

Street careers: homelessness, drug use, and sex work among young men who have sex with men (YMSM)

Stephen E. Lankenau^{a,*}, Michael C. Clatts^b, Dorinda Welle^b,
Lloyd A. Goldsamt^b, Marya Viost Gwadz^c

^a *University of Southern California, Keck School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, 6430 Sunset Boulevard, Suite 1500, Los Angeles, CA 90028, USA*

^b *National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., International Institute for Research on Youth at Risk, 71 West 23rd Street, 4th floor, New York, NY 10010, USA*

^c *National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., Institute for AIDS Research, 71 West 23rd Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10010, USA*

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Abstract

“Hustling” or sex work is a common means of surviving on the streets and paying for drugs among homeless youth. In this article, we formulate the concepts of “street capital” and “street competencies” to describe how 10 young men who have sex with men (YMSM) in New York City accumulated various knowledge and skills throughout their childhood and adolescence, and later entered into homelessness and the street economy as sex workers. While half of these young men described themselves as gay or bisexual, sexual identity was not a primary consideration amongst these youth. All were homeless and/or users of illegal drugs, and all survived through intimate involvement in the “street economy”—an informal system of exchange that circulates drugs, sex, and money across a range of settings and participants. Based upon an analysis of life history accounts gained through ethnographic interviews, we describe common pathways into the street economy with an emphasis on understanding how these 10 young men of diverse backgrounds became involved in homelessness, drugs, and sex work. In doing this, we document the differential sources of knowledge and particular childhood experiences that launched these youth into coherent street careers.

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Introduction

The liminal, transitional period in a young person’s life between being housed and becoming homeless is a neglected area in the study of youth homelessness. During this period, a young person may still live in a relatively stable household while becoming sexually active, using drugs, and entering the street economy—an informal system of labour and exchange circulating drugs, sex, money, and other resources across a range of settings and participants. In this article, we

formulate the concepts of “street capital” and “street competencies” to describe how 10 young men in New York City accumulated various knowledge and skills throughout their childhood and adolescence, and later entered into careers in the street economy as homeless sex workers.

Numerous studies have focused on the various economic, survival, and criminal strategies utilized by homeless youth (Baron, 1999; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Clatts and Davis, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Kipke, O’Connor, Palmer, & MacKenzie, 1995; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992, 1995; Terrell, 1997). In their study of homeless youth, for instance, Kipke et al. (1995, p. 514) refer to the “street economy” as comprising the following survival strategies: “prostitution or survival sex, pornography, panhandling,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: slankenau@chla.usc.edu (S.E. Lankenau).

stealing, selling stolen goods, mugging, dealing drugs, and/or scams or cons.” Work within the street economy may be patterned or stratified according to characteristics of a youth prior to becoming homeless (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002). Furthermore, experiences preceding homelessness may relate to the specific ways that homeless youth earn money and engage in risk behaviour within the street economy.

Studies on homeless youth suggest that an impoverished household (Research Triangle and Institute, 1995; Smollar, 1999), sexual abuse (Forst, 1994; Terrell, 1997), and living in a substance-abusing household (Research Triangle and Institute, 1995) are risk factors for homelessness. Youth homelessness and drug use are significant since each are associated with a variety of risk behaviours and poor health outcomes directly or indirectly connected to the street economy. For instance, homelessness is a primary risk factor associated with entry into sex work among youth (Deisher, Robinson, & Boyer, 1982; Luckenbill, 1985) and studies on homeless youth indicate a high percentage—between 25 and 47%—engage in sex work during homeless careers (Clatts & Davis, 1999; Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999; Kipke et al., 1995; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Roy et al., 2000; Yates, MacKenzie, Pennbridge, & Cohen, 1988). Similarly, studies indicate that a relatively high percentage of homeless youth—between 15 and 36%—have a history of injection drug use (Clatts & Davis, 1999; Kipke et al., 1995; Roy et al., 2000; Yates et al., 1988). Both sex workers and injection drug users are at increased risk for exposure to HIV as well as violence and victimization (El-Bassel et al., 2000; New York City Department of Health, 2000; Stricof, Kennedy, Natell, Weisfuse, & Novick, 1991).

In addition to various characteristics that place youth at risk for homelessness and involvement in the street economy, research indicates a relatively high percentage of homeless youth—between 13 and 35%—identify as a sexual minority, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or other (Clatts & Davis, 1999; Forst, 1994; Kipke et al., 1995; Roy et al., 2000). Gay-identified male homeless youth are at high risk to engage in male sex work (Kruks, 1991). However, straight-identified male homeless youth also undertake sex work with other men (Boyer, 1989; Elifson, Boles, & Sweat, 1993; Luckenbill, 1985; Reiss, 1964), and some research indicates higher rates of risk behaviours among heterosexual or bisexual MSM compared to their gay-identified counterparts (Doll, Petersen, White, Johnson, & Ward, 1992; Heckman, Kelly, & Sikkema, 1995). Among youth engaging in sex work, disadvantaged background characteristics, such as sexual and physical abuse (Deisher et al., 1982; Elifson et al., 1993) and single-parent household (Snell, 1995), are commonplace. A key connection between childhood sexual abuse and entry into sex work is the knowledge that abused youth have that other youths do not: abused youth know there is a demand for certain types of sexual activity (Boyer, 1989). We refer to knowledge gained during childhood or adolescence as “street capital,” and argue such knowledge may later serve economic purposes upon becoming homeless.

Street capital, competencies, and careers

Street capital is derived from Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of “embodied cultural capital”—culturally valued knowledge transmitted from parent to child. This knowledge may ultimately be converted into economic capital within various fields upon entering adulthood, such as within a school, university, or employment. Bourdieu suggests cultural capital is transmitted diffusely, continuously, and often unconsciously within the family, and is accumulated throughout childhood and adolescence. Similarly, “street capital” is latent knowledge gained through observations and experiences within a family or household, though tied to drug use, sexual activity, criminal behaviour, and housing contingencies, that enable a youth to develop survival skills in the street economy.

“Street competencies” are practical actions and skills that emerge from the accumulation of street capital, and include buying and selling drugs, commodifying sexual activity, shop lifting, or finding housing. Street competencies enable young people to survive in the street economy, and develop through embeddedness in a social network (Granovetter, 1985) among other street youth. Young people build street competencies through differential associations and interactions with more experienced youths on the street. The more knowledge a youth has about “life on the street,” the greater their street capital, which relates intrinsically to developing a repertoire of street competencies.

Trajectories into the street economy and the survival strategies undertaken by youth on the street can be understood as constituting a “career.” The term career is often used to describe a person’s passage through an occupational structure (Hughes, 1958), but has also been defined sociologically to mean “any social strand of any person’s course through life” (Goffman, 1961, p. 127). We describe various types of careers associated with the street economy, such as homeless career, sex worker career, or street career more generally. Street careers are rooted in street capital and street competencies, evolve over a period of years, and may be disrupted and redirected by a variety of events and circumstances.

Methodology and sample

The data presented in this report are part of an ethnographic study investigating patterns of risk and resiliency among young men who have sex with men (YMSM) in New York City. Ethnographic field work extended from December, 1999, through October, 2000. In total, over 50 field visits were undertaken, each lasting between 2 and 5 hours, including time spent administering the various interview protocols. Each interview protocol focused on a different topic: life history, sexual identity, utilization of services, history of drug use, history of exposure to violence, and a recent sexual encounter. Field visits consisted of the ethnographer arriving at one of two sex work venues, noting the clientele and social interactions occurring within the space, engaging in some

informal conversations, and recruiting others for formal interviews. Interviews were conducted in pizza parlours, fast-food restaurants, coffee shops, and bars within each venue. Five participants were selected from each of the venues equalling a total of 10 informants. A total of 53 interviews were undertaken with the 10 young men, each being interviewed between four and six times.

Recruiting subjects, following up with each several times, and conducting the interviews posed several challenges. First, the young men typically came to the venues to trade sex or buy drugs, and since sex work is illegal and stigmatized some were initially reluctant to be interviewed. However, each became more trusting as the lead author spent more time in the venues. Second, following the initial interview, locating the men for a follow-up interview was sometimes difficult since each had varied schedules. Most of the interviews were gained by the ethnographer “hanging out” at each venue during various times, waiting for a particular young man to appear, and then persuading him to sit for an interview. Third, since these men were approached and interviewed while working, many were engaged in their “normal” daily activities which included using drugs, such as heroin, crack, and cannabis. The ethnographer ensured the informant’s capacity to consent and ability to provide reliable data by using visual clues to ascertain sobriety, monitoring overall well-being as interview questions were asked, and taking brief breaks during the interview.

To qualify for enrollment in the project, participants had to meet three criteria: to be male; to have had a sexual encounter with another man in the past six months; and to be between the ages of 17 and 28. Prior to being interviewed, all subjects signed a written consent form approved by an institutional review board and were paid \$20 for each interview. All participant names are pseudonyms and certain biographical details have been deleted or altered to protect anonymity.

While the two recruitment venues were quite different spatially and attracted young men with different demographic characteristics, the practices and routines occurring within each were comparable: sex work, drug use, and homelessness. Half of the young men described themselves as bisexual or gay, while the rest identified as straight or heterosexual. At the “Bar,” a long-standing gay-identified bar in the West Village, young men working this venue were almost exclusively white, straight-identified, homeless, and drug involved with heroin injection being pervasive. These men were typically not patrons of the bar themselves, but rather solicited clients along the street and sidewalk across from the bar. The accounts of five young men who worked outside of the Bar are described—Franky, 22 and his younger brother Jimmy, 21; Sid, 23; Keith, 27; and Jason, 22. In contrast, at the “Station,” a busy midtown transportation hub, the young men working this venue were typically Latino or African American, non-injection drug users, and identified as bisexual. The stories of five of the young men who worked outside of the Station are described—Rey, 20; Armando, 19; Timo, 25; Miguel, 20; and Todd, 20.

Early exposures to street capital: low SES, caretaker fluidity, and consecutive housing

All 10 of these young men experienced certain living situations before turning 10 years old that inculcated street capital and paved the way for careers in the street economy. First, these boys were born into typically poor or working class households, and the boys’ parents or caretakers held jobs with ties to either the formal or informal economies. Four of the mothers were supported by welfare, while other occupations held by mothers included sex worker, teacher, and cleaning woman. Among the young men who knew anything about their birth fathers, their fathers’ jobs included mechanic, mason, artist, and soldier. Given the low incomes earned by each family, the boys were often raised in marginal neighbourhoods. Sid, whose mother received welfare until she married a machine operator when he was five years old, lived in several inner-city Chicago neighbourhoods. As he describes, living in different neighbourhoods during childhood exposed or sensitized him to a number of street-based practices, earning strategies, and criminal activities:

We lived in a couple different houses, different parts of the city. We had break-ins—at least three times at the first house. In the second house, there was one break-in. There was a lot of drug dealing going on—a lot of gang activity and prostitution, robberies, violence, murders. We lived a block away from the projects. It was a low-income neighbourhood.

Second, all of the boys experienced significant fluidity in their relationships with caretakers. Some had parents that were separated or divorced, while others discussed new caretakers entering the household, such as boyfriends, foster parents, stepfathers, and grandparents. None of the boys were raised by both of their natural birth parents past the age of five. We refer to this flux among caretakers within a boy’s household as “caretaker fluidity,” which may cause disciplinary problems and difficulty developing adult role models in addition to placing youth at risk for homelessness at a young age. Caretaker fluidity also facilitated the flow of various kinds of knowledge and information in and out of the household.

Third, the boys frequently moved to and from various housing situations to visit parents, to reside in new foster homes, or to escape abusive parents. For instance, six boys moved households at least one time before the age of five, which brought three youths—Armando, Timo, and Miguel—to New York. We refer to occasional or frequent movement to new housing locations as “consecutive housing,” which may cause problems for youth developing peer relationships and maintaining consistency in school.

Many of the boys experienced two or three of these three conditions—low socio-economic status, caretaker fluidity, or consecutive housing—during early childhood which presented problems upon entering their teenaged years. Here,

Franky, who was born into a poor family in Brooklyn, points to the overlap between caretaker fluidity and consecutive housing during his childhood along with the consequences these disruptions had on his school attendance. Additionally, he reports exposure to parental alcohol, cannabis, and cocaine use which impacted upon housing stability:

My father wasn't so bad. He got my mother into drinking and smoking weed. But my stepfather got my mom into cocaine—shit like that. He'd get drunk and beat on her, and then start beating on us. He ended up breaking up the family. They were always working to feed their alcohol and drug habits while trying to pay rent. They fought constantly and as soon as they started getting fucked up—forget about it. We were constantly getting kicked out of apartments and going from apartment to apartment. What happened was my brother Jimmy and sister were put into foster care. She had to give me up too, and I went to live with my godparents after staying with my grandparents for awhile. But during that time, I missed a good four months of school straight. So I wound up being held back in the third grade because of that.

Although Franky narrates a series of deprivations and losses regarding housing, caretakers, and school, these same losses inform the practices that build street capital among high-risk youth: fighting, drug use, hustling for rent, living in multiple domiciles, and being supported by much older adults. Couched in the experiences of deprivation, street capital was rarely recognized as such by these young men.

Foster care was an instance where caretaker fluidity and consecutive housing frequently overlapped. Four of the youth—Keith, Jimmy, Armando, and Todd—were placed in foster care by the time they turned 10 years old. With the possible exception of Keith, who was placed into foster care at birth and had no knowledge of his birth parents, each of these four boys' mothers were compelled to place one or more of her children into foster care after being overwhelmed by a crisis of some kind, such as a personal illness, an abusive boyfriend or husband, or financial difficulties.

Upon entering foster care, however, none of these four youths found a stable or non-abusive home environment. Rather, consecutive foster homes were commonly reported. Additionally, each boy experienced one or more serious harmful events in foster care beyond neglect and consecutive housing. For instance, Armando made his first suicide attempt following physical abuse he suffered in a foster home. Here, Keith, whose consecutive housing experience involved moving in and out over a hundred foster homes during his 17 years in the system, describes his first sexual abuse occurring at the age of six years old. His account indicates how disclosures to social workers provided the young men with early practice at discussing sexual experiences and abuse:

There were plenty of sexually and physically abusive places. Those wouldn't last too long though. It would

happen once or twice and I'd say something, and then I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. The first time that I remember, it happened with the night shift guy—I was probably about six. He threw me down the stairs a couple times. He was the first one that made me sexually jerk him off. It was pretty gross. I supposedly had a lot of sexual abuse when I was real young. I don't remember any of those. The case workers put in your head to tell you about anything that happens to you that's unusual. They take you out once or twice a week and take you for a ride—"So what happened this week?"

Boys who grew up in households with little caretaker stability also commonly witnessed their parents, caretakers, or older siblings using illegal drug or abusing alcohol. For instance, Franky saw his mother snort cocaine, three others observed a parent or adult relative smoking cannabis, and Todd smoked cannabis with his older sister. Here, Sid describes how he came to recognize the smell and look of cannabis, which later proved to be constitute street capital when he began dealing cannabis in school:

My stepfather smoked pot in the house when I was a kid. I could tell the difference between a cigarette and a joint—by the look and how they smelled. He used to have big pot plants growing right there in the front window in big five gallon buckets. He told me what they were. I was at least eight years old when he was growing them. I always tried to grow them too. He'd give me seeds to grow them but I'd never grow them right.

For several boys, caretaker fluidity and consecutive housing were also associated with early sexual experiences, both forced and consensual. In addition to Keith, who earlier described the sexual abuse suffered in foster care, Jimmy reported being molested by his mother's boyfriend and by his mother's sister at the age of four years old. Keith later had vaginal sex at the age of nine as did Franky, while Timo received oral sex from a 15-year-old female at the age of 10. At the age of eight, Rey had his first sexual encounter with a male—mutual oral sex—with his 14 year-old cousin. While each young man framed some of these early sexual experiences as consensual, assessing how much control a child can assert while having sex with another child or older teenager is difficult. Whether molested or not, these five youths gained an early awareness of sex which introduced the practice of keeping secrets and hiding information from adults and authorities—a valuable competency within the street economy.

Alongside witnessing drug use and engaging in sexual activities at a young age, all of the boys began violating rules and laws relatively early, such as forging a parent's signature, taking money from a parent, skipping school, vandalizing or stealing property, and running away from home. These actions represent early applications of street capital and the emergence and testing of street competencies. Few reported

being disciplined for these transgressions either by the police, at school, or at home, however, apart from Jason who was sometimes physically abused by his father for stealing while growing up in Russia.

By the age of 10, each of these boys began accumulating significant amounts of street capital through exposure to homelessness, drug use, or sex which foreshadowed pathways into the street economy during their teenage years.

Troubled teens in public institutions: translating street capital into street competencies

Public institutions, such as schools, represented one of the first locations where these young men began translating street capital into competencies and developing social networks aimed towards economic survival. Additionally, these institutions offered opportunities to participate in informal associations, such as gangs, which also served as less visible sites for elaborating street capital into street competencies. The boys' experiences in school often reflected their troubles at home: four quit school by the time they reached 15 years old. As Franky describes, the decision to leave school was rooted in a series of actions and difficulties stretching back into childhood and brought on by caretaker fluidity and consecutive housing:

I was held back when I was in third grade. From there on in I passed. In the fifth grade I got suspended because I got in a fight in the lunch room and I really beat this kid up. And the principal tried to grab me and the kid hit me while I was being held and I hit the principal. So I got suspended for that. But as I was getting older and realized that my father was dying [of AIDS] I really started fucking up in school. I was cutting school. In one year—during 8th grade—I got kicked out of two schools, suspended five times, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Saturday suspension. I was basically kicked into high school. I went into high school with a 0.0 grade point average and nothing but Fs. They were basically like, “We can't handle this kid.”

In this case, school became a site where the accumulation of street capital and enactment of competencies became periodically curtailed or “suspended.” For others, school became a site for translating street capital into economic survival skills and the beginnings of a street career. For instance, Sid describes how he first began selling cannabis in school, and how pervasive gangs were in his neighbourhood:

I started selling pot when I was 13—before I started smoking it—until I was 16. A lot of the people in the gang I was in sold it, so I could get it through the gang. I sold it mostly in school.

Foster care represented another state-sponsored institution in which street capital could be further accumulated and

elaborated through practice. In foster care, several youth became more socially isolated and focused more intensively on individual economic survival. Keith and Todd continued to live in foster care into their teens which consisted of a mixture of households and group homes, while two other boys—Armando and Rey—experienced a variety of other institutions as young teenagers. By the age of 15, Armando had moved into and out of two group homes, two psychiatric hospitals, and two family homeless shelters.

Homelessness served as a critical point in the translation of street capital into street competencies. Like Armando, Rey entered a series of institutions as a teenager—a psychiatric hospital, a detoxification facility, and jail. He entered a homeless shelter for youth after his mother kicked him out of the house for using drugs and stealing. After becoming homeless, Rey transitioned from a heroin sniffer to a heroin injector, and later began supporting his drug habit through sex work with men at the Station—all before the age of 15 years old. Two other youths—Miguel and Jimmy—became homeless or marginally housed during this period, and both also turned to sex work for housing. Like Rey, Miguel was kicked out of his house by his mother following drug use and arrests. Here, Miguel describes the odyssey that began after becoming homeless—which coincided with his entry into sex work. In this narrative, sex work emerges as an almost natural or inevitable practice, although earlier exposures to homelessness situated his “choices” in street-based economic survival strategies:

I was 13 years old when my mom kicked me out. From there, I went down to Philly to my sister's house for one month, then I came back to New York to stay with a friend of mine from school who I lived with for two months. Then I talked with my father, and he helped me rent out a room so I still did my things [sex work]. I rented the room out in Long Island City with my home brother. I stayed there for two years. From there I found a job down in Philly and lived down there for two years. I went back forth between there and New York every weekend. In New York, I did the same thing—hustle.

Jimmy became marginally housed following a relatively stable period in which he left the foster care system and reunited with his father and two brothers (one of them being Franky) for three years. Unbeknownst to Jimmy, his father was dying of AIDS and moved the family from Brooklyn to Florida. However, Jimmy did not like his new environment and his father agreed to return him to live with a neighbour who then became his legal guardian—a man Jimmy calls his “stepfather.” Here, Jimmy describes the exchanges that occurred between him and his stepfather—forms of street capital—which paved the way for developing competencies as a sex worker:

I then lived with [my stepfather] for about nine years. But during those nine years—he's a major alcoholic and also a

drug addict—I got kicked out sometimes during the weekends and sometimes during the week. I was living there and not living there. By the age of 13, I was mainly out on the streets but sometimes I stayed there . . . He also molested me. It became like if I did it [gave or received oral sex] I got what ever I wanted—mad gifts, gold chains. That was one of the deals. It happened all the way up until last year.

The early teens marked a period when the boys began developing competencies in the areas of sexual exchanges and drug use and sales. During this time, sexual activity increased for the boys, sometimes prompted by involvement in the street economy. All but one youth, Jason, had sex with a young woman during these years. Typically, the first female sexual partner was one year or older than the youth. Five also had their first sexual encounter with a male—three described voluntary encounters while two described survival-driven sex work involvement. Older sexual partners also frequently served as sources for drugs or alcohol. Here, Franky describes his first sexual encounter with a man which introduced key elements—paid work, substance use, and negotiation—that could be more efficiently combined later into street-based economic survival strategies:

I knew this guy, he was older—maybe 36 years old—and I was working in his house. We got done with work, sat down, had a few beers, and watched a porno. I got drunk and I was 14 with a hard on. He was basically gay and asked me if I wanted to be blown. I said “Sure.” I was drunk and didn’t give a fuck and wanted to get my rocks off. That was basically that. I completely consented. I was never molested or anything.

By the age of 15, eight youths had smoked cannabis for the first time, including three who snorted cocaine and one who injected heroin. Generally, cocaine and heroin initiation began with an older teenager or a young adult. Here, Timo describes how he was introduced to cocaine by an older neighbour—the same person with whom he later had a sexual relationship:

I was 11 years old the first time I tried cocaine. When my father came home from work, he used to give me money to go buy him beer at this candy store. And I never knew they sold drugs [cocaine] until one day my next door neighbour took me there. She was a lesbian or bi. She was older—like 15 . . . I always told her that I liked her, and she started giving me oral sex one day. A year later, I had sex with her for the first time.

Similar to Franky’s experience, the elements of work, money, alcohol, drugs, and sexual encounters gained increasing proximity and interrelationship, and formed the basis for a kind of practical logic to later inform the cohesion of a street career.

Full speed into street careers: the coalescence of street capital and street competencies

After the lengthy process of accumulating street capital during childhood and adolescence, the young men’s street careers began a rapid evolution. This coalescence of street capital and street competence into an individual street career was typically accelerated by a life crisis. Nine out of 10 youths became homeless before starting to undertake sex work. Three boys—Timo and the brothers Franky and Jimmy—lost their fathers to AIDS during their adolescence. For these youth, their transition into a street-based career as a sex worker was often facilitated by lesser-known individuals who seemed to perceive their transitional state and need to support themselves. Here, Timo describes how his life changed after his father died:

In 1994, my father died [of AIDS] and that’s when I started going wild. I was dealing crack. It was after I got into this type of scene [hustling]. Somebody asked me if I wanted to start selling drugs for them, and I said, “yea.” I used to make a lot of money off of that. And then I went into prison in 1996 and got out in 1998.

Timo, the sole person who was not homeless prior to beginning sex work, eventually became homeless while hustling. Another youth, Armando described how his pathways into homelessness and sex work merged into a street career. In this account, a friend at a homeless shelter introduced him to a more efficient way of earning money on the street. Sex work became an important part of survival and sustaining his crack use:

I’ve been doing this [sex work] for six or seven months. I left my mom’s when I was 18 [after leaving hospital for injuries received during a robbery] and then stayed with a friend for several months. And then he kicked me out and then that’s when I came out here—to the shelter [for homeless youth]. I was living there and then I met a friend. I was trying to sell some walkie-talkies and he brought me here [the Station] and told me about it. Ever since then I stuck with it. It was easy money, good money. It put clothes on my back, fed me, kept me sleeping good at night, and supported my crack habit.

Seven of the youths travelled to or relocated in Manhattan during their mid to late teens after becoming homeless. During this period they become acquainted with hustling venues in New York City. Sid, who travelled to New Orleans, Miami, and Austin before arriving in New York for the first time, provided an overview of the various ways he made money during his homeless and migratory periods, and how his initiation into sex work was enabled through knowledgeable individuals:

I moved to New York for a couple weeks when I was 18. I supported myself then by panhandling—no boost-

ing [stealing] or hustling. It was the first time I panhandled. Then I returned to Chicago. Before this most recent time, I lived in Brooklyn for awhile—about a year and a half and did some hustling then. I talked to some people in Tompkins Square Park who knew about the hustling scene. I ended up going back to Chicago and then down to Phoenix for a year. I didn't do any hustling there—strictly boosting. Then I came back to New York. I've been back and forth between Chicago and New York ever since.

While many youth established street careers as sex workers with surprising speed, the lengthy exposure to the elements of street capital and the testing of street competencies made this rapid transition possible. Keith, who became HIV positive during a 10-year ongoing hustling career, described how homeless youths who are new arrivals to New York can quickly “learn the ropes” by connecting with a few key institutions or individuals.

When I arrived [from Minnesota] I knew the youth system. I knew there were programs out there that were more than happy to house me for a little while until I got the gist of things in New York. So I went to the shelter [for youth]. I got here with \$78 on me, I spent \$35 on a hotel at the YMCA for one night, and I ran down the next morning and found the number to the shelter. From there I learned from the other kids where the good places to hustle were—where the money was, how to do it.

After amassing a considerable amount of street capital and demonstrating street competencies in a number of contexts, these newly homeless young men quickly learned from others about the local venues and the particulars of translating capital and competencies into careers.

Disruptions in street careers: stigma, hospitalization, incarceration, addiction, and injury

The development of careers for these young men as sex workers did not follow a linear path. Rather, a variety of circumstances often disrupted the trajectories into stabilized careers, such as stigma, incarceration, hospitalization, addiction, and injury. However, these disruptions were often opportunities to acquire additional forms of capital which could then be tested and deployed on the street.

Street careers are risky enterprises that, like any form of labour performed in dangerous settings, can invite injuries. During this period, five were hospitalized for several days or more after suffering various injuries—two were involved in car accidents, two were involved in fights, and one was injured while working part-time at a warehouse. These injuries had significant implications for homeless and drug using careers for three young men. Armando nearly died following a stick-up attempt that went afoul, and while recuperating from his injuries, he lost his drug dealing business, girlfriend, son, and

support from his mother. Armando describes how this injury became the impetus for his becoming homeless a few months later. Also, his account highlights the limits of street capital and street competencies, and the degree to which the “work environment” asserted itself over and against the most skilled hustler.

I was with two members of my crew and we were hanging out—beer, liquor, weed, Ecstasy. I was twisted. We needed money and wanted something to do so we decided to go rob somebody. We started roughing the guy up and I got in between and got stabbed six times—once in my spleen—it got punctured, my lung was punctured twice, my forearm—my artery was ripped out as well at the bone. I got hurt bad. I thought I was gonna die. My mother and grandmother used to tell me, “You keep acting the way you are—you'll never make it to 18.” I was only 17 at the time. It kind of spooked me.

Stigma impacted the types of family support available to some of the young men sustaining street careers as hustlers. Jason describes the forms of stigma, particularly around sexual orientation and AIDS, his family attached to him as a sex worker. The shame and anger associated with family rejection only served to highlight the often hidden emotional toll that sex work took on some youth:

Upon learning that I hustled, my mother teased me all the time. When I used to visit my mother [prior to hustling] she'd serve me some food and take it off my plate and eat it if I didn't finish it. Now, if I don't finish it she throws it out and makes sure my fucking plate is sterilized. They're positive that I have AIDS. At one point, my stepfather wouldn't shake my hand, and I was really close with him. That really, really hurt.

Incarceration for drug selling or drug use interrupted the street careers of most of the young men. Four described becoming involved in dealing drugs, such as heroin or cocaine, including two whose gang involvement preceded drug dealing. In addition, the five youth who began dealing in their earlier teens continued dealing into their later teens. In all, eight of the youths spent time in jail or prison for drug related offences during this period.

Drug involvement escalated significantly during the development of street careers. For all, the potential risk of drug addiction remained a possible disruption in their abilities to sustain a street career. Between the ages of 15 and 20 years old, four began sniffing heroin while another four became regular heroin injectors. Additionally, Rey, who began shooting heroin in his early teens, became a regular heroin injector. Seven initiated cocaine or crack use, including five who shot crack or cocaine. The extent of drug use is revealed by the fact that four entered drug detoxification programmes during this period, while one kicked heroin temporarily on his own. Drug addiction became a reality for some. The difficulty

underlying quitting permanently is demonstrated by the fact that all five resumed using heroin, cocaine, or both following detox programmes.

The street careers of several young men were also disrupted by fathering children. Four youths—Timo, Armando, Miguel, and Franky—had a total of seven children during their street careers. All of the children were being raised by single mothers, except for Timo's daughter, as he explains:

I had two kids. The first one died—not even two months after she was born. Her lung collapsed—she was premature. And then I had another daughter. I was 15 at the time and my girlfriend was going on 14. We wound up separating. She was too young. She was still going through school. My girlfriend's mom died when she was a kid so I took her to live with me and my mother pretty much raised her. She finished school but left my mother with the kid cause it was in better hands. So my mom's raising my daughter.

For some, children became a crucial point of contact between themselves and the baby's mothers. For others, experiences of profound loss ensued. For still others, children served to reunite the young men with their parents, intervening in chronically faltering relationships. Thus, the young men's children themselves became a form of capital, which could be lost, or which could give the young men renewed access to various forms of family support, or the prized status of father.

Discussion

Through the narrative accounts of 10 young men, we detailed a kind of developmental process of the accumulation of street capital that preceded surviving on the streets as hustlers or sex workers. We argued that through their experiences in a number of varied institutions—the family, foster care, school, drug treatment, hospitals, jail—these young men gathered fragments of knowledge that we described as street capital. Once homeless, youths became familiar with the experiences and settings of homelessness—often recognizing aspects of homelessness from childhood and adolescence. Formerly diverse, disparate types of street capital and street competencies coalesced into street careers as sex workers that not only made sense to the youth, but also formed the basis for a pragmatic way of surviving on the streets. While the speed of initiating a career within the street economy varied, the previous life history accounts suggest that these youth began to accumulate street capital and develop street competencies at an early age.

Older males—gang members, drug dealers, and sex work clients—offered emotional and financial support that opened pathways into the street economy. In certain ways, these male figures—some a few years older while others as old as their biological fathers—filled gaps left by their parents. For some young men, an uncommitted sexual identity followed a his-

tory of emotional and sexual experiences with both older and younger males and younger females. This ambiguity around sexuality coupled with more immediate material and physical needs for housing and drugs may have fostered openness to trading sex for money. Ultimately, entry into sex work marked a period of crisis for all of these young men—homelessness, failed relationships with parents or girlfriends, release from institutions without job prospects, and escalating drug habits.

As we described, pathways into the street economy are varied but often characterized by an accumulation of street capital and translation into street competencies. However, the relationship between street capital, street competencies, and street careers is not necessarily deterministic or linear. While not detailed here, young people who develop street capital and street competencies do not inevitably transition into homelessness or become sex workers. In fact, many youth of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds develop varying degrees of street capital but never or rarely deploy it because a crisis situation or opportunity does not materialize.

Street competencies reflect a kind of resilience among street youth. Resilience is described as positive adaptation to considerable hardships (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000), while individuals are viewed as resilient if they exhibit minimal difficulties as adults despite contending with significant adversities in younger years. However, since homeless youth are frequently legal minors or have not reached adulthood developmentally, different conceptions of resilience may be required to describe homeless youth (D'Abreu, Mullis, & Cook, 1999; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001). As these narratives indicate, finding shelter on the streets, exchanging sex in a safe manner, avoiding arrest, building relationships with clients, and securing untainted drugs and injection paraphernalia represent competencies that indicated resilience within this group of young men.

Policies directed towards assisting street-involved youth should be informed by the understanding that homelessness, drug involvement, and sex work are interrelated facets of the street economy. The development of street capital and testing of street competencies occur in a variety of settings, and the subsequent involvement in the street economy unfolds over a period of years. Given the often overlapping, complimentary logic connecting careers within the street economy, exiting any particular career may require long periods of adjustment. Street-involved youth may be resistant to assistance offered by some institutions, such as homeless shelters or outreach programmes, since many recall negative experiences in institutional settings at younger ages. Programmes that recognize the developmental nature of street careers and their origins may be more successful at attracting street-involved youth and offering new pathways outside of the street economy.

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