



Research Paper

High prevalence of risky income generation among street-involved youth in a Canadian setting



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ABSTRACT

Background: Previous research has found a range of barriers to mainstream employment among street-involved youth; however, less is known about the characteristics of street-involved youth who engage in risky income generation and the potential role of substance use in perpetuating engagement in these activities.

Methods: Data were collected between 2005 and 2012 from the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS), which is a prospective cohort study of street-involved youth aged 14–26 in Vancouver, Canada. Generalized estimating equations were used to identify factors associated with risky quasi-legal and illegal income generation. Participants also reported their willingness to give up these sources of income if they were not using drugs.

Results: Among 1008 participants, 826 (82%) reported engaging in risky income generation activities during the study period. Factors associated with risky income generation included: homelessness, binge drug use, injection drug use, crack use, crystal methamphetamine, overdose, interactions with police, and experiencing violence; regular employment was negatively associated with this outcome (all $p < 0.05$). Among those who reported risky income generation, 440 (53%) were willing to give up these income sources if they were not using drugs.

Conclusion: Risky income generation was alarmingly prevalent in our sample, and associated with higher intensity drug use and other markers of vulnerability. The majority of participants (53%) reported willingness to give up their risky income sources if they were not using drugs; however, a substantial proportion of youth (47%) indicated that they would continue to engage in risk income generation regardless of their substance use suggesting that both substance use and economic insecurity likely perpetuate risky income generation among our sample. Findings highlight opportunities to reduce risky income generation by addressing problematic substance use through better access and engagement with evidence-based addiction treatment, and exploring, monitoring and evaluating innovative interventions to improve the overall economic security of street-involved youth.

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Introduction

Unemployment and extreme poverty remain common among street-involved youth, and as a result many of these youth turn to

risky activities that are quasi-legal or illegal in Canada such as sex work, salvaging/recycling, squeegeeing car windows for donations, panhandling, drug dealing, theft, and other criminal activities to generate income (Baron, 2001; Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012). Previous research has identified the prevalence of select income generating activities among homeless youth, and found that as many as 34% of street-involved youth panhandle, 21% deal drugs, and 16% steal to generate income (Ferguson et al., 2012).

Under Canadian law, drug dealing, theft, robbing, and stealing are considered criminal offences; offenders may be arrested and

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punished by the legal system. Salvaging recyclable materials, panhandling (begging for money), squeegeeing car windows for donations, and sex work are considered quasi-legal activities because they are not criminal offences in Canada as determined by the federal criminal code; however, provincial legislation passed in the province of British Columbia known as the *Safe Streets Act* (*Safe Streets Act of 2004, 2004*) and similar legislation in other Canadian and American jurisdictions (*The People v. Michael Barton, 2006; Safe Streets Act of 1999, 1999*) impose several restrictions on solicitation for money or “things of value” in public spaces that increase the likelihood of arrest for those begging for money and salvaging recyclable materials. Sex work exists within a similar quasi-legal framework, although federal legislation has been changing and efforts are currently directed at decreasing the victimization of sex workers (*Payton, 2015*). As a result of these policies, youth who engage in illegal or quasi-legal income generating activities are at an increased risk of interacting with police and being involved in the criminal justice system (*Gaetz, 2004*), both of which have been linked with myriad negative health and life outcomes among youth such as homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and high intensity drug use (*Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Freudenberg, Daniels, Crum, Perkins, & Richie, 2005; Omura, Wood, Nguyen, Kerr, & DeBeck, 2014; Ti, Wood, Shannon, Feng, & Kerr, 2013*). Drug dealing and sex work have also been linked to experiencing violence from customers, such as being physically assaulted and robbed (*Shannon et al., 2008; Small et al., 2013*).

Street-involved youth frequently experience social and economic exclusion from mainstream society, which often occurs due to the cumulative effects of negative familial, societal, and educational experiences during childhood and adolescence (*Baron, 2001; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002*). Street-involved youth are known to spend a large proportion of their time meeting their immediate survival needs (*Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Fast, Small, Wood, & Kerr, 2009*), which leaves little time for job searching. In addition, structural factors, such as housing instability, lack of education, and poverty, limit the ability of youth to participate in the job application process that typically involves regular access to a telephone, computers, looking clean and well-kept, and having a fixed address (*Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002*). Consequently, youth are pushed and pulled towards generating income from the street economy, which often includes illegal and quasi-illegal activities, to meet their survival needs (*Gaetz, 2004*).

While these socio-structural barriers to employment among street-involved youth have been established, less is known about the characteristics of youth who generate income through risky means. To address this gap we undertook the following study to assess the prevalence of risky income generating activities among street-involved youth, identify demographic, behavioural, and socio-structural factors associated with participating in these activities, and examine the potential role of ongoing substance use in perpetuating engagement in risky income generation.

Methods

Data for this study were obtained from the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS), a prospective cohort study of street-involved youth in Vancouver, Canada. The cohort began in 2005 and has been described in detail previously (*Wood, Stoltz, Montaner, & Kerr, 2006*). In brief, snowball sampling and extensive street-based outreach methods were employed. To be eligible, participants at recruitment had to be aged 14–26 years, use illicit drugs other than cannabis in the past 30 days, be “street-involved”, and provide written informed consent. In this study, “street-involved” was defined as being recently homeless or having used services designated for street-youth in the last year (*DeMatteo et al.,*

1999; Marshall, 2008; Roy et al., 2004; Wood et al., 2006). At enrolment, and on a bi-annual basis, participants completed an interviewer-administered questionnaire that included questions related to demographic information and drug use patterns. At each study visit, participants were provided with a stipend (\$20 CDN) for their time. The University of British Columbia/Providence Health Care Research Ethics Board has approved the study.

All ARYS participants who completed a survey between 2005 and 2012 were included in our primary analysis examining the prevalence and correlates of engaging in risky income generation. Participants who indicated any of the following categories in response to the question “since your last visit [or over the past 6 months], what were your sources of income?” were coded as engaging in risky income generating activities: sex for money; recycling (salvaging recyclable scrap metal or plastic bottles and aluminum cans to receive the small deposit that was paid at the time of purchase); squeegeeing (washing car windows while the car is stopped at an intersection and then asking the motorist for a donation); panhandling (asking people on the street for money); selling drugs, which is the most common role in the drug trade among ARYS participants (*Werb, Kerr, Li, Montaner, & Wood, 2008*); theft, robbing or stealing; or other criminal activity. Participants were also asked if they received social assistance.

To identify factors associated with engaging in risky income generation, we considered a number of potential explanatory variables of interest including the following socio-demographic factors: age (in years); gender (female vs. male); Aboriginal ancestry (yes vs. other); having completed high school or post-secondary education (yes vs. no); and homelessness, defined as having no fixed address, sleeping on the street, or staying in a shelter or hostel (yes vs. no). Variables related to substance use included: binge drug use, defined as a period of using injection or non-injection drugs more often than usual (yes vs. no); daily non-injection heroin use (yes vs. no); daily non-injection cocaine use (yes vs. no); daily non-injection crystal methamphetamine use (yes vs. no); daily crack cocaine smoking (yes vs. no); any injection drug use (yes vs. no); experiencing a drug overdose (yes vs. no); and heavy alcohol use, defined as more than 4 drinks per day or more than 14 drinks per week for males, or more than 3 drinks per day or more than 7 drinks per week for females in the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism guidelines for “heavy” or “at-risk” drinking and risk for developing Alcohol Use Disorder (*National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, n.d.*; yes vs. no). Other variables considered included various individual, social, and structural exposures: regular employment, defined as having a regular job, temporary work, or being self-employed since the last study visit (yes vs. no); encounters with police, defined as being stopped, searched, or detained by police (yes vs. no); experiencing violence, defined as being attacked, assaulted, or experiencing any kind of physical violence (yes vs. no); incarceration, defined as being in detention, prison, or jail (yes vs. no); and being enrolled in addiction treatment, defined as any kind of drug or alcohol treatment, including a methadone program (yes vs. no). All substance use and behavioural variables refer to activities in the past 6 months.

In a sub-analysis examining the potential role of ongoing substance use on risky income generation, we assessed whether participants who reported risky income generation were willing to give up any of these activities if they were not using drugs. Specifically, participants were asked “if you were not using drugs, are there any sources of income in the last 30 days that you would eliminate?”. Those who responded affirmatively *and* indicated that they would give up a risky income generation source (as defined previously) were categorized as being willing to give up risky income generation. Participants were categorized as not being willing if they responded (i) “no” or (ii) affirmatively *and* reported

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