turn myself in right now, I'd automatically get 30 days in jail. I got a B n' E charge and I got a failure to appear charge cuz March 10th I was supposed to go to court and I was in Vancouver then and I tried to get my charges waived up there but they wouldn't do it.... And while I was gone the cops were looking for me cuz I missed my court date. So if I were to turn myself in right now which if it were only my first failure to appear I would get off but this is my second failure to appear so I would automatically get 30 days in jail.

While the act of squeegeeing is not illegal, many of its constituent activities may be construed contrary to municipal bylaws or the criminal code. For example, police ticketed street youth for such bylaw infractions as obstruction of traffic and loitering; and some squeegee kids were charged with criminal code offenses such as soliciting and possession of a deadly weapon. Most of the offenses that squeegee youth were ticketed for were bylaw violations which resulted in fines. Generally, youth could not and did not pay fines, and many used false names when they were stopped by police officers. For youth at the drop-in who squeegeed, fines were an expected consequence of work, and they commonly had multiple unpaid fines.

I'm clean. The only thing they can get me on are some unpaid tickets. ...I had a job...selling hot dogs, but we were doing it without licenses so we got tickets...those are unpaid. Squeegeeing tickets...from Winnipeg. I got a drinking in a public ticket.... I'm not too worried about my tickets. (Steve).

Given that squeegeeing is a relatively new phenomenon, youth in this study reported income generating activities other than squeegeeing throughout their histories on the streets. To meet survival needs, many had resorted to criminal means. For homeless youth, employment opportunities are rare and in many cases offer far smaller returns than can be gained through crime (see Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Petty theft, breaking and entering, and the drug trade

were most common among the youth at the drop-in. Lee also had worked as a prostitute in the past.

At the time of the study, the six youth who participated in interviews as well as other street youth at the drop-in were supplementing the money they earned squeegeeing by doing “odd jobs”. In addition to squeegeeing and panning, Allison “...sometimes runs errands for people”. She explained that this meant delivering drugs for drug dealers or their agents.

“Like I go pick something up for somebody or I go drop it off.... You know they’ll give me a few buck here and there or throw me a pack of cigarettes.... It’s not that safe cuz if you get caught, you get in shit.” She used to steal clothing.

We go into clothing stores and we’ll walk out with like \$200 worth of clothes. And we know people that’ll buy them. But I haven’t done that in a long time cuz I’m just too scared to get caught and I don’t need that you know. So if I want money I’ll squeegee for it, I’ll pan, or if anyone wants me to pick something up for them, you know, I’ll do it.

Lee and some of his friends periodically worked for a scalper buying tickets for him, a strategy which enabled the scalper to collect more tickets than the per-person limit permitted. He also sold flowers for special occasions like Mothers’ Day and participated in drug research. “...You can become a live guinea pig for about 6 to 10 days and they will give you food and that ...for different drugs, needles and pills and that.”

Steve and Kyle took whatever employment opportunities were available to them.

A lot of the times I do like under the table work.... Like last summer I painted the side of a building...I helped renovate apartments.... Like I’ve had times where people will come up on the street and say ‘hey, tomorrow do you want to do this

instead of squeegeeing?'. I'm like, 'sure'. You know, I'll always take that option, half the time just for a change of pace and half the time for the experience you know. Just cuz it's good to do a lot of different things I think. (Kyle)

Unfortunately, under-the-table ventures often resulted in the youth being mistreated. For example, Kyle and a couple of other street youth at the drop-in took an under-the-table job cleaning up a construction site. They worked hard at it for two weeks and spoke enthusiastically about the early hours that they began work to beat the heat and the plans they had for their pay which would come at the end of the job. When the job was over, their employer paid them much less than they had agreed upon.

Steve found a manual labour job through a job placement agency. He worked one night shift moving boxes in a warehouse in Markham. One month later, during our interview, he said, "I'm still waiting for that second day of work. I'm still waiting for that pay cheque." Powerless and vulnerable, with effectively no opportunity for recourse and redress, Kyle, Steve, and others fell prey to unscrupulous employers.

While squeegeeing provided livelihood in the face of less reliable employment options, it was not a panacea for homelessness and unemployment. None of the youth in this study were able to meet subsistence needs through squeegeeing and/or other employment strategies.

5.3 Health

Youth at the drop-in suffered from health problems related to being homeless. These included colds and other communicable infections, injuries from squeegeeing, dental problems, and foot problems.

During the winter, youth were continuously sick with respiratory infections and flues, and talk at the drop-in about feeling ill, lacking energy, etc. because of infections was commonplace. The lack of a stable, safe and nurturing environment, made restoring health problematic. Youth regarded shelters as breeding grounds for disease, but many had no better sleeping options. Although there were no beds at the drop-in, the staff allowed people to stretch out on the floor as long as they did not obstruct the way. Sick youth often took this opportunity to attempt to sleep off their illness. They also used the shower facilities on a regular basis to keep clean to prevent colds, scabies, and other bugs from being transmitted.

Kyle explained how even a minor cold was detrimental to a street kid.

...When it's like cold and pouring rain, you're soaked, you know you're shivering and cuz of that you know you'll end up catching a cold or something. You'll be sick for a few months and because you aren't in a good enough situation to really take care of yourself you know like...when you're squeegeeing, usually you don't get a day off you know. Well you can. I mean you're free to take as many days off as you want but you take a day off and you have no money... I mean there's been days where I've been sick as a dog I still went out and squeegeed just cuz I needed the mcney....

In addition to infectious disease, youth who squeegeed reported work related health problems such as sore backs, necks, and arms. Acute injuries also occurred. For example, Lee was hit by a car while he was squeegeeing. "I was squeegeeing Sunday morning and a car ran a red light. I tried to jump out of the way but I just didn't move quick enough. So then I got nailed, hit, nailed in the leg." He suffered hairline fractures in his knee and fluid under his kneecap. At the time of our interview, he was using crutches, taking pain killers and was consulting with specialists about surgery. He was worried about not being able to squeegee because of the accident.

Foot problems caused by improper footwear and damp feet were also common. Youth wore shoes and boots from clothing banks, that often did not fit properly. On one occasion at the drop-in, Allison rested her sore feet and showed me multiple blisters that were caused by three different pairs of shoes. Youth explained that in the winter, it was difficult to keep their feet dry because they spent so much time outside, they lacked clean and dry socks, and their shoes often had holes. Steve periodically had fungus on his feet that made walking painful.

Now when you're on the streets, if you're squeegeeing, the main thing you've got to take care of is your feet. You lose your feet, you can't walk, you can't squeegee... When I don't have enough socks to last you know, then I got to wear the same pair over and over.... And because of that, the sweat on my feet or if my feet get wet, it just irritates. ...I've had fungus like two weeks ago, I had a problem with my feet cuz I didn't have any socks. I had one pair of socks....

When youth described health problems, they often expressed concerns about not being able to work. Two young men at the drop-in kept putting off having their wisdom teeth pulled because they worried about being unable to squeegee up the money they needed for the day. Health was a prerequisite for work and instrumental to survival. "I worry about catching a flu or something. You know because health when you're on the streets, of course you've got to be healthy or you can't work. If you can't work, you...die." (Steve)

Youth in this study continually suffered health problems which limited their ability to earn an income. These health problems were related to being homeless and dependent on squeegeeing.

5.4 Drugs and alcohol

Drug and alcohol use were common among the youth at the drop-in. Youth reported using marijuana, crack-cocaine, heroin, PCP, LSD (Acid), speed, and model airplane glue to get high. Most of the time youth at the drop-in appeared sober, however, sometimes individuals or small groups would leave for the day to “score” (get drugs). On other occasions, youth went outside to get high with friends and would return shortly after. “Partying” seemed to be an important part of the youth’s lives. At the same time, many youth reported drug problems and worried about their friends overdosing.

Drug and alcohol use seemed to be associated with pleasure, social interaction, and friendship. In describing their days, youth talked about hanging out. Invariably this time involved getting high - smoking a joint, dropping acid, and/or drinking beer - with a group of friends somewhere, usually a park. On special occasions like birthdays, “...like if we’re all really good friends, you know then we’ll go out and we’ll make money to get each other completely smashed. And we do it out of love for each other. Like I said we’re all family, we all take care of each other.” (Steve) Sharing marijuana seemed to be a symbol of trust and friendship.

Like you know if someone smokes me up today, tomorrow I’ll go squeegee money and go buy them a dime of weed. It’s like they know they can trust me and I can trust them. ...I mean someone got me high yesterday so next time I have drugs on me, I’ll say you wanna go for a walk and I’ll get them high. You know like we pay each other back. (Allison)

While youth were generally disapproving of the use of heavily addictive drugs such as crack or heroin, many youth who were critical continued to use, themselves and/or had experienced

periods of heavy drug use. Kyle, who used to use PCP heavily, said chemicals, crack, and heroin were “complete garbage.”

I've seen too many of my friends screw themselves over. I've lost a few friends from it (heroin). ...And like, there's not much I can do really cuz I mean, all I can do is tell them my opinion on it you know. I say 'look, you're gonna fuck up your life'... A few, a very few, have said 'you know you're right' and they've gone on and they quit. ...Now they're telling other people the same thing I was telling them. But you know, also I've had people who were my friends and I told them 'you know you're gonna fuck yourself up' and they just said 'ya, ya shut up, I don't care what you say. If you don't like what I do then don't talk to me.' And I've lost friends over it...it's kind of a no win situation.

Kyle, Lee, and Steve spoke in detail about their addictions. Kyle reported that he had been addicted to PCP. Lee was addicted to heroin and recounted times when his need for the drug overrode all of his other needs. When I met Steve, he was working on getting off crack. He said it was hard, but that he knew other people who did it, and he thought he could do it. A few months into the study, he began using crack more and more heavily. By the summertime, he stopped hanging out at the drop-in and was known as a “crackhead”. I often ran into him on the street and he told me that he was “back into the crack” but working on quitting. Quitting drugs while living on the street was easier said than done, as Allison explained.

Ya, I smoke crack. And I mean I did a toke yesterday. It's like I said, it's not that easy to get out of it. You know I mean you can try to stay off of it as long as you can but it's also not that easy when all your friends do it, you're out on the street, it's everywhere and it's not that easy to get out of it. You can go to a detox but you'll be out the next day doing it again.

For youth in this study, the formidable task of breaking physiological addictions was compounded by a lack of stable housing, employment, and people who were in positions to provide them with support.

5.5 Food implications

The food experiences of youth in this study were shaped by the insecure context that has been delimited. The following are illustrations of the food implications of each of these contextual factors.

5.5.1 Shelter

The lack of a home with facilities to store, prepare, and cook food, prevented youth from eating in an economical way. At the same time, they did not have the income to sustain eating out. Kyle described how things would be different if he had a place to live.

I wouldn't have to spend nearly as much money on food cuz I'd go grocery shopping instead of eating out everyday. Like that four bucks I spend on breakfast would last me all week for breakfast, you know. Buy like a carton of eggs and a loaf of bread and stuff like that. I could cook way better and way more nutritious food...so, it'd be a lot easier like if I had a place of my own and a fridge to store it in.

5.5.2 Employment

Clearly, money is needed to purchase food. The limited employment opportunities for youth in this study meant that squeegeeing and panning were their main sources of income. When food assistance was not available or suitable, these were often the only means of procuring food. "Even if I have to be there for five hours, I'll pan or I'll squeegee till I get enough to feed myself". (Allison) However, inclement weather, police crackdowns, the whims of

individual passersby/drivers, and sickness all impeded the capacity of squeegeeing and panning to provide youth in this study with adequate income to consistently meet their food needs.

5.5.3 Health

When youth were sick, making money for food money was sometimes unfeasible, and getting food was problematic. "...When you're sick, you don't feel like going anywhere, [and] 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." (Steve) In January, Kyle caught a bad flu that had been going around. At the time, he was staying alone in a squat. "...Almost everyone I knew had caught it and that laid me up for like three days or so and two out of those three days I didn't eat. Like I was too sick to even like get up out of my bed...I couldn't even walk up to the health clinic."

Lee's situation at the time of our interview illustrated the impact of both employment and health on food access. Since he was hit by a car, he was unable to squeegee. Usually, he put a portion of his money aside into a separate pocket so that when it rained, he had money for food. "Like now, I've got no money put to one side now, so like if it rains, it is no good for panhandling...so like really what I'm worried about is the weather, because if it's bad weather, I'm gonna need food. Because I won't be able to get no money or anything."

5.5.4 Drugs

Youth reported that the use of virtually all drugs had an immediate effect on appetite, and except in the case of marijuana, drugs usually suppressed appetite. Lee reported that on heroin, “as long as you’re high, you’re not hungry....” Appetite suppression was also a noted side effect of PCP, crack, and LSD (Acid). Steve recalled how he “went from 210 pounds to 120 pounds in six months” when he first started using crack and cocaine. “When I was into the crack there’d be like, I’d go three days without eating then just I’d take a toke and I’d just be like OK I gotta go eat now you know. But I’d always forget to.” Robin reported that on acid, “food sticks together like a ball in your stomach...it feels weird, and you don’t have an appetite”. Will explained that marijuana gave him the “munchies”. He reported that when he was high, he would buy snacks like potato chips, if he had money, otherwise he would ignore his cravings.

Youth reported that when they were addicted to drugs, food money was sometimes spent on drugs. Kyle was addicted to PCP for six months.

...I went on like a six month bender basically. And it really makes you not have any appetite at all and plus I’d spend all my money on it too you know. So I wasn’t thinking about eating at all so I just wasn’t. And because of that I ended up losing a lot of weight and almost killing myself with it. So that’s why I went into detox and Narcotics Anonymous.

When Steve was addicted to crack, “I’d say I gotta eat, but I’d make ten bucks, I’d go call up my dealer and say, hey meet me. That’d be during the day and then at 7:30, if I wasn’t doing a blast, I’d go eat at the Christian Centre....”

For the purposes of examination and presentation, youth's food experiences and the context within which they occurred have been somewhat fragmented. To gain a fuller appreciation of the insecure nature of life on the streets, it is important to bear in mind that in the reality of youth in this study, these factors operated simultaneously.

6. THE FOOD EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESS YOUTH

Homeless youth in this study sought to meet their basic food needs within the larger context of their lives. The results in this section detail the daily food experiences of these youth. The guiding principle behind food acquisition strategies was survival; food was fuel for subsistence. Everyday, youth engaged in two predominant food acquisition strategies, namely buying food and using food assistance. Youth's experiences of obtaining food through these means reveal strengths and limitations of these strategies, both in terms of the youth's ability to secure food and the social/emotional consequences of the strategies. In addition to daily food acquisition strategies, youth used less common strategies (e.g., stealing food) to augment everyday strategies, in exceptional circumstances. Even with the various acquisition strategies, meeting basic food needs was problematic, and the precarious nature of each of the strategies meant that efforts to get food were stressful and often fruitless. Despite developing techniques to attempt to manage food insecurity, youth in this study experienced episodes of hunger.

6.1 Food as fuel

In our society, food has multiple taken-for-granted meanings that extend beyond providing adequate nutrition for normal physiologic functioning. Food is imbued with sociocultural meanings that are interconnected with our conceptualizations of health, pleasure, recreation, social interaction, and cultural transmission; food is central to our beliefs about physical and emotional well-being. Despite these popular notions, food in the day-to-day lives of youth in this study functioned predominantly as fuel for survival. When asked if Will had any

“comfort foods”. he responded: “Like to me food is life. I mean, if there wasn’t any food then we wouldn’t be living so like it’s not really comforting. It’s more of a necessity.”

To serve as fuel, ideally, food had to be available, safe (i.e., not rotten or harmful), and filling or adequate in terms of amount. Although it was not always possible to achieve all three components, youth spoke of these when they considered food selection. Kyle said that in general, he ate whatever was available.

You know, just whatever’s available really, you know.... Like even if it’s just going to the Salvation Army or something like that. They’ll give you a couple sandwiches and a coffee, you know. Still, it’s something to fill your gut you know. So it’s something to keep you going. But usually it’s pretty good, you know.

Allison reported that she ate any food she was given, as long as it was free. “As long as they give me free food then I don’t care. I’ll go anywhere I have to go, you know....” But when she purchased food, she was careful to make sure that it was filling. “I don’t eat chips and bars that much. To me, that’s not a meal...that’s just junk food, and I don’t eat a lot of junk food. So, it’s like I’ll buy something that I know is gonna fill me up for the next two or three hours.” Whenever Steve had the chance, he “filled up” on food. “I eat like a dog. I mean I’ll eat and eat because I don’t know where my next meal’s going to come from. When I do know, then I pace it out. You know I could have anywhere from two to eight meals in a day.”

Sometimes youth noted a difference between the food that they ate and what was commonly considered to be healthy. However, food that provided efficient fuel was more important than “good nutrition”.

...To me that’s a healthy lunch you know, a burger on the run. Cuz it’s got some food groups in it, but a lot of people look at it like oooo, it’s greasy. So what? Grease is what keeps me healthy. Fat in my body keeps me going. It’s energy.

Stored energy. No energy, you can't move. (Steve)

Lee also disparaged greasy food, but nonetheless it was a worthwhile compromise for an affordable hot meal. "When I got money I will go to McDonald's so that I can get a hot meal and you know a hot breakfast, even though it is greasy and that, but it's food."

When I asked if nutrition factored into the food choices that Will made, he explained that poverty imposed limits. "Like I try to eat things that will keep me like energized and like half healthy and keep me up on my feet, right - so I'm not droopy and you know. [But]...I have a limit to what I can eat and what I can't, right. Like price, prices of food and stuff."

Although food for youth in this study was inextricably linked to survival, it was not *only* viewed in this instrumental way. All of the youth who participated in interviews expressed food and taste preferences. For example, Allison said she loved Chinese food, and pasta was Steve's favourite food. Will and Kyle, in particular, expressed their love of cooking and eating. Kyle was really passionate when we spoke about comfort foods.

I love food. I love good food. I love certain foods. Like sometimes I'll just [buy] - I don't know, onion rings. I love onion rings. I'll go get me some onion rings and just nibble on my onion rings as I think about why I'm bummed out.... And I like ice cream. Sometimes I'll grab some ice cream and sit, eat my ice cream, enjoy it. Cuz like I don't know, like half of it is just like I really enjoy the taste of certain foods you know, especially like a lot of garlicky foods so I just really enjoy the taste of it so it makes me happy when I eat it you know.

However, youth reported that satisfying food cravings and preferences were not significant in terms of their usual food intake. The psychosocial and healing properties of food were secondary, if they existed at all, to the primary goal of filling up on food as fuel for survival.

6.2 Food acquisition strategies

Youth in this study spent a considerable portion of their day engaging in activities related to obtaining food to meet their basic needs. This time was filled earning money to buy food (e.g., squeegeeing) and making their ways to various charitable food/meal programs around the Queen west area. The food acquisition strategies employed by youth in this study fell into two main categories: everyday strategies and less common strategies. The latter strategies were often used under exceptional circumstances.

6.2.1 Everyday strategies

In an effort to meet their daily food needs, youth in this study purchased food and sought food aid regularly. Purchased food included food that was both ready-to-eat and food that required preparation. Food aid was provided by social service organizations and charitable groups. Street youth had access to free food through onsite snack and meal delivery programs and through mobile services which brought food to the streets. (Please see Appendix C for an example of what interview participants ate in a day).

6.2.1.1 Purchased Food

Street youth purchased prepared, usually fast foods, that were eaten on the street and cheap and easy-to-make foods which were prepared in the kitchen at the drop-in. They reported buying sandwiches from doughnut stores, pizza and burgers from fast food chains, potato chips and chocolate bars from variety stores, and French fries, onion rings, hot dogs, and ice cream from street vendors. Youth also ate at certain “street youth/squeegee-friendly” restaurants.

Queen West street youth routinely ate at the Barn, one street youth/squeegee-friendly restaurant, located nearby the drop-in. There was a shared enthusiasm for “Barn burgers” among the youth at the drop-in. “Like when I’m hungry I’ll make three dollars for a burger, go over to the Barn. They’ve got the best burgers I’ve ever eaten. Like they’re really good there.” (Steve) Some youth also enjoyed breakfast at the Barn. Will reported that he began each day “squeegeeing up” enough money to eat breakfast at the Barn: two eggs, bacon, home fries, coffee, a large glass of milk, and a large glass of water.

Macaroni and cheese was the most common food that youth prepared; it was prepared and eaten during virtually every visit I made to the drop-in. “[For lunch], well, usually we go buy like Kraft Dinner, you go buy two for a dollar at the dollar store....” (Allison) Since the drop-in provided access to kitchen facilities and free powdered milk, macaroni and cheese was a cheap and quick and easy meal to prepare. During operating hours at the drop-in, youth and others used the kitchen on an ad hoc basis and were responsible for their own cleanup and negotiating shared use of the space, appliances, and dishes.

The kitchen at the drop-in was also used for a community (collective) kitchen program. This program aimed to increase participants’ food security by bringing together a group of individuals to purchase food and cook meals, and in doing so, provide access to kitchen facilities and minimize costs and social isolation. At the time of the study, no homeless youth were enrolled in the program, however, they had heard about it from two youth (formerly homeless) in the program. Allison reported that “they say it’s really good...but I haven’t decided to join yet. I’m thinking about it.” She thought the community kitchen was

a great deal because the food was really good. "It's \$20 a month and...you get 16 meals...and these are like, pork chops, steaks, potatoes, bacon, carrots...." Kyle was also enthusiastic about the program.

I'm going to get into it cuz like it's really good. It's a really good set up. You throw in 20 bucks every month and you get put into a group of four or five people and you choose your own recipe and you cook up enough meals like, one big tin, like a pie plate. Cook up one of them for each person in your group you know. But I mean you can eat half of the pie plates worth and it's a huge meal...a lot of times for 20 bucks, you can get you know 20 meals out of it, and like they're big meals too.

Youth did pool their money to buy food and other things on an ad hoc basis. Usually, a group of four went in on two boxes of macaroni and cheese. Youth also reported sharing food, buying food for others, and providing others with money for food. "If someone needs food and I've already eaten or something like that, I'll offer them food or offer to buy some food or offer them money or something." (Kyle) Steve and Robin shared all of their money. Steve was in charge of purchasing and preparing their macaroni and cheese lunches at the drop-in.

...We're both in this 50/50. It's completely awesome. Right now, she'll give me all her money to hold onto and we'll go halves on weed or food, you know. Like this morning, I had four bucks in my pocket and she said 'go have breakfast.' I said, 'no, wait till we have \$6.50' you know, cuz I don't want to eat while someone's still trying to make money.

At times, friendship networks enhanced youth's food security by offering access to other people's resources. However, depending on others for food sometimes hindered youth's access to food. Robin's situation is instructive here. Robin relied on her friends, particularly Steve, for food, and she only ate when they offered her food or suggested that they buy something together. On many occasions at the drop-in, Robin complained to Steve that she was hungry. He responded by suggesting that she go outside and squeegee up money for

food, but because Robin was uncomfortable squeegeeing alone, she opted to wait until Steve or another friend wanted to squeegee or offered to buy her food. Robin reported that she had lost weight since she started hanging around with Queen West street youth, and that this worried her.

There were other incidents at the drop-in which revealed that friendship did not always lead to improved food access. Regularly, there were confrontations over food between friends at the drop-in. On one occasion, Steve interrupted his lunch to go to the washroom, and while he was away, Mark (a friend of Steve's), ate a couple of forkfuls. When Steve returned to discover that Mark had nibbled on his lunch, he became enraged at Mark, yelling and cursing at his friend. Another time, Sam (also a street youth known at the drop-in) was eating a plate of macaroni and cheese and rice that a friend had prepared. Mark walked into the room, and the friend who had the prepared the dish, instructed Sam to give half of his food to Mark since Mark apparently had first priority for the meal. Sam was noticeably unhappy, and he grudgingly proceeded to scoop only the rice onto Mark's plate. Although this amounted to half the contents of his plate, Mark wanted half of the macaroni too which provoked further argument. In these cases, youth were not willing to share their food with friends.

Youth's ability to purchase food was constrained by their extreme poverty. Youth were explicit about money being the limiting factor for buying food. They prefaced statements about food purchases with phrases like "if I have money" and "when I have money". For example, Lee reported, "When I've got money, I'll go to McDonalds...." And Will reported that occasionally, he skipped breakfast, his main and often only meal of the day, because he

was unable to squeeze up the money he needed for breakfast. Of course, not all the money that youth had was directed to purchasing food. Food was in competition with other needs for the scarce resources that youth in this study possessed. Each decision to spend money on something other than food, necessarily took away from the money that was available for food.

Over the course of the study, street youth were forbidden access to two food establishments nearby the drop-in. Being barred from these places prevented youth's access to affordable restaurants, of which there are few. Michael's was one restaurant where they were prohibited entry. "...I used to go there (Michael's) until an incident happened and then no one can go there anymore because you know a big fight happened or something." Galaxy doughnuts, where youth from the drop-in used to buy sandwiches, was another spot from which street youth were barred entry. Youth reported no knowledge of an altercation involving street youth at the doughnut store, and presumed that the management had become aware of the incident at Michael's and were worried that the local street youth were bad for business. Youth from the drop-in who attempted to eat at Michael's or Galaxy Doughnuts, were told to leave and assured that they would not be served because they were street youth.

6.2.1.2 Food aid

In comparison to other places in Canada, youth at the drop-in from British Columbia, Quebec, and other parts of Ontario reported that Toronto had better food assistance services.

Like part of the reason I moved to Toronto is it's a lot easier to get food here when you're living on the street than it is [in Peterborough]. ...[There] I'd go to the food bank but they'd give me about two days worth of food and I could only go there once a month. And so the rest of the time...I had a setup with this guy, he worked at Pizza Hut and I'd wait at three in the morning when they closed and I'd get all the extra pizza and I did the same at sub shops, and like doughnut stores would do that - you

know you'll look through dumpsters behind there and there's bags of day-old doughnuts. And there's a Hostess potato chip factory in Peterborough and they'd throw out any bags of chips where they put like too much seasoning or any little defect in it. It's just a lot easier here. There's more [places] that give out: you know, help you with food and there's a lot more access to free food and shelters and stuff like that, that will feed you. (Kyle)

The agencies from which Queen West street youth sought food assistance were generally located within the vicinity of the drop-in; the approximate boundaries of this area were College Street (north), King Street (south), Spadina Avenue (east), Bathurst Street (west). Street youth generally used onsite food and meal programs. Two additional services, Street Patrol and Street Connection, provided emergency food and other supplies to people in the area through outreach in vans. Youth did not generally go to food banks because most of the food distributed there required preparation and cooking facilities that they did not have. Some youth at the drop-in reported that they occasionally received some non-perishable and ready-to-eat items from food banks. When Kyle squeegeed on Lakeshore Boulevard, he sometimes went into Daily Bread Food Bank to snack on food which was provided for food bank clients who were waiting for their food parcels.

The youth identified Ordnance shelter, the Christian Centre, Evangel Hall, the Corner Drop-In, the Salvation Army, and the Scott Mission as places where they went for food. Kyle mentioned some of the food aid programs he used.

I go to a lot of the Out of the Cold shelters and places that give out meals. There's the Christian Centre.... They give out food every night. So I go there sometimes. There's the Street Connection truck that drives and parks right on the corner here like two nights a week, and sometimes they got pretty good food that they hand out. So I guess, I get some of that.

The system and type of food/meal delivery varied with each program. For example, most programs served one meal each day, five days a week, while others served two meals and/or snacks; some programs used a cafeteria style of food delivery where participants moved through a lineup as volunteers plated food, while other programs provided table service. The hours of operation, rules and regulations for participation, and quality of the food varied by organization.

The food assistance programs operated at set hours and days of the week. Youth were generally familiar with the schedules of the various food assistance programs and often structured their days around these. The organization's policies and governing rules and regulations affected youth's access to food aid. For example, Allison reported that babies and children were not allowed at certain programs, and this was a problem for her when she had her son. Also, either explicitly or implicitly, all of the food aid programs used by youth at the drop-in were rooted in a broader religious agenda. This meant that food provision was often tied to religious indoctrination. Steve offered his perspective on dinnertime at the Christian Centre.

...Depending on the night you know, like it's all different [religious] groups from all over the place that come down and serve us food, and depending on the group sometimes they'll force it down your throat while you're eating. Sometimes they'll just you know, 'eat and have fun'. They'll throw on a (religious) tape. Oh well, you don't have to listen to them preach.

Prayers took place before dinner. Allison also often ate at the Christian Centre and reported that "[dinner was] worth waiting for cuz the meals are always good." Steve thought that it was "cool" that religious groups wanted to help, "...but the religion part, they can wait. You know because not everyone that goes in there is religious."

Youth reported mixed reviews about the food at the various programs. Not only was the quantity of the food served at programs inconsistent (e.g. "Sometimes they'd have good food that'd fill you up. Sometimes they'd just have soup." (Steve)), but quality also varied from place to place and time to time. "Like some of the places give out really good food, but a lot of the time it's not that good. You know, it's like it's either not high quality food or just tastes bad." (Kyle) Some programs such as dinner at Ordnance shelter were generally considered to serve superior food. Other food assistance programs earned unfavorable reputations. Many youth reported experiences of food sickness after eating food from food assistance programs, and consequently, they were distrustful of particular organizations.

Street Connection... I've eaten their food and I've puked right after I've eaten it just cuz it's so disgusting.... I was eating the hot dogs and chili. It came out right after. I mean I've never eaten from them again. I'll get their juice, ya, but I'll never eat their food only because of that. And I scared three people off that night because I got sick right there and I didn't mean to you know, it wasn't my fault. It was the food that they gave me. It was rotten, it was bad. Like I got an iron gut. I do. This gut is made of steel. I've never done that right after eating. And I'm glad my gut did because it would, it probably would have killed me. (Steve)

Although not all youth reported experiences of food sickness, fears of food sickness and poor quality food were often expressed during conversations about food aid and were described by each youth who participated in an interview. "Like I worry about like if it's been cooked fully or you know, like if there's a hair in it or something like that...[or] salmonella." (Will)

Allison was generally satisfied with the quality of the food she received, but worries about food poisoning were never far from her mind. "I mean I pray to god that I don't get food poisoning, but I mean most of the meals they serve us are like good food...." She talked about other street kids, friends of hers, getting sick on several occasions. She considered herself lucky - there had been times that she had fortuitously missed contaminated meals at

the shelter - to have escaped food poisoning thus far. Sometimes food poisoning or sickness was avoided because youth were able to detect poor quality food. "I mean I've been given sandwiches [at Scott Mission] and like, take a bite out of it, it'll taste bad so I'll look inside and there's mold growing on the meat or something, you know. So sometimes, the quality's not that good." (Kyle)

Allison explained her approach to food aid: "you eat what they give you. If you don't like it you don't eat." And, in their efforts to stave off hunger, youth at the drop-in compromised personal choice and safety and ate food that they recognized as bad tasting or poor quality.

Steve explained this predicament.

We have a choice of eating or not... I mean there's been nights where, it looks like puke on your plate, OK. And you're gonna eat it anyway. If you're hungry enough you're gonna eat it. I've been at that point where I was hungry enough that I didn't care what it looked like or what it tasted like you know.

Some of the youth in this study resisted using food assistance programs, using them only when they were hungry and had no money for food. Purchased food was considered safer, allowed for more choice, and was less stigmatizing than food assistance. For safety reasons, when Kyle had money, he preferred to buy his food. "If I have money I usually buy it just cuz like some of the places give out really good food, but a lot of the time it's not that good. You know, like it's either not high quality food or just tastes bad."

It was important for self-esteem for Will and others to eat food that they purchased.

It's more of that independent thing again. Like I try to be self-reliant. If I'm gonna eat supper, I wanna be able to pay for it. You know like I wanna be able to have the satisfaction of going in some place and saying, 'ya, I want this', you know.

When Will had to use food assistance because he did not have enough money for food, he preferred getting food from Street Patrol or picking up a sandwich “to go” from Scott Mission rather than eating at a charitable food agency. He found the experience of going to food agencies for food handouts extremely disconcerting. “...It’s like that standing in line, waiting for food. And to me, it’s depressing. You know. I find it, not revolting, but like, it’s like personal space, you know what I mean. Like, it’s invading me in some way. I haven’t really figured it out.”

Allison also loathed the unsavoury atmosphere of some of the food/meal programs she ate at.

Like the one place I really don't like to go is the Corner Drop-in. I really don't like it there, but hey it's a place to go eat. It's really dirty and you know people who go there are really dirty. Like they don't wash themselves. ...As soon as you walk in there you can smell pure piss. You know and that's disgusting. You know like when I had my son, I never went there.... Sometimes it gets pretty rowdy because it's like Evangel Hall and the Corner Drop-in are quite small and you get like 60 people in one place....

However, unlike Will, Allison and other youth relied on food assistance programs on a daily basis, often structuring their days around the hours and location of meal programs in the city.

For example, Allison reported that she went to at least three places a day. She grew more indifferent about the condition of the programs since her son was no longer with her.

...I go there to [the Corner Drop-in and Evangel Hall] now cuz I don't have [my son] with me, I don't give a shit.... I mean, like I'd like to go to a place where it's not as rowdy and the people there are nice, but sometimes I really don't care cuz I just want to eat. I'm there to eat. As soon as I eat I'm out of there.

Although using food assistance could be unpleasant, stigmatizing, and unsafe, it provided an important and relatively stable source of food for youth in this study. For example, Robin reported that eating dinner each night at Ordnance was an extremely important part of her

day. She counted on this evening meal because she usually ate very little else during the day, and she worried about what she would do to replace this meal when Ordnance closed for the season. When they served “bad food” at Ordnance, she generally went without food for the night because there was no money to buy anything else to eat.

Using food assistance also allowed youth to free up money that would have otherwise been needed for food, to make other purchases. Allison explained, “Like I don’t really spend money on food because I know I can get that free.” Instead, she spent money on “...like whatever I need the most.”

In varying proportions, youth in this study purchased food and used food aid on a daily basis. The desire for independence from food assistance and the associated stigma and safety risks, and the impossibility of meeting basic needs without the use of food assistance were both part of the food experiences of youth in this study. Further, the fundamentally precarious nature of food assistance - operation hours and policies, rules for participation, limited food supply, and at times, compromised food quality - meant that this acquisition strategy was ultimately unreliable.

6.2.2 Less common strategies

In addition to everyday food acquisition strategies, youth at the drop-in reported strategies that were less common. These strategies usually emerged when youth were facing particularly desperate circumstances such as during the first days on the streets and periods of heavy drug use.

When youth at the drop-in recounted their first few days on the street, they described food deprivation and hunger. To cope during this period of street acclimatization, Allison reported foraging through garbage for food. When she first came to Toronto, she often went hungry.

I've already gone down to the point where I was scrounging through garbage cans and that's when I went to - where did I go? - I found out about the Evergreen and then I went to the Evergreen on Yonge Street.... That's when I first came here and then they gave me a list of places that I could go to eat.... Once you know where you can get things [it's] OK... When you live on the streets the most important thing that you need is food. Because you need food in your stomach to survive.

She had a similar experience when she went to Vancouver to get away from all of the problems she was having after putting her son up for adoption.

Like when I was in Vancouver for those two weeks I didn't have a goddamn clue where I had to go to eat, you know. But then I got myself in a shelter and they gave me a list of places but that still didn't help because I didn't know my way around Vancouver, you know.

Whether it was someone's first time on the street or they had moved to a new city, youth said it was difficult initially to find food. This period involved learning, among other things, when and where in the city free and cheap food could be obtained; where the highest quality food was served; and the rules for participation in the various food programs. Youth reported that networking with other homeless people expedited the process of street acclimatization.

Knowing the ropes did not mean that food aid was always accessible. Allison was periodically hungry, with no money and nowhere to go for food. Sometimes, in these cases, she would "play a guy" to get food and money.

Like I'll play him for his money. I'll get him to think that he can take me home, you know. He'll bring me to a restaurant, I'll eat, you know. He'll get me drunk, he'll give me a few bucks. And then, as soon as he thinks that he can take me home, I'll say, well I gotta go to the bathroom and then I'll leave.

Youth also reported stealing food - usually snacks such as chocolate bars, chips, or bananas - from grocery stores to feed themselves when they were desperate. Lee reported that when he was hungry coming down off of heroin and had no money, “[he’d] go down to one of the corner markets and maybe steal a few things to eat.” He was never caught stealing. “Once and a while you get chased after but you know I suppose that it is the law of the survival, you do whatever you have to do.”

“Scamming” and getting food from passersby were other less common ways that youth obtained food. Lee offered an example of a food scam that had used in the past. “It’s like I go up to a [staff] person at McDonald’s somewhere and say ‘I was here 20 minutes ago. I had French fries and I bought them and they were soggy, or else like they were burnt up...I want some more.’ And they will replace them.”

Kyle and Will reported that pedestrians and people in cars sometimes offered them and other youth food instead of money. “You know some people, like sometimes when you squeegee their car they’ll have food in it and they’ll give you food instead of money which is cool you know.” (Will) And, “...if you’re out on the street people would even come up and say ‘hey, you want me to buy you dinner?’” (Kyle) However, youth who spoke about receiving food from passersby, said they had safety concerns about the food. They worried that the food had been tampered with.

You’ve got to be careful because there are new faces around, there are also people who don’t like street kids, who kinda want maybe revenge or something. Like there was a couple street kids about two years ago, took sandwiches. ate them and they wound up in the hospital with rat poisoning. Like, the way I see it, if you’re gonna help us out then help us out. Don’t like try to kill us because life is

hard enough. (Lee)

Over the course of the study, exceptional circumstances befell many youth at the drop-in. For example, youth were barred from shelters, lost money and had money stolen, and moved in and out of accommodations. Thus, although these circumstances were not necessarily everyday experiences of individuals, they seemed to be an inevitable part of the unpredictability of life on the streets. Less common food acquisition strategies, whether they were used in exceptional circumstances or to augment everyday strategies, played a regular role in the food experiences of youth in this study.

6.3 Coping with food insecurity

The fragile nature of youth's access to food meant that they were in a continuous state of food insecurity. Food insecurity in this context (i.e., extreme poverty; insecure living circumstances such as living on the streets, in squats, and in temporary shelters; and health problems related to homelessness such as recurring infectious disease, foot problems, and fatigue), meant contingent and inadequate access to purchased food and food assistance, and regular experiences of hunger. Consequently, youth in this study treated food as a precious commodity and took measures to stave off hunger and manage their food situations.

Many events over the course of the study illustrated the coveted nature of food in the lives of street youth at the drop-in. On several occasions at the drop-in, I was asked to keep an eye on someone's food that they had either purchased or received from a food assistance program (e.g., cereal, crackers, cookies, and soup) while they went for a smoke, to squeegee, or to

prepare lunch in the kitchen. On other occasions, Bob, a middle aged man who usually sat at a table with the street youth, was solicited for this job. Bob and I, older and seemingly responsible, were entrusted with the task of guarding food. Other times, when no guard was designated, youth accused each other of stealing food.

Sharing food among the youth at the drop-in was a selective process. Youth offered food only to certain people. If these individuals declined the offer, there was a pecking-order which was followed. At times, youth offered food to return a favour, and at other times, food was given to one's closest friends. When there was a pregnant street youth, food was often shared with her. Although, it was not always clear what the hierarchy was based on, food was not given up in a spontaneous fashion. This deliberate way that food was shared, and the territoriality and emotions provoked by the imposition of sharing (see discussion of friendship networks and food access, **6.2.1.1 Purchased Food**) was indicative of the precious and scarce status of food.

To cope with food insecurity, youth at the drop-in employed daily techniques to increase their control over their food situations. For example, Lee and others put a portion of the money they earned squeegeeing aside, perhaps into a separate pocket, for food money. Similar to this tactic, youth prioritized food money by making money for breakfast the first order of the day. Steve reported that breakfast was his "primary focus". "...Like, that's all I really think about now is food in my gut before anything else. Like this morning it was breakfast, you know. Make breakfast first then make the (other) money I gotta make...." Breakfast at the Barn was Will's "main objective". "Like eggs give me energy. I feel really full after I eat my

breakfast cuz my stomach's used to having that, like that one meal everyday, you know....”

Earning enough for breakfast most days was a realizable goal for some of the youth who squeegeed for a living and it contributed to a sense of control over their food situation.

Another common way that youth at the drop-in exerted control over their food situation was to save food such as sandwiches from the Scott Mission that could easily be carried around in a pocket, bag or knapsack. This strategy made food available at a later time in the day and allowed youth some measure of control over their immediate food situation. Food stored in this way allowed youth to eat on the run or on the job (e.g. squeegeeing) and to avoid a time consuming visit to an undesirable meal program.

In spite of "filling up" on food whenever possible, multiple food acquisition strategies, and daily techniques to increase food security, youth at the drop-in regularly experienced hunger. Ignoring feelings of hunger was another way that youth tried to manage and control their food insecurity.

It's not a matter of like not getting hungry, it's just I'm used to it, right. I'm used to like not making enough money to eat therefore I can't so you know it's like out of sight, out of mind sorta deal. You just get used to not eating after a while....
Basically, like I know it's (hunger) there but I ignore it. (Will)

According to Lee, episodes of hunger were part of street life. “Once you've been on the streets for so long, you're used to not eating sometimes, you know. Like me, I can go two or three days [without food], and it just won't bother me.”

6.4 Summary of results

In summary, day-to-day life for the youth in this study was characterized by insecurity and their food experiences were no exception. Food insecurity existed as part of the broader instability and chaos associated with homelessness. Youth in this study lacked secure shelter and dependable sources of income, and suffered health problems related to living on the street. This context shaped the meaning of food and food acquisition strategies. Food was primarily viewed as a source of fuel, necessary for survival. Everyday food acquisition strategies included purchasing food and food aid; purchasing offered access to a greater selection of safe food in socially acceptable ways, while food aid was characterized by a lack of food choice, unsafe food, and an undesirable atmosphere. Less common food acquisition strategies such as stealing were used by youth under extremely desperate circumstances. Youth in this study ultimately resorted to the use of food assistance to try to manage their food situations. Food aid provided a relatively stable source of food as well as a possibility for youth to direct money that would have otherwise been spent on food, to other needs. Due to the precarious nature of the various food acquisition strategies, youth continuously experienced food insecurity. Despite creative efforts to increase food security, youth in this study reported regular episodes of hunger.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

7.1 The contingent nature of food access

The key results from this study have been organized into a conceptual framework for understanding the daily food experiences of street youth (**Figure 7.1**). Conceptually, food in the lives of homeless youth can be understood as interconnected to other fundamental aspects of life, namely, shelter, income, and health. The model describes the process that homeless youth engaged in on a *daily* basis as they tried to meet these basic needs. Thus, in immediate ways that were integral to daily survival, food access and consumption were shaped by and contingent upon conditions of income, health, and shelter. The contingent nature of these factors as exemplified through the lives of homeless youth in this study is reflected in this model through its pyramid shape. As a pyramid, each factor is directly connected to the others, and each *may* be at the apex of the model, acting as the major lens through which to view daily life. In this study, food was the focus. However, exposure to issues of employment, shelter, and health were unavoidable due to their strong connections to food experiences.

The lack of permanent and secure shelter conditions (component A of the model) restricted youth's ability to prepare food in an economical way. Youth in this study slept primarily in temporary shelters (e.g., Out of the Colds) and "squats". These shelter circumstances represent the segment of the street youth population that other studies found to be most vulnerable to experiences of hunger and food deprivation (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998 and

Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Insecure shelter meant that youth lacked cooking and storage facilities, and consequently, the search for food was a daily endeavor.

All of the youth encountered in this study used charitable food assistance/meal programs to some extent because none had the financial means to continually satisfy their food needs by purchasing prepared foods. This is consistent with McCarthy & Hagan's finding that social service agencies were the most common single source of nourishment among their diverse sample of Toronto street youth (1992). Youth's reliance on food aid was related to their lack of income (component B of the model). Homelessness severely restricted youth's employment opportunities. For example, they lacked resources such as a telephone to set up interviews or do on-call work, sleeping and washing facilities in order to be rested and clean for work, experience, education, and skills that are required for most jobs. Consequently, youth relied on precarious sources of income such as squeegeeing, panhandling, and odd jobs. These employment problems resonate with the statistics that McCarthy & Hagan (1992) documented among the 390 street youth in their Toronto study. While the majority of adolescents they surveyed (70%) reported that they had some sort of employment since leaving home, this work was often temporary as 62% of the youth who had worked since living on the streets were unemployed at the time of the survey. Further, at the time of the present study, none of the youth who participated in interviews were receiving government provided social assistance, although some of them as well as other youth at the drop-in spoke about receiving welfare in the past. Since provincial changes in social assistance provisions in 1995, it has become more difficult for homeless youth to secure welfare. To receive the

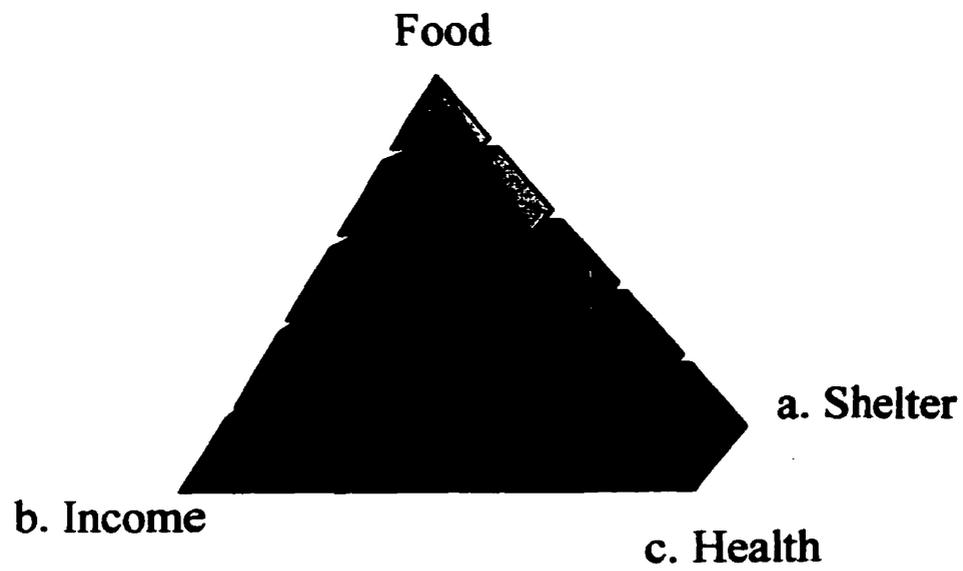


Figure 7.1 Model for understanding daily food experiences

full benefits of social assistance, youth require a proof of residency and verifiable shelter costs, and youth under the age of 18 are eligible only if they are in school and have an adult trustee (CSPC-T, 1998).

Part C of the model is health. Health problems, caused or exacerbated by homelessness (e.g., respiratory infections) affected youth's ability to earn money through street-based activities. Health problems impacted food consumption indirectly, when illness prevented youth from earning money for food, and directly, when youth were too sick to make their way to charitable food programs.

Past research suggests that the situation of extreme poverty relegates homeless youth to the margins of health, shelter, income, and food acquisition (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998; Kendall, 1994). This conceptual model suggests that the relationships among these four factors represent sets of multiple interacting processes that are shaped by current situations. For example, rainy days demanded alternative income strategies to squeegeeing, which had ramifications for food acquisition strategies (and consequently consumption), shelter, and quite possibly health, on that day. Or, on any given night, being turned away from a full shelter that might have offered a place to sleep and a meal, had immediate consequences for food access, income, and health. Efforts to increase security in any of these areas often occurred at the expense of stability in other areas. For example, eating dinner at a given meal program required time which might have been used to secure a spot at a shelter, squeegee or earn money another way, or to receive health services, shower at a drop-in centre, look for housing, jobs etc. Enmeshed in a precarious web of insecurity, managing uncertain and even

chaotic food acquisition, shelter, income, and health circumstances was a daily enterprise, and changes in any of these conditions resulted in immediate fundamental changes in the other factors.

7.1.1 Generalizability of model

This understanding of the contingent nature of daily food experiences is based on data from a group of street youth in the Queen West area of downtown Toronto. However, it may be relevant among other homeless youth and adults as well. The powerful context which circumscribed the food experiences of youth in this study is shared by other street youth in Toronto and other Canadian cities. Antoniadou & Tarasuk (1998) and Hagan & McCarthy (1997) described living circumstances of street youth in Toronto and Vancouver consistent with those found in the present study. Also, the majority of street youth in these two separate and recent studies reported experiences of hunger. They further demonstrated that the likelihood of experiencing hunger was greater among youth who were most closely associated with street life (i.e., youth who relied on street based activities such as squeegeeing for income, youth who slept on the street or in “squats”, and youth who had been away from home the longest duration). The findings from the present qualitative, ethnographic study complement and add texture to the findings from these quantitative studies on street youth and hunger by providing insight into the daily experiences of street youth in Toronto. By observing a group of street youth at a downtown drop-in centre and conducting in-depth interviews with six of these youth, I was able to explore how and why hunger and other food experiences occurred in the context of day-to-day life. While the quantitative studies provided knowledge about the salient features of street life, this study provided information

and a plausible explanatory framework for how food experiences (i.e., food acquisition, food sources, and consumption characteristics) shape and are shaped by these features.

Homeless adults share with their younger counterparts, the fundamental experiences of street life: extreme poverty, lack of shelter, hunger, unemployment, harassment, and trouble with the police (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). The strategies that adults use to cope with income, food, shelter, and health problems and the manifestation of these may be different from youth (e.g., mental health conditions such as schizophrenia are more common among homeless adults (Report, 1999), prostitution is probably more common among youth, and squeegeeing may be less common among adults), however, the *homeless situation* characterized by extreme poverty, instability, and the daily struggle to meet survival needs, is at the basis of the conceptual framework. Thus, the conceptual scheme depicted in this contingency model of food experiences may be generalizable to the Canadian homeless population.

7.2 Food insecurity: Households vs. homelessness

Results from this study extend the current understanding of food insecurity to the homeless population. To date, North American research in the area of food insecurity has focused on households (Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999; Kendall et al., 1995; Radimer et al., 1992; and Tarasuk & Maclean, 1990). Among low income households, food insecurity is a process whereby household resources are deployed to try to manage food situations in a predictable way (Radimer et al., 1992). Food insecurity begins with feelings of anxiety about running out of food and proceeds to a situation where the selection and quality of foods consumed are compromised in efforts to "stretch" food budgets. Next, food intake among mothers is

reduced and families focus on using alternative strategies to obtain food and money for food, and in the most desperate, severe stages, food intake among children is restricted.

The predictable pattern of coping strategies which mark the severity of food insecurity in the context of a household does not characterize food insecurity among homeless people.

Although household circumstances may change (i.e., households can move backward and forward along a continuum of food insecurity), living conditions are relatively stable. The stability of housing is absent in the context of homelessness. Homeless people lack household resources to draw upon, and instead, they engage in a daily struggle for survival, trying to meet the interdependent and often competing needs of food, shelter, health, and income. Homelessness is characterized by a constant state of flux, and consequently, markers of food insecurity within this context are also highly variable. Food situations change daily and even from meal to meal. Youth in this study reported the regular use of both charitable food assistance and purchased food, and experiences of hunger and food deprivation were also common. For example, a 24 hour period in which youth reported eating only purchased food, was likely followed and/or proceeded by episodes of hunger and the use of food assistance.

Food insecurity among street youth was part of the overall health, income, and shelter insecurity that existed in day-to-day life as depicted by the conceptual framework in **Figure 7.1**. This understanding of food insecurity is rooted in experiences of homelessness and is different from food insecurity experienced by households.

7.3 Food insecurity and street youth

To cope with food insecurity on a daily basis, youth in this study primarily sought food through meal programs and by purchasing food. Canadian research has explored the use of food banks and community kitchens, however street youth in this study as well as in other studies, tended not to rely on these sources for food. For the most part, youth in this study could not store or make use of the unprepared food stuffs available at food banks. And, although youth expressed the desire to join the community kitchen at the drop-in, no homeless youth participated in the program at the time of the study. It seemed that their unpredictable living circumstances and extreme poverty, prevented them from participating.

The food assistance programs that youth in this study used regularly were meal programs offered by shelters, Out of the Colds, and charitable/ religious organizations. Although there is no published Canadian literature about these programs, it is possible to draw insights into the experience of using these programs from findings of this study and others. For youth in this study, food programs were a fundamental source of food. At the same time, food sickness, lack of food choice, unpalatable food, and inadequate amounts of food were common experiences of youth using these programs. The inconsistent quality and quantity of the food that youth in this study reported eating at meal programs is likely a function of the nature of the food supplied by meal programs. Like food banks, the charitable meal programs rely on food donations (e.g., local fund-raisers or food drives at churches) and/or many receive food from Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank which itself relies on corporate and public donations (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994). Meal programs are run at the local /community level largely through the efforts of the charitable and voluntary sector, and there is no

centralized system which coordinates, regulates, or evaluates the various programs that comprise this system of food distribution. Thus, the quantity of food available is variable and dependent on the good will of corporations and individual citizens. Quality is also variable because food that is donated by the food industry is often food that does not meet retail standards (e.g., food that is mislabeled, approaching expiry dates, or packaged in defective packaging). “Good Samaritan” Laws which safeguard food donors from liability in the event of illness resulting from eating tainted or spoiled food encourage this practice and less food would probably be donated without this protection (Daly, 1996). Thus, Federal health policies such as the Food and Drug Act which were established to oversee the safety of the food supply in a market system of food distribution do not apply to food that is served to homeless people at meal programs. Ironically, laws governing the charitable system of food distribution focus on protecting the food donors rather than the vulnerable recipients of food assistance.

In addition to inconsistent food quality and quantity, access to meal programs was precarious for youth in this study. Most feeding programs that were used provided only one meal each day or sometimes only one per week, and to access food through this system, youth had to negotiate various rules for participation, hours of operation, and transport to agency locations. Agencies differed in their philosophical approaches. Some were religious in their orientations, and food access was tied to prayers or religious sermons. These inherent characteristics of meal programs may in part explain why youth in this study and a majority of Toronto street youth in other studies reported episodes of hunger in spite of using these programs (Antoniades & Tarasuk, 1998 and Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

The contingency model elucidated in this study also reveals an important limitation of meal programs in addressing food insecurity among homeless people. Meal programs target only one factor (i.e., food) of the contingency model, however, the model explains that food access is dependent on conditions of health, shelter, and income. Meal programs do not alter these contextual factors, and thus, food needs continue to compete with the vital pursuit of shelter and income, and managing health conditions. Negotiating the rules and regulations for participation in feeding programs and getting to their scattered locations to access food competes with efforts to meet other important needs. For example, a food program might serve a meal during the same period of time that a medical clinic offers examinations to people without health cards, or on a sunny day, the same time might be needed to squeegee for money. Feeding programs cannot remedy food insecurity among homeless people because they do not provide housing which would provide unrestricted access to cooking and food storage facilities; they cannot address street-related health issues such as chronic infections and substance use which impact intake and the ability to earn money; and while they remove the burden of payment for food, they impose a host of practicalities which structure homeless youth's lives in ways which remove freedom, dignity, and time to pursue livelihood.

While findings from this study suggest that food-based responses are fundamentally inadequate responses to food insecurity among homeless youth, they also offer insight into the development or adoption of initiatives to increase food access at the community-level. This is important as communities are currently struggling to come up with effective responses to the food problems of growing numbers of homeless people. Community agencies which

provided flexibility around food access (e.g., takeout sandwiches from the Scott Mission and unrestricted access to kitchen facilities at the drop-in) were amenable to the chaotic and contingent nature of street life. These programs reduced the resources (i.e., time, effort, and commitment) that youth had to expend on food access. There were constraints to these approaches. For example, the variety of "mobile foods" was limited to only relatively durable items, and food access provided by kitchen facilities was still dependent on purchasing food and was restricted by hours of operation, location, and capacity. However, these food responses are easier and more practical to make use of, and thus may provide greater access to food than other more regulated onsite meal programs. Regardless of need, onsite feeding programs may not be used to their potential because they may not fit with street youth's life circumstances.

The contingency model delimited in this study offers an explanatory framework for the food insecurity and hunger experienced by homeless youth and likely homeless adults as well. The contingent and turbulent nature of food access and street life raises concerns about the nutritional health of homeless people, however it is impossible to draw conclusions about nutritional adequacy from this study. Further research on the nutritional status of homeless people in Canada is needed to determine the physiologic impact of homelessness. Nutritional problems may impair physiologic functioning and consequently, hinder productivity and the ability to cope with street life. Chronic poor nutrition may also increase the risk of nutrition-related health problems such as heart disease later in life. Among street youth, increased nutritional needs due to growth and pregnancy are particularly worrisome.

7.4 Sociopolitical context

The contingency model of daily life articulated in the previous section occurs within a larger context. It is worthwhile to re-examine some recent sociopolitical trends in Canada and Ontario in light of the contingency model because these trends shape the components of the model and consequently, the day-to-day life of homeless people.

Actions taken by the municipal, provincial, and federal governments have eroded housing and income supports, effectively worsening the situation for homeless people. Federal and Provincial (Ontario) moratoria on funding for social housing have reduced the supply of affordable housing. In 1995, the Canada Assistance Plan program - the Federal government's program of funding welfare and other social services - was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer (National Council of Welfare, 1997). This shift resulted in large reductions in federal spending on social programs and downloaded responsibility for these programs to the provinces. In 1995, the Ontario government cut social assistance rates and enacted legislation to reduce eligibility for benefits. These changes made it difficult for youth under 18 years old to qualify for benefits (National Council of Welfare, 1997). These government actions have a negative impact on the shelter and income components of the contingency model presented in **Figure 7.1**, and consequently, homeless people will also suffer health and food ramifications.

At the same time, there appears to be an increase in concern for the worsening situation of homeless people in Toronto. The growth of the homeless population has been widely recognized, and a flurry of activity concerning homelessness has taken place in Toronto.

Over the past year, the media have published ongoing accounts of the reports of the Mayor's Homeless Action Task Force. In addition to this municipal report, the Conservative government of Ontario conducted a less extensive assessment of the homeless situation in the province (Provincial Task Force on Homelessness, 1998). In the media and at local public forums, city officials and representatives of the major provincial political parties have engaged in discussions of the specific contents of the various reports and the "homeless problem" in general.

Outside of the political arena, social service agencies and local community groups have voiced concerns about the unprecedented numbers of homeless people in Toronto (United Way of Greater Toronto, 1997). In the fall of 1998, the Toronto Hostel Division and local groups anticipated a shortage of hostel and shelter beds for the upcoming winter and worked to open additional emergency shelters throughout the city to prevent homeless people from dying over the cold weather months. The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) mounted a campaign to declare homelessness a national disaster and have sought the widespread cooperation of organizations across the country (including the University of Toronto). Along with other local groups, they have organized protests and demonstrations in Toronto and in Ottawa demanding that all three levels of government pay attention to the needs of their homeless citizens through supportive housing and social policies. These activities have been followed by the recent Federal appointment of a minister in charge of homelessness, a gesture which reflects recognition of the severity of the homeless problem in Canada.

Although there have been developments that reflect an increased concern about homelessness, the continued withdrawal of social support to the most vulnerable members of society seems to have overwhelmed initiatives to improve the conditions of homeless people. The sociopolitical trend to reduce social spending is disturbing given the already precarious living circumstance of homeless people.

7.5 Crackdown on squeegee kids

The crackdown on squeegee kids that occurred during the summer of 1998 in Toronto exemplifies the contradictory behaviour of governments who on the one hand, have voiced concerns for the growth of homelessness, and on the other hand, have enacted damaging legislation. When disturbing findings about the homeless situation in Toronto were released in the interim report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force (July 1998), Mayor Mel Lastman declared that the extreme poverty and deprivation of homelessness was unacceptable amidst a country as rich and prosperous as Canada. However, at the same time that the Mayor pledged his commitment to eradicate homelessness in Toronto, he declared war on homeless squeegee kids.

According to youth in this study, crackdown efforts by the City of Toronto and the Ontario government on squeegeeing narrowed their income options. A municipal bylaw to ban squeegeeing and panhandling was proposed during the summer of 1998. The mayor of Toronto, Mel Lastman, declared "war...to get rid of squeegee kids" and directives to beef-up policing of major intersections where squeegeeing was common and to arrest and detain disobedient squeegee kids were set in motion (*Toronto Sun*, July 23, 1998). At the same

time, the Provincial government examined the possibility of amending the provincial Highway Traffic Act to give police greater powers than would be afforded through the municipal legislation (e.g., incarceration vs. fines) to make the crackdown on squeegeeing more effective.

The extent of the political and public backlash against squeegee kids that ensued over the spring and summer months resonate with the moral panic that Stanley Cohen first described in his characterization of the reactions of the media, the public, and political forces to youth subcultures of the mid-1960s in Britain (i.e., Mods and Rockers) (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Moral panic refers to a situation in which there is an excessive public reaction to a group of persons or their behaviour because they or their behaviour is perceived as threatening to societal values and interests (Cohen, 1973). *Toronto Sun* journalist, Linda Williamson noted the increased media focus on squeegee kids: in the *Sun*, the word “squeegee” was used in only two stories in 1994; squeegee kids were first profiled in July 1995; in 1997, 81 articles on squeegee kids were published; and at the time of her writing in July 1998, 80 articles on the topic had already appeared that year (*Toronto Sun*, July 23, 1998).

According to Cohen’s analysis, fears about the moral health of society created “folk devils” and moral panics, disproportional to the situation. He predicted:

More moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created. This is not because such developments have an inexorable inner logic, but because our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members - like working class adolescents - and then condemn whatever solution these groups find (Cohen, 1972, p.204)

Excluded from social assistance and mainstream income options, homeless youth turned to squeegeeing as an alternative source of income for survival. Youth in this study reported that while squeegeeing was not as lucrative as the sex trade, drug trade, and theft, it provided a less risky and a legal alternative source of income. However, in media accounts, the lack of employment opportunities for homeless youth, their experiences of poverty and deprivation, and factors precipitating youth homelessness remained secondary to the problems that squeegee kids posed for drivers and business owners. Squeegee kids were often depicted as menacing nuisances whose activities threatened the public at large, and newspaper articles referred to a "plague" and "infestation" of panhandlers (*Globe & Mail*, July 15, 1998).

The proposed bylaw to restrict panhandling and outlaw squeegeeing and the moral panic that ensued was a disturbing reaction to homelessness. This type of response focuses on what homelessness imposes on society rather than what society has imposed on homeless people. For example, squeegeeing and panhandling are viewed as undesirable public behaviour rather than a source of income in view of limited alternatives and extreme poverty. Moral panic obscured the problems faced by homeless people and created a perception of street youth as deviant and undeserving, paving the way for increased police intervention and reinforcing other "get tough" policies aimed at abolishing unwanted public conduct (see Fischer & Poland, 1998 and Sibley, 1988 for discussions of purification of public space and social control). Due to their domestication of public space, homeless people are highly visible and consequently vulnerable to public scrutiny. Squeegee kids in particular, were susceptible to media labeling and portrayal as "folk devils" because of their non-customary appearances (e.g., multiple tattoos, piercing and wild hair styles). Although the bylaw was eventually

defeated, the ideology behind it perseveres. On the wake of an upcoming provincial election in Ontario, a promise to “ban aggressive panhandling and squeegee kids” is listed among the important social issues that the Conservative Party will attend to if re-elected (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, 1999).

The sociopolitical trends which continue to reduce the level of income and housing supports available to those in need and, at the same time, condemn alternatives strategies (e.g., squeegeeing) are disturbing. In light of the contingency model presented in this study, narrowing income and shelter possibilities have dire implications for the food and health conditions of homeless people and aggravate the challenges of daily life.

7.6 Conclusion

In this study, a critical ethnography was conducted to explore the food experiences of homeless youth. Food experiences for youth in this study were shaped by extreme poverty and instability. Youth reported several food acquisition strategies, however, food access was ultimately insecure, and youth reported times when they were hungry and went without food. The most common, or everyday, food acquisition strategies reported were purchasing food and using food aid. Due to limited employment opportunities, youth could not generate enough money to continuously meet basic food needs. Squeegeeing, a primary source of income for youth in this study, was dependent on the weather, political and public will, and youth’s physical health. The quality and quantity of food available through food aid programs were inconsistent and at times, insufficient. The location of food programs, their capacity, and idiosyncratic rules, policies, and hours of operation also affected food access.

An understanding of food experiences within the context of day-to-day survival formed the bases for a conceptualization of food insecurity among street youth. In addition to the daily search for food, youth struggled to find shelter and income and often needed to manage homeless-related health conditions. Further, the needs of food, shelter, income, and health were interdependent and often competing. The framework depicted in **Figure 7.1** extends the current understanding of food insecurity to the homeless population, explaining that in the situation of homelessness, food experiences are contingent upon conditions of shelter, income, and health.

In light of this framework, conditions of unstable shelter, income, and health must be addressed to remedy food insecurity among homeless people. However, the current government trend to reduce social spending at the federal and provincial (Ontario) levels is undermining the availability of supports in these areas. Without changes to improve income and housing opportunities, the income, shelter, food, and health situations of homeless people in Toronto will likely worsen and the number of homeless people will continue to grow.

9. REFERENCES

- Ambrosio, E., Baker, D., Crowe, C., & Hardill, K. (May 1992). The street health report: A study of the health status and barriers to health care of homeless women and men in the City of Toronto. Toronto.
- Anderson, S.A. (1990). Core indicators of nutritional state for difficult-to-sample populations. Journal of Nutrition, 120: 1559-1600.
- Antoniades, M. & Tarasuk, V. (1998). A survey of food problems experienced by Toronto street youth. Canadian Journal of Public Health, 89(6): 371-375.
- Brannigan, A. & Caputo, T. (1993). Studying runaways and street youth in Canada: Conceptual and research design issues. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Bunston, T. & Breton, M. (1990). The eating patterns and problems of homeless women. Women & Health, 16(1): 43-62.
- Campbell, C. & Desjardins, E. (1989). A model and research approach for studying the management of limited food resources by low income families. Journal of Nutrition Education, 21(4): 162-171.
- Canadian Association of Food Banks. (September 1998). HungerCount 1998: Emergency food assistance in Canada. Toronto.
- Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD). (1998). The progress of Canada's children. Ottawa.
- Canadian Public Health Association. (1997). Draft position paper and resolutions. Ottawa.
- Charmaz, K. (1993). Studying lived experience through grounded theory: Realist and constructivist methods. Paper presented at "Studying human lived experience: Symbolic interaction and ethnographic research 93". Waterloo, Ontario: May 19-22, 1993.
- City of Toronto Community Services. (April 1997). State of homelessness report 1996/1997: Report of homeless initiatives. Toronto.
- Cohen, B.E., Chapman, N. & Burt, M.R. (1992). Food sources and intake of homeless persons. Journal of Nutrition Education, 24(1): 45S-51S.
- Cohen, S. (1972). Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC-T). (November 1998). Surviving the streets: Street youth and squeegeeing in Toronto. Toronto.

Daly, G. (1996). Homeless: Policies, strategies, and lives on the street. London: Routledge.

Davis, B. & Tarasuk, V. (1994). Hunger in Canada. Agriculture & Human Values, 11(4): 50-57.

Davis, B., Katmay, S., Desjardins, E., Sterken, E. & Pattillo, M. (1991). Nutrition and food security: A role for the Canadian Dietetic Association. Journal of the Canadian Dietetic Association, 52(3): 141-145.

Deisher, R. & Rogers, W. (1991). The medical care of street youth. Journal of Adolescent Health, 12(7): 500-503.

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (1995). Handbook of qualitative research. California: Sage.

Drake, M. (1992). The nutritional status and dietary adequacy of single homeless women and their children in shelters. Public Health Reports, 107(3): 312-319.

Fischer, B. & Poland, B. (1998). Exclusion, 'risk', and social control - reflections on community policing and public health. Geoforum, 29(2): 187-197.

Frongillo, E., Rauschenbach, B., Olson, C., Kendall, A. & Colmenares, A. (1997). Questionnaire-based measures are valid for the identification of rural households with hunger and food insecurity. Journal of Nutrition, 127: 699-705.

Gelberg, L., Stein, J. & Neumann, C. (1995). Public Health Reports, 110(4): 448-457.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. San Francisco: University of California Press.

Globe and Mail. Wednesday, July 15th, 1998.

Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life. New York: Doubleday.

Goldman, B. (1988). Health of Toronto's street kids disturbing, study reveals. Canadian Medical Association Journal, 138: 1041-1043.

Goode, E. & Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994). Moral Panics: The social construction of deviance. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

- Grabb, E. (1990). Theories of social inequality: Classical and contemporary perspective, 2nd ed. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Greenblatt, M. & Robertson, M. (1993). Life-styles, adaptive strategies, and sexual behaviors of homeless adults. Hospital & Community Psychiatry, 44(12): 1177-1180.
- Hagan, J. & McCarthy, B. (1997). Mean streets: Youth, crime and homelessness. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hagan, J. & McCarthy, B. (1992). Streetlife and delinquency. British Journal of Sociology, 43: 533-561.
- Janus, M., McCormack, A., Burgess, A., Hartman, C. (1987). Adolescent runaways: Causes and consequences. Massachusetts: D.C. Health and Company.
- Jones, G. (1997). Youth homelessness and the 'underclass'. In MacDonald, R (ed.). Youth, the 'underclass' and social exclusion. London: Routledge.
- Jones, G. (1995). Leaving home. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Kendall, A., Olson, C. & Frongillo, E. (1995). Validation of the Radimer/Cornell measures of hunger and food insecurity. Journal of Nutrition, 125: 2793-2801.
- Kendall, P. (1994). Profile of youth health in Toronto. Toronto: City of Toronto Department of Public Health, Community Health Information Section.
- Kufeldt, K. & Nimmo, M. (1987). Youth on the street: Abuse and neglect in the eighties. Child Abuse & Neglect, 11: 531-543.
- Luder, E., Ceysens-Okada, E., Koren-Roth, A. & Martinez-Weber, C. (1990). Health and nutrition survey in a group of urban homeless adults. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 90(10): 1387-1392.
- Luder, E., Boey, E., Buchalter, B. & Martinez-Weber. (1989). Assessment of the nutritional status of urban homeless adults. Public Health Reports, 104(5): 451-457.
- Macdonald, N., Fisher, W., Wells, G., Doherty, J. & Bowie, W. (1994). Canadian street youth: Correlates of sexual risk-taking activity. Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal, 13(8): 690-697.
- McCarthy, B. & Hagan, J. (1992). Surviving on the street: The experiences of homeless youth. Journal of Adolescent Research, 7(4): 412-430.
- McCarthy, B. & Hagan, J. (1991). Homelessness: A criminogenic situation? British Journal of Criminology, 31(4): 393-410.

Metro Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons. (July 1997). On the move: Transportation issues of homeless and socially isolated persons in Metropolitan Toronto. Toronto: Metro Community Services.

Mustard et al. (1997). Age-specific education and income gradients in morbidity and mortality in a Canadian province. Social Science & Medicine, 45(3): 383-397.

National Council of Welfare. (Spring 1998). Poverty profile 1996. Ottawa: National Council of Welfare.

National Council of Welfare. (Autumn 1997). Another look at welfare reform. Ottawa: National Council of Welfare.

Opie, A. (1992). Qualitative research, appropriation of the "other" and empowerment. Feminist Review, 40: 52-69.

Personal communication. (May 18, 1999). Kevin Lee, Research Associate, Canadian Council on Social Development.

Personal communication. (May 14, 1998). Cheryl White, HIV/AIDS Project, Queen West Community Health Centre, Toronto.

Personal communication. (February 5, 1998). Steve Gaetz, Health Promotion, Shout Clinic, Toronto.

Poland, B. (1997). Critical interpretive methods. Guest lecture, NUR 1024, October 2, 1997.

Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario. (1999). Blueprint. www.ontariopc.on.ca

Provincial Task Force on Homelessness. (October 1998). Report of the Provincial Task Force on Homelessness. www.ontariopc.on.ca

Radford, J., King, A. & Warren, W. (1989). Street youth and AIDS. Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada.

Radimer, K., Olson, C., Greene, J., Campbell, C. & Habicht. (1992). Understanding hunger and developing indicators to assess it in women and children. Journal of Nutrition Education, 24: 36S-45S.

Report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force. (January 1999). Taking responsibility for homelessness: An action plan for Toronto. Toronto.

Reuler, J. (1991). Outreach health services for street youth. Journal of Adolescent Health, 12: 561-566.

- Rew, L. (1996). Health risks of homeless adolescents. Journal of Holistic Nursing, 14(4): 348-359.
- Roy, E., Lemire, N., Haley, N., Boivin, J., Frappier, J. & Claessens, C. (1998). Injection drug use among street youth: A dynamic process. Canadian Journal of Public Health, 89(4): 239-240.
- Sherman, D. (1992). The neglected health care needs of street youth. Public Health Reports, 107(4): 433-440.
- Sibley, D. (1988). Survey 13: Purification of space. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 6: 409-421.
- Smart, R., Adlaf, E., Wash, G. & Zdanovicz, Y. (1992). Drifting and doing: Changes in drug use among Toronto street youth, 1990 and 1992. Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation.
- Smart, R. & Walsh, G. (1993). Predictors of depression in street youth. Adolescence, 28(109): 41-53.
- Smart, R. & Adlaf, E. (1991). Substance abuse and problems among Toronto street youth. British Journal of Addiction, 86: 999-1010.
- Social Planning Council of Winnipeg. (1990). Needs assessment on homeless children and youth. Winnipeg.
- Statistics Canada. (1998). Labour, employment and unemployment: Labour force characteristics by age and sex. www.statcan.ca
- Surbeck, M. (1997). Presentation to the city of Toronto alternative housing subcommittee. Shout Clinic, Toronto.
- Tarasuk, V. & MacLean, H. (1990). The food problems of low-income single mothers: An ethnographic study. Canadian Home Economics Journal, 40(2): 76-82.
- Tarasuk, V. & Woolcott, L. (1994). Food acquisition practices of homeless adults: Insights from a health promotion project. Journal of the Canadian Dietetic Association, 55: 15-16.
- Tarasuk, V. & Beaton, G. (1999). Women's dietary intakes in the context of household food insecurity. Journal of Nutrition, 129: 672-679.
- Thomas, J. (1993). Doing critical ethnography. Qualitative research methods volume 26. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness. (May 1996). One is too many. Toronto.

Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC). www.tao.ca/~tdrc/

Toronto Sun. Thursday, July 23rd, 1998.

United Way of Greater Toronto. (November 1997). Beyond survival: Homelessness in Toronto. Toronto.

Wang, E., King, S., Goldberg, E., Bock, B., Milner, R. & Read, S. (1991). Hepatitis B and human immunodeficiency virus infection in street youths in Toronto, Canada. Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal, 10(2): 130-133.

Weber, M. (1991). Street kids: The tragedy of Canada's runaways. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Wiecha, J., Dwyer, J., Jacques, P. & Rand, W. (1993). Nutritional and economic advantages for homeless families in shelters providing kitchen facilities and food. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 93(7): 777-783.

Wiecha, J., Dwyer, J. & Dunn-Strohecker, M. (1991). Nutrition and health services needs among the homeless. Public Health Reports, 106(4): 364-374.



APPENDIX A

DEPARTMENT OF NUTRITIONAL SCIENCES

Faculty of Medicine University of Toronto

FitzGerald Building 150 College Street Toronto Ontario Canada M5S 3E2 416/978-2747 FAX 416/978-5882

A Nutrition Study of Homeless Youth

Consent Form

For more information, please contact
Valerie Tarasuk 978-0618 or
Naomi Dachner 978-5452
University of Toronto, Department of Nutritional Sciences

I agree to participate in a nutrition study of homeless youth. The researcher wants to understand the kinds of food problems I face. She will ask me questions about where I live, where and how I get food, and what and when I eat.

The interview will take about an hour and will be in a place that is convenient to me. The researcher will tape record our interview, but the tape machine may be turned off anytime, at my request. Nobody except the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the tapes or transcripts.

I understand that I have been selected because my age, sex, and living circumstance and that this study is totally voluntary. I am free to drop out of the study at anytime. I don't have to answer any question(s) that I don't want to answer. Everything I say to the interviewer is confidential. Nothing I say will be used in way that people could identify me.

There are no direct risks or benefits associated with my participation in this study. I understand that I can continue to participate in this drop-in centre in the same way as I do now, whether or not I decide to participate in this study. The researcher will pay for any expenses that result from my participation in this study (e.g. TTC).

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

(Date)

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

- **Living situation: Current and past, impact on eating**
- **Eating patterns: What, where, when do you eat and with whom?**
- **Food acquisition: How do you get food? From where? Why? Do you worry about getting enough food? Participation in meal programs?**
- **Satisfaction with food: Quality (taste, safety, healthfulness), quantity**
- **Social role/meaning of food: Special foods and meals, where it is eaten**

APPENDIX C

When and what interviewed youth reported eating “yesterday” and whether it was food assistance or purchased food

	Allison	Kyle	Lee	Steve	Robin	Will
06:30	Cereal, orange juice (food assistance)	Cereal, orange juice (food assistance)		Orange juice (food assistance)		
08:30		Bacon, eggs, home fries, toast, coffee (purchased)		Bacon, eggs, home fries toast, coffee (purchased)		Bacon, eggs, home fries, toast ilk, coffee (purchased)
12:00	Egg salad sandwich (food assistance)					BBQ chips, pop
13:00		Half box macaroni and cheese (purchased)	2 chicken salad sandwiches (food assistance)	Half box macaroni and cheese (purchased)	Vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce (purchased)	
15:00						Chocolate bar (purchased)
17:00	Muffin (food assistance)			Muffin (food assistance)	Falafel (purchased)	
18:00		Fries and gravy (purchased)			Chocolate fudge sundae (purchased)	Cheddar cheese bagel (purchased)
21:00	Beef stew (food assistance)			Salad, mashed potatoes, chicken, gravy (food assistance)	Corn (food assistance)	
22:30			Pepperoni Pizza (purchased)			
24:00					Peach juice, coffee (purchased)	