

# Chapter 7

## “Being hooked up”: Exploring the experiences of street youth and information technologies

Jeff Karabanow

Ted D. Naylor

The vast majority of research with street youth has focused on etiology and street culture (Karabanow 2004; Panter-Brick and Smith 2000; Raffaelli and Larson 1999; Robertson and Greenblatt 1992). Such investigations have been concerned with how young people enter street life and the myriad of activities associated with street survival (see for example, Green 1998; Karabanow et al. 2005; McCarthy 1990; Michaud 1988; Raffaelli and Larson 1999). This chapter takes a different, yet complimentary, approach and explores the experiences of twenty Halifax street youth with regard to information and communication technologies (ICTs). For the purposes of this study, ICTs primarily refer to the basic networking possibilities created through the Internet and the prerequisite computer skills required for “being online.”

The significance of such an investigation is twofold. One, such an investigation recognizes that, at present, many aspects of civil society incorporate diverse elements of ICTs in ways that are thought to be novel, potentially creating new possibilities of social capital in terms of bonding, solidifying, or enhancing existing relationships among communities, groups, or individuals. Paradoxically, at the same time, the lack of skills and competency with ICTs, coupled with inequalities around access for marginalized populations, may only deepen feelings of isolation and social exclusion (Looker and Thiessen, 2003; Eamon 2004). This is particularly poignant for street youth, who are by

nature a marginalized population and are found to suffer from loneliness differently from those in the general population (Rokach 2005, 477).

Secondly, there is now a significant contention that literacy with ICTs is fundamental to a successful socio-economic sphere in an age of “informational capitalism” (Parayil 2005), or what is commonly referred to as a “knowledge economy.” Competency with ICTs, therefore, is considered to be increasingly essential for social capital in terms of its bridging capacity, potentially creating access to education and skills training programs, and for labour-force participation (Eng 1994; Murray 1995; Pearson 2002). As Milton (2003, 2) notes, “ICT skills are a key factor in both individuals’ success in the labour market and in national economic growth.” When we consider that many homeless and at-risk youth lack basic employment skills (Karabanow et al. 2005) and also comprise a marginalized and vulnerable population in relation to civil society at large, exploring street youth experiences and attitudes in relation to ICTs becomes an important field of empirical inquiry. Nevertheless, there continues to be a dearth of knowledge concerning ICTs and homeless populations.

This study begins to explore how young people living on the street in one Canadian city understand, experience, and access ICTs. Equally important, the study also attempts to shed light on whether street youth feel “hooked up” or “left behind,” embedded within the tensions of living on the margins of an increasingly technology-driven socio-economic landscape.

### **YOUTH, STREET LIFE, AND ACADEMIC STUDY**

One of the significant findings from this study suggests that young people living on the street and/or in emergency shelters and supportive housing structures are not only familiar and comfortable with ICTs but interact with this technology frequently. The remarkable issue here is that these young people are primarily homeless and spend much of their day-to-day living attempting to satisfy basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety.

The majority of research about street youth has focused on the ways in which these young people enter street life and experience homeless culture. There has always been a debate within the literature as to the “true” causes of homelessness, some conceptualizing the phenomenon in terms of “running toward” the glamour, freedom, and excitement of street life (Yablonsky 1968), others as pathologies inherent within the actor such as “runaway reaction disorders” (Stierlin 1973) and “depressed-withdrawn delinquencies” (Edelbrock

1980). In the last few decades, especially considering the discovery of high levels of sexual and physical abuse experienced in street youth populations (Janus et al. 1987; Kufeldt and Nimmo 1987), the conceptualization of street entry has been understood in terms of "running away" from traumatic and distressful experiences within the family unit, child welfare settings, and other institutional structures, such as school. Numerous studies concerned with street etiology have pointed toward family dysfunction and strain, problematic child welfare experiences, poverty-related living, struggles with sexual orientation, school dropouts, and substance abuse (Child Welfare League of America 1991; Green 1998; Karabanow 2004; McCarthy 1990; Morrisette and McIntyre 1989). In general, it has become more apparent that homeless youth face grave situations prior to street life and move toward the street as a way to manage and cope with traumatic situations (Karabanow 2008). As one young person living on the street in Toronto remarked, "Don't you think I'd go back [to family] if I could, why would someone want to be out here on the streets?" (Karabanow 2003). It is apparent that many young people perceive the street as safer than where they have come from—a telling point considering the dangers and exploitation of street living. The "street-as-dangerous" understanding of homeless youth effectively underscores the current study and how we understand homeless youths' interaction and engagement of ICTs.

Street life presents a myriad of activities, legal/quasi-legal and illegal, to occupy the time and energy of its inhabitants. Much has been written about the degradation and exploitation of young people on the street, primarily in terms of the drug and sex trade, unsanitary living conditions (in squats, sidewalks, under bridges, and in parks), risks to physical and mental health, and issues of violence and abuse. Although there has been some attention paid to the sense of communities or surrogate families that emerge on the street, the vast majority of street experiences appear to be degrading, unsafe, and traumatic. The majority of young people on the street engage in informal employment, such as panhandling and squeegeeing, to earn a meagre income. Moreover, many street youth are involved with drug selling and prostitution. A minority of the population does seek out formal employment (such as in the restaurant and construction business), especially those who have a stable living arrangement such as a long-term shelter or supportive housing structure. The vast majority of street youth do not maintain ties to school; however, some do attend alternative school programs that are supportive of their street lifestyle (Fitzgerald 1998).

### CONTEXTUALIZING THE DISCUSSION – STREET YOUTH IN HALIFAX

According to the *Portraits of Streets and Shelters* studies conducted by Halifax Regional Municipality in 2003 and 2004, one-third of the homeless population in Metro Halifax, Nova Scotia, is under the age of twenty-four (Halifax Regional Municipality 2004; 2005). Two recent investigations of street life in Halifax (Karabanow et al. 2005; Karabanow 2004) found that young people on the street described themselves as not having a choice to stay at home. Most youth had experienced turbulent family backgrounds, often characterized by severe physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse and neglect. Life on the street for the vast majority of youth was described as lonely, dangerous, unhealthy, and detrimental to their sense of personal identity. Many homeless youth were struggling with economic, social, and health-related problems associated with street life. Youth highlighted the extreme difficulty of finding/keeping formal employment and/or maintaining a school schedule and staying focused on their studies while being homeless. Most of the youth interviewed envisioned and craved a conventional lifestyle. For the majority, governmental and non-governmental services were inadequate in providing required supports (i.e., there were too few services available to them). What these youth desire most is long-term, safe, and affordable places to live.

As with other subcultures, the culture of street life is diverse and complex. As such, those who make up street or homeless youth are equally diverse in terms of background, present experiences, and future aspirations. Labels such as “squeegee kids,” “punks,” “street-entrenched,” “group-home,” “in-and-outers,” “runaways,” or “shelter youth” are used in the literature as an attempt to make sense of the population and to organize analytical discussions (see, for example, Kufeldt and Nimmo 1987; McCarthy 1990; Morrisette and McIntyre 1989; Shane 1989; van der Ploeg 1989). This study has made every effort not to construct labels in order to acknowledge the diversity of street youth populations. Not only are such monikers static and vague, but life on the streets is extremely ephemeral, so the meaning of these categories may be different depending on the circumstance in which the youth finds him—or herself.

Homeless youth are by nature a transient population, frequently moving between and within localities in search of supportive services, basic needs, adventure, a sense of community, and better (real and perceived) opportunities (Karabanow 2004). Not surprisingly, youth homelessness is also extremely

complex, not only because of the diversity of the population but also because of the challenges in defining, describing, and understanding street etiology, street culture, and most important, the individuals who make up the "street youth" label. There is a tendency for street youth to cycle between sleeping on the streets, shelters, squats, and low-quality housing several times before eventually maintaining housing for more extended periods of time.

It is also significant to acknowledge that, as is true with youth in general, street youth are at a time in their lives when they are incessantly seeking a sense of self and their environment, shifting in terms of identity and outlook, and acquiring understanding and knowledge. The process of exploring their relationship to information technology must be examined from within this context, for as youth cycle on and off the streets they are continually learning about themselves and the world around them. Learning comprises both the acquisition of particular knowledge sets and the process/experience of acquiring (Lindsey et al. 2000). In many ways, the development patterns of street youth reflect those of youth in mainstream society, albeit without the comfort of a safety net that is available to most young people.

Another contextual dimension that should be addressed is that street life is in itself a cultural arena and, as such, contains a particular set of values, norms, and mores that significantly affect youth when leaving the streets. The perception of street culture as isolating, deviant or criminal, and distinct from mainstream society presents significant challenges for young people as they attempt to bridge such separate worlds and regain a sense of citizenship in civil society.

It is important to remember that this population should be understood first as young people—adolescents—who in many ways exhibit characteristics similar to their mainstream cohorts: they are spirited, adventurous, resilient, and searching for and carving out a space for themselves within their environments. There is a significant difference about these young people, however. Street youth are a traumatized group; they are spiritually, physically, and emotionally unhealthy and have experienced unimaginable scenarios of exploitation, neglect, abuse, and suffering at the hands of both caregivers and civil society in general (Green 1998; Karabanow 2004; Panter-Brick and Smith 2000; Weber 1991). As such, the research concerning street youth and their relationships with the modern world becomes all the more important in order to support and advocate for this very marginalized population.

## METHODOLOGY

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty young people, aged 16 to 21 years, living on the street and/or in youth shelter/supportive housing in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Halifax is a mid-size coastal city on the eastern shores of Canada. Out of the twenty youth interviewed, fourteen were male (70%) and six were female.<sup>1</sup> Seventy percent of the sample had lived in Nova Scotia their entire lives. Street youth were invited to participate in the research study through advertisements situated in two local service agencies and through word of mouth. Each young person was offered fifteen dollars to complete an interview. Interview questions were semi-structured and explored young people's experiences with various technologies in terms of interactions, perceptions, comfortability, access, and knowledge. In order to complement the qualitative narratives, a quantitative survey was administered to participants that posed similar queries in the form of closed-ended questions and gathered information on demographic variables.

Qualitative data analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding techniques that encompassed fracturing of the data into conceptually specific themes and categories, rebuilding the data in new ways by linking primary categories and auxiliary themes into a path analysis, and constructing a theoretical narrative shaped by data integration and category construction (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The quantitative data was organized using basic descriptive frequencies.

One of the reasons we chose to interview those on the street and in more stable living arrangements (such as shelters and supportive housing structures) is to begin to explore the experiences and insights of both hard-core street youth and those situated within the street-exiting process (Karabanow, 2004). As such, although it seems reasonable to suspect that those in more stable settings would have some familiarity and access to ICT-related activities, it was also noted that street-entrenched young people have similar interests and encounters with computer technology. In fact, these two diverse street youth populations shared very similar experiences in general.

## FEELING CONNECTED

Historically, of course, the Internet represents a major development as an electronic communication medium, analogous to earlier technologies such as the telegraph, radio, and telephone. The Internet as a technological tool, however, can be seen to depart from these other ICTs in new and novel ways by

not only compressing but extending time and space, allowing asynchronous communication possibilities to take place at undetermined times and sequences (Castells 2001). While remaining a constituent dimension of earlier ICT trajectories and developments (Thrift 1996), the Internet offers different social ways to interact (Veenhof 2006). For instance, how street youth in our sample use ICTs capitalizes on the communication possibilities created through now seemingly ubiquitous tools such as email, leveraging new ways to stay in touch and communicate in the otherwise potentially risky or unstable relationships associated with street youth life.

The vast majority of the sample reported incorporating ICT-related activities in their daily lives. Although there has been very little research exploring street youth experiences with ICTs, this study highlights a surprising finding—the majority of the street-youth sample used computers either daily or at least several times per week. On average, participants spent 6.5 hrs on the computer per week, primarily on the Internet. This is an astounding figure when we consider that a recent Statistics Canada study classified “heavy internet users” as those who spend on average an hour or more per day of personal time on the Internet (Veenhof 2006). What makes this figure even more impressive is that the street-youth population is one that fits within any definition of the “digital divide,” whether we define the digital divide in terms of equal access (Canada 2001) or gaps in socio-economic status (OECD 2001). In this respect, it becomes important to explore and attend to *how* street youth experience the “feelings of connection” offered by ICTs, since it is this capacity of connecting through ICTs that they primarily leverage when accessing a computer.

The street youth interviewed in this study reported generally that through the communication capacities offered by the Internet they felt more connected. Surprisingly, street youth and those in supportive housing spoke of feeling at ease with ICTs—lacking discomfort or overwhelming feelings using computer programs or learning new computer skills. Youth made statements such as, “I feel more connected for sure,” “You can find out what’s going on in the world,” and “I feel more in touch with the world” to demonstrate their attitude toward the Internet. Speaking to the communication capacities of the Internet, one youth summed it up by saying, “It’s like you’ve got instant power at your fingertips pretty much.” For the most part, these young people used computers for email activity—connecting with friends and family. In our sample, the Internet was primarily used for email (37%) and instant mes-

saging (26%), while 40% of participants primarily played games on the computer. As such, to our surprise, these youth have both computer skills (for such activities as email, Internet activity, job and apartment searches, and resumé creation) and frequent computer interaction. For many, the only interactions these young people had with family members involved email discussions. As many youth suggested, email use was a more cost-efficient and immediate forum by which to connect, especially considering the marginal status of this population. One youth pointed out, "I still think they [computers] play a major role in the life of a homeless person. Just because they don't have a computer it doesn't mean they don't know how to use them or enjoy using them whenever they can. They probably don't play as big a role in their life as in the life of someone that owns a computer of course but still, they can keep in touch with their friends and stuff like that. They're still a regular person, they just don't have a computer."

Although a homeless person may still be a "regular person," being homeless is definitively marked by a differentiated set of psycho-social factors. It is often associated with a sense of failure, feelings of helplessness caused by the inability to secure basic needs, and by familial and social isolation and ostracism (Cohen, Putnam and Sullivan 1984). As Rokach (2005, 476) notes, the literature is clear that "relocating to the street is probably a sure way of losing important relationships, and transience of living necessarily brings with it transient social connections." For homeless youth, caring, trustworthy, and supportive close relationships are very important, but maintaining close relationships with family and friends can prove exceedingly difficult, particularly since adolescent runaways and homelessness may include a chaotic home life marked by disruption, abuse, and conflict (Rokach 2005). In our view, our sample's heightened use of the computer to access the Internet for communication purposes tentatively suggests that it is being used as a coping tool for youth in their street careers. When considering the obstacles to access for this population, who identify themselves as a marginal and alienated subculture (Karabanow 2004; Green 1998; Michaud 1989; Miller et al. 1980), their perseverance in gaining access to and exploiting the communication features of ICTs appears remarkable. Asked about his computer use now that he was out of the home, one respondent noted that "I use them a lot more because I've gotten reconnected with my family when I got kicked out and stuff. Now I can go and do whatever I want, you know without my parents always being on my back and stuff. I'm more free to just like go to the library and check my

email."

Typical of comments from our sample, who reported feeling more connected through the Internet, as well as a heavy investment of time, this comment suggests that despite inequalities around access for marginalized populations, street youth are engaging ICTs as an exploitative coping strategy for life on the street and out of the home. Moreover, many participants suggested that computer use was a way to pass time and stay out of trouble. Instead of engaging in illegal or delinquent street activities, computer involvement allowed many young people an enticing and legitimate option. As one youth stated, "Well, you can stay out of trouble ... if you had a computer and you're playing for hours and hours, you wouldn't be doing stupid stuff." Previous research has identified the notion of boredom that plagues street youth populations and at times can induce criminal and/or deviant behavior (Karabanow 2004; Karabanow et al. 2005; McCarthy 1990); the use of ICTs may in fact reduce such involvement, which suggests the need for increased opportunities and access to computer use. There is some evidence that computing activities also act as safe refuges for those living in stressful environments (Tsikalas, Gross, and Stock 2003). Numerous participants suggest that time spent with computers enabled them to escape or disengage from their street identities: "It's kind of nice because you can just kind of be yourself and not really worry about how people look at you ... you can just sort of be yourself."

In conceptualizing ICT use, evidenced through the communication capacities of the Internet explored here, it is possible to suggest that street youth see ICTs as a means to feel connected in their lives in ways that other technologies do not permit, and in ways that are novel to our understanding of street youth careers. That said, we would caution against understanding ICT as a solution to the complex problems of homelessness, and here we take care to distance ourselves from understanding ICTs as a communications panacea, expressed commonly through positive orientations expressed in metaphors of highway, surfing, or play. The experiences and understandings of homeless youth with ICTs lack any meaning without reference to their everyday lives. As Sassen (2002, 368) reminds us, "Digital space is embedded in the larger societal, cultural, subjective, economic, imaginary structurations of lived experience and the systems within which we exist and operate." While more research is needed to investigate the possibilities of connectedness for street youth through ICTs, we can surmise that ICTs amount to a potentially powerful tool in the lives of street youth, yet one that remains contested by

virtue of its embeddedness in the material conditions of social marginality and rejection associated with homeless youth.

### STREET YOUTH AND ICT LITERACY

Now an ever-present term of popular media, business, and government, the notion of a knowledge economy is an attempt to conceptually depict new processes where *knowledge about technology* and levels of information flow become fundamental to individual and socio-economic development (OECD 1996). To this end, there is now a significant contention that *literacy with ICTs* represents a major obstacle to overcome for both capital and labour in advanced economies if they are to compete globally as a “knowledge economy.” Within Canada a range of resources and efforts aimed at increasing ICT literacy in mainstream domains such as education and training have been allocated within the past decade. If we begin with the assumption that access to ICTs is crucial to today’s knowledge economy, exploring street youth’s attitudes and understandings of ICTs becomes essential, in this context, at the peril of confining an already marginalized population to become further “left behind.” particularly given the current emphasis on the links between ICT literacy, employment and economic success. To continue to ignore street youth experiences with ICTs risks not only deepening an already deep digital divide, then, but also denying that one exists altogether. When we consider the connection, however, between ICT literacy in relation to street youth, the link becomes extremely tenuous. For instance, many homeless and at-risk youth lack basic employment skills (Karabanow et al. 2005), and a lack of interest in personal well-being is often associated with being homeless (Layton 2000).

Although less integral than finding food or a place to stay, the majority of our sample surprisingly perceived ICTs as a fairly major activity within their street careers. As our discussion above suggests, these young people had intimate knowledge of technology through previous experiences with family and/or school and found time daily or weekly to maintain some involvement with ICT activity. The majority of young people interviewed also spoke of having some comfort and ease with ICTs (approximately 70% of participants self-assess their computer abilities as better than average; 85% of the sample suggest a comfortability with computers), much of it stemming from previous elementary and high school experiences (the majority of the sample is currently out of school) and/or learning from a family member. The mean sample age of first using a computer was eleven years old (twelve years old for first

#### < QUERY:

I have deleted the edits but please look at that last sentence. If you use the word “between” you need to have two things. So, your connection is between ICT literacy AND ? in relation to street youth

Internet use). Although the majority employed ICTs for email use, many also spoke of job/apartment searching, resumé development, game playing, downloading music, and searching for particular information, suggesting some depth to their ICT literacy. Interestingly, participants did not use computers to search out services/programs for homeless youth or general information concerning homelessness, instead relying on word of mouth to access such specific service-delivery structures.

Evidence from this study identifies the importance of ICT use and access from the perspectives of young homeless people. A majority of participants are keenly aware of the need to become computer literate in order to take advantage of what can be offered via such technologies (such as word processing, email, internet searches, and resumé writing) and, equally important, become competitive employees within the current knowledge-economy nexus. One participant commented, "technology is becoming the way everybody does everything nowadays; it's becoming part of the world. If you don't know it, you might get lost." Another young person suggested, "I think you can't be computer illiterate nowadays because computers are everything."

It is not surprising that young people living on the street identify themselves as constituents of marginal and alienated subcultures (Karabanow 2004; Green 1998; Michaud 1989; Miller et al. 1980); however, it is significant that a majority perceive the importance of technology know-how (i.e., ICT literacy) if they are to eke out fruitful and meaningful employment in the future. As such, ICT use and access are important issues facing homeless youth in terms of reducing *feelings* of "being left behind" and being left behind in real terms with respect to mainstream ICT adoption. Statistics Canada (2004) reports that Internet use is highest at home (about 6.7 million households had at least one member who regularly used the Internet from home), a fact not particularly encouraging for the homeless. In addition, Statistics Canada (2004) reports that households with high income, members active in the labour force, and people with high levels of education remain at the vanguard of Internet adoption in Canada. Given these patterns, it is clear that street youth remain dangerously marginalized as users of ICTs. Although more study is needed to explore the links between homeless youth and ICT literacy, however, it is possible to conclude that homeless youth do take ICT literacy seriously, and our sample clearly recognized its importance to any potential career or future advancement.

### ACCESS

The use of ICTs by street youth to cope and communicate as a way of feeling “hooked up,” coupled with their recognition of the importance of ICT literacy, suggests ICTs are a surprisingly robust feature in the street careers of the youth in our sample. When we begin to examine issues of access to ICTs for street youth in terms of simple contact with ICTs we find access problematic. The majority of our sample lived on the street and/or in a local shelter/supportive-housing complex, where access to computer technologies proved limited and constrained: “Sometimes I don’t have any access at all and it’s hard, when I really, really need to use a computer.” Many of the young people interviewed, however, spoke of a local downtown drop-in service which allowed computer use during operating hours. The drop-in center was primarily a popular service for food, counselling, showers, and washing clothes, but nonetheless employed three modern computers that could be accessed by clients on a first-come, first-served basis. Street youth highlighted the importance of such a service that allowed them mostly unregulated computer use, with workers available to provide any technical support: “Here they help you out. We can come in and say we need help or anything and they’ll come over and help us and tell us you know, this is the best way to do it and stuff and it’s really good.”

For young people living in a residential shelter, computers could be used through the organization’s learning and employment centre; although somewhat more regulated (as to what sites/activities could be accessed), this provided ample opportunity to familiarize oneself with ICTs. Moreover, this learning and employment centre provided regular computer workshops on such topics as resumé writing, job searching, and accessing the Internet. The majority of the sample felt much gratitude for these two homeless-youth service providers for allowing young people the ability to become (or continue to be) computer literate. Although some youth accessed computers through friends or family on an irregular basis, the vast majority experienced frequent computer use through the shelter and/or drop-in settings.

A second avenue for computer access came from a local downtown public library (C@P Site) where young people could access one of five computers set up for public use. Although limited in terms of having to present personal identification (or library card), hours of operation, long waits, not being allowed to download or print, and having certain restrictions on site searches, many street youth frequently used the library as a way to check/send emails and search for jobs/accommodations. Speaking about access and restriction

issues, one youth suggested, "There should be, I don't really know but maybe there should be places where there's a larger number of computers and maybe a little more freedom that people have when they're at home rather than being told what they're allowed to do. You know there's always limits on what you're allowed to look at and do on computers."

A number of young people shared their frustrations with not having personal freedom on a library computer (as one would have with one's own computer) and the often-long waits for computer access. Nevertheless the library still provided street youth with a free opportunity to access computer technologies. One youth noted, "With all these C@P sites that they have around, they should have several more of those [computers]. Plus the public libraries, you should not have to use your library card to log on because it makes it a lot harder for youth who have nothing to do throughout the day but want to go in and learn things."

The majority of participants highlight the fact that when homeless youth services and local libraries are closed, there is little avenue by which these young people can engage in computer activity. Such a finding not only gives credence to services that involve young people with computer activity but also argues for increased access so that young people on the street do not become left behind vis-à-vis the emerging knowledge economy.

Although physical access to ICTs remains a key divide to digital access, many analysts of the digital divide now emphasize the importance of not simply seeing the digital divide as a one dimensional problem reduced and solved by simply providing ICT and connectivity access to those without. Indeed, as Parayil (2005, 41) observes, "The digital divide is often portrayed in crassly reductive terms as a mere technological access that can be ostensibly addressed by providing cheap computing and communication technologies to the poor." Rather, it is essential to see ICTs as part of social process that is dynamic and complex and that social inclusion around ICT "does not exist as an external variable to be injected from the outside to bring about certain results" (Warschauer 2002, 6). With respect to street youth, recognizing that their experiences with ICTs remain marginal and situated locally within an existing web of social services, organizations, and processes, we deepen our understanding of their relation to ICT by reminding ourselves that street youth participants exist within domains of social exclusion and inclusion vis-à-vis their interactions with ICTs. On one hand, this research suggests that these street youth are in fact "citizens" of technology through their comfort and ease with

computers; however, this sense of citizenship is ephemeral when faced with issues of accessibility as well as the larger context of street survival. For instance, several street youth suggested that ICTs had only a minor impact on their lives, which for the most part involved meeting basic needs (i.e., shelter, food, clothing, and money): “the main thing for me is getting through the day.” Another youth noted, “Most homeless people have more important things to think about like getting off the streets, not playing on computers.” These kinds of comments remind us that simple access to ICTs for street youth, while helpful, will not bridge the digital divide in ways that necessarily improve equity or social inclusiveness. As noted by a service provider at one of the organizations that support street youth access to computers, “They [street youth] are isolated, so technology doesn’t suddenly mean that they are not isolated, but it doesn’t mean that they are less. I just mean in terms of education and school and society. It’s not the technology that’s isolating them. They’re isolated period or we have isolated them as a community. And their proficiency in technology does not mean that they are no longer isolated.”

Recognizing that street youths’ experiences with ICTs are embedded within the complexity of their everyday lived experiences requires us to consider the wider social context of their relationship to ICT: “The big problem with ‘the digital divide’ framing is that it tends to connote ‘digital solutions,’ i.e., computers and telecommunications, without engaging the important set of complementary resources and complex interventions to support social inclusion, of which informational technology applications may be enabling elements, but are certainly insufficient when simply added to the status quo mix of resources and relationships” (Kling, quoted in Warschauer 2002, 6).

In this context, future research needs to explore whether ICTs can act as an agent of change for young people to support their transitions out of homelessness and into adequate employment and safe housing, or whether they act simply as short-term distractions from the misery of being homeless. What appears clear from the data is that this street-youth sample uses ICT predominantly for bonding social capital purposes—connecting with people who are familiar to them (i.e., family and friends). The finding that these young people actually engage in ICT use within their day to day activities could, however, be understood as glimpses of bridging social capital (linking with diverse others) through the connection between social exclusion (i.e., street youth) and information technology (i.e., mainstream apparatus). In this light, the interplay between street youth and information technology demon-

strates both bridging and bonding social capital elements—young people forming ties within subgroups and across groups. Future research will need to explore whether ICT use supports (or even precipitates) a young person's transformation from an identity of exclusion (i.e., being a street youth) to an identity of inclusion (i.e. moving into mainstream society). If so, how does this process of bridging the divide between street life and mainstream culture actually take place? Moreover, we contend that if ICT is to act as more than just another coping or job-search strategy, effective as it may be, efforts must be made to incorporate the full experience of homeless street youth into any effort to employ ICT as a means to social inclusion. In other words, future analyses can help define whether such technologies in fact bridge the digital divide in the broadest sense or simply deepen it.

## CONCLUSION

There has been little discussion of street youths' interpretations and experiences vis-à-vis ICTs; rather, the vast majority of literature has investigated how young people enter and survive street life. This study of twenty street youth in Halifax Nova Scotia, explores how young people interact, experience, and access ICTs in their day-to-day street existence. Surprisingly, findings demonstrate that this population was in daily or weekly contact with ICT-related activities including email, Internet search, job/housing search, and resumé creation. Apart from the daily stresses of finding shelter, food, clothing, and other basic needs, these street youth were interested and knowledgeable about computer activities.

The majority of participants felt comfortable and at ease with computer work and were keenly aware of the importance of information technologies within the current global economic structure. ICTs were primarily used to make life easier for them on the street and involved connecting (or reconnecting) with family and friends, searching out employment and housing, developing a resumé, and searching out particular information via the Internet. In addition, like many of their counterparts in mainstream society, computers were a source of enjoyment and passing time. Numerous participants suggested that computer use was directly associated with less involvement in criminal and/or delinquent street activities—providing rather a space for recreation and personal development. Access to computers was primarily achieved through local youth services and a downtown public library. Although these avenues did provide youth with significant computer interaction, a

majority of the sample noted a desire for increased access to information technologies that meet the needs of those who are homeless and living on the street. Such a recommendation may prove highly significant if future research demonstrates a correlation between ICT use/access and reduction of deviant and dangerous street activities.

Finally, it was surprising to explore the keen insights of these young people in terms of how important computer literacy was in the face of an increasing technology-driven knowledge economy—again raising the issue of computer access for marginalized groups. The majority of our sample suggested that knowledge of ICTs could lead to more fruitful and exciting employment in the future, which perhaps explains why such an alienated population continues to maintain frequent computer involvement even in the face of such degradation as living on the street.

---

## NOTE

- 1 A limitation of the study is that the sample was made up of those who volunteered to be part of this investigation and is not representative of the broader population of street youth. Given the focus of the research on ICTs, the youth who participated may well be those most interested in and involved with ICT.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Castells, M. 2000. *The Rise of the Network Society 2nd edition* Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Child Welfare League of America. 1991. "Homelessness: The Impact on Child Welfare in the '90s." Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- Cohen, N., J. Putnam, and A. Sullivan. 1984. "The Mentally Ill Homeless: Isolation and Adaptation." *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 35:922–24.
- Eamon, M.K. 2004. "Digital Divide in Computer Access and Use Between Poor and Non-Poor Youth." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 31:91–112.
- Edelbrock, C. 1980. "Running Away from Home: Incidence and Correlates among Children and Youth Referred for Mental Health Services." *Journal of Family Issues* 1:210–28.
- Eng, J. 1994. "Even the Homeless Find Welcome Mat on the Internet." *Vancouver Sun*. Vancouver.
- Fitzgerald, M. 1998. "To Live and Learn: Homeless Youth, Literacy, Education and Career." Halifax, NS: Phoenix Youth Programs.

- Green, D. 1998. *Hidden Lives: Voices of Children in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Halifax Regional Municipality. 2004. *Homelessness in HRM: Portraits of Streets and Shelter*. Halifax, NS: Planning and Development Services.
- Halifax Regional Municipality. 2005. *Homelessness in HRM: Portraits of Streets and Shelter, Vol. II*. Halifax, NS: Planning and Development Services.
- Janus, M., A. McCormack, A. Burgess, and C. Hartman. 1987. "Adolescent Runaways—Causes and Consequences." Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Karabanow, J. 2003. "Creating A Culture of Hope: Lessons from Street Children Agencies in Canada and Guatemala." *International Social Work* 46:369–86.
- . 2004. *Being Young and Homeless: Understanding How Youth Enter and Exit Street Life*. New York: Peter Lang.
- . 2008. "Getting off the Street: Exploring Young People's Street Exits." *American Behavioral Scientist* 51:772–88
- Karabanow, J, Clement, P., A. Carson, and K. Crane. 2005. "Getting Off The Street: Exploring Strategies Used by Canadian Youth to Exit Street Life." Ottawa: National Research Program.
- Kufeldt, K. and M. Nimmo. 1987. "Youth on the Street." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 11:531–43.
- Layton, J. 2000. *Homelessness: The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis*. Toronto: Penguin.
- Lindsey, E.W., P.D. Kurtz, S. Jarvis, N.R. Williams, and L. Nackerud. 2000. "How Runaway and Homeless Youth Navigate Troubled Waters: Personal Strengths and Resources." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 17:115–40.
- Looker, D. and V. Thiessen. 2003. "Beyond the Digital Divide in Canadian Schools: From Access to Competency in the Use of Information Technology." *Social Science Computer Review* 21:475–90.
- McCarthy, W. 1990 "Life on the Streets," PhD thesis, Sociology, University of Toronto.
- Michaud, M. 1988. *Dead End*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises.
- Miller, D., D. Miller, F. Hoffman, and R. Duggan. 1980. *Runaways: Illegal Aliens in Their Own Land*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Milton, P. 2003, "Trends in the Integration of ICT and Learning in K–12 Systems." Toronto, ON: Canadian Education Association. [http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/Trends\\_ICT\\_Integration.pdf](http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/Trends_ICT_Integration.pdf).
- Morrisette, P. and S. McIntyre. 1989. "Homeless Youth in Residential Care." *Social Casework* 20:165–88.
- Murray, M. 1995. "Up Front: Putting a byte on the street-wise." *Toronto Star*. Toronto.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. 1996, "The Knowledge-based Economy." <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/8/1913021.pdf>
- . 2001. "Understanding the Digital Divide." <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/38/57/1888451.pdf>.
- Panter-Brick, C. and M. Smith. 2000. *Abandoned Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press.
- Parayil, G. 2005. "The Digital Divide and Increasing Returns: Contradictions of Informational Capitalism." *The Information Society* 21:41–51.
- Pearson, T. 2002. "Falling Behind: A Technology Crisis Facing Minority Students." *TechTrends* 46:15–20.
- Raffaelli, M. and R. Larson. 1999. *Homeless and Working Youth Around the World: Exploring Developmental Issues*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Robertson, M. and M. Greenblatt. 1992. *Homelessness: A National Perspective*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Rokach, A. 2005. "The Causes of Loneliness in Homeless Youth." *The Journal of Psychology* 139:469–80.
- Sassen, S. 2002. "Towards a Sociology of Information Technology." *Current Sociology* 50:365–88.
- Shane, P. 1989. "Changing Patterns among Homeless and Runaway Youth." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 59:208–214.
- Statistics Canada. 2004. "Household Internet Use Survey", 8 July. <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/040708/d040708a.htm>.
- Stierlin, H. 1973. "Family Perspectives on Adolescent Runaways." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 29:56–62.
- Strauss, A. and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Thrift, N. 1996. "New Urban Eras and Old Technological Fears: Reconfiguring the Goodwill of Electronic Things." *Urban Studies* 33:1463–93.
- Tsikalas, K., E. Gross, and E. Stock. 2002. "Applying a Youth Psychology Lens to the Digital Divide: How Low-income, Minority Adolescents Appropriate Home Computers to Meet Their Needs for Autonomy, Belonging and Competence, and How This Affects Their Academic and Future Prospects." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA. 1–5 April.
- van der Ploeg, J.D. 1989. "Homelessness: A Multidimensional Problem." *Children and Youth Services Review* 11:45–56.
- Veenhof, B. 2006. "The Internet: Is It Changing the Way Canadians Spend Their Time?" Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Science, Innovation and Electronic Information Division (SIEID).
- Warschauer, Mark. 2002. "Reconceptualizing the Digital Divide." *First Monday* 7:1–17.
- Weber, M. 1991. *Street Kids*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Yablonsky, L. 1968. *The Hippie Trip*. New York, NY: Pegasus.