

## No Place Like Home: Final Research Report on the Pridehouse Project



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## Background and Goals of the Study

The purpose of the Pridehouse Study was to identify the needs of street-involved “queer and questioning” youth<sup>1</sup> for housing and support. The study was solicited and sponsored by the **Pride Care Society**, and supported by **Human Resources Development Canada**. Partners and collaborators in this study included: **Save the Children Canada**, a child-centred development agency whose aim is to assist, enable and empower children, families and communities; **The McCreary Center Society**, an organization focusing on research and action concerned with the health of BC youth; **Status of Women Canada** whose mandate is to promote gender equity; and **The Access to Media Education Society (AMES)**, a registered non-profit society dedicated to helping people cultivate individual, group and mass communications skills that will enable them to express themselves through the media arts.

Assisted and informed by these organizations, the research project described here is a short term, ethnographically based study of conditions and needs of youth at the intersection of economic conditions, sexuality, and housing needs<sup>2</sup>. It was initiated as a grounding for fundraising work to create designated housing for street-involved LGBT youth who find themselves on the fringes of, or unable to “fit in” to, existing institutions and structures of support.<sup>3</sup> Its initial premise was that, among Canadian street-involved youth at risk of illness, homelessness, violence, and suicide are children and youth whose sexuality, whether self-asserted as “queer” or so assigned by others, renders them more likely than their peers to ‘fall through the cracks’ of existing service provision. Such youth are far more likely than their peers to experience bullying and violence at school

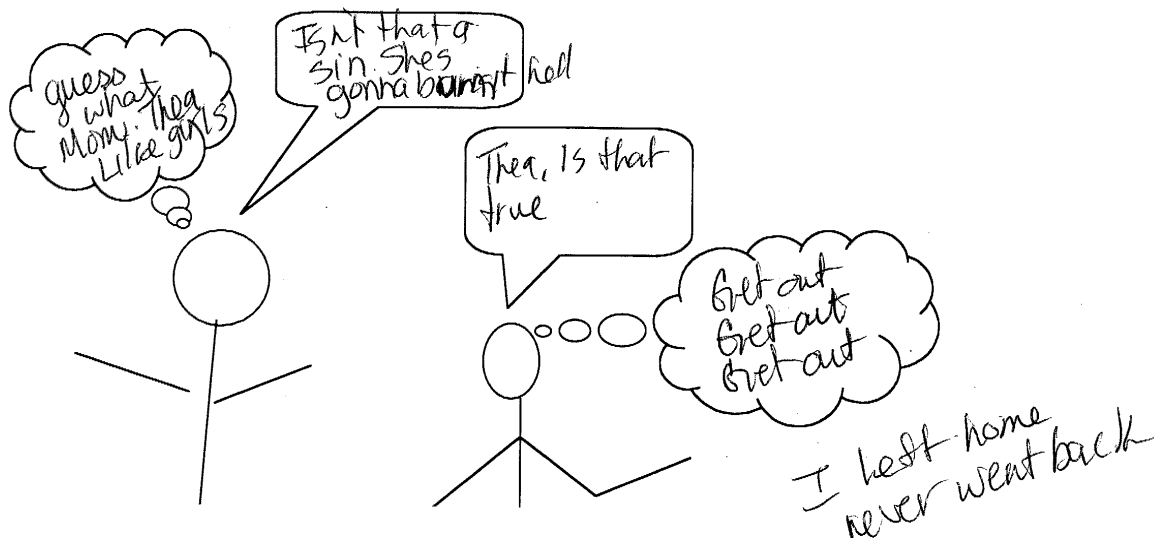
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<sup>1</sup> This descriptor is intended as inclusive of both youth who have affirmed, whether only for themselves, or more publicly, gender identifications other than heterosexual, and to include as well youth who may simply be unsure about gender and sexuality. The question of whom this research was actually about became a major, *the* major, question, as things turned out. See the discussion of gender in ‘out/comes’ section of this report.

<sup>2</sup> The original proposal was greatly assisted by the efforts of Dr. Mary Bryson, Faculty of Education, UBC, whose contributions are acknowledged with thanks.

<sup>3</sup> Like the school’s guidance counselor, from whom many youth reported they had no support. Presumably others DO feel supported by guidance counselors at school.

and to “drop out” of school prematurely, to suffer bodily and sexual violence, to be alienated from family members, to be “kicked out” of their family homes and to migrate to street-based survival.



The initial goals of the project, accordingly, were defined as follows:

- (1) *to determine the distinctive and particular risks to, and therefore the distinctive and particular needs for, housing, supports and services, of homeless/inadequately housed “queer and questioning” LGBT youth who are, or who are at risk of becoming, street-involved;*
- (2) *to describe and document these needs in an extensive and comprehensive report including both textual and visual documents;*
- (3) *to contribute informational resources which can be used as a basis for seeking further funding to establish safe and supportive housing for this at-risk population;*
- (4) *to contribute to the shaping and informing of policy which better acknowledges and meets the needs of youth who too often “fall through the gaps” of existing social policy;*
- (5) *to provide information, resources and materials useful for the purpose of public education to prevent or reduce the kinds of social harms (bullying,*

*discrimination, parental rejection) which induce youth to leave their homes prematurely;*

- (6) to effect capacity-building and networking through participant-researcher training and community-university collaboration, providing youth with skills-training, work experience, and paid employment as community-based researchers.*

The primary intended outcome for this research was to better inform a community-based housing development organization about the conditions, needs, and expressed desires of the specific population for whom they sought to improve existing housing support. The research has been guided by this question:

***What are the particular needs experienced by “queer and questioning” youth with respect to safe and supportive housing, and what are the ‘gaps’ in existing social policy and service provision which place this group at particular risk<sup>4</sup> of homelessness?***

## **What we did**

Being queer has never been much of a status symbol, and for most of us, there are real dangers associated with making it public that one’s sexuality diverges from the mainstream.

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<sup>4</sup> Social science provides one way of understanding people and situations, but people and their lived situations are, we recognize, far more complex and finely wrought than charts and graphs and the language of ‘causes’ and ‘risk factors’ can hope to encompass. So we use these terms ‘ironically’, as invariably too-rough approximations of the ‘lived actualities’ of youth who become homeless/street-involved, in the service of trying to find out how family, housing and support services might be made more adequate for QQ youth as a particular group who are both over-represented among street-involved youth, and under-served by mainstream family, housing and support services. Although research ‘consumers’ very often most value quantitative methods of research and reporting, we in this study have found greater accuracy, depth and significance in a combination of methods with face to face qualitative research guiding the work.

*“I would never wish a gay life on anybody” (Bob)*

So this study of the conditions and needs of youth who are “queer or questioning” presumed that little information could be accessed about the impacts of a stigmatized identity, unless the researchers themselves were already so “marked”. We created a diverse team of researchers, all of whom self-identified as “queer or questioning”. Half were university graduate students, and half community-based “experiential” youth knowledgeable about street survival. An initial researcher training week gave intensive training in ethnographic research methods, and researcher training was supported by weekly “team-building” meetings where the week’s fieldwork was discussed, new skills were workshopped, discussions about problems and priorities took place, and the next week’s work was mapped out. It was at these weekly meetings that the survey was developed, videowork was viewed, and routine administrative issues were covered—this was the one time each week when the entire team assembled to work together. The remainder of the time, the researchers worked, normally in pairs, making site observations and recoding these in fieldnotes and images, conducting interviews and focus groups, designing, then administering a survey, conducting video-based research, and further developing their post-production video skills by creating a research-based video, “Building a house for pride” (August, 2002). These research methods yielded both qualitative and quantitative data to develop a richer, clearer and better-informed picture of the conditions and needs of street-involved sexual minority youth.

This report is organized and presented as the story of a community-oriented, peer-based research project rather than as a narration of facts about sexuality, youth and housing. Accordingly, each section takes up a different dimension of the research and shows what each component contributes to the study as a whole. This produces a stylistic hybrid: an unusual but hopefully also informative and eloquent mix of ethnographic, grounded, multiply-informed exposition which fuses both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Interspersed throughout the analytical discussions, observations and interpretations of the

principal investigator's text are the voices of researchers and participants, graphs and charts, lists, pictures, drawings, fieldnotes and reflective analytical notes written, often as critical 'out-takes' by research assistants commenting on their own work and the work of the project.

## **Literature Reviews**

### *Establishing a context*

To establish the context for this research, an extensive literature review was conducted as a two-stage process. The first phase of the review (see appendix 1) was completed by SFU Ph.D. student Claudia Ruitenberg who presented the research team with a preliminary overview of the field of inquiry as part of their first week of training. The second phase was conducted at the end of the project by Trish Salah, a Ph.D. student at York University, and that review was guided by particular questions that had arisen, and omissions that had become evident, during the fieldwork phase of this study.

Accordingly, Trish Salah's review (see appendix 2) concentrated on transgender/transsexual youth- a neglected category of youth who also appeared in our own work to be in greatest need of support and services- on "grassroots" networking, and on the design, implementation and outcomes of similar projects to that planned by the PrideCare Society.

*"For a straight catholic organization, I think we do pretty good" (Colleen, youth shelter worker)*

*"There are no housing services for people like me...They [the youth shelter] didn't know what to do regarding transsexuals" (Tim, transsexual youth)*

Supplementing those literature reviews, two members of the research team, Michelle Reed and Darcie Bennett, shared papers they had written which focused on this project's central questions: the current needs, conditions and specifically the housing needs of "queer and questioning" youth. Michelle's paper (see Appendix 3) on street involvement

“risk factors” for gay and lesbian youth was written initially as a course paper and Darcie’s analysis (see Appendix 4) of the current political and economic conditions in BC, the impact of the recent and impending budget cuts to social services, and the impact of these policies and cuts on queer and questioning youth, was written in and for the specific context of this study.

The Pridehouse Project has benefited greatly from, and is much indebted to, the work of these four researchers, whose contributions are available in their entirety in appendices 1-4. Highlights and excerpts from that work are presented below, following a brief, but important, note about some significant discrepancies between theoretical and field-based research on the experiences, conditions and needs of ‘queer and questioning youth’.

### **Theoretical note**

What soon became a clear and key difference between this academic/textual work, and our own very partial and patchy, but also very much more embodied, immediate, “grounded” fieldwork, is the relative ease with which sexual identity categories like “gay and lesbian”, “heterosexual” and “queer” are used in research reports, compared with how problematic and contested/contestable these categories were when we tried to “map” them onto real bodies. A second striking difference is in the way “identity development” is often portrayed and reported on. Typical textual representations and models of queer identity development are very much of an embryonic, painfully emerging sexuality, whose specific “stages” of emergence map on to both epistemic ‘stages’ (awareness, denial, acceptance, and so on), and particular perils (isolation, stigma, abuse, suicide, etc). We really don’t see much of this determinateness of identity, nor its “stage-like” emergence, in our own fieldwork. Instead, sexual identification/s and sexual practice/s appear created far more by the economics of survival than determined by desire. It seems to be more outsiders who traverse these so-called stages of identity development, which they then (as attribution theory might suggest) attribute to the “socially problematic”.



*“I always knew I was into women, but I hid that part for a long time, cause I just didn’t want to deal with the backlash of it.” (Kitty Kat, Interview)*

In our interviews, we heard accounts that suggested that youth themselves fairly rapidly comprehended their own sexuality, including its contextual variability and uncertainty. By contrast, they describe as hazy, conflictual, and stage-like the process that **others** in their lives have undergone in “dealing” with interviewees’ sexual a-typicality.

*“At 14 my father asked, “David are you gay?”  
“You don’t really need to ask, Dad”  
(David, Interview)*

We shouldn’t be surprised, then, that while much academic work makes identity categorization a recognizably patterned “developmental” process, identity as it is *lived* for queer children and youth, contending with unheeding, disbelieving and often condemnatory others, is rarely a simple matter of accepting “what” one is, so long as one is perennially held hostage to what one is ALLOWED to be/come.

*“If my father found out I was bisexual, he would probably disown me, treat me like shit. I would not be his child anymore...and I wouldn’t be able to see my mother anymore which would be the hardest part.” (Tony, Interview)*

## **Literature Reviews: Key Points**

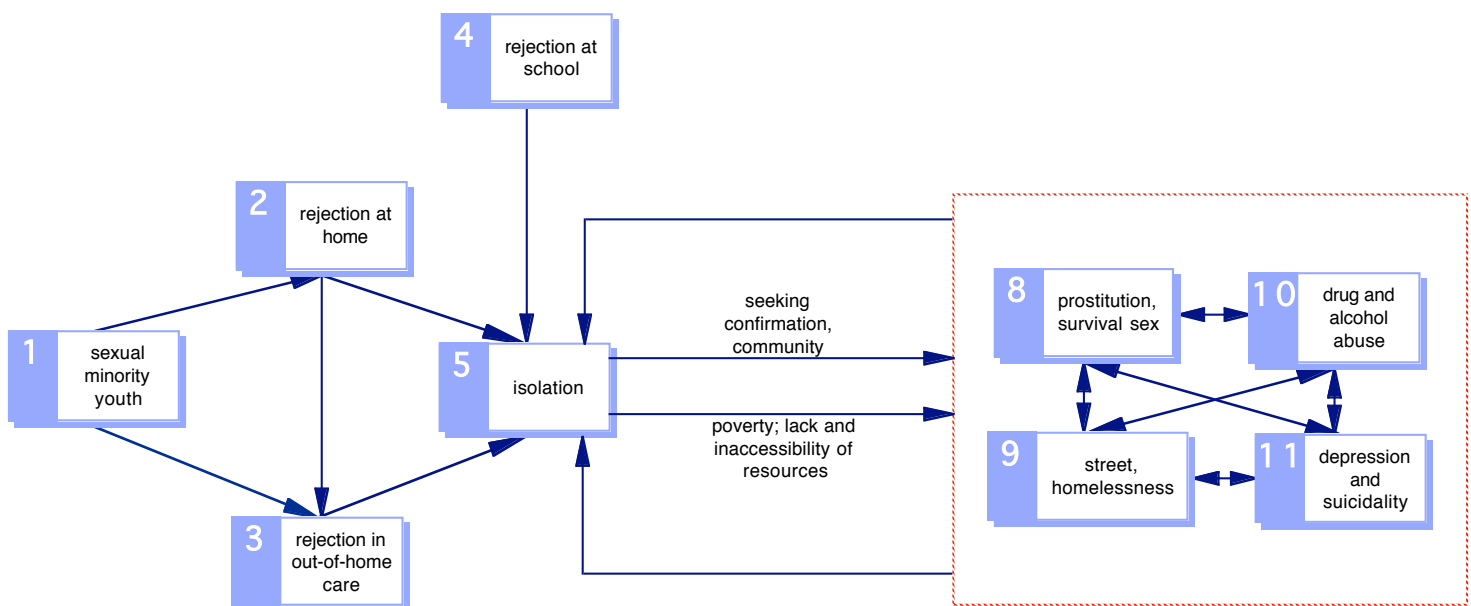
### **Part 1**

The first phase of the literature review, conducted by Claudia Ruitenberg, was to provide the research team with background on the conditions and needs of street-involved “queer and questioning” youth. To do that, Ruitenberg creates a model (see below) for explaining how it is that sexual minority youth become street-involved. She begins with a glossary of terms whose purpose is to make clear the conceptual complexities involved in

researching the present study's most central category ("queer and questioning youth"). She then reports on research which documents early rejection at home, lack of support and safety in "care". Stigmatization at school, disregard/denial/discrimination on the part of service agencies and providers, she details, contribute to social isolation, damaged self-esteem, economic marginalization, vulnerability to sexual exploitation, and can lead to increased risk of street involvement, and, in that context, to violence, ill-health, drug and alcohol addictions, and homelessness.

*"The government has such strict guidelines and hard rules to get on welfare and there's no other choice unless you turn to the street." (Bob, Interview)*

Her review concludes that, as a result of these factors, it appears that LGBT youth are indeed overrepresented in populations of homeless youth, that is to say, the percentage of LGBT youth among homeless youth is higher than the 5-20% identified as LGBT within the general population.



Modeled above are the following specific factors identified in the research literature as contributing to this over-representation:

Sexual minority youth (1) face sexism, heterosexism and monosexism at home (2) as well as in other environments (3, 4). Some sexual minority youth grow up in out-of-home care (3) from a very early age, others live in out-of-home care (e.g. foster families) later on, after they have run away from home, or have been kicked out. Rejection (2, 3, 4) is used as a general descriptor for a wide variety of experiences of sexual minority youth, such as sexual, physical and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, homophobia, and heterosexism. As a result of subtle and not so subtle ways of being rejected in a variety of environments, many sexual minority youth feel isolated (5) and often have low self-esteem.

*“My father was a strict physical discipline person. Pull out the belt. Most of it was verbal though. A lot of verbal, psychological damage. One day I took enough of it, called the police. So now it’s all verbal... every time I call he puts me down, says I’m useless.”  
(Tony)*

Some youth are asked to leave home, find themselves on their own and, faced with a lack of financial and other resources (7), end up on the street (9).

*“I have to refer kids, and try to hook kids up with outside resources, and there’s fewer and fewer outside resources all the time, and there’s fewer resources available for gay and lesbian kids for sure.”*

*(Jerome, teacher)*

D’Augelli et al. (1998) observe that “upon disclosure [of non-heterosexual orientation], young people are likely to experience hostility from peers and, at best, varying degrees of ambivalence from parents, siblings, and extended families. Some, finding themselves cut

off from both families and friends, may ultimately become homeless” (pp. 367-368). On the street, they may or may not turn to survival sex (8). Others may leave home in search of a more supportive community (6) on the street (9) or in search of emotional confirmation (6) in the form of sexual partners (8).

*“My street friends are my family and I know they watch my back.”*

*(Janice)*

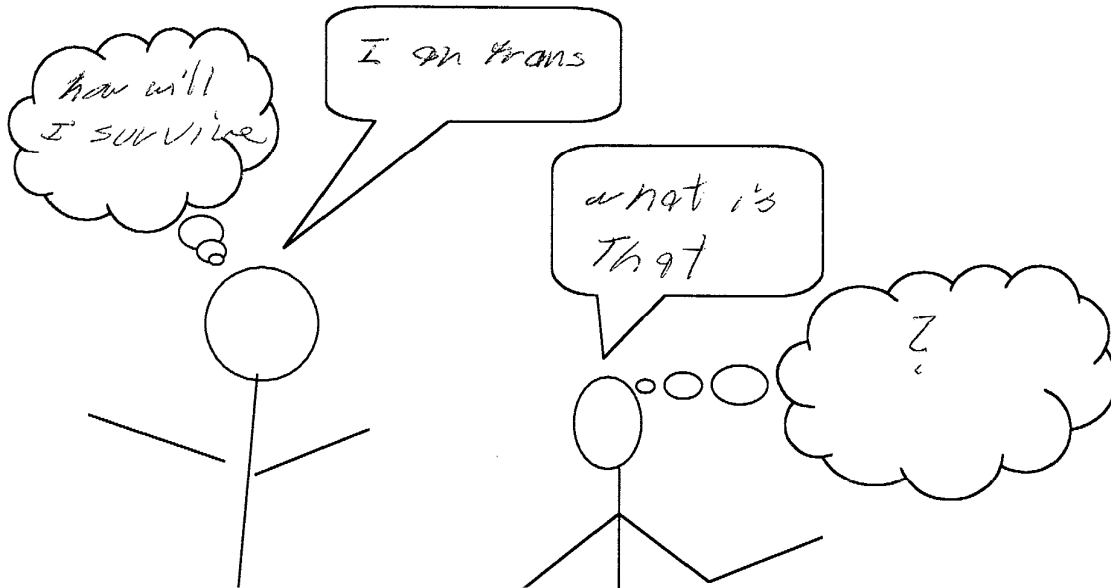
## **Part 2**

The second phase of the literature review, carried out by Trish Salah, offers some supplementary and corrective recommendations to the initial review, covering both transgender/transsexual youth, and reviewing housing projects and programs which offer relevant and instructive models for establishing safe, affordable and supportive housing for LGBT youth. Particularly intriguing and yet troubling are observations arising from our initial review which flag the difficulty of accessing data on the situation of homeless youth who identify as transgender, of assessing the relative agency of youth engaging in survival sex and/or sex work (sometimes referred to as youth “at risk of sexual exploitation”) and of determining the character of the attachment of some homeless youth to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual/transgender communities and identities, as well as the role of sexual minority status, and homophobia in the decision of some youth to leave home at an early age.

*“...the world is I think just generally unsafe for trans people.  
There is so much fucked up stuff that happens to trans people.  
Housing is just one place where it happens.” (Jackie)*

Because whatever challenges thinking through the racial composition of street active queer and trans youth might entail, not to address matters of cultural specificity and racial oppression in surveying the situation of homeless and street active sexual minority youth makes it likely that a large percentage of such youth, who are trans youth and youth of colour, will be underrepresented or misrepresented by that survey. This in turn may

contribute to the disidentification of some youth of colour and trans youth with “white” LGBT communities, identities, etc.



The area of LGBT activist scholarship is work which has ostensibly taken transgendered people as its object, but it has routinely done so in a fashion that obscures, erases or redescribes trans identities in the service of other agendas (Namaste 23, Prosser 55, Rubin 276). Likewise there is a significant history of feminist hostility towards intersexual, transsexual and transgender people and issues (Ross 10, Darke & Cope 8,9). This situation is shifting somewhat, and there is a growing body of responsible and respectful feminist and queer social research on trans issues (Fausto-Sterling, 1993, 2000, Cross 2001, Darke & Cope 2002).

In the context of social service delivery the implications of not addressing the misunderstanding and/or misrepresentation of trans and intersex folk, is the alienation of trans and intersex population from the service provider, leading to a failure to access services (Namaste 177). According to surveys of shelter workers and policies conducted in Ontario in 1995 (Ross), 1997 (Namaste), 1999 (Cope & Darke), frequently trans people face the outright denial of social services (Ross 10).

*“Being in queer housing just on its own would be so big of a thing for me because I would know that I was allowed to be queer or*

*trans and have my identity affirmed by some care services...”*  
(Jackie)

Namaste offers the following quotation from an Ontario shelter worker: “We do outreach with street kids—that’s our mandate. We don’t serve them [transgender youth]. Well, I guess maybe some of the kids are like that [transgendered] I don’t know.” (Namaste, 1999. p.174) Namaste goes on to say that in her interviews “representatives of agencies and shelters that work with homeless youth generally demonstrated an ignorance of transgender people...” even going so far as to coerce those trans youth who were allowed access into highly gender normative behaviour (Namaste, 1999. p.174/5).

It is important to keep in mind the extreme overrepresentation of youth of colour and aboriginal youth among street active and homeless populations.<sup>5</sup> For service providers the challenge in providing support to gender and sexual minority youth will entail remaining sensitive to not only their ambivalent identifications and disidentifications with “western” signposts of gay culture (Munoz 4-8) but to culturally specific articulations of cross gender identities that may or may not resemble queer or trans sexualities, genders or cultural practices.

One final concern has to do with the question of sex work and its relation to trans identities. Contemporary transsexual and transgender activists have articulated the importance of sex work to male-to-female transsexual identity and community, as well as the detrimental effect of anti-prostitute attitudes and laws upon male-to-female transsexual and transgender lives. Anti-prostitute attitudes and laws contribute to

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<sup>5</sup> A recent study by Christine Christensen & Leonard Cler-Cunningham for the Pace Society surveyed 183 Vancouver sex trade workers, and highlights the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth among street active populations:

Our youngest contributor was 15 and the oldest was 51. In an industry where youth is a commodity it’s not surprising that over half were 24 and under...The average age of entry into the sex trade was 16.98. There is an immense overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in the street level sex trade (31.1%). According to the 1996 Census data from Statistics Canada, Aboriginals (North American Indian, Metis, Inuit) constitute only 1.7% of Greater Vancouver’s population. Almost three quarters of the women had left their parent’s or guardian’s home permanently at age 16 or younger.

routinized violence against sex workers and systemic difficulties in accessing housing, healthcare, and other social services. Even as respect for the lived cultural contexts, expertise and experiences of sex and gender minority youth is necessary in developing social supports for those who are grappling with the challenges of homelessness and street involvement, so sex work needs to be recognized a legitimate form of employment which many trans people pursue, and corresponding questions of the health and “safety” of that workplace necessarily addressed. A serious commitment to trans-positive service provision to street youth necessarily entails the adoption of a sex work positive model and, at minimum, a commitment to ameliorating if not contesting outright, the effects of criminalization on young trans peoples’ lives (Highcrest 1996: Statement by the National Committee on Prostitution, transsexuality, and HIV, 2001).

*Looking at Other Models and Projects : Housing Support and Transitional Housing*

Toronto’s recently opened Sherbourne Health Centre provides some supports to homeless and underhoused gay, lesbian and trans people, operating an infirmary/recuperative care unit for up to 30 people at a time.

Toronto’s 519 Community Centre and Seattle’s Lambert House provide similar sorts of support to homeless and street active sexual minority youth, through peer support groups, drop ins, skill building workshops, social service referrals and advocacy, and free meals and social events. ([www.lamberthouse.org](http://www.lamberthouse.org), <http://www.the519.org/>).

In terms of transitional housing for LGBT youth, San Fransisco’s Ark House, in the Castro district, opened in March of 2001, will house a maximum of 15 queer youth, for three to six months at a time.

In the Seattle area, The Orion Centre operates a home for sexual minority youth transitioning off the streets. ([http://216.167.41.106/Agency/Constellation\\_TL.cfm](http://216.167.41.106/Agency/Constellation_TL.cfm)).

### *From Squats to Cooperative Housing*

St. Clare's Multifaith Housing Society came together in response to the escalating homeless crises in Toronto, and organized itself initially around supporting a group of street youth who were arrested for squatting an abandoned building at 88-90 Carlton Street. TASC raised \$100,000 in pledges and \$20,000 from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to purchase 25 Leonard and have converted it to affordable, self managed housing. 25 Leonard is not a LGBT specific housing initiative but it is an excellent model of how community allies and service providers can work with street involved people to create affordable, cooperative housing, and it is a model that is currently being emulated by those, including many queer and genderqueer youth, activists who are attempting to convert the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's 2002 Popesquat into affordable housing.

### *Housing Registries*

In Ottawa, Housing Help, a non-profit, charitable agency, devoted to assisting people find safe, affordable, adequate housing is working to build a Housing Registry for the GLBT Community.

(<http://www.housinghelp.on.ca/glbts.html>)

Toronto's SOY, Supporting Our Youth ([www.soytoronto.org/mentor.html](http://www.soytoronto.org/mentor.html)) is developing a similar housing registry that is specific to trans and queer youth and which operates in tandem with their youth mentoring program. This program matches lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual or transgender youth with adults from the lbtg community.

*"...sometimes I think it scares us... because...we're segregating a group that's already segregated, but if we just step back for a minute and look there are men's shelters, and there are women's shelters ... and there's detox for people who are detoxing and so to have a shelter...specifically for young people who are GBLT, coming out, questioning I don't think that its and issue of segregating I think it provides some safety I think it provides*



*community, and I think it provides an opportunity to learn from your peers.” (Colleen, youth shelter worker)*

### Part 3

Michelle Reed’s paper, (appendix 3) entitled “Issues and Social Stigmas which Cause Gay and Lesbian Youth to be at Increased Risk for Becoming Street Involved,” is essentially a review of the literature surrounding youth and sexual identity. As such, it provides a theoretical matrix of sorts for mapping out the stages and barriers to queer and questioning (QQ) youths’ processes of sexual identification. Reed’s paper rests particularly on Hetrick and Martin’s (1987) analysis of the threefold nature of QQ youth isolation (social, emotional, and cognitive), and on Zera (1992) and Cass’s (1979) model of the six stages of homosexual identification. For the purposes of this project, these models must be interpreted as **conceptual** tools and NOT “practical maps” for an understanding of LGBT street youth; as Ruitenbergh reminds us with regards to her own model, the interviews which form the nucleus of this project prove that the categories described so crisply in the literature become blurred and amorphous in practice. Within Reed’s paper, for instance, are contradictory reports on the relative risks/benefits of a QQ youth’s early sexual identification (McCreary Centre 1999, McDonald 1982).

Despite the limitations inherent in such a purely academic approach to the process of sexual identification, Reed’s paper is helpful in identifying and confirming the societal attitudes and stigmas which lead to many QQ youth becoming involved in street life. In particular, Reed emphasizes the traumatic effects on QQ youth which homophobia can exert in the home and at school, and notes that abuse and rejection is not restricted to physical violence; indeed, it is often the more subtle forms of verbal abuse and social ostracism which are more destructive to a QQ youth’s self-esteem.

*“Fag is still the number one insult to a guy, and I think that harassment against homosexual students, is really prevalent, its everywhere and it kind of goes un-noticed.” (Jerome, teacher)*

Reed also notes the phenomenon of “dual denial,” where both the larger gay community and poverty services ignore the needs of a population at the intersection of homosexuality and poverty.

Most importantly, Reed emphasizes that LGBT youth’s high risk for homelessness and street involvement “is not inherent in being homosexual, but rather is related to society’s treatment of homosexuality.” This reinforces the principle, stressed throughout this report, that societal attitudes and stigmas are the first and often most insurmountable barrier to allowing street involved QQ youth to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

#### **Part 4**

Darcie Bennett’s paper on the B.C. political-economic context and its implications provides a critical analysis of the new vulnerabilities to street involved queer youth by current economic policies. Social service, health, education and housing cuts, she urges, have “made British Columbia a far less secure place for young people.”

*“ I totally think that counseling is like major, major important. I’ve been on and off the streets since I was 11 years old, I’m 18 now and this last time...I really needed counseling, you know I was in desperate need of it, and I went out to my community in search of counseling and its been a couple months and they still haven’t gotten through to me and that’s been through crisis response that’s when everything just sort of fell from there I didn’t know what to do anymore that’s why I came down on the streets...” (Janice)*

Bennett suggests that “While the specific policies enacted by the current government are aimed at all resource-deprived young people, they are of particular concern to queer and questioning youth.” First, QQ youth are over represented among resource-deprived youth. In addition, Bennett explains, “Family rejection, social stigma, as well as the threat of violence in schools and the community, result in a lack of traditional support systems for queer and questioning youth, and increased economic marginalization in the places of

last resort for young people in our society. This leaves these young people at risk of homelessness, malnutrition, illness, violence and sexual exploitation, all with potential long-term consequences”. Bennett stresses that “The ministry of children and families has had its budget cut by 23%. One of the first decisions made has been to cut child protection services to 16-18 year olds. This means that youth who face family violence at home due to their sexual identity, or failure to conform to expected gender roles, cannot turn to the state for protection.”

*“When you get in trouble, the government is kind of like your parents...” (Jack)*

The B.C. ministry of human resources, which is responsible for income assistance, has also undergone major restructuring. Youth now have to prove that they have been living independently of their parents for 2 years before being eligible for assistance. Youth who cannot return home, but have not been independent for 2 years, will now represent a class of citizens without a social safety net. Youth who can prove they have been independent for 2 years face reduced rates, a 3-week waiting period, and an end to the earnings exemption and the right to finish high school while on assistance if they are over 19.

*It's like Gordon Campbell is making it harder for kids that are working the stroll to get on income assistance....it's totally wrong you know.” (Jay)*

Training wages for youth have dropped to \$6 an hour for the first 500 hours of work. This makes it hard to afford housing while you are in an employment training program, yet its next to impossible to continue work or work training while you are homeless.

*“I wish they had told me ‘You’re not applicable right now. You have no place to live which means we cannot put you in a job program where you’re actively looking for work.’” (Bob)*

These reviews and reports are available here in an appendix to this final project report.  
Anyone interested in having a copy of these papers should email [PH-research@sfu.ca](mailto:PH-research@sfu.ca).

### **The Methods We Used:**

This project utilized peer-researchers and a participatory action-research process. An extensive preliminary literature survey and document analysis (policy, founding documents of service agencies, service provision guidelines, etc.) was followed by peer-facilitated focus groups, interviews, ethnographic observation, and video-documentary methods. In addition, a weekly late-night delivery of hot food and snacks to youth on or working the streets provided valuable opportunities both to support as well as to hear from those within the target population, likely to be at greatest risk of violence, homelessness, illness and addictions. Being the group least likely to seek mainstream supports and services, they are, therefore, youth whose voices and perspectives are least likely to be heard.

*“I have no faith in healthcare” (Eliza)*

*“Terribly sexually abused by my grandfather and uncle...But I didn’t identify it as sexual abuse, cuz I was gay...”(Adam)*

From April to August 2002, a range of ways of looking at and for information was employed with the intention of capturing as wide a data set as possible, and to try to determine which research approaches were most productive. Methods included all of the following: individual and group interviews, observations, photographs, survey data, documentary analysis, reviews of research literature, focus groups, art-based activities, video and audio recordings. The questions we used to guide fieldwork were revisited and redefined several times in the early stages of the fieldwork, and Appendix 5 gives the initial question set, while Appendix 6 provides the eventual questions in final survey form.

### **An Important Note on Ethics and research involving minors**

Because the age at which many youth become (homo)sexually active is below the legal age of consent, service providers who do cater to this age group are precluded, whether

*de jure* or *de facto*, from formally acknowledging alternative sexual identifications/practices, and so may often fail to recognize or, therefore to meet the distinctive social, cultural, psychological and health/housing related needs of this group. This can often mean that child welfare delivery system deficits, and subsequently housing policies and priorities, have never adequately served LGBT children and their families. In other words, a significant gap exists between services provided to “youth at risk,” in general, and access to services for the *particular* youth at risk who are the subjects of this study. However, any attempt to conduct research involving under-age, sexually active youth meets with the same obstacles. Under-age subject—children in the eyes of the law—need their parents’ consent to participate in research. But youth who have no parental care, those who have left or who have been forced to leave their parents’ home, cannot very well be expected to obtain a parent’s signature on a consent form.



These constraints make it difficult for researchers to provide the levels and kinds of information about homelessness within this specific population that are required to remediate serious deficiencies and omissions in social policy and service provision.

*“Abandonment is the worst thing a person can ever feel, being left alone and having to deal with a problem on their own.” (Tony)*

Formal research ethics aside, there are numerous substantive ethical questions which arise in research involving subjects under the age of consent, and, indeed, any vulnerable and disadvantaged persons or groups.

*“The issue is not that I am getting uninteresting information from my interviews and focus groups. Of course when you interview people who are street involved, you are bound to get tragic, dramatic stories of what happens to people in crises. The focus group was in fact quite interesting and from a personal standpoint, I learned a lot. The issue for me is that if we are going to get information from people in crises, I feel that there has to be some real immediate benefit to them besides a \$10.00 honorarium. I think for me (and I’m still exploring this) it is an issue of ethics.” (Justin, Fieldnote)*

And although the research team continuously tried to raise these issues, to deal responsibly and ethically and in a sufficiently informed way with participants, it is important to draw attention to the apparent lack of concern among participants themselves about issues of confidentiality and anonymity, about risks, about privacy, or about “telling their story” in general.

Researchers commented with some concern about the extent to which interviewees made themselves vulnerable by sharing often surprisingly personal and traumatic narrations which, however, were accompanied by little if any distress in the telling, and an almost embarrassing willingness to lay their lives bare to researchers. This is noteworthy given the documented tendency of abused children to be insufficiently guarded about their own welfare and insufficiently protective of themselves.

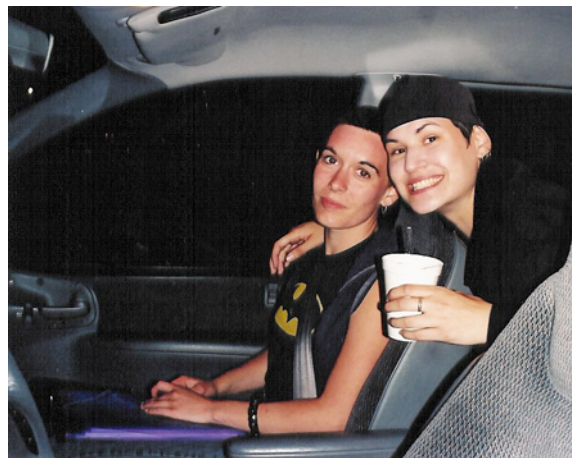
*“I was sad thinking about why these young men were so willing to tell their stories for so little in return” (Jax, fieldnote)*

Other informants appeared to want to get through the requisite probing and prodding as soon as possible, and it was often clear that the monetary payment given to interviewees

for their time was the sole motivation behind the interview. In these cases, interviewees would generally choose to cut the session short. Whether for money, or for a brief connection with a person willing to listen, or because they have spent more time than most of us in reciting accounts of themselves and their lives, it appeared that many of these youth had become accustomed to telling their story, and there sometimes seemed to be a fairly rehearsed ‘script’ to many of the interviews. This is nothing new in this kind of research, but the fact that what we so often get from direct interview questioning is fairly formulaic and scripted, mediates the ways we make use of interview “data” here.

### **Researcher Training**

Capacity-building of youth themselves was an explicit goal of this project, which was structured so as to provide youth hired for the project with skills-training, work experience, and paid employment as community-based researchers. Trainees worked in teams, pairing community-based youth with experience of street-involvement and/or homelessness, and university-based graduate students, so that community-based youth might develop a better understanding of academic approaches to research and what being a university student might involve or offer them, and university-based youth could better understand something of the resources, skills and knowledge under-supported queer youth use to manage their very different conditions of survival.





After the initial orientation, and an intensive program of researcher-training (see appendix 7), the fieldwork was begun and trainees developed skills and experience in field-based research, including logistics, team-building techniques, observational approaches, interviewing techniques, documentation and fieldnotes, record-keeping, running team meetings, transcription of interviews, how to set up and facilitate focus groups, and survey design, development and administration.



During the second month of the project, 6 trainees along with one senior research associate attended a week-long residential course in ethnographic documentary video making at the AMES (Access to Media Education) media center on Galiano Island.



This intensive program helped to deepen and solidify relations among team members, and offered youth unfettered access to tools, skills, training, and expertise, under ideal learning conditions, with comfortable accommodation, transportation and all meals provided for the duration of the training.



Working in two smaller teams, the group produced 2 five-minute videos as a vehicle for developing their skills in camera work, scripting, sound editing, directing, and video editing.

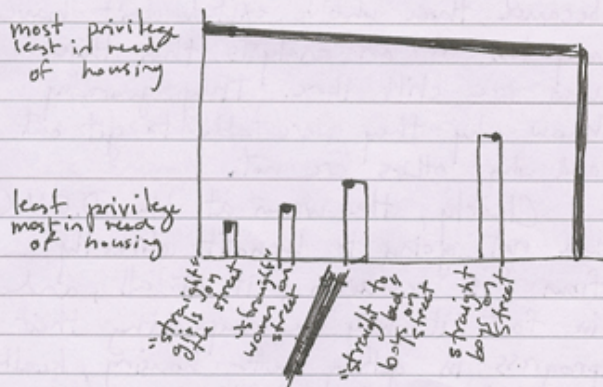
Throughout the period of researcher training and fieldwork from April to August 2002, regular weekly meetings allowed project team members to evaluate and monitor the progress of the project. Data from each week's work were continuously compiled, and new questions arising were considered.



As well, the Tuesday meetings were the place that difficulties and complications, including criticisms of the project, interpersonal issues, and questions of ethics and accountability were taken up.

① (continued from pg. 10)

Since my understanding is that the reason PridettHouse is focused on "queer youth" is because previous research has indicated that they are the people with the least. My research thus far seems to indicate otherwise. It looks like this:



Therefore I think we need to re-evaluate exactly who PridettHouse should be targeting, as the needs of these various groups are radically different.

(Sacha, fieldnotes)

### **Learning from the Research Team**

Because more than half of the research team consisted of “experiential” youth, youth who had personal experience of a range of aspects of street life for queer and questioning youth, a great deal was learned about relationships between non-hegemonic sexual identification, and risks of homelessness and street involvement from the members of the research team themselves, who gave their informed consent for this information to be used alongside other study data. As important, then, as any other source of data for this study were the interviews, focus groups, and other activities conducted with research team members. As explained earlier, the team was composed of 10 members plus the Principal Investigator, and all team members identified as “queer or questioning”. Two of the women identified as bisexual, three team members identified as lesbian and one of these had personal experience of transgendered (F-M) identification. One team member identified as transgendered (M-F), and three as gay males. All males were of colour, and the trans youth was First Nations, however all female team members were Caucasian, and this representation is likely significant in itself.

### **Team work Conclusions: Learning about community-based research**

From the contributions of members of the research team during training and team-building meetings, the following conclusions related to the implementation of participatory action research involving community-based youth as peer researchers are suggested:

- Researching disadvantaged individuals and groups can cause actual risk and harm to those persons, and this needs to be recognized in the kinds of questions we ask, who we ask and under what conditions, how we compensate participants for their time, and how we interpret the results of our inquiries.

- “Outsiders” to the population being studied are readily recognized by participants. They will not necessarily understand what they are seeing or hearing, and their insufficient understanding may needlessly place informants at risk.



Outsider status severely limits access to people and information, so that it is necessary to support and, in most cases, to defer to the judgment of community-based researchers in deciding who to contact and where and when to request information from participants.

- In many cases, extreme economic need means that informants may participate only for the money or other material perks, in which case it may be better simply to provide the remuneration promised and cut short the interview. It is not ethical to require research participation from people whose only motivation is financial, and whose “consent to participate”, therefore, is actually coerced by economic need, and not in fact “freely” granted.

*“To be perfectly honest, when I left after the focus group, I felt disgusted with the experience. I didn’t feel that these boys really wanted to share information about their problems with housing, health, education, work, subjugation to violence, expressions of sexuality etc. etc. Sure, they did...but did they have a choice? Could we say that they chose to sign up for the focus group? Well, yes, technically they chose to participate...but this is where I have the biggest problem—entrenched in their conditions, I don’t believe they had a choice in participating and for*



*\$10.00 they sat their waiting for the focus group to finish. I felt like a trick".  
(Justin, Fieldnote)*

- The least advantaged members of the research team proved the least able to complete the work of the project. This is not a criticism of these team members, but rather an important consideration when designing research structures which aspire to involve and assist disadvantaged youth. As with any job, having a stable home and supportive living conditions and adequate economic resources is actually a condition, and not merely an outcome, of getting and keeping a job, including a job as community-based peer researcher.

*"...a lot of the slummy places I stayed at were places outdoors, lobbies, some were underground so I'd do underground parking lots in Kitsilano. Mostly, in Vancouver, down Bute I'd just walk to sunset beach and sleep on a bench." (P.J.)*



*"Home" (Boys-R-Us participant)*

*"Since I saved up some money while I was working, I bought myself a car, so I'll most probably find a place for most of my stuff...and sleep in the passenger seat of my car." (Tony)*

### **Site Observations**

Site observations were conducted at the following locations, identified as significant by research team members in consultation with community-based organizations: The Gathering Place, Mom's (a volunteer-run food van), Grandview park, The (LGBT) Center, The Downtown Eastside Women's Center, Boys-R-Us, the Salvation Army Van, Dusk Till Dawn, the Dufferin Hotel, the Ocean Star Video game arcade, Café de Soleil on Commercial Drive, Union Gospel Mission, and the strolls around Granville Street, Davie Street, East Hastings Street and Franklin Street. These locations included strolls where youth were involved in prostitution, meeting places for drugs and drug use, support centers for housing and recreational and social services, youth drop-ins, bars, and commercial and other "queer sites" in Vancouver. Informal participant observations were conducted by research team members at a range of community events, at bars, and at after hours parties and clubs.

Site observations were used to familiarize ourselves with the locations where street-involved youth tended to circulate and allowed us to contact participants for interviews and focus groups. These observations were also useful in determining the places where people might be more likely to need the services of the late night food van.

Finally, the site observations allowed the researchers to acclimatize themselves not only to their intended sites of research, but to their role as researchers and to the problems associated with this role. A central issue for the graduate student researchers, as recorded in the site observation reports, was overcoming or navigating around their "outsider" position.

The researchers discovered that everything which speaks of a different (more privileged) socio-economic status, from vocabulary, to hairstyle, to shoes, is indicative of this outsider position and often produces suspicion and a degree of discomfort at field sites. Conversely, for the community-involved researchers, the central concern in their acclimatization to their new role revolved around being taken seriously by their academic counterparts, and not being treated as part of the environment – assuming the role of researcher and not researched.

*“I am seeing what I expected when I try to conduct research without a community-based partner: nothing”  
(Jax, university-based researcher)*

*“[We] sat and focused on me during this time, which I didn’t think was relevant”  
(Lesley, community-based researcher)*

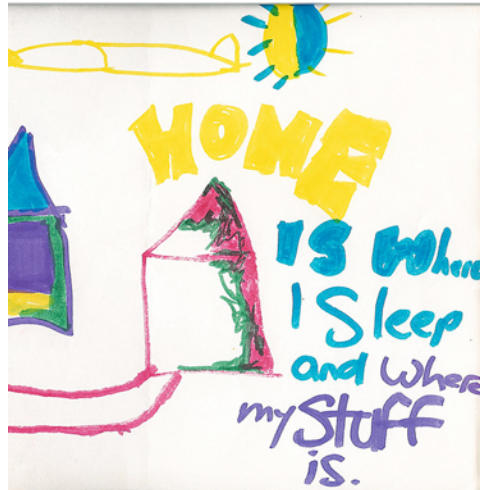
### **Focus groups**

Focus groups were held with members of the research team, with service providers working with street-involved youth, with participants at GAB youth drop-in (The Center), and at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Center. The focus group with service providers allowed us to acquaint prominent service organizations with the research and solicit their cooperation, as well as to understand both how these organizations operated, and to learn about their experiences working with queer and questioning youth.

*“The gay comfort zone is also the gay trouble zone.”  
(gay service provider)*

We heard their views on the viability of a youth-run housing project, the kind of housing most needed, how the needs of queer and questioning youth might differ from those of straight-identified youth, where we should run the late night food van, and other people and groups we should be in contact with.





Other focus groups allowed us to pursue the housing difficulties of street involved, primarily gay male youth, to explore with them, through activities, their conceptions of what 'home' means to them and to elicit their suggestions and recommendations for the kind of housing which would be most effective in meeting their particular needs.



These exchanges also asked about their experiences of the accessibility of social services for queer and questioning youth.



*“Housing is a right not a privilege. Embracing equality, diversity, respect and mutual aid would help to address housing, sexuality, and race issues.” (Survey # 42)*

A women-only meeting enabled us to see more clearly the ways in which the experiences and needs of women are shaped and constrained by systemic gender discrimination across lines of “sexual identity”. More particularly, it became clear that especially for women who are on the streets or street involved that an “out”/queer identity is not one which they readily name for themselves.

*“I have yet to meet one [woman] who considered herself lesbian or bisexual while still on the street, yet I’ve met several who have come out, after exiting the street life. Even that little bit of gay dialogue that goes on with boys (regardless of the fact that its centered around prostitution) is not available to street girls because it works against them. All youth on the street who have the least are dependent on the material goods of the male*

*consumer. Gay or not, men own the property”  
(Sacha)*

### **MMP: The Van Run**

A key element in the fieldwork was the late-night food-van run, re-named by the research team, the “Mobile Midnight Picnic” (MMP). Save the Children Canada, a partner in this study, permitted us to make use of their Van to run a weekly late-night outreach initiative which proved to be one of the most challenging but also one of the most informative aspects of the research.



The idea behind the MMP was, firstly, that very little research on disadvantaged populations ever brings any real benefit to anyone but the researchers. The researched themselves rarely experience or enjoy any direct benefits. By bringing hot food, fruit, coffee and other snacks out to youth on or working the streets, we could both offer some material support to youth in need, as well as hear from that sub-group of queer and questioning youth likely to be at greatest risk of violence, homelessness, illness and addictions. Being the group least likely to seek mainstream supports and services, these are also the youth whose voices and perspectives are least likely to be heard, and the people we most needed to hear from.



Originally scheduled to run 3 nights a week for three months, logistics proved extremely difficult to negotiate, as none of the research team except the principal investigator had access to a car, and the van had to be returned to Save the Children, located on Vancouver's West side, a substantial distance from the fieldwork site, after the MMP

ended, which was usually between 3 and 4 a.m. Moreover, with staff changes at Save the Children, the arrangements we had negotiated originally proved burdensome to the staff now administering the van, and we had to reduce our expectations accordingly. That meant cutting down to one van trip per week, on either a Friday or a Saturday night.

Despite this reduced street presence, we were able, over the period of the study, to make regular weekly trips out between midnight and 3 a.m. to feed and talk to youth, and to observe, first-hand, conditions on the street. The evening of each trip, we would arrange in advance for food preparation (hot soup, vegetarian stew, or chili, and home-baked bread or buns), then equip the van with fruit, snacks, and drinks coffee/tea/chocolate/bottled water/juice, as well as condoms and shelter information, and set out, usually beginning around Davie Street, about midnight. The procedure we followed was that one person would drive, another take notes and help set up and maintain food distribution, while two people would go out and invite people on or working the streets to come over to the van for food.



Researchers were provided with cell phones for safety. That also meant that we could phone for help for others as well. We did need to telephone for an ambulance on one occasion to assist a youth whose buddy had lapsed into unconsciousness. On a few occasions interviews were conducted in the back of the van on site, and surveys were filled out on the street, and in bar parking lots, but normally we simply gave information about the study, and made contacts for follow-up interviews.

It is difficult to encapsulate in one short paragraph the many valuable things we learned during the MMP trips. Most of all, we got a “feeling” for late night street life, and could more accurately comprehend what the youth we sought to study had to go through in their struggles to survive with inadequate family and state housing, service and support. An example of the various kinds of fieldnotes that were taken during these trips is available in Appendix 10, and this may help to give a better sense of what MMP trips involved and made clearer to us. Prominent among the reportable observations from these trips were the following:

- Young women working the streets may be positively endangered by researchers wanting to speak with them, since, unlike the young men who are normally ‘free agents’, many of the women are working for pimps who control their time and activity, and from whom violence may be a real threat should the woman communicate with anyone but prospective johns.
- Lesbians are least visible among youth on the street, and were therefore the most difficult group for researchers to access. This may mean lesbian needs and experiences remain largely overlooked in studies like this one, and services and supports for young lesbians will, accordingly, tend to be less than for any other population.

*“It just means you have to keep it [being a lesbian] more secret...you’re in survival mode all the time when you’re on the street, so you’re not gonna do anything that will get your ass kicked or get your ass killed. It’s not something you talk about, it’s not something I even thought a lot about, except with my street sister cause all I was thinking about was using and keeping my ass alive.” (Kitty Kat, Interview)*



- The activities and identities of street involved youth revolve far less around sexuality and far more around the economics of the sex trade. As one young man put it *“We’re all queer out here; we’re queer for money”*.
- Many young men working the streets identify as heterosexual, although their clientele are other men. It is men who typically buy sexual services. We found no mention whatsoever of women purchasing sexual services from youth.
- Ages of youth met working the streets ranged from males 15-30+, and females 17-30+.
- Women and trans youth worked the least well-lit, least affluent and most dangerous parts of the city; young gay men worked the most established (Boystown), populated and well-lit locations.
- Many of the youth on or (less frequently) actively working the streets were high, with the greatest concentration of “strung out” youth located on or just off Davie street in the vicinity of the LGBT Center. Some of these youth were actively engaged in “chopping” stolen bikes, in drug trade, and in drug use.
- Even though it was summer, youth on the streets at night were cold, often wrapped in blankets and huddled in liquor store windows or alleys in small groups, and most wanted hot food and, especially, sweet foods. They also requested condoms (which we provided) and needle exchange (which we could not).
- Many youth appeared to be resorting to drugs as a way of coping with the cold when they were unable to find a place to sleep.



Some others reported that they used

sexual exchange as a way of getting a place to sleep. *“We were so high, it didn’t matter. We didn’t feel the cold or anything...”*



Perhaps the main “finding” of this part of the research is that the stocking and staffing of a dedicated, regularly scheduled, youth organized and operated food van is an excellent way to keep in touch with what is going on in the street, including bad drugs, violent and other crimes, police violence, detox, health, and other needs, and for understanding the real impacts of social policies and cuts to social services, and **where these might most feasibly, responsibly and effectively be addressed.** It would be the very strong recommendation of this study that HRDC or some comparable organization fund such an initiative on an ongoing basis. This program could be expected to be well-supported by donations, and would create an excellent ‘training ground’ for entry level social service/youth workers. This is a not inconsiderable contribution to street-involved and drug/alcohol addicted youth, given that so many of these youth seek, on recovery, to gain employment working in counseling and other peer support services. It would be a program well worth the investment of time and resources, and could in time become a cost-recovery (through donations, youth employment subsidies and volunteerism) initiative..





### Structured Interviews

Full length (one-half to 2 hours) interviews were conducted with 8 young women and 12 young men, and fully transcribed and analyzed. In addition, full length interviews were conducted with six adults: two community activists, a teacher, four social workers (a front-line volunteer who takes out food to youth on the street and 3 experienced social workers with prominent shelter and support services, who engage in directly supporting queer street-involved youth). Adults<sup>6</sup> spoke about their experiences in working with this diverse group, and the ways in which inclusion can be undermined, whether through explicit policy, through omission, or through the “micropractices” of everyday institutional life.

*“Sometimes schools will require that parents sign a contract stating that its OK for their child to participate in this club. The problem with a gay-straight alliance that most kids are, like, ‘Don’t tell my Mom!’, which is a drag...”*

*Jerome, teacher*

Youth spoke about home life and how and why they left, about sexual identifications, about being ‘out’, the role of drugs in their lives, school life, and what supports they did and didn’t get at school, about sources of and experiences of violence in their lives, about

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<sup>6</sup> Of significance here is the definition of ‘youth’, ‘adult’, and ‘senior’ operative in communities of poverty within affluent societies, such as the Downtown East Side within the City of Vancouver. Senior’s services, which can include housing, are available to people as young as 40. “Youth” services extend until aged 30. That makes the adult life of a member of the DTES community just ten years. This is in perspective of a reduced life span, and likely also connected to both relatively weaker intergenerational relations of obligation and accountability, and an apparently higher rate of child/youth sexual exploitation.

what has been good, has been most help to them, then about their health, housing and about where they see themselves headed.

*“Dying... its kind of scary but it brings some sort of relief.”*

*(Adam)*

They also spoke at length about the impacts of sex work on their emotional well-being, their personal relationships, and about drug use as a way to manage with the emotional and physical harms of the sex trade.

*“Hustling is very degrading. I don’t think anybody should have to...Hustling does affect my intimate relations with people...Its almost like when you start hustling, you enter a state of mind... its very difficult to get out of... So if you met someone you like... you think, ok, how am I going to get money out of this person or how am I going to get what I want out of this person. Its very effective on the way you think.” (Tony)*

*“Going to the streets is easy money, not always safe, but its easy money...the government has such strict guidelines and rules to get on welfare and there’s no other choice unless you turn to the street” (Bob)*

Interviews with service providers enriched our understanding of a central theme which arose in the surveys and youth interviews: the sense of isolation from which the GLBT street youth community suffers, not only from the general population, but from other minority groups.

*“I always feel that I’m alone and most of the time I am”*

*(Jay)*

Rodrigo, a Latino outreach youth, describes how the QQ Latino youth he’s dealt with feel ostracized from a largely homophobic Latino community. Similarly, Colleen, frontline worker in a large youth shelter, suggests that QQ youth are often suspicious of the gay community as whole, which they deem as predatory and exploitative.

*“[It’s] hard to both stay in your community as a queer youth and stay away from predators at the same time, same people are in both places, such a small community” (Colleen)*

Sexism, racism, ageism and homophobia are attitudes which are just as easily condoned among minority groups as they are among the general population, and as these discussions illustrate, these attitudes may be more destructive when they come from the communities in which one would expect and hope to find the most support.

*“We are criss-crossed by various oppressions”. (Francisco, quoting Michael)*

While most of the service providers interviewed were social workers from charitable institutions, one was an individual deeply involved in the non-institutionalized, grass-roots “charity culture” of Vancouver. The interview with “Street Mom,” an elderly woman who prepares and distributes food for approximately 400 street-involved people, offers a more personal account of the issues and problems associated with providing services to street-involved individuals in general and QQ street youth in particular.

*“I’ve tried to make these kids my family, I try to help them make changes in their life and I try to keep them alive so they can do that.” (Street Mom)*

While the interview touches on many themes elsewhere explored at length in this report, it is important to note the emphasis which “Street Mom” places on bringing a non-judgmental attitude to her work. Furthermore, while her actions demonstrate the importance of providing the population with the basic material elements for survival, her words illustrate that the open-mindedness which she brings to her work is another crucial element to the overall well-being of QQ street youth.

*“I think all of us have a share in the burden of these children. I think if everybody accepted a share and made these kids know they weren’t going to ostracize them, that it would change things a lot.” (Street Mom)*

What full length and fully transcribed interviews allowed (and continues to allow) us to do, is gain a larger informational context for interpretation, as well as---and this was important us---make opportunities to be surprised, to hear unexpected things from participants and interviewees, to understand something more of the reasons and realities behind “gender identity”, “sexual exchange” or “addiction” that had been really not at all well understood at the start of the work.

*“I wouldn’t think about this gross guy that’s touching me... Ya, you know, I wouldn’t think about his family cause sometimes I would think about like, what if he has a family? You know what if he has two kids at home, you know, he’s lying to them, his whole entire life, his whole entire marriage, his everything is one big fat lie... And that would actually bring me down as well... like I’ll just get really depressed so, like if some other guy is just, um, telling me a story about his family all this stuff, how he supports them but yet he still goes and picks up a boy, it just makes me amazingly depressed to think about how those kids would feel if they knew about what he was doing. Or if his wife knew about what he was doing, so I would kind of take all her, all the burden that she would have felt if she knew onto me, and, ah, that was hard to deal with, so that’s why I started meditation....or uh, I had my pills. I was a big pill popper, and that helped a lot.” (Tom)*

Cultivating ‘surprise’ in research is fundamental to learning from its practice. For this reason we tried to create ways that people could express ideas not anticipated by our questions, and to enable representations and expressions which might not so readily emerge in face to face interviews with researchers, even researchers from the community, and we used these resources to enrich as well as to challenge our analysis of what the interview transcriptions could tell us.

**RANT PAGE-----Use this space to add, using words or pictures, whatever you think we should know about sexuality, street life and housing...**

Inside I feel ~~like~~ like a nymph, seductress, lesbian bisexual who desperately wishes to be a woman. I hate fact I could be such a beautiful thing, wearing what I like without having some hideous lump of meat between my legs.

“Rant” component of the Pridehouse Survey

### **Ethnography: Summary**

One of the recurring themes in the ethnographic interviews is the sense that while many services for LGBT street-involved youth exist, they are often rendered ineffective because of ignorance on the part of both users and service providers. This trend, as brought out through the interviews, is not limited to one particular type of service: Anika

and Eliza both reported a fundamental distrust of the health-care professionals and the health care system as a whole; Kitty Kat suggested that LGBT street-involved youth are less aware of housing services provided to them than their “normie” counterparts; Tony remarked on how employment services provide only the rudimentary resources, and not the actual knowledge, for job searching and acquisition; Jackie speaks about how her trans identity makes finding work impossible; in an “analytical fieldnote”, Gary’s interviewer expressed concern that his attempts at staying clean would fail without addiction professionals; and Speedy’s interview portrays a community which views the entire system of services offered to them as bureaucratic and manipulative. On the one hand, a lack of knowledge on the part of LGBT youth about the services provided to them devalues these services and constitutes a needless waste of resources. On the other hand, when knowledge of these services does exist, it is often accompanied by the perception or recognition that those providing the service do not understand that LGBT street-involved youth face a unique set of needs, issues, and dilemmas. Janice tells us that the youth shelter might be a way for her to get off the streets except that *“...my parents would have to sign for me ‘cuz I’m only 18 and they won’t sign, there’s no fuckin’ way.”*

Conversely, many interviewees expressed dissatisfaction or distrust of the services provided to them not because of any knowledge gap, but because the service plays too large a role in the interviewees’ lives. This applies particularly, but not solely, to government services: Aaron claims that he has “never been free from the Ministry,” while Bob states that the street is often a more desirable alternative than dealing with the government’s strict and non-negotiable guidelines for income assistance. The same goes for shelters, according to one ‘savvy’ informant who sees herself as having learned to ‘play the system’:

*“...too much structure: they’re always telling you when to get up, when to go to bed, kick you out every day. I played them--- if you say you’re detoxing, you don’t have to go out every day, all day. The people there are too fake- they had this one counselor who was there for a work*

*experience, for like 2 months. I ate that girl for lunch: I always quoted her own fake words back at her.” (Felix/Felicity)*

Peter, similarly, painted a disturbing portrait of a relationship between service and client in which his ability to “work the angles” and manipulate the service into providing him with resources beyond those normally offered is creating a dangerous dependency. While Peter’s situation is unique, the overall sense of the interviews is that the instrumentalization which is occurring between service and client is common. Dependency on the part of the clients and manipulation on the part of the services deeply endangers the sense of personal agency so vital to this population, and so greatly lacking on the streets.

*“...everything changes, you can go from good to bad in like seconds....it’s a roller coaster....you can be having the greatest time of your life, you know good friends, and the feeling of security, and then everything can just drop, just like that.” (Janice)*

What does need to be stressed about agency, and what the ethnographic work so richly indicated, is that although these youth greatly value self-reliance and very typically characterize themselves as having plans, abilities and real prospects for improving their lives, it would be a mistake simply to conclude that they can provide us with “answers” to what they ‘need’.

*“I just I knew that one day something better would happen. And then I just... I always put my thought onto that aspect that I will, my life would change, and then I’ll get better.” (Taz)*

Because what we saw very often in our extended conversations was that plans and schemes, while abundant, were often ungrounded. When we asked youth about where they thought they would be, or hoped to be, a year and then 5 years from now, we heard bemused puzzlement, abject despair, cynical resignation, and frankly incredible

optimism. We heard plans and schemes and strategies, but little plausible ideas about how these plans could be put into action. Taz, for example, answered confidently:

*“Where do I see myself being in one year? Well hopefully holding a manager position in retail maybe le Chateau or Aldo, because I have, cause you know ...if you’re going to apply at a place you need to wear what they’re selling, and I just finally got a whole new Aldo outfit except the shoes, but that’s ok.”*

Jane, 18 years old and already a veteran of 7 years of life on the streets, told us:

*“...within the next year I am planning on hitchhiking to either Banff or the Okanagan and getting a job out there. I am going to find one. I am determined. I am going to work my butt off and do what ever I have to do and, you know, and I am going to get a tattoo with my first paycheck in celebration, as in ‘I did it. This is myself. I accomplished it.’ I am half way through grade 11, I would like to finish that and start my grade 12, I want to have my own place I want to get back into the community and give back to the community yah, but I hope to be off the streets.”*

At the opposite end of the spectrum are youth who have abandoned any such ambitions:

*“Where will I be a year from now? Dead, I hope.” (Jason)*

And while we may well wish street-involved youth were more “realistic”, working with youth who despair of any chances at a better life is surely just as difficult as working with those whose plans and aspirations are completely ungrounded.

“Street Mom” contends that service providers may often be as unrealistic as their clients:

*“Sure we can they pick up our socks and keep going but if you have no address, no clothing, no telephone, no education, how can you get a job? How can you go to school without the basics behind you?” (Street Mom)*

Negotiating an effective action plan which suffers neither from a romanticisation of youth’s abilities to direct their lives (“they know best what they need”), nor from a top-down managerial stance which patronizes, over-regulates and stifles autonomy, is an urgent need at both policy and service provision levels. In this study, youth were very



clear about the limitations of ‘solutions’ for their benefit engineered by agencies and organizations remote from the everyday realities of street life, and they were adamant about the need to have youth seriously involved in the organizing and running of services for themselves. However it would be naïve and it would be in effect undermining to simply hand over the reins to young people who have not had the kind of stability and support needed to develop real competence in managing, along with the mundane tasks of shopping and self-care and budgeting and the like, the extreme challenges they face under the dual obstacles of both discrimination and deprivation.

*“The ability to navigate services seems important to success, having peers to help with that might be useful and help break down power hierarchies.” (Darcie, reflecting on interview with Speedy)*

Above all, what is needed is an approach to service provision which both supports youth organizing for themselves, and at the same time scaffolds and assists in the development of skills and abilities which most have not had real chances to master and so do not place in their hands responsibilities which they are incapable of shouldering. Lacking support of that kind, perhaps the **most** realistic assessment of future prospects for these youth is that they remain, quite simply, **unimaginable**.

*Darcie: so where would you see yourself in a year?*

*Jackie: I have no idea where I’ll be in a year*

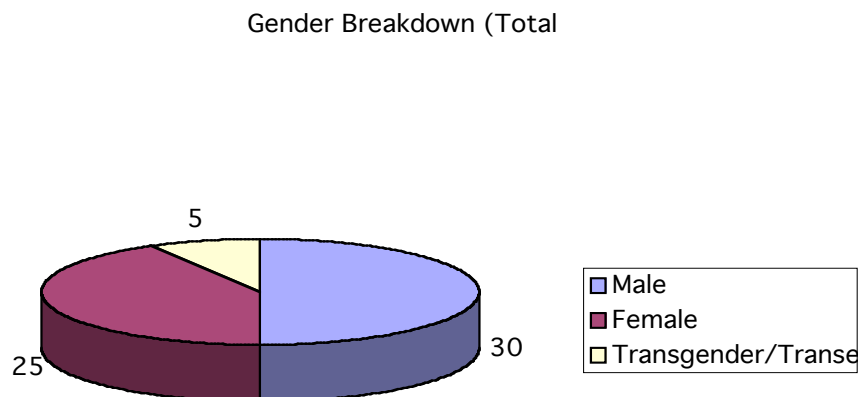
*Justin: What would you like to be doing in a year?*

*Jackie: in a year I’d like to . . . um, don’t know just have a stable place to live and know that I can have food on my plate... I can’t even imagine it.*

(A spreadsheet providing data summaries from these interviews is provided in appendix 8.)

## Surveys

Starting with an initial set of 90 questions devised at the outset of the study, after many team meeting discussions, trials and revisions of the survey, and a pilot testing of two versions of it, we were left with a 6 page, 45-question survey (see appendix 6).

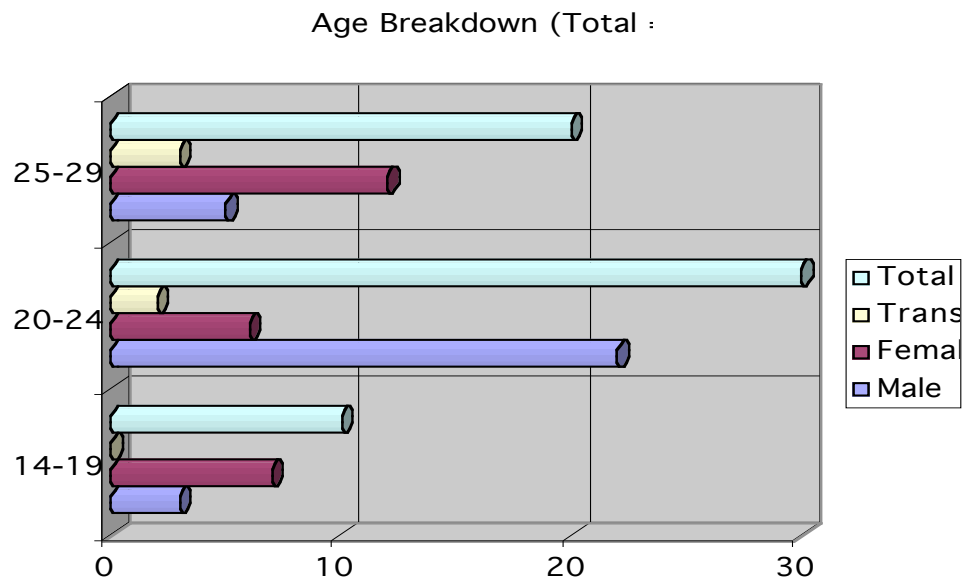


Although the survey had been designed to be done in 20 minutes and self-administered (and so we gave respondents just \$5 for doing one), it transpired that most of the time surveys were actually done individually and face-to-face with research assistants.

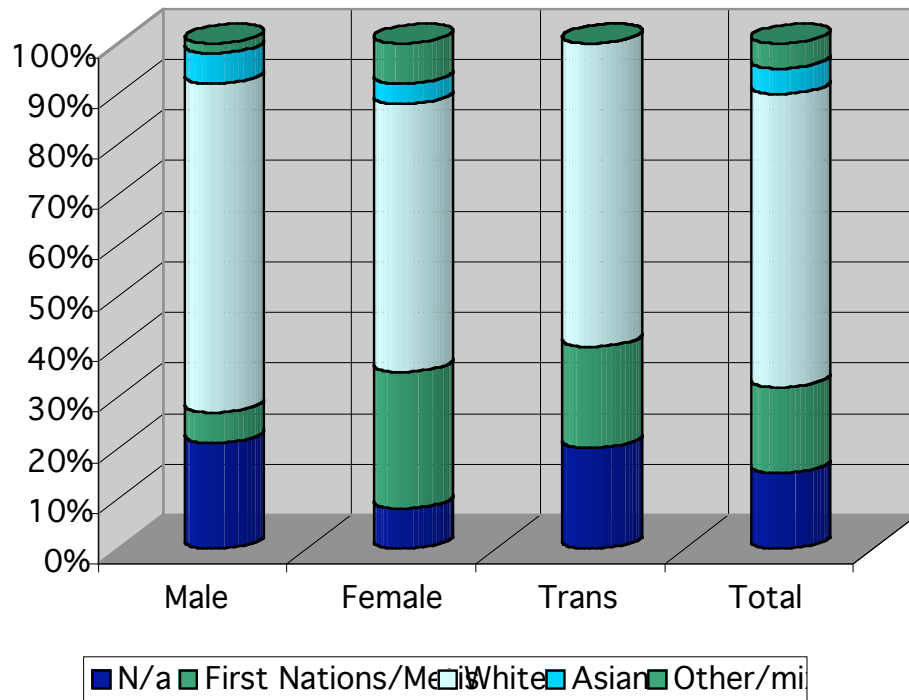
Although this has limitations, it does ensure that we can be more than normally confident that these surveys were done earnestly. Rarely did it seem that responses were “flippant”,

or simply a series of “ticks” on a form. People took the time to draw, and to add information and write extended comments. Full details of the survey form and the survey data are available in Appendix 9.

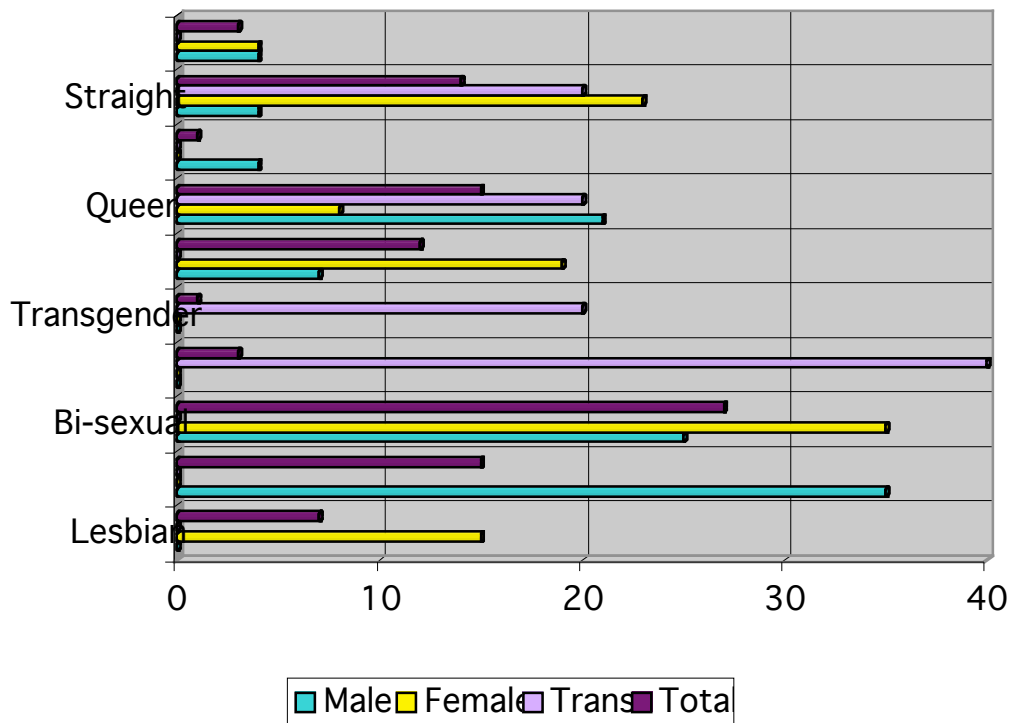
A few of the surveys were completed by people over 29, but these were withdrawn from the set, leaving us with the following age distribution:



The ethnicity of the respondents was primarily Caucasian, although it is important to note the relatively higher representation of Metis youth, and in particular, young Aboriginal women.



The following chart depicts the sexual identification of the respondents.



Here it is worth noting that whereas over half (56%) of males identified as queer or gay, less than a quarter (23%) of the females identified as queer or lesbian. As the qualitative aspects of the project illustrate, this difference may stem from the fact that, among the represented population, there seems to be more males involved in homosexual “survival sex” than females---this is, however, merely one interpretation of the figures.

To enrich the survey data and to create multiple kinds of opportunities to represent their experiences, we tried to create questions which were both fully “inclusive” in their categories and terms, and ‘interactive’, in the sense that we offered a mostly blank ‘rant page’ at the end, and had a ‘bubble dialogue cartooning task as another ‘interactive’ element.

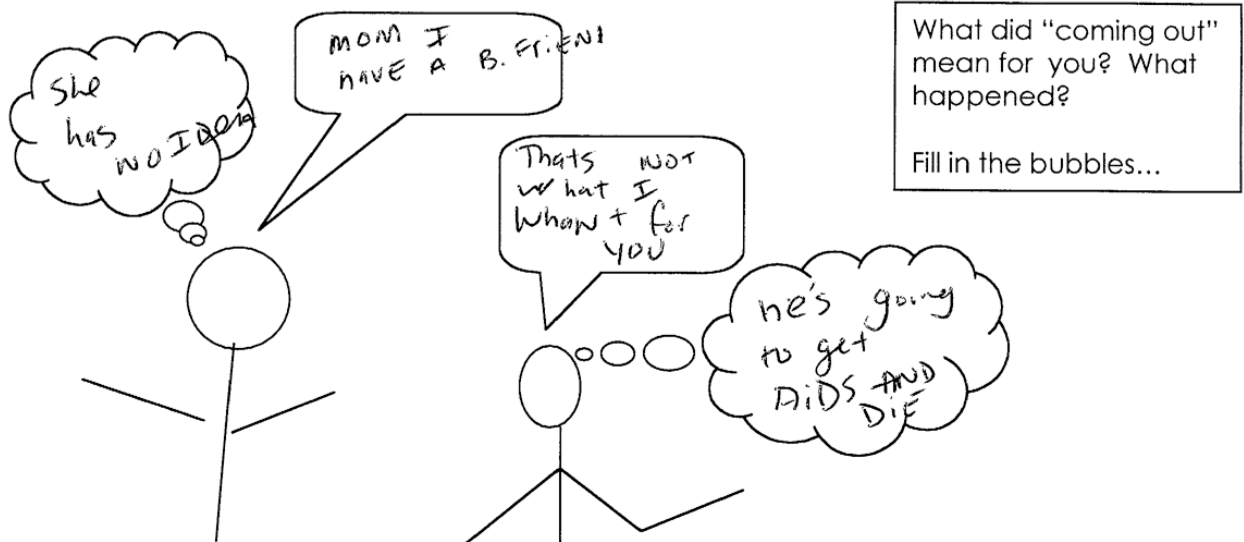
**RANT PAGE-----Use this space to add, using words or pictures, whatever you think we should know about sexuality, street life and housing...**

I believe drug dealers use youth  
addictions and need to abuse and  
confuse youth about their sexuality=  
preying on them making them confused  
angry and unproperly focused on  
sex.

One of the survey’s interactive elements was a stick figure drawing to create a “bubble-dialogue” question about the impacts of expressing a ‘queer’ identity. Interestingly, this

relatively demanding question task was completed by 35 of the 60 respondents.

45. Did you ever 'come out' to your parents or others? Were you 'outed'? What happened? Use this sketch to illustrate...



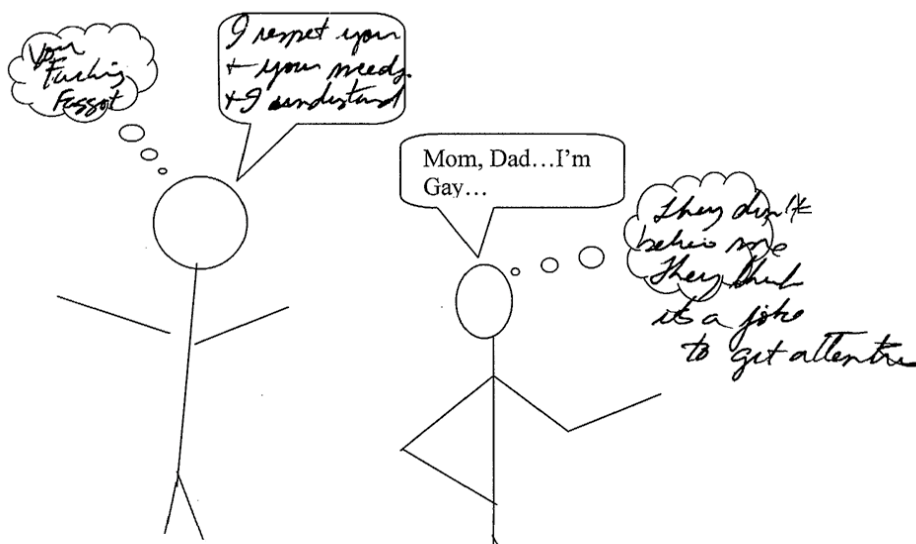
These drawings made apparent the fears, threats and harms that 'coming out' presented for queer/questioning youth, and portrayed their reasons for leaving home.



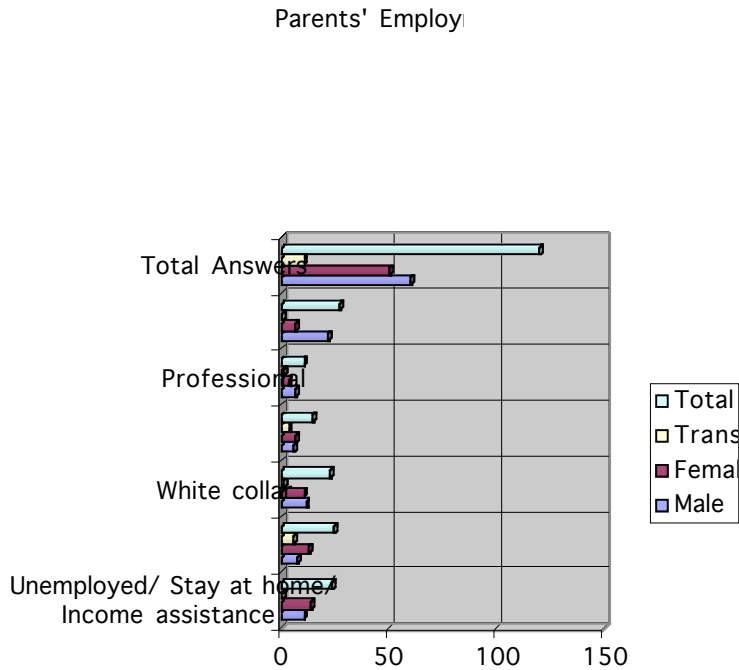
It was evident that respondents put significant thought into their responses, and a high degree of effort into representing the misconceptions, ignorance and homophobia they confronted.



The theme of finding oneself unable to communicate, to speak or to be listened to by parents, was a recurrent one, as was an undercurrent of abuse.



Youth from all socio-economic strata were represented, as the following chart based on parents' employment indicates.



### **At Home: “*Black (eyes) Red (scar tissue) Blue (bruises)*”**

Although we have no wish to play into the stereotypes that seem often to define popular wisdom about street-involved youth, one of this project’s goals was to provide information which might serve to educate those responsible for the care and control of youth. First among these, the institution of primary socialization, is the home, and parents set the stage for their children’s conceptions and experiences of adults, and, in particular, whether adults are seen as trustworthy, or whether they are seen as unsupportive, even dangerous. Certainly, too, an unhappy home life is often identified in research studies as a critical “risk factor” for becoming street-involved.



Our survey asked youth, accordingly, “How was your home life growing up?”, and we asked, as well, a question about sources of violence in their lives, and included “parents” and “family” as two of the possible sources.

37 out of 60 youth explicitly reported violence at home. These are their characterizations of family life, answering, in their own words, the question “How was your home life growing up?”:

*Home life...sucked/ shitty, parents dysfunctional/ very abusive/ very strict/ not good/ shaky/ fear of doing “girly” things/ terrible, oppressive controlling, verbal, physical, sexual abuse/ very chaotic/ very directive/ mother was drug addicted/ difficult, abusive/ difficult/ somewhat livable/ a blur, standard Christian/ crazy, abusive/ very bad/ awful/ confusing, I became secretive/ in and out of group homes all my life/ sucked/ messed up/ shitty/ abusive/ in and out of foster home/ abusive/ somewhat rough/ horrible/ crappy, abusive, kicked out at 13/ great until parents split up/ very secretive/ alcoholic mom, came out at 13, she flipped out/ “Black (eyes) Red (scar tissue) Blue (bruises) =Violence from both biological mother and in foster care/ violent/ My mom neglected me; my dad beat me, on the rare occasions I saw him/ parents had no affection for each other, dad rarely around/ not very open about sex/ awful, physical, emotional, mental.*

### **School Life: “3 1/2 years of hell”**

The most influential institution of secondary socialization in this country is the school, and rejection, intimidation and harassment at school, from teachers as well as from students, is very often cited as a major “risk factor” for youth leaving home and becoming street-involved. So we asked a number of questions about life at school, about sources of support at school, and about whether or not youth were “out” at school.

*“...in terms of being gay in high school, I think its wrong... um knowing that they are queer and putting them in that situation of hell.” ( P.J.)*

Of the 58 people who responded to this latter question, 9 stated it did not apply to them (6 of these were straight identified, 2 bisexual, and one self-identified as a “open”).

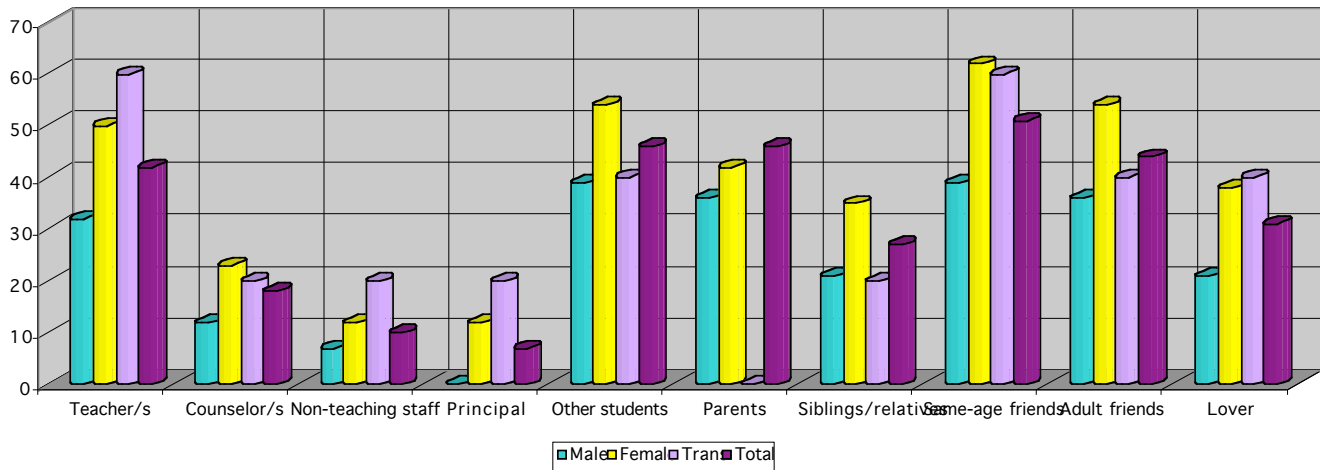
Heterosexually identified youth did not see “coming out” as relevant to them, and this is surely because the presumption at school is that everyone is heterosexual, notwithstanding that it is public knowledge, and has been for many years now, that on average 10% of our population is LGBT. What matters here is that teachers and other educators know this, but that most typically there is no recognition of this at school. Teacher education programs typically ignore and avoid any discussion, let alone any educational intervention concerned with sexuality to guide teachers in dealing supportively with LGBT youth in their care, and homophobic jokes and remarks are, typically, both tolerated and even legitimized by some teachers, who engage in homophobic discourses and practices themselves, and model this for their students.

*“... the kids would ... follow me home with a carton of eggs and...they would wait until I was alone ... and um they’d wait until I got home and just throw them at my window. They’d call me fag um like right outside the house and my mother would hear it...”*

*I did not drop out of school...I didn’t want to leave school. I enjoyed it very much. I tried the hardest I could try at my abilities. The only reason I left is because my mother kicked me out.” (P.J.)*

In the following chart which shows the sources of support at school, note that the support given to QQ youth by school counselors is no greater than that given to them by non-teaching staff—school secretaries, caretakers, etc.

Question #24: “Who gave you support at school? Tick how much.



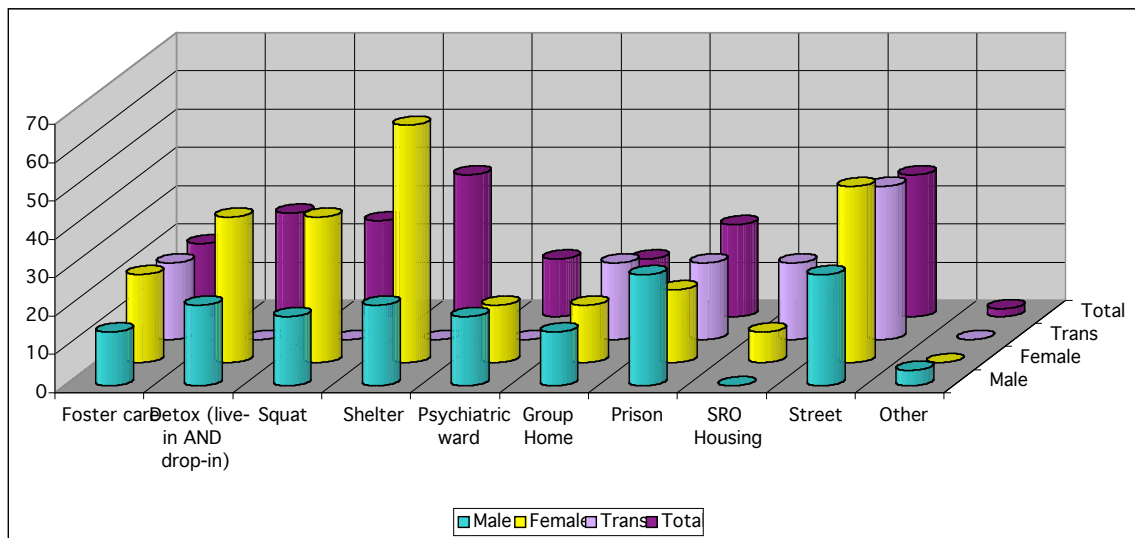
So the results of our survey questions about school life should come as no surprise. Of the 49 QQ identified youth who responded to the question, 9 were “out at school”, 23 were NOT out at school, and 17 declared they were “partially out”, in some of these cases specifying “to one friend”. Of those 9 who were “out at school”, 4 self-identified as gay or queer men, 4 as bisexual women, and one as lesbian. All of the bisexual women were under 21. It may be that it is more acceptable for young women to identify as bisexual at school, and that it may be easier nowadays for women to do so than it has been in the past. Nevertheless, what we see here is a picture of schools as institutions which make little or no room for non-hegemonic sexualities.

This impression is reinforced if we take a closer look at the characterizations of their school experience by QQ youth. Because one goal of this project was to provide an informational basis for education, specifically to enable caregiving adults to understand the role they play in excluding and thereby endangering QQ youth, it seems useful to reproduce for educators’ benefit the kinds of comments youth made about their life at school. Note that not all youth responded to this question, and a few (6) characterized their school life as good, or fun, or OK. The rest had this to say. School life was...

*rough/ shitty, hated school/ very hard/boring/ very upsetting, people making fun of me all the time/ hard and depressing/ lot of harassment from students teachers and vice principal/ shit. Just a lot of shit/ I was never there/ false, phony/ scary, hectic, lonely/ HORRIBLE, homophobic graffiti on locker, repeated sexual violence and hate, no-one in whole school was out/ classist and homophobic/ boring/ torments of being something I wasn't/ I loved it before I came out/ not very good, a lot of problems/ stressful/ at some time very hard because I'm native/ no support/ had few friends/ sucked/ parents had hard time with me coming out/ hated it, homophobic/ 3 1/2 years of hell/ OK except once I came out/ hell: I hated every fucking minute of it/ ostracized, excluded, picked on/ not so good/ couldn't read till I was 16 so it was very hard/ confusing, chaotic/ Hell. Almost life-threatening/ saved me from home/ bad.*

## Housing

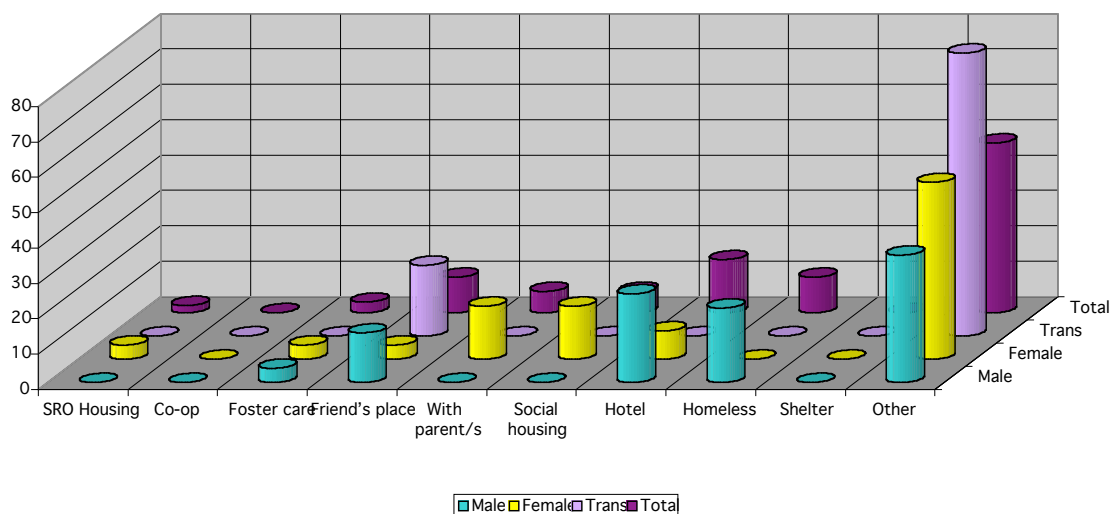
Growing up, respondents experienced a wide array of housing situations, as evidenced by the following chart.



*“A gay group home is sorely needed. Foster care sucks if you are gay (homophobic staff/residents).”*

Respondents' current housing situation is represented by the following chart:

## Question #16: “Where do you live right now?”



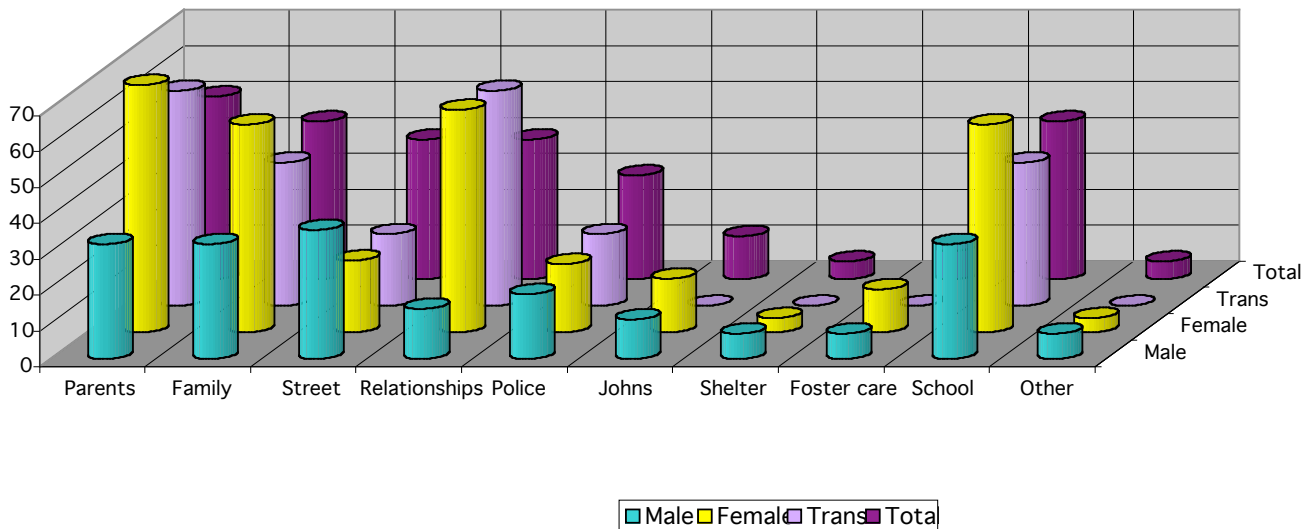
Firstly, it is important to note that among those who marked their current housing as “other,” the majority stated that they were currently living by themselves. This contributed to the difficulty in ascertaining the quality of current housing conditions and needs, and adds to the sense of the great diversity of living situations reported.

*“...the living conditions at the hotel I stayed at were harsh. Umm...cockroaches everywhere, fuckin’ fridge that wouldn’t work, it had blankets at the bottom just to soak up the water that would leak from god knows where.” (P.J.)*

It is significant, however, that 21% of male respondents reported being homeless, and 25% were living in hotel rooms. Young women report mostly living in shared apartments with friends, and 15% of female respondents claim still to be living with their parent(s), even though 69% of young women experienced violence from parents and 58% from family members.

**Income** *“Health issues? I’m allergic to poverty”*

Income was extremely difficult to calculate with any reliability, as a number of respondents gave figures (e.g. \$12.00 per year) which made no sense, some said they didn't know, some said NO income, and others simply said "assistance" or "welfare". Because we could not know the values for these respondents we excluded their answers from our calculations. On that basis we were left with figures for 15 female and 23 male respondents, or just under 2/3 of those surveyed. The average incomes reported for males were 9,584, with the median being 10,000. The average incomes reported for females were 10,066, with the median income being 7,000 per annum. The female group included 2 very high salaries, which tends to skew the average annual income upward for females. Apart from that anomaly, the overall picture is one in which more males had higher annual incomes than the annual incomes for most females. In both cases, however, almost all these youth are living in poverty.



### Sources of Violence

These last figures highlight the tragic realities which connect these charts. Violence among this population most often stems from those physical and emotional arenas which are traditionally held to be safest: parents (51% claim to have been abused by their

parents), family (44%), school (44%), and relationships (36%). For whatever reason, these realities are particularly harsh for the female respondents, as evidenced by the higher percentages (parents: 68%, family: 56%, school: 58%, and relationships: 62%). For all kinds of violence, women reported greater levels than men. Bear in mind also that in this survey more males than females worked the streets, and also that it may be that males are less likely to judge experiences violent, or possibly to acknowledge to themselves or to report to others that they have suffered violent treatment, so it's not clear to what extent this finding of greater violence may be a result of internalized gender norms of "toughness" (males) vs. "vulnerability" (females).

### **Services**

A pervasive sense of isolation, a need for "community" and a need for better supports and services for QQ youth has been stressed in much of the literature we reviewed, so it was important to ask questions about use of and experiences with the services available to, and in some cases specifically designed for them. In some of the surveys, the sense of isolation many youth feel from any and every support or service is palpable.

**Part 5 Services**

32. Do you use... Never Sometimes Often Is it gay-positive? Lesbian +? Trans +?

The GLBT community center						
Community health/medical center (e.g. Three Bridges)						
Family doctor						
Food Aid such as free meals, food banks, soup kitchen (e.g. Street Mom)						
Youth centres and drop-ins (e.g. YAC)						
Aboriginal services						
Immigrant services (e.g. Success, SOS)						
Legal aid						
Bars –dance clubs						
Community services such as the Women's centre, the Dugout, etc.						
Community centres (e.g. Carnegie, Gathering place)						
Other						

**Part 6 Help and Support**

23. Do you seek help/support from any of these? (tick one or more)

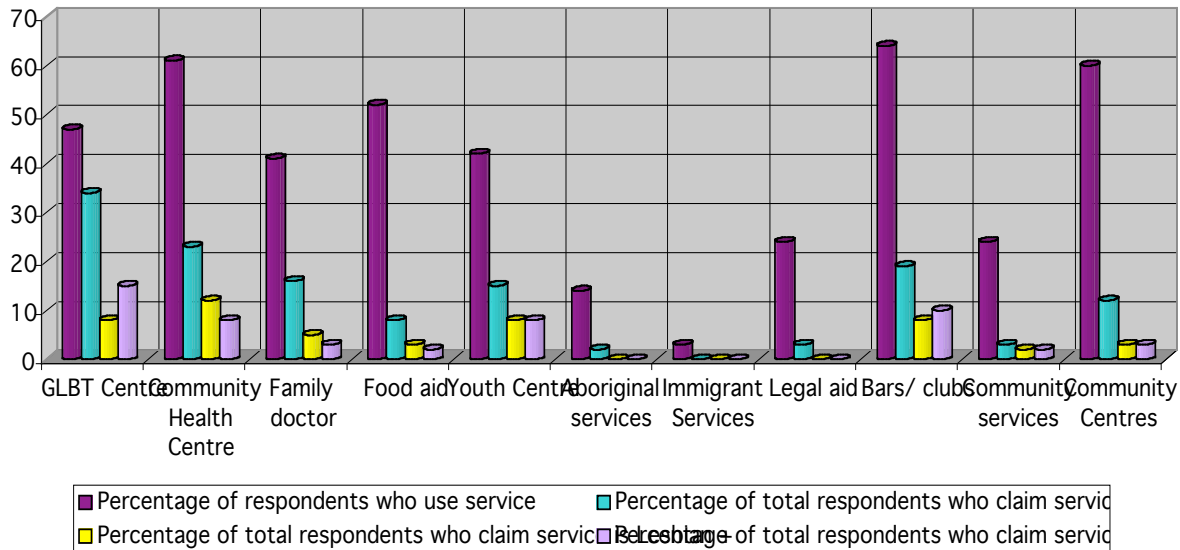
<del>Friends</del>	<del>relatives</del>	<del>neighbours</del>	<del>social worker</del>	<del>advocate</del>	<del>counselor</del>
<del>street family</del>	<del>elders</del>	<del>support groups</del>	<del>lover</del>	<del>religious</del>	<del>Other</del>

34. If none of the above, what do you do in a crisis? talk to myself35. Who do you give help/support to? none

Even for those services specified for the LGBT community, the youth who responded to our survey didn't necessarily feel those services to be "QQ positive", and this was especially true among minority respondents. Users of the Youth center found it "queer positive", while those who use aboriginal services, immigrant services, community centers and services, food services and legal aid services overwhelmingly reported that they were not LGBT positive. The most queer-positive places were identified as the LGBT center, community health center, and bars and clubs. Where people found they got the most support was, surprisingly, from service industry locations, such as bars and pubs



– perhaps because of the lack of authority and subsequent degree of freedom found therein. The following chart presents these findings.



## Substance Use

As indicated by our qualitative data gathered from interviews and focus groups, there are serious problems associated with bars and clubs being seen as the most supportive locations for QQ youth. Sexual exploitation and drug/alcohol addiction play a mutually reinforcing role and both predispose youth to street-involvement. In our survey, many respondents indicated the prevalence and nature of drug use in this population: 39/60 used non-prescription drugs, described in their own words as:

*Weed & down/ pot/ crystal meth/ mushrooms/ coke and heroin/ morphine/  
pot/ weed, hard liquor/ pot/ pot/ alcohol, weed/ pot/ marijuana,  
mushrooms, acid/ pot, beer/ alcohol, some street drugs/ advil and tylenol /  
weed/ pot/ drinks/ pot/ dex/ booze, weed mushrooms/ weed, beer meth/  
heroin, coke/ weed/ booze, pot/ rock/ meth/ pot, coke/ exheroin, smoke pot/  
pot, heroin, booze, coke/ booze, pot/ pot, booze, mushrooms/ booze, coke/*

*heroin/ beer, pot, mushrooms, PCP/ pot, booze, down, mushroom/ pot, E, crystal/ meth.*

Far fewer reported using prescription drugs, and the prescription drugs by far most often used were those prescribed for depression. Drug addiction was very frequently cited as a primary factor in street life, and drug use by their parents as well as by respondents themselves was often cited in stories of trouble at home. One youth indicated graphically the role drug use played in his own inability to communicate with his parents:

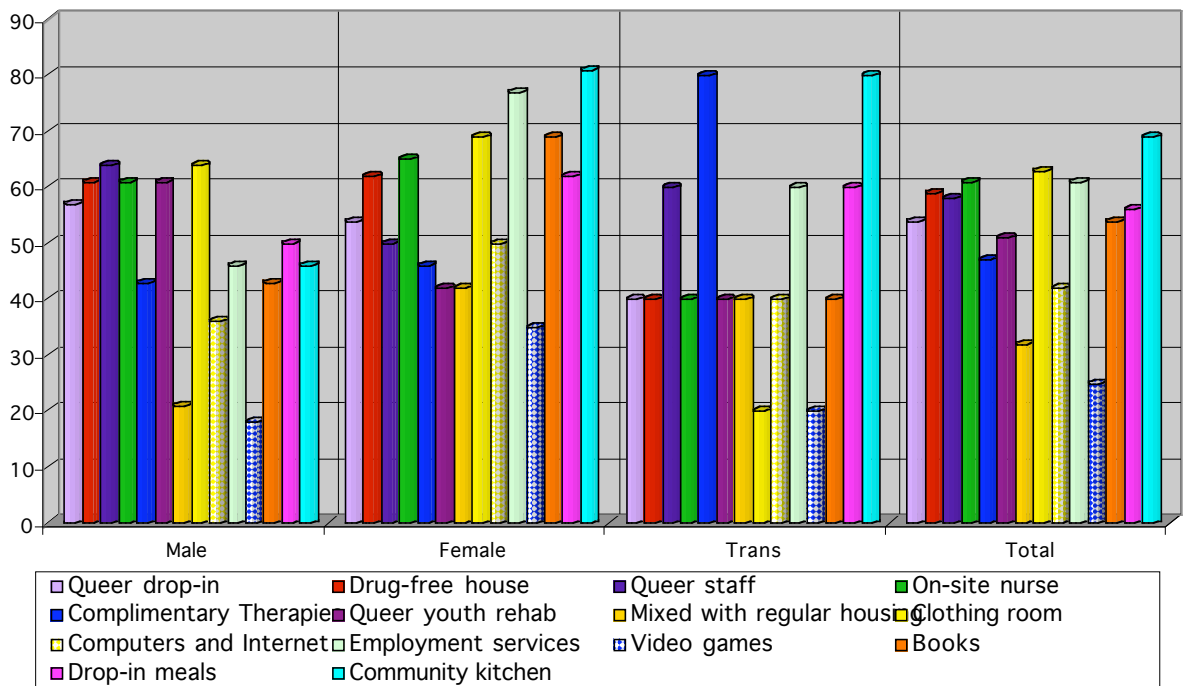


### Planning for Pridehouse:

*"Housing for queer youth should be an essential part of Vancouver street life. In other shelters you are at risk, street life is hard core, tough." (Tim)*

A primary aim of this study was to determine the kinds of housing arrangements that QQ youth would find most conducive to their support, stability and general well-being. So the last section of the survey asked a number of questions about what youth needed, wanted, and would most like to see if dedicated housing were to be designed for them. It is important to be very clear that many differences were apparent in what different groups wanted to see in a future Pridehouse: 80 % of women and 82% of trans respondents vs. 46% of males wanted a community kitchen. More women than men wanted books, internet access, computer access and employment services (77% of women compared with 46% of men); while more men than women wanted queer youth rehab and were far more adamant than women that they did NOT want to be mixed with regular housing – a sentiment which echoes the statements of many male ethnographic interviewees.

There was strong agreement on the need for a queer drop in, drug-free house, queer staff, an on-site nurse, a clothing room, and drop in meals. The following chart documents these findings.



The survey indicated a clear need and use for a “Pridehouse”, seen as stabilizing, supportive and accessible housing dedicated to youth who are situated, identified, or positioned, as sexually marginalized. However this study’s central category was problematic for many respondents.

*“I think it would be better to have a queer positive place rather than just for queer because you don’t want to single people out because that’s what people are doing to us, you know.” (Janice)*

It was agreed that even among street youth, it is stigmatizing and dangerous to self-identify as “queer”, and this is particularly so for young women, for what appear to be largely economic survival reasons. As one young man we met during a midnight Van run told us:

*“We’re all queer out here. We’re queer for money.”*

“Queer” sexuality is in complex ways regulated by economics of sexual exploitation and sexual exchange. This may be why we saw relatively fewer women than men declaring themselves to be unequivocally ‘queer’.

*“I have yet to meet one [woman] who considered herself lesbian or bisexual while still on the street, yet I’ve met several who have come out after exiting street life” (Sacha, fieldnotes)*

Men by contrast were more likely to self-identify as ‘gay’, ‘queer’, ‘two-spirited’, trans, etc. In fact “queer” was interpreted by many people as “really about gay men”.

*“A couple of women asked me what does ‘out’ mean? The fact that even the language around being gay or lesbian is foreign to them only further indicates that there is no room for it on the streets” (Sacha, fieldnotes)*

*“They [women] are prostituted and have sex with men...they have so many other things to deal with it’s unlikely they really get to put any attention to their sexuality.” (Darcie, fieldnotes)*

*“I feel that her being a queer female [working in the trade for 2 years] is much different than being a queer male. The pressure she has on her all day is so harsh that she has tried to commit suicide 4 times. It’s just the pressure of having to be this stereotypical woman is too much for her. Gay men don’t have that kind of pressure being put on them.” (P.J. fieldnotes)*

Despite the complexities of navigating sexual identity categories, almost all respondents spoke of the need for housing designated for queer youth.

*“ Most of the people I lived in group homes with were homophobic...I’d have to listen to them make all these gay jokes, and I just wouldn’t say anything...I’d have been the butt of every joke” (Sandra)*

Nevertheless, a recurrent stress among respondents was the need for housing that recognized difference within the queer community, and that the category “queer” (including any expanded categories of “LGBT” or “Queer and Questioning”) did NOT refer to a uniform, compatible, integrated “community of difference” but indeed groups whose interests and therefore whose needs for housing would NOT necessarily be easily compatible. First among these was the need (62%) for separate housing for people living with addictions and those seeking to be away from that struggle.

*“Life on the streets can be very dangerous for queer/trans youth. Life at ‘home’ can be very scary and very heartbreaking for queer/trans youth. Where can youth who identify as queer or trans feel safe, even if being ‘home’ can be scary? All people need to feel accepted and cared for, and if LGTB youth don’t feel either way, something’s wrong” (Jessie)*

Because of the way sexuality creates risk of rejection, the places of greatest support and safety were also the places of greatest harm and danger. Respondents indicated that as children, families were for QQ youth the most frequent source of violence, and schools were frequently hostile (44% of the survey respondents, including 62% of the female portion, reported experiencing violence at school. The streets, bars, and community

centers were characterized as being more predatory than protective to the young. A repeated theme was the need for ‘queer’ support beyond and outside of the rave/bar scene. Note that bars/clubs is the highest reported source of support for queer youth. This underscores expressed need for safe and supportive and stable housing in which one’s sexuality could be accepted.

*“Around homophobia, there’s a lot of police violence on the streets, cops beating up young women...Sure, some of that has to do with homophobia...” (Service provider)*

*“I had my legs run over by their bikes after I had fallen asleep on the sidewalk” (Lisa)*

Note also that for QQ youth, violence at the hands of the police exceeded for both males and females their experience of violence at the hands of Johns.

*“The label I put on myself is I’m a people person. I like boys and girls. But the label society puts on me is that I’m bisexual. And the label everybody else puts on me is that I’m a bisexual drug addict.” (Ben)*

Overall, in terms of sexual identification, youth themselves expressed far less concern about their sexuality than their survival, and voiced far less concern with their own sexual identification than with the inability of those around them to treat them with respect and acceptance.

*“I don’t believe in labels because they are very degrading, how is anybody different from anybody else? They are all humans, all made up of the same matter...everybody deserves love.” (Tony)*

In that way it might be fair to say that a house for QQ youth is less a response to the special needs of a particular group of youth, than to a generalized societal requirement for care, respect and compassion.

*“Sexual orientation is sometimes just a practice, not a key part of an identity” (Speedy)*

Nevertheless, whatever respondents’ personal views about sexual identification, most youths seemed to agree that, if not specifically housed and protected, queer youth will not be accepted, acknowledged or tolerated.

*“I think awareness and publicity, and promotion to generate knowledge about a large, multi-function GLBT youth center/housing space (similar to one in Seattle) is an absolute necessity. There needs to be at least one large community housing space for youth to go who may have been forced to leave home.” (Survey#23)*

### **Pridehouse: Wants and Needs**

The last section of the survey concerned wishes, wants and needs for a future Pridehouse. The respondents expressed a widespread desire (67%) to see a community kitchen, including drop in meals, as one of the central features of QQ-dedicated housing. Similarly, respondents expressed the desire for a safe and clean resource, as 58% and 60% chose a drug-free house and on-site nurse, respectively, as desirable features. This illustrates that the sense of community such an initiative would endeavour to create must not overlook the fundamental human necessities of food, health-care and safe shelter.

The population represented in this survey, and in this project as a whole, is often faced with impossible choices – between economic stability and emotional or mental well-being, in the case of those involved in the sex trade; between social acceptance and physical or mental health, for those wishing to break free of drug addiction; and between

the need for community and the need for privacy, in the case of the majority of respondents who long for a stable social milieu, yet value time alone in a safe environment as a rare and precious commodity. It is the challenge of a future Pridehouse to solve the dilemmas represented in these surveys, by providing basic and rudimentary resources for survival.



At the same time, a majority of respondents felt (57%) that Pridehouse should be staffed with queer social workers, and that it should be kept separate from regular housing (only 36% labeled mixed housing as a desirable feature); these findings suggest that the respondents see the initiative as a source of solidarity for the LGBT youth community. Lastly, respondents felt that Pridehouse should provide services to help integrate youths into the working world: 60% felt that it should provide employment services to its clients. Again, however, the nature of the respondents' desires for a future Pridehouse, and indeed the general slant of the surveys as a whole, suggest that resources for social,



intellectual and professional development must be preceded by the rudimentary materials for survival.

*“When you stop trying to survive, you can actually grow.”*

*(Speedy)*

***Caveat Surveyors: Some Warnings about the Use of Surveys and Interpretations of Survey ‘Data’.***

In interpreting survey data, some general points are in order. First, it seems important to explain that although the research team dedicated a considerable amount of time to rewording questions, deciding on what questions would be most important to ask, trying out the surveys with youth to get their detailed feedback and critique, and bringing those comments and criticisms back to the group, then revising the survey a number of times to arrive at the final version, nevertheless the actual practice of administering a survey to young people living under conditions of hardship and even crisis seemed to many of us to border on the unethical. What good, team members asked, does completing a survey do for these youth? The point of the survey---to collect quantitative data about what youth wanted and needed, as well as to try to get a better, more empirically grounded understanding of who these youth were, what their living conditions were, and the factors which contributed to their present circumstances, seemed “academic” in the worst sense of that term. The position many of us took was that the exercise felt rather exploitative, just another way of reducing the complexity of peoples’ lives and turning that complexity into numbers. Too-simple ‘data’ could make us LOOK like better researchers, when in actuality, in terms of our goals as community-based interventionist researchers, doing surveys made our research praxis WORSE, not better. It took peoples’ time, and gave them little (\$20 for helping us pilot the surveys, and giving detailed feedback on them,

and \$5-\$10 for completing the final version.) The research team expressed a clear preference for face-to-face interviews rather than paper and pencil surveys as a research tool.

The problem with surveys is surely compounded because typically survey data are artifacts of the survey itself, in other words, how you design and word the survey produces the so-called “information” you can get from it. In our survey, we saw this in some very specific ways. For example, the survey asked if people would want Pridehouse to be a “drug-free house”, and data show that this was a clear preference. However in interviews it became clear that many people believe that this is an unrealistic and even sometimes oppressive condition to live under, and wanted fewer rules and restrictions for their own “home”. One young man spoke of the need to be allowed to have moderate uses of non-addictive drugs as a “reward” for staying off harder drugs, and as a way to help managing addictions. Even those who were adamant that trying to “kick” while around other users would be impossible, envisaged a house where one floor, but not all floors, would be drug free. People did recognize degrees of drug (ab)use and addiction, and many people clearly felt moderate consumption of non-addictive drugs was certainly no worse than moderate consumption of alcohol. But we did not ask about drug use in any way that permitted them to express their views about degrees or kinds of drug use---nor, interestingly, did we ask whether the house should be alcohol free. So what we produced as a response to drugs at a Pridehouse was in this way an artifact of our own survey, in that it told us more about our survey (specifically its errors and weaknesses) than about the (far more sophisticated and complex) views of the respondents.

Another apparent contradiction our survey produced was about whether homophobia is a barrier to accessing services and support. Because although respondents stated overwhelmingly that there is a real need for dedicated QQ housing, in fact only 10 of the 60 surveyed stated that homophobia is a barrier to their use of services and supports. Taken by itself, that would tend to suggest that dedicated services, including housing

specifically for QQ youth, are NOT needed. However when we look in detail at the responses, what we discover leads us to ask whether this question itself has created these contradictory “findings”.

Because, interestingly, this question was NOT answered by 33/60 people. This is the highest number of non-responses in the whole 45-question survey, and even higher than the number of non-responses to the (far more time-consuming) cartoon task question. How do we interpret peoples’ failure to answer the homophobia question? One possibility is that terms like discrimination and homophobia use academic language which is alienating and/or meaningless to many respondents. But interestingly, one young woman who didn’t answer the homophobia question took the trouble to write on the rant page that “foster care sucks when you’re gay” because, she said, of “homophobic staff/residents”. At least in her case, understanding the term itself wasn’t the problem. Another urged that we should use the more “neutral” language of “alternative lifestyle”, and not mention homophobia.

What we need to be able to do, and what we have been able to do because we combined multiple data types and multiple ways of “getting at” youth views and experiences, is to interpret numerical data in greater complexity than is typical of survey data interpretation, and one thing we might caution about a question like this is that people seem reluctant to accept and to state that their sexuality creates barriers for them, even though in many other ways, through words and pictures, through face to face interviews and in their responses to other survey questions about their home, school and street experience, youth are very clear about the many ways that QQ sexuality definitely IS a barrier. So rather than conclude that only 10/60 youth found homophobia to be a barrier, we would suggest, instead, that this question makes people, even LGBT people, far too uncomfortable for them to want to answer, and would, again, warn against an overly literal interpretation of quantitative data, particularly when questions deal with stigmatized identities/practices.

A third example of the limitations of surveys is seen in our question “what would you like to see in a future Pridehouse?” and we listed 14 possible services, from drop in meals and drug rehab to books and video games. Lacking almost all these services, many people, not surprisingly, ticked off everything in sight, and the result you see in the chart is a veritable rainbow flag of different desires, with slight variation in priorities among the groups we distinguished (male/female/trans). Now this response is quite different than responses to other multi-item questions, such as “where did you get support while you were at school”. In one case we are asking about what, in the abstract world of ideals, people would “like to have”; in the school question we were asking about an experience they all did in fact have, so their responses tended to be less “global” (e.g. “I was supported by *everyone*”) and therefore more significant (e.g. we could see that school counselors on the whole were NOT very helpful to QQ youth, and not more helpful than peers or other adults, or regular teachers, despite the fact that it is explicitly their job to give that kind of support).

So how do we make useful sense out of the Pridehouse services question? One way is simply to see where each group differed in their desires for a future Pridehouse, and, if what people tended to do was to check off everything, then we could perhaps look to see what items people actually chose NOT to tick off. This would tell us what they DIDN'T value. And what they didn't value, using that criterion, was for males, video games, to be mixed with regular housing, and computers and the internet. For females, they DIDN'T value video games, queer youth rehab, and to be mixed with regular housing. Trans respondents DIDN'T value video games, and a clothing room. Trans and female youth MOST valued a community kitchen, something very low down on the agenda of males, who MOST valued queer staff, and a clothing room. Interestingly, books were very high on the list for women; and complimentary therapies very high on the list for trans respondents. Consistently valued by all three groups was an on-site nurse, and interestingly less valued by women than by men or trans youth was to have queer staff.

This of course makes sense given our finding that fewer street involved women than men self-identified as lesbian, for the reasons explained earlier in this report. What we can derive from this question is perhaps simply the need to look at differences within QQ groups, rather than generalize statistically across groups, because we can see that such a generalization would produce living conditions which best suited the dominant group (white gay men) and far less well suited the group numerically under-represented, i.e. trans youth of colour. And indeed this is the pattern identified in Trish Salah's literature review, and it should make us wary of generalizing from numerically based data sources such as surveys, which invariably "lump together" information about *all* QQ youth rather than seeking to understand and identify group-specific needs.

Perhaps the most important warning about interpreting these data, however, is the fact that the sample size is so small. Of the 60 respondents, for example, there were only 5 trans youth. Now that number MAY be representative of the proportion of trans youth to street-involved QQ youth of all other categories out of a total pool of 60 people, however it is simply not statistically significant to poll 5 individuals and then produce statistical "outcomes" from such a small set. And indeed 60 respondents is a very small sample for a survey. However what we were about in this study was trying to gather "suggestive" information, to try out a range of methods and see what the powers and the limitations of each method appeared to be, and to see if using multiple methods produced contradictions (in the case of the "drug-free house" and "homophobia" questions, it did, for example), and to see whether we could enrich our information by combining several data sources (as we could e.g. in the case of understanding women's seeming devaluing of queer staff, and their apparent under-involvement in street-based life in general, which appeared, from in depth interviews, to be an artifact of the economic determination of sex/gender "options" for young street involved women living in poverty).

So overall, this survey, and indeed all aspects of this research, should be read as richly suggestive, as a place to begin, as a "trial run", and therefore as a good basis for creating

a longer-term, more extensive study of sexuality, street-involvement, and housing needs. And the study as a whole is perhaps best read as indicating a need for more complex, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional research methods, since it does show the many ways in which layering one kind of data on top of another enables more complex, more complete, and indeed more accurate understandings to be developed.

## **Out/comes: Conclusions from “Interventionist” Research**

Interventionist research, research in which you actively set out to DO something in a context in which action is urgent, and when simply “studying the situation” actually does harm to the population being researched, is one way to engage in a study such as this one. The context here is urgent: the lives of street youth, and particularly those involved in prostitution as many “queer and questioning youth” are, are genuinely at risk moment to moment, and to conduct distanced, impartial data collection in such a setting can actively harm youth, whether by taking their attention and resources away from the urgent matter of getting enough to eat or a place to sleep that day, to attracting the punitive attention of the pimp overseeing a young woman who bravely agreed to speak to us. This is why we followed what has become established practice of paying participants for their knowledge and their time, why we ran the late-night food van, and as well why we tried to find ways we as researchers could become more knowledgeable about, and offer assistance in accessing, community resources for youth in crisis. What is clear is that we did not pay informants enough, nor were we able to offer much real assistance, given the enormity of the problems these youth contend with. Researchers who hope to do “community-based research” have some work to do figuring out how these things can actually be done ethically and respectfully.

*“A lot of research is used as a stalling tactic in light of the fact that addressing the real problem with real solutions is a daunting task...”  
(Justin, Fieldnote)*

Our findings contribute the following to our understanding of the many issues we’ve grappled with summarizing in this report:

1. The majority of street-involved queer youth take to the streets initially because of family breakdowns and/abuse. When family support breaks down, fewer services

and support are available to sexual minority youth in comparison with those available to heterosexually identified youth.

2. Unsupported youth, being particularly vulnerable to harm, are placed in the greatest dependency upon the state, yet they are also the group most likely to be overlooked in “social safety-net” provisions.
3. In terms of institutionally provided support for this most vulnerable group, least tolerated means most overlooked. Accordingly, in relation to social service provision, the most overlooked populations among sexual minority youth are likely to be aboriginal and “of colour” transgendered youth, those located at the furthest edges of the race/gender hierarchy whose normative order governs our daily lives.

*“We’re still not accepted, people just ignore the fact that we exist, they’re not accepting us, they just ignore the fact that we exist...” (Jay)*

4. Societal and institutionally entrenched, sexual ideologies and orthodoxies, imposed on as well as internalized by schools and community service providers, whether heterosexual or “LGBT”, function together to undermine efforts at effective provision of support and service for youth. Routinely, policies, procedures, and workers themselves operate in complete disregard of sexuality as an issue for youth, at best silencing the matter, at worse, prohibiting it.

*“Why can’t people accept differences? Why the fear? Why the obsession with labels?” (Survey#42)*

5. Community-based supports and services are few and hugely underfunded, and youth services sponsored and run by LGBT adult community members suffer from the same predation problems, actual and attributed, that heterosexual youth clubs, organizations and churches do. In multiple ways, this project found, for



sexual minority youth, starting with their own parents and family, **places of greatest refuge become the places of greatest danger**. In many ways, because of adults' exploitation of youth, because of the kinds of places there are to "*be queer and be safe*", as one woman put it, seems to be most often where it's most dangerous for queer youth to be, and this significantly includes drug and alcohol exposure. So far, bars and parks and after hours clubs have been among the few places LGBT adults have devised for keeping an always besieged culture active and visible.

6. With queer identities always on our societal "prohibited list", there are few places where youth can be and fewer yet where they can be safe. **Greatly intensified in the case of the LGBT community, therefore, is the responsibility adults have to make safe and supportive space in queer culture for youth**, given that LGBT youth often have no where else to go when they discover the ways shelters, doctors, detox centers, foster homes and jobs available to other young people end up being denied to them.
7. **Youth see themselves as agents in their own lives** whenever that has been possible for them.

*"We don't let young people grow up in our community."  
(Colleen, Youth Shelter Worker)*

They assert their need for agency, and in terms of dedicated housing, they stress the importance of privacy, non-judgmental support, and a real say in how the house or building is run. They are, after all, already agents in their own lives, in part because they have "chosen"<sup>7</sup> to live on the street, they "choose" their friends, decide their own hours, activities and sexualities.

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<sup>7</sup> A useful way to think about "choice" here was suggested by one of the researchers, P.J. Simon, who reminded us that before you say something was chosen its useful to look at what the other options were.

8. All participants were in agreement that youth trying to quit drugs and/or alcohol should not be housed with youth who were actively abusing these substances. Despite the unfortunate “all-or-nothing” wording of our survey, which produced an evident preference for a “drug-free house”, in the full-length face to face interviews **a policy of inclusive, supportive and non-judgmental harm reduction was the clear majority preference**, and, in interviews, some respondents directly challenged the view that complete prohibitions on substance use could or would be an effective “house rule”.
9. **Gender and economic conditions appear inseparable.** So among street-involved youth, and specifically those involved in sex work, young men working the streets, many of whom self-identify as heterosexual, appear to have greater freedom, greater material resources, and better prospects than young women, likely due in large part to the fact that their clientele are male, men buy sex much more often, and men in this country are better off financially as a group than women.

*If you could say one thing to Johns, what would you tell them?*

*“You don’t purchase a life...For God’s sake you never purchase a life for any period of time, you just don’t. A life is its own life ...and that’s what I’d tell them basically, you don’t buy life. You know. I hope I said that right.” (Taz)*

Among the young women we interviewed, a majority self-identified as bisexual, citing queer self-identification as ‘dangerous’. Not surprisingly, lesbians are the least visible sexual minority group among street-involved youth. Youth are most visible, and most likely to take up transgendered identifications. It would appear

that a sexual economy regulates both of these identity positionings, and requires ambiguity with respect to one's own sexuality. Correspondingly, the affirmation of any particular sexual identity is a right with a price tag, and we found it was the youth with greatest economic means who were most likely to unambiguously self-identify as queer or gay/lesbian.

10. A house divided into dedicated "floors" or "wings" would be essential to serving the different needs of differently positioned youth. This was the strong recommendation by all groups. Discrimination of many, often intersecting kinds, punctuates street-life, rupturing relations of solidarity among disenfranchised youth themselves, as well as being interwoven in the fabric of a persistently gender-differentiated social service provision. In terms of housing, therefore, both the determination of housing need and the determination of housing structure must take this social fragmentation seriously into account. The idea of "a room of one's own" was very passionately endorsed by all, and it is quite clear that privacy is greatly valued. Although many respondents spoke of their desire to "mix" with others, all stressed that differences between and among sexual minority groups made needs and desires and attitudes very different among the many different groups of "sexual minority" youth, and echoed warnings about incompatibilities, discomfort and even hostilities between and among groups who might seem all to be encompassed by the broad umbrella term, "queer".

By way of conclusion, rather than leave readers of this report with the kind of closure that the researcher contrives for it, we turn, instead, to the eloquent openings offered by the participants' own words

*That's why we're social animals, we're supposed to deal with these problems together, we're meant to deal with them as a community, and*

*love, that's my belief, love, we're supposed to go out there and show a little common courtesy and dignity...(Jay)*



“I was raised with defensive mechanisms where somebody tries to put any labels on me, I can bullshit my way out of it or don't tell them the whole truth. But why should life be like that people should be able to tell the truth about each other, not have to bullshit their way just so they feel safe and you walk down the street, why should you put your eyes down when everybody keeps their eyes up.” (Tony)

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### **Web-based resources**

ACLU: <http://www.aclu.org/issues/gay/Statistics.html>

Advocates for Youth <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fsglbt.htm>

Age of Consent, Canada: <http://www.ageofconsent.com/canada.htm>

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