

At Street Level: Learnings, Voices, Experiences, and Lifestyles of Street Involved Youth

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Abstract Street Involved Youth (SIY) are part of a diverse, complex, and heterogeneous group which is underestimated, under resourced, and often ignored in programs and planning for health and social wellness. As the numbers of SIY continue to grow, so do the issues and challenges related to the roles of nursing in working with this vulnerable population. Study Intent: The goal was to engage SIY to gather, share, and exchange information (learnings + voice) about experiences, lifestyles, needs, opportunities, and strengths of SIY from their perspectives; and to inform programs/services, policies, and interventions to achieve preferred futures. Method: The project used a qualitative community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach with an arts-based method – specifically music. Results: Two thematic groups with sub-themes were derived. The first thematic grouping is LOCATION which had four sub-themes - ‘Individual Orientation’; ‘Collective (Culture/Sub-culture) Orientation’; ‘Behavioral Orientation’; and ‘Time Orientation’. The second thematic group is DIRECTION with three sub-themes - ‘Path of Disempowerment’; ‘Path of Empowerment’; and ‘Shifting Paths’. Study Limitations: This study was conducted in partnership with a single SIY agency in a relatively small urban setting in Canada. Conclusions: In working with SIY, it is imperative to ‘meet them where they are’ with research methods that are innovative and engaging. In this study, the use of music as an arts-based method was found to be highly suitable, efficient, and mutually beneficial.

Keywords Street Involved Youth, Nursing Research, Arts-based Methods, Music and Performative Methods

1. Introduction

"Street Youth have been a hidden part of our community that is underserved and under recognized." (Sutherland, Leader Post, August 2011)

Street involved youth (SIY) have become a phenomenon, both locally and globally, replete with labels, little understanding, and poorly constructed solutions; hence, an inexact, intractable situation is in play. This population is ill defined, which contributes to a lack of national and global data, including the absence of systematic measures for youth homelessness and, by extension, SIY [1]. Estimating the numbers of SIY, although a necessity, is a challenge due to ambiguity in definitions, inconsistent service use by SIY, and a lack of intentionality to enumerate these individuals. Most counts are cross-sectional and conservative estimates that do not sufficiently capture the fluidity or diversity of SIY. In addition, estimates vary in relationship to diverging philosophies, theories, and political agendas [2].

Aside from the difficulties in enumerating and even identifying SIY, the research has consistently revealed that this population is far from being homogenous and accessible. Regardless of the numbers, health professionals, including nurses, meet, treat, and support SIY in innumerable settings with innumerable challenges. Despite this, SIY remain underserved, understudied, and ‘under heard’. Given the on-going growth, range of high risk behaviors, and lack of consistent programs/services within this population, it is obvious that there is a significant and pressing need to find unique ways to engage the members of this group to build rapport, understanding, and trust.

This research project was rooted in a desire to better understand the needs, strengths, and potential to engage with SIY on issues related to health and lifestyle choices. The research team was privileged to have a strong community partner and prior relationship with a SIY agency that embraced flexibility and client-centeredness as foundational to working with this target group. In our experience, the SIY that we worked with in a small urban setting tended to be transient, insular, and disengaged. As a result, we invested a significant amount of our efforts to build a relationship and visibility with the youth. Further, we intentionally sought out a research process that was highly inclusive and transparent

that offered the potential to engage with the youth in a manner that mattered to them. As the project evolved it intentionality quickly led to an arts-based approach with the youth's preferred ways to voice and share their perspectives about their circumstances, challenges, and choices. Through the creation of music and songs, the youth in this project told and taught us what it was like "At Street Level".

2. Background

Our literature search included Medline, Ovid Nursing, and CINAHL full text peer reviewed English research articles with the key words of street youth, homeless youth, health and social services, arts based method, music, and nursing. As a general observation, there was a paucity of articles on this topic. Of the retrieved articles, three major categories emerged.

2.1. The Scene at Street Level

In the first literature set, the characteristics and attributes – often leading to street engagement - of street youth were revealed. This contained the largest representation of articles. Essentially, these contributions revealed SIY as diverse, complex and heterogeneous, with strangely named subcultures like "group homers", "twinkies" and "throwaways". The literature defines SIY as those young people 25 years of age or younger who are homeless or under-housed; have been forced to leave their families of origin; who have run away from their homes without the consent of their parent or guardian; or who left foster or group care placements [2, 3, 4]. Worthington et al. [4] expanded the definition of SIY to include youth who are not living on the street, but who experiment and engage in street-involved activities and identify with street culture and street peer groupings. According to Karabanow [5], researchers, service providers, and policy makers define SIY as individuals between 16 and 24 years of age who lack a permanent place to call home and who spend significant amounts of time/energy on the street (e.g., in parks and dumpsters); in squats (i.e., abandoned buildings); at youth shelters and/or with friends (i.e., couch surfers).

A number of typologies [6, 7, 8] have been proposed to categorize SIY. Most categorize the SIY according to the reason(s) for presence on the street, duration of presence on the street, and/or range of activities (such as sex work) on the street. Auersald and Eyre [9] developed a life-cycle model that illuminates the stages or pathways of involvement and non-involvement for SIY as they transition into and, potentially, out of street life. The model describes key influences at each stage, including street mentors who provide youth with basic street survival skills and assist them in understanding the culture of street life.

Current trends related to SIY include: 1) increasing incidence; 2) decreasing age of entry into street involvement, especially for females; and 3) increasing identification as gay,

lesbian, bisexual or transgendered [10]. Currently in Canada, youth (ages 16-24) make up about 20% of the homeless population [11]. According to Segaert [12], in Canada there are approximately 30,000 homeless youth annually, of which approximately two-thirds are male.

2.2. The Gravity at Street Level

The second, rather limited, literature set focused on the circumstances and conditions experienced by SIY, including health and social support systems considerations. Youth become homeless – and quickly transition to Street Involved Youth (SIY) status - when and because multiple systems fail them. At the heart of this issue lies a burgeoning list of issues including poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, gaps in health, education, and social services, family violence, social isolation and a myriad of other social problems. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC] [13], SIY are a hard population to reach from a surveillance perspective, as they have little interaction with the health, welfare, and education systems [14]. Limited studies on SIY have shown that this population experiences poor nutrition [15], high incidence of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B & C [16, 17], high rates of pregnancy [16], and drug addictions [18]. Mortality rates have been reported up to 40 times that of the general population [16, 19]. Additionally, SIY experience disproportionate rates of mental health issues [20] including high rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide and death due to drug overdose [21].

Historically, research involving SIY in Canada portrayed them as pathologically-laden delinquents [22]; as pathetically maltreated children [23]; and as misunderstood and structurally-disengaged individuals [24]. More recently, Tyler & Schmitz [25] revealed that family backgrounds replete with abuse and violence were a major catalyst to a lack of permanent residence for adolescents. Remaining on the streets is most often related to substance abuse, lack of addiction treatment, lack of housing, incarceration, and sex trade work [26]. Further, most research with this population remains cross-sectional, and is often related to agency or service effectiveness, or to the immediate survival needs of SIY.

A number of key studies inform this proposed research. The first is the work of Worthington et al. [4] in Calgary, which considered the experiences, needs and strengths of SIY through a participatory approach. From this study, it is noted that youth voiced a number of concerns about services available or unavailable to assist them while on the street. The second study is the 'Voices from the Margins' project which considered youth homelessness in Winnipeg [27]. The final recommendation from this report is for "societal support systems to be examined to determine changes needed to better support and respond to those at-risk youth who fall outside the mainstream". The third study is the synthesis work of Boivin, et al. [16], which challenges

researchers, policy/decision makers and providers to address the need for Canadian data on SIY in specific areas including mental health, violence, pregnancy, and STIs to inform future health interventions for this target population. This latter work is further affirmed by Elliott [28] who charged health care providers with the role of reducing the impact of risk factors related to SIY.

Intervention models and cases populate a significant proportion of the literature. The intervention models ranged from critical theory based practice models [29, 30] to brief intervention models [31] to integrated models [32] to youth-friendly models [33, 34]. Case based articles tended to focus on local or specialized programs and services [35, 36]. The Canadian Homelessness Network [10] recently released a comprehensive document that outlines a number of such models and cases as well as their implications for policy and practice.

2.3. Engaging at Street Level

The third literature set highlighted the diversity of research approaches and techniques used to engage and study SIY, ranging from traditional empirical pursuits to arts in nursing/health research. Fraser and al Sayah [37] recognized the potential of such approaches in knowledge production and knowledge translation. These same authors emphasized the utility of such research methods to reflect feelings and experiences. Others [38, 39] highlighted the therapeutic purposes of such methods.

Historically, the rise of interest and uptake of arts based approaches in health research is relatively new [40,41]. According to Findlay [42], these approaches are often used jointly with other qualitative methods. The literature subdivides the arts based methods into three groupings. Visual arts [43] are often pictorial or photographic depictions that are effectual in data capture such as perceptions of health [44], cultural differences in health [45], and subject feelings/emotions [46]. Theatre (such as ethno-drama), dance, and music are frequent examples of performance arts approaches. These approaches are highly accessible to a wide array of audiences [47] and are effectual in knowledge translation [37]. Travis [48] spoke about hip hop as a means for youth (although not SIY) to voice their realities, describing them as developmental narratives that align with positive youth development. Finally, literary arts (such as poetry and autoethnography) which like the visual arts are primarily knowledge production approaches [37] that reveal the human experience [49].

The extant literature consistently articulated the potential and imperative for arts-based health research. Arts based methods fall within the qualitative umbrella and generally are underpinned by post-modernist thought [50] including the use of reflexive and situated accounts [51]. Numerous authors [52, 53, 37] reflect on the nature of arts-based research, including the essentials of being participatory, contributing to co-creation of knowledge, and rooted in

equality. In addition, the extant research has positioned artistic activities as congruent with participatory action research methods [54].

3. Methodology

The ‘At Street Level’ project was a community based participatory research (CBPR) study, a highly collaborative approach, which is potentially empowering and inclusive for groups who have lacked voice. The project participants were invited to tell their stories in their way through the use of self-created lyrics. For the participants, this project sought meaningful interactions and opportunities to enable them to describe their realities and create their preferred futures. Through CBPR, a community group and academic researchers teamed up to gain a better understanding about a practical community issue – the health and social status of SIY in one city - in order to bring about change. The community team was comprised of a community researcher from within the organization and a reference group within the agency (including the management team). This team determined the site, nature of the interactions, and access to the youth, as well as participating in the data collection and analysis phases of the research. The academic team was comprised of three (3) faculty members with backgrounds in nursing, education, and music as well as two (2) undergraduate student research assistants. This partner group took the lead in grant writing and resource mobilization (such as links to the music community), and worked cooperatively with the community partner on all parts of the research. By its nature, CBPR is collaborative, participatory, empowering, systematic, and transformative in addressing community issues. CBPR “highlights the centrality of the community and its members in not only setting but operationalizing its research agenda” [45]. CBPR promotes consciousness-raising and critical thinking as a means to engage and catalyze action for change [55]. In undertaking such research, the community-academic team was challenged by emerging trends, policies, and preferred futures of this community to ensure control of the research and equitable involvement [56] in all phases of the research process.

As an outcome of the CBPR process, the team was led to seek an innovative and SIY friendly approach to engagement and data collection. As a result, the creation of rap music by participants, as a form of lyrical storytelling, was utilized by the community-academic research team. This approach, according to a number of researchers, is revealing and challenges negative stereotypes about youth [57, 58]. Despite this promise, it is noted that music infrequently appears in the research, which again appears counterintuitive to its evocative and therapeutic outcomes and its potential to build understanding at new levels [59].

The project was approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board.

3.1. Research Questions

The research purpose was to gather, share, and exchange information (learnings + voice) about health-related experiences (and lifestyles), needs, opportunities, and strengths of SIY from their perspectives. In addition, a major objective of the study was to inform programs/services providers, policymakers, and interventions for SIY to achieve preferred futures.

3.2. Sampling

A purposive sampling technique provided the participants in this study. Inclusion criteria were: 16 years to 19 years of age; self-identifying as a SIY for at least three (3) months; involvement with the participating community based partner; an interest in music, generally, and rap music, specifically. A total of seven (7) youth participated in this process. By the very nature of this group they are highly transient, so at times the agency would have ten (10) to twenty-five (25) youth at the site over the course of a month with variation in the nature and length of stay. It is noted that we only worked with youth at one location during this project, although the agency has a number of sites and programs. Although a relatively small sample, it reflects the exploratory nature of this study and addresses the transitory nature of the target population.

3.3. Data Collection

Through the participating community based partner and academic research team, select SIY were offered the opportunity to attend a national music awards event. During this event, the participants were exposed to music creation (i.e., lyrics), instrumentation, and performance (i.e., lighting, staging). The community based partner had a prior existing sound and recording studio at one of its sites. The SIY participants were invited to co-create a song for potential recording by the community researcher. Within the timeframe, two songs were created and recorded for this purpose, as well as video recordings of each. All seven (7) participants contributed to the lyrics, music, and video based on their individual interests. For the purpose of this study, only the lyrics were considered in the analysis. Further consideration of the video recording will be given in a future paper.

The community-academic research team chose to transcribe the lyrics from the recorded music rather than from the written scripts to ensure capture of the full text. These were done independently by one member of the academic team and then compared with the community researcher's transcription for accuracy and integrity. Discrepancies were reviewed and a 92% inter-rater reliability was achieved.

3.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis of the lyric contributions was conducted by two of the academic research team members (led by the first author). Through an iterative process, each researcher conducted independent multiple reads of the data. Following that process, each sorted the data into meaning units (i.e., words or phrases). These units were then jointly sorted into 21 distinct categories which represented related meaning units. These categories were then reconsidered and collapsed into 7 sub-themes. With the sub-themes revealed, the researchers undertook a further consideration. At this point, two thematic groups were derived. A further description and examples of each of the elements are reflected in the following section.

4. Findings

The first song produced by the participants was entitled 'Warrior',^{© street culture studios}. Comprised of three verses, a chorus, and an epilogue, the song contained 848 words in 103 lines. The words were intentionally masculine and related to the roles and images - past, present, and future -of warriors in the Aboriginal context. Two representative lyrics highlighted this song's contributions to our research dialogue:

"I told ya I'm a warrior, a warrior. Fighting for the right thing."

"Our people need our young warriors to come back to the ways of a true warrior."

The second song produced by the participants was entitled 'Stereotypes',^{© street culture studios}. Comprised of three verses, and a chorus, the song contained 399 words in 41 lines. In this instance, both genders were represented and articulation of images and labelling was evidenced as these pertained to SIY. Again, representative lyrics related to the song's focus included:

"You look at me, like you think you know what you see. But you don't have any idea of who I really am."

"I'm livin' proof that good girls can go bad"

Further presentation of the research findings will be highlighted below using the themes and sub-themes to guide the discussion. The summary of the sub-themes, categories, and (abridged) meaning units are presented in Table 1. The first thematic grouping is LOCATION, which encompassed the four (4) sub-themes of 'Individual Orientation'; 'Collective (Culture/Sub-culture) Orientation'; 'Behavioral Orientation'; and 'Time Orientation'. The second thematic group was DIRECTION, which encompassed the three sub-themes of 'Path of Disempowerment'; 'Path of Empowerment'; and 'Shifting the Balance'. These relationships are further described and integrated in a tentative model using a compass metaphor.

Table 1. From meaning units to themes.

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories	Examples (meaning units)	Frequency
L O C A T I O N	INDIVIDUAL ORIENTATION	Being/knowing	Person; personal	5
		Self-identification	I; myself	136
	COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION	‘The Collective’/Aboriginal	Our; family	13
		Our People’	Tribe	32
		World (s)	Colour; skin	6
		‘On the Street’	Nations; racist	9
	BEHAVIOURIAL ORIENTATION	Addictive	Out there; streets	14
		Perceptions	Drink; fix; habits	8
		Personal Consequences	Dangerous; crazy	11
		Social Consequences	Beaten; bruised	18
TIME ORIENTATION	Past	Correctional; poverty	8	
	Present	Over; end	10	
	Future	Now; am	6	
D I R E C T I O N	PATH TO DISEMPOWERMENT	Directionality	When; become	7
		Power	Away; negativity	54
		Labels	Target; control	8
	PATH TO EMPOWERMENT	Physiological	Haunting; snakes	17
		Goal Driven	Breathless; burning	12
S H I F T I N G	SHIFTING PATHS	Processes	Destiny; dream	55
		Quality	Give; understand	64
	Facilitators	Equal; fulfill	38	
	Taking Control	Champ; protector	21	
		Strategies	Afford; keep	39
			Bet; steps; protect	84



Figure 1. 8 Point Compass Rose

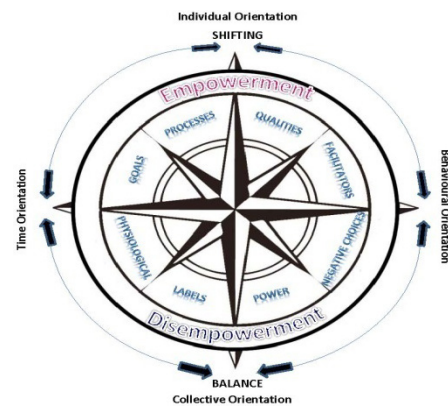


Figure 2.A compass model for SIY: In the pursuit of direction

4.1. Location

The first theme, ‘Location’, refers to how the SIY position themselves. This positioning is analogous to the compass rose with its eight principal points (see Figure 1). In the traditional use, the cardinal (large points) and inter-cardinal (smaller points) represent geographic directions. In this study, the youth voiced four (4) cardinal ‘places’ in which they must position themselves. Specifically, they must know who they are in terms of both individual (INDIVIDUAL ORIENTATION) and collective (COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION) identity. They must also recognize their TIME ORIENTATION in terms of past/present/future. Finally there is a need to understand their behavioral (BEHAVIORAL ORIENTATION) stance. Each of these cardinal locators hold positive and negative options for the youth, which are represented by the inter-cardinal markers. For example, with respect to COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION, the SIY may opt for gang lifestyles or linkages with supportive agencies.

4.2. Direction

The second major theme is DIRECTION which is rooted in choices made by the SIY. In this study it refers to the paths to empowerment and/or disempowerment available. It was clear from the lyrics that the SIY are in a constant power battle and there is a continuous tension in the shifting of powers. As with the compass, there is no judgement of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ on this continuum but rather the interest lies in the balance established by the individual SIY. Furthering the compass metaphor, this relationship is visually depicted as the circular demarcation known as chapter ring. This term reminds us that each increment or position is a chapter in the life of the SIY.

4.3. A Tentative Relationship

The model presented (see Figure 2) encapsulates the

above discussion of the various components. It emphasizes the ‘fluidity’ of the needle as in the compass, which reflects the movement and fine ‘attune’ment to changes in the prevailing ‘winds’ of SIY.

5. Implications

5.1. Relevance to Nursing

This study contributes to nursing practice and research with SIY, specifically, and vulnerable populations, generally. It highlights this specific complex, underserved, vulnerable population as a potential interest for nurses. The work done with this small group creates awareness of the issues and challenges faced by SIY where nurses have a clear role, such as health awareness, positive choices, cultural safety, and mental health. The value of these involvements will be not only at the client level, but will further inform nursing practices, potentially increase cultural competencies, and lead to innovative interventions. Additionally, the relative lack of extant literature on this group invites nurses not only to be at the research table, but to establish the research agenda. Nurses have a key role in bringing appropriate, ethical, and inclusive research methods to this topic. In such a role, nurses can affect the academic-community partnership that is so imperative to meaningful, transparent, and effective research pursuits.

5.2. Relevance to Research

This project has contributed to exploring the nature of this research topic and revealing the imperative to establish a responsive research agenda. As posited within this document, arts-based approaches, including music, appear to hold promise in this context. However, in embracing such diverse and emergent approaches, it is critical to fully explore the ethical aspects of such approaches, especially confidentiality, ownership, and control.

The research approach used in this study was responsive and appropriate to the SIY population. It invited them to share in a manner that they identified as preferable. This research approach enabled full participation, reduced barriers to inclusion (such as literacy), and created a non-judging environment for SIY contributions. The use of an arts based approach with SIY was meritorious in that the participants could work independently of the research team, which was seen as an empowerment approach. In addition, there is an imperative as researchers working with vulnerable or at risk populations to ensure that they are comfortable with the location of the research and the approach. Again, the strength of this research method was that the power and control remained with the SIY.

A number of areas for potential research development and improvement were identified. In terms of potential topics related to SIY, the need to explore the meaning of

‘life’ on the street and ‘mentorship’ emerged. The realities and experiences shared were, at times, overwhelming and emotional; thus, often we did not get to the depth of exploration that is important to fully understand and respond. Also through this study, we recognized the need for replication of the research method to refine and further expand its description in the research literature. One area of interest would be in ‘interviewing’ the song writing process to understand the emergence of the lyrics and potentially reveal the underpinnings to the concepts and depth of perceptions. Further, working over a longer time period with a larger group of participants would be important to the research rigor and trustworthiness. Additionally, more involvement of the youth in interpretation of the research data/findings would strengthen the approach. We learned that the commitment of the few consistent participants was important, but the involvement of the many SIY who came throughout the project was not fully represented or captured in our research. Each of them contributed to our learnings and understanding. It would be a strength in future research to bring their ‘unheard’ lyrics and voices into the process. Although we have not fully explored how that might be achieved, it is an area of challenge and consideration for researchers working with vulnerable and/or transient populations such as SIY.

6. Conclusions

In this study, a small group of SIY participated in an arts-based CBPR study to explore their perspectives on their circumstances and preferred futures. The participants were SIY accessing services through the partner organization in a small urban setting. In total, seven individual SIY remained consistently involved in the research project, although a number of others showed varying levels of involvement and/or interest.

The research team recognized the complexities and challenges of not only reaching this unique population, but also in successfully engaging them in a research process. The selection of an arts-based music driven approach was intentional and informed by input of the partner organization and the participants. This approach was successful in engaging this non-homogeneous and potentially vulnerable group in a short-term research intervention. Further, this research method was seen as a strength as it was highly flexible and invited the SIY to explore their issues and options at their own pace in a novel and innovative manner.

As a result of the project, the participants generated rich data in the form of two co-created songs. This data (in the form of lyrics) was thematically analyzed resulting in two major themes – Location and Direction – essentially, where they are and where they are going. In terms of ‘Location’, the research uncovered four orientations for the youth – individual, collective, time, and behavioral – which speak to the continuous flux for the SIY as they seek balance in their

lives. In terms of 'Direction', the research is about choices that SIY encounter that is often influenced by the level of power enjoyed by the youth at a given point in time and within a given context. Through a reflection on meaning units, sub-themes, and major themes, a tentative model was created built around a 'compass' as metaphor.

In conclusion, this research contributed to the opportunity for voice and participation by SIY, a vulnerable or potentially vulnerable population. Further, it informed future researchers of the imperative for a research agenda involving SIY to not only be innovative and transparent, but also inclusive. In keeping with this imperative, the final challenge to researchers belongs to the participants and comes from their own words from Warrior^{© street culture studios}

"I hope you see what I'm about, until then I am a warrior".

Acknowledgements

This study received financial support from the University of Saskatchewan -College of Nursing Royal Bank of Canada Nurses for Kids.

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