

# Homeless youths most often victims of crime: study

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Homeless young people are victims of crime at rates that society would consider unacceptable for any other group, according to a new report by researchers at York University and the University of Guelph.

The report, *Surviving Crime and [Violence](#): Street [Youth](#) and Victimization in Toronto*, highlights the degree to which it is street youth themselves – often perceived as delinquent and dangerous – who are vulnerable to crime and violence.

"The very people we are taught to fear are the ones who are most at risk," said Professor Stephen Gaetz, associate dean of research and field development in York's Faculty of Education. "More than 76 per cent of the [homeless](#) youth we surveyed said they had been victims of violent crime in the past year, and almost three-quarters of them reported multiple incidents."

In comparison, about 40 per cent of [young people](#) in the general population reported that they had been victimized in the previous year, when the Canadian General Social Survey last asked them about it in 1999 – and they experienced mostly property crime.

Gaetz and University of Guelph Professor Bill O'Grady interviewed 244 homeless youths across Toronto last year about life on the streets. Their report was commissioned by Justice for Children and Youth, a not-for-profit legal aid clinic that operates a Street Youth Legal Services program, providing legal advice and support to homeless youth in

Toronto.

The solution to problems youth face on the streets lies in changing the way youth homelessness is addressed, according to the report. It calls for a balanced response that, instead of relying mostly on emergency services, would balance preventive measures, an emergency response, and transitional support to move young people out of homelessness quickly.

In the interviews, conducted at agencies serving youth in downtown Toronto and the suburbs:

- female street youth were more likely than males to report being victims of crime (85.9 per cent compared to 71.8 per cent).
- 38.2 per cent of the female street youth reported being [victims](#) of sexual assault. Reports of sexual assault were higher among black females (47 per cent) than white females (33 per cent).
- 60 per cent of lesbian and bisexual females reported that they had been sexually assaulted in the past year, making them perhaps the most victimized group among street youth.
- young homeless women reported extremely high levels of violence and abuse from their intimate partners.
- youths who had become homeless at a young age (16 or 17) were much more likely to have been violently victimized than young people who became homeless later.
- only 20 per cent of all respondents said they had alerted police about their victimization.

Much has changed since Gaetz first wrote a report on homeless youth in Toronto, also for Justice for Children and Youth, seven years ago. The City of Toronto and non-profit agencies have improved services, and the City has expanded its Streets to Homes program to move youth into housing. Street Youth Legal Services, a program of Justice for Children and Youth, has expanded its capacity to support young people with their legal and justice issues.

However, the report concludes federal, provincial and municipal governments should be addressing youth homelessness with an integrated strategy that includes: an adequate supply of supported, affordable housing for young people; efforts by health and mental health sectors, corrections and child welfare services to ensure their practices do not contribute to homelessness; crisis intervention and family mediation to help young people remain housed; and transitional approaches with income, social and health care supports for young people.

"Many people, including policy makers, believe that youth homelessness and crime are linked, and they use laws such as the Safe Streets Act to 'move along' young people," said Gaetz. "In fact, our findings show that young homeless people are among the most victimized people in our society, and they need our protection."

Provided by New York University

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