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Canada

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

BY

Allison Rice Roberts

Bachelor of Science (Honours), Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1996

THESIS

**Submitted to the Department of Psychology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree
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2001**

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Abstract

Very little research has been carried out with young homeless females in Canada. Therefore, the following study investigated homeless in the Kitchener-Waterloo Region, in two age groups of female adolescents from two different types of settings, a youth drop in centre and a female youth shelter. One sample of 8 female youth was between the ages of 14-19 and was presently homeless. The other sample was an older group of 5 individuals between the ages of 19-27, who had experienced homelessness in their earlier adolescent years. A semi-structured, open-ended interview was carried out with these 13 females. The interview was also structured to capture their life story. They were asked questions about their childhood, their family, their schooling, their homeless experience and their future. The older sample of females was also asked questions about their pathway out of homelessness.

Three broad research objectives were outlined: to develop an in-depth understanding of females' experiences of homelessness; to identify and link the individual, family, school and structural risk factors that are critical for female adolescent homelessness in the K-W region, as described by these adolescents; and to compare the similarities and differences that may emerge between the two age groups of female youth regarding their homeless experiences and to identify the protective factors that were important for the older group in their pathway out of homelessness.

A qualitative analysis of the results revealed that there were two types of homelessness stories, a street story and a shelter story, and that there were a number of substantial differences between the two stories, including drug use, sexual behavior, negative school experiences and

no contact with their biological father, which suggested that the street story was associated with greater risks. However, addressing the second research objective, all of these female youth were experiencing multiple risk factors at all the three levels, individual, family-school-peer and structural, therefore increasing their chances of becoming homeless. Having supportive and caring relationships and learning about themselves were the two primary factors that seemed to have been important for the older youth in finding their pathway out of homelessness.

Also, there were some noteworthy differences in the comments of the two age groups. For example, the younger group of female youth spoke about how their friends became more important than school, and their close sibling and peer relations. Whereas, the older group of females spoke about sibling abuse, their concrete plans regarding their schooling and they used mental health terminology, such as depression and suicide. Overall, both age groups had experienced a number of family conflicts, had negative relationships with their mother, had very little contact with their fathers and described similar homeless and school experiences.

The stories documented by this thesis in the area of female youth homelessness provide a number of possible suggestions for future research with this particular population of homeless youth. Homelessness is a complicated issue and a single intervention program designed for homeless youth in general is not going to address the varied types of homeless situations that different youth face. The streets, with all of their dangers and hazards, appear to entrench the youth that go to them, likely making it harder for them to find their pathway out of homelessness. We have to address all youth's individual needs, by helping them to feel connected to their families, schools, and communities.

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A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

As we enter the 21st century, we cannot ignore many of the economic and social problems that continue to plague our country (e.g., child poverty, health and education cutbacks, high unemployment rates in some areas and sectors and the lack of affordable housing). However, one specific pressing social concern that requires immediate attention is the increasing number of homeless youth found in every city in Canada. Taking Responsibility for Homelessness (1999), a document prepared for the Toronto Homelessness Action Task Force, highlighted the fact that youth are the fastest growing group in the homeless and at-risk population. In Toronto, youth under age 18 are the fastest growing group of hostel users (Taking Responsibility for Homelessness, 1999). Kariel (1993) estimated the number of youth living on the streets in Calgary to be between 150 and 1,000. Taylor, Brooks, Phanidis and Rossma (1991) estimated that in downtown Vancouver there are between 300 to 500 street kids.

One can certainly assume, from the statistics stated above, that this population of youth who are without stable and permanent housing represents one of the most vulnerable groups of youth within today's society. Raffaelli and Larson (1999) suggested that the primary cause of youth homelessness in the 1990's was family dysfunction. Within the last couple of years, family poverty as well seems to be an important characteristic of the homeless youth population (Raffaelli & Larson, 1999). The problems homeless youth face, whether through living on the streets or temporarily in a shelter, are numerous. They are victimized, at risk for drug/alcohol abuse, involved in illegal activities to survive and face a number of health issues (Shane, 1996).

Depending upon the source of the sample of homeless youth studied, the proportion of males to females can vary (Kryder-Coe, Salamon & Molnar, 1991). In the Kitchener-Waterloo

region in 1999, 60% of the homeless youth population were female (Betty Thompson Youth Centre video, 1999). The executive director of R.O.O.F., an organization in Kitchener that works with homeless youth, stated that there was an increase in the number of females under the age of 16 who accessed their services in 1999 (informal interview, April 2000).

Milburn and D'Ercole (1991) stated that women must be viewed as a distinct population and that female homelessness is becoming a separate issue from the male experience. Novac, Brown and Bourbonnais (1996) defined the "the new" homeless as being "younger, more often female, disproportionately a racial minority, and arguably, having more problems with mental illness and drug abuse" (p.vii). These authors noted that there has been very little research carried out with young homeless women in Canada.

In this thesis, I intend to fill the gap in the current literature on female youth homelessness by focussing on the life stories and experiences of a sample of homeless female youth in the Kitchener-Waterloo region.

Personal Interests and Motivations

In the winter term of my community psychology program, a classmate and I decided to work together on our term papers for a social intervention class. We were both interested in youth and social problems, such as poverty and homelessness. We decided to focus our papers on youth homelessness. While completing the literature review for these papers, I became very interested and intrigued in youth homelessness as a topic for my thesis. I have always been interested in studying adolescent development and had been working with youth in community settings for the past three years, who were having difficulty entering the workforce or choosing a career.

Coming from a middle class family, the one thing I kept thinking about was, how bad does it get at home to have to leave a warm, comfortable and secure place and go to the streets, where it is cold, dangerous and lonely? Do these youth think about going to the streets, do they weigh the pros and cons of living on the streets versus living at home? Do they think about how they will survive on their own? After reviewing the enormous amount of literature on youth homelessness, a lot of questions were spinning around in my head. I decided that I would like to be able to provide an opportunity for these youth to tell their stories, regarding why they left home, and about their homeless experience. Also, I wanted my research to be useful and valuable to service providers working with homeless youth. After narrowing down the scope of my thesis topic, I decided that exploring homelessness in the female youth population would contribute to research lacking in this area. Also, identifying the protective factors that are fundamental in finding a pathway out of homelessness would provide valuable information for service providers working with homeless youth and youth “at-risk” of becoming homeless. Therefore, my thesis approach involved interviewing homeless and formerly homeless female youth as a way to obtain the information outlined above.

Literature Review

The adolescent homeless population remains the most understudied group within the area of homelessness (Cauce, Paradise, Embry, Morgan, Lohr, Theofelis, Heger & Wagner, 1998). Bronstein (1996) stated that it is only within the last decade that the study of homeless youth has progressed. As I was researching the area of youth homelessness, I found very little research focussing on young females who were homeless. Some researchers mentioned gender differences; however, the majority of the research I found focussed on female runaway

behaviour, pregnancy and prostitution. Also, the amount of research carried out in the area of youth homelessness in the United States has definitely exceeded Canadian research.

Due to the gap in the current literature on young females who are homeless, the majority of my literature review will focus on the homeless youth population. Also, I will review homeless adolescent female research, focussing on victimization, pregnancy, runaway behaviour and prostitution. This literature review will provide the reader with background information regarding the definition of youth homelessness, the terminology that has been used to describe this population of youth, the risk factors of youth homelessness, a description of the survival/coping strategies and problems that youth face on the streets and the identification of protective factors.

Defining Homelessness and Terminology

There is little agreement about just what constitutes homelessness (Hutson & Liddiard, 1994). Some researchers focus on youth living solely on the streets, whereas others study youth who live in shelters, or youth who have been away from home for a substantial period of time. Some only concern themselves with youth who simply ran away from home (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). However, Shane (1996) defined youth homelessness in a broader context as youth who lack a fixed and consistent residence. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) noted that over the years, there have been many definitions of homeless youth. They suggest that youth homelessness can be distinguished at “two extreme poles, a broad and narrow band definition”(p.1). The broad band approach includes homeless youth who have “been cast out, abandoned or rejected by their families and who have no fixed address and find themselves moving frequently from place to place” (p.1). In contrast, the narrow band approach defines

homeless youth “as youth who have no roof over their head and sleep every night on the street” (p.1). These youth are referred to as street youth, street children, or street kids. However, very few youth actually spend every night of the year sleeping on the streets. They may stay in a shelter for a couple of nights or may spend a night or two with friends or family. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) refer to this as a cyclic process, “today on the street, tomorrow in the house of a stranger and the day after tomorrow in a shelter” (p. 2).

The terminology that researchers use to refer to youth who are homeless also varies widely. Shane (1996) stated that there are six different terms for youth homelessness that people use: runaway (left home voluntarily); throwaway (ejected from their families and homes); system youth (youth taken into custody due to abuse, neglect, or other serious family problems); street youth (spend most of their time on the streets unsupervised); out-of-home and unsupervised youth (youth who do not fit into any of the categories stated above, who also may have inadequate guardianship and lack of supervision); and abandoned children (their families have dissolved, due to such factors as illness, incarceration and death).

For the purpose of this thesis, female youth homelessness will be defined as youth under the age of 24 who meet at least one of the following criteria, as outlined by Smollar (1999, p. 47):

- “They have run away from their homes or from their alternative care placements and remained away for a long period of time with little or no connection with their families or caretakers.
- They have been pushed out of their homes or foster care placements, have been abandoned by their parents, or have left home for the streets with their parents’

knowledge and consent.

- They have no stable place of residence; lack adult supervision, guidance, and care; and have little likelihood of reunification with parents.”

These criteria will take into account all of the youth who fall into the various categories described above by Shane (1996).

Getting to the Streets: Why Youth Turn to the Streets

Previous research has focussed on individual factors, such as physical, psychological or psychiatric characteristics, as risk factors for homelessness in youth (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Generally, then, homeless youth were labelled as psychologically deviant in the 50s and 60s. In the 70s and 80s researchers began linking stressful socioeconomic factors (i.e., poverty and lack of affordable housing) and homelessness. However, researchers today recognize the importance of identifying risk factors at multiple levels: individual (gender, maltreatment and abuse and neglect), group (lack of family, peer and school support) and community and society (lack of income and lack of employment). In Canada, however, O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) stated that these individual, group and societal factors have not been thoroughly examined by researchers. Shinn (1992) pointed out that research focussing on person-centred and individual-level factors, rather than on structural factors, is not a sufficient approach to understand the causes of homelessness and what can be done about it. Researchers must focus on linking both structural and individual level factors.

Individual risk factors. O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) concluded that many teens who turn to the streets are victims of both physical and sexual abuse. The streets are seen as an escape from the intolerable violence experienced at home. Based on literature reviews by O'Reilly-Fleming

(1993), van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) and Smollar (1999), a number of individual risk factors have been identified as increasing the likelihood of a young person experiencing homelessness: alcohol and drug abuse; mental illness; suicidal tendencies; legal troubles; delinquency; minority status; a lower socioeconomic status; school failure and underachievement; personality traits such as low self-esteem, ineffective coping, an external locus of control; and a history of having been in psychiatric hospitals, juvenile justice facilities and alternative care placements. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) reported that these individual behaviours and factors usually attract the greatest attention by the public, as they are seen as most disturbing. However, one must consider the risk factors that occur at the other two levels of group and of community and society as a whole.

Family and school risk factors. A number of researchers (Kariel,1993; O'Reilly-Fleming,1993; Smollar,1999) have stated that family dysfunction is the primary risk factor of youth homelessness. After interviewing a number of homeless youth, Kariel (1993) reported that almost all of the youth reported coming from "extremely disturbed, dysfunctional homes" (p.57). Smollar (1999) reported that these youth do not leave home after one single episode of violence; rather, these problems are longstanding.

O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) and Shane (1996) commented on the changing structure of the traditional nuclear family. Shane (1996) stated that a number of families do not fit the stereotypical idea of a middle class family (i.e., two-parent, wage-earning father, homemaker mother and two or three children). O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) stated that family breakdown and dissolution are occurring quite frequently, as the divorce rate has increased within the last couple of decades. There are now more blended families, consisting of partners from previous

marriages and their children, as well as single-parent families (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993). Emotional and economic difficulties are common in these step families (Shane, 1996). As a result of these conflicts, youth may choose to leave home. Others may be thrown out of the house, while others are taken into custody by the local children's protection agency and put into a group home, where they end up running away. Shane (1996) stated that "the tensions often lead to deconstituting the reconstituted family" (p. 69).

Schweitzer, Hier and Terry (1994) found that homeless adolescents, as compared with non-homeless adolescents, perceived more conflict and hostility in the home, reported a lack of cohesiveness within the family, perceived their parents as being unresponsive and rejecting, perceived their family environment as relatively unstimulating, and received very little encouragement of individual autonomy and family participation in outside activities. Therefore, Schweitzer, Hier and Terry (1994) concluded that homeless youth tend to suffer from emotional, social and "cultural deprivation."

The majority of youth at risk of becoming homeless have also had negative experiences at school, such as repeating classes and frequently changing schools (van der Ploeg, 1989). Van der Ploeg (1989) found that 50% of homeless youth were regular truants from school; 70% of these youth changed schools more than once, and 40% repeated one or more classes. As a result of these negative school experiences, these youth usually do not graduate from high school and their prospects of finding employment are limited (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Also, the disruption and termination of schooling may have a negative effect on their social lives. Their network of friends begins to diminish, therefore reducing the number of positive and supportive relationships in their lives (Shane, 1996). To summarize, Shane (1996) stated that youth are less

likely to end up homeless if they have supportive and caring extended family units or friends, and positive school experiences.

Structural risk factors. Many researchers, such as Shane (1996), Shinn (1992), O'Reilly-Fleming (1993), and van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997), have identified structural factors as being partly responsible for the existence of homelessness in Western societies. Poverty, a lack of housing, and unemployment have also been found to be linked to youth homelessness (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). As a result of economic hardships, there has been the necessity for multiple incomes in order for families to survive. The number of women seeking work outside the home has increased and there is also a lack of affordable child care. Therefore, neighbours, friends or relatives are being left to provide after-school supervision. However, if parent(s) cannot find work and affordable housing, many families are coming together to live under the same roof, resulting in larger, multifamily households. In these situations, conflicts may arise, as overcrowding, lack of privacy and economic problems occur. As a result of these conflicts, opportunities for relatives to abuse and exploit children may arise. Parents and their children may even have to leave the home involuntarily and be forced to find alternative living arrangements separately, in order to survive (Shane, 1996).

Robertson (1993) stated that dysfunctional families are at a greater chance of breaking down during economic hardships, due to problems with social assistance, employment and affordable housing. Homeless youth have reported leaving home because they felt like an economic burden to their families, and a number of homeless youth are also pushed out by their families due to economic crises (Robertson, 1993).

Youth who have left school and lack qualifications may have difficulty in finding

employment. Therefore, these youth are often left with finding alternative sources of income that may be illegal. There are social services programs available for people trying to find work. However, the most vulnerable group of street youth may not be capable of benefiting from these services (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Homeless youth are less likely to find affordable housing, and underage youth are not allowed to sign a contract such as a lease (Robertson, 1993). Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) suggested that deinstitutionalization may also contribute to the problem of youth becoming homeless. In one of their studies they found that youth in residential centres for treatment of psychosocial problems ran away or were discharged as “untreatable cases” before their treatment was completed. A literature review by Robertson (1993) also reported that homeless youth have had extensive histories of contact with foster care and residential programs. As well, youth may be returned to their homes inappropriately, due to the unavailability of longer-term alternative care facilities (Robertson, 1993).

Another important consideration in the lives of many youth who become homeless is the failing system of professional youth care. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) stated that the failing system of professional youth care does not cause the problems of youth homelessness; however, many youth were involved in some aspect of professional services before becoming homeless. They highlight a number of reasons why the system of professional youth care is failing: agencies are repeating ineffective treatment strategies; they are too problem-focussed; they have ineffective outreach strategies; contact with the system starts too late; there is very little focus on the importance of a supportive social network; and, if youth become too problematic, they are sent to another agency or institution. As a result of these ineffective strategies utilized by a number of agencies, van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) state that these

youth are not self-empowered; they do not get opportunities to develop effective coping styles; they become too dependent on the system; they are repeatedly forced to adapt to new environments; they have difficulty attaching to people; and the youth learn to avoid their problems instead of trying to solve them.

To summarize, a number of individual, group and structural risk factors have been examined in order to understand the potential causes of youth homelessness. Please refer to Table 1 for a summary of the risk factors described above. For female youth who are homeless, we can only assume (because of the lack of research focussing on this population) that the majority of these risk factors are important predictors of homelessness for females. Research carried out with the female population can help clarify which of these risk factors are more predominant in predicting female youth homelessness.

Next, I will review research that focusses on the survival strategies homeless youth engage in to provide basic necessities, and the hazards that result from participating in dangerous and illegal activities.

Surviving on the Streets: Strategies and Hazards

Walters (1999) stated that “for street youth the basic rights to food, shelter, health care and safety have not been met”(p.189). Therefore, the majority of these youth engage in illegal activities and problem behaviours in order to provide these basic necessities. Homeless youth may break into buildings, trade sex for food or shelter, sell drugs and be paid for sex (Robertson,1993). Robertson (1993) stated that these behaviours are part of the youths’ survival strategies while they are homeless. Walters (1999) reported that “prostitution serves as a means of surviving street life and obtaining basic needs”(p.189). A number of researchers (Anderson

et al., 1996; Clatts et al., 1998; Clements et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 1996; Leach et al., 1997; Bond et al., 1992) have investigated the risk factors for AIDS among the homeless youth population. They concluded that many homeless youth are sexually active, have a large number of sexual partners, practice unsafe sex and abuse drugs and alcohol. These problem behaviours put homeless youth at high risk for exposure to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). A literature review carried out by Walters (1999) reported that many youth not only use drugs to numb their fears, but they also use drugs before sexual episodes as a way to separate themselves from the sexual act. In effect, they are putting themselves at a much greater chance for contracting HIV by using tainted needles and having unprotected sex.

Kennedy (1991) collected data from 100 homeless youth and found that these youth were “at a high risk for serious emotional and psychological problems that result from past traumatic experiences in the home and current pressures of coping with existence on the streets” (p.578). Shane (1996) also stated that homelessness exposes one to mental health problems. However, mental health problems also may be the precipitating factors of their homelessness. Literature reviews by Shane (1996) and Robertson (1991) stated that many studies report high rates of depression, behavioural problems, anxiety, aggression, social withdrawal and post-traumatic stress disorder in homeless youth. Also, Robertson (1989), cited in Robertson (1991), stated that about half (48%) of a Hollywood sample of street youth had attempted suicide at some time in their lives.

Literature reviews by Shane (1996), van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997), Smollar (1999), and Robertson (1991), reported that there are a number of issues youth face when they become homeless: unstable and unsanitary living conditions; lack of nutritious meals; increased risk of

alcohol/drug use; increased risk of victimization and injury; acute and chronic physical health risks; increased risk for STD's and AIDS; mental health issues; increased risk of sexual abuse and abuse of sex; lack of health care; increased risk of mortality; a lack of opportunity to receive an education and an increased risk of poverty.

The day to day survival activities of homeless youth, and the hazards they face, are important aspects of homelessness to study, in order to develop an understanding of the experiences and consequences of homelessness in youth. However, researchers have also studied and highlighted a number of positive developmental assets that can be considered important in reducing the probability of youth engaging in negative activities such as drug/alcohol abuse and violence. Also, these positive assets may play a critical role in interacting with many of the risk factors outlined earlier to protect youth from becoming homeless.

Protective Factors: Developmental Assets, Positive Youth Development and Empowerment

A number of risk factors for youth homelessness were outlined above. However, it is also important to discuss the protective factors for youth homelessness. Risk factors are characteristics of a person or the environment which are associated with an increased probability of negative outcomes, whereas protective factors are those which interact with sources of risk to reduce the probability of negative outcomes (Compas, Hinden & Gerhardt, 1995).

Developmental assets. RESPECTEEN (1994) outlined 30 developmental assets that are important for positive youth development. These 30 assets for youth were identified in a study in 1993 called "The Troubled Journey." Youth across 600 communities in the United States

completed a survey measuring the presence and effect of these 30 developmental assets. These included family support, discipline from family, positive activities, church involvement, commitment to education, positive values and life skills. The identified assets were divided into either external or internal assets and placed under six major themes. External assets consisted of support, control and structured time use, whereas internal assets consisted of educational commitment, positive values and social competence. Please refer to Table 2 for the complete list of assets.

RESPECTEEN (1994) stated that society has failed our youth in providing positive developmental assets that are important for these youth to lead healthy, positive and productive lives. The allocation of resources to develop and implement intervention programs to deal with crises occurring with our youth, such as teen violence, school dropouts, pregnancy, drug use, suicide and street youth, is enormous (Building Assets For Youth, RESPECTEEN, 1994). They state that research gives very little attention to the benefits and the potential to build assets among our youth. Also, they state that by providing opportunities to increase these positive developmental assets in youth, young people will experience a decrease in the number of crises they face. Creating healthy communities, creating opportunities for youth to be involved in leadership, service and other positive activities, as well reinforcing positive messages in all areas of their lives, are key themes outlined by RESPECTEEN as a way to build these positive assets.

Positive youth development. Smollar (1999) stated that assumptions can be drawn about the developmental outlooks for homeless youth by exploring the individual and environmental characteristics that promote positive development among adolescents. Smollar (1999) has identified four specific characteristics that foster positive developmental pathways from

childhood to adulthood: a sense of industry and competency, a feeling of connectedness to others and society, a sense of control over one's fate in life and a stable sense of identity. Smollar (1999) discussed these four pathways with regard to homeless youth.

Opportunities that are available for adolescents to be involved in productive activities in school, in the community and at home, and to receive recognition for this productivity, will promote confidence in their own abilities. This confidence, in turn, will foster a sense of industry and competency. However, homeless youth lack opportunities to engage in positive and protective activities in their school and home environments. Poor attitudes towards school, conflict with teachers and truancy, and as well, the lack of cohesion with their parents or caretakers hinders homeless youths' ability to develop a positive sense of industry and competency.

Homeless youth do develop a sense of industry and competency. However, it is not from engaging in positive and productive activities, but in illegal activities such as shoplifting, begging and prostitution. As homeless youth develop skills to survive on the streets, they receive recognition from other homeless youth and adults for these skills. As a result of this recognition from other homeless people, youth develop confidence in their abilities to survive. These opportunities and recognition from others foster a sense of industry and competency in homeless youth. Service providers state that once homeless youth develop this sense of industry and competency from living on the streets, it is much more difficult to reach out to them (Smollar, 1999).

Adults who provide young people with social and emotional support, and independence, promote a feeling of connectedness to others and society in their adolescents. These positive

adolescent and adult interactions show adolescents that adults do care about them and that they do want to be involved in their lives. However, as discussed earlier, family dysfunction in many homeless youths' families prevents these supportive interactions from taking place between parent and child. As a result of this negative home environment, homeless youth develop a sense of alienation from others and society. Therefore, they turn to the streets to develop this feeling of connectedness to others. On the streets many homeless youth develop relationships with adults, and unfortunately many of these adults exploit these youth and involve them in illegal activities. Many homeless youth develop a sense of connectedness with other youth who are homeless. These relationships provide them with the security, comfort, acceptance and understanding previously lacking at home. Smollar (1999) noted that homeless youth may develop this sense of connectedness with other youth; however, they typically are still not connected with the wider society. Therefore, homeless youth often do not trust service providers and are fearful of many societal institutions.

Children learn from an early age that their behaviour is related to particular responses, and that they have some control over what happens to them. Parents respond with either positive or negative reactions, depending on the behaviour expressed by the child. However, homeless youth may learn a sense of helplessness rather than control, because of the inconsistent and random responses they receive from their dysfunctional parents. Therefore, many homeless youth turn to the streets, thinking that they can develop a sense of control over the fate of their lives by being on their own (Smollar, 1999).

A sense of competency, a feeling of connectedness to others and a sense of control over one's fate in life all contribute to a sense of identity. Homeless youth are unlikely to develop a

sense of identity because of the lack of opportunities to develop the above developmental characteristics. The identity that homeless youth develop is based on street survival and a feeling of connectedness to other homeless youth. This particular identity, however, may not lead to productive adulthood, as a result of alienation from society (Smollar, 1999). Erikson's theory of adolescent identity development would refer to this as "identity diffusion" status, or perhaps as a "negative" identity (Fabes & Martin, 2000). Fabes and Martin (2000) stated that Erikson believed that the formation of a sense of identity was one of the most important developmental tasks during adolescence. If adolescents do not deal with the challenges of identity crisis successfully, they will develop an incomplete sense of self. The formation of an identity is important for adolescents because it provides them with information about who they are and their direction in life (Fabes & Martin, 2000). For this research project, the life stories told by the homeless females will help me to determine if they have developed a "positive" sense of identity.

McAdams' work with life-stories uses narratives to study human identities in modern societies (e.g., McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin & Mansfield, 1997). In recent years, McAdams and a number of other researchers have been using narratives as a focus for life-story interviews. McAdams (1993) stated that in his life-story theory of identity, men and women in their late adolescence years and young adulthood construct integrative narratives of the self to provide a sense of purpose and unity to their lives. Therefore, stories are a natural and organized way in which people can make sense of their lives over time. McAdams et al. (1997, p. 678) stated that, "identity, therefore, may itself be viewed as an internalized and evolving life story, a way of telling the self, to the self and others, through a story or set of stories complete with

settings, scenes, characters, plots and themes.” McAdams’s structured life-story interview asks the participant questions that draw upon the most important features of a person’s “self-defining” life-story. The participant is asked to think about her life as a book divided into chapters. McAdams asks questions in the interview that focus on stories of peak and nadir experiences, a turning point experience, earliest and most significant childhood memory, to name four people who had the biggest impact in her life, to name a personal hero or heroine, to describe future goals/plans, to describe conflicts and tensions and also a number of questions concerning personal ideology. For my purpose, I adopted appropriate parts of this framework to elicit life-stories from the homeless female youth I interviewed.

Empowerment. Kim, Crutchfield, Williams and Hepler (1998) stated that since the 1960s the field of prevention research has been moving away from preventing negative problems from occurring with our youth to increasing positive youth development via youth empowerment. The prevention strategy of traditional research was “problem free youth” and the main strategy of the Youth Development and Empowerment (YD&E) approach is “fully prepared youth” (Kim et al., 1998). This new paradigm views youth as “community assets and resources” instead of “community problems” (Kim et al., 1998, p.6). The YD&E approach suggests that youth should participate and be involved in the socioeconomic and public affairs of the community (Kim et al., 1998).

A number of mechanisms to support the empowerment processes for youth have been identified by Kim et al. (1998): adequate family and social support; opportunities to learn life skills; meaningful opportunities to assume responsibilities; opportunities to participate in and contribute meaningfully to the social, cultural, economic or public affairs of the school,

community, and government; opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and successes and to have their achievements reinforced by significant others in their social networks. They state that this approach has been getting significant attention. However, there is not a lot of practical research being carried out to try and make this paradigm shift. Nessel (1988) stated that youth empowerment programs that are well designed and implemented can build a youth's self-esteem and skill development while at the same time meeting community needs.

Youth who are at-risk of becoming homeless may possess many of the positive developmental assets described above. These characteristics of resiliency will help youth overcome risky and dangerous situations. Shane (1996) stated that we need to identify the elements that promote resiliency in children and learn how to build these elements into our families, schools and communities. However, once a youth is homeless, it is also important to identify which factors are critical in finding a pathway out of homelessness. Shane (1996) interviewed five adults who experienced homelessness as youth, and from their stories they all had one thing in common. All five adults spoke about someone in their youth who cared about them and who they cared about. Therefore, are caring and supportive relationships an important factor in finding a pathway out of homelessness? In particular, what protective factors are fundamental for female youth in overcoming homelessness? Research in the area of survivors of youth homelessness is particularly lacking (Shane, 1996).

Very little research in the area of youth homelessness has focussed on the female adolescents' homeless experience. As I was researching homelessness in female youth, I found that the limited research carried out with this population has tended to focus on four issues: female adolescent runaway behaviour, young homeless females who engage in prostitution, the

victimization of homeless female youth, and homeless youth who are pregnant. Next, I will review this literature and explain why it is important to focus my research project on this particular population.

Consequences of Homelessness for Female Youth

As stated earlier, the “new homeless” have been described as younger and more often female (Novac, Brown & Bourbonnais, 1996). However, homelessness has been viewed “as a male experience and problem,” according to these authors (p. vii). Novac, Brown and Bourbonnais (1996) stated that there has been an increase in the population of women and youth using Toronto’s battered women’s shelters since the 1970s. They state that only recently has there been a focus on women’s experience of homelessness. Also, research that is usually carried out takes place within shelters and on the street, and therefore may not adequately reflect women’s experiences.

Runaways. Englander (1984) investigated runaway behaviour in 52 adolescent females. He found that these females were more likely to perceive their parents as lacking warmth and support, and that they reported themselves to be relatively high in socially undesirable traits and low in sociability as compared with non-runaways. Also, runaway females were found to be more aggressive, unstable, easily annoyed, and depressed, and usually lied more and practised truancy regularly (Reilly, 1978, cited in Rothman, 1991). Reilly (1978, cited in Rothman, 1991) also concluded that runaway girls believed that leaving home would bring them more of an independent social life, one where there was a tolerance for drugs and sex on the streets. Kufeldt, Durieux, Nimmo and MacDonald (1992) found that adolescent females using shelters usually follow a pattern of “in and out,” meaning that they tend to run back and forth from home

to shelter.

A number of researchers have also investigated gender differences in the runaway behaviour of girls and boys. Kratcoski (1974), cited in Rothman (1991), stated that runaway girls, when compared to boys, have a history of severe deprivation and neglect. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) also stated that girls are more likely to run, whereas boys are more likely to be pushed out by their parents. A literature review carried out by van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) concluded that homeless girls are more depressed, have lower self-esteem and are more hostile than homeless boys. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) also found that the dysfunctional and negative parents of throwaway females had an extremely damaging impact upon these girls' development. These females were more depressed, socially isolated, and displayed more anti-social and aggressive behaviours than did runaway boys. Also, young homeless women have higher rates of psychiatric hospitalization and are more vulnerable to psychiatric problems. A study investigating personal and family distress in homeless adolescents, carried out by Dadds, Braddock, Cuers, Elliott and Kelly (1993), found that family problems were a predictor of behavioural and emotional problems for homeless females, but not for males, and that parental overprotectiveness was also related to externalizing behaviour problems more for females than males.

Victimization and maltreatment. Whitbeck and Simons (1990) hypothesized that youth are more vulnerable on the streets if they have been victimized at home. However, they point out that this relationship is indirect. They explained that abuse at home has a direct effect on youth running away from home, forming relationships with deviant peers and engaging in dangerous survival strategies. According to the authors, these are the mediating variables

between victimization at home and on the streets. They stated that these four factors, an abusive family, runaway behaviour, deviant peers and deviant survival strategies, are all ones that can influence the victimization of street youth. Whitbeck and Simons (1990) tested this model with 100 homeless youth and found that this model was supported. Also, the researchers found that, for girls, the number of times they ran away from home greatly increased their risk of being victimized.

A literature review carried out by van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) found that homeless girls are significantly more often victims of abuse, especially sexual abuse, whereas boys are subject more to neglect. The physical and sexual abuse experienced at home are important reasons why girls run away from home more often than boys. Moreover, while girls are on the streets, they are more at risk to be sexually assaulted than are boys (Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). A literature review carried out by Milburn and D'Ercole (1991) found that homeless women are more likely to report childhood histories of abuse, than are housed women. Therefore, they highlight the fact that a number of researchers have stated that homeless women are less likely to have future positive interpersonal relationships, because of episodes of abuse experienced early in their lives that inhibit the development of strong relationships of attachment and trust.

Prostitution. Rothman (1991, p. 122) stated that “a young female’s sexual activity is viewed as self-destructive and as a sign of personal, familial, and emotional problems, while male heterosexual behaviour is viewed more liberally and is taken less seriously.” Baxter (1991) stated that female street youth are more likely than males to be prostitutes and to be unemployed, but are less likely to abuse drugs and to be youth offenders. In order for young females to survive while they are homeless, many of them may trade sex for food, clothes, and

shelter (Pennbridge, Mackenzie & Swofford, 1991). Some people may call this prostitution, whereas the teens themselves call this “survival sex.” Michaud (1988) stated that these young females are not committed to a life of prostitution; rather, it is a means of survival. She also stated that the introduction of prostitution is usually made by a friend or another street person. Also, a female may find shelter with an older male “protector,” who then may turn around and exploit her (Kufeldt, Durieux, Nimmo & MacDonald, 1992). As a result of getting involved in prostitution, the young female usually loses the support of friends and family. She moves into the world of prostitution and away from mainstream society. New street friends also involved in these deviant behaviours offer a sense of belonging, becoming substitutes for the lost family. Young females who also experienced sexual abuse as a child, or early promiscuity, may be more at risk to become involved in prostitution (Michaud, 1988).

O'Reilly-Fleming (1993, p. 43) stated that prostitution may also be considered by these female youth as “a form of control over what they are doing.” These females can decide whom they want to have sex with, and how much they are going to charge. Also, because of their age, lack of education and job experience, they can make larger sums of money than in other work, sometimes receiving \$200 to \$500 per night. It may be thought of as a freedom from some demanding jobs, which may involve punching a time clock and listening to a boss shout orders. However, many females in the world of prostitution end up using drugs to dull the pain of their degrading existence.

Pregnancy. As a result of engaging in high risk sexual behaviours, homeless adolescents are at a high risk of becoming pregnant (Greene & Ringwalt, 1998). They are not prepared physically, economically and emotionally to take care of a child. Greene and Ringwalt (1998)

stated that the extent of pregnancy among homeless youth is unknown. They decided to examine pregnancy among three national samples of runaway and homeless youth. They found that youth living on the streets and in shelters are at much greater risk of becoming pregnant than youth living at home. Furthermore, youth living on the streets were more likely to indicate that they had been pregnant a number of times during their adolescence.

Greene and Ringwalt (1998) stated a number of reasons why these youth are at an increased vulnerability of becoming pregnant. They stated that many of these youth reported experiencing sexual abuse. Sexual abuse could be linked to pregnancy in several ways: the adolescent could become pregnant as a direct result of sexual abuse: sexually abused youth tend to have more sexual partners; they are more likely to engage in unprotected sex and to initiate sexual activity at an earlier age. Also, homeless youth are at an increased risk of being raped when living on the streets; they may not be able to afford effective forms of birth control such as birth control pills and intrauterine devices; and they may have to trade sex for basic survival needs. They also concluded that many pregnant homeless youth may not return home because of fear of their parents' rejection, or the pregnancy may have been the precipitating factor for why they left home, especially if it resulted from sexual abuse.

Pennbridge, Mackenzie and Swofford (1991) carried out a risk profile of homeless pregnant adolescents. They concluded that pregnant homeless youth are at a greater risk for poor pregnancy outcomes, to have attempted suicide, to be diagnosed as depressed, to have a history of sexual and physical abuse, and to be more likely to be abusing drugs. These youth have few social supports, they tend to rely on their street friends and they gain little support from the father(s) of their children.

The issues discussed above are of particular concern to the adolescent female homeless population. However, it is important to investigate adolescent female homelessness in a broader context to understand what it means to be a young female who is homeless. As stated earlier, this area of research has been lacking, especially in Canada. Therefore, in order to address this gap in the current literature, this research project will focus on female adolescents' experiences of homelessness.

The literature review provided on youth homelessness has covered an array of areas. To summarize, we have examined a number of definitions of homelessness and terminology, the individual, family and school and structural risk factors that are often used to explain the causes of youth homelessness, their survival strategies, the dangers they face on the streets, the protective factors of positive youth development and empowerment and the consequences of homelessness for female adolescents. One can certainly conclude from this literature review that homeless adolescents experience an astounding range of difficulties. Bronstein (1996) stated that these youth are perhaps one of the neediest groups of youth in the United States, who must have their array of needs met both at macro and micro levels. Therefore, it is important to address policy and program development at the macro-level and the day to day experiences of these youth at the micro-level. The use of ecological systems is now being advocated by many researchers as an overarching paradigm to guide work with homeless youth (Bronstein, 1996). The ecological theory will be examined in the next section as a theoretical perspective of youth homelessness.

The Ecological Theory and Youth Homelessness

The ecological theory takes into account the importance of understanding human

behaviour as a by-product of multiple levels of the ecological environment (Goodman, Wandersman, Chinman, Imm & Morrissey, 1996). The ecological perspective was adapted from the field of biology, in which the entire biological community is studied (Toro, Trickett, Wall & Salem, 1991). Fabes and Martin (2000) noted that, in order to understand child development, children must be studied in their historical, social, and cultural contexts. They outlined Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to explain child development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the ecological theory to describe the interaction between a child and his or her immediate social and physical environments on four levels. He stated that a child's experiences can be viewed as subsystems within larger systems. The first level is the microsystem, which describes the child's immediate environments (e.g., school, parents, and physical environment). The next level is the mesosystem, which embodies the connections among these settings (e.g., how the home and school together connect [or not] to influence the child). The exosystem is Bronfenbrenner's third level. This involves groups and settings which do not directly include the child (such as the agencies which provide assistance to the family) and how these influence the child's development in an indirect way, by influencing the child's microsystems. The fourth level is the macrosystem, which represents broad cultural attitudes and values that indirectly influence the child through these more immediate levels.

Shane (1996) stated that youth homelessness is a social phenomenon which is multifaceted. He suggested that the causes and effects of youth homelessness can be examined on these four levels. However, research on youth homelessness has tended to focus on individual factors, neglecting the importance of the interactions between individuals and their broader social context. Toro et al. (1991) stated that psychological or social events are a result

of the interaction of people and the environment. They argued that “the ecological perspective encourages researchers and program developers to assess the problems of homelessness at multiple levels of analysis, to view homelessness as a result of contextual factors that interact with individual and family vulnerabilities, and to assess carefully the social context in which researchers and program developers operate” (p.1208).

Kelly (1966) developed four fundamental principles which he argued are central to the ecological theory. The four principles are interdependence, cycling of resources, adaptation and succession. These principles appear to have many parallels with the theorizing of Bronfenbrenner (1979). The four principles will now be briefly explained and applied to youth homelessness, along with Bronfenbrenner’s four-level ecological model.

Interdependence. This principle states that there are interconnections among the various contexts in which an individual resides, and that movement in one context induces change in other contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Levine & Perkins, 1997). Shane (1996) referred to youth homelessness as functional/relational and occurring across time dimensions. One can examine the causes and effects of youth homelessness on all four levels based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model. The microsystem is the effect of an immediate setting on the homeless youth themselves. This may involve interactions in the youth’s immediate family, peers and school environment. The youth may live in a dysfunctional household, which will have a negative effect on her development. The mesosystem refers to the effects of the connections between the social units with which the youth has immediate interaction. Because of a conflict within the family, positive social support networks with relatives or peers may start to diminish, and negative school experiences may occur. All of these changes may contribute to the youth

becoming homeless, as noted previously. The exosystem refers to influences from settings that do not directly involve the youth, but have an influence on others in her microsystems, such as the legal system, social services support and neighbourhood conditions. The lack of social services support for homeless youth can certainly have a direct effect on the lack of help these youth will receive in trying to return to their families or to live independently. The macrosystem describes the effects of social level factors on youth homelessness, such as cultural norms, attitudes and values. For example, the negative attitudes and stereotypes towards homeless youth portrayed by the media may induce a kind of “blame the victim” perspective in society, and even in the youth’s caretakers.

When the ecological principle of interdependence (Kelly, 1966) is applied to youth homelessness, it can help us to understand how the contexts in which youth reside, contribute to the cause of homelessness, both directly and indirectly. Also, it indicates how these different levels of influence interact to affect the youth’s development and behaviour.

Cycling of resources. The ecological principle of cycling of resources focusses on developing a “resource perspective.” This perspective highlights who and what contributes to the development of the setting, and where the individual and community strengths lie (Trickett, 1984). Toro et al. (1991) stated that it is important to assess the resources needed to survive as a homeless person. Homeless youth can become very creative and competent in terms of the strategies they use on the streets to survive. They may have a number of odd jobs to earn money; they develop supportive relationships; and they learn how to negotiate the so-called “system.” However, as described earlier, some of these survival strategies may also be very harmful and not be beneficial to the youth’s overall health (e.g., abusing drugs and survival sex, trading sex

for food, money or shelter).

Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge and focus on the strengths that homeless people possess (Toro et al., 1991). McGraw - Schuchman (1997) stated that there is a shift in understanding regarding the need to acknowledge and build on adolescents' strengths and competencies. Toro et al. (1991) stated that the cycling of resources principle should also focus on the kinds of resources the homeless need, to better adapt to their varied situations, and the kinds of settings, both formal and informal, that already exist to provide shelter and support to the homeless. The youth-serving agencies described in this research project above do focus on the youth's individual strengths and competencies, and also attempt to link youth to other resources available in the community.

Adaptation. Adaptation requires an examination of the demand characteristics of the setting, such as norms, structures and values, and how these characteristics enhance or hinder the individual's ability to cope or adapt to environmental change (Trickett, 1984). In applying the adaptation principle to youth homelessness, one can consider how changes in social factors (e.g., family structure and peer networks) and structural factors (e.g., poverty and lack of employment) influence the extent of youth homelessness. For example, the socioeconomic demands placed on single-parent families can be overwhelming. These demands can place enormous stress and tension on the family. Along with the stress may come neglect and abuse, resulting in the youth running away from home or being thrown out. Not being able to cope or have supportive networks available to deal with the crisis at home, many youth turn to the streets. Once the youth are on the streets, they must adapt to their new environment. Toro et al. (1991, p. 1211) suggested that it is also important to examine the person-environment fit regarding "how

individuals' characteristics and qualities may mesh or interact with the varied structures in their environment relevant to their survival." No particular service, resource or support network is appropriate for all homeless people (Toro et al., 1991). They highlight the fact that the person-environment fit supports the notion of "different strokes for different folks."

Succession. This ecological principle focusses on understanding the history of the setting and how that history provides information regarding future decisions in order to conceptualize an understanding of the environment (Trickett, 1984). Applying the succession principle to youth homelessness, we need to understand how individual and structural factors in the past at multiple levels have resulted in youth becoming homeless. Also, there should be an examination of the services and supports that are available for youth who are homeless. What has worked in the past? What will work for today's homeless youth? The population of homeless youth will change over the years, and the types of services provided to youth 20 years ago may not be meeting the needs of the youth today who are homeless. For example, the "new homeless", as described earlier by Novac, Brown and Bourbonnais (1996), are younger and more often female. Therefore, service providers are going to have to tailor their programs and services to meet the needs of this new generation of homeless people.

Bogenschneider (1996) proposed an ecological risk/protective theoretical framework for understanding human development, and for building prevention programs, policies and community capacity to support youth. This theoretical perspective is grounded in ecological and developmental-contextualist theories, like that of Bronfenbrenner (1979). The ecological theory suggests that risk and protective factors should be identified at multiple levels, involving the individual, family, school, work, and community, while developmental contextualism

emphasizes that as youth mature and settings change, these processes will also vary. Therefore, the ecological risk/protective theory “contends that human development is shaped by a myriad of processes and that these processes must be identified in multiple levels of the human ecology” (Bogenschneider, 1996, p.130). The model proposed by Bogenschneider (1996) integrates both risk and protective theories based in ecological and developmental perspectives. The risk factor model highlights the processes that can hinder youth development, whereas the protective factor model identifies the processes that resist dangers and promote positive youth development.

A description of a number of risk factors, both individual and structural, as well as protective factors, was provided earlier in the literature review for homeless youth. However, researchers are now understanding the importance of trying to determine the resilient characteristics that some children possess when they are living in adverse circumstances, such as war and conflict, poverty, neglect, or parental alcoholism. The identification of protective processes can certainly be of benefit to agencies developing services and supports for youth at risk of becoming homeless. Also, the identification of protective factors that help youth find a pathway out of homelessness can assist agency staff in focussing on these protective factors when working with youth who are currently homeless. For one of my data collection tools, I interviewed formerly homeless female youth who provided me with “protective” factor information. Please refer to Table 3 for a summary of the ecological risk and protective processes that influence youth development.

The ecological perspective provides a basis for understanding the causes and effects of homelessness at multiple levels. I reflected on this theoretical perspectives throughout my study and apply the theory to my research findings as it appears relevant.

Research Purpose and Objectives

The overall goal of this thesis was to capture the life stories and experiences of the female population of homeless youth in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. Three research objectives were identified that provided me with valuable information, as well as helped service providers, in developing an understanding regarding the experiences of homelessness for adolescent females. These objectives also focus on identifying risk factors of homelessness for female youth, and protective factors related to finding a pathway out of homelessness. The literature reviewed in this proposal provided a basis for addressing the following research objectives.

- 1. To develop an in-depth understanding of females' experiences of homelessness in K-W.**
- 2. To identify and link the individual, family, school and structural risk factors that are critical for female adolescent homelessness in the Kitchener-Waterloo Region, as described by these adolescents.**
- 3. To compare the similarities and differences that may emerge between presently and formerly homeless female youth regarding their homeless experiences, and to identify the protective factors that are seen as fundamental for females in overcoming their homeless experience, as portrayed by a young adult group of formerly homeless females.**

By capturing the life stories of currently homeless female youth and their older, "successful" peers, I hope that this thesis provided an opportunity for their voices to be heard, thereby helping to empower them.

Methodology

Research Context

Homeless youth in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. The number of youth experiencing homelessness in the Waterloo-Kitchener region has been increasing each year (interview with R.O.O.F.'s executive director, 2000). In 1991, a survey was carried out by the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo to investigate the problems of runaway and homeless youth in the K-W area. Also, two community forums were held in 1991 and 1992 to discuss the needs of street kids and the results of this survey.

Forty-nine youth completed the survey, 63% male and 37% female. Ages ranged from 12 to 28 years, with 76% of the sample under 21 years of age, and a mean age of 18.2 years. Fifty-two percent of the youth had left home more than 1 year ago. The most common reason given for running away from home was poor communication with a parent or guardian. For the female population of youth, the top four reasons given for running away were psychological/verbal abuse, physical abuse, neglected/rejected by parent and pushed out. Sexual abuse was more often reported by females (39%) as a reason for leaving home than by males (7%). The majority of the females stated that while they were on the run, they had been involved in drugs and had gotten in trouble with the law. However, none of the females indicated that they were currently involved in prostitution. Ninety-one percent of the youth indicated that a youth shelter was needed in Kitchener.

As a result of the survey and the associated community forums, a number of recommendations were made and a seven-bed shelter was opened, called *Safe Haven*, for youth

under the age of 15. Since 1992, despite these issues, very little research has been carried out to monitor the problems and needs of homeless youth and their families. In 1999, research was carried out by The Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge and North Dumfries, and The District Health Council, to develop an understanding of homelessness within the region. A number of methods for gathering data were used, such as interviews with agency staff, reviewing agency data, a shelter resident survey, conducting a street estimate of populations and carrying out focus groups with people who had experienced homelessness or were at risk of homelessness.

Results from this survey found that the majority of people who are homeless fall into two age categories, 16-18 and 22-24. However, the results of the survey do not look at the homeless youth population separately, so I will report the results for homeless females overall. Over the two-month study period, 60% of the residents of the emergency shelters were women. The female respondents reported family/relationship breakdowns, eviction by parents or landlord, and abuse by partner or parents as the most common reasons for using emergency shelter services. In 1998, there were 482 admissions at Mary's Place (a women's shelter) as compared to 413 admissions in 1997, and there were 202 admissions overall at Safe Haven (youth shelter) as compared to 193 in 1997. The number of admissions has increased, as well as the length of the stay at the shelters. At Mary's Place, 44% of the women stayed 2 weeks to 6 months in 1998, as compared to 37% in 1997. From these results, it appears that the number of homeless people in the K-W region may be increasing, as well as the population of homeless youth.

That the "new population" of homeless people is younger and more often female can also be assumed for the K-W region. Informal interviews with executive directors of youth service

organizations in the K-W Region have suggested that the average age of homeless youth is decreasing. Also, as stated earlier in 1999, 60% of the homeless youth population in this area was female. The teen pregnancy rate in this region is also the highest in the province, suggesting that there may be a link between homeless female youth and pregnancy (an informal interview with the executive director of the K-W Social Planning Council, 2000). These distressing facts concerning the homeless female youth population in this area need to be addressed. I hope that my research can provide a basis for addressing the unique issues of this vulnerable population.

A meeting was held with Trudy Beaulne of the Social Planning Council, who provided me with some direction for my thesis, as well as the names of various agencies in the area who work with homeless youth. I contacted the Betty Thompson Youth Centre (Safe Haven), R.O.O.F.(Reaching Our Outdoor Friends), Mary's Place, Saint Monica House and Argus House. I explained to them that I was interested in studying female youth who were homeless. Each agency expressed an interest in my research topic and said that it would be possible for me to interview some of the female youth at their facilities. However, when it came time to begin my thesis interviews, only two places could provide me with the support I needed, R.O.O.F. and Argus House. Below is a brief description of each.

Reaching Our Outdoor Friends (R.O.O.F.). *R.O.O.F.* is a youth drop-in centre located in Kitchener. They work with street youth aged 12 and up in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. *R.O.O.F.*'s objectives are to maintain the health and safety of street youth by providing meals, food hampers, clothing, hygiene products, laundry facilities, showers, payment of prescriptions and a safe environment. They also provide referrals to the youth to other services, such as employment counselling, housing alternatives, schooling, addiction and crisis counselling and

life skills training. The education of the public on street youth and related issues is also an objective of *R.O.O.F.* They also carry out preventive work with youth in junior and senior high schools, stressing alternatives to street life.

Specific programs at *R.O.O.F.* include Gateway, a 12-week program focussing on helping youth to reintegrate into the education system; a Lifeline program, which provides youth with the opportunity to develop coping skills not only to survive, but also to avoid or escape the cycle of homelessness; crisis counselling and individual support services; group sessions and life skills training; and a substance abuse prevention program. Outreach is also carried out by *R.O.O.F.* workers, who link with youth in their own environment. One thousand, six hundred and three youth contacts were made at *R.O.O.F.* in 1999. Forty-three percent (684) of these youth were female, and the average age was 16.5 years.

Argus House. Argus House provides emergency and transitional shelter for young people age 16 - 24 living in crisis. Their goal is to foster personal growth and awareness among young people. Argus House offers a comprehensive life skills acquisition program. The program is tailored to the individual. Workshops include building self-esteem, relationship and social skills, money management, housing options, nutrition and household management. This program prepares young men and women for independent living, or a safe and supportive return home. Argus House also provides family mediation/support and telephone crisis support and referrals. Since Argus House was opened, approximately 70% of youth accessing Argus report this was a result of abuse and irreconcilable family breakdowns.

Stakeholder Involvement

During the initial meetings with executive directors and managers of the five research

settings, I explained to them the importance of having their input, as well as the input of female youth, to guide my research project. Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin and Lord (1998) referred to this type of alternative research approach as participatory action research (PAR). “Participatory action research is a research approach which consists of the maximum participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the problem under study, in the systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of taking action and making change” (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin & Lord, 1998, p.888). However, as mentioned earlier, only two agencies were able to offer me the support I needed to carry out my thesis. Furthermore, due to the nature of their work and the demands that were placed upon them, staff were not able to commit to a structured stakeholder committee. However, each time I visited the settings I would orally provide the staff with an update regarding my interview process. As well, they gave me their input regarding my thesis approach, for example, suggesting how to approach the females to discuss their participation in the study.

Sampling

Site selection was based on a maximum variation, purposeful sampling strategy. The two sites were chosen to ensure that there was representation of the different types of organizations that provide services and support to the homeless female youth population in the K-W area. Patton (1990) stated that this type of sampling strategy will yield two kinds of findings: 1) high-quality detailed descriptions of cases which will capture the uniqueness of each case, and 2) shared and common information across the different cases which has emerged out of heterogeneity. It is important to note that this type of sampling strategy does not attempt to generalize findings to all people and cases (Patton, 1990).

As stated earlier, two different age groups were studied in order to understand the female youth's experiences of homelessness and to identify some of the protective factors that are seen as fundamental for females in overcoming their homeless experience. The two different settings, R.O.O.F., a youth drop-in centre, and Argus House, a shelter for youth, also provided quite a bit of diversity in terms of the different types of youth that access each of these settings. Purposeful sampling was the strategy used, to obtain information-rich cases for in-depth study. The majority of times, names of female youth who took part in the study were provided by the staff at each of the two sites. Also, I would meet female youth at the two research settings as part of "hanging out" there. So I would approach the female youth myself, but only after asking the staff person if they thought that this particular female would be willing to talk with me. Four out of five formerly homeless females were nominated by the staff. Also, I volunteered at and took part in some of the activities at each of the sites in order to develop a rapport with the youth and a general understanding of each setting.

Two groups of female youth were studied, youth between the ages of 14-19 who were presently homeless (sample one), and youth between the ages of 19-27 who previously experienced homelessness as part of their development (sample two).

Procedure

This research project used two qualitative methodological approaches to gather data for the research objectives outlined earlier. They are open-ended, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Patton (1990) refers to this particular research approach as triangulation, the use of multiple methods or data to strengthen a study design. Utilizing qualitative data collection methods provided me with an in-depth understanding of female youth

homelessness and allowed me to capture the thoughts, feelings and opinions of homelessness from the female adolescents' perspective. Also, I adopted McAdams's (1993) work regarding narratives described earlier as a framework for my life-story interviews. Please refer to Table 4 for a summary of data collection tools linked to the research objectives.

Open-ended - semi-structured interviews. As stated earlier, females were either approached by me or by a staff to determine if they wanted to participate in my research. Overall, 14 interviews were carried out over a five-month period. However, only 13 interviews were used for my thesis. One of the participants initially interviewed in sample one turned out to be highly unreliable. I only found this out from staff after I interviewed her because I had approached her on my own. I did not know what information in the interview was true or not, and I did not see her afterwards at R.O.O.F. to ask her to verify any of the information, or to ask her if a staff person could verify the information. So, I decided it was probably best to drop this interview. For sample one (the younger age group), there remained one 14 year-old, four females age 16, and one female each age 17, 18, 19, for a total of eight interviews. Three of these interviews took place at R.O.O.F and five at Argus House. For sample two (the older age group), there were two females age 19, and one each age 21, 22 and 27, for a total of five interviews. Two of these interviews took place at R.O.O.F. and three at Argus House.

The interviews were carried out in a private room away from the rest of the clients (e.g., nurse's office, staff office or dining room). All of the female youth were given two dollars in Tim Horton's gift certificates as a thank-you for their participation. The interview guide approach was used to provide in-depth and detailed information regarding the life-stories of these homeless females. Based upon McAdams's narrative work, as described earlier, the

interview for younger females was broken into chronological chapters. The first chapter asked each of the females general questions about herself and her family. The next section focussed on questions about her childhood and adolescent years. The next set of questions focussed on the year before she left home. The next chapter focussed on the present situation, specifically the experience of homelessness. The next two sections focussed on the services the youth are currently using or have used in the past, and their thoughts regarding the future.

There were two versions of the interview guide. The first guide, just described, was used with presently homeless female youth, and the second guide was used with formerly homeless female youth. The sections and questions outlined above were the same for the formerly homeless female youth, except for one addition. Questions focussing on the pathway out of homelessness (their “turning point experience”) were asked, to elicit their key memories and to elaborate on protective factor information. A number of the questions proposed in the interview guide were similar to, or adapted from, McAdams’ life-story questions, such as peak and nadir experience questions, the turning point question for the formerly homeless female youth, questions regarding childhood memories, the question regarding a mentor and the questions about future goals and plans. See Appendix A and B for a copy of the interview guide used for presently and formerly homeless female youth.

Furthermore, an “interview guide” approach was utilized here to ensure that the interview remained fairly conversational and informal. Patton (1990) describes this interview guide approach in the following manner. Topics and issues to be addressed are specified in advance in outline form, and the sequence and wording of the questions is determined by the interviewer during the course of the interview. Patton (1990) also points out an advantage to

using the interview approach, in that it allows for the interviewee to use her own words, thought patterns and values in answering questions.

Participant observations. Participant observations are often used by researchers in carrying out ethnographies (Reinharz, 1992). Patton (1990) stated that participant observation is a combination of observing and informal interviewing. I volunteered and “hung out” at R.O.O.F. for 16 evenings, and I attended two house meetings at Argus House. The observations took place over a five-month period. Participant observations provided me with a holistic perspective regarding the females’ interactions with service providers and other homeless youth. Also, they provided me with opportunities to develop a rapport with the females, so interviewing did not seem so intrusive. At the end of each evening, I would record general information regarding what happened during my visit, for example the types of conversations the female youth would have with other youth and the staff.

My main goal in deciding to carry out participant observations at the two research settings was to develop a rapport with the female youth, and staff. I volunteered 16 evenings at R.O.O.F., from October to February. Sometimes, I would see certain females more than once, but more often than not there were new faces, making it difficult to develop a rapport with the females. Moreover, it was much easier to have conversations with the male youth than the females. The females were either not comfortable with my presence because I was a new face or because I was a female. Some evenings, I would have specific duties to carry out. A couple of evenings, I was in charge of preparing a snack for the youth and their dinner. I found food to be a great way to engage some of the youth in conversation. We would talk about how things were going, if they had a job, or if they were looking for one. Sometimes they would start telling me

about fights they would have with other youth. Some evenings I was the chore checker. I would make sure each youth had their assigned chore completed before leaving for the evening. There were no major difficulties with this.

Some evenings there would be a group discussion about a particular topic or they would get to hang out and watch t.v. and chat. The smoke room was a popular place. However, due to my allergy to cigarette smoke, I could not go into the smoke room. So, at times I felt like I missed out on some great conversations with the females. Some of the females were quite chatty, while others would keep a distance. Typically their conversations would be about this person and that person, complaining about school and talking about the latest music. I heard very little conversations about their home life. However, one night in particular, two of the girls heard that I was trying to carry out some interviews and started sharing information about their families. They talked very negatively about their mothers and complained that their mothers didn't care about them and didn't do anything for them. It was difficult to engage staff in conversations at R.O.O.F. because they always had to be very alert and attentive to the youths' behaviors. They were constantly discouraging inappropriate behaviors and/or counseling someone in private.

At Argus House I sat in on two independent living skills groups. One was about budgeting and the other was about conflict resolution techniques. On one evening, I had the opportunity to have dinner with the female residents. It was interesting to observe the females' behaviors around the dinner table. On this particular night they were giving the staff person a difficult time regarding that night's group. The girls did not want to have group and were being very uncooperative and impolite to the staff person. Also, they were complaining about their

chores. The atmosphere was very tense. At both groups the females expressed very little interest in the group topic and it was a challenge for the facilitator to keep them on track.

Overall, I felt that hanging out at these two settings was very beneficial to my understanding of what each type of setting is trying to accomplish, what kind of youth access these settings and the challenges and frustrations the staff people deal with on a regular basis, working with the homeless youth population.

Analysis and Verification of Data

The first step in the analysis plan was to organize the data and review the original research objectives. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. This type of analysis applies to both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach is used when there are predetermined categories and focussed research questions, whereas the inductive approach is guided by general research questions and looks at qualitative data from several perspectives. For this present study, a mixed approach was best suited for the type of data collected. Earlier, specific research objectives were highlighted. However, these objectives were used as a guide in order to allow for a thorough exploration of the data. This approach also allowed me to capture unexpected insights when the female youth provided stories and descriptions of their homeless experiences. Also, this mixed approach captured the uniqueness of each of the females' homeless experiences that varied across the two research settings.

Each interview was tape recorded to ensure accurate accounts of the females' stories. When each interview was completed, tape-recorded conversations were transcribed, and quotes were recorded verbatim, to obtain a more complete sense of the quality of each discussion. Open coding was then used to highlight interesting and important points from the interviews and

participant observations. Categories were then formed and placed into overarching themes. Specific themes were pulled from the data to address the research objectives; however, I remained open to any new emerging themes that captured unexpected insights regarding the females' stories. The analysis was completed when I felt that I had gained a sense of integration and no new themes emerge.

Trustworthiness of qualitative data was established in a number of ways. Firstly, saturation of the data occurred, so that qualitative information was rich and detailed enough to ensure that key themes had not been missed. Secondly, an audit trail was established throughout the data gathering and analysis stages of the study. I documented all of the steps taken to analyze the data, to verify the extent to which the research findings were consistent and dependable. Third, four female youth were provided with a summary of their interview. And fourth, the females who indicated on their consent form that they would like a summary of the results will be provided with a letter summarizing the research results.

Ethical Issues

There were a number of ethical issues to be considered when working with an oppressed population such as these youth. Many of these female youth experienced an abusive childhood. They were victimized while living on the streets: they were failed by "the system"; and they experienced many other life difficulties. For this study I took a number of precautions to ensure that all possible risks to the youth were kept to a minimum.

One very important risk that was considered when working with an oppressed population was to be aware of the power imbalance that existed between researcher and participant. As stated earlier, I volunteered, "hung out" and took part in structured activities at the two research

settings. These opportunities allowed me to interact with the youth, thereby developing a supportive relationship and gaining their trust before any interviews were carried out. Reinharz (1992) stated that some feminist researchers refer to themselves as learners and listeners rather than “researchers,” to encourage the development of trust. This was definitely the way I introduced myself and my thesis work when I was working with this group of youth. Hopefully, the actions taken above minimized the power imbalance. Also, based on my ethics, the community psychology values of caring and compassion, human diversity, self-determination and participation, health and social justice were used to guide my research project by helping me to seek an understanding regarding the participants’ stories and views. As well, there was diversity in sampling and a focus on potential strengths, avoiding “pathology.” Please refer to Table 5 for a definition of each of the community psychology values.

Before any data were collected, a description of the study was approved by the ethics board at Wilfrid Laurier University. Participation in the interview was voluntary for the youth. They were provided with a detailed information letter, outlining the purpose of the study and the precautions that were taken to ensure confidentiality. They also signed a consent form which ensured confidentiality. See Appendix C, D, E, F, G and H for a copy of the information letters and consent forms. The interviews took place at a location that was comfortable and convenient for the youth. Also, they were ensured that participation in the interview had no negative effect on the delivery of services or kind of services they would receive, even if they chose to withdraw from the research at any point.

To ensure confidentiality, no names were attached to the interview or to the direct quotes used in my thesis. Also, transcripts of the qualitative data were stored in a locked cabinet away

from the research settings. The only other person who had access to the research data was my thesis advisor. At the completion of the research, all research data will be destroyed when the final report of my thesis is produced.

Some of the interview questions caused emotional distress for the youth. Therefore, they were told that they did not have to answer all the questions in the interview. Also, they were told that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any point during the research project. The youth were also directed to a staff person for support. The youth who could provide me with an address were sent a summary of their interviews to check for accuracy, make changes and provide feedback.

There were a number of benefits for the female youth participating in this study that I believed outweighed any of the risks stated above. For example, youth tend to be overlooked, and therefore, by having them involved in the interview they had a chance to share their stories and describe their experiences of homelessness from a personal perspective. They also could express their ideas and opinions about the services and supports they considered effective, and what factors were important in determining their pathway out of homelessness. Many of them were eager to provide advice for younger adolescents considering the streets, for example. The interview also allowed them to talk about any needs that were not being met. They also had the opportunity to offer suggestions on how service providers might have been able to meet those needs. Also, the opportunity to share their life stories may have been an empowering experience for them.

Participant Feedback

Seven out of thirteen females indicated on their consent form that they were interested in

receiving feedback, regarding the results of the interviews. A brief summary of the results was mailed to four of the females who had provided an address, and for the other three females who did not provide an address, their summaries were dropped off at the shelter and youth drop-in centre to a staff member to pass onto them. See Appendix I for a copy of the summary. As well, the two research settings were provided with a five-page summary highlighting the main research results.

Next, I will provide the reader with a profile of each female participant who took part in the interviews. This profile will provide the reader with some background information regarding each female and some highlights from her story. Also, it will help the reader follow each female's unique story as I present the qualitative and narrative data.

Participant Profiles

Note: Identifying information has been changed, throughout, to protect confidentiality.

Sample 1

Interview #1. Participant one is a 16-year-old. She had long brown hair with blue streaks. Her look was very eccentric. She wore a lot of make-up and jewelry. She was wearing a tank top with long black lace gloves with no fingers in them. She was living with her mom before she got kicked out. She has two older sisters, both living, and two older brothers, one living and one dead. She does not know who her biological dad is. She has been homeless now for almost a year. She goes back and forth between her home, the streets and living with friends. Sometimes she leaves on her own or her mom may kick her out. Her relationship with her mom is not great. There is a lot of fighting and arguing. Presently, she is not attending school. She talks about her

street friends as a family. At the time of the interview she and her boyfriend were renting a room at a friend's place. She was very chatty during the interview, a real story-teller.

Interview #2. Participant two is a 16-year-old. She had medium length blonde hair. Her clothes were very baggy and her hat shaded her eyes. Currently, she is staying at a local shelter. She was at a juvenile detention centre before going to the shelter. Before this she was back and forth between living at home, on the streets and with friends. Her first homeless experience was at age 13. Her mom kicked her out. She does not have a good relationship with her mom. She does know who her biological dad is, but she has no contact with him. She has an older sister she and and a younger half sister. Presently, she is not attending school. At the beginning of the interview she was quiet, but became talkative.

Interview #3. I did not use this interview.

Interview #4. Participant four is a 16-year-old. She had long black hair. Her appearance was very neat and tidy. She was casually dressed. At the time of the interview she was staying at a local shelter. She was living with her biological dad in Brantford but she did not get along with her step mom. They would fight a lot and the step mom ended up kicking her out. She went to live with her mom in Brampton but things did not work out there. She also lived with a friend and as a live-in nanny. She grew up as an only child. She has a step brother through her mom and step dad. She spoke about one incident with the law. She is currently completing grade 10 through correspondence. She was very quiet during the interview. She did not expand on the questions I asked her.

Interview #5. Participant five is a 17-year-old. At the time of the interview she was pregnant. She had long blonde hair, which was tied back. She looked very tired. She was staying

at a local shelter, at the time of the interview. Her biological dad died and her mother remarried. Then she moved to the K-W area with her family when she was 12. She has a younger sister and three brothers. She would go to Brampton to visit her boyfriend, but her step dad did not approve of this, so there was a lot of stress and arguing at home. She is still with her boyfriend. When she became pregnant, she chose to live at a local shelter because of all the stress at home. She dropped out of school. She spoke about getting in trouble with the law. She will be moving to a shelter for young pregnant women. She was talkative during the interview.

Interview #6. Participant six is a 16-year-old. She had medium length blonde hair. Her appearance was neat and tidy, well dressed. At the time of the interview she was living at a local shelter. She was living with her mom and step dad, but her mom found some marijuana in her bedroom so she kicked her out. She has two younger sisters. She is still attending school. She is having a difficult time understanding why her mom had to make such a drastic move and kick her out of the house. She plans on moving to St. Catherine's to live with her biological dad. She was very chatty during the interview. However, it was difficult to keep her focused on the interview questions, as she would keep going back to the issue of why would her mom kick her out.

Interview #7. Participant seven is an 18-year-old. She had long brown curly hair, which was tied back. She had sparkles on her cheeks. She had a really great smile and a very bubbly personality. She kept her jacket on during the whole interview. She was very conscious of her appearance. She described herself as fat. At the time of the interview she was living with a friend. She left her home because of her abusive parents. She is still attending school. She has a younger brother and sister. She would like to return home but only when her parents decide to

get help. Her family does not want anything to do with her. She was very talkative and emotional during the interview.

Interview #8. Participant eight is a 19-year-old. She had long black hair. Her appearance was neat and tidy. At the time of the interview she had recently moved into a local shelter. She has a younger brother and sister. She does not know who her biological dad is. She was living with her boyfriend, but then he broke up with her and kicked her out of their apartment. Her mother would not take her back. She has been back and forth between home, the streets, friends and shelters for years. At some points in time she actually has straightened herself out, but something will happen and she will end up homeless again. She spoke about the dangers on the streets and also her experiences with drugs. She has dropped out of school. She was chatty during the interview and wanted to talk to me so she could try and help other females experiencing similar issues.

Interview #9. Participant nine is a 14-year-old. She had long dark brown hair. She wore a lot of make-up. She looked a lot older than 14. She was very fashionably dressed. At the time of the interview she was living at a local shelter. She is originally from Bradford. She has an older brother and sister. She knows who her biological dad is, but she does not have any contact with him. Her mother called the local shelter and moved her there because her step dad made her mother chose between her and him. She has been involved with drugs since an earlier age. She has suffered from depression. She is presently attending school, but fears that she will be kicked out soon. She was very talkative during the interview.

Sample 2

Interview # 1. Participant one is a 21-year-old. She had long brown hair. Her make-up

was interesting. She wore white eyeliner that stood out a lot. She is adopted. She has a two year old daughter. She has an older sister and a younger brother. She was homeless for much of her adolescent years. She and her mother could not get along and there was a lot of fighting between them. She would live with friends, on the streets, in foster homes and in shelters. Her mother would kick her out and she would also leave on her own. She dropped out of school, and suffered from depression. Also, she was heavily involved with drugs. She had very little contact with her family. When she became pregnant, she realized she would have to make a better life for her and her baby. A number of people helped her along the way. The interview took place at R.O.O.F. She was very talkative during the interview.

Interview #2. Participant two is a 19-year-old . She wore really baggy clothes. She kept her hood up during the interview. She is originally from Manitoba. She has two older sisters and an older brother. Her biological father left when she was 8 years old. She comes from a very religious home. She was abused by her two sisters. She left on her own will, and she was on the streets in Edmonton for a year. She was heavily involved with drugs. She dropped out of school. One of her older sisters died in a car accident. She came to Ontario because her mother and sister moved here. Thinking about the future was a big part of her deciding it was time to get off the streets. She was very quiet and she did not expand on her answers to some of my questions.

Interview #3. Participant three is a 22-year-old. She had short brown hair. Her appearance was very neat and tidy. She is originally from the Toronto area. She has an older brother and sister. She does not have any contact with her biological dad. Growing up, she would witness domestic violence. Her mother abandoned her, and she went from living with family members, to living with friends and in group homes. Sometimes her mother would come back

and she would live with her for a while until she left again. She lived with her sister until she started abusing her and then she went to a local shelter. She did not complete high school. She was quite chatty.

Interview #4. Participant four is a 27-year-old. She had long blonde hair. She was dressed in all black clothes. She is originally from Ottawa. She is from a big family, 8 brothers and 4 sisters. Her parents divorced when she was young and her dad remarried. She did not get along with her step mom, who kicked her out at age 12. She continued her schooling and attended university. Her real mother passed away. She traveled across Canada, staying in youth hostels and shelters. She had very little contact with her family. When she came back to Ontario, she would stay at shelters. However, during this time she was self-abusive. Eventually she ended up staying at a local shelter. She was very quiet and I found it difficult to follow her story.

Interview #5. Participant five is a 19-year-old. She had long brown hair. Her appearance was very neat and tidy. Her parents divorced when she was 11. She has two younger brothers. She lived with her dad growing up. She had very little contact with her mom. She found it difficult taking care of the house and her brothers. She could not have any friends. She finished school but she started hanging out with friends and not returning home for days. Her dad did not like her behavior, so he kicked her out. She ended up staying with a friend. Her friend kicked her out and then she went to a local shelter. She moved out of the shelter and ended up staying with friends who were involved in criminal activities. She got in trouble with the law and returned home to live with her dad. She was talkative during the interview.

Results

In trying to develop an understanding of homelessness as experienced by these female

youth, two important distinctive stories emerged from the participants' interviews. One distinction contrasted two different types of homelessness, a "street story" told by females who have lived on the streets and have also accessed the shelter system, and a "shelter story" described by females who have lived in shelters and groups homes and have lived with friends and other family members, but have never gone to the streets. The other contrast involved the differences and similarities in the homelessness stories told by the older group of female youth and their younger counterparts. The first part of the results section will concentrate on the differences as well as similarities in the two different types of homelessness stories, and the second part of the analysis will concentrate on the differences and similarities in the homeless stories told by the two age groups. As well, the protective factors that were important to the older age group of females in finding their pathway out of homelessness will also be presented.

The Homeless Experience - Streets versus Shelters

In this section I will provide a brief illustration of a street and shelter story. I will then highlight some themes that are distinctive to each of the two different types of homelessness stories as told by the female youth. Next, I will describe the differences and similarities between the two types of homelessness stories. In doing so, I will follow the ecological theoretical framework in presenting the differences and similarities based on multiple ecological levels, using individual, family, peer, school, work setting and community levels to organize the interviews' themes.

Living On The Streets and In Shelters

Out of the total sample, six of 13 females went to the streets and also accessed the shelter system. In the younger sample, four females, and in the older sample, two females, went to the

streets during their homeless experience. Below is a brief illustration of a street/shelter story told by Betty.

Betty's story. Betty was living at a local youth shelter before she came to this new shelter. Before the shelters she stayed at a youth detention centre. She was living with her mom before she became homeless. She has an older and younger sister. She does not get along with her older sister. The older sister has also been kicked out of the house. She said that things began to change when they moved to downtown Kitchener. She and her sister started hanging out downtown. They started using drugs and drinking. They would also skip school. Then her relationship with her mother got worse. She would disrespect her mother and they would fight and argue constantly. Her first homeless experience was at age 13 years. She went to the streets for a couple of months, living in abandoned cars, sleeping under a bridge, and then went back home.

Betty told a story about a scary night when a drunk guy came by and was acting very violent and scared them. She would panhandle, shoplift, break into cars and homes. She also talked about eating at soup kitchens and accessing drop-in centres. She said that she felt safe most of the time. She also talked about getting really thin. When she went back home, her mother said she had to go back to school, but the school wouldn't let her go back, so her mother kicked her out again. Then she went to a youth shelter and then her aunt's house, then to a friend's house, moving from one friend's house to another friend's house and sometimes sleeping under a bridge. She went to London because she was sick of things happening in Kitchener. She ended up staying in an abandoned house there. However, things were no better there. Her boyfriend left her there so she came back to Kitchener. She would talk to her mom

and her mom would say that she could come back home. So she would go home again, but then the fighting would continue and she would get kicked out again. *“Cause we always fought and she got really mad at me cause I was showing up with a new outfit every day. I told her it was her own fault and she got mad at me. She said it had nothing to do with me, and I said ‘you won’t buy any clothes. I have no sweaters, I have no coat, I have no extra clothes, so I had to go out and steal them.’ And my mom didn’t really care, she just got mad at me and she kicked me out.”*

Betty also lived in a female youth shelter for a short period of time. She hated the experience, too much structure, too many rules. Presently, she is living at a women’s shelter. So far, she likes the shelter, but at the time of the interview she had only been there for a couple of days. Her plans for now, are to get a job and go back to school. However, she said what she needs this very moment is, *“a friend that would actually be there for me.”* But she said that she knows, *“I’m the only person that is always going to be there and... like nobody is always going to support you and always going to be there for you and always help you. The only person that can really help you is yourself.”*

A number of key themes emerged from these 6 participants’ street stories, including themes of “out here on the streets we are in control of our lives,” “the streets can be a scary place, but our friends will protect us,” “the streets are a better place for me than home”, and “the shelters are not great places.”

Out here on the streets we are in control. For many of these females, living on the streets seems to be a place where they feel more in control of their lives. There is a sense of freedom and independence. *“To be completely honest with you, that one year, that first summer on the*

streets, was probably one of the funnest couple of months in my entire life. I never felt freedom until then and I liked what I felt. And that's why I keep coming back, because I am so attached to that feeling that I can take care of myself..”

The streets can be a scary place but our friends will protect us. These participants spoke about the dangers on the street. However, they all felt safe with their friends. *“I had my group of friends who always looked out for me...,” “At first it was scary. The first couple of nights it was scary. But I mean it was just like I made friends with people on the streets.”* They all talked about how they would help each other and support each other during difficult times. Amy describes her street friends as *“a big giant family.” “Like about seven wives, it is like this friendship thing we do.”* (They wear a chain with a friendship ring on it, it says “best friends forever”). Betty talked about how she and her street friends would sleep together in abandoned cars and under a bridge. She spoke about a friend who was afraid of dying because she was getting so skinny, and she was afraid that a guy would rape her. Betty replied *“nobody would let that happen.”*

The streets are a better place for me than home. All of these participants said that they could not deal with all the stress and fighting at home and that's why they would leave home again or get kicked out. *“I realized that home wasn't the best for me. Like I can't stay at home if she (mother) keeps pulling this bullshit on me.”*

Shelters are not a great place. These females also accessed the shelter system, but felt that their shelter experiences were not very positive. Betty accessed Argus House, a shelter for young homeless females, and Safe Haven, a youth shelter. She said that there were too many rules and too much structure. *“But, it is like when you live there, you work like so hard. Like you*

do a whole bunch of chores..., We have a curfew..., You even ask to go out for a smoke.” Gina also talked about staying at Safe Haven and Mary’s Place. But it would be just a place to crash for the night and then she would move on again. Presently, she is staying at Argus House. At the time of the interview she had only been there for a couple of days.

A Summary of The Street Story

This group of six youth talked about going to the streets, meaning that they would sleep in abandoned buildings, in cars, on park benches, under bridges and in stairwells. These females also talked about feeling a sense of freedom and independence as a part of being out on the streets. There was no one there to tell them what to do, and there were no rules. Out on the streets, however, these youth were also more susceptible to being involved in criminal activities. As noted by Robertson (1993), homeless youth may break into buildings, trade sex for food or shelter, sell drugs and be paid for sex. In fact, the street youth in the present study spoke about shoplifting to get necessities such as food and hygiene products. They also talked about breaking into buildings to sleep, selling drugs and trading sex for shelter.

Despite the dangers on the streets, these youth felt that the streets were a better place for them than being at home. They would periodically go home, but would leave again because they could not deal with the fighting, stress and structure of living at home. On the streets they felt a sense of security by hanging out with a group of people. They referred to these people as their street friends. They felt that they provided a sense of “brotherhood,” or even a family of “wives.” These youth would access the shelter system for periods of time and live with friends for short periods too. However, these youth generally felt that the shelters were not great places to live. There were too many rules, a curfew, and too much structure. O’Reilly-Fleming (1993)

also noted that many teen shelters pose rules that may be too rigid for these youth to follow because of their particular lifestyle. Teen shelter staff, of course, hope that these rules will indeed reform the youth.

Shelter Living

Out of the 13 females interviewed, seven participants accessed the shelter system and did not go to the streets. In the younger sample, four females are presently living in a shelter, and in the older sample, three females accessed the shelter system when they were homeless. Below is a brief summary of a shelter story told by Kate.

Kate's story. Kate lived with her mom before her first homeless experience. She has an older half brother and sister. Growing up was difficult. Her mother was involved in a number of abusive relationships. So, Kate would witness this abuse. At times the abuse was so violent that her mother's life would be in danger. They would move around a lot to get away from these boyfriends. School was also difficult for her. She would be picked on a lot because of her weight. However, she was very close to her grandmother. At age 16 or 17, her mom abandoned her. *"... my mother kinda took the car one day, put her stuff in it and left, and said 'I'm leaving you.' She said I disrespected her and she left me in this house and I remember going outside to the car, crying and screaming, 'why aren't you taking me with you?'"*

Kate lived with her aunt for a while and bounced around from one family to another. *"The thing was, I bounced around so much from one family's house to the next. I would stay here for two weeks, I would stay here for a month. I never really had a place to go."* She then moved to a group home for a brief period of time. Things were going well. She went back to school and she had a job. However, her mom then came back into her life again and she lived

with her mom. They would move around a lot to get away from her mom's abusive boyfriend. Then her mom left again and she moved into a group home again. Then she left that to move to a friend's house and then a group home and then she moved back with her mom after not having contact with her for two years. Then she moved to her friend's house. Things were going well again. Then she moved in with her sister and her children and the boyfriend. Her sister ended up leaving her boyfriend, so they then went to a local shelter. The shelter was not a positive experience. The residents there would tease her and bully her. From the shelter they found a townhouse and moved in there. However, her sister started abusing her. One night her sister became very violent, so Kate ran away. Her boyfriend at the time put her up in a hotel for the night and got her in contact with a local youth shelter. She stayed at the shelter for a couple of months and then moved out with her new boyfriend into an apartment. This was when her pathway out of homelessness story began. This part of the story will be told in a later section.

It was difficult to find common themes within these shelter stories because they were so individualized for each participant. However, two general themes that did emerge were: "we will access resources so we don't have to go to the streets," and "our mothers do care, even though we don't realize it."

Accessing resources. Two of these participants accessed their youth care workers at their school when they learned that they would have to find another place to live. Their workers told them about Argus House and they made the contact.

Our mothers do care even though we don't realize it. Two of the participants' moms from sample one contacted Argus House when their daughters had no place to live. When these mothers realized that having their daughters live at home was not the best at the present time,

they made alternative living arrangements instead of just kicking them onto the streets.

A Summary of The Shelter Story

This group of seven female youth spoke only about accessing the shelter system and living with friends and family members. When asked if they gave any thought to going out on the streets, they answered no. This group of females seemed to be more connected to their families, school and community in terms of being able to ask for help. Some of them went to their Youth Care Worker at school, or a friend connected them with Argus House or Mary's Place. Also, for some of these youth, their mothers made the call to the shelter and found them alternative living arrangements. Some of these females spoke about how grateful one should be to the staff at these shelters for helping teens who are experiencing homelessness. Kate spoke about how some of the residents at Argus House didn't like the rules, *"I remember the ones I did live with here, they didn't like the rules...What they didn't understand was that Argus took them out of the cold, gave them a warm bed to sleep in, and gave them food."*

Differences Between The Street and Shelter Stories Across Ecological Levels

There was a notable difference between the two stories regarding their length of the homeless experience(s). Some of the females go to a youth shelter and return home after a brief period of homelessness, while others are homeless for a longer period of time, going back and forth between home, the streets and shelters. The majority of these street youth have been homeless or were homeless for a year or more. In contrast, the majority of the shelter youth have been homeless for only a couple of months.

Can one presume that once a youth goes onto the streets they become entrenched within the streets, finding it more difficult to find stable and permanent housing and follow the

structured rules of shelters? Are shelter youth just experiencing a temporary homelessness, where they just need to work things out with their families or obtain the necessary skills to get their own place? Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1993, p.11) said that, “ the state of homelessness appears to be a continuous switching between living in more acceptable and stable housing situations and living on the streets.” O’Reilly-Fleming (1993) stated that homelessness can be characterized as: 1) “chronic - involving 30 or more days of continuous lack of proper accommodation; 2) sporadic, wherein individuals vary between domiciled and homeless for less than 30 days; or 3) situational, where homelessness is a result of acute life crisis.” The majority of female youth in this study would fall into the first two categories. This section will examine the differences and similarities between the two types of homelessness stories.

Looking at the two types of homeless stories, one can conclude that when youths become homeless, they do not automatically end up on the streets. Instead they seek alternative living arrangements that may help them overcome their crisis, and then either move back home or find permanent housing. The trajectories of their lives so far seemed different, even though one group of female youth was contacted at a shelter and the other group was contacted at a drop-in center for this study. Please refer to Table 6 for a summary of the noteworthy differences between the two homeless stories regarding a number of themes.

Individual

Within the ecological framework, at the individual level, there were a number of categories that appeared in the interviews as differences, including childhood memories, drug use, sexual behaviour and pregnancy, and future outlooks and identifying a special person as resilience factors.

Childhood. When describing their childhoods, the shelter youth were more likely to recall good and bad memories of their childhood as compared to the street youth. They would recall happy times with their family and friends, such as family trips and doing special activities. The bad memories were about fighting and arguing with their mothers and negative school experiences, such as being bullied. For example, Melanie from the shelter group recalled attending Girl Guide camp as a child, but her parents also divorced when she was 11, an unhappy thought. More of the street youth recalled tough times during their childhood than good and bad times. These tough times included abuse, violence and fighting intensely and constantly with their mothers.

Drug use. The female youth on the streets were more involved in drug use than the shelter youth. The extent of their drug use varied, from occasional use to everyday use. For three of the participants, drugs interfered with their day to day living, such as not being able to go to school, smoking themselves into a stupor, or causing physical complications. Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997, p.29) stated that, "living on the streets has a tremendous impact on alcohol and drug use." In a literature review carried out by van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997), they reported a study that concluded that being on the streets was a predictor of the participants' alcohol and drug use. On the streets, drugs were readily available to the youth in this study, and they know where and whom to get the drugs from. A couple of the females spoke about getting their drugs from older men and selling drugs as well. Also, they spoke about using drugs as a way to cope with life's stressors.

Gina from the street group said, "*.... As far as weed is concerned, everybody's got it, so you know once or twice a day someone is going to come to you and ask you, do you want to*

smoke a joint?" She also spoke about using drugs as a way to cope with stress. "Sometimes it is a coping thing...."

Sexual behaviour and pregnancy. The street youth were also more likely to speak about being pregnant and about promiscuity. Irene, a street youth, had a child at age 17. Amy had been pregnant at an early age and miscarried and Betty thought she might be pregnant at the time of the interview. Donna, a shelter youth at the time of the interview, was pregnant. Teenage pregnancy is an issue for any female youth; however, out on the streets it is even a bigger issue, because of the lack of proper nutrition, the lack of prenatal and postnatal care, the lack of stable housing and the financial burden of taking care of another person. Amy said that sometimes she feels that she would like to have a baby. *"I kinda want to have a baby just so I know that I love something just as much something loves me. I don't know, it is weird."* She said her boyfriend would love for her to have his baby. *"He would love for me to have his baby, he really would..."*

Amy, who is living on the streets, talked about how a guy picked her up downtown and she had sex with him because she felt like she owed him for letting her stay at his place. *"I needed a place to stay for that night, so I started coming on to this guy at his house. He let me stay there. So, I ended up having sex with this guy. I met him down at city hall, he took me home and I slept there and I had sex with him. I felt dirty and grubby and gross Like I wouldn't of had to but I felt like I should, like I don't know."*

Irene from the street group spoke about older men she stayed with when she was 13, and said she was sexually involved with these men. But after the age of 13, she said *"I really didn't have the issue again of men wanting favours in return."* However, people would tell her you are staying with these men and in return they are going to want something, and this surprised her.

She also spoke about having sex with a 20-year-old when she was 14. She became pregnant at age 17.

Future outlooks - Growing up. Future outlooks for the shelter and street youth varied.

When asked if they ever thought about the future when they were growing up, the street youth were more likely only to be able to think about day to day living. *"You know what, it never crossed my mind. I only take it one day at a time,.... Where I end up is where I end up. It's like where am I going today, where am I going to eat today, where am I going to sleep tonight. It's just, you know, I will just cross that bridge when I come to it"*

However, three of the shelter youth said that they did not have any thoughts about the future when they were growing up as compared to one street youth. Melanie from the shelter group said she did not think about the future when growing up because, *"I had too much on my plate..."* Also, four of the shelter youth said that they thought their future would be bright, as compared to two street youth

The present. When asked how did they presently view the future and if they had any future plans, the participants' responses varied. The street youths' future plans were very vague as compared to the shelter youth, who had more concrete plans for the future. For example, Amy from the street group felt that she may be on the streets for the rest of her life. *"Here I am out here again and I will be for the rest of my life."*

Heidi from the street group commented, *"I really don't know where I'm going to be. I don't know where I see myself."* Her friends think that she is going to turn bad, be a drug dealer. However, she would like to turn things around. *"... I keep hoping to see that I'm going to turn things around. I don't even know what I want anymore, ...I think I really need to find out who*

myself is before I'm going to be able to do the things I want.... but the real me, I don't even know who it is anymore."

The shelter youths' future plans were more concrete and seemed brighter. Interestingly, for two of the female youth their plans were about to take place within the upcoming week, suggesting that planning in the short-term may be easier than the long-term. Cathy is moving to Brantford with her boyfriend. She is going to go back to school and get a part-time job. She also has some career goals in mind, such as computers, office work or owning a restaurant. *"The future looks better."* Ethel is moving to her dad's house, where she is looking forward to starting over.

Identifying a special person. When the female youth were asked if they have a special person or a role model in their lives at the present time, the shelter youth were more likely to identify someone than the street youth. Leanne said that, *"Special people, yeah there are a few, close and personal friends."* Melanie said, *"Well, I had a couple of my dad's friends that have helped me out through different things, but if I need to talk to them they are there for me and if I just need time alone, they will go out with me and just go shopping together."*

Family

At the family level, there were some differences in a number of unsupportive and negative family relationships that appeared in the interviews as risks, and some supportive sibling relationships that would appear to be a resilience factor. Please refer to Table 6.

Family composition. There were more single parent households among those in the street group than those in the shelter group of youth. Kariel (1993) also found a high number of single parent families among street youth.

A lack of a father and daughter relationship. Quite strikingly, the street female youth either did not know who their father was, or did not have contact with their fathers. Amy said that her mom has been telling her for years that it is this certain guy, and then she will say no, it is this guy. She thinks that her dad is a Hell's Angel, and that he will come and kidnap her someday. Gina was also told it was this certain guy, and then her mom said no, it is a famous wrestler. Betty and Heidi know who their biological father is, but do not have any contact with him. As well, Jenny said that her dad left her life when she was eight. She described him as *"like my dad has this power whole trip, he has to be in control, he is always right, one of those bible things."*

For the majority of the shelter youth, their fathers were present in their lives. They either lived with their father, or had some type of contact with him. Cathy and Melanie live with their biological dad. Donna's real dad died, and she now has a step dad. Ethel recently started having contact with her real dad.

A close sibling relationship. The street youth were more likely to talk about a close relationship with a sibling, whereas the shelter youth were less likely to make this distinction within their sibling relationships. Heidi from the street group stated that she is very close to her brother. *"He is my life."* *"I have always been so close to my brother.... so I'm going to follow him, I follow him and I became friends with those types of people and those types of people did all that stuff and I would just hang out with them."* She talked about one time when she was scared that her brother was going to die because a guy was holding a knife to his throat. Jenny from the street group also spoke about her older brother, who is handicapped. She described their relationship as close. She said that, *"He is the only thing that kept me alive. Otherwise I would*

have succeeded in killing myself."

Peers

Within the ecological level of peer relationships, there was only one possible difference. Two of the shelter youth, Kate and Melanie, spoke about being bullied by their peers when they were in school. Kate said that, *"I was tormented cause I was overweight. They made fun of me everyday."*

School

Within the ecological level of school there were a number of negative school experiences that would be regarded as risk factors. There was one resilience factor of supportive teachers. The street youth were markedly more likely than the shelter youth to report skipping school, to drop out of school, to be kicked out of school, and to have a negative school attitude. Kariel (1993) also found that his participants had difficulties in school, academic and/or behavioral, from an early age. In contrast, the majority of the shelter youth continued with their schooling even under tough circumstances. Leanne said that, *"I decided what was important , my education, and I'd finish it up and be somebody."*

Negative attitude towards school. The street youth said that, *"School sucks, boring, hate it."* *"Really boring and really long and too early in the morning."* *" School is crap, I hated school always. School wasn't appealing to me at all and it still isn't. It's not appealing now and it wasn't then at all."*

Skipping school. *"I started skipping school and in grade eight I just didn't go at all."* *"I never went to school, I was always trying to get out of school..."* Betty and Heidi from the street group talked about how their mothers tried to make them go to school, but they couldn't do

anything about it because they were not going to go to school.

Irene from the street group recalled that, *"I went to school maybe once a week. I'd show up hung over, just not in good shape, and the vice-principal would say to me, you're suspended for three days. All that did was help. Now I don't have to be in school for three days."* Kate would pretend she was sick so she would not have to go to school and deal with the bullies.

Dropping out and being kicked out of school. The street youth were also more likely to talk about dropping out of school and being kicked out of school. Jenny said that, *"I was in private school from grade four to grade eleven. Then I dropped out because one of the teachers called me a _____, cause I'm not white."*

A supportive teacher. Three of the street youth, as compared to no one in the shelter group, spoke about a teacher who had tried to help them during their homeless experience. Amy mentioned a teacher who gave her money to get a hotel room. *"She gave me the little black book (this book has a list of community resources) and a hundred dollars and she said, get a hotel room."* Jenny spoke about how teachers from her private school would encourage her to come back to school. Heidi said that she had some good teachers. *"My grade eight teacher was _____ and the only reason he didn't get me to go to jail for coming to school high was because he knew I would pull out of it and I did."*

Work and Community

There were no substantial differences between the two homelessness stories at the ecological level of work and community.

Summary

In comparing these two types of homelessness stories there were a number of

differences at the various ecological levels. Please refer to Table 6. At the individual level, there is a greater potential for females to engage in riskier behaviours such as drug use and sexual activities when they are living on the streets, versus shelter living only. Concerning future outlooks, shelter youth were more likely than the street youth to think that they have a bright future ahead of them. As well, shelter youth were more likely to identify a special person in their lives at the present time.

Regarding family, street youth were more likely than shelter youth to come from a single parent household, to not know who their father was or to have no contact with their father. However, the street youth were more likely to stress that they had a close sibling relationship. At the peer level, two of the shelter youth spoke about being bullied by their peers, whereas no one in the street group spoke about bullies.

Regarding their schooling, the street youth were more likely than the shelter youth to have negative school experiences, which included skipping school, dropping out and being kicked out of school and having an overall negative attitude towards school. However, interestingly, three of the street youth spoke about a supportive teacher. The majority of the shelter youth remained in school, despite their family circumstances and living conditions. At the ecological level of work and community, no substantial differences were found between the two types of homelessness stories.

Similarities Between the Two Homelessness Stories

Despite the differences just reviewed, there were also a considerable number of similarities between the two types of homelessness stories. These similarities will also be summarized based on the stories and the ecological framework. Please refer to Table 7 for a

summary of the similarities between the two types of homelessness stories. Some of the similarities are common to all of the females in both groups or are equally present for some of the females in each group.

The Homeless Experience

A number of themes emerged from the females' stories that were common to both types of homelessness stories. Both groups talked about: (1) what happened for them to become homeless, (2) how they left their homes, (3) living with friends, (4) how they go back home and then leave again.

Why are we homeless? For all of the females, fighting/arguing with their mothers, parents and/or stepparents, was one of the main reasons they give as to why they are homeless. Some of the issues they fight about include skipping school, breaking curfew, hanging out with friends and drinking, poor school marks, getting in trouble with the law, boyfriends and drugs. For Faye, being emotionally and physically abused by her parents was the main reason why she left home. Also, Gina talked about how her stepfather was an alcoholic/drug abuser and how she could not put up with his behaviour anymore. Donna became pregnant and she could not deal with the stress at home, regarding her pregnancy and her stepfather not liking her boyfriend, so she left. *"Because me and my mom just didn't get along, my family, my step dad, fighting, fighting. It was so much stress. I just didn't want to put up with it, so I just left."* Jenny and Leanne said that abuse was the main reason why they were not living at home.

How do we leave our homes? How they became homeless, whether they were kicked out by their parent/stepparent, or left on their own, was a pattern of variation that was equivalent among the females from the two types of stories. For the street group, Amy, Betty, Heidi and

Irene were kicked out by her mothers but sometimes they would also leave home on their own. Gina and Jenny left on their own. For the shelter group, Donna and Faye reported that they left on their own. Melanie was kicked out by her father. Cathy, Leanne and Ethel and were kicked out by their mother or step mother. Kate was abandoned by her mother.

Living with friends. Females from both types of homelessness stories talked about living with a friend(s) when they became homeless. However, all these places were only temporary, lasting from a couple of nights to a few months. Faye from the shelter group spoke about living with some friends in an apartment, but it didn't go very well. *"I stayed there a week, not even. I couldn't handle it anymore. We all had an argument, it was over damages..."* Irene from the street group spoke about living with some older guys in an apartment.

A pattern: Leaving home, going back home and leaving again. The majority of females from both types of homelessness stories talked about how they go back and forth between their home and other living arrangements. So, for most of them, there is an ongoing pattern of leaving home and going back and leaving again. Gina from the street group said, *"And then I go home and I'd be like, but I'm not used to this anymore, and then you go back out on to the streets....it is just a big jumping game, that's what it is."* Cathy from the shelter group spoke about how she would go back and forth from her mom's house to her dad's house, then a friend's house and home again.

Leanne from the shelter group went home to try and make things work, but the abuse kept happening so she left again. For Kate from the shelter group, her mother would come back into her life and she would live with her for a short period of time before her mother would leave her again. This happened a number of times throughout her adolescent years.

Summary

When the street and shelter youth were describing their homeless experience(s), there were similar reasons regarding why they left home. For everyone, typically the fighting and arguing with their mothers, parents and step-moms/dads were mentioned. Participants in both groups talked about living with friends and also displayed transient behaviour, living at one place for a short period of time and then moving on to another place.

Individual

At this level, there was the risk factor of involvement in criminal activities and a resilience factor of identifying a special person that were common across the groups.

Childhood. Female youth from both the streets and the shelters spoke about a tough childhood. They recalled abuse, fighting with their mother, an alcoholic step-parent, not feeling loved or supported, or a part of the family. Cathy from the shelter group recalled that her childhood was tough because her mom was not around. Her mom left the family when she was 3 years of age, and she grew up with her dad and step mom. *"I don't know. It wasn't like the best, it could of been better. Like I was left a lot, my parents started to leave me at home when I was like 6 or 7."* Faye from the shelter group recalled an abusive childhood and feeling very frustrated with schoolwork and not getting any help and support from her parents. Jenny from the street group did not describe any happy childhood memories. She said *"I don't really remember it. I wasn't very happy with it cause I was beat a lot, it was very abusive, verbally, mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, everything."*

Criminal activity. Criminal activity was equally varied across the two groups. Females in both groups spoke about being involved in criminal activities, such as shoplifting, under age

drinking, setting fires and selling drugs. *"So, I have a couple of months left for probation and I got arrested a short while ago because my mom kicked me out again... And there was no room at Mary's Place so my probation officer charged me because of failing to reside and because I have never had an approved residence...."* Irene stated that her first offence was at age 12, when she tried to set the school on fire. However, no charges were laid. She also said that she had about five assault convictions and she was caught shoplifting. Melanie got charged three times because of stealing. Jenny, who had been on the streets, commented that she has *"lucked out"* with not getting charged.

Gina, who had lived on the streets, spoke very proudly about not getting in trouble with the law. *"I have always had a perfect record, that's one thing I can definitely say through all my experiences. I have never been in jail, I have never been charged, so definitely a lot of people look at me like I can't believe you can do that, you can live on the streets for five, six years and not get in trouble with the police."*

Identifying a special person. When the female youth were asked if they had a special person in their lives they could look up to when they were growing up, both the street and shelter youth typically could name at least one person. Jenny from the street group said, *"My brother, he is like my best friend."* Donna from the shelter group identified her grandmother. *"You could always tell her something, she was like my friend."*

Family

Within the ecological level of family, there were a number of risk factors typical of all the females, including broken homes, blended and step families, negative mother and daughter relationships, minimal contact with biological fathers, and negative relationships with step

parents and boyfriends. However, there was also a resilience factor present, sibling relationships. Please refer to Table 7.

Family compositions. Street and shelter youth had quite similar family compositions. Four participants have parents who are divorced. One participant has parents who are married, but six participants belong to a single-parent family (this was more common among the street group, however). Many of the participants in both groups are part of a blended family, including step-parents and half/step-siblings.

A negative mother and daughter relationship. Relationships with their mothers were quite negative for all these youth. There was fighting and arguing, they felt unloved and they felt that their mothers did not listen to them. A couple of females said that they hated their mothers, and then at some points during the interview they said that their mothers were the best moms in the world.

All of the females from both homelessness stories spoke about how they would fight/argue with their mothers regarding such things as school grades, skipping school, lack of money in the home, mom's work, criminal behaviour such as stealing clothes, breaking curfew, drinking and doing drugs. Betty from the street group said that, *"... my mom, she got money from welfare, baby bonus and all that. I even told her, can you buy me clothes, I have to go out and steal clothes from stores. She got mad at me every time I did steal....I told her I don't want to walk around in rags and everything. She doesn't really seem to care."*

Several of the participants from both homelessness stories spoke about how their mothers never listened to them, supported them or made them feel loved. When Irene from the street group told her mother she was pregnant, her mother was not supportive and kept telling her to

get an abortion or put the baby up for adoption. *"And of course I heard abortion, abortion, and then I heard adoption, adoption and adoption."* She wanted to move back home, but her mom would not let her. *"I would beg my mother and father, I would cry and I would just be beside myself, let me come home, let me come home and my mother would say no..."*

Other relationships. Female youth from both the street and shelter groups have or did have step parents in their lives. For the most part, these step relationships have not been very positive. There has been a lot of fighting and arguing.

In the street group, Heidi said that she liked her step dad at first, but then he started taking her mom away from her. *"All of it was defensive, because he was taking my mom away and I could see it."* Gina from the street group described her step dad as an alcoholic and drug abuser. However, Ethel from the shelter group describes her step dad as, *"He is good, he is a sweetie."* Kate from the shelter group had a step dad for awhile, and her mom had a number of boyfriends around the house. However, the step dad and boyfriends were not positive role models. They were violent. They would beat up her mother very badly. Leanne from the shelter group had a step mom. However, she said that she destroyed their family. *"My father remarried when I was 12 and he married a lady that destroyed my family inside and out..."*

Female youth from both the street and shelter groups also spoke about having a boyfriend at some point in their lives. Amy from the street group was engaged to her boyfriend, but they had a fight and broke up. They are now back together, but not engaged. He is also homeless. Betty from the street group said that her ex-boyfriend is in jail.

Melanie from the shelter group talked about going from boyfriend to boyfriend. Her experiences were not very positive. She was involved with a *"rough crowd,"* and they would get

her involved in stealing and breaking and entering. She had to bail her boyfriend out of jail at one time.

Sibling contact and role models. The majority of female youth remained in contact with their siblings while they were on the streets or in a shelter. Gina stated that she would always keep in contact with her sister when she was on the streets. *"I would always keep in touch with my sister, always. She wouldn't even let on to my mom that she was talking to me, because my mom wouldn't let me talk to her."*

Two of the street youth also described how their siblings were "walking down the wrong path." Gina said that her little brother is following in her footsteps and she is scared for him. She would like for him to learn something from the mess she has gotten herself in. *"He is following me in my footsteps, and it's making me a little nervous because you know I went down this road for a number of reasons, one being maybe they can learn from my mistakes...."*

Peers

The majority of females in both groups spoke about a close friend, who had supported them during their homeless experience. Betty from the street group said, *"There is this girl and she let me live with her and she has been trying to help me get back into school and to get my life together. She woke me up every morning to get to my probation appointments."* Ethel from the shelter group spoke about a friend who has always been there for her. *"I always tell her everything, she is like my sister practically. I think of her as my sister and she has been there, that's who I usually talk to if I have no else."*

Also, females with both types of stories spoke about engaging in risky behaviours and/or illegal activities with their friends, including drinking, doing drugs, skipping school and breaking

the law, such as shop lifting and public mischief. Betty from the street group commented on peer pressure and fitting in with the crowd. *“Basically I think when I first started acting that way I was trying to fit in with everybody else, ...everybody was doing drugs and doing this and that.”* Melanie from the shelter stated that, *“Well, like the people I was living with, they had told me if I wasn’t to steal they were going to kill me and that.”*

School

Within the ecological level of school, there were no similarities between the two different types of homelessness stories; school was much more difficult for the street group, as discussed above.

Work and Community

Finding employment has not been a big priority for either the street or shelter female youth, and only a small number of youth had some work experience. Cathy from the shelter group spoke about working as a live-in nanny for two months. Gina from the street group talked about having jobs when she was living on the streets where you would work one day and get paid the same day, for example, telemarketing, selling flowers and door to door selling. Irene from the street group worked as a bartender when she was trying to get her life straightened out.

Female youth from both stories spoke about being involved in community activities when they were growing up, such as attending summer camp, singing in a choir, Girl Guides and sports activities such as swimming, figure skating, soccer and basketball. As well, females from both stories spoke about accessing a variety of community resources during their homeless experience(s). These resources included R.O.O.F., Mary’s Place, a woman’s shelter, The Betty Thompson Youth Centre (Safe Haven), a shelter for homeless youth, Argus House, a soup

kitchen, youth hostels, group homes and a drop in centre for homeless people called Oasis.

The ecological level of community was not a primary focus during the interview, and the participants were not probed for this type of information except as it came up with respect to use of community resources. Therefore, this level may seem somewhat sparse in information.

However, participants from both types of stories did share some community information, such as being involved in community activities, accessing community resources and being sensitive to their social conditions.

Summary

There were a number of similarities between the two types of homelessness stories that were identified at the various ecological levels. These included: involvement in criminal activities; identifying a special person growing up; family compositions; a negative mother and daughter relationship; unsupportive step parent relationships; negative boyfriend relationships; maintaining sibling contact; having a close and supportive friend; engaging in risky behaviors with friends; not having employment; involvement in community activities as a child and accessing community resources during their current problems.

The Homeless Experiences of Two Age Groups of Female Youth

In this section I will begin by providing an illustration of a homeless story from each age group. Then I will present the differences and similarities between the two different age groups of female youth, based on the different levels of individual, family, peer, school and work and community from the ecological theory framework.

The younger age group - Ethel's story. Ethel was living with her mom and step dad. She has two younger sisters. Recently, she has made contact with her biological dad. She now visits

him regularly. She described her childhood as alright. She had lots of friends and was involved in a number of community activities. She said it has been tough growing up with two younger sisters. *"It's tough, man. I feel like the outside person. It was only two of us at first, but then she married my step dad. Then they had _____ which is my younger sister, the three-year old. All the attention went onto her as soon as she came, so then it just went downhill from there, me and my family. That's why I'm here today."*

Things were going ok until her mother found marijuana in her bedroom. Her mother confronted her and told her that she only had a couple of days to find another place to live. *".... she said she didn't want that under her roof and it is going to happen again, so I'm just going to kick you out kinda thing cause I don't want it to happen again. I was scared. She told me on a Wednesday, I had four days to find somewhere to live like quickly. Oh, I thought she was joking at first. You know what I mean. I thought that she said it because she was mad. But no, she wanted me out. She was serious. At first I thought she was joking until I got home from school that day and I came home and she kept bugging me that night, 'did you find a place, have you found a place, you better start looking,' that kind of thing. Oh, she must be serious then."* She doesn't understand why her mother had to be so drastic with kicking her out. *"I don't understand why my mom kicked me out over something so stupid. It was nothing to kick out your daughter over, you know what I mean?"* She said that her mother also calls her a liar and a thief because she used to steal. She said that her middle sister thinks she was the one who wanted to leave home. She misses her little sister the most. She wishes she could be back home to be *"with her and everybody."*

Apparently, this was not the first time her mom found marijuana. She found some before

in her pants pocket and she called the police, to try to scare her. She thought she might have to go to the streets, or try to rent an apartment or a room, but a youth care worker at school told her about a female youth shelter. Presently, she is staying there, but she may be moving to her biological dad's house in Brantford. He knows that she got kicked out of the house. She is still attending school. She does not like staying at the local shelter, *"To be honest it drives you up the wall."* She describes the people at the shelter as weird and stupid. Her relationship with her mother is not the best. She says that her mother never calls her. She has to always call her. Then when she calls her, her mother starts crying on the phone, saying, *"Was I that bad of a mother that you can't call me?"* She said that she doesn't see her mother very often. Her mother said she would not take her back until she changes. Ethel would like to build a new relationship with her mom.

The older age group - Irene's story. Irene is adopted, as is her older sister. She also has a younger brother. She said that growing up was difficult. Junior high school was when she started to get *"involved with the wrong crowd and started walking down the wrong path."* She fought quite a bit with her mother. She and her mother could never get along and she felt that she could not do anything to please her mother. But junior high school was when the fighting became very intense between Irene and her mother. Her father would get involved only when the fights became physical between Irene and her mother. The first time she was homeless was when her mother kicked her out at 12, because she could not find her winter boots. She ended up going to a friend's house and her friend's mom ended up calling her mother and her mother denied the whole scenario.

She was homeless from age 13-17. She would leave on her own and sometimes her

mother would kick her out. However, after age 14 she did not return home, and her mother would not let her come back home. She would stay with older men at their apartment. *“The first place that I chose to live when I was 13 was just not a safe environment, and I was getting beat up there and there were older men living there and.... fifty of us younger girls, using the apartment to drink and to do drugs, hang out and skip school.”* She was heavily involved in drugs and she did not attend school. Sometimes she would squat in abandoned buildings. She would access a number of community resources. She attempted suicide a number of times and she suffered from depression. She spent some time at a psychiatric hospital. At 14 she was placed into foster care and ran away from that house. *“I had been placed into foster care and I was just not staying in a foster home. You know it’s like I got all these friends downtown who are going to get me high and give me a place to sleep and you know I can go do whatever I want there, why am I going to stay in a foster home?”* While she was on the streets, she talked about how she would be starving and surviving on V8 juice. *“I remember being starving, just absolutely starving, and drinking like two one litre bottles of V8 at a time. It was all that was left and I wanted to fill my stomach. I will never forget how sick I was after....”*

At age 16 she went to live at a local shelter so she could receive student welfare, but she was still practising her same old habits. She then met an older guy and moved out to live with him for a year and a half. This boyfriend was very violent and controlling. He would emotionally and physically abuse her. What contact she had with her family and friends, was gone. She then became pregnant at age 17 with his child. She left him and moved around a lot, to different shelters. This was when her pathway out of homelessness started. Her pathway out of homelessness story will continue in the next section below.

Differences Between the Homeless Stories of the Two Age Groups Across Ecological Levels

First, I will present the differences that emerged regarding their childhood stories. Then, the differences will be presented at the various ecological levels. Please refer to Table 8 for a summary of the differences.

Childhood

More females in the younger sample recalled both good and bad times during their childhoods. Their happy memories tended to be about a special friend, having fun with siblings, attending community programs and just a fun childhood in general. The bad memories were about fighting/arguing with their mother and siblings, the death of a father, parents divorcing, and witnessing domestic violence.

Amy from the younger sample recalled both good and not so good memories. Good memories included hanging out at a special friend's house. *"She lived in this really nice house with a pool in the backyard and every weekend I would go over to a sleep-over at her house. She never came to mine, but I would always go to her house because it was so much fun."* Not so good memories involved fighting/arguing with her sisters and mother. The fights with her sisters would often turn physical. She felt that her childhood was like *"an emotional roller coaster. Like one day I would be all up and happy, and the next day I was down into the gully and it would be just the worst day of my life."* Donna from the younger age group described her childhood as fun, but when her dad passed away, *"then everything went downhill after that and my mom wanted to move out of the province and stuff."*

More of the females in the older age group recalled abusive childhoods or had come to

think of their earlier lives in this way. Some of the females in the older age group were able to articulate that the tough times during their childhood were due to the abuse they had experienced or witnessed.

A turning point in childhood. From some of the participants' descriptions regarding their childhood, one can presume that a particular situation or event during their childhood changed their home life. More of the females in the younger sample than the older sample described a situation or event that changed their home life. Betty from the younger age group felt that the family's move to downtown Kitchener was when things changed for the worse. She started hanging around with the "wrong group", began engaging in risky behaviours, skipping school and fighting/arguing with her mother. These behaviours led to her mother kicking her out of the house. Donna stated that her father's death was hard on the family and if he had never died, they wouldn't have had to move to Ontario. Ethel from the younger age group felt that when her sisters were born all attention went to them, *"so then it kinda just went down hill from there, me and my family. That's why I'm here today."* Gina from the younger age group felt that when she entered grade nine she started seeing her friends as more important than her family and started *"rebellious against my parents and everybody, friends just became above it all for me because I didn't have any when I was younger."*

Irene from the older age group talked about when she started junior high school. She said she *"started to get involved with like the wrong crowd and started walking down the wrong path."* This led to intense fighting with her mother, engaging in risky behaviours, skipping school and eventually getting kicked out. Melanie said that her parents' divorce made things much worse between her and her mother. Living with her dad, she became the primary caregiver

of her brothers and she did all the housekeeping. Eventually, she could not deal with all the responsibilities and with not having a social life, so she ended up leaving her father's house. For Jenny, Kate and Leanne in the older group, though, abuse was always a part of their lives. So, this led to them leaving on their own, getting kicked out or being abandoned by their mother.

Summary

Females from the younger age group spoke about happy and unhappy moments during their childhoods, suggesting that at some point during their childhood, there were happy times. However, more of the females in the older age group described abusive childhoods. Also, more of the female youth from the younger age group spoke about an event that happened to change the family dynamics and can be presumed to be the precursor that led up to their homeless experience. These events included the death of a parent, parents divorcing, entering junior high school and a new move.

Individual

Within the ecological level of individual qualities there were a number of risk factors that differed by group, including risky behaviours, and mental health issues. There were also resilience factors including identifying a special person and future plans.

Risky behaviours. Heidi from the younger age group said that she is heavily involved in drugs/alcohol and smoking. *"I started smoking when I was nine, I was in grade four, and I started drinking when I was like 10. I started smoking pot in grade five, tried mushrooms for the first time in grade five, so I did all that stuff when I was really, really young."* Ethel from the younger age group said that's why she got kicked out of her house, because her mother found drugs in her bedroom. Also, four of the female youth in the younger age group mentioned a

pregnancy, as compared to one youth in the older age group.

Mental health. All but one of the females in the older age group talked about mental health issues, such as depression and self-abuse and attempting suicide. Heidi was the only female youth from the younger age group to mention a mental health problem directly. She said she suffered from depression and had attempted suicide. Irene and Kate from the older age group talked about their experiences with depression. Irene had been seeing a psychiatrist since she was 12 and she used to take anti-depressants. Kate experienced depression at the age of 16. She was seeing a psychiatrist and was taking Prozac. Kate said she was depressed because of the way people treated her. *"I was majorly depressed because of the way people were treating me. I felt like I meant nothing at that age, because people made me feel like I meant nothing."*

Irene and Jenny from the older age group had attempted suicide. Irene had made a number of attempts, and at one point in time she said that, *"I swallowed like over 500 different aspirin, anti-depressants, all sorts of different things... and I guess in the middle of the night, I was in a foster home they could hear me puking in my sleep."* She was also self-abusive.

Identifying a special person. When asked if they had a special person in their lives growing up, all the participants from the older age group could think of someone, whereas only half the participants from the younger age group could name someone. Family members were the common choices made by participants from both samples. Donna from the younger age group chose her grandmother. She described her as a friend. *"I don't know, you could tell her anything. Like if I personally told her I did something bad at school, she wouldn't phone my mom and tell her, so you could always tell her. She was like my friend too. I really love my Nan cause, I don't know, she kept secrets away and stuff so."*

Gina from the younger age group chose a famous television wrestler, and Betty, Cathy and Faye from the younger age group never had a special person they could look up to when they were younger. Betty said, *"I never had anyone to look up to, like my mom has been on welfare all her life. My sister, she is no better than I am, like she's been kicked out of my house for like two, two or three years."*

Irene from the older age group said she never had anyone until a police officer came into her life at age 13. When this police officer saw her on the streets, he would give her money to get a coffee or let her drive around with him so she could get warm. Also, she would call him and vent her frustrations. He was someone she could rely on and he would listen to her. He is even the godfather of her child. *"He even listened to things that he really didn't need to listen to. even at 13, it is 3:00 in the morning and I am out on the streets and he knew very well that if he put me in his car and took me home, I was going to be gone the next day anyways. So he might give me a pair of gloves and a dollar for a cup of coffee, and chat with me for a few and drive around with me for a while so I could get warm, whatever. He was always, always there. There was never a time I felt he was not there for me."* The rest of the participants from sample two chose family members, such as their brother, mother or father.

When asked if they had a special person in their lives at the moment, all the females in the older age group could name someone, whereas not all the females in the younger age were able to name someone. Two participants from the younger age group said, *"I don't look up to anybody, I guess."* One female chose a friend, and another participant chose herself and a friend. *"I look up to myself now. I don't really have, like I have my friends to talk to. There is my best friend _____, she has always been there for me..... I always tell her everything, she is like*

my sister practically... ”

However, the other four participants from the younger age group chose more than one person. They chose people like their boyfriend, grandparents, their mother, their brother, a friend and everybody who has helped them to straighten out their lives.

Gina from the younger age group said that she is very grateful for everybody’s help. *“I think all the people that are trying to help me get back upon my feet, cause I couldn’t be any benefit to anybody..... I tell them every night before I go home and thanks for all that you have done for me today, you know. And I really, really look up to them...”*

In the older age group Irene and Leanne could not identify one person. They both felt a number of people are special to them at this point in their lives. Irene said that *“... like obviously the police officer is still closely involved in my life. Another woman who I just met along the way through my daughter’s father is actually very closely involved in my life. I think very fondly of her and I think she’s just a wonderful woman.”* Leanne said that, *“Special people, yeah there is a few, close and personal friends.”*

Jenny, Kate and Melanie from the older age group chose different people than the ones they chose growing up. For example, an ex-boyfriend, a sister, and dad’s friends. Melanie said, *“Well, I had a couple of my dad’s friends that have helped me out through different things, but if I need to talk to them they are there for me and if I just need time alone, they will go out with me and just go shopping together.”*

Future plans. Concerning their future plans, more of the females in the older age group had concrete plans for their future than the female youth in the younger age group. These older females also were more hopeful and optimistic about their future plans. Leanne from the older

age group spoke about getting her chef's papers and opening up her own restaurant. Jenny's plan is, *"I want to apply for school, get better living conditions and get a job. My goal is to be off welfare by summer. I want to be back in school and then by next June be graduated."* The majority of participants from the younger sample said that they did want the future to be brighter, but their plans were vague and their anticipations were more ambivalent, both positive and negative. Amy from the younger age group said five years from now, *"I see myself in a one bedroom or two bedroom apartment with my cat, with _____, a good job and hopefully out of school by then."* Donna from the younger age group who was pregnant at the time of the interview said, *"We are going to buy a house after the baby is born. Maybe I will go on assistance for a while until I can get a job."*

Family

Within the ecological level of family there were differences among the two age groups concerning the mother and daughter relationship and sibling relationships. Please refer to Table 8.

Mother and daughter relationship patterns. More of the females in the younger age group than the older female youth could recall that at one point in their lives, their relationship with their mother would have been described as satisfactory, but then it turned bad, in that the fighting/arguing became more frequent and intense.

Cathy from the younger age group said that she and her mother were fighting a lot and then her mom wanted her to move out. *"It was alright in the beginning, and then she started like, ... everything I would tell she would somehow twist it around and use it against me and criticize me for it and I really didn't like it and I just got sick of her telling me and I just started*

telling her to shut up....she wanted me to move out."

Interestingly, half of the younger females, Amy, Ethel, Gina and Heidi, spoke about their mothers from two viewpoints. They would describe their mothers very negatively and then they would describe them as the best moms in the world. However, no one from the older age group made this sort of comment. Amy from the younger age group said that, *"My mom's the greatest person in the world, she is like the coolest person, she like smokes drugs, she used to drink a lot, she used to smoke. She is crazy, she is like the best parent in the world, but I hate her guts. Just because the way she has treated me throughout my life. She is my mom, got to love her, got to hate, got to kill her. Love, hate and discipline."*

Maintaining contact with their mothers. For the older group of female youth, keeping in contact with their mothers varied for each individual. Irene from the older age group had very little contact with her mom during her homeless experience. Jenny from the older age group said that she would call her mother periodically to let her know that she was ok. *"Every once in awhile I would call home and let them know I was ok, like out of respect, and then in the last little while I called all of the time."* Kate from the older age group would have contact with her mom, depending on whether or not she knew where her mom was living. Her mother would move around a lot and not keep in touch with her. Melanie from the older age group said that after her mom and dad divorced, she had very little contact with her mom. Then when she turned fifteen, they started talking again and she would visit her on weekends.

Reestablishing a mother and daughter relationship. The females in the older age group were more likely to talk about reestablishing their relationship with their mom than the younger age group. For each of the females in older age group except for Leanne, their relationship with

their moms has changed for the better. However, their relationship still needs work and it is not perfect. Irene feels that she and her mom have definitely made progress. But her mother still says some hurtful things, which upsets her. She has learned how to deal with these comments and looks for the positive in their relationship. *“My mother still says things that one like should just never say to another person. Most of the time I let it slide off my back. If she says something that really upsets me, I will stop her and I'd be like, mom what are you doing? And now my mother is that person I call every day...my mother has definitely become my confidante....”*

Three of the younger females commented that they would like to improve their relationship with their mothers. However, no steps have been taken.

A close sibling relationship. Five of the younger females talked about the close relationship they have with their siblings. Kate and Jenny were the only two from the older age group, however, who talked about the closeness they felt with their siblings. Faye from the younger age group talked about how difficult it is to be away from her sister. Her younger sister misses her a great deal. *“Oh, I tell you she was really upset. She was glad to see me....she was missing school, not sleep, not eat ...she would switch beds cause we had the same room and she wouldn't change the sheet that I was on....”* She also talked how she is concerned for her sister's safety because of their abusive father. *“I told her last night and I told her plenty of times, that if you ever get hit or _____(brother) ever gets hit or if you feel whatever, call me.*

Gina from the younger sample is also very close to her younger sister. *“But me and my sister we are like glue and paper. We stick and I don't think it matters what we go through, we will always be still talking to each other regardless of what is said.”* She also explained why she feels that they are close. *“Because me and my sister have been through so much crap and I*

have taken so much crap for her. Like I remember taking beats for her when I was a kid.... I continue to take it for her and I will continue to take it for her until I'm dead, and I think she just appreciates that now and I think that's how we got that closeness, that bondness."

Leanne from the older age group came from a large family. When asked about her relationship with her siblings she said that, *"My relationship once upon a time was pretty good and now it's not. We don't really have a relationship."* She said that when they were growing up, they were close, but then their parents divorced and things fell apart. *"Basically we lost the value of family."*

Contact with siblings. The younger sample also reported more contact with their siblings when they were homeless as compared to the older age group of female youth. Irene and Melanie from the older age group had very little contact with their siblings when they were not living at home. Irene said they were not getting along. *"We were just head to head, we didn't get along at all. We really didn't have no use for each other."* Melanie said that she had very little contact with her brothers when she was living away from home. *"I didn't even really talk to them. I didn't even call my brother on his birthday and I felt really bad about that and everything."* Jenny spoke about visiting her brother, and Kate and Leanne had contact with their sisters but only for a short period of time. They did not have contact with any of their other siblings.

Sibling abuse. The females in the younger sample spoke about how they would have fights with their siblings and they would feel jealousy towards them. However, for two females in the older age group the normal fighting and arguing that occurs between siblings would often turn violent. Jenny and Kate spoke about their sisters beating them up. Jenny recalled that, *"And like so my sisters used to take their anger out on me because I was the youngest and they had to*

do the whole power trip, like my dad."

Reestablishing sibling relationships. The females in the older age group spoke about how their relationships with their siblings are improving, whereas no one in the younger age group did this. Irene spoke about how her relationships with both her sister and brother have improved. She and her sister are getting along. They talk quite frequently. *"My sister and I are getting along wonderful."* She described a conversation she had with her brother about her unruly behaviour and apologized for hurting him. *"....my behaviour has traumatized my brother a lot more than I thought it did..... I found out in the end that my brother was scared of me, and that really, really bothered me. Like my mother told me about one incident that happened with him, and after she told me about it, I was in tears and I had no memory of it.....And since then, of course, I have sat my brother down..... I don't want you to be scared or afraid of me. I just want to let you know that I really don't know what was wrong with me when I was younger, but I know I put you through a lot and I'm really, really sorry for that..."*

Peers

Within the ecological level of peers, there is a resilience factor of helping and supportive peers, and the risk factor of bullies, each of which differed by age group.

A helping and supportive friend. The females in the younger age group were more likely to think of at least one friend who has tried to help them and has been there for them during difficult times than the female youth in the older age group. Amy and Betty from the younger age group talked about a close friend who has a stable home and is worried about them not having a place to sleep. Amy's friend offered her money, but she wouldn't take it. Betty said that, *"Yeah, there is this girl and she let me live with her, and she has been trying to help me get back into*

school, get my life together, and she woke me up every morning to get to my probation appointments.” Donna talked about a close friend she has had since childhood. “Yeah, she is like my buddy, I can tell her anything. Whenever you could find me, she wouldn’t be too far behind.”

Several females from the older age group talked about how much they moved around, therefore not being able to maintain friendships. Leanne said that she did not have many friends because she moved around so much. *“I had a couple of really good friends, but unfortunately I moved around a lot so I lost contact with them.”*

Bullying. The females in the older age group talked about being bullied by their peers, while this was never mentioned by the younger age group. Kate and Melanie talked about not having too many close friends because people at their school often bullied them. *“Well, I didn’t really associate with too many people when I was younger. I was more of, I was a big girl and nobody really liked me so I didn’t have very many friends. I used to buy candy, take it to school so I could buy friendsit was kind of like buying their friendship.”*

School

Within the ecological level of school there were a number of risk factors, including having a negative attitude towards teachers, and friends becoming more important than school, that differed between the age groups. Resilience factors included having a supportive teacher and having concrete future plans for school.

Negative teacher attitude. The younger female youth were more likely to express a negative attitude towards their teachers than the older age group. Amy from the younger age group said that her teachers told her that she does not respect authority. *“Teachers hate me*

because I have no sense of discipline for others. They tell me I have no sense of authority, I don't respect anybody's authority usually.” Betty stated that her teachers had given up trying to help her. *“They gave up, they gave me a truancy officer and everything and my teachers just gave up. Like me and my friend if we didn't show within a minute of class starting they already knew that we were absent that we weren't going to be there. Basically the teachers made bets with each other, whose class are they going to this month?”*

Supportive teachers. However, the younger females also could name one teacher who was supportive. Amy and Heidi from the younger age group and Jenny from the older age group recalled at least one teacher who was trying to help them. Amy talked about a teacher who gave her a little black book that contained names and numbers of community resources when she found out that she got kicked out of her house. She also gave her some money to get a hotel room. She still keeps in contact with this teacher. She referred to her as a friend. Jenny also talked about how some of her teachers were trying to support her and get her back into school. *“Like there were some teachers there who were incredible, like... even though they knew what I was going through and they would see me on the streets, they were like trying to talk to me, to help me, Oh, you should go back to school, we miss you and they arranged it so I could go back there for free.”*

Friends became more important than school. Females from the younger age group were more likely to comment on how their friends became more important than school. *“I started to have more fun with my friends instead of my school work.” “Friends became more important...”* Cathy from the younger age group commented that she thought it was stupid that her friends became more important than her school work. *“I think I realized it was kinda stupid.”* Only

Irene from the older age group talked about how when she entered junior high school, that was when she started to get involved with the “*bad kids.*”

Concrete future plans for school. For the older female youth, their plans regarding their schooling were more concrete and detailed, whereas for the younger age group, school simply may be in the future. The younger females’ responses regarding their present school situation varied. Amy dropped out of school on her own and she was also kicked out of school. Betty was kicked out, Donna and Gina dropped out of school, Cathy is completing her schooling through correspondence and Faye, Heidi and Ethel are presently attending school. Betty, Gina and Donna talked about going back to school in the future and Heidi feared that she might be getting kicked out of school very soon.

Irene from the older age group is back in school, taking adult and continuing education classes to get her high school diploma. She would also like to further her education and work with street-involved youth or seniors. Jenny plans on going back to school in the near future. She would like to work with the disabled or be a teacher’s aide. Kate went back to school, but she had to quit school and get a full-time job so she could afford to live on her own. In the near future she would like to go to hairdressing school. Leanne and Melanie from the older sample graduated high school. Leanne felt that her education was very important. *“Decided what was important, my education, I’d finish it up and be somebody. I wanted to finish high school, I wanted to show people I wasn’t stupid. Graduated with honours, 96.7%. Pretty good grades for someone who’s had it rough all her life.”* She then went to university in B.C. and graduated with a degree in biochemical engineering. She also has a diploma in business administration and has studied anthropology in Indonesia. Presently, she is trying to complete her chef’s papers.

Work and Community

Not surprisingly, within the ecological level of work and community, all of the females in the older group spoke about having a job. Presently, Irene is working with homeless youth. Jenny just quit her job. She was working the night shift at a bakery. She complained that she was the one who did all the work and it wasn't worth getting up for. Kate worked at a couple of fast food places and a place that cleaned cars. Presently, she is working at a fast food restaurant. Leanne spoke about working during the summers when she was out of university for the year and she would do odd jobs while she was travelling across the country in various cities. Melanie worked at a donut shop, and presently she is trying to find work. In the younger age group, Amy, Cathy, Ethel and Gina were the only females to mention even having a job. Amy talked about working in a factory and being a telemarketer. *"I had some jobs, but most of them fired me because I am so young, I like get sick easy. I am a few hours late.... or I just leave because it is a real shitty job anyway."*

Also, two females from the younger age group spoke about the type of communities they lived in. Amy spoke negatively about the neighbourhood she was living in. She said, *"I lived in this third world kind of apartment building.everybody there had low life jobs, like I am a secretary, or I am a janitor...."* However, Heidi said that when she and her brother were growing up it was a nice neighbourhood and everybody knew their names.

Summary

There were a number of differences between the stories of the two age groups as shown in Table 8. At the level of individual, the younger females were more likely to speak about engaging in risky behaviors. For the older females, they were more likely to speak about mental

health issues, to have concrete future plans, and more likely to identify a special person.

Within the family level, the younger age group expressed that they had a close relationship with their siblings, they were more likely to maintain contact with their siblings, they spoke about a period in their lives when their relationship with their mother was ok, but then turned bad and they were more likely to describe their mothers as a love and hate type of relationship. The older females spoke about sibling abuse, and said that they are trying to reestablish a relationship with their mothers and siblings.

Regarding peers, the younger age group was more likely to speak about a close and supportive friend, whereas some older females spoke about being bullied by their peers. At the school level, the younger females said that their friends became more important than school and they had a negative attitude towards their teachers. The older females had more concrete plans regarding their schooling. At the work and community level, the older females were more likely to speak about having a job either during or after their homelessness experience(s).

Similarities Between the Two Age Groups of Female Youth

For the two age groups there were also many similarities. These similarities will also be presented using the levels of the ecological theory framework. Please refer to Table 9 for a summary of the similarities between the two age groups. Some of the similarities are common to all of the females in both groups or are equally present for some of the females in each group.

Homeless Experience

The common themes presented earlier on pages 71-72 were also common for females in both age groups when describing their homeless story.

Individual

Within the ecological level of individual, females from both age groups had similar future outlooks when they were growing up. Females from both age groups said that their future looked bright or they never gave it any thought.

Childhood. Both age groups recalled tough childhoods, characterized by family conflicts, broken homes, blended families and abuse. Faye from the younger age group recalled, *"I was abused a lot. I have been abused ever since I was little."* Leanne from the older age group said, *"It was rough. There was a lot of abuse in my childhood."*

Family

Within the ecological level of family, family compositions for both age groups were quite similar. Single parent families, divorced parents, step-parents and blended families are the norm of participants' lives from both samples. In each sample, only one participant has parents who are still married, and each sample has one participant who lives with her biological dad.

Family conflicts. Females in both age groups described their home life as very chaotic, with conflicts and crises. They both felt unloved, not supported and not listened to by their mothers.

Other relationships. Their fathers did not really play a major role in the lives of either age group. As well, stepparents and boyfriends were not really positive influences and supportive people for either age group.

Irene from the older age group talked about a guy she met while she was living at Mary's Place. She moved out of Mary's Place to live with him and shortly after they moved in together,

things started to change for the worse. He started to physically and emotionally abuse her. He controlled her life. However, she had convinced herself that she loved him and desperately needed him. *"It was like I loved him, like I never had loved anybody in my life like I loved this man. We were like soul mates."* She described him as a "bad boy." He was involved in criminal activity and drugs. But despite all of this, he was *"really big and he dressed great and he was really hot..."* Things got worse as time went on, the beatings also got worse. He was very controlling, so she lost contact with many of her friends and what little contact she had with her family was also gone. However, she wanted things to work out. She would say, *"you know, if we just go to counselling. I was doing everything to make this happen, cause at that time I truly believed he loved me. I just believed he had to stop what he was doing."* Then she became pregnant with his child. She left him and tried to stay away from him during her pregnancy. Presently, she is in a relationship. She describes this relationship as a very positive one and things are going great. She says he is *"loyal, trustworthy; he is honest."* She is very happy to have this kind of relationship. *"I didn't think it was really possible to have a relationship as good as this one is."*

Peers

Within the ecological level of peers, females in both age groups spoke about engaging in risky behaviours with peers. Irene from the older age group said that, *"It was always more often than not, I had a partner in crime, so to speak. There was always someone else who was in the predicament I was in."* Jenny said that, *"Like with my street friends and stuff it was the whole drug scene, drug and alcohol scene, day in and day out, every single day."*

Also, females from both age groups talked about living with friends for short periods of

time while they were homeless.

School

Within the ecological level of school, the majority of participants in both age groups said that school was not a great place to be and they would skip school on a regular basis. Also, females from both age groups spoke about dropping out of school and/or being kicked out of school. For Irene in the older age group, school was going good until junior high, and then school became a place where she did not want to be. *"I couldn't care less whether I went or not."* Kate did not have a positive school experience because she was picked on a lot. *"Then in grade nine when I went to high school, I was tormented cause I was overweight. They made fun of me every day ..."*

Work and Community

Within the ecological levels of work and community, female youth in both age groups mentioned being involved in community activities and accessing a variety of community resources. Please refer to Table 9.

Greatest Hope and Fear

In the interviews, I asked the participants in both age groups to tell me their greatest hope and greatest fear. Their responses varied for the fear question. But for the hope question, the majority of females said that they wanted a better life, or wanted to keep continuing to better their life. Their fears were to be alone, to die, to become mentally ill, to have a miscarriage, to not achieve my goals, to be beat on, to lose my brother, and having no contact with my family. One female, Betty from the younger sample, said that she was not afraid of anything. She has already lost her family and has been to the streets so there is nothing else to be afraid of.

Advice To Other Females

At the end of the interviews I asked the question, what advice would you give to other females who are experiencing similar homeless issues? Participants' responses from both samples were similar. They suggested the following: Don't go to the streets, find an alternate place to live, go to a shelter, make things work at home, don't go down the wrong path, be grateful for those who help you and get help, don't turn it away. Betty from sample one said, *"leaving home, it wouldn't be very smart cause it is a never ending cycle and you keep getting on the streets and it is scary....."*

It was interesting to hear their responses to the question of greatest fear and hope. Of course, the majority of the females wanted a good life and to be able to make good decisions regarding their future. Their fears are probably fears that any adolescent would have, maybe with the exception of becoming mentally ill. However, Betty does not have any fears because of all the hardships she has been through at such a young age.

Their advice to other homeless females of course was to not go to the streets, get help and go to a shelter. They may have said these things because it was the correct thing to say and it is what society expects of them.

Summary

There were a number of similarities between the two age groups, mostly in terms of risk factors. The similarities included: recalling a tough childhood; family composition; minimal contact with fathers; family conflicts; unsupportive step parents; negative boyfriend relationships; engaging in risky behaviours with peers; having negative school experiences;

being involved in community activities growing up and accessing community resources. The differences presented above between the two age groups could be due to the fact that these older females have had time to reflect on their homeless experience in terms of trying to understand how and why things went wrong, who has helped them along the way and what their future may actually look like. Being able to reflect on one's homeless experiences, build support networks and to think concretely about the future are important points along the pathway out of homelessness.

There were also differences between the two age groups in terms of how they told their story. Some of the stories told by the younger females were very hard to follow. They would jump around a lot in their stories from one point in their lives to another. There seemed to be no chronological order. The older females' stories followed more of a chronological order, starting with what had happened for them to become homeless, their homeless experience and how they found their pathway out. One of the older females told me that she specifically selected certain parts of her story to tell me because if she told me everything we would have been there for days. However, many of these older females have probably told their story quite a few times. There also may be some kind of therapeutic effect with telling it over and over again, a way to make sense of what happened during those homeless times. As well, they are hoping to help other females in similar situations.

The Pathway out of Homelessness

This section will highlight the factors that were important to the females in the older sample in finding their pathway out of homelessness. First, I will provide two illustrations of "pathway out of homelessness" stories.

Irene's story. At age 17, she was living with her abusive boyfriend, and she became pregnant. She said that the pregnancy was not her turning point, but that's when *"my growing stage began."* She had started accessing a drop-in centre more often to escape the abuse and to feel safe. However, she moved to Toronto with this boyfriend. He became more abusive and her life, as well as the baby's, was in danger. She called the drop-in centre to help her get back to Kitchener. She then moved to a shelter for young pregnant mothers where she gave birth to her daughter. However, they terminated her residency because of the danger her ex-boyfriend posed to the other residents and also because of a health condition.

During this time, Family and Children's Services apprehended her baby because of her health condition and violent ex-boyfriend. She then stayed with her baby at a foster home and eventually moved into a local shelter. During this time, she was receiving counselling and she had a restraining order against her ex-boyfriend. They also ended up terminating her residency because of her health and safety. She then moved to another local shelter with her daughter and eventually into her own apartment (second-stage housing for this particular shelter). During this time she was working at a bar to save money for her and the baby. Presently, she is still living at this apartment with her daughter. She is working with street-involved youth. She has returned to school to get her high school diploma. She is in a new relationship. She described her relationship with her daughter as excellent.

When talking about what happened to straighten out her life, she said that it was because she had to change her life to make things better for her baby. *"I had stopped the year of 1997, so as far as like my suicide and self-abuse went, I already had done some growing in that section. But there was so much more as a person and as somebody who was going to be a mother that I*

needed to change about my life, about the way I lived, the things I did, about the people I hung out with, about those sorts of things.” “....I came to the point in my life where I was like what am I doing, you know, where am I going, what kind of life am I’m going to make for myself, for my child” A number of people have helped her turn her life around, such as her worker from Family and Children’s Services. *“I had an excellent worker. She was so down to earth.... and because of that, instead of making her my enemy, you know, what do you mean you are taking my kid. Instead of making her my enemy when there were problems with where I was living, when I was having troubles with whatever, when I was unsure of what to be doing or where to be turning, I’d phone her.These people are not working against me. I can work with them, I don’t have to fight with them over this .”* A police officer also gave her a lot of support. As well, a woman she met along her pathway helped her in terms of learning how to love herself. *“I would say that she did the most for me in terms of teaching me how to love myself. Everybody else helped me to better myself, but she was really the one who helped me to love myself....”*

Kate’s story. She stayed at a local shelter for a couple of months after leaving her sister’s place. She said that the shelter staff helped her with learning how to budget, getting to know the community and where to look for resources. *“I learned some budgeting here, so now that I am out on my own, I know how to budget my money to pay my rent. I know out of each pay cheque I have to save so much, so at the end of the month I have my rent money. They taught me more here how to get involved with the community. Like before I was so shy I didn’t want to do nothing. Now when I ever need anything or help I am not afraid to call anybody, like any places in the community or anything like that. So Argus did help me out a lot.”* She met her present boyfriend, who was also staying at a local shelter, and they decided to move out together. They

lived with a friend for a short period of time until they got their own place.

Presently, they are in the process of moving from a one bedroom apartment to a two-bedroom apartment. She went back to school but she had to quit to be able to work full-time because her boyfriend could not find work. It was difficult for a while, financially. Now he is working, so things are better. She said that she was very grateful to the shelter for providing her with shelter and food.

For all of the five older females, their stories had one theme in common, finding and building a supportive network of people and agencies who will help them find their pathway out of homelessness. All of the females talked about a person or agency who helped them along their pathway. Irene mentioned a number of people who helped her start her "*growing stage*," the police officer, her worker from FACS, a certain woman friend, the youth drop-in centre and a number of staff people at different shelters. They were her allies. Jenny spoke about counsellors who understood what she was going through. Kate, Leanne and Melanie felt that the staff and resources at a local shelter helped them out of homelessness. Leanne said that, "*My turning point was actually the people here at _____. They actually showed me there were people who cared and you are not alone in this world. It was incredible.*" Presently, she is living on her own. She is completing her chef's papers because she would like to open up her own restaurant.

Melanie spoke about the opportunities she had to talk things through with the support staff at the shelter. "*....The sessions helped to get things out that needed to be said, and it helped me just to get my feelings out and help me get my life back on track and everything like that.*" She recalled that at the shelter everybody sits down together to eat their meal, like a family. They never did that in her house. Presently, she is still living with her dad. She plans on going to

college in the near future. She is also looking for a job. She would like to get her own place, but she said that no boyfriends would be living with her, because she needs her own space and time for herself.

A number of the females also talked quite extensively about *“self-love”* and *“self-respect.”* Irene in her story spoke about how a woman helped her to love herself. Leanne also spoke about *“learning to love yourself.”* *“Once you learn to love yourself, then you can make it. Once you learn how to respect yourself, only then you will receive it.”* She also talked about taking advantage of resources when they are available to you and not destroying them, because they may not be there the next time you need them. *“Don’t close the door, keep the bridge from burning, because if you burn the bridge it may not happen anymore.”*

Jenny talked about how it was time to start thinking about her future. *“What got me off the streets was like I’m 19, no one is going to want to hire a druggie, alcoholic, criminal to watch their kids.”* She commented that she is too old for the street thing, it was ok when you were 16 or 17, but not 19. She also shared a story about a 12-year-old girl whom she helped to realize that the streets were not the best place to go. On many occasions, Jenny would see this particular young girl hanging out on the streets. Jenny would encourage her to go home, and she told her about the many dangers that exist on the streets. Many months later the girl returned with a friend and she told her friend that Jenny was the one that had encouraged her to go back home. Jenny is presently living at a boarding house. She is hoping that her boyfriend will come to Ontario and she will go back to B.C. with him. However, the streets are not in her future. She plans on going back to school, to get off welfare by the end of the summer and to obtain better living conditions.

What does the future hold for these female youth? All of the participants from sample two have a brighter outlook towards the future. However, each participant differs in terms of where they are in their lives for making their plans concrete. Irene has already gone back to school to complete her high school credits. She has made tremendous progress with family relationships. She is happy with herself, emotionally. She also has some career plans in mind. *“I’m happy with where I’m going educationally, I’m happy with the beginning of my career, I’m happy with where I’m at in my relationships and with people. I’m a lot more self-confident, my self-esteem is a lot higher, I respect myself a lot more and I care about life, I care about living, I care about my daughter, I care about what’s going to happen...”*

Discussion

This qualitative study has made an attempt at filling the gap in the current literature on female youth homelessness. As stated by Milburn and D’Ercole (1991), there has been very little research carried out with young homeless women in Canada. The participants, eight currently homeless female youth (ages 14-19), and five formerly homeless female youth (ages 19-27), were asked to describe their childhood, their family, their homeless experience(s) and what they thought the future may hold for them, in an open-ended, semi-structured interview. Using the narrative approach in my interview process allowed me to capture the unique story of each individual female. A qualitative analysis of the interview results led to the emergence of two major research findings. The results section, concentrated on these two findings: (1) two different types of homelessness stories, a street story and a shelter story, and (2) differences between the two age groups of female youth in the telling of their homeless stories. The

homelessness stories told by the older females then led into their story regarding their pathway out of homelessness.

These two major findings, and the differences and similarities of the female youth's responses in these two patterns, will be discussed in relation to the research objectives that were outlined earlier. They were: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the female homeless experience(s), (2) to identify and link the individual, family, school and structural factors that are critical for female adolescent homelessness in the K-W region, (3) to compare the similarities and differences that may emerge between the two age groups of female youth regarding their homeless experiences (these similarities and differences will be discussed above in objective number one), and to identify the protective factors that are seen as fundamental for the formerly homeless females in overcoming their homeless experience. The ecological theory and the concept of gender will also be discussed in relation to the results of this present study. The possibilities for future research, the implications for policy, and the limitations of this study will also be discussed.

Developing an In-Depth Understanding of the Female's Homeless Experience

The street versus shelter stories in this sample pointed out an important distinction. The information provided by the females' interviews allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of homelessness experiences by younger females in the K-W region. We now recognize that not all homeless females end up on the streets; some access the shelter system, but do not end up on the streets. Female street youth in this study tended to be homeless over a longer period of time and to dislike shelter living. Some of the differences pointed to the incapacities of the female street youth to adjust to structure, and the difficulty these females

have in making connections with their community and schools, compared to the female shelter youth.

The older females in this study, as compared to the younger females, were more optimistic in their future outlooks, had a special person in their lives and were interested in reestablishing family relationships. These older females were also more likely to use therapeutic and mental health terminology that may reflect their experiences with therapists and counselors.

There are a number of developmental concepts that can be discussed to explain why there are differences between the two types of homelessness stories and between the two age groups of females. As presented earlier in the literature review, Smollar (1999) described four specific characteristics that foster developmental pathways from childhood to adulthood. They were: a sense of industry and competency, a feeling of connectedness to others and society, a sense of control over one's fate in life and a stable sense of identity. The differences that were outlined in the results section above can be discussed in relation to these four characteristics, as well as other developmental concepts such as self-esteem. Also, I will discuss the structure and interpretation of the homelessness stories as told by the two different age groups as a way to help understand the differences that emerged.

A sense of industry and competency. The majority of homeless female youth in this study did not have opportunities to engage in positive activities within their home, school and community to help them develop a sense of industry and competency, as do adolescents who may be living in a more positive environment. The family backgrounds of these female youth were usually very complex, with multiple problems that have always been there. Kariel (1993, p.57) concluded that all the participants he interviewed came from "*extremely disturbed,*

dysfunctional homes.” As well, van der Ploeg and Scholte (1993) stated that the negative characteristics of “rejection, neglect and aggressive control” are often a part of the youth’s family background. Also, many of these families are dealing with unmanageable crises.

Homeless youth, as Smollar (1999) suggested, do develop a sense of industry and competency. However, they do so by engaging in illegal activities such as shoplifting. They also receive recognition from other homeless individuals on the streets regarding their survival strategies. Therefore, many of the female youth who had been on the streets probably did not develop a positive sense of industry and competency. The female street youth in particular were faced with many family crises and conflicts, had negative school experiences and were not involved in positive community activities. The female street youth, perhaps due to their more dysfunctional homes, were probably more likely than shelter youth to learn coercive, deviant and abusive behaviors, in turn leading them to seek out familiar settings and groups of peers who displayed these similar behaviors and then to receive recognition from other homeless individuals for these acts (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck & Cauce, 2001). These street youth were more likely than shelter youth to engage in various risky behaviors (e.g., drugs). These deviant behaviors also spilled over to other parts of their lives such as school, which may have led to many of the street youth having more negative school experiences than the shelter youth.

A feeling of connectedness to others. The majority of homeless female youth in this study did not have the presence of positive adults in their lives who could provide them with emotional and social support to help promote a feeling of connectedness to others and society. Adolescents who do have positive adult interactions develop a feeling of connectedness to others. The females in this study, during and before their homeless experience(s), did not have

supportive and caring parents or positive peer influences, and some of them (especially the street youth) could not identify with a special person in their lives who could be a potential mentor. This lack of positive and supportive relationships in their lives certainly hinders their ability to feel connected to others. Many of these females appeared to feel alienated from others and society.

The pressures on today's families have led to family breakdowns. Many of the female street youth, particularly, grew up in single parent households or blended families. Single moms having to meet financial responsibilities on their own and raise children at the same time can be very stressed. Blended families are becoming more common in our society, often than traditional family forms (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993). Having to deal with new family members and step-parents can be an overwhelming experience for some youth, who may already feel abandoned by their parents' choice to get a divorce. Knowing their father, and having contact with him, can be very important, especially during the adolescent years when identity issues are so important. Many of the street youth in particular did not have the opportunity to know who their biological father was, and if they knew him, there was minimal contact. In a literature review by Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan and Anderson (1989), they concluded that after a marriage break up, children do want to maintain positive contact with their parents. Maintaining this contact can be an important factor in the child's ability to adjust to family and life transitions. The females in the shelter group all knew who their fathers were and some had contact with their fathers, therefore having more connections with their families and perhaps helping them to deal with their homelessness.

Interestingly, the younger females and the street youth did talk more about having a close

sibling relationship and the younger females about having a close and supportive friend. This probably reflects their feelings of wanting to remain connected. Most of the younger group remain hopeful for a reconciliation with their families, and sibling relationships can help that hope. Also, in leaving home, many of the younger group developed a sense of connectedness to other youth who were homeless. These youth provided them with security, comfort, acceptance and understanding previously lacking at home. The older females did not exhibit these connections to their siblings or street peers. These females being older and now away from their homeless experience(s) have had time to deal with their feelings regarding their families. They realize that it will take time to rebuild a relationship with their family or they have cut off all ties with their family members. Also, most of these older females have found other positive and supportive people in their lives who have helped them to develop a sense of connectedness to others.

The older age group also has had time to deal with their feelings of wanting to be loved by their family, and may consider it healthier to remain somewhat distant from their families in order to make their transition from homelessness to greater independence. The younger age group probably still wants to be connected to their families and to feel loved, and it seemed that the feelings they described about siblings were an expression of this.

The older females also had more time to think about their futures and to build support networks to help them achieve their plans, so that the steps could be articulated better. Also, they would have had time during their transition from homelessness to think about the people in their lives who have been there for them. In contrast, the younger age group of females is still in the midst of their homeless experience(s). They are probably feeling hopeless and lonely, unable to

realize that there are supports available and there are people who care. As Leanne from the older age group said, you have to be careful not to *"burn your bridges,"* but take advantage of them when they come along, because the door for making changes may shut and never reopen again. The older age group is also at a point in their lives where they know more clearly who their "real" friends are. Interestingly, several females in the older age group recalled being bullied quite often by their peers, which made for unpleasant school experiences. No females in the younger age group shared this sort of information, although due to their negative school experiences, one would suspect that bullies were also present. However, because of the personal experience of this older group, or them hearing about the incidences of bullying portrayed by the media, the older females were able to think of their negative peer interactions as bullying encounters. As well, the younger females were more likely to express a negative attitude towards their teachers than the older sample. They were unable to see these teachers as resources to help them, because of the unsupportive nature the teachers would display to the youth, for example, making bets on who would come to class and making prejudiced comments.

A sense of control over one's fate in life. Many of these female youth perhaps left their homes thinking that they could have control over the fate of their lives by being on their own. Adolescents who live in a household where their parents provide consistent reactions to a child's behavior, either positive or negative, develop a sense of control over their lives because they learn that their behavior is related to particular responses. In contrast, many females in this study, due to the disruptive households in which they grew up, probably received inconsistent responses from their parents, therefore developing a sense of helplessness. The majority of the female street youth, in particular, did not have a bright outlook regarding their future. As well,

their plans for the future were also very vague. They may feel helpless regarding trying to change their present situation. The shelter youth seem to have more of a sense of control over their present homelessness, realizing that it is only a temporary situation. As well, the street youths' ability in only being able to think about their day to day living and not about the future, may be what Kariel (1993) referred to as a "*survival mode*," where the youth only concern themselves with living day by day, without any thoughts for the future. In contrast, shelter youth have resource people available to help set goals, and to develop a concrete action plan for their future. Without this type of guidance and support, street youth do indeed seem to fall into this "*survival mode*." Melanie's advice to other homeless females was, "*Go to Argus House. They will help you with future planning, career goals.....If you need to access their services they are always there for you.*"

A sense of identity. All of the above developmental characteristics contribute to the development of a "positive" sense of identity (Smollar, 1999). The females in this study, particularly the younger age group of females, would have a sense of identity based on their street survival and feeling connected to other homeless youth. Smollar (1999) stated that this sense of identity would not lead to a productive adulthood. Erikson (1963) would say that these females have "identity diffusion" status, or perhaps a "negative" identity. Also, if these younger females do not deal with the challenges of the identity crisis successfully, they will develop an incomplete sense of self. Many of the quotes above demonstrate the fragile nature of this sense in the younger sample. The older females during their pathways out of homelessness have been dealing with the challenges of the identity crisis. They are finally developing a "positive" sense of identity. Several of these formerly-homeless females commented on their growing sense of

confidence and self-esteem, as indicated above. The formation of this identity will provide them with information about who they are and their direction in life.

Jaffe (1998) stated that a balance of risk and protective factors determines coping ability. The younger females in this study have many more risk factors present in their lives than protective factors. These females do not have good relationships with supportive parents, they do not seek help from other caring adults and they do not have a supportive school environment. Therefore, they may be predisposed to develop ineffective and negative coping strategies to deal with the stressors in their lives.

Interestingly, the older group of female youth spoke more often about experiencing mental health issues such as depression, self-abuse and suicide. They were able to articulate this information and used this type of terminology. Due to the descriptions provided by the younger age group regarding their backgrounds, one can presume that mental issues were also present in this group, but they were not discussed in these terms. Kennedy (1991) found that, due to their traumatic home lives and the stressors that are present on the streets, the group of homeless youth in his study were at risk for emotional and psychological problems. Cauce, Paradise, Ginzler, Embry, Morgan, Lohr and Theofelis (2000) found that the homeless female youth in their study were more likely to meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder than were males. Also, major depression was more common for females than males. In turn, females reported that they had attempted suicide in the past more often than males. For whatever reasons, personal experiences or therapy, the older sample in this study was more able to talk about these problems as distinct experiences that had “happened to” them. This may have helped to rehabilitate their feelings about their selves and their sense of self-esteem..

Jaffe (1998, p.194) stated that “self-esteem is how we feel about who we think we are.” The younger females in this present study have low self-esteem. They feel depressed, insecure, and inadequate, they have doubts about the future, and have unrealistic expectations. Many of these females have parents who accept them only conditionally, at best, and they probably do not receive positive feedback from others regarding their ability and appearance and are unable to adjust socially and emotionally. Supportive child rearing, parent affection and healthy family relationships are important in developing positive self-esteem. When these are not available, other central relationships may provide an alternative pathway to health, as with the females in the older sample here, who reported such connections with special others were important for them in moving out of homelessness.

Summary. Homelessness is a very complex issue that can take many forms, as discovered in this study. Youth can be kicked out of their homes, abandoned by their parents or they may choose to leave on their own. Whether they chose to go to the streets seemed to depend in part on the youths’ resourcefulness and ability to seek out community and social supports. Family and friends may also help the youth find alternative living arrangements. Therefore, we have youth that only accessed shelters and youth who got to the streets. These street youth face a number of dangers on the streets and do seem to switch to “*a survival mode.*” They may lack a special person in their lives who could provide them with guidance and support. Also, their schooling was not a positive experience. Again, we think about the capabilities of these female youth to adjust to structure, and the difficulty these females seemed to have in making connections with their community and schools, compared to the shelter sample.

A number of questions for future research can be asked regarding these two types of

homelessness stories. Do these street youth, as compared to shelter youth, more often come from multi-problem families that cannot provide the emotional support and guidance that their children need? Once on the streets, do these youth become entrenched into the street life, and therefore find it more difficult to get off the streets? Do shelter youth feel more connected to their communities and schools? Do shelter youth have more positive people and experiences in their lives? Both street and shelter youth have similar childhood backgrounds, but why do some youth go to the streets and others manage not to?

Whether or not the younger, currently homeless female youth will soon be on a pathway out of homelessness will certainly depend on their abilities to start connecting with others. These connections are important for them in terms of them being able to start thinking about a brighter future, to start making amends with their families or regulating family ties. It certainly would be interesting to interview these younger females a year from now to see if their interpretation of their homelessness experiences has changed. Would their stories be more structured? Have they reflected on their homeless experiences? Do they feel like they are still the victims? Hopefully, the therapeutic effects of story telling will provide a start for them to make positive changes in their lives.

Paradise, Cauce, Ginzler, Wert, Wruck and Brooker (2001, pp.167&168) examined youth homelessness from both a social learning and attachment perspective. They provide a clear summary of what was discussed in this section:

“It seems clear that homeless and runaway youth, who have often been exposed to inconsistent, hostile, and punitive parenting during their first several years in life, are likely to lack the sort of social skills necessary to navigate the complex world of

adolescent peer interaction. Without a developed and healthy sense of self and ability to see oneself as worthy of love and help, a young person may lash out or withdraw from others, or alternately become too quick to bond with others and become indiscriminate in their relationships. In this way, lessons that are learned at home are then re-enacted in the larger world.”

The structure and interpretation of stories. Another important developmental difference was reflected in the structure of stories told. It is important to comment on the two different age groups in relation to how they told their stories. The older females’ stories were definitely easier for me to follow during the interview process. The younger females’ stories were less structured. They just seemed to tell their story in one big breath, from one point in time to another. I would assume that the older females have told their stories quite a few times, especially when they were trying to find their pathway out of homelessness. They may have felt more of a sense of control in telling me their stories and felt less of a victim, selecting what they thought would be helpful for my thesis. The maturity of the older females as compared to the younger ones is also relevant here. The older females had more time to reflect on their homeless experience(s), and therefore could make more sense of their homeless situation. Being able to reflect on one’s homeless experiences, build support networks and think concretely about the future are important points along the pathway out of homelessness. However, telling their stories was also probably therapeutic for both age groups and was empowering for everyone.

Identifying and Linking the Individual, Family, School and Structural Factors That Are Critical for Female Adolescent Homelessness in the K-W Region

As stated earlier in the literature review, previous researchers have tried to understand the

causes of homelessness by focusing on individual and person-centered factors such as physical, psychological or psychiatric characteristics. However, researchers today, such as Bogenschneider (1996), are recognizing the importance of identifying risk factors at multiple levels: individual (gender, maltreatment and abuse and neglect), group (lack of family, peer and school support) and community and society (lack of income and lack of employment). Bogenschneider (1996) proposed an ecological risk/protective theoretical framework for identifying these factors at multiple levels. In this section, I will highlight a number of risk factors at multiple levels that emerged generally from all the females' stories of homelessness. Many of these points cover issues that were similar in stories told by each of the groups discussed above.

Individual risk factors. Drug abuse, delinquency, legal troubles, school failure and underachievement, and personality traits, such as low self-esteem and ineffective coping skills, are the individual risk factors for female youth homelessness most notable in this study. The majority of these females were experimenting with drugs. Ethel's mom found drugs in her room on two occasions, and Betty, Amy, Gina, Heidi, Jenny and Irene started hanging out with friends who were involved with drugs. Amy, Betty, Irene, Cathy, Donna, and Melanie had encounters with the law. As well, the majority of the females were experiencing difficulties in school before they became homeless. Also, their low self-esteem and ineffective coping skills doubtless made them more vulnerable to these negative influences.

Mental illnesses, such as depression, self-abuse and suicidal tendencies, were also a problem for a number of these female youth. However, as noted, females in the older sample were able to articulate this type of information more clearly and used this type of terminology more than did females in the younger sample. For females in the younger sample, mental illness

was more hidden, so it was only assumed that they were experiencing these types of issues due to their backgrounds and descriptions of experiences. As well, the females in the older sample were more open about their experiences with maltreatment and neglect than females in the younger sample. Some of these youth, such as Donna and Betty, had spent time in a juvenile justice facility. Irene spent some time in a psychiatric hospital. Also, Irene and Leanne had stayed in foster homes. It was difficult to determine if some of these females came from families of lower socioeconomic status because I did not systematically ask about this. Betty and Amy were the only two females to mention that there was not enough money and that their mothers were receiving social assistance.

All of the risk factors stated above increase the likelihood of a female youth experiencing homelessness. Disruptive and delinquent behaviors may lead to a youth being kicked out of her home, or to being taken away by the appropriate authorities. Melanie spoke about hanging out at a friend's house for extended periods of time, and not letting her father know where she was. He eventually kicked her out because of this behavior. *"Well, he kicked me out because I had spent too much time there...."* Also, female youth experiencing maltreatment and neglect may choose to leave their homes to escape the violence. Faye spoke about leaving home because of the abuse she experienced. *"I was abused a lot. I have been abused ever since I was little. I can't take it anymore."*

Family - school - peer risk factors. Dysfunctional homes, changing structure of the traditional family, negative school experiences and the lack of a positive social support network of peers, are risk factors that seemed to increase the likelihood of these female youth experiencing homelessness. The majority of these female youth described dysfunctional homes

(e.g., fighting, domestic violence, alcoholism, abuse and neglect). However, dysfunctional families, in and of themselves, are not the cause of homelessness. Timmer, Eitzen and Talley (1994) commented on the fact that many people attribute the causes of youth homelessness to dysfunctional families. They do not take into account the structural factors that play a major role in why these families are experiencing so many hardships and stressors. The authors go into great detail examining the failure of social policy to support families. This point must be kept in mind in thinking about the present interviews.

The majority of these females were from blended families and have or have had step-parents. As well, the majority of these females had negative school experiences, especially the street youth (e.g., skipping school, frequently changing schools and lack of school support). Also, the lack of positive peers and/or a mentor can have a negative influence on the youth. Smollar (1999) suggested that it is important for youth to develop a feeling of connectedness to others. However, many street youth do not connect with adults who will have a positive influence on them. Rather, they connect with adults on the streets who will exploit them and have them involved in criminal activity.

The lack of a supportive and loving home, the lack of positive school experiences and the lack of positive peers/mentors can all increase the chances of a female youth experiencing homelessness. All of these factors were mentioned frequently in the present interviews.

Structural risk factors. The structural risk factors of poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment and the failing system of professional youth care were much more obscure in the females' stories of homelessness here. Maybe they found it difficult to articulate this type of information. However, due to the nature of their stories, these risk factors were perhaps present

to some degree. As stated earlier, two females did mention that there was not enough money in the household. Betty said that she had to steal clothes because her mother would spend her family allowance on other things. Amy said that she lived in an old townhouse community and Melanie mentioned that her father lost his job. McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) stated that family stress and school failure are highly correlated with poverty.

Many of these females came from single-parent households. Therefore, their mothers probably had to work outside of the home. Due to a lack of affordable child care, many of these females were then left to take care of themselves after school, increasing their chances of getting into trouble. Heidi said that, *"She wouldn't be home until five, I got out at noon and I had five hours to do whatever I wanted..."* Robertson (1993) noted that dysfunctional families are at a greater chance of breaking down during economic hardships, due to problems with social assistance, employment and affordable housing.

A number of these females also had been in contact with professional people and agencies, such as youth care workers, Children's Aid workers, psychiatrists, probation officers and counselors at various shelters and drop in centers. However, these female youth still did not get the help they needed and often fell through the cracks. The system of professional youth care is failing because of ineffective outreach and treatment strategies, because the youths' contact with the system is too late, and because of the lack of focus on the importance of a supportive network (van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). As well, the youth do not become empowered to help themselves; they do not have the opportunities to develop effective coping strategies; they are forced to adapt to new environments; they have difficulty attaching to and trusting people; and they learn how to avoid their problems rather than coping with them.

Summary. In trying to identify the risk factors for female youth homelessness, it is important to identify risk factors at all three levels, individual, group and structural. All of these risk factors are linked together, and if youth are experiencing multiple risk factors at all three levels, their chances of becoming homeless are increased. However, once a female youth becomes homeless there is still hope that she can find her pathway out of homelessness.

Identifying the Protective Factors That Were Seen as Fundamental for Females in Overcoming Their Homeless Experience

Five females, who had earlier experienced homelessness, spoke about what helped them to overcome and find their pathway out of homelessness. Each female told her own unique story about how she overcame her homeless experience; however, each of their stories had one thing in common. Each female spoke about caring and supportive relationships they had formed during their homeless experiences. These relationships were typically with professional people they met during their encounters at various shelters and drop-in centers. Irene, for example, even considered her worker from Family and Children's Services and a police officer as positive people who had helped her. Argus House was a positive resource for Kate, Melanie and Leanne. Leanne said she finally realized that there were people who actually cared and that she was not alone. The staff helped them to deal with their emotional pain and to develop independent living skills.

In order to accept this help and find their pathway out of homelessness, each female spoke about a type of realization she had come to on her own. For example, Irene spoke about how she wanted her baby to have a good life, and Jenny wanted to "make something" of herself. Some of the females referred to this point in their lives as when their "growing stage" began. It

was also important for them to learn how to love and respect themselves. The supportive relationships these females had formed played a role in helping them to learn how to love and respect themselves. Irene spoke about a woman she met during her transition out of homelessness, who had helped her the most in terms of showing her how to love herself.

Shane (1996) interviewed adults who had experienced homelessness as youth, and found that they identified someone in their youth who cared about them and whom they cared about, as helping them to overcome their homelessness. Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis and Nackerud (2000) interviewed formerly runaway and homeless young people. Their interview results revealed information regarding who provided help, the types of help provided, conditions that facilitated acceptance of help, and advice to helping professionals. The young people named family members, friends and professionals as helpers. They said that they provided help with caring, setting boundaries and holding the youth accountable, concrete assistance, and professional intervention. They also stated two conditions that must be present in order for youth to accept help, including perceiving the helper as trustworthy and being ready to accept the help. They said that professionals should be there for them and listen to them, try to put themselves in the youth's shoes, develop meaningful and personal relationships instead of rigid helper-client boundaries, and not feel sorry for the youth.

The female youth in the present study named mainly professional people who had helped them. They did not name family members or friends. For many of these female youth, contact with their families during their homeless experience was minimal. Therefore, family relationships were not maintained and they could not be of much help. These female youth spoke very negatively about their family members, especially their mothers. There was little mention of

other family members who may have been there for support, for example, grandmothers. Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis and Nackerud (2000) said that it may be best for some youth to have some distance from their families, because they are an obstacle for them in trying to turn their lives around.

The female youth in this study stated that their helpers were there for them and listened to them. The helpers also provided them with caring, concrete assistance and professional intervention. However, Jenny said that she would be frustrated when counselors would say, "oh, I know what you are going through," and they had never been homeless. *"There are so many counsellors out there, who are like 'Oh, I know what you mean' and you are like 'no, you don't.' 'Have you ever been beat up?' They are like 'no'. 'Have you ever been raped?' 'No.' 'Have you ever been on the streets?' 'No.' 'Well, you don't know what I'm talking about.' "*

Jenny commented on the type of help the counsellors provided, *"Even there were a couple of counsellors who had never been on the streets, but they were a world of help to me just because they didn't play games, they weren't like 'oh poor you.' They were like, you do this and this, and this, you will get off the streets. If you don't, then you know. They said, 'ok, here is your choices' and they were nice. They helped you out when they could. Took you for lunch or coffee, you know, bought you groceries."* For these female youth, stable and supportive relationships seemed to be what they drew on in order to help them find a pathway out of homelessness. These stable and supportive relationships probably helped them come to terms with all the pain they had been carrying around with them and helped them to rebuild their "damaged" selves.

Another study by Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams and Nackerud (2000) also found that the young people they interviewed spoke about personal strengths and resources. They said that

they had to learn about themselves, in terms of the development of self-confidence and self-love, and learn both the importance of taking care of oneself and how to do so. They also spoke about the difficult situations they went through which helped them to realize what they wanted in life. This was also similar for the female youth in the present study.

From this study, then, two primary factors seemed to be important for female youth in finding their pathway out of homelessness. They included having supportive and caring relationships, and learning about themselves. The females did not always clearly articulate this factor, but learning from their difficult experiences probably also played a part in their transition. As the females learned how to love and respect themselves, they were able to learn better ways to take care of themselves with the help of supportive relationships. In fact, these two things were closely intertwined, as some of the quotes suggest. Feeling cared for and respected by important others is no doubt central to self-respect.

Ecological Theory and Youth Homelessness

As explained earlier in the theoretical section, the ecological theory should be taken into account when one is trying to understand the causes and effects of youth homelessness. As stated earlier by Toro et al. (1991), psychological or social events are a result of the interaction of people and the environment. Earlier the four fundamental principles of the ecological theory developed by Kelly (1966), along with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) four-level ecological model of environmental factors, were explained and applied to youth homelessness. Now I will discuss ecological theory in relation to the results that emerged from this study.

Interdependence. This principle states that there are interconnections among the various contexts in which an individual resides, and that movement in one context induces change in

other contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Levine & Perkins, 1997). In Bronfenbrenner's model, the microsystem describes the effect of an immediate setting on the homeless youth themselves. In this study, the female youth's immediate family, peers and school environment generally increased the likelihood of the female youth experiencing homelessness. There were family conflicts, violence and abuse in their homes. Parents were unsupportive, neglectful and often emotionally deprived their children. Their peers were not a positive influence. They were involved in risky behaviors and for some, there were bullies. As well, all of these youth had negative school experiences. They were typically involved in skipping school, changing schools, displaying disruptive behavior and underachieving, although these factors were more common in the street youth than the shelter youth overall. All of these negative situations undoubtedly had effects on the females' development. The females' self-esteem and confidence were low, there was a lack of a sense of belonging and they did not feel connected to their family, school, peers (in many cases) or community. Certainly there was a range of risk factors at this level of the model.

The mesosystem refers to the effects of the connections between the social units within which the youth have immediate interaction. Due to conflicts within the family and their feelings of being outsiders, the females started finding other places to go to feel connected. They started hanging out with the "wrong crowd" of peers, and for some, began staying with older men. Therefore, positive social support networks with relatives or peers started to diminish more, and negative school experiences magnified. Moving farther away emotionally from their families, the females' disruptive and delinquent behavior often contributed to them being kicked out by their family or choosing to leave on their own. A negative spiral could often be traced in the pathway

into homelessness the females described, which reflected these problematic connections.

The exosystem refers to influences from settings that do not directly involve the youth, but have an influence on others within the microsystems, such as legal systems, social services and neighbourhood conditions. Obviously, these families were experiencing a number of hardships, and did not receive the help they needed to achieve family cohesion. Some of the families were involved with Family and Children's Services, the juvenile court system and the mental health system. The youth also accessed a number of different agencies in a fairly uncoordinated fashion. As more youth become homeless each year, there will be a strain on our social system. Extra supports will be needed to tackle youth homelessness. Our neighbourhoods are vulnerable to broken homes and family distress, perhaps particularly those in impoverished areas.

The macrosystem describes the effects of cultural level factors on youth homelessness, such as cultural norms, attitudes and values. The negative attitudes displayed by the media regarding homeless youth, as all deviant and delinquent, may lead others to think that all such youth are hopeless, and that they will be lost for life within the midst of our society. The homeless youth of today will become the homeless adults of tomorrow. In fact, the descriptions of the different life stories regarding homelessness in this present study may help one to understand the complicated nature of homelessness, and to resist stereotyping. There is not only the street story of homelessness, but also the shelter story and the situational, temporary story of homelessness which must be kept clearly in mind.

Cycling of resources. The ecological principle of cycling of resources focuses on developing a "resource perspective." The females who were homeless, and went to the streets,

spoke about how resourceful they had to be in order to survive. However, many of their strategies were dangerous, for example, selling drugs, trading sex for shelter, shoplifting and sleeping in parks and in abandoned buildings. It should be noted, though, that the shelter system which the females accessed, tried to focus on the youth's individual strengths and competencies, and also attempted to link youth to other resources available in the community.

Adaptation. In applying the adaptation principle to youth homelessness, one can consider how changes in social factors (e.g., family structure and peer networks) and structural factors (e.g., poverty and lack of employment) influence the extent of youth homelessness. In this study, a lot of the youth were from single-parent households. The socioeconomic demands placed upon this family category, in particular, can be very overwhelming, increasing the amount of stress and tension in the home. As well, many of these youth had to adapt to being part of a blended family. Many of these females did not have a supportive network to help them to deal with these stressors, therefore increasing their chances of becoming homeless.

Succession. Applying the succession principle to youth homelessness, we need to understand how individual and structural factors in the past at multiple levels have resulted in youth becoming homeless. In trying to understand female homelessness, two different stories of homelessness emerged, a shelter story and a street story. We need to investigate this further, to try and understand why it is so that some females go to the streets. Why are these females apparently less able to utilize the shelter system for any length of time? Why do these youth seem to have much more difficulty in connecting with others in their school and community? Are we reaching and serving all street youth in the best possible way? As stated earlier by Toro et al. (1991), no particular service, resource or support network is appropriate for all homeless people.

“Different strokes, for different folks.” The differences between these two groups in the present study speak very directly to this point.

O’Reilly-Fleming (1993) suggested that many teen shelters have a short-term stay policy, usually two weeks, and then teens have to find another place to stay. Here in the K-W region, some teen shelters have the same policy, whereas others focus on teaching independent living skills for the youth. The youth entering this type of shelter must be committed to making a positive change for themselves in order to take advantage of the supports that are offered to them. However, placing these youth in a general women’s shelter may pose some complications to the youth. Here the situation is a little different, as youth are mixed in with women experiencing homelessness for a variety of reasons. O’Reilly-Fleming (1993, p.73) noted that “some of these shelters mix women who have minor to severe forms of mental illness, drug, alcohol and hygiene problems with women who are quite ‘normal’.” One may wonder if this type of living arrangement is a positive one for the youth. Will the female youths’ needs be met in this type of shelter arrangement or will they return to the streets? Will they feel as though there is no hope for them, and that they too will become a permanent example of homelessness?

Gender

Four consequences of youth homelessness for females in particular were outlined and discussed in the literature review. They were: runaway behavior, victimization and maltreatment, prostitution and pregnancy. I will briefly discuss each of these in relation to the current study.

Runaways. The females in this study chose to leave their homes on their own and were also kicked out, mainly by their mothers or step-mothers. The majority of the females were not runaways, as previous research has sometimes labeled homeless female youth in particular.

However, consistent with previous research, the females were found to follow a pattern of running back and forth between home, friends, streets and shelters. Also, some of the female youth in this study were found to suffer from mental health problems.

Victimization and maltreatment. Very few females talked about being victimized on the streets. Whitbeck and Simons (1990) stated that youth were more vulnerable on the streets if they had been victimized at home. However, this was either not the case for these females, or they may have chosen not to share this type of information with me. Some females in this study spoke about being physically and emotionally abused. However, a literature review carried out by van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997) found that homeless girls were significantly more often victims of abuse, especially sexual abuse. Again, these female youth did not share this type of information with me.

Prostitution. Baxter (1991) stated that female street youth were more likely than males to be prostitutes and to be unemployed, but less likely to abuse drugs and to be youth offenders. This study found none of the female street youth referred to themselves as prostitutes. When I asked Amy if she had ever practiced prostitution, she said, "*No, god, no.*" However, she said that she "*came on*" to this guy once because she needed a place to stay. As well, Irene spoke about having sex with older men who were letting her stay at their apartment. But she did not call it prostitution. Is it then a means of survival, "*survival sex?*" All of the female street youth in this study were found to abuse drugs, and some were youth offenders.

Pregnancy. Greene and Ringwalt (1998) stated that homeless adolescents are at a greater risk of becoming pregnant because they engage in high risk sexual behaviors. Two females thought they might have been pregnant, one had been pregnant as a result of being raped at age

14, but she miscarried, and the other two had become pregnant because they did not practice safe sex. For another, her pregnancy was why she did not return home, based on her parents' rejection.

More research needs to be carried out to develop a more in-depth understanding of female youth homelessness. A study comparing male and female homeless youth would certainly add to this knowledge in interesting ways. In what ways would male stories of homelessness be different than those of the females in this present study? Would there be a "street story" and a "shelter story"? What kinds of differences would there be between presently and formerly homeless male youth regarding their homeless experiences? Although this is speculation, males may be kicked out of their homes more than females, and they may not go back and forth between their homes, the streets and shelters as often as females. Perhaps males may maintain less contact with their families and they may describe their childhood as tough. The stress on relationships in the turning point episodes of the older sample in this study might also have been somewhat less dramatic for males.

Limitations of This Qualitative Study

Before suggesting areas for policy implications and future research, there needs to be a discussion regarding the limitations of this study. First, due to the exploratory nature of this study and the small sample size, one cannot generalize these results to any population of homeless female youth. Kurtz et al. (2000, p.400) suggested that, "the generalizability of qualitative research findings must be determined by the reader and considered in relation to situations in which they might apply the knowledge."

Second, the female youth interviewed were from only two settings within the K-W

region. R.O.O.F. is a youth drop-in center, where they maintain the health and safety of street youth and provide referrals for youth to other community services. They also provide various types of programs that help youth to escape the cycle of homelessness and to reintegrate back into the community. The other setting, Argus House, is a shelter for female youth. Argus House provides an independent living skills program that helps youth find permanent housing or reunite with their families. Hutz and Koller (1999) stated that it is difficult for a researcher to know how many homeless youth are present in other settings around the city. There are definitely many more valuable stories to be told by female youth from other types of settings within the region that can certainly be added to the present research findings.

Third, we do not know how reliable the interview data of this study are. Hutz and Koller (1999) said that many researchers question the data that homeless youth provide, because of the influences of the youth's "street wisdom." Homeless youth may like to tell stories that will frighten, impress or elicit pity from the researcher. However, if "the researcher knows their reality, understands their attitudes, and is indeed paying attention to what they are saying, it becomes possible to collect truthful and reliable data" (Hutz & Koller, p.63). By following these recommendations during my interviews, I feel that the interview information I obtained was generally reliable. As well, the shelter staff would provide me with guidance concerning who would be a reliable person to talk to.

Fourth, each encounter with the female youth was limited to a single interview, and no long-term relationship was formed. Therefore, the youth may not have felt comfortable in sharing certain details of their homeless stories with me. Additional interviews might have produced more information regarding their homeless stories because a better rapport would have

been able to be established over a longer period of time.

Fifth, the females interviewed in the older age group were chosen by staff members at R.O.O.F. and Argus House. Therefore, the staff were the ones who determined in their minds what they considered to be a successful transition out of homelessness. In turn, they chose females that they felt had made this transition “successfully.” Obviously, others might have had different views and recommended different examples for this more mature group.

Policy Implications and Future Research

One implication of the findings that emerged from this study is that there needs to be a program designed for female street youth who have difficulty following the structure of shelter living. Typically the interventions designed for street youth have been drop-in centers and out reach programs. Female street youth mainly use the shelter system as a temporary living arrangement until they can find some other place to go, or until they go back onto the streets. Rotheram-Borus (1991) stated that youths’ cycling in and out of shelters over time brings about increased tolerance for structure. Shelter staff anticipate these cycles and see their roles as helping youth to become tolerant of structure and rules over time. While recognizing this point, the present study clearly highlights the risks of such cycling back onto the streets, and the need to prevent this as much as possible.

Kurtz et al. (2000, p. 400) suggested that programs designed for homeless youth need “to be flexible and person-centered.” Formerly homeless youth in their study reported that professional help that had the greatest impact included programs that “balanced structure with flexibility, rules with understanding, and concern for program integrity and consistency with recognition that the development and healing of an individual youth follows a unique path.”

The lack of appropriate funding is also another obstacle homeless youth face in obtaining the services they need. For example, the majority of female youth in this study had substance abuse problems. However, there are few appropriately designed programs to address the substance abuse problems of these youth. Further research with female street youth would determine if we are indeed serving this population in the best possible manner.

A second implication I would suggest is to establish a service network of formal and informal providers, to work together in addressing the needs of homeless youth. As well, public agencies need to collaborate with community-based agencies. However, this informal network should also include presently and formerly homeless youth and their families. By having the youth involved, we are giving them the opportunity to have their voices heard and respected. These youth need to be empowered. We have to focus on their personal strengths and resources instead of focusing on their negative characteristics. Lofquist (1993), as cited in Kurtz et al. (2000), commented that homeless youth need to be regarded as resources rather than clients of services. The stories of the older youth in the present study highlight particularly well the resources and ideas that these formerly homeless individuals can provide for their younger peers.

Third, we need to provide preventive services to families who are experiencing crises and hardships. We need to reach out to these families before the risk factors of youth homelessness outweigh the protective factors. These families need to feel connected to each other, to their schools and to their communities. Only when these connections are made and strengthened will the numbers of homeless youth decline. Enabling some of the youth to maintain these connections, even in a tenuous state, seemed to help protect these homeless individuals from the worst risks of the streets in the present study.

Fourth, there are also clinical implications for counselors and therapists working with this population of youth. Professionals should try to develop meaningful and personal relationships with the youth. They should not feel sorry for the youth, but try and really listen to what the youth are saying. As Jenny stated earlier, counselors should not say, “ ‘Oh, I know what it is like,’ ” when they have not actually experienced the hardships of homelessness. Also, Jenny suggested, counselors need to be honest and up front with youth, meaning to tell them what they have to do to get out of homelessness and do not talk in circles and make promises you cannot keep.

This study only touched on a small portion of the valuable knowledge there is available from formerly homeless youth regarding their transition from homelessness. Agency providers can learn a great deal from these youth. However, finding these youth can be a difficult task. As well, longitudinal studies following presently homeless youth during the course of their homeless experience would produce very valuable information that would not be as retrospective in nature as the present study had to be.

Reflections

I would like to briefly reflect on how I felt about carrying out this thesis. Interviewing these females has given me a whole new perspective on youth homelessness. When I was writing my proposal I didn't realize that homelessness was quite as complicated as it turned out to be. Each female had her own story to tell and each story was unique to that female. I enjoyed hearing their stories. For some, they were interested in what I was doing at school and they wanted to help me out. For others, I think the Tim Horton vouchers were more of an incentive. However, once they started talking, the majority of the females were quite comfortable in

sharing their stories. Also, it was much more difficult getting the sample of older females. I had to rely more on the staff in recruiting these females.

Hearing the females tell stories of abusive childhoods, the constant fighting and arguing with their mothers, the broken homes and the many crises they had to deal with made me feel like I had lived a sheltered life. Yes, we all go through the normal turmoil of adolescence, but these females were being kicked out of their homes, being abandoned by their mothers and actually choosing to leave on their own. Does it really get that bad? Is there no hope? I do feel sorry for these females in not being able to have a “normal adolescence,” where all you have to worry about is the latest fashions for the school year, not where am I going to sleep tonight or is mom going to take me back this time?

I didn't realize that there would be these two different types of homelessness stories. The literature I was reading for my thesis did not make this distinction between street stories and shelter stories. However, when I had a few interviews carried out, these two stories started to appear, as well as a number of notable differences between the two age groups.

Another part of me is appalled, that we as adults and caretakers of our children turn a blind eye to these families who are having trouble coping from day to day. What can we do to prevent more youth from becoming homeless? Where has the value of family and community been lost? We need to understand the importance of feeling connected to our families, our schools and our communities in order to address this question, for it is everybody's responsibility.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has provided much knowledge in the area of female youth homelessness. We know that homelessness is a very complicated issue that requires much attention in order to address the needs of each individual homeless youth. These female youth have experienced an array of difficulties during their adolescence, more than the “normal” teenager. The lack of positive parenting, the lack of supportive and caring adults, low self-esteem, inadequate coping skills and a negative sense of identity all have been contributing factors to their homelessness. We must not take a “blaming the victim” approach, but also address the lack of support from our communities and schools. These youth do not feel connected to their families, schools and communities. As adults we raise our children and we also have the responsibility to help them during difficult times. In the school system, how can we better connect with families who need extra support? Programs are needed to connect families, schools and communities. Families need to feel supported, not isolated.

I hope that the information provided by this thesis can be used by service providers to develop an in-depth understanding of homelessness from the adolescent perspective. This information can also be used by service providers to tailor their programs and services to meet the unique needs of the homeless female population and perhaps of particular groups of this population. The possibilities for future research are enormous. Survivors of youth homelessness have so much knowledge to contribute to the area of youth homelessness. Public education and awareness are also necessary, so societal attitudes regarding youth homelessness can begin to change.

Table 1. A Summary of Individual, Family-School and Structural Risk Factors for Youth Homelessness

Individual	Family-School	Structural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ alcohol/drug abuse ◆ mental illness ◆ delinquency ◆ legal troubles ◆ minority status ◆ lower socioeconomic status ◆ school failure and underachievement ◆ personality traits, such as low self-esteem, ineffective coping skills ◆ a history of psychiatric hospitals, juvenile justice facilities and alternative care facilities ◆ gender ◆ maltreatment and neglect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ dysfunctional homes ◆ changing structure of the traditional family ◆ negative school experiences ◆ lack of a positive social support network, ie., peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ poverty ◆ lack of affordable housing ◆ unemployment ◆ deinstitutionalization ◆ failing system of professional youth care

Table 2. Thirty Developmental Assets

External Assets		
<i>Support</i>	<i>Boundaries</i>	<i>Structured Time Use</i>
1. Family support 2. Parent(s) as social resources 3. Parent communication 4. Other adult resources 5. Other adult communication 6. Parent involvement in school 7. Positive school climate	8. Parental standards 9. Parental discipline 10. Parental monitoring 11. Time at home 12. Positive peer influences	13. Involved in music 14. Involved in school extracurricular activities 15. Involved in community organizations or activities 16. Involved in a religious congregation

Internal Assets		
<i>Educational Commitment</i>	<i>Positive Values</i>	<i>Social Competencies</i>
17. Achievement motivation 18. Educational aspiration 19. School performance 20. Homework	21. Values helping people 22. Concerned about world hunger 23. Care about other people's feelings 24. Values sexual restraint	25. Assertiveness skills 26. Decision-making skills 27. Friendship-making skills 28. Planning skills 29. Self-esteem 30. Positive view of personal future

(From Benson (1993) cited in RespecTeen, 1994)

Table 3. Ecological Risk and Protective Processes That Influence Youth Development

<i>Level</i>	<i>Risk Processes</i>	<i>Protective Processes</i>
Individual	Antisocial behaviour Alienation or rebelliousness Early initiation	Well-developed problem-solving skills and intellectual abilities Self-esteem, self-efficiency, and personal responsibility Religious commitment
Family	Poor parental monitoring Distant, uninvolved, and inconsistent parenting Unclear family rules, expectations, and rewards	Close relationship with at least one person
Peer	Association with peers engaged in risk behaviours	Close friend
School	School transitions Academic failure Low commitment to school	Positive school experiences
Work setting	Long work hours	
Community	Low socioeconomic status Complacent or permissive community laws and norms Low neighbourhood attachment, community disorganization, and high mobility Media influences	Required helpfulness Belonging to a supportive community Bonding to family, school and other social institutions

(From Bogenschneider, 1996)

Table 4. Summary of Data Collection Tools Linked to the Research Objectives

Research Objective	Data Collection Tool
1. To develop an in-depth understanding of the female's homeless experiences.	open-ended, semi-structured interviews with presently and formerly homeless female youth participant observations
2. To identify and link the individual, family and school and structural factors that are critical for female adolescent homelessness in the K-W region.	open-ended, semi-structured interviews with presently and formerly homeless female youth
3. To compare the similarities and differences that may emerge between the two age groups of female youth regarding their homeless experiences, and to identify the protective factors that are seen as fundamental for females in overcoming their homeless experience.	open-ended, semi-structured interviews with presently and formerly homeless female youth

Table 5. Community Psychology Values

Community Values	Definition
Caring and Compassion	Showing empathy and concern for the well-being of others
Human Diversity	Appreciating the inherent worth of others and respecting each person's right to define her or his identity
Self-Determination and Participation	Directing and participating in decisions affecting one's own life
Health	Preventing illness and promoting physical and emotional wellness for the individual and the community
Social Justice	Distributing bargaining power, resources and burdens in society in an equitable manner

(From Nelson, Amio, Prilleltensky & Nickels, 2000)

Table 6. The Differences Between Two Homelessness Stories

	<i>Streets</i>						<i>Shelter</i>						
	Amy	Betty	Gina	Heidi	Irene	Jenny	Cathy	Donna	Ethel	Faye	Leanne	Kate	Melanie
<u>Homelessness</u>													
A Year or More	x	x	x		x	x					x	x	
<u>Individual</u>													
Good and Bad Childhood	x	x						x	x			x	x
Drug Use	x	x	x	x	x	x			x				
Pregnancy	x	x			x			x		x			
Promiscuous	x				x								
Future-Growing Up Bright	x				x		x			x	x	x	
Day by Day		x	x										
No Thoughts				x				x	x				x
Vague Plan	x	x	x	x				x		x			
Special Person - Now			x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x
<u>Family</u>													
Single Parent Households	x	x		x		x						x	
Father Unknown	x		x		x								
No Contact With Father	x	x	x	x		x					x	x	
A Close Sibling	x	x	x	x		x		x	x			x	
<u>Peers</u>													
Bullies												x	x
<u>School</u>													
Negative Attitude	x	x	x	x	x	x						x	
Skip School	x	x	x	x	x			x	x			x	
Dropped out	x		x		x	x		x				x	
Kicked out	x	x											
Supportive Teacher	x			x		x							

Table 7. The Similarities Between Two Homelessness Stories

- **Homeless Experience: Why we left our homes?**
 - How we left our homes?**
 - Living with friends**
 - A pattern of leaving home and going back and leaving again**

- **Individual level: Childhood: Recalling tough times**
 - Involvement in criminal activities**
 - Identifying a special person - Growing up**

- **Family level: Composition of families**
 - A negative mother and daughter relationship**
 - Other unsupportive/negative relationships - Step parents and boyfriends**
 - Maintaining sibling contact during the homeless experience**

- **Peers level: A close and supportive friend**
 - Engaging in risky behaviours with friends**

- **School level: No similarities**

- **Work and community level: Employment not a priority**
 - Involvement in community activities as children**
 - Accessing community resources during homelessness**

Table 8. The Differences Between The Two Age Groups

	<i>Sample One</i>							<i>Sample Two</i>					
	Amy	Betty	Cathy	Donna	Ethel	Faye	Gina	Heidi	Irene	Jenny	Leanne	Kate	Melanie
Childhood													
Good and Bad	x	x		x	x							x	x
Abusive Childhood						x				x	x	x	
Turning Point		x		x	x		x		x				x
Individual													
Crime	x	x	x	x					x				x
Drug Use	x	x			x		x	x	x	x			
Pregnancy	x	x		x		x			x				
Mental Health									x				
Special Person									x	x	x	x	
Growing Up	x			x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Now			x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Future: Bright & Have a Plan			x		x				x	x	x	x	x
Family													
Rein. Patterns		x		x	x								
Love/Hate	x				x		x	x					
Contact	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x			
Mother/Sibling									x	x			x
Rein. Better													
Close To		x			x	x	x	x				x	
Sibling(s)													
Contact with	x			x	x	x	x	x		x		x	
Siblings													
Sibling Abuse										x		x	
Peers													
Close Friend	x	x		x	x					x			
Bullying												x	x
School													
Neg. Teacher	x	x				x		x		x		x	
Attitude													
Supportive	x									x			
Teacher													
Friends Imp.	x	x	x				x						
Concrete Plans					x	x				x	x	x	x
Work/Community													
Employment									x	x	x	x	x

Table 9. The Similarities Between The Two Age Groups

- **Childhood: Recalling tough times**
- **Homeless experience: Why we left our homes?
How we left our homes?
Living with friends
A pattern of leaving home and going back and leaving again**
- **Individual level: Future outlooks - Growing up**
- **Family level: Compositions of families
Family conflicts
A negative mother and daughter relationship
Minimal contact with biological fathers
Other unsupportive/negative relationships - Step parents and boyfriends**
- **Peers level: Engaging in risky behaviours with friends**
- **School level: Negative school attitudes
Skipping school
Dropping out and being kicked out of school**
- **Work and community level: Involvement in community activities as children
Accessing community resources during homelessness**
- **Hopes and fears**
- **Advice to other homeless female youth**

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Appendix A

Interview Guide for Presently Homeless Female Youth

Introduction

Tell me about yourself.

- **Age**
- **Resident of K-W**
- **School - still attending, highest grade completed?**
- **Employment**
- **Duration of homelessness**
- **Currently staying with - friends, relatives, shelter, streets, abandoned building, other?**

Family

Tell me about your family. Describe them.

- **Make-up of family - parent(s), step-parents, adoptive parents, foster care, siblings, other relatives**
- **Type of housing**
- **Family employment**
- **Parents know your whereabouts**

Childhood and Adolescence

Tell me about growing up. What was it like? Describe your childhood and adolescent years.

- **Living in K-W**
- **Family: Environment (safe, happy place, comfortable, depressing, scary, violent?)**
- **Relationship(s) with: parents were they supportive, caring, loving, encouraging, discipline?) siblings and other relatives.**
- **Friends: how many, close peer relationships.**
- **School: Enjoyment or frustration, repeat grade(s), truancy, describe reln. with teachers**
- **Activities: school, community involvement, religion/spirituality**
- **Future: thoughts, goals, ambitions**
- **Yourself: happy, confident, fun, easy-going**
- **Things you loved to do for fun: a special talent**
- **Mentor: a special, supportive and trusting person**

Year Before Left Home

Describe your life the year before you were homeless.

- **Family: environment, relationship(s)**
- **Friends: how many, close, activities**
- **School: attendance, repeat grade, attitude**
- **Yourself: happy, depressed, confused, frightened?**
- **Events: leaving home (abuse, freedom, poor communication, drugs, pregnancy, trouble with the law?)**
- **Family's Reaction**
- **Mentor: a special, supportive and trusting person**
- **Future: goals (bright, scary, confusing?)**

Present Situation

Been away from home for _____, tell me about your homeless experience.

- **First night homeless: Describe this night. Where did you find shelter? Describe your feelings (scared, freedom, independence, sad?), Whom did you meet?**

Describe your typical day.

- **Survival: food, shower, sleep, money? Prostitution: Involved with pimp? Dangers?**
- **Coping strategies: Friends, past-times (art, music, poetry, stories, hang-out, games), drug and/or alcohol uses, how often, type?**

Describe the dangers/risks of being homeless.

- **Victimization: Experienced physical and/or sexual assault and/or raped?**
- **Crime: In trouble with the law? Jail and/or probation?**
- **Health Needs and Risks: Opportunity to see a doctor, prescriptions filled, hospital admitted for (physical or mental) Risks: STD's, HIV, other diseases.**
- **Sexual Activity and Pregnancy: Sexually active, practice safe sex, how many partners? Resulted in pregnancy? Care during pregnancy, how many pregnancies, pregnancy outcome(s), where is the child, parents knowledge of pregnancy, father of child known?**
- **Birth Control: Use or not, type, consistently, availability.**

Describe relationships with family and friends.

- **Friends: Who are they? Other homeless youth and adults. Help each other?**
- **Family: Know your whereabouts? Still, connected? Contact with other relatives, siblings, female relative or friend? Possible to return home?**

How many times experienced homelessness?

- **Reasons for going back?**
- **Family's Reaction?**
- **Reasons for leaving again?**

Services**Describe services and resources used in the past and currently using?**

- **Effective/Ineffective?**
- **Likes/Dislikes?**
- **Awareness of services/resources: Through friends, relatives, advertisements, by chance, referred?**
- **Service(s) needed?**

Outlook**Five years from now where do you see yourself?**

- **Future: bright or dull?**
- **Goals/ambitions? (School/employment)**

Additional Questions:

- **Public attitude: Negative attitude, recognize you or turn away and ignore. Are they helpful?**
- **What is one word you can use to describe your experience? From a female's perspective: Special considerations, unique issues to be addressed, attitude towards other females who are homeless?**
- **Name four people, in your life, who have been your mentors.**
- **Greatest hope?**
- **Greatest fear?**
- **At this very moment what do you need the most?**

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Formerly Homeless Female Youth

Introduction

Tell me about yourself.

- Age
- Resident of K-W
- Married/children
- School
- Employed

Childhood and Adolescence

Tell me about growing up. What was it like? Describe your childhood and adolescent years.

- Make-up of family - parent(s), step-parents, adoptive parents, foster care, siblings, other relatives
- Type of housing
- Family employment
- Living in K-W
- Family: Environment (safe, happy place, comfortable, depressing, scary, violent?)
- Relationship(s) with: parents were they supportive, caring, loving, encouraging, discipline?) siblings and other relatives.
- Friends: how many, close peer relationships.
- School: Enjoyment or frustration, repeat grade(s), truancy, describe reln. with teachers
- Activities: school, community involvement, religion/spirituality
- Future: thoughts, goals, ambitions
- Yourself: happy, confident, fun, easy-going
- Things you loved to do for fun: a special talent
- Mentor: a special, supportive and trusting person

Year Before Left Home

Describe your life the year before you were homeless.

- Family: environment, relationship(s)

- **Friends: how many, close, activities**
- **School: attendance, repeat grade, attitude**
- **Yourself: happy, depressed, confused, frightened?**
- **Events: leaving home (abuse, freedom, poor communication, drugs, pregnancy, trouble with the law?)**
- **Family's Reaction**
- **Mentor: a special, supportive and trusting person**
- **Future: goals (bright, scary, confusing?)**

The Homeless Experience

- **First night homeless: Describe this night. Where did you find shelter? Describe your feelings (scared, freedom, independence, sad?), Whom did you meet?**

Describe your typical day.

- **Survival: food, shower, sleep, money? Prostitution: Involved with pimp? Dangers?**
- **Coping strategies: Friends, past-times (art, music, poetry, stories, hang-out, games), drug and/or alcohol uses, how often, type?**

Describe the dangers/risks of being homeless.

- **Victimization: Experienced physical and/or sexual assault and/or raped?**
Crime: In trouble with the law? Jail and/or probation?
- **Health Needs and Risks: Opportunity to see a doctor, prescriptions filled, hospital admitted for (physical or mental) Risks: STD's, HIV, other diseases.**
- **Sexual Activity and Pregnancy: Sexually active, practice safe sex, how many partners? Resulted in pregnancy? Care during pregnancy, how many pregnancies, pregnancy outcome(s), where is the child, parents knowledge of pregnancy, father of child known?**
- **Birth Control: Use or not, type, consistently, availability.**

Describe relationships with family and friends.

- **Friends: Who are they? Other homeless youth and adults. Help each other?**
- **Family: Know your whereabouts? Still, connected? Contact with other relatives, siblings, female relative or friend? Possible to return home?**

Describe services and resources used while you were homeless?

- **Effective/Ineffective?**
- **Likes/Dislikes?**

- **Awareness of services/resources: Through friends, relatives, advertisements, by chance, referred?**

What was your vision for the future?

- **Where did you see yourself in five years?**
- **Future: bright or dull?**
- **Goals/ambitions? (School/employment)**

How many times did you experience homelessness? Did you go back and forth between being homeless and not being homeless?

- **Reasons for going back?**
- **Family's Reaction?**
- **Reasons for leaving again?**
- **What was longest period of time you were homeless?**

Pathway out of Homelessness

- **How long have you not been homeless?**
- **What helped you to change your life around? Describe this turning point experience. A particular person, family, services/resources, religion/spirituality, a combination of factors?**
- **Describe the steps you took in finding that path out of homelessness? Did you have any connections with your family during this time and what was their reaction?**
- **What were the challenges and frustrations?**
- **Recommendations for females who are presently homeless.**
- **Describe your current situation. How are you doing?**
- **At this very moment what do you need the most? Are you still struggling?**

Additional Questions:

- **What is one word you can use to describe your experience? From a female's perspective: Special considerations, unique issues to be addressed, attitude towards other females who are homeless?**
- **Greatest hope?**
- **Greatest fear?**
- **Name four people, in your life, who have been your mentors.**

Appendix C

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

Information Letter for Presently Homeless Female Youth

Date _____

I (Allison Rice Roberts), am currently a community psychology student at Wilfrid Laurier University. The second year of my program involves carrying out a research project. I am interested in a project in the area of youth homelessness. I would like to hear the life-stories and experiences of homelessness of female youth. More specifically, I would like to try and understand what it is like to be a female and have no stable place to live and what factors may contribute to homelessness for female youth in K-W (e.g., abuse at home, not getting along with parents, and wanting more independence).

Very little research in the area of youth homelessness has focussed on the female adolescent's homeless experience. Homeless people in the K-W area are becoming younger and more often female. However, there has been very little research carried out with young homeless women so far. In the Kitchener-Waterloo area, the number of females occupying emergency shelters such as Mary' Place and Safe Haven is increasing. Also, in 1999, 60% of the homeless youth population in this area was female.

I would like for you to share your story in an interview. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. The interview will last approximately one hour and will take place at a location that is comfortable, private and convenient for you. I would like to ask you questions about your family, your childhood, your health, sexual activities (pregnancy) and what circumstances led to your homelessness. I will also ask you to describe your homeless experiences (such as, where do you find shelter?, how do you survive?, what are the dangers and hazards of being homeless?). Also, I would like to offer you gift certificates from Tim Hortons, as a way to say thank-you for your participation and sharing of personal information.

Youth, in general, tend to be overlooked. By having you involved in this research you will have a chance to share your story and describe your experiences of homelessness. You can also express your ideas and opinions about what services and supports you consider effective. The interview will also give you a chance to talk about what needs are not being met. You can also offer suggestions on how service providers might be able to meet the needs of homeless females.

I hope that after carrying out this research project, the results can be used by service providers to develop a better understanding of homelessness from the adolescent females' perspective. This information can also be used by service providers to tailor their programs and services to meet the unique needs of homeless females.

I plan to record the interview on audio-tape to help me remember what was discussed. If you would be more comfortable not being recorded please let me know and I will not use the tape-recorder.

Some of these questions may be upsetting for you and therefore you may decide not to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Also, I can direct you to a staff person at the agency for support if you identify any such need. You can stop the interview at any time. You can withdraw your interview information from the study at any point during the research project. If you choose not to take part in the interview, not to answer all the interview questions or to withdraw from the research project, this will have no negative effect on the delivery of services or kind of services that you receive in any way. Also, I will be obtaining written confirmation from the staff to ensure that your involvement in this project will not result in negative behaviour towards you.

Everything you share with me will be kept private and in a locked room away from the research setting. The only other person who may have access to the interview information will be my thesis advisor. However, your name will not be attached to it anywhere. Your interview will be identified by a code number (not your name), and your name will not be associated with any quotes found in any written report.

All information will remain confidential (private) unless there is reason to believe that:

- someone will be seriously harmed by criminal conduct**
- you will attempt to physically harm yourself**
- a minor is or will be subjected to physical or sexual abuse**

Also, if you disclose child abuse to me, I am required by law to report the abuse to Family and Children's Services or The Waterloo Regional Police Service. Also, you should be aware that disclosing information concerning participation in illegal activities also limits confidentiality. I may be summoned or subpoenaed to go to court to testify if police authorities become aware that I have knowledge of any criminal activity which you may have been involved with.

You will be provided with a summary of your interview to check for accuracy, to verify quotes, make changes and provide feedback. You will also be able to get a summary of the interview results. Finally, the interview notes will be destroyed when the research project is finished or if you choose to withdraw your interview data from the project.

If you have any further questions you can feel free to contact Allison Rice Roberts, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710, x 2988 or Dr.Mike Pratt (thesis supervisor) at 884-0710, x 2824, or Dr.Bruce Arai, Chair of Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board, at 884-0710, x 3753.

Thank-You!!!

Appendix D

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

Information Letter for Formerly Homeless Female Youth

Date _____

I (Allison Rice Roberts), am currently a community psychology student at Wilfrid Laurier University. The second year of my program involves carrying out a research project. I am interested in a project in the area of youth homelessness. I would like to hear the life-stories and experiences of homelessness of female youth. More specifically, I would like to try and understand what it is like to be a female and have no stable place to live, what factors contribute to homelessness for female youth in K-W (e.g, abuse at home, not getting along with parents, and wanting more independence) and what factors may be important for female youth in trying to find a pathway out of homelessness.

Very little research in the area of youth homelessness has focussed on the female adolescent's homeless experience. Homeless people in K-W are becoming younger and more often female. However, there has been very little research carried out with young homeless women so far. In the Kitchener-Waterloo area, the number of females occupying emergency shelters such as Mary' Place and Safe Haven is increasing. Also, in 1999, 60% of the homeless youth population in this area was female. Furthermore, research in the area of survivors of youth homelessness is lacking. However, once a youth is homeless, it is also important to identify which factors are critical in finding a pathway out of homelessness. Are caring and supportive relationships, an important factor in finding a pathway out of homelessness?

I would like for you to share your story in an interview. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. The interview will last approximately one hour and will take place at a location that is comfortable and convenient for you. The interview will ask you questions about your family, your childhood, your health, sexual activities (pregnancy) and what kind of circumstances led to your homelessness. I will also ask you to describe your former homeless experiences (such as, where did you find shelter?, what were your survival strategies?, what were the dangers and hazards of being homeless?) and to describe your turning point experience (what helped you find your pathway out of homelessness? a friend, a local agency or a combination of factors). Also, I would like to offer you gift certificates from Tim Hortons, as a way to say thank-you for your participation and sharing of personal information.

Youth, in general, tend to be overlooked. By having you involved in this research you will have a chance to share your story and describe your former experiences of homelessness. You can also express your ideas and opinions about what services and supports you consider effective. The interview will also give you a chance to talk about what needs of homeless females are not being met. You can also offer suggestions on how service providers might be able to meet the needs of homeless females. Also, the identification of factors that are critical in helping female youth, get out of their homeless situation is important information for service providers. This information can be used by service providers to help female youth overcome their homeless experiences and the information can be incorporated into programs to prevent youth homelessness. I hope that after carrying out this research project, the results can be used by service providers to develop a better understanding of female homelessness.

I plan to record the interview on audio-tape to help me remember what was discussed. If you would be more comfortable not being recorded please let me know and I will not use the tape-recorder.

Some of these questions may be upsetting for you and therefore you may decide not to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Also, I can direct you to a staff person at the agency for support if you identify any such need. You can stop the interview at any time. You can withdraw your interview information from the study at any point during the research project. If you choose not to take part in the interview, not to answer all the interview questions or to withdraw from the research project, this will have no negative effect on the delivery of services or kind of services that you receive in any way. Also, I will be obtaining written confirmation from the staff to ensure that your involvement in this project will not result in negative behaviour towards you.

Everything you share with me will be kept private and in a locked room away from the research setting. The only other person who may have access to the interview information will be my thesis advisor. However, your name will not be attached to it anywhere. Your interview will be identified by a code number (not your name), and your name will not be associated with any quotes found in any written report.

All information will remain confidential (private) unless there is reason to believe that:

- someone will be seriously harmed by criminal conduct
- you will attempt to physically harm yourself
- a minor is or will be subjected to physical or sexual abuse

Also, you should be aware that disclosing information concerning participation in illegal activities also limits confidentiality. I may be summoned or subpoenaed to go to court to testify if police authorities become aware that I have knowledge of any criminal activity which you may have been involved with.

You will be provided with a summary of your interview to check for accuracy, to verify quotes, make

changes and provide feedback. You will also be able to get a summary of the interview results.

Finally, the interview notes will be destroyed when the research project is finished or if you choose to withdraw your interview data from the project.

If you have any further questions you can feel free to contact Allison Rice Roberts, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710, x 2988 or Dr.Mike Pratt (thesis supervisor) at 884-0710, x 2824, or Dr.Bruce Arai, Chair of Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board, at 884-0710, x 3753.

Thank-You!!!

Appendix E

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

Information Letter for Service Providers

Date _____

I (Allison Rice Roberts), am currently a community psychology student at Wilfrid Laurier University. The second year of my program involves carrying out a research project. I am interested in a project in the area of youth homelessness. I would like to hear the life-stories and experiences of homelessness of female youth. More specifically, I would like to try and understand what it is like to be a female and have no stable place to live and what factors may contribute to homelessness for female youth in K-W (e.g., abuse at home, not getting along with parents, and wanting more independence).

Very little research in the area of youth homelessness has focussed on the female adolescent's homeless experience. Homeless people in K-W are becoming younger and more often female. However, there has been very little research carried out with young homeless women so far. In the Kitchener-Waterloo area, the number of females occupying emergency shelters such as Mary' Place and Safe Haven is increasing. Also, in 1999, 60% of the homeless youth population in this area was female.

This study will try and fill the gap in current literature on female youth homelessness by focussing on the life stories and experiences of the female population of homeless youth in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. Two age groups of female youth will be studied: female youth, 12-17 years old, who are currently homeless, and female youth, 18-24, who experienced homelessness in their earlier adolescent years. A number of research objectives have been proposed:

- to develop an in-depth understanding of females' experiences of homelessness in K-W
- to identify and link risk factors of homelessness for this population of youth
- to identify the protective factors that are seen as fundamental for females in overcoming their homeless experience, as portrayed by a young adult group of formerly homeless females
- to compare the similarities and differences that emerge between the two age groups of female youth regarding their homeless experiences.

This research project will be using a variety of methodological approaches to gather data for the intended

research objectives outlined above. They are open-ended, semi-structured interviews, participant observations and a case study. Interviews with female youth will provide me with an in-depth understanding of female youth homelessness and allow me to capture the thoughts, feelings and opinions of homelessness from the females' perspective. Participant observations will provide me with a holistic perspective regarding the females' interactions with service providers and other homeless youth. Also, it will provide me with opportunities to develop a rapport with the females, so interviewing will not seem so intrusive. A case study will provide me with an in-depth study of the day to day living activities of a homeless female youth.

It will be important to try to interview females receiving services from a variety of organizations, in order to obtain a representative sample of females who have experienced, or are currently experiencing, homelessness. Four research settings have been contacted, Betty Thompson Youth Centre, Reaching Our Outdoor Friends (R.O.O.F.), Mary's Place and Saint Monica House.

Volunteering at the research settings will also provide me with opportunities to interview service providers. These informal interviews will allow me to capture:

- the service providers' perspective of what it means to be a female youth who is homeless
- to discuss if the services they provide are meeting the needs of female youth
- to capture their perspective regarding what individual and structural factors are critical for female adolescent homelessness in the K-W region.

As a service provider, I would like for you to participate in a number of brief informal interviews while I am volunteering at _____. However, participation is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time. You can withdraw your interview information from the study at any point during the research project. If you choose not to take part in the interview, not to answer all the interview questions or to withdraw from the research project, this will have no negative effect on your employer-employee relationship at _____.

Having service providers involved in this research will give you a chance to share your stories and describe your experiences when working with homeless female youth. You can also express your ideas and opinions about what services and supports you consider effective and what are the challenges in working with a vulnerable population of youth. I hope that after carrying out this research project, the results can be used by service providers to develop a better understanding of homelessness from the females' perspective. This information can also be used by service providers to tailor their programs and services to meet the unique needs of homeless females.

Everything you share with me will be kept private and in a locked room away from the research setting. The only other person who may have access to the interview information will be my thesis advisor. However, your name will not be attached to it anywhere. Your interview will be identified by a code

number (not your name), and your name will not be associated with any quotes found in any written report.

All information will remain confidential (private) unless there is reason to believe that:

- **someone will be seriously harmed by criminal conduct**
- **a minor is or will be subjected to physical or sexual abuse**

You will be provided with a summary of your interview to check for accuracy, to verify quotes, make changes and provide feedback. You will also be able to get a summary of the interview results.

Finally, the interview notes will be destroyed when the research project is finished or if you choose to withdraw your interview data from the project.

If you have any further questions you can feel free to contact Allison Rice Roberts, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710, x 2988 or Dr.Mike Pratt (thesis supervisor) at 884-0710, x 2824, or Dr.Bruce Arai, Chair of Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board, at 884-0710, x 3753.

Thank-You!!!

Appendix F

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

Interview Consent Form for Presently Homeless Female Youth

By signing this form I am indicating that I am willing to take part in an interview to share my life story and experiences of homelessness.

I have been told that the interviewer (Allison) will ask a variety of questions about my family, my childhood, my health, sexual activities (pregnancy), the circumstances that led to my homelessness and my current homelessness situation. Also, I have been provided with an information letter outlining the details and purpose of the research project.

I understand that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I can refuse to answer questions which make me feel uncomfortable. Also, I can stop the interview at any time. I understand that I can withdraw my interview information from the study at any point during the research project. If I choose not to take part in this interview, not to answer all the interview questions or to withdraw from the research project, I understand that this will have no negative effect on the delivery of services or kind of services that I receive in any way.

I have been told that everything I share with Allison will be kept private and in a locked room away from the research setting. I have been told that the only other person who may have access to the interview information will be Allison's thesis advisor. However, my name will not be attached to it anywhere. My interview will be identified by a code number (not my name), and my name will not be associated with any quotes found in any written report.

I understand that all information will remain confidential (private) unless there is reason to believe that:

- someone will be seriously harmed by criminal conduct**
- I will attempt to physically harm myself**
- a minor is or will be subjected to physical or sexual abuse**

Also, if I disclose child abuse to Allison, I understand that she is required by law to report the abuse to Family and Children's Services or The Waterloo Regional Police Service. I understand that disclosing information concerning participation in illegal activities also limits confidentiality. I am aware that Allison may be summoned or subpoenaed to court to testify if police authorities become aware that she

has knowledge of any criminal activity which I may have been involved with.

I will be provided with a summary of my interview to check for accuracy, to verify quotes, make changes and provide feedback. I also know that I will be able to get a summary of the interview results.

Finally, I have been told that the interview notes will be destroyed when the research project is finished or if I choose to withdraw my interview data from the project.

If I have any further questions I can feel free to contact Allison Rice Roberts, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710, x 2988 or Dr.Mike Pratt (thesis supervisor) at 884-0710, x 2824, or Dr.Bruce Arai, Chair of Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board, at 884-0710, x 3753.

- I agree to have our chat recorded on audio-tape.
- I would like a summary of the interview results provided to me.

If I am under the age of 16, and if currently there is a guardian in my life, I understand that I will need to have them give consent. If there is no guardian in my life at the present time to discuss this request with and to give consent for me, I realize I must do this on my own. In light of this, I fully understand the consequences and implications in choosing to take part in this interview and feel competent to make this decision.

Interview Participant:

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Address(if available) _____

Date _____

Guardian:

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Address _____

Date _____

Appendix G

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

Interview Consent Form for Formerly Homeless Female Youth

By signing this form I am indicating that I am willing to take part in an interview to share my life story and experiences of homelessness.

I have been told that the interviewer (Allison) will ask a variety of questions about my family, my childhood, my health, sexual activities (pregnancy), the circumstances that led to my homelessness, a description of my homeless experiences and what factors helped me to find a pathway out of homelessness. Also, I have been provided with an information letter outlining the details and purpose of the research project.

I understand that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I can refuse to answer questions which make me feel uncomfortable. Also, I can stop the interview at any time. I understand that I can withdraw my interview information from the study at any point during the research project. If I choose not to take part in the interview, not to answer all the interview questions or to withdraw from the research project, I understand that this will have no negative effect on the delivery of services or kind of services that I receive in any way.

I have been told that everything I share with Allison will be kept private and in a locked room away from the research setting. I have been told that the only other person who may have access to the interview information will be Allison's thesis advisor. However, my name will not be attached to it anywhere. My interview will be identified by a code number (not my name), and my name will not be associated with any quotes found in any written report.

I understand that all information will remain confidential (private) unless there is reason to believe that:

- someone will be seriously harmed by criminal conduct**
- I will attempt to physically harm myself**
- a minor is or will be subjected to physical or sexual abuse**

I understand that disclosing information concerning participation in illegal activities also limits confidentiality. I am aware that Allison may be summoned or subpoenaed to court to testify if police authorities become aware that she has knowledge of any criminal activity which I may have been involved with.

I will be provided with a summary of my interview to check for accuracy, to verify quotes, make changes and provide feedback. I also know that I will be able to get a summary of the interview results.

Finally, I have been told that the interview notes will be destroyed when the research project is finished or if I choose to withdraw my interview data from the project.

If I have any further questions I can feel free to contact Allison Rice Roberts, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710, x 2988 or Dr.Mike Pratt (thesis supervisor) at 884-0710, x 2824, or Dr.Bruce Arai, Chair of Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board, at 884-0710, x 3753.

- I agree to have our chat recorded on audio-tape.
- I would like a summary of the interview results provided to me.

Interview Participant:

Name (please print) _____ **Date:** _____

Signature _____

Address _____

Appendix H

A Qualitative Study of Presently and Formerly Homeless Female Adolescents

Consent Form - Service Providers

By signing this form I am indicating that I am willing to take part in a number of informal interviews regarding female youth homelessness while Allison (the researcher), carries out her research project at the agency.

I have been told that Allison will ask a variety of questions regarding female youth homelessness (e.g., Does your agency tailor their services/programs to meet the needs of homeless female youth, what are the challenges in trying to meet the needs of homeless females and what do you see as the fundamental risk factors in predicting homelessness for female youth in K-W?) Also, I have been provided with an information letter outlining the details and purpose of the research project.

I understand that my participation in these interviews is voluntary. I can refuse to answer questions which make me feel uncomfortable. Also, I can stop the interview at any time. I understand that I can withdraw my interview information from the study at any point during the research project. If I choose not to take part in this interview, not to answer all the interview questions or to withdraw from the research project, I understand that this will have no negative effect on my employer-employee relationship at _____.

I have been told that everything I share with Allison will be kept private and in a locked room away from the research setting. I have been told that the only other person who may have access to the interview information will be Allison's thesis advisor. However, my name will not be attached to it anywhere. My interview will be identified by a code number (not my name), and my name will not be associated with any quotes found in any written report.

I understand that all information will remain confidential (private) unless there is reason to believe that:

- someone will be seriously harmed by criminal conduct**
- a minor is or will be subjected to physical or sexual abuse**

Also, by signing this consent form I assure Allison that involvement in the research project and the recommendations presented will not result in negative behaviour towards any female participant that I may be able to indirectly identify.

I will be provided with a summary of my interview to check for accuracy, to verify quotes, make changes and provide feedback. I also know that I will be able to get a summary of the interview results.

Finally, I have been told that the interview notes will be destroyed when the research project is finished or if I choose to withdraw my interview data from the project.

If I have any further questions I can feel free to contact Allison Rice Roberts, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710, x 2988 or Dr.Mike Pratt (thesis supervisor) at 884-0710, x 2824, or Dr.Bruce Arai, Chair of Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board, at 884-0710, x 3753.

I would like a summary of the interview results provided to me.

Interview Participant:

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Address (if you would like a copy of the interview results mailed to you)

Date _____

Appendix I

Participant Feedback

September 17, 2001

Dear Participant,

Thank - you for participating in my thesis project on female youth homelessness in the K-W Region. I hope everything is going well for you. I truly appreciate the time you took to share with me such personal information about yourself and your family. It has been a few months since the interviews took place and since that time I have been in the midst of writing my thesis and putting everything together. I am now almost finished and I would like to share with you some of the major results that came out of the interviews.

The overall goal of my thesis was to capture the life stories and experiences of homeless female youth in the K-W area. Therefore, I decided to interview two age groups of female youth from two different types of research settings, a youth drop-in centre and a female youth shelter. One group of 8 female youth was between the ages of 14-19 and was presently homeless. The other group consisted of 5 older female youth between the ages of 18-27, who had experienced homelessness in their earlier adolescent years but now have homes.

Results

One of the major results that emerged from the interviews was that there were two types of homelessness stories, a “street story” and a “shelter story.” One group of six youth talked about going to the streets, meaning that they would sleep in abandoned buildings, in cars, on park benches, under bridges and in stairwells. These females also talked about feeling a sense of freedom and independence as a part of being out on the streets. There was no one there to tell them what to do, and there were no rules. Out on the streets, however, these youth were also more susceptible to being involved in criminal activities, such as drugs or shoplifting.

Despite the dangers on the streets, these youth felt that the streets were a better place for them than being at home. They would periodically go home, but would leave again because they could not deal with the fighting, stress and structure of living at home. On the streets they felt a sense of security by hanging out with a group of people. They referred to these people as their street friends. These youth generally felt that the shelters were not great places to live. There were too many rules, a curfew, and too much

structure.

A group of seven female youth spoke only about accessing the shelter system and living with friends and family members. When asked if they gave any thought to going out on the streets, they answered no. This group of females seemed to be more connected to their families, school and community in terms of being able to ask for help. Some of them went to their Youth Care Worker at school, or a friend or a family member connected them with a local shelter. Some of these females spoke about how grateful one should be to the staff at these shelters for helping teens who are experiencing homelessness.

There were also a number of differences between the two different types of homelessness stories. The street youth were more likely than the shelter youth to experience homelessness over a longer period of time; to not know who their biological father was and to have no contact with him; to speak about a close sibling relationship and to have negative school experiences. Some of the similarities between the two stories included: the reasons why they left home; a pattern of leaving home and going back and leaving again; involvement in criminal activities; a negative mother and daughter relationship; and identifying a close and supportive friend.

There were also a number of differences and similarities in the homelessness stories told by the older group of female youth and the younger group. The younger group of female youth were more likely to have contact with their family during their homeless experience; to describe a close sibling relationship; to talk about close friends; and to speak about how their friends became more important than school. However, the older group of females were more likely to recall abusive childhoods; use mental health terminology such as depression, suicide, etc.; to experience sibling abuse; and to have concrete plans concerning their schooling.

Similarities between the two age groups included: recalling tough childhoods; the reasons why they left home; a negative mother and daughter relationship; minimal contact with their biological father; and negative school experiences.

Pathway Out of Homelessness

The older group of female youth were also asked to talk about what helped them to overcome their homeless experience(s). The majority of the females spoke about finding and building a supportive network of people and agencies and learning to love oneself as the key things that helped them the most.

All of the females talked about a person or agency who helped them along their pathway. One of the females said that, *"My turning point was actually the people here at the shelter. They actually showed me there were people who cared and you are not alone in this world. It was incredible."*

A number of the females also talked quite extensively about *"self-love"* and *"self-respect."* One of the females in her story spoke about how a woman helped her to love herself. Another female also

spoke about *“learning to love yourself.” “Once you learn to love yourself, then you can make it. Once you learn how to respect yourself, only then you will receive it.”*

To conclude, having the opportunity to interview each one of you has given me a whole new perspective on youth homelessness. When I was writing my proposal I didn't realize that homelessness was quite as complicated as it turned out to be. Each of you had your own story to tell and each story was different. It is important for adults to understand that, and not think there is just one problem and one right way to “solve” it.

All of you interviewed has provided us much knowledge in the area of female youth homelessness. We know that homelessness is a very complicated issue that requires much attention in order to address the needs of each individual homeless youth. This information can be used by service providers to tailor their programs and services to meet the unique needs of the homeless female population and perhaps of particular groups of this population. Survivors of youth homelessness have so much knowledge to contribute to the area of youth homelessness. Public education and awareness are also necessary so societal attitudes regarding youth homelessness can begin to change.

Once again thank- you for your participation. I hope that your future looks bright and I wish each one of you love, luck and happiness!

With warmest regards,

Allison Rice Roberts

Please note: If you have any questions or concerns regarding the following research project please call my thesis advisor, Dr. Michael Pratt at Wilfrid Laurier University, tel # 884-0710, x 2824 to leave a message for me and I will return your call.