Safe Streets: Considering the Impact of Social Exclusion on Youth who Engage in High-Risk Behaviors, Phase 1

April 2013

Project Summary

The Safe Streets project considers the impact of social exclusion on the places youth who engage in high-risk behaviors go to, and how they get there. In Phase 1, youth were asked about the routes they traveled on a typical day, the activities they pursued, and whether the routes were safe or not.

To capture their perspectives, youth completed a mapping activity to record their typical daily routes and destinations, shading the areas they considered safe green and the areas they considered unsafe red. The maps were then collated and analyzed. 57 youth participated in the project, which was completed in 2010.

Project Background

Old Strathcona is a neighbourhood with a high number of transient youth, and service providers observed trends such as youth accessing services on both sides of the river, and youth reports of being banned from public spaces. OSCMAP members were interested in the question of social exclusion; whether a transient lifestyle led to social exclusion, or whether social exclusion led to a transient lifestyle.

Gaetz (2004) argued that restricted access to housing, employment, school programs and public spaces place youth at risk for being victimized by crime, and committing crimes, because such exclusion forces youth into spending their time on the street. The depression and suicidal ideation that is common amongst street youth (Kral & Kidd, 2002) may also reflect exclusion, as well as feelings of alienation or unworthiness.

It was hypothesized that feeling marginal with respect to others may influence youth to stay on the geographical margins of the community (i.e. the street), rather than accept safe spaces in shelters, or other forms of social assistance.

Project Design

Custom maps were created for a mapping exercise (see page 2), and a discussion guide was designed. Four member agencies serving youth who engage in high-risk behaviors facilitated the discussions.

Old Strathcona Community Mapping and Planning Committee is a partnership of human services providers working in the neighbourhood of Old Strathcona in Edmonton, Alberta. Our mandate is to **improve services and supports to youth through collaborative planning and delivery of services**. Organizations in this collaborative include:

- Boyle Street Community Services
- Catholic Social Services
- Child and Family Services, Edmonton & Area
- City of Edmonton Community Services
- Edmonton Public Library
- iHuman Youth Society
- Inner City Youth Housing Project, E4C
- Mapping and Planning Supports Alberta Capital Region
- Old Strathcona Youth Society
- Youth Empowerment and Support Services

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The Maps

Mapping and Planning Support created 54 large maps for the youth to document their routes and destinations. These maps were created using ESRI ArcGIS 9.3 Geographic Information Systems mapping application. Each of the maps were created with specific geographic base data layers and landmarks, including:

- Edmonton street layer with street names
- The North Saskatchewan River
- Transit information (LRT routes, transit stations)
- Mill Creek Ravine
- Location of the organizations hosting youth discussions
- Edmonton Public Libraries
- Other landmarks such as police stations, recreation centres and malls

Participants

57 youth at 4 agencies (iHuman, OSYS, YESS and ICYHP) participated in the focus group discussions. The youth were ages 14-24, with almost half of the participating youth between the ages of 16-18 years. 21 youth were female and 31 were male (5 youth did not record their gender on their maps).

Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods
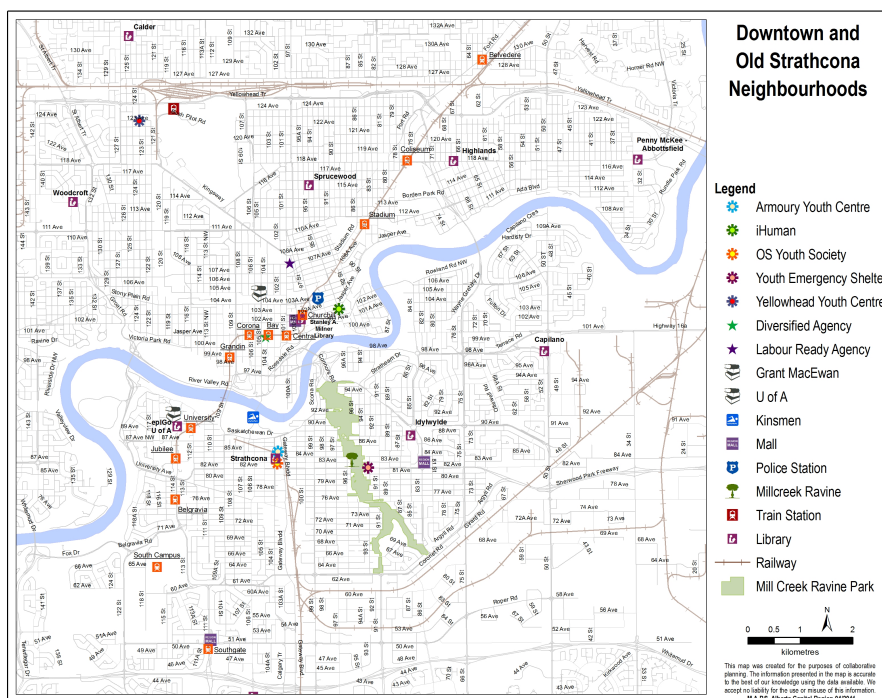
Mapping Activity Findings
Maps can be found on pages 4-6

Youth had routes they traveled regularly with specific destinations. The most common route was the LRT route between Belvedere and Jubilee LRT stations. How far the youth traveled on a typical day was a surprising result to service providers.

The same area might be reported safe by some youth, and unsafe by other youth.

Differences were found between the maps completed by female youth and the maps completed by male youth:

Male Youth	Female Youth
-Routes encompassed **larger areas** than female youth -Identified **more safe areas** than female youth	-Identified **more unsafe areas** than male youth -Identified **fewer safe areas** than male youth

Note: The maps themselves may have influenced the reporting of the youth. For example, highlighted landmarks (see insert) may have influenced the mapping activity more than unmarked landmarks (e.g. shopping centres, medical facilities).

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Youth Discussion Findings

During the mapping activity, the youth were asked questions about their routes and destinations, and decision-making processes. The destinations youth most frequently reported going to were youth services, the library, malls, and Whyte avenue. Other responses included the university, Mill Woods, downtown, and the LRT.

When the youth were asked where they would go in the city if they could go anywhere, most participants did not answer this question. Youth who did respond offered a variety of answers, including home, West Edmonton Mall, youth services, and Whyte Avenue. When asked what stopped the youth from going there, again most participants did not answer the question. Amongst the responses received, the most common answer was lack of money for transportation, followed by basic needs (need for food, accommodation and shelter).

The need to use transit to access services or follow court orders despite an inability to pay for transit tickets is a huge barrier for the youth, and causes considerable stress and anxiety. For some youth, accessing transit without payment is an introduction to the criminal justice system.

Implications for Practice

While youth reported accessing youth services, they also reported that the areas around youth services were unsafe. How to help youth feel safe in accessing youth services should be considered.

Discussions with transit officials following this project informed service providers that requests can be made to make changes to transit bans, e.g. exceptions could be made for certain routes. Including transit access for court orders necessitating transit is recommended.

Implications for Further Research

Recommendations for future study include further analysis on why youth are going to their destinations. For example, do they access services for non-intended purposes, such as to use the washroom, sleep, or escape bad weather? How do youth decide a space is safe or unsafe, and what are their recommendations to make unsafe places safer? What is the impact of social exclusion on their decision-making? Phase 2 of the Safe Streets project seeks to provide more answers to these questions.

As direct service providers, youth services are constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of the youth population they serve. Building research capacity into youth service funding could inform policy more quickly on the best practices of meeting these needs.

Observations from Service Providers

Service providers who facilitated the discussions and mapping activity offered the following insights:

- Areas youth identified as unsafe were usually because of drugs, and violent people who frequent the area
- Youth were likely to have been victims or perpetrators of crime in the areas they reported as unsafe
- Youth tried to avoid unsafe areas, but were limited by lack of choice in determining where they lived
- Youth identified that few places were safe and that a safe place could become dangerous quickly and unexpectedly
- The youths' destinations were likely where their supports were located
- Youth feel as if they are always on the lookout; always alert for a situation or place to become dangerous
- The maps were an inclusive tool for the youth to share their thoughts and opinions, as they did not require a high level of literacy or verbal self-expression

References:

Gaetz, S. (2004). Safe streets for whom? Homeless youth, social exclusion, and criminal victimization. Canadian Journal of Criminology & Criminal Justice, 46(4), 423-455.

Kral, M. J., & Kidd, S. A. (2002). Suicide and prostitution among street youth: A qualitative analysis. Adolescence, 37(146), 411-430.

MALE participants who identified DAILY ROUTE in Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods

Legend

- ✿ Armoury Youth Centre
- ✿ iHuman
- ✿ OS Youth Society
- ✿ Youth Emergency Shelter
- ✳ Yellowhead Youth Centre
- ★ Diversified Agency
- ★ Labour Ready Agency
- Grant MacEwan
- U of A
- Kinsmen
- Mall
- P Police Station
- Mill Creek Ravine
- Train Station
- Library
- ┼ Railway
- Mill Creek Ravine Park

N

0   0.5   1   2
kilometres

This map was created for the purposes of collaborative planning. The information presented in the map is accurate to the best of our knowledge using the data available. We accept no liability for the use or misuse of this information.
M.A.P.S. Alberta Capital Region 05/2012

Legend
PLACE
— Daily route
▨ Daily route

FEMALE participants who identified DAILY ROUTE in Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods

Legend

- ✿ Armoury Youth Centre
- ✿ iHuman
- ✿ OS Youth Society
- ✿ Youth Emergency Shelter
- ✳ Yellowhead Youth Centre
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0   0.5   1   2
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M.A.P.S. Alberta Capital Region 05/2012

Legend
PLACE
— Daily route
▨ Daily route

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MALE participants who identified SAFE places in Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods

Legend

- Armoury Youth Centre
- iHuman
- OS Youth Society
- Youth Emergency Shelter
- Yellowhead Youth Centre
- Diversified Agency
- Labour Ready Agency
- Grant MacEwan
- U of A
- Kinsmen
- Mall
- Police Station
- Mill Creek Ravine
- Train Station
- Library
- Railway
- Mill Creek Ravine Park

Legend PLACE
- Safe route
- Safe area

0 0.5 1 2 kilometres

Note:
Color transparency (70%) used. Darker the shade greater the number of youth indicating the place safe on the map.

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FEMALE participants who identified SAFE places in Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods

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Legend PLACE
- Safe route
- Safe area

0 0.5 1 2 kilometres

Note:
Color transparency (70%) used. Darker the shade greater the number of youth indicating the place safe on the map.

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MALE participants who identified UNSAFE places in Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods

Legend

- Armoury Youth Centre
- iHuman
- OS Youth Society
- Youth Emergency Shelter
- Yellowhead Youth Centre
- Diversified Agency
- Labour Ready Agency
- Grant MacEwan
- U of A
- Kinsmen
- Mall
- Police Station
- Mill Creek Ravine
- Train Station
- Library
- Railway
- Mill Creek Ravine Park

Legend PLACE
— Unsafe route
■ Unsafe area

Note: Color transparency (70%) used. Darker the shade greater the number of youth indicating the place unsafe on the map.

0 0.5 1 2 kilometres

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FEMALE participants who identified UNSAFE places in Downtown and Old Strathcona Neighbourhoods

Legend

- Armoury Youth Centre
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- OS Youth Society
- Youth Emergency Shelter
- Yellowhead Youth Centre
- Diversified Agency
- Labour Ready Agency
- Grant MacEwan
- U of A
- Kinsmen
- Mall
- Police Station
- Millcreek Ravine
- Train Station
- Library
- Railway
- Mill Creek Ravine Park

Legend PLACE
— Unsafe route
■ Unsafe area

Note: Color transparency (70%) used. Darker the shade greater the number of youth indicating the place unsafe on the map.

0 0.5 1 2 kilometres

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