

# **Struggles for Access: Examining the Educational Experiences of Homeless Young Women and Girls in Canada**



**A Research Report by Jaskiran Dhillon in Partnership with Justice for Girls**

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## Executive Summary

Broadly speaking, this research project set out to explore the educational experiences of street-involved and/or homeless young women and girls in Canada. More specifically, we were interested in examining the role of educational institutions in the lives of homeless and/or street-involved young women to shed much needed light on the barriers to access, lack of support, and alienation from teaching and learning environments faced by homeless young women in the educational arena. Having recognized the challenges of the public education system to meet the varying needs of a diverse student population, this project aimed to uncover the ways the education system can impact the lives of homeless young women either as a possible means to social mobility, life chances, and political engagement, or alternately, as a doorway to forced economic survival on the street, violence, and related deprivation of human dignity, respect, and the basic necessities of life. From this perspective, employment for homeless young women and girls was of secondary concern and an issue that can only be considered within the context of first improving their access to education, thereby creating opportunities for meaningful and sustainable employment in the future.

### Select Findings

The findings for this project are based on the perspectives and experiences of homeless young women and girls in Saskatoon, Halifax, and Vancouver. While we believed that it was important to obtain the insight, knowledge, and experience of individuals who are situated at different vantage points in relation to this issue, it was the young women and girls themselves who provided the greatest experiential insight on how being homeless and/or street-involved intersects with access to educational opportunity. Consequently, their analysis and experience was the privileged reservoir of knowledge upon which our findings are based.

➤ *Social and Economic Constraints*

Homeless and street-involved young women have limited access to safe and affordable housing, have experienced violence and trauma as a result of living on the street, and have unstable relationships with parents and other significant family members.

➤ *Economic Survival Strategies*

Young women and girls living on the street survive economically through a variety of means, including theft and petty crime, panhandling, welfare and other forms of social assistance, drug dealing, and becoming sexually exploited. Young women and girls are experiencing high levels of violence through these survival attempts, particularly through sexual exploitation.

➤ *Importance of Schooling*

The young women and girls participating in this project expressed a sincere desire to attend school as a means out of social, political, and economic forms of deprivation.

- *Sexism and Young Women's Experiences of the Street*  
Young women and girls frequently commented on being made uncomfortable and feeling judged by male teachers and sexually harassed by their male peers. On numerous occasions they made reference to how their street lives had followed them into the walls of the school.
- *The Importance of School Choice*  
The importance of female only educational programs with female only teachers came up repeatedly across the nation. This must be understood within the context of having experienced much violence and trauma as a result of living on the street.
- *Material Needs and School Experience*  
The material requirements such as childcare, transportation, housing, and school fees are not being met for homeless and street-involved young women and girls.
- *"Fitting In" and School Culture*  
Young women and girls drew attention to the middle class construction of the public education system and the ways in which their status as homeless or 'living in poverty' served to alienate them from the conventional practices of schooling. This, in turn, prevented them from 'fitting in' with the rest of the student body.
- *Racism in Schools*  
Young women and girls pointed out the high level of racism in the schools, both individual acts of racism as well as institutional forms of racism reflected in the lack of First Nations content in the curriculum and the schools inability to address violence in the school as it related to racism.
- *Teacher/Student Relationships and the Notion of Caring*  
Young women and girls revealed how they felt as though their teachers did not care about or understand the conditions of their lived reality on the street and that their presence in the school was indispensable.
- *Policies and Practices*  
When asked about specific school policies and practices that may have impacted their experiences of education, the young women and girls cited attendance policies, address policies, and being passed on to the next grade without knowing what was happening in their current or previous grade as central in their ability to remain connected to formal education.
- *Criminalization of Poverty*  
One of the most alarming findings of this exploratory project was the high degree of policing and criminalization of teenage girls living in poverty. This has the added implication of disrupted educational programming for homeless and street-involved young women.

## Primary Recommendations

- *Alternative Educational Programming for Homeless Young Women and Girls and School Choice*

Given the range of challenges and barriers to access public education as indicated through the experiences of these young women, this recommendation calls on the provincial government and territories, as well as Ministries of Education across the nation, to establish the option of school choice through the development of alternative educational programs specifically designed for homeless young women and girls. These would be ‘girls only’ educational spaces with female teachers.
- *Professional Development and Training*

Since it is unrealistic to assume that all homeless young women and girls in Canada will have access to alternative forms of education that may be designed to meet their needs, this recommendation speaks to the need for professional development and training in the area of social inequality, specifically as it relates to issues of poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia, for all teachers, school administrators, and school personnel.
- *Social Justice Education*

We recommend that provincial and territorial governments and Ministries of Education re-establish anti-racism, anti-homophobia, and anti-sexism education and policy development as an imperative element of schooling for our children and youth.
- *School-Community Alliances*

Considering the range of factors impacting homeless young women and girls’ experiences of education, this recommendation relates to the strengthening of relationships between schools and community organizations and institutions that may be attempting to address the broader range of needs articulated by homeless and street-involved young women and girls. These organizations may also be useful in developing educational strategies that would be targeted at addressing the systemic causes that create conditions of social inequality and limited access to the exercise of social rights.
- *Commitment to the Allocation of Resources*

We recommend that provincial and territorial governments commit to the allocation of resources for education in all provinces and territories across the country in order to ensure that all of our children and youth have access to the public education to which they are constitutionally entitled. The social, economic, and political consequences of the denial of this social right are especially grave for homeless young women and girls who will continue to be subjected to violence and criminalization on the street without the ability to secure the means of access to social and economic mobility.
- *Shifting from Employment to Education*

This recommendation calls for the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to shift the focus of policy and program development and support for homeless young women and girls from one solely preoccupied with job readiness and employment training to

increasing accessibility to education. Employability must be of secondary concern to the importance of ensuring the social right of access to education.

## Preface

This project grew out of years of work with marginalized youth, in both Canada and the United States, around issues of social exclusion. After encountering numerous young women and girls who had become disconnected from formal education, and thus lacked the skills, formal educational training, and academic credentials to access many of the taken for granted opportunities available to children and youth occupying more privileged social positions, I became deeply concerned about how these young women would be able to transition to more safe and stable life circumstances without access to formal education. I had worked with Justice for Girls on related issues in the past, so I approached them about partnering on this initiative. The project's goal became to increase our knowledge surrounding the educational experiences of homeless teenage girls in Canada with the aim of illuminating the potential for educational institutions and community-based programs to create opportunities for girls-centered, alternative, and/or participatory learning environments that would effectively engage girls in education while simultaneously addressing their diverse needs, employment and otherwise. Given their expertise and experience working to promote and support the rights of teenage girls who had experienced violence and live in poverty, Justice for Girls was uniquely situated to partner on this project and generously provided the organizational support to get it off the ground. What is portrayed in the following pages is a result of this concerted effort and the cumulative work of many individuals across the nation to draw attention to this issue in the hopes of creating some form of educational change and an improved quality of life for these young women both inside and outside the walls of the school.

## Part 1: Introduction and Project Overview

### 1.1 Introduction

In recent years, issues of poverty and homelessness in Canada have continued to be problems of great concern to individuals, collectives and organizations working in the areas of social justice and community development. In response to the alarming number of homeless Canadians, educators, activists, researchers, and service providers alike have been struggling to find ways to alleviate homelessness and poverty through a range of social change strategies. However, given the multitude of factors contributing to the life experiences of homeless peoples, accompanied by the growing diversity within the homeless population itself, this remains a complex and challenging task. Moreover, there is a paucity of research which identifies the interconnection between social institutions such as education, criminal justice, health, and social services which cumulatively impact the experience and proliferation of homelessness within Canada. Research in these areas is not only vital to improve our knowledge of the underlying causes of these issues, but is also integral to the development and design of *effective, ethical, and just* social programs and systemic change strategies that are reflective of the interests of those they are intending to serve. It is within this greater context of homelessness and poverty in Canada that the project described below is situated.

Broadly speaking, this research project set out to explore the educational experiences of street-involved and/or homeless young women in Canada. More specifically, we were interested in examining the role of educational institutions in the lives of homeless and/or street-involved young women to shed much needed light on the barriers to access, lack of support, and alienation from teaching and learning environments faced by homeless young women in the educational arena. Having recognized the failure of the public education system to meet the varying needs of a diverse student population, this project aimed to uncover the ways the education system can impact the lives of homeless young women either as a possible means to social mobility, life chances, and political engagement, or alternately, as a doorway to forced economic survival on the street, violence, and related deprivation of human dignity, respect, and the basic necessities of life.

For the purposes of this project, we use the term homelessness to indicate a broad range of social, political, and economic experiences. In keeping with the UN definition of homelessness, we identify both ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ forms of homelessness in the lives of the young women and girls upon which this project was centered. Absolute forms of homelessness refer to that aspect of homelessness directly related to a lack of safe and affordable housing, while relative forms draw attention to the additional marginalization and social exclusion homeless peoples face in their everyday interactions with social institutions (Novac et al, 2002: 1-2). Street-involved is used to represent those young women’s experiences who spend considerable amounts of time on the street and in unsafe environments, but may still have to option of returning to a home at night (Novac et al, 2002: 20). However, we also contend that conditions of homelessness cannot be separated from the larger issues of poverty, property (re) distribution, and power that have been made somewhat invisible by the language of homelessness that creates a category of people based on their appearance, behavior, and housing status as opposed to

asserting poverty, class inequality, and the redistribution of wealth and income as key social concerns (Wright, 1997: 2).

As a signatory to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)* Canada has demonstrated its commitment to education for children as a fundamental social right, not as a privilege for those who are part of a dominant culture, but indeed for *all* children. In their assessment of the Social Union Framework Agreement, Day and Brodsky of The Poverty and Human Rights Project state:

“The ‘social union’ refers to that commitment, namely, that Canadians will take care of each other, and that they will share resources in order to do so...Everyone needs adequate food, clothing, and housing; fair, safe, and non-discriminatory conditions of work; access to education; a degree of income security throughout his or her lifetime; and health care, including protection from environmental causes of ill health. Canadians have accepted that there is a collective responsibility to create a society in which these are entitlements, provided, not as a matter of charity, but as incidents of social citizenship” (Poverty and Human Rights Project, 2002: 1).

Considering our country’s pride in itself as a leader in the promotion of global human rights and education, we must continue to critically examine where and how our institutional systems and structural arrangements have failed the most marginalized and disenfranchised groups in the country, including homeless young women and girls. In this regard, nations such as Canada are obligated by the very tenants of democratic governance to ensure that notions of equality and justice are imbued not only in legislation, but also in the policies, practices, and cultural realities of our social institutions. This message was eloquently captured by Prime Minister Paul Martin when he stated,

“We must measure our progress by the standards of care that we set for the least privileged among us [...] The true challenge of leadership is to rally a nation to its unfulfilled promise. To build a society based on equality, not privilege; on duty, not entitlement. A society based on compassion and caring; not indifference or neglect” (Prime Minister Paul Martin, November 14, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Our project, then, begins from the premise that an analysis of the forms of exclusion that are explicitly linked with the social rights of citizenship and the ability to exercise such rights, particularly in relation to accessing services such as education, housing, employment, and healthcare is vital to make visible the contingency and fragility of the social contract between the state and the individual in the attainment of citizenship rights and the opportunity to exercise such rights (Kennet et al, 1999: 38). It also demonstrates the importance of ensuring that social rights are not downgraded to the status of mere ‘principles and objectives’ and that provinces and territories in Canada are made aware of their legal obligations under international covenants which are enforceable through the legislation of specific policy measures.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, “a social

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Campaign 2000, <http://www.campaign2000.ca/>

<sup>2</sup> Public education falls under provincial jurisdiction in Canada, although the federal government is responsible for the instruction of children living on reserves or crown lands. Please see (Canada’s Fourth Report on the United Nations’ ICESCR at [http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pdp-hrp/docs/escr/escr\\_e.pdf](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pdp-hrp/docs/escr/escr_e.pdf) for more information.

rights approach means recognizing that even in the development of social policy and in decisions about how to allocate the budget, there are certain democratic values and basic human rights which elected governments must agree not to violate” (Porter, 1998: 1).

The individual *Education Acts* of Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia are all premised on the notion that all students must have the opportunity to develop their potential, acquire knowledge and develop the skills necessary to achieve social mobility. For example, Nova Scotia’s Education Act states,

“The purpose of this Act is to provide for a publicly funded school system whose primary mandate is to provide education programs and services for students to enable them to develop their potential and acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy. *1995-96, c. 1, s. 2.*”<sup>3</sup>

Saskatchewan’s similarly advances,

“Subject to Sections 154, 155, and 157, no teacher, trustee, director or other school official shall in any way deprive, or attempt to deprive, a pupil access to, or the advantage of, educational services approved and provided by the board of education or the conseil scolaire.”<sup>4</sup>

British Columbia’s reigns a similar sentiment in its claim that,

“Subject too Section 74.1, a person is entitled to enroll in an educational program provided by the school district if the person is (a) of school age, and (b) is resident in that school district.”<sup>5</sup>

As such, this report should be viewed first and foremost as an exploratory study into the social right of educational access for homeless and/or street-involved young women in Canada. It is a first step at beginning to unravel how young women who are experiencing marginalization on multiple fronts become dislodged from educational institutions prior to completing a high school diploma or attaining the necessary educational certification required to attend post-secondary training, vocational or trade schools, and in many cases, local community colleges. As Stephen Gaetz articulates in his recent review of literature on homelessness, “broader studies done in the field of education that focus on drop-outs and/or students experiencing problems in school generally do not explore how homelessness (or the risk of running away) plays a role in student failure. In fact, there is very little research on education and homelessness in Canada” (Gaetz, 2004: 46). Given this scarcity of research, this project can be viewed as an attempt to address this dearth of knowledge and increase our understanding of how educational institutions themselves are implicated in the high drop out rates traditionally associated with homeless youth (Fitzgerald, 1999; Hagan and McCarthy, 1998; Gaetz and O’Grady, 2002). Such an approach deliberately shifts the focus of analytic inquiry solely from the young women and girls to the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gov.ns.ca/legi/legc/statutes/eductn.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.qp.gov.sk.ca/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/E0-2.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/S/96412\\_00.htm](http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/S/96412_00.htm)

institution of education itself thereby revealing the structural, systemic, and cultural issues contributing to homeless young women and girls' disconnection from formal schooling and alternate forms of educational programming. Wiens comments on the usefulness of this method when he says,

“In retrospect, perhaps we need to spend more time reminding ourselves of the threats to democratic spaces posed by our institutional identities. For example, systems reinforce hierarchy, power differentials and regulatory arrangements that predetermine people's places, create barriers that emphasize differences and establish distance between people. Too often, contemporary systems focus on the winners and losers; on credit and blame as if credit is in limited supply; on advantage and privilege as if entitlement accrues naturally or deservedly to some and not to others. When we believe these arrangements are necessary, practical and inevitable, we stifle the human imagination and thwart human possibility” (Wiens, 2004: 22).

The conceptual framework for this study, then, was constructed to disrupt the seemingly black and white picture of the educational disengagement of particular students, an explanation commonly found in studies on 'low academic achievement' which largely locate this problem within the bodies and/or dispositions of the students themselves.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, the social location and context of the young women and girls lives, as well as the institutional barriers within the parameters of educational and access and opportunity, become the launch point from which recommendations for school reform and pedagogical innovation can be made alongside a political statement about the ideological underpinnings and structural realities of Canadian public schools that contribute to the (re)production of social inequities.

The report begins with an overview of the rationale for focusing solely on the educational experiences of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls, as opposed to homeless youth more generally, and is followed by a more detailed description of the research context and broader impetus for the study. The succeeding sections explain the methodology and research design for the project, capture the findings and results, and raise important questions about recommendations for educational reform that can be made in the light of this exploratory work. The report concludes with proposals for future action and research in the area of educational reform as it relates to the distinct experiences of homeless young women and girls in Canada.

## ***1.2 Why Young Women?***

The scope of this project was intentionally focused on the specific experiences of young women as a result of the growing number of girls living in poverty and the accompanying vulnerability to victimization and reduced life opportunities, employment and otherwise, these young women confront.<sup>7</sup> “The number and proportion of young people and women without adequate and

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<sup>6</sup> We use the term 'low academic achievement' in parenthesis to indicate that this very terminology itself reflects an approach to understanding the educational disengagement of certain groups of students from the perspective of personal failure and individual responsibility.

<sup>7</sup> The terms 'young women' or 'girls' in this project are used interchangeably and indicate those individuals from 12 to 24 years of age.

secure housing have increased in Canada during the last two decades” (Novac et al, 2002: 1). It is widely accepted that homelessness is a key factor in young women and girls’ vulnerability to various forms of victimization. Once they are on the street, young women and girls experience incredible amounts of violence, from assaults (being kicked, spat on) by passers-by, abuse through sexual exploitation by adult men (johns), rape and assault by boyfriends and male street “brothers,” extreme mental and physical cruelty by pimps and drug dealers, to sexual harassment, assault, and brutality by police and prison guards.<sup>8</sup> A recent study specifically addressing the issue of homelessness among young women also revealed that young homeless women routinely experience health problems, face significant barriers to completing their education, and have high pregnancy rates (Novac et al, 2002: 18-21). A report released in December 2002 by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation also reiterated the gendered nature of youth homelessness when it stated, “The gender distribution among homeless youth is distinct from that of adults; unlike older homeless people, girls are well-represented among homeless youth” (Serge, 2002: 1).

A preliminary scan of current research reveals that almost all inquiries into youth homelessness construct youth as a homogenous category, downplaying the feminization of poverty and the unique life trajectories, experiences, and needs of young women and girls characterized as homeless.<sup>9</sup> “While women’s particular experiences of homelessness and its gendered nature are beginning to be explored, there is still a strong tendency in the literature on youth homelessness to ignore gender except as a variable that occasionally reveals differences of some interest to researchers” (Novac et al, 2002: 1). The specific vulnerabilities of girls on a global scale did not even gain prominent attention until the 1980s when UNICEF adopted the phrase, “the girl child” in recognition of the oppression of girls as a gendered concern. The distinct plight of young women was also highlighted as a significant issue of concern at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (The Alliance of Five Research Centres, 2002: 1). This research project begins to fill a wide gap in knowledge surrounding youth homelessness as it relates to the distinct experiences and needs of girls and young women, and provides a window into discerning how limited and stunted access to formal education may create ripple effects in the production of homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted, however, that even within the category of homelessness among ‘young women and girls’, there is marked diversity. That it, the issue of homelessness impacts young women and girls differently. For example, Aboriginal young women are greatly over-represented amongst low-income and street-involved girls (Novac, et al, 2002: 66). “Poverty is a scourge that stalks Aboriginal children as they grow up. It is a well-documented fact that poor children suffer more health problems of every kind, and Aboriginal children in Canada are among the poorest of the poor” (Fournier and Crey, 2000: 306).

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<sup>8</sup> Please see [www.justiceforgirls.org](http://www.justiceforgirls.org) for more information.

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘feminization of poverty’ has been widely used since the late 1970s to describe the particular plight of women who, as single mothers, are disproportionately poor and face an alarming array of obstacles that threaten their family stability, health care, employment opportunities, and educational attainment (Polakow, 2003: 90).

<sup>10</sup> We do not wish to imply that *all* homeless young women and girls we may encounter through this research will follow a predetermined path of lifelong marginalization in Canadian society. Rather, we intend to illuminate how their pathways to achieving a reasonable standard of living, social mobility, and economic opportunities are directly impacted by the policies, practices, and constructions of homelessness embedded within the education system and related social institutions.

In the specific case of education, conditions of extreme poverty, abuse and cultural genocide imposed by colonization, individual and systemic racism often drives First Nations girls out of the education system (St. Denis and Hampton, 2003: 10).<sup>11</sup> “The actual record is no longer effaced, however; it is clear that the schools have been, arguably, the most damaging of the many elements of Canada’s colonization of this land’s original peoples and, as their consequences still affect the lives of Aboriginal people today, they remain so” (Milloy, 1999: 14). In addition, many Aboriginal girls have been removed from their families and communities and remain wards of the state until they reach the age of 16 thereby disrupting Aboriginal extended family systems and disconnecting them from home communities. Repatriation rarely occurs successfully (Waterfall, 2003: 55). As a result, a number of these girls become homeless when they run away from the (racist) alienation and violence they experience in white group or foster homes.

First Nations girls also experience abuse both in and out of the home at disturbing rates. Up to 75% of victims of sex crimes in Aboriginal communities are female under 18 years of age, 50% of those are under 14, and almost 25% of those are younger than 7 years of age (Correctional Services of Canada, cited in McIvor & Nahanee, 1998: 65). The incidence of child sexual abuse in some Aboriginal communities is as high as 75 to 80% for girls under 18 years of age (McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995: 228). Aboriginal youth generally exhibit a suicide rate seven times that of the national average for youth. “There is no more telling indictment of the future of Canada has handed First Nations children than their rejection of life itself. First Nations caregivers say that children are killing themselves in record numbers as an expression of self-hatred induced by the intergenerational assault, in many guises, on the very core of Aboriginal identity” (Fournier and Crey, 2000: 308).

Lesbian youth are also over-represented amongst homeless teenage girls yet the needs of homeless lesbian girls with regards to education have not been thoroughly explored by researchers. Generally it is girls whose lives have been shaped by poverty that wind up homeless (Williams, 2003: 48). However, for many of these girls homelessness is compounded by, or a result of, heterosexism and homophobia within families, schools, and foster or group homes. de Castell and Jensen point out, “within the social service “culture of silence”, many queer and questioning youth experience hostility, violence, and sexual abuse while in foster care where homophobia is the norm” (de Castell and Jensen, 2004: 1).

### ***1.3 Rationale and Research Context***

The need for a detailed examination of the educational experiences of homeless youth has been identified in numerous reports and studies on this issue, as well as through the experiential knowledge of youth advocates, service workers, and educators (Gaetz, 2004; Karabanow, 2004; Timmer et al, 1994; Tyyska, 2001; Novac et al, 2002; Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Dekeseredy et al, 2003). While there has been limited research in this area, the few studies that do exist have drawn attention to more general trends such as homeless youths’ lack of formal educational experience, drop out tendencies, and minimal skills to obtain adequate employment and secure a

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<sup>11</sup> “.....a staggering 7 out of 10 First Nations youth will drop out of school” (Urban Aboriginal Youth: An Action Plan for Change, 2003: 66).

steady income. It is well-documented that in Canada, as elsewhere, youth with no fixed address also have poor education and job skills (Kraus et al, 2002, Shane, 1996). Novac et al reveal that

“early school leavers express dissatisfaction with their courses and school rules. They skip classes and feel they do not fit into school, have problems with their teachers, participate less in classes, and not at all in extracurricular activities, have friends who are not in school, and associate with peers who did not consider high school completion” (Novac et al, 2002: 20).

However, while issues of educational access and opportunity have been touched on within the scope of other studies, the extent of these issues has not been thoroughly investigated and the systemic and institutional barriers young women may confront in accessing public education have largely remained unveiled.

Furthermore, it has been argued that schools have a distinct role to play in addressing the issue of youth homelessness given educators’ unique association with young women and girls and the potential for schools to act as a point of connection, stability, and support as they struggle with the multiple causes that may lead them down the path to homelessness (Fitzgerald, 1999: 4).<sup>12</sup> Gaetz reiterates the importance of reconfiguring the role of education as a pathway off the street when he comments, “we need to identify how schools and other service providers might more successfully prevent adolescents from dropping out of school when they become homeless, and alternatively, ways to successfully reintegrate people who have experienced homelessness back into the education system” (Gaetz, 2004: 45). However, there has been little explicit recognition of this by the public school system in Canada and almost no formal research investigating the specific policies, practices, and processes through which schools fail to assist youth who are homeless or on the verge of becoming so. The confines of our public education system to meet the needs of homeless girls and young women will continue to result in students’ alienation, isolation, and vulnerability in schools and this disrupted educational experience directly links with the limiting of future educational, employment, and career opportunities (Dei, 1994: 12).

Valerie Polakow, a prominent advocate for homeless women and children internationally, states,

“my own ethnographic observations of poor children in Michigan document widespread discrimination and prejudice on the part of the teachers and school personnel toward destitute children and their families—where classroom environments for poor children, particularly difficult and angry children, become landscapes of condemnation that reveal shared experiences of exclusion, humiliation and indifference” (Polakow, 2003: 102).

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<sup>12</sup> There is no documented singular cause of homelessness among young women or girls. Rather, teenage girls become homeless through several avenues. Many girls leave home because of abuse, many leave State run foster and group homes for this same reason. When the child welfare system does not address male violence against girls in the home (family, group or foster home) young women are faced with staying and enduring violence and abuse or entering the enormously difficult situation of having to be completely responsible for themselves without adequate resources. When girls seek assistance from child welfare agencies they are often met with a “go home” response and thus left to fend for themselves if they refuse to go back into an environment of abuse and violence (Novac et al, 2002: 4-20).

In his work on educational issues facing homeless children and youth in America, Paul Shane identified the inability of educational systems in the post-industrial era to accommodate the needs of children and youth who presented challenges to the standard forms of instruction and learning characteristic of current educational structures (Shane, 1996: 33). Shane points to the lack of information about homelessness generally, the limited understanding of the specific needs of homeless children and youth, and the disjuncture of knowledge between school districts and the education acts governing specific states as contributing factors in securing homeless children and youth's equal access to quality education in America. In addition, while there has been substantial educational research conducted on the impact of gender on educational experiences (Ng, 1993; Briskin, 1994; Tyyska, 2001), there is almost no research which address gender at its intersection with homelessness, education, and employment. In other words, given the large gap in research and literature that pertains to the specific experiences of homeless girls and young women, there is virtually no research that draws attention to the ways that homeless young women and girls' experiences of school might be different from that of their male counterparts.

Thus, the approach to this research project is grounded in the notion that access to education is indeed an integral component of reducing homelessness and poverty in the lives of young women and girls by mitigating the personal and systemic violence and victimization they experience on the streets and in various social securing one of the primary means to achieving a reasonable standard of living and quality of life, and by providing the foundation for meaningful employment opportunities in the future. It is a gateway to young women and girls' social mobility, life chances, and civic opportunity/participation within the Canadian nation. When conceived in this light, meaningful and supportive educational experiences *can* be one part of a holistic *preventative approach* to homelessness for young women and girls. In the words of Power, Whitty and Youdell:

“Given the apparent intractable relationship between homelessness and disadvantage, it is perhaps not surprising that education is sometimes held up as providing the way forward. First, and in the longer term, a successful educational career potentially provides one of the few mechanisms through which the cycle of cumulative disadvantage can be broken (Power, Whitty, and Youdell, 1999: 130).

Teachers, administrators, school counselors, government officials, and policy makers must have the capacity to identify avenues through which the needs of this population can be better met, as well as the means to eliminate obstacles and barriers currently alienating young women from schools and ultimately resulting in their high rates of expulsion and/or drop-out. From this perspective, employment for homeless young women and girls is of secondary concern and an issue that can only be considered within the context of first improving their access to education, thereby creating opportunities for meaningful and sustainable employment in the future.

#### ***1.4 Research Questions***

In order to begin to comprehend homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls experiences of education, our research was broadly guided by the following research questions:

- How do homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls in Canada describe, understand, and make sense of their secondary educational experiences?
- What are the implications of their experiences in terms of social mobility and employment prospects? How do homeless young women survive economically when they have been marginalized from the public school system?<sup>13</sup>
- How have public schools in Canada attempted to address the educational needs of homeless young women?
- How are the interests and needs of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls defined and identified by school processes and practices?<sup>14</sup>

### ***1.5 Project Objectives***

The central objectives of this study were:

1. To come to a greater understanding of how educational experiences influence the lives of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls in Canada. This will be accomplished by identifying the educational policies, practices, and experiences that alienate these young women from the public educational system and block their access to education which they are constitutionally entitled.
2. To determine the kinds of education, skills, and supports that would be required for homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls to make a healthy transition to adulthood and obtain stable employment in the future.
3. To obtain descriptive data on homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls as it pertains to their educational attainment, economic survival, and income level. This aspect of the project was geared towards creating a greater understanding of this particular segment of the homeless population with the aim of revealing how their life experience may contribute to the likelihood of a young woman or girl becoming homeless and the related risk of increasing her encounters with victimization and violence.

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<sup>13</sup> The original research proposal also included a question addressing the employment history and income level of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls but in most cases this area of focus was only marginally applicable. Given the limited time we had to complete the project, we decided our time would be better spent focusing on exposing the barriers alienating young women from being able to access education in the first place.

<sup>14</sup> These questions were intended to be guiding areas of interest for the project with the first question listed as the primary basis for our investigation. It should be noted that the original proposal for this project also included a research question relating to an investigation of alternative school programs in order to determine what could be gleaned from them for the creation of a girls-centered educational program. However, given the limited time and resources allocated to this project, and the magnitude of field work in three cities, we were not able to explore this area in detail or explore in depth the various informal strategies public school administrator's and staff may have been using to address some of the issues highlighted in this report. Through our work in this area, we discovered in fact, that there is very little formal policy or strategy developed to address the specific situation of homeless and/or street-involved youth in public schools in Canada. The majority of the focus seems to be placed on employment training and/or vocational skill development.

## Part 2: Methodology and Research Design

### *2.1 Methodological Approach*

The primary methodological approach for this research was grounded in qualitative research traditions. We chose to use qualitative methods in light of the complex nature of the social problem being explored and the importance of providing the opportunity for homeless and/or street-involved young women themselves to participate in the project in a way that valued their insight, knowledge, and experience. In addition, qualitative studies are especially suited for studies aimed at understanding the processes by which events and actions actually take place. Maxwell states that the interest in a qualitative study is in processes as well as outcomes; a major strength of qualitative research is in getting at the processes that led to these outcomes, processes that experimental and survey research are often poor at identifying (Maxwell, 1996: 20). Hatch also points out the usefulness of qualitative research when he says,

“qualitative data are objects, pictures, or detailed descriptions that cannot be reduced to numbers without distorting the essence of the social meanings they represent. They build the case for the researcher’s interpretation by including enough detail and actual data to take the reader inside the social situation under examination” (Hatch, 2002: 9).

Young women and girls were invited to participate in focus groups and individual interviews about their educational experiences. We also encouraged young women and girls who were being interviewed to bring a friend or peer along, which may have provided a source of additional support thereby increasing accessibility of participation.

Secondly, we conducted interviews and focus groups with educators, youth advocates, and service providers to learn from those in the position of a supporting young women, teaching students both in and out of the mainstream school system, and providing direct services (educational, employment, and otherwise) to homeless and/or street-involved girls and young women. It is important to acknowledge, however, that while we conducted supplementary interviews with educators, service providers, and youth advocates, it is the voices and experiences of the young women themselves that served as the basis from which the findings and analysis in this report were both derived and written. In short, while we believed that it was important to obtain the insight, knowledge, and experience of individuals who are situated at different vantage points in relation to this issue, it was the young women and girls themselves who provided the greatest experiential insight and emic perspectives on how being homeless and/or street-involved intersects with access to educational opportunity. Consequently, their analysis and experience was the privileged reservoir of knowledge upon which our findings are based.

Thirdly, we conducted some documentary analysis of school/educational policies and legislation to ascertain the ways the public educational system currently attempts to meet the educational needs of homeless youth.<sup>15</sup>

## ***2.2 Site Selection***

The research sites selected for this project were Saskatoon, Halifax, and Vancouver. Considering the large regional differences across Canada, and the changing social, political, and economic conditions in each part of the country, we believed that it was important to select cities that would represent both the regional and political diversity as well as the diversity within the population of homeless young women and girls itself.

Supporting a large urban Aboriginal population, Saskatoon served as excellent site to be able to meet and talk with homeless Aboriginal young women and girls. Given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young women in many social service areas, we would argue that this is an essential component of the study and one that warranted thoughtful consideration when selecting research sites. Saskatoon also represented a prairie city in Canada; it is the largest urban centre in the province of Saskatchewan and consequently attracts youth from reserves and rural areas in the province. The prairies are often overlooked or under-researched in national research projects, the attention primarily focusing on the largest urban centres in the country and we argued that a focus on Saskatoon would provide a useful and distinct perspective on the educational experiences for homeless young women. It also offered insight into how the experience of homelessness is different or similar to the characteristics in a larger city such as Vancouver.

Often conceived as one of the cities in Canada where youth are most visibly homeless, Vancouver was also chosen as one of the research sites for this study. Vancouver was the largest city in the research study and one with a significantly diverse populace. Consequently, we argued that Vancouver would provide us with the opportunity to meet and talk with a diverse group of homeless young women and girls in a city that has a considerable focus on the development of services for 'high-risk' or 'at-risk' youth.

Providing a window into discerning homelessness from the vantage point of young women and girls in the Maritimes, Halifax was chosen as the final research site for this project. Similar to Saskatoon, Halifax also acts as a gathering place for youth from rural communities in Nova Scotia, although the ethno-racial composition of the homeless youth population diverges somewhat from both Vancouver and Saskatoon.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> While we intended this to be included in the data collection and analysis component of the research, we found that there was very little written policy in terms of addressing the educational access of homeless youth. Consequently, we were unable to address this to the extent that we had initially envisioned.

<sup>16</sup> According to the report commissioned by Status of Women Canada, 95% of the street youth population in Halifax is white. Novac, Sylvia, Serge, Luba, Eberle, Margaret, and Brown, Joyce. *On Her Own: Young Women and Homelessness in Canada*. Status of Women Canada: Policy Research Fund, 2002.

### ***2.3 Sample Size***

We conducted focus groups and individual interviews with 118 young women and 43 service providers and educators across our three research sites in order to gather a range of the young women and girls' educational experience. In total, 23 focus groups and 14 individual interviews were conducted with young women and girls to reach the total of 118 and 5 focus groups were conducted with educators and service providers and 2 individual interviews to reach the total of 43. Focus group and interview questions are included in Appendix A of this report.

### ***2.4 Focus Group and Interview Protocol***

The focus group and interview questions were constructed and reviewed by the Advisory Committee guiding the project. Community based organizations in each of the project sites made contact with homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls and assisted in the organization of focus groups and individual interviews. Young women and girls received a \$30 honorarium for participating, as well as food and transportation costs. The focus group questions were piloted in Vancouver in November, 2004 in order to ensure their efficacy and to guard against any unpredicted ethical violations. All personal names, as well as names of organizations and schools, have been changed in the body of this report to protect confidentiality and ensure anonymity.

### ***2.5 Limitations of Research***

As with almost every type of research project, there are shortcomings and drawbacks to the research process that must be acknowledged within the context of setting forth results and findings. We wish to clarify, then, that the findings offered in this study must be considered in light of the methodological challenges and limitations outlined below.

First, we had limited time available to conduct the research project. Ethnographic and qualitative research relies strongly on the element of time in producing reliable and valid analyses of social and cultural phenomena (Hatch, 2002: 50). Given the abbreviated time period framing the scope of this study, we were not able to investigate the educational experiences of homeless and/or street-involved young women with consistency and depth over a longer span of time, or in a way that shed light on the many other factors in their individual lives that may have been impacting their educational experience.<sup>17</sup> What this means, in effect, is that the views and information presented in this report must be viewed as exploratory self-report perspectives that represent the range of experiences offered by the participants in the project. The point of this study was to not to prove or disprove a definitive set of hypotheses about the educational experiences of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls across the nation. Rather, the primary objective of this work was centered on exploring the factors alienating young women from educational institutions across Canada and, based on this information, to propose a preliminary framework for crafting alternative learning environments.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, many of the young women made references to how their experiences of criminalization served to further disrupt their educational experiences. However, the connection between the prison system and the education system was something that we were not able to explore in detail given the limited time in which we were given to complete the project.

In relation, since we had a limited amount of time to complete the project and the work needed to be undertaken in three cities across Canada, our ability to make contact with young women who were interested in participating in this project was restricted to those young women accessing the youth-based organizations that were providing some kind of social service programming. While these groups of young women were certainly well acquainted with issues of homelessness and/or street-involvement, many homeless young women may not, in fact, be accessing these services for a whole array of reasons. This restricted our access to a potentially insightful data source, one that could have provided a sketch of how educational experiences for homeless young women differ when they have limited or no access to formal support services and organizations designated to meet their needs.

Finally, while there was marked diversity in the groups of young women who participated in this project in terms of their experiences of homeless and street-involvement we were not able to undertake an in-depth analysis of how different social markers influence the experience of homelessness at its intersection with education. The sample size chosen for this project was intended to collect a range of the experiences that could then be used as springboard for launching future studies that examined the specific experiences of certain groups of homeless and/or street-involved young women. Education program development would also need to be developed with understanding of the specific needs of young women differentially situated along the continuum of homelessness and street-involvement within the context of racialization and sexuality. For example, the distinct experiences of First Nations young women, gay and lesbian girls, and immigrant and refugee experiences need to be explored in greater depth in future studies.

Thus, what is rendered here is a collection of the perspectives and interpretations of educational experiences as outlined by a segment of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls. While we believe that the research conducted to inform this study is sufficient enough to offer some preliminary insights into the educational experiences of homeless and/or street-involved young women, a more comprehensive investigation over a longer time period would have strengthened the validity of the findings and provided greater scope to the overview and representation of the issues. Hatch points this out best when he says, “ethnographers who claim to have captured their participants’ perspectives in field notes and interviews then written these into accounts that objectively represent the cultural experience of those participants are said to be *creating culture* rather than representing reality” (Hatch, 2002: 5). Nonetheless, we would argue that the findings of this project are indeed suggestive of future research and program development, raise critical questions about the construction and purpose of our educational institutions, and contain valuable insights into the nature and scope of educational reform efforts targeted at improving access and addressing the diverse and multi-faceted educational needs of homeless young women and girls in Canada.

## Part 3: Research Results and Findings

### *3.1 Theoretical Framework: The Social Context of Schooling*

Critical educational theorists and practitioners have, for some time, been drawing attention to the deeply social and political aspects of public education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994; Dei, 1994; Roman and Eyre, 1997; Foley, 1996). Simply put, education and educational processes do not exist in a vacuum. Embedded within a larger societal structure marked by the unequal distribution of power and resources, educational institutions are intimately connected with the (re)production of the dominant culture through the management, validation, dissemination, and construction of knowledge (McLaren, 1994: 12). As such, schools function as a microcosm of what is happening in larger society and have historically acted as a vehicle for the legitimization of ‘status quo’ ideas and capitalist state interests, which inevitably extends to the consignment of students to certain classes or social categories (Ng, 1993: 57). Nespors captures this point when he says,

“Educational discourse usually treats the school as a bounded system, a container of classroom processes and curricular texts, and institutional shell waiting to be filled by the actions of teachers, students and administrators. But looking at the schools as somehow separate from cities, politics, neighborhoods, and businesses, and popular culture obscures how these are all inextricably connected to one another, how they jointly produce educational effects” (Nespor, 1997: xi).

The role and constitution of teaching and learning situated within this context becomes increasingly complex, as the everyday conventional practices of schooling, including curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and the intimacies of student-teacher relationships, become inextricably linked with the successes of certain students and the failure of others. “Schools have also proven themselves a contradictory resource for those who would fit the young to a particular vision of society” (Levinson and Holland, 1996: 1). It is within this context of education that the young women and girls who form the focal point of this research enter into their educational endeavors. The perspectives of education they articulate are situated within this broader theoretical framing of educational institutions as a whole.

### *3.2 Demographic Composite of Young Women and Girls*

Young women and girls who participated in this project ranged in age from 12-24, with the majority of young women being between the ages of 15 and 18. 77 self-identified as First Nations, 8 self-identified as African Canadian, and 1 self-identified as Mexican. The remainder of the young did not self-identify with any specific racial or ethnic group. 46 of the 118 young women were enrolled in some form of educational program at the time of focus groups and interview, mostly within the public system of education. The young women’s experiences with homelessness and street involvement varied, although the majority of the young women did not reside with family members and had experienced difficulty securing safe, stable, and affordable housing.

### 3.3. Social and Economic Constraints

One of the most glaring findings of this exploratory study relates to how the social context in which these young women and girls live on a day-to-day basis circumscribes their educational experience. In other words, a glimpse into their daily lived realities provides a much needed backdrop for understanding the myriad of social, political and economic constraints homeless young women and girls face when attempting to participate in educational programming. Their lived experiences outside the school walls also point to the importance of building school-community alliances that counter the isolation that educational systems regularly practice in terms of operational mandates and policy development. Anyon addresses this issue in her deconstruction of the inside/outside school binary when she says, “this binary notion is an ahistorical construct that ignores, among other things, the ways schools are created by, and help to create, their environments” (Anyon, 1995: 66).

With specific reference to transient and inadequate housing supports, the young women and girls explained how their inability to access safe and affordable housing impacted their ability to access school and meet the standard requirements of public education such as regular attendance, dress codes, school fees, and basic personal hygiene. As one young woman explains,

*“I just don’t think they understand it...when you are living on the street and you got no where to go and then you’re not in school and they’re on your back and everything.....like why aren’t you in school....what are you doing and why can’t you make it everyday...and then they compare everybody to everybody where its like...well its like, look at Jessica man, she had a baby and she makes it to school everyday and I say well she has a place to live, you know.....” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Another young woman points out how her unstable housing situation becomes demarcated as her ‘individual problem’ by school officials. She comments,

*“...I just don’t feel like they are concerned about it and everything but you know, it’s my problem kind of thing....so keep it to yourself.....I think that is one of the reasons I keep dropping out of school...because I have an unstable living situation.....like you are living in one place and then you get kicked out and like you can’t go home or something.....you have to get away from school for a couple of weeks and then they kick you out....if it is something you can’t help and you still want to be in school then it is not really your problem and they should keep you there” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

This quote demonstrates how the ‘problem of homelessness’ becomes the individual responsibility of this young woman who is struggling to meet her shelter needs. The lack of safe and affordable housing and the material reality of poverty is not positioned as a barrier to her ability to maintain regular attendance, a situation that would make it close to impossible for any child or youth to sustain an acceptable attendance record, but instead constructed as a personal deficit that is violating the ‘universal standard’ of attendance policies at her school. We must question, then, how educational practitioners conceptualize and understand the nature of the social inequality that is producing this young woman’s condition of homelessness in the first place. For example, in terms of her poverty, everyday practices, such as the schools denial of her

lived social and economic reality, serve to produce and reinforce particular conceptions of about both the causes and ‘treatment’ for these social problems (Lyon-Callo, 2004: 18). As a result, the young woman’s experience of homelessness and larger issues of social inequality remain largely unchallenged by the school and it is her individual motivation and desire to maintain attendance that becomes the focus of scrutiny and disciplinary measures. In turn, intervention strategies have the potential to become more reactive in nature and designed to address her ‘individual problem of homelessness’ and not geared towards advancing systemic change or understanding the conditions of social inequality and marginalization that produce the conditions of poverty in the first place. As McLeod states, “The familiar refrain of “behave yourself, study hard, earn good grades, graduate with your class, go on to college, get a good job, and make a lot of money” reinforces the feelings of personal failure and inadequacy that working class students are likely to bear as a matter of course. By this logic, those who have not made it have themselves to blame” (MacLeod, 1995: 262).

Accompanying the issue of the lack of safe and affordable housing, the young women and girls also drew attention the harsh realities of survival when living on the street. The following lengthy quote captures the lived reality of one young woman and the conditions of violence she has experienced,

*“.....when you go to school and try to talk to another 14 year old who hasn’t been through what you’ve been through and you want me to fit in with them, there’s no way.....how...you know like....’oh, what you do this weekend?....oh, one of my friends was murdered last week or my god, my pimp just knocked out one of my teeth...or I’m wanted and I got no where to stay and social services will turn me in if I go there for a place to sleep....I got no where to live so I’m sleeping with johns so I have a place to crash.....you, you just can’t.....you know then,....and then getting up and brushing my teeth and doing all that normal shit that people do in the morning is the least of my problems.....being alive and worrying about myself is a bigger problem, then you know, what I’m gonna get in English.....” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

What rings clear through the above quote is that homeless young women and girls’ experiences of living on the street are deeply connected to experiences of sexualized violence and related survival strategies. In the material reality of student life, this means that educational systems must work in partnership with other social institutions to address the multitude of factors impacting homeless young women and girls experiences of schooling and work towards understanding how experiences of violence and trauma impact homeless young women’s experiences of learning. Horsman sheds light on this point when she says,

“violence is not an aberration that can be excluded from children’s lives at home and at school. It is an everyday occurrence that needs to be acknowledged and addressed. In the face of this widespread experience of violence, the school and societal approaches of removing children from violence in the home and removing ‘violent’ children from the school seems inadequate to maintain a safe learning environment or support learning for those who have experienced violence” (Horsman, 2004: 3).

Clearly, public schools should be equipped, through staff training and professional development, to offer support to young women who have experienced violence and make connections to

appropriate community supports (ie. Rape Crisis Centers and Feminist Anti-Violence organizations) that can assist in offering counseling and other services to homeless and/or street-involved young women who are survivors of sexual abuse and violence. Support services offered in this regard, however, must be done with secured confidentiality and at the request and permission of the young woman. Horsman reiterates this point by adding,

“a starting point for innovative programming will take into account that many students have a lot going on in their lives. These students need school and educational programs to become a place where they want to be, where staff can help them understand their issues and offer safe spaces there they can retreat. Schools needs to develop new responses to the learning needs of students who have experienced violence” (Horsman, 2004: 70).

In the painful description of one young woman,

*“For me, I had self esteem issues and I didn’t have anybody to talk to or mentor me and even just to love me...no adult support person....and that would have made a big difference...I went through so much sexual abuse and physical abuse and I think I must have went through post-traumatic syndrome because I had those symptoms and it was just really hard to comprehend being a teenager and having all these personal issues...I think there should be more counselors helping students.....even normal kids get stressed out from all they go through....”*(Individual Interview, 2005).

Without an awareness of the impact of these life experiences and strategies designed to create safe learning environments for homeless young women who have experienced violence, schools will be unable to provide opportunities for learning and the related knowledge and skill acquisition required to achieve social mobility. As stated by Shane, “educational systems and institutions are often incompatible with and nonresponsive to the needs and lives of large numbers of their students, particularly minorities, the poor, and those with difficulties. But those who are not able to navigate through the educational system are also most vulnerable to not being able to navigate through the economic and social systems of life” (Shane, 1999: 37). One young woman describes the multitude of factors impacting educational experience and how having support at school did make a difference in her individual circumstances:

*“Ummm, well.....I have grade 9. I have a grade 10 English and Art credit and what else do I have....an independent studies credit or something like that, which is basically like a resource credit. But ummm, ahh, I’ve actually like, the last grade that I completed like normally was grade 8 and when I went to grade 9, about 2 weeks into grade 9 well my mom was staying with a boyfriend, we were all there and stuff, it was kind of an abusive and weird situation. She left and I ended up staying with the boyfriend, ummm, and that’s where I lived for, between the ages of 14 and 17, 17 and a half. And ummm, in that time I didn’t go back to school and I did, ummm, I tried to go back to, ummmm, well I tried to do home courses, and that didn’t really work out because I had no support, like no one to sit down and teach me, or be like a tutor or anything. The guy, my mom’s ex-boyfriend, who I was staying with, that was a really bad situation. He wasn’t supportive at all with schooling or anything, like there was all sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse blah, blah, blah. Ummm, so, I was like, ok this home schooling isn’t going*

*to work and maybe I should go back to school. When I was 16, I decided to go back to ummm, you know, grade 9 and he wasn't supportive at all, he like got mad almost, but I wanted to go back to school, but that's a whole other story. And, ummm, for grade 9, ummm, I had a really hard time, because I felt like I was surrounded by kids really and, my attendance was very poor, just cause of my home situation or whatever. Ummm, so what happened with that.....So the teachers, my teachers in grade 9, they were pretty good. The math teacher, like I felt some teachers just kind of ignored the whole fact that, I mean it was obvious that I was having really hard trouble, I mean just sitting in the classroom and ummmm....but for the most part, like my English/Social Studies teacher was really supportive, ummmm, the principal, Mr. Hofer, was really really supportive, and the guidance counselor was really really supportive. I was really close to her. I spent like....any day I went to school I was in her office basically, and what happened basically near the end was I was put in like a little separate room so I could sit there and do my work and, yeah, I don't know”(Individual Interview, 2005)*

When asked about broader support networks that were available to them, young women and girls across all focus groups and interviews commented on their shifting relationship with family members and how a disruptive home environment impacted their educational experience. The following exchange between two young women and the interviewer sheds light on the impact of family:

*G1: “I had a lot of family problems, you know...my parents had split up and my Dad was like doing a lot of things her shouldn't have been doing and I just kinda left,, I couldn't take it anymore....I tried to attempt suicide a few times and then they sent me right to a shelter and.....(sighs)....and I am gettin' really tired of this whole chaotic lifestyle and I am just getting back in school and I should be graduating this year and I still have to push myself to you, to stay in school....”*

*G2: “ Me too....I have been in high school for two years and I have 2 ½ credits....”*

*G1: “And I am only going to have one more by the end of June and I should have more and I just wish I could start over.....just all the these problems...I wish I could have been stronger but there is only so much a person can do.....”*

Thus, limited parental involvement and/or an unstable relationship with parents and other significant family members characterized the lives of many of these young women and girls.

### ***3.4 Economic Survival Strategies and the Importance of Education***

An objective of this research project was to document how homeless young women and girls were attempting to survive economically without the means or access to formal education that would enable them to obtain stable and adequate employment. The point of verifying these experiences was not simply to lend voice to young women about what was happening in their lives in terms of day-to-day material survival, but rather to highlight the lack of employability and access to a decent quality of life because of their limited formal schooling and inability to access forms of secondary education and post-secondary forms of training. The insights of these young women and girls also call attention to the importance of formal education in improving

their life circumstances and transitioning from poverty, criminalization, and violence to a safe, healthy, and sustainable standard of living.

The range of economic survival strategies undertaken by youth who are homeless and living on the street has been cited in other reports and studies of the causes and nature of youth homelessness (Dean, 2004; Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002; Hagan and McCarthy, 1998). Sexual exploitation, drug dealing, theft and petty crime, panhandling, and welfare and/or forms of social assistance are among this range and the findings in this project remain consistent with what has been identified in other reports.

However, especially noteworthy within the context of economic survival strategies, is the extent to which homeless young women and girls are experiencing sexual violence vis a vis their experience of sexual exploitation and other means of economic survival on the street. Across all of the focus groups in each of the project sites, there were young women who commented on their inability to find the means to secure adequate housing and food and being forced into prostitution as a means of financial revenue or to stay with an older man in order to maintain some degree of stable housing.<sup>18</sup> We would argue, however, that the sexual exploitation of young women through prostitution must be understood within a larger context of the social control of young women's bodies through sexualized and racialized forms of violence. Given the large number of First Nations young women participating in this project, this exploitation must also be understood within the parameters of colonialism as Razack explains, "although there is no systemic study of the sexual violence Aboriginal women endure today on the streets at the hands of white men, the cases that do surface suggest that the 19<sup>th</sup> century perception of the Aboriginal woman as a licentious and dehumanized squaw continues to prevail" (Razack, 2000: 105). The extent of this issue is captured by one young woman when she says:

*"I look at it like if you drive up and down these streets on a good day hey, you'd probably be like I am happy I am going to school man, I'm happy I'm you know I am not working my body out and doing what other girls are doing and injecting myself full of drugs because I couldn't do it...cause they didn't get chances and no one was listening to them.....so that's why those people are out there like that and that's what my mom said to me...that's why I am still standing...."* (Focus Group Participant, 2005).

Another young woman articulates the social conditions that led her to selling her body when she describes her own experience with sexual exploitation:

*"I used to be in prostitution. I've done a survey and a couple speeches for...uh... Girls for Change .....the place for prostitution and one thing that I pointed out is that when you get into prostitution, nobody wants to do it obviously...like you said you sorta have to do it...and one night I basically needed shelter and I wanted drugs and I needed to get something to eat and it was freezing cold and I had nothing but what was on my back and finally this guy.....I was in the ghetto or whatever you want to call it...the bad neighborhood ..... and he thought I was a prostitute and he said get in and I was so cold and I said fuck it...he said he'll take me to a hotel and he said he'd give me thirty bucks and I could go and get something to eat and I had all my*

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<sup>18</sup> An analysis of the gendered and racialized violence embedded in the commodification of young women's bodies through the sexual exploitation is not able to be addressed within the limited scope of this report.

*problems taken care of and I didn't think I was going to do it again but just I'd done it already and it didn't seem that bad the next time....like I have already done it before and just sorta as you do it ( you lose control of yourself)....exactly, you don't even realize that you are doing anything wrong...it is just like....I'm doing a job...like I need to feed myself .....*" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).

A service provider working in with homeless and/or street-involved youth also commented on the vulnerability to violence and the potential for criminalization homeless young women face when living on the street and attempting to get their basic needs met. She states,

*"It is the crime that you see now. Mail fraud, break and enters, stealing people's credit cards, carrying drugs....these girls are hooking up with adult men in order to do these things to have their basic needs met because they are not being met elsewhere"* (Focus Group Participant, 2005).

Interestingly enough, and contrary to commonly held beliefs about homeless young women's desire to participate in educational programming, almost all of the young women and girls who participated in this project conveyed the importance of obtaining a formal education and expressed a sincere desire to attend school as a means out of social, political, and economic forms of deprivation. A young woman captured this point remarkably when she said,

*"That is one of the reasons I want to stay in school and never ever drop out.....I have thought about it but I never did even though there was a time when I didn't want to go to school.....I would rather...I don't want to live by minimum wage for the rest of my life because it sucks and I don't want to live on welfare....I would rather do it for my own self and be independent cause it doesn't feel all that good waiting for a cheque every two weeks every month.....it makes you feel not all that great....especially cause like I remember my mom on welfare and I would never ever do it.....and you never get nothing, ever.....like our apartment, we lived in a little apartment for like 10 years, me and my mom, my little sister and my little brother and my Dad – just because my mom was on welfare and she couldn't afford anything else....."* (Individual Interview, 2005).

Sharing her perspective, another young girl who was temporarily living in a group home stated:

*"I think about school all the time because I do want to be probation office and I want to have like a good job and I don't want to drop out of school and then I can't go to college and I can't do what I want to do.....yeah its pretty stressful.....the easier thing to do is to just drop out and do whatever but then I think what if I do drop out, what am I going to do like 10 years from now....I'll be living on the streets and its really hard to make money....yeah especially with just a Grade 10"* (Individual Interview, 2005).

This tendency was also echoed by another service provider working with street-involved young women who recounted her experiences and relayed,

*"Generally, the girls I meet absolutely want to go to school, value education, and see it as a major priority"* (Focus Group Participant, 2005.)

Thus, these young women's experiences of economic survival strategies and their related expressions of the importance of education provide a window into discerning how minimal access to educational opportunity can result in increasingly vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and the criminalization of homelessness and poverty. Their social right of access to education, then, is fundamental to ameliorating the social and economic circumstances leading to homeless young women and girls involvement in dangerous, abusive, and exploitive economic survival strategies. This young woman captures this point well when she says,

*"If you don't have school then you can end up resulting in like prostitution and all that other stuff 'cause you're not getting that help that you need (emphasis)...you need that support to keep you from having to do stuff like that"* (Focus Group Participant, 2005).

When asked about where they saw themselves in the future and what they were interested in becoming, the young women and girls routinely responded with professional careers such as lawyers, architects, teachers, social workers, doctors, professors, and veterinarians indicating that they had set goals for themselves, had dreams about how they envisioned their life, and aspired to a quality of life that was commensurate with the 'normal' kids at school to which they were often compared.

### ***3.5 Sexism, Schooling, and Young Women's Experiences of the Street***

Particularly disturbing through the course of focus groups and interviews were the young women and girls' explanations of how they felt they were being judged and scrutinized by male teachers and peers and their reports of sexism and harassment within schools. Their comments became a mirror of the paternalistic nature of society and make apparent the reality that educational institutions are part of a complex set of institutions – the state, families, households, workplaces etc.—which both reflect and reinforce the values and practices of patriarchal capitalism.

Roosmalen describes this larger context as follows,

*"Young adolescent women come of age in a patriarchal culture. The gender system characteristic of the patriarchal culture experienced by girls is largely grounded in constraints such as economic dependence, gendered power relations, fear of harassment, sexism and violence, norms of caring cooperation and appearance, and in shared peer group assumptions about appropriate behavior for females"* (van Roosmalen, 2000: 202).

On numerous occasions, the young women made reference to how they felt as though their sexual histories and life on the street had followed them into the school and this served as a major deterrent for wanting to stay in school and pursue their educational endeavors. One young woman drew attention to how male students at her school harassed her about her sexual history from the street,

*"If you have sex with a certain amount of people and you are a girl, you are a fucking whore.....but guys are heroes. And then people say that to you in school and shit and that is a big problem and I think it is always going to be like that because women are supposed to be lower than men but I think women are way higher than guys...."* (Individual Interview, 2005).

Other young women explained how they felt as though they did not have adequate measures of recourse within the school to challenge what was happening to them by their male peers and male teachers who were making them feel uncomfortable, awkward, and ultimately violated. In other words, their experiences of sexism and sexual harassment suggest the extent to which these experiences have become normalized as part of the social and cultural practices of the school and so deeply embedded in the school fabric and gendered character of interactions between students and between students and teachers that they become extremely difficult to challenge (Briskin, 1994: 443). “Young adolescent women’s sexuality becomes commodified—in advertisements, magazines, music, television and movies, in the economic lures of the sex trade, and in simple day-to-day affirmation of the value males place on females as sexual beings, from teasing, bullying, and harassment to piqued sexual interest by boyfriends and potential boyfriends” (Van Roosmalen, 2000: 203).

One young woman explained how she was made to feel by a male guidance counselor who just found out that she was pregnant,

*“I don’t know, like guidance counselors they don’t work out...I’ve been to lots of guidance counselors and it just never works out...I don’t like the way they look at you just because you are a teen and you’re pregnant...they looked at you in such a different way and they think that you’re bad and stuff...I get that now....he looked at me in a different way, like I am a slut or something” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

The following young woman describes the experience of one of her friends,

*“My friend she is pregnant with twins and she is only 14 years old and her guy teacher looks at her chest and she got grossed out so she didn’t go back to that class. And he is kind of young too and the older girls like him so they have like less clothes” (Individual Interview, 2005).*

Young women also frequently commented on how important it is for homeless young women to have access to female teachers in light of the high degree of male violence many of them have experienced. The importance and urgency of female only teachers in a female only space comes to life in the following quote,

*And like, totally like....girls get sexually abused for a couple of years and then at home by their dads...and then prostitutes are getting raped...like god I don’t know how many times I have been raped....I have been a prostitute since I was 11 and I am 25 now....like come on...how many times have I been like, even when I was wasn’t in school from years 11 to 16...like you know I was violently violated so many times and to bring that into the education system, they just don’t know what to do like... like I remember going to Grange Collegiate and them not knowing what to do with me just because I was a 13 year old prostitute, IV drug user, violent, a lot of people just didn’t know what to do with me at that time....there was no Street Help and there was no safe house, there was nothing...unless someone....girls when they are on the streets....the shit that they go through on the street....you know...not only that but losing our friends...watching them get murdered and OD and raped and left outside cities, do you know what I mean, those are things that we deal with on a day to day basis, not only bad tricks who piss on us and shit on*

*us and beat us and rape us and pull out our hair .....you know, one of my friends got lit on fire....there are so many stories we have of girls who never made it and that is the reality we had to deal with when we were out there.....so there needs to be some kind of group or something if you are going to be able to go to school to be able to deal with that.....not only that...I don't know if Diane told you about that guy she testified against who was a trick....he was a school teacher.....it happens and I am sure.....every high school in this city, being a prostitute for as many years as I was a prostitute in this city...I bet you if I walked through every school and lined all the teachers up I bet you I would find at least four or five who were tricks...I see tricks all over the fucking place...whether it be the janitor, or the principal...whether it be your art teacher or gym teacher....guys buy sex.....(Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

The experiences articulated by these young women and girls clearly demonstrate that sexism and male violence continues to be a serious problem within the context of schools. Their insights also call attention to how sexism intersects with issues of poverty and race to create additional challenges in designing teaching and learning environments. What is vital to consider as a result of this finding is the development of female only educational spaces where homeless and/or street-involved young women who have experienced male violence have the opportunity to participate in educational programs without the sexual harassment and threat of male peers and the power and authority of male teachers.

### ***3.6 Material Needs and School Experience***

Another finding from this research speaks to how the material requirements of education were *not* within the reach of these young women and girls and therefore they were not able to maintain a connection to their public school or chosen educational program. For example, many of the young women had children of their own to care for and without access to safe, quality, and affordable childcare, they were not able to attend school. As one young woman responded when asked about why she had dropped out of school:

*“The childcare. I had three kids and trying to go to school....and....uhm, well the childcare I did have I didn't like it for my kids, it wasn't good enough for my kids. It was too far from where I was living .....” (Individual Interview, 2005).*

Another young woman adds,

*“A baby. Having a baby. I thought it was hard going to school before I had kids....but now it is really hard....nobody will help me...they want me to be independent....” (Individual Interview, 2005).*

Others commented on their inability to secure transportation to and from school, especially within the context of unstable housing and living arrangements.

*“It is hard going to school at the safe house because they only give me two bus tickets a day and I want to go to school.....and sometimes I wanted to go to hand out my resume and they gave me two bus tickets to spend...and the sky train guy he gave me a ticket and I told him to call the safe house because they only gave me two tickets” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Basic school fees and expenses such as money for books and supplies, food for breakfast and lunch, lack of computer access to complete assignments, and having no physical space in which to complete homework and assignments after school were also cited as impediments to educational access. One young woman observed:

*“And most of the teachers expect that you have computers and all this....I never had that...and then they would tell you to go to the public library where you need a bunch of stuff like an address to even use anything at it” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Another remarked:

*“Fees is another big thing...fees for anything like field trips, especially in a class....like if you are living at home it is fine to ask us to bring something from home or we are having a potluck can you bring something from home and tell your mom to do this for you....or especially if you are doing like an assignment and you need supplies and stuff....it is pretty hard for people who aren't living at home because how are they supposed to like take care of themselves and pay for all the supplies and everything....grad fees....it is \$350 just in fees” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

What became clear through these discussions with homeless young women and girls was that, generally, the educational system assumes a very specific understanding of the life experiences and class position of its student body resulting in an erasure of the conditions of poverty many students may be experiencing. The taken for granted financial support of youth residing within the homes of their middle class parents was the hallmark against which these material requirements for school were being both constructed and expected of all students. Although some schools have made attempts to ease the financial burden of participating in what is intended to be free and universally accessible public education, the families of students are increasingly being called upon to financially supplement public education initiatives at a time when nearly every jurisdiction in Canada has been reducing expenditures for education (Ungerleider, 2003: 207). In the specific case of homeless and street-involved young women and girls, this cost translates directly in an increased financial burden for attending school when they themselves may have children to support and almost no financial security, housing instability, and limited employment prospects. This point is affirmed best by one young woman, who said,

*“School fees and school supplies, that's another thing. I don't got money for school supplies...I barely got money to put clothes on my back, you know what I mean....I only have a certain amount of money to last the whole month and I don't want to buy binders and shit like that...and I got my kid” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

### **3.7 ‘Fitting In’ and the Cultural Practices of School**

When the young women and girls in both focus group discussions and individual interviews were asked about how they saw themselves integrating into the education system as a whole, one of the themes that came out consistently was that of the middle class construction of the public

education system and the ways in which these young women's status as homeless or 'living in poverty' served to alienate them from the conventional practices of schooling (Willis, 1981; Foley, 1996). This, in turn, prevented them from 'fitting in' with the rest of the student body. One young woman talked about her lack of housing and support in the following way:

*"My living situation would be the biggest factor there. I just had absolutely no support, actually minus support. Ummm, you know, from my living situation, and as far as school goes, ummm, I of course expected the students not to relate to me, ummm, but none of the teachers, or principal, guidance counselor, resource people did either....nobody" (Individual Interview, 2005).*

In addition, many of the young women and girls also mentioned how this resulted in the labeling and stigmatization of their intellectual ability by school personnel. "Schools have proven themselves a contradictory resource for those who would fit the young to a particular vision of society" (Levinson and Holland, 1996:1). One young woman described how she internalized these feelings of 'difference' within the context of her educational experience,

*"Yeah, but in my mind I was coming from like, 'I'm different', it wasn't like everyone else was different it was like I'm different" (Individual Interview, 2005).*

This finding demonstrates how these young women became characterized as 'different' from the other students as a result of their social status as homeless and/or 'living in poverty'. As aptly stated by Willinsky, "education is no small player in giving meaning to these differences. We are schooled in differences great and small, in borderlines and boundaries, in historical struggles and exotic practices, all of which extend the meaning of difference" (Willinsky, 1998: 1). Intimately related to the social construction of knowledge within the space of the school, then, is a dialogue about the broader school culture itself in relation to notions of difference. Amid debates of multiculturalism and the importance of valuing, recognizing, and contending with a student body politic that is growing increasingly diverse, schools have been forced to come to grips with the fact that they need to address issues of diversity within the educational setting. How this diversity is addressed is a matter of great relevance to the lives of the young women who were involved with the research project. According to these young women and girls, the conflict between the ideology of democratic liberalism and the ideology present in the collective belief system of the dominant culture of Canada seems to create a fundamental dissonance between the kind of access to education that was purported to be offered in the Canadian nation and the reality of groups who fall outside the realm of a middle class and white Canadian citizenry. One young woman sheds light on this phenomenon when she says,

*"They [school personnel] sit there and are prejudging us without even knowing what we are gonna be – like how can you sit there and judge – judge an Aboriginal young girl for instance and say that in five years from now you are either going to overdose or you are going to be a prostitute you know.....how are they making us any more goal oriented than we already are.....they are setting our goals for us already" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Another young girl unveils how she feels as though she has been labeled and stigmatized as a result of the school finding out that she has been homeless and is now on the methadone program to address her addiction issue,

*“.....I don’t know, it just seemed like the same old shit....you know and then I’m on the methadone program and it seemed to really irk people out that I was on methadone and they’re like.....my English teacher was like, what were you drinking....and I said, yah, I am on the methadone program and she said, oh, oh, and you have the methadone on you and I said yah....and she started asking me questions about how they should be assessing me in school and if I should be sitting near the back or does it make you nauseous? And I said no, I have been on five years, I am fine.....it just keeps the needle out of my arm...and when I said that she kinda like (makes face).....and then the next day there was a break and then class started and she got me just 15 minutes into class and said the nurse and the guidance counselor came to talk to you and we didn’t realize you were on the methadone program and I talked to the guidance counselor and then they brought me to the principal and asked ....saying we’re not sure if you should have methadone on school property and I said I’ll keep it in my backpack and take it in front of the nurse, and I don’t know, it turned into too much of a big deal and then I felt cheap...cause now everybody knew I was on the fucking meth and I don’t tell anybody....if I just meet ya I won’t tell you, yeah I’m on the methadone program.....because there is a stigma to it...like oh, you are a hard core heroin addict or whatever...so after that I just..., I wanted to stay clean and I knew I couldn’t stay clean if I was at school.....” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

These comments encourage us to pay heed to the ways in which the education system, through their everyday practices, are complicit in (re)producing forms of social inequality that these young women find outside the school walls. It is through this lens that the education system’s role in the lives of homeless young women and girls is revealed thereby demonstrating that the social, cultural and economic capital generated by the formal education system does not extend to all students equally, and in many cases, is dependant on a normalized middle-class conception of the white student (Giroux, 1983; Bourdieu, 1977; Dei, 1994).<sup>19</sup>

The young women and girls also set forth the notion of ‘difference’ in terms of how the homeless young women and girls perceived their ability to ‘fit in’ with other students in the public schools they were attending. Numerous girls spoke of how they did not see themselves blending in with other students at the school as a result of their lack of stable housing and experiences of poverty. The following young woman describes the conflict between her life experience and those of her peers at school,

*“I have been in like 7 different junior highs and most of them I didn’t make any friends in....people just picked on me because I was chubby and poor....I think I was the poorest kid in school.....I was in foster homes moving all over Nova Scotia” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Another young woman remarked,

*“Yeah, basically because Daddy doesn’t have the Lexus and Mommy doesn’t drive the whatever, we’re not the same you know....whatever...right....I don’t see how any of us really are*

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<sup>19</sup> The notions of social, cultural, and economic capital were set forth by Pierre Bourdieu in his social theories concerning the social reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). For a discussion of the forms of capital as they relate to education and homelessness, please see Vappu Tyyska’s *Long and Winding Road: Adolescents and Youth in Canada Today* (2001).

*different...I find that people on the street....homeless people....you know, they took care of me....when I went to people for help and stuff, they turned me away and people on the street made sure I ate, made sure I was okay...you know I was living in a tent in the back alley... you know...like....and the homeless people took care of me and I...I dunno.....I just don't think enough people in school know that we are really not different and in a lot of ways we are better” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

This young woman who had experienced violence in her home related how disconnected she felt from the school culture as a whole when she stated,

*The day I quit school, ummm, I walked into the school, I was late, and I was having anxiety and stuff, sometimes, and I walked into the school and the bell rang and it just felt like a whole swarm of kids, or young people, cause I'm young and a kid myself, I don't think I'm better than anyone, but sometimes I feel like I'm on another level or something, ummm, it was almost like it was like this slow motion thing where everyone is just running around and in the moment I just felt so separated and I was like....I couldn't breathe, I just left. I walked out and I never went back. So that was the last day (Individual Interview, 2005).*

These young women's stories and perspectives on alienation from the school environment raise serious concerns about the political underpinnings of our educational institutions as well as the forms of knowledge and implicit social messages that are directly and inadvertently being transmitted to students about equality of opportunity, citizenship rights, and the nature of social inequality and injustice in Canadian society. We must ask the question then, if Canada purports to espouse notions of democracy, fairness, and justice in its social institutions, how can the experiences of these young women continue to prevail in our public education system? Moreover, this finding draws attention to how class, race, and gender differences serve to justify differential social, economic, and political participation in Canadian schools. Hampton and St. Denis capture this well when they say, “in other words, race, class, and gender are social relations that have to do with how people are defined, and how those definitions affect participation in social life” (Hampton and St. Denis, 2002: 13).

### ***3.8 Racism and the Legacy of Colonization for Racialized Young Women in School***

In conjunction with homeless young women and girls' critique of the middle class construction of the public education system was their critique of the racist and Euro-centric nature of schooling. Given the large number of participants who self-identified as First Nations, this finding is all too familiar. As Hampton and St. Denis state, “there is no doubt that Aboriginal people, students and teachers must contend with racist practices and beliefs rooted in white supremacy and colonialism” (Hampton and St. Denis, 2002: 5). Intersecting with the issues of homelessness and poverty, then, is the issue of racism, and related process of racialization, that further resulted in many homeless young women and girls' alienation and disengagement from education and formal schooling.<sup>20</sup> In the words of Omi and Winant “race still remains a

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<sup>20</sup> Racialization can be defined as “a political and ideological process by which particular populations are identified by direct or indirect reference to their real or imagined phenotypical characteristics in such a way as to suggest that the population can only be understood as a supposed biological unity” and “any process or situation wherein the idea

fundamental principle of social organization and identity formation (Omi and Winant, 1993: 6). Marker also argues this point precisely when he says, “it is a complex landscape of colliding interpretations and fundamental goals and purposes across the cultural barricades. In short, Indian education is about Indian-White relations. It has been, and remains, the central arena for negotiating identities and for translating the goals and purposes of the cultural Other” (Marker, 2000: 31).

*“I just didn’t like it there...and then you know my ethics teachers was like psychotic.....he looked weird and then the way they have it...I feel like that school is so racist....like I felt dirty going into that school you know if I walked in with this (points to a symbol on her necklace)...like I would feel dirty.. but now that I see it as I go into that school and I try to act bigger than them...they try to make me feel small, I’ll come back at them and try and make them feel smaller...that’s how I come back at it...like I am not going to go back there and cause stuff but what I am saying is that when....I wouldn’t like anyone to take their kids to go there....and awful school, they are so racist...I felt dirty basically I felt like people can just walk all over you....so I stopped school for a year...I didn’t want to go back to school...” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Surfacing through these descriptions is the notion that the educational experiences of homeless and/or street involved young women cannot be understood through the lens of poverty alone. Rather, we would argue that racialized young women who are homeless and/or street-involved experience interlocking forms of oppression that impact how they experience education. As Henry and Tator most aptly suggest, “although lip service is paid to the need to ensure equality in a pluralistic society, in reality individuals, organizations, and institutions are far more committed to maintaining the status quo in order to stabilize or increase their power.” (Henry and Tator, 1994: 1). As such, the experiences of these young women must be understood as part of a greater societal arrangement that deliberately renders the voices, lived experiences, and histories of certain collectives invisible within our social institutions.

Alongside young women’s accounts of individual incidences of racism were more nuanced critiques of the institutional forms of racism in the education system as a whole. First Nations young women participating in the project consistently cited the lack of First Nations teachers and support workers, as well as the lack of First Nations content and curriculum as problematic aspects of their educational experience. This becomes evident in the following exchange:

*G3: We learn about the history and I am sorry...I think they should have....when you go to a regular school and you know you learn about white people (laughs).....you never learn about you know like native people.....we were the first people in Canada.*

*G5: I know.*

*G3: We don’t learn about us...and I don’t know.... that’s stupid.*

*G7: It’s like we don’t exist.*

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of ‘race’ is introduced to define and give meaning to some particular populations characteristics and actions” (Miles quoted in Jiwani, 2001, 7).

*G3: Out of all of the history books how many pages do you guys see out of there that is the history of natives? One little section.....*

*G4: One page.....*

*G5: And when you are like the only native person in the classroom they treat you like you should know everything about your past and everything...they just put you on the spot....when we moved to Daylesford I was the only....it felt like I was the only native one there and there was Punjabi and everybody else and I was just like, okay where do I fit in.*

*G3: Yeah, they should have like a native school from like Grade 8 to like Grade 12. But I don't know.....Actually we should be learning about ourselves, you know.....like the only place when I was in elementary that I learned about my native culture was the reserve because they had a native school there right...and like instead of Spanish and shit, why aren't we learning our native language.....*

This point was reiterated by another young woman who passionately stated:

*“There are also not that many Aboriginal teachers.....there needs to be more Aboriginal teachers and classes too.....they should have more classes, like what she said, about learning about your culture and stuff.....you know like some parents were never taught the stuff because their parents were in residential schools or whatever....and you know like, they should have classes.....” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

The following young women drew attention to the importance Aboriginal support workers for First Nations students when she told the following story,

*“I think that in the elementary schools the Aboriginal support workers used to be a lot better.....than they are now. Like I think there was probably like 20 or 30 kids in my school and, and like....our Aboriginal support workers took us out of class to just like hang out just because she knew that we wanted to get out of class or something....she would figure out something, she would make appointments or whatever.....like we would have walks or whatever or we would be hanging out and making necklaces.....and now, I think they cut a lot of them.....I know there is like only Aboriginal stuff like afterschool one day a week.....or something like that....they don't have that stuff anymore.....like I was really close to my support worker when I was in elementary school....like we were.....she would help us with our homework after school and it was much better than it is now because I don't think they really care about that anymore and I think they should have it for every kid who is Aboriginal in elementary school because I know high school they don't care about it, but elementary school they have more control over it because they are taken out of class and if the kids don't want any of that stuff they don't have to, but if you are the kind of person that wants to get more involved actually like in your culture or whatever...they can be there and they can do stuff with you.... especially like some kids maybe they don't have anyone to hang out with and maybe they can't talk to their parents or whatever....if there is like somebody there for you to look up to and who you can talk to and who*

*you can have fun with at least like once or twice a week.....but they don't even have that anymore....." (Focus Group Participant, 2005)*

Calls for First Nations content in the curriculum and the hiring of Aboriginal teachers, then, was of paramount concern to many of the homeless young women participating in the project and advanced as fundamental component of any educational program designed to meet their needs.

### **3.9 Teacher/Student Relationships and the Politics of Caring**

*"There are a lot of just .....uh....judgments made by teachers and stuff...like what she was saying (gestures to another young woman)...it's hard to feel comfortable when your teachers.....you know when this person is trying to give you a so-called good education is .....like I don't like you because your Dad does not impress me and you are not wearing the right kind of clothes.....maybe they see too much of themselves, who knows what their problem is.....maybe they have some kind of judgment and you can't have a good education when you don't have a good relationship with the educator" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

The quote above demonstrates one of the salient findings of this research; the perceived relationship between the young women and girls and the teachers with whom they interact on a daily basis at school. The notion of 'caring' came up in every focus group and interview with homeless young women and girls across the country, many of them citing experiences where they felt as though the teachers simply did not care about their life circumstances or the struggles with poverty, racism, and sexism they were facing. The 'politics of caring' as talked about by the young women and girls, then, served as an avenue for them to articulate why they chose to reject or embrace their education depending on the situation with their individual teachers. As stated by Valenzuela, "relations with school personnel, especially with teachers, play a decisive role in determining the extent to which youth find the school to be a welcoming or alienating place" (Valenzuela, 1999: 7). A young woman explained what happened with her teacher when she was trying to secure stable housing,

*"When I was going through like house to house to house and I missed a week of school because I was just going from house to house to house....and when I got to school she (the teacher) was like 'why weren't you here?' and I said well can I talk to you at recess and she was like 'no say it front of the class' and I was like 'well I really don't want to' and she was like 'fine, you can talk to me at recess'. And, I talked to her and she was like oh, you are the kid my husband ... cause her husband tells her everything right. And I was just like, that shit is confidential. She was like, so where are you staying now, and I was like I am moving in with my auntie but it doesn't really concern her. And the next day she was like, did you get all of your homework done and I was like what homework, you didn't give me anything....and she was like, that's your problem" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Another young woman adds,

*"One excuse the teachers use is that we can't give you like special needs, you know...you should be at the same pace as the rest of the class, like....even if you have no where to live and you don't have any money....everyone else did this test on this day and but.....maybe everyone else*

*isn't homeless and like living in this kind of certain situation and they don't see that. Or maybe like everyone else doesn't have to work" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Having no school support when moving schools as a result of transfers between foster homes and/or groups homes was also deemed problematic by the girls as the following young woman clarifies,

*"Well, when I got shipped off to the group home I remember like....I dunno I thought I could do work and stuff but then they said oh, go to Shawville and like....I really didn't understand what was happening and no one ever gave me the chance to like sit down and talk to me about what was happening and then I still had to do all the work.....like no one ever said like 'you're in a group home, like'....and the school just like.....it was just like they didn't care .....they just give you the work and whatever happens happens....." (Individual Interview, 2005).*

In the eyes of these homeless young women and girls, the lack of authentic displays and endorsements of caring become normalized teaching practice and their (non)presence within the school seemed to be of little concern to the teachers and administrators with whom they interacted the most often. This dispensability, in turn, portrayed the message that these particular students are nonessential parts of the school machinery and are not worthy of the network of supports granted to students located at more privileged social positions.

*"They [teachers] don't care about your problems....you are not supposed to technically bring your problems to school but that is their job right.....like they don't care if you have problems, they want straight A's, 80 and above.....they don't give a fuck about your problems....." (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Some of the most compelling evidence that these young women and girls *do* care about their education can be seen in their determination to make it to the classes of those teachers who they felt have been supportive of them over time, despite extremely challenging life situations.

*"I used to have two jobs and try and go to school and it is insane....like you get off school.....I used to work in the MacDonal'd's.....I would get off school and run home.....with enough time to get home change into my uniform and I would have to be at work for 3:30pm.....I was like ready to collapse....then I had to eat and go to work for like 4-8 hours and then leave work, go home do my homework and go to sleep and get up the next day and do it again" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

This young woman comments on how important it was to her that a principal attended a family member's funeral with her:

*"My principal came to my grandmother's funeral and that made me feel like she was really trying to help and make me feel better and stuff.....and sometimes at Christmas and stuff she would help us, cause we were really poor and stuff, get Christmas gifts and stuff" (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

In essence, these remarks point to the importance of the teacher-student/student-school personnel relationships from the vantage point of homeless and street-involved young women and girls. In

the absence of genuine and sincere displays of caring and humanity as demonstrated by teachers and school personnel, these young women will continue to experience educational spaces as disconnected from their lived experience and exclusionary social institutions that operate more as factory sites of production than spaces of teaching, learning, and respect.

### ***3.10 School Drop-Out and/or Expulsion and the Question of ‘Choice’***

School drop-out and expulsion was a theme that arose across all focus groups and interviews and is also highlighted in the limited studies that have been conducted on this topic. However, we would argue that it is important to consider the context under which homeless and/or street-involved young women may be expelled or forced to drop out of public educational institutions.

Within the scope of this project, school fighting between students and attendance problems were cited by the young women as the primary reasons for their expulsion from school. It is our contention, however, that strict school attendance policies, as outlined in the previous finding, are not developed or constructed within the scope of the life experiences of homeless and/or street-involved young women and girls and consequently forcibly removes these young women from schools without due or just cause and without acknowledgement or support of their lived reality. Missing a series of classes as a result of a lack of safe and affordable housing, poor nutrition, experiences of violence and trauma, and childcare responsibilities is *not* a matter of individual choice but a direct consequence of a declining welfare state, the refusal of basic needs and social supports, unlivable welfare rates, and a related shift in popular societal understandings of the origins of poverty from one of the unequal distribution of power, property, and resources to individual failure and personal responsibility. The young women directly challenged the absurdity of suspension as a punishment for skipping school and indicated that this measure increased their growing disengagement rather than motivating them to continue to find ways to pursue schooling.

*“Well attendance for me was like this because like....I don’t know, its hard on methadone, but not only that, but you know with single moms and everything and when I had the kids....when I was trying to get back into school I had my two boys and just getting up every morning and hauling my kids and taking them to daycare and one wasn’t old enough to go to day care so I’d have to drop him off at a babysitter’s and then get back on the bus and transfer to another bus to get school and then I was fucking 20 minutes late and there was this whole attendance part....and I’m sorry but I was up at 5:30am this morning you know hauling my ass on the bus with my two fucking babies to get here and I am sorry I missed the bus because one of them puked all over himself or whatever, you know what I mean....like some mornings I was on the bus at like 7:20am and then school.....you know.....and then you get ...your attendance has really been off.....like fuck off, I don’t care.....” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

One young woman explained what happened when she ‘dropped out’,

*“I just got so behind and it just kept piling up in all my classes, all my work that I was missing cause I couldn’t make it to school – I didn’t have bus fare and plus I was just so like upset that my brother kicked me out when I was just starting to build my grades up again...I was just so discouraged because the whole reason I moved in with him was to get out of my mom’s place*

*which was an unstable environment and then I just got thrown back in there right before I was about to graduate. I just wanted to give up. If I had like a lot more support than I might have stuck in there....instead of teachers saying like actually I am not going to let you make up this test...they think that is going to make you like, oh no I am going to buckle up and make sure I am there, but it doesn't it pushes me in the direction and .....oh great, my marks getting lower and lower by the day...so if she is not letting me make this test up....it is more like, they should be like yeah,, make this test up....I think they are just thinking about the other students – like they all did this and it is not fair” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

With respect to the notion of school fighting, many of the young women girls described how they were expelled for resisting sexual harassment by male teachers and peers, responding to racism and homophobia, and defending their past histories of street life. While zero-tolerance policies have been designed to decrease incidences of individual acts of violence, they have done little, if anything, to address institutional forms of violence that are deeply connected to issues of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia which ultimately resulted in many of the individual acts of violence these young women revealed.<sup>21</sup>

The following young woman, who had been expelled many times from school for ‘fighting’, describes her school’s attempt to address the racism she was facing,

*“I mean, there was a lot they couldn’t help me with.....they knew what’s happening but they didn’t help....I know one big part, like it wasn’t personal but like the time I got....like I was getting beat up all the time and they sent home a letter to my mom saying maybe I shouldn’t go back to that school because they can’t do anything about it and that’s why I stopped going to school” (Individual Interview, 2005).*

The fighting that many of the young women described, then, must be understood as a response to the racialized, gendered, and classed system of schooling and the perceived difference these young women represent to their peers. In other words, it is a response to the institutional forms of violence that are enacted against them through racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia that become part of the education system as a whole (Roman and Eyre, 1997).

### ***3.11 Policies and Practices***

When asked about specific school policies and practices that may have impacted their experiences of education, the young women and girls cited attendance policies, address policies, and being passed on to the next grade without knowing what was happening in their current or previous grade as central in their ability to remain connected to formal education.

In relation to attendance policies, young women explained how their absence from school resulted in their continued expulsion and prohibited them from attending until the next semester began. As one young woman explains,

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<sup>21</sup> Please see <http://www.safeschoolsmanitoba.ca/On-line%20Resources/Zero%20Tolerance.htm> and <http://www.law.du.edu/russell/rj/uwi/Haft.pdf> for more information on the critique of zero tolerance policies in schools.

*“.....uhm, in a lot of schools there is this thing that if you miss 12 classes you get kicked out...that’s what happened to me....I got kicked out because I had so many absences but I don’t think its fair...I mean I had good marks in every single one of my classes, even when I wasn’t there.....and I don’t think they should have kicked me out...I still...I mean when I did go to school I got caught up and I still had good marks....I think that is really weird....”(Individual Interview, 2005).*

This young woman describes what happened when the school she was attending found out that she was homeless and had no current address,

*“In Grade 8 I was living on the streets and they told me that I couldn’t go to school but yet I was coming to school everyday and getting my homework done but when they found out I was living on the streets, they said I couldn’t go....but I didn’t want to go to a group home and I didn’t want to go from foster home to foster home again.....so.....and they kicked me out and told me I was not allowed to go back to that school” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

Expressing frustration with not having the opportunity to adequately learn the curricular knowledge associated with a particular grade, the following quote demonstrates how homeless young women and girls may be passed on to the next grade without having mastered the skills and knowledge of their current grade.

*“Well, uhm.....in Grade 7 I got kicked out or whatever so that kind of messed me up for school and like my teachers could help me but they didn’t really understand.....I mean they knew that I was going through this but I was back and forth between my mom and dad’s and foster homes for a long time and I had to put myself in a group home because of it and I guess that they didn’t (teachers) really help you....like...I find that I don’t want to be in a young grade but maybe it would help me more because some of the stuff that people do I don’t understand and because the reason why I couldn’t go to school was because I had a fucked up family kind of thing....they didn’t really help...they just sort of pushed you along and that puts more stress on you....they think they are helping you but they are not – like I would rather they put me back in Grade 8 again so that I can do my work.....like that year they kicked me out in October and they kicked me out for the whole entire year.....I don’t know anything...they did fractions and I don’t know how to do fractions.....I don’t know how to do my times tables....like I am in Grade 11 and I can’t multiply and I have to use a calculator.....like all of this because all of the stuff that happened in my family...like... I didn’t focus on school.....like that’s horrible....I am 17 and I don’t know multiplication.....I don’t know how to divide....like, I don’t know.....” (Individual Interview, 2005).*

These girls’ experiences with school policies and practices, once again, indicate a lack of awareness and understanding of the social realities of poverty faced by these young women and the continued association of the ‘problem of homelessness’ with the individual young woman. We would argue that the education system’s refusal to accommodate these experiences effectively denies these young women their social right to educational access thereby blocking one of the primary means of securing an adequate standard of living and decent quality of life to which all Canadians are entitled.

### ***3.12 Education and the Criminalization of Poverty***

One of the most alarming findings of this exploratory project was the high degree of policing and criminalization of teenage girls living in poverty. The criminalization of young women and girls living in poverty has been documented by criminologists and feminists studying the legacy of social control mechanisms enacted by the state against young women who fall outside the realm of acceptable social norms of behavior or practice (Reistman-Street, 1999; Faith, 1993).

“Poverty and racist discrimination are frequently demonstrated by researchers to be significant factors in criminalization processes. However, since most poor people and most “people of colour” do not engage in crime, neither poverty nor racist designation, alone or in combination, can account for criminal behaviour. Those who are held accountable for criminal behaviours are often those who are already under the eye of the law and who have little voice (Faith, 1993: 107).

In her recent report of young women’s experiences of prison in British Columbia, Dean describes how the criminal justice system, alongside various forms of policing, have been drawn upon as a protective measure for securing the safety of young women who are deemed homeless, street-involved, or ‘high-risk’. She states,

“unfortunately, the criminal justice system is seldom, if ever, a “safe” place for girls, as sexual harassment from police officers, male guards and inmates is common in these young women’s experiences, and violence, segregation, strip-searches, and invasive psychological assessments combine to put girls at as much if not greater risk within prison walls” (Dean, 2005: 3).

*“You know a lot of crime that people do is mostly for money right....like I have done crimes for money and you know why that is why schools should be helping you to find a job and then I won’t have to do crime” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

In addition to the forms of harm described above, however, is the added implication of disrupted educational programming for homeless and street-involved young women. One young woman explains how her incarceration in prison resulted in a serious gap in her educational career,

*“I did most of my schooling while I was incarcerated and so my schooling doesn’t stand up in the education system...I was incarcerated for three years....after they released me into this program at Stoga High and I was in a half-way house after secure custody and my schooling was like nothing, you know what I mean...” (Focus Group Participant, 2005).*

This comment suggests the need for a much deeper investigation of the relationship between the criminal justice system and institutions of education, as well as programs that are designed to ‘reintegrate’ youth who have been incarcerated back into the public system of education. In addition, a critical evaluation of the educational programming offered in youth prisons and the development of recommendations for action and reforms in all of these areas is of paramount

concern. We would argue that this initiative must be carried out with overall belief that young women living in poverty should not be criminalized and incarcerated for their own protection, and that we must work towards the development of supports and services for these young women that provide the means of access for an improved quality of life and the meeting of their basic needs.

## Part 4: Recommendations

### *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28*

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

- (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
- (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
- (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;
- (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;
- (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.<sup>22</sup>

The question of educational reform is one of the most highly contested and debated efforts in our society. Schools are considered to be the benchmark of a nation and one of the social institutions with the most influence over the molding and shaping future of citizens. The ‘deep structures of schooling’ are composed of values and assumptions about education that are widely shared throughout our society (Tye, 2000: 3). As such, we would assert that it is imperative that we be mindful of the kind of educational reform initiatives we recommend in light of research findings and exploratory inquiry into social issues related to education. The question of homelessness and poverty as it relates to education is no different. MacLeod explains this concern well when commenting on the push for ‘better schools’ in the United States to address broader questions of social and economic inequality in American society,

“If only poor children had access to quality education, opportunity for individual social mobility would be equalized across the social classes and the gap between rich and poor substantially reduced. But the problems with this approach are substantial. First, as we have seen, schools actually maintain and legitimize social inequality. Second, educational reform leaves the underlying structure of economic inequality untouched.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>

Still though no substitute for fundamental structural change, improved schooling could help countless individuals.....” (MacLeod, 1995: 262).

In other words, improving the educational experiences of these young women is more than a question of increasing educational access and opportunity alone. As these young women and girls have so articulately pointed out in their own words, the cultural practices of the school, institutional forms of racism and sexism, curriculum issues, alongside many material constraints of schooling, and the perceived lack of caring exhibited by school personnel as a whole suggests a rethinking of the underlying purpose of our educational institutions within the context of social and economic inequality experienced by these young women and girls. Nonetheless, the process of educational change must begin somewhere and this exploratory research has important implications for educational reform efforts. While what is offered below is by no means a comprehensive overhaul of the public education system, it provides some practical suggestions with which educators and broader school personnel, policy makers, other government officials, and youth advocates can begin to think about how to create changes in the educational experiences of homeless young women and girls.

#### ***4.1 Framework for Alternative Educational Programming for Homeless Young Women and Girls***

Given the range of challenges and barriers to access public education as indicated through the experiences of these young women, our first recommendation calls on the provincial government and territories, as well as Ministries of Education across the nation, to establish the option of school choice through the development of alternative educational programs specifically designed for homeless young women and girls. These programs would be situated outside the mainstream public education system, ideally in a feminist community-based organization that could facilitate such an educational program. Some of the last questions that were posed to the young women through focus group discussions and individual interviews related to their perspectives and ideas for the development of this alternative educational program. The potential components they identified were as follows:

- A girls only space with female teachers only;
- Flexibility in the teaching and learning environment;
- A rethinking of the tradition relationship between teachers and students to involve a more interactive exchange between teachers and students;
- Material supports for participating in educational programming such as on-site day care, food programs, and monetary stipends for attending the program to address the lack of financial support available to homeless young women and girls by their families and social services;
- Counseling services specializing in sexual abuse training to address the issues of violence and trauma many of the young women have experienced;
- Policies to address racism, sexism, and homophobia within the program;
- Education for counselors and teachers about the impact of poverty in girls lives, and how this impacts access to education;
- Access to addictions counseling and treatment;
- Connection to housing support workers in the community as well as health-care workers;

- The development of a girls group where young women who have experienced poverty, homelessness, and street-involvement can share their ideas and experiences and challenge some of the institutions affecting them;
- The educational program start mid-morning and be shorter than a traditional school day;
- Curriculum content that speaks to the lived experiences of these young women and girls while teaching basic skills;
- A life skills component that address topics such as personal banking, cooking, and parenting;
- Teachers and staff who had a level of knowledge and understanding of issues of poverty, homelessness, and violence;
- Smaller class sizes with the capacity for one-on-one tutoring as required;
- First Nations teachers and First Nations content in the curriculum for First Nations young women and girls;
- A concerted focus on social responsibility in the program curriculum; and
- Access to extracurricular activities that is not contingent on paying fees.

#### ***4.2 Professional Development and Training***

Since it is unrealistic to assume that all homeless young women and girls in Canada will have access to alternative forms of education that may be designed to meet their needs, our second recommendation speaks to the need for professional development and training in the area of social inequality, specifically as it relates to issues of poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia, for all teachers, school administrators, and school personnel. Provincial governments and territories across Canada, as well as local school districts, must make a commitment to raising awareness of these issues and to decipher the ways in which educational institutions, as well as individual teacher practice, are contributing to the disconnection and alienation of homeless young women and girls from public education. Moreover, there needs to be an acknowledgement and understanding of the material reality of poverty, violence, and the social context in which these young women live in order to facilitate their learning and to ensure an approach of humanity and respect when attempting to meet the educational needs of homeless and street-involved young women. These professional development workshops and training would directly counter the tendency to construct poverty, racism, and sexism as individual problems as opposed to broader social concerns.

#### ***4.3 Social Justice Education***

We recommend that provincial and territorial governments and Ministries of Education re-establish anti-racism, anti-homophobia, and anti-sexism education and policy development as an imperative element of schooling for children and youth. Social justice education and notions of social responsibility need to become fundamental aspects of public education in Canada. This would involve the development of school policy to facilitate social justice education as well as an implementation and plan to ensure that resources are allocated to this effort. Social justice education would impact the development of teaching and learning environments generally, curriculum choice, pedagogic practices, and the underlying philosophies of the purpose of our educational institutions.

#### ***4.4 Teacher Education Programs***

Next, we would recommend that teacher education programs operating at the university and college level implement curriculum that draws attention to issues of social inequality before new teachers enter the education system to ensure some awareness and understanding of these issues prior to teaching.

#### ***4.5 School-Community Alliances***

Considering the range of factors impacting homeless young women and girls' experiences of education, the fifth recommendation relates to the strengthening of relationships between schools and community organizations and institutions that may be attempting to address the broader range of needs articulated by homeless and street-involved young women and girls. These organizations may also be useful in developing educational strategies that would be targeted at addressing the systemic causes that create conditions of social inequality and limited access to the exercise of social rights. For example, local school boards could develop relationships with housing coalitions, organizations working on addressing issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty, and feminist organizations that were providing advocacy and support to young women living in poverty. Government must value feminist organizations providing much needed rape crisis and anti-violence programs. The expertise of social justice/equality seeking groups must be sought and supported in relation to improving educational access, as well as the nature of the education itself, for girls who have experienced violence and are living in poverty. It is vital, then, that we begin to think about creating alliances across institutional structures, where similar sorts of transformations need to occur. It is not enough to make the changes in one social institution when each one forms a piece of a network for a larger whole.

#### ***4.6 Pedagogic Innovation and the Role of the Teacher***

The specific relationship between the individual student and her teacher has a profound impact on a student's desire to participate in learning. "Teacher quality is the single most influential factor in student achievement" (Barr and Parrett, 2003: 15). Teachers are mediators, legitimators, and propagators of ideas and social practices, operating from a very specific social location and position of power, and in some ways acting as gate-keepers to students' achievements and access to further education and related opportunities. The authority of a teacher to choose a certain set of readings over another, utilize specific teaching practices, and set the physical conditions of the classroom speak to the notion that teachers engage in decision making on a daily basis that reflects their political positions. As such, teachers play a crucial role in the construction of school experiences, production of school outcomes, and validation of certain lived experiences for their students. While we are aware that a teacher's capacity to influence the entire educational experience of a student may be constrained by broader school policy, state mandated requirements, and the impact of other societal institutions on the conventional practices of schools, we would argue that teachers can significantly influence how teaching and learning occurs in their individual classroom environments.

Many of the young women in this project voiced their concerns about the authoritative nature of the student-teacher relationship. As a result, we recommend that educators develop new pedagogic strategies for engaging young women and girls who may be experiencing the material, social, and emotional consequences of homelessness, poverty, and violence. This may involve a shifting of the traditional teacher-student relationship, which is predicated on the imparting of ‘facts, skills, and knowledge’ *from* teachers to students, to an alternative approach that recognizes the experiential knowledge of homeless and street-involved young women. It may further entail the formation of a critical, dialogical, and participatory classroom setting where teachers invite these young women to take ownership over their own education and give meaning to the subject matter with their own words. In this context, both teachers and students become guides to class discussions, encourage social and self- reflection, and foster the creation of a non-competitive academic environment. These calls for alternative pedagogies, inclusive curriculum, and representative environments can be more broadly understood as a challenge to the Euro-centered norms, values, and ideas that currently characterize Canadian schools, and rests on the assumption that schools *can* serve as a site of resistance to various forms of domination (Dei, 1996: 22).

#### ***4.7 Changes in Curriculum***

Alongside the development of new teaching strategies we recommend that public school curriculum become more situated within students’ thoughts, language, and experiences. Information must be presented that is both representative of student backgrounds and mirrors their material reality in some way. These young women and girls need to be engaged in their education in a way that acknowledges their social conditions instead of denying them. Connecting the curriculum with the interests and experiences of these young women can be done, but it requires commitment—both attitudinal and material—to meeting their needs.

In this regard, learning must involve the formulation of critical and analytical habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, and discussing that demand a deeper analysis of subject matter and curriculum content. Students, then, must engage in education in a way that fosters the development of a set of skills that enables them to analyze their localized environment as part of a larger social and political milieu where events carry meaning that can be attached to an individual’s particular context. In this sense, critical analysis and thought cannot be reduced to a set of skills, but must also be regarded as the adoption of a critical conscience. As succinctly stated by Osbourne, “critical thinking, in other words, is not only the ability to analyze what other people say and do—it is also a set of principles for shaping one’s life, both in thought and action” (Osbourne, 1994: 428). If the goal of student learning is to become empowered in a way that will prompt them to become advocates of ‘true’ democratic citizenship, then they must acquire the skills with which this may be accomplished – critical literacy is fundamental to reaching this end.

#### ***4.8 Development of Formal School Policies and Actions to Address Challenges and Barriers Facing Homelessness Young Women and Girls***

In light of the numerous institutional barriers to merely accessing what is intended to be free and universal public education in Canada, we recommend the provincial and territorial governments, as well as Ministries of Education across the nation, develop a strategy and set of actions for addressing these challenges. Specifically school attendance and address policies are in need of amendment to reflect the realities homeless and street-involved young women, as well as the removal of schools fees and related costs of attending public school without adequate financial support and secured housing for homeless and street-involved young women. Feminist housing strategies must be also be supported as well as the development of support programs to address nutritional issues, healthcare, criminal justice advocacy, and childcare. The development of these action plans must be done collaboratively with organizations who are working directly with young women living in poverty and who have knowledge of the interlocking and multiple forms of marginalization and oppression these young women face. Provincial and territorial governments must make a commitment to fund these changes and provide the resources required for their implementation and evaluation.

#### ***4.9 Shifting from Employment to Education***

We recommend that federal, provincial,, and territorial governments shift the focus of policy and program development and support for homeless young women and girls from one solely preoccupied with job readiness and employment training to increasing accessibility to education. Employability must be of secondary concern to the importance of ensuring the social right of access to education.

#### ***4.10 Commitment to the Allocation of Resources***

Finally, we recommend that provincial and territorial governments commit to the allocation of resources for education in all provinces and territories across the country in order to ensure that all of our children and youth have access to the public education to which they are constitutionally entitled. The social, economic, and political consequences of the denial of this social right are especially grave for homeless young women and girls who will continue to be subjected to violence and criminalization on the street without the ability to secure the means of access to social and economic mobility.

*International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, Article 13*<sup>23</sup>

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

2. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of this right:

(a) Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all;

(b) Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education;

(c) Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education;

(d) Fundamental education shall be encouraged or intensified as far as possible for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education;

(e) The development of a system of schools at all levels shall be actively pursued, an adequate fellowship system shall be established, and the material conditions of teaching staff shall be continuously improved.

3. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

4. No part of this article shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principles set forth in paragraph I of this article and to the requirement that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm#art13>

## Part 5: Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this exploratory work demonstrate some of the challenges and limitations our schools face in making education accessible, meaningful, and relevant for the diverse student body politic that comprises many of our educational institutions today. More importantly, they make evident the urgency of creating educational spaces and programs that disrupt many of the conventional practices of schools that are constructed to meet the needs of a particular student that fits within the standards of the mythical norm.<sup>24</sup> What becomes alarmingly clear as one listens to the perspectives and experiences of these young women and girls is that they are being denied their social right of access to universal public education which we would argue is a direct contravention of both the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, and the *Education Acts* governing the provinces of British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia.

As stated previously, this project was intended to be a first glance at how educational institutions are implicated in issues of poverty and homelessness and Canada, specifically for young women and girls. Much work still needs to be conducted in this area, including an investigation of the links between the education system and other institutions such as criminal justice, health, and child welfare which are also intimately connected to how these young women experience their education, and the related actions and recommendations for change. A more nuanced analysis of the impact of racism and the legacy of colonialism for First Nations young women living in poverty also needs to be undertaken as well as analysis of how sexuality and homophobia may differentially impact educational experiences for different groups of homeless and/or street-involved young women. An exploration of the existing alternative educational programs designed to meet the needs of homeless and street-involved young women and the impact of violence and trauma on their learning are also areas worthy of exploration if we are going to work towards the development of alternative education spaces and participatory learning environments.

It would be in our best interest to pay heed to the experience, wisdom, and insight of the many young women across the nation that participated in this project. By sharing their knowledge, stories, and perspectives, they have invited us to rethink the kind of society we wish to live and, in turn, to shape our educational institutions to reflect the sentiments of humanity, justice, and equality to which we all should aspire. In the heartfelt and inspiring words of one young woman,

*“people like to be knowing that someone is actually listening to what they are saying...some people look at you like,.....what are you talking about, we can't change the system.....but we can change the system...we can change it” (Individual Interview, 2005).*

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<sup>24</sup> The mythical norm refers to the notion of the ‘ideal’ students as constructed through the policies and cultural practices of schools. It often refers to the white, middle-class, heterosexual male student (Ellsworth, 1989: 309).

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## About the Project Team

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**Jaskiran Dhillon** has been a researcher of social issues and community worker/advocate for the past ten years. She has worked extensively in both Canada and the United States with marginalized youth around issues of social exclusion. Jaskiran is currently a PhD Candidate in the Education, Culture, and Society program at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania and the principal investigator of the Struggles for Access Project examining the educational experiences of homeless young women and girls in Canada.

**Asia Czapska** started at Justice for Girls when she was 17 years old as part of an HRDC funded Young Women's Internship Program. As a result of her success in the program, Justice for Girls employed Asia to work as a court monitor and eventually to coordinate a multi-year federally funded project on young women and the criminal justice system. Since then, Asia has secured federal funding from Status of Women Canada for a 3-year initiative, starting in April 2004, to develop a national housing strategy for girls in poverty. Asia brings to her work critical experiential knowledge as a young woman who grew up in poverty and who was marginalized out of the secondary school system. She has been consulted nationally, provincially and locally on issues relating to violence, poverty/homelessness, and criminalization of teenage girls and has represented Justice for Girls amongst educators, policy makers, legal professionals, media outlets, and grassroots organizations.

**Annabel Webb** is a founder of Justice for Girls and currently works as an advocate and coordinator of the organization. She has been a feminist activist for over a decade and has worked to prevent violence against women and girls in a variety of frontline organizations including women's anti-violence groups and street outreach programs for youth. Formally educated in psychology, she has also worked as a researcher in the academic context on a number of projects relating to domestic male violence.

## About Justice for Girls

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Justice for Girls (JFG) is a non-profit organization that promotes and works towards creating justice and equality for low-income and homeless teenage girls. The organization was formed in response to local, national, and international calls for "girl only" programs and services that acknowledge and address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of girls, particularly in relation to homelessness, poverty, and violence.

Justice for Girls is well established in the community, amongst academics, media outlets, and legal professionals, as a credible and innovative organization. JFG's work ranges from localized and individual hands on advocacy and support for/with teenage girls to provincial, federal, and international systemic work to promote justice and equality. Please see [www.justiceforgirls.org](http://www.justiceforgirls.org) for more information on the organization's work.

## **Appendix A**

# Struggles for Access: Examining the Educational Experiences of Homeless Young Women and Girls in Canada

## SAMPLE THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

### Young Women and Girls

#### *General Questions*

1. What is the thing that comes to mind first when you think about your school experiences?
2. What do you think the purpose of school is? Can you describe whether or not you think getting a formal education in school is important?
3. What are some of the things you do when you are not in school?
4. How far have you gone in school?
5. What are some of things that you dream about becoming in the future?
6. What were the things that you liked about school? What did you dislike and why?

#### *Peer Relationships*

7. What were (are) the other students like in your school? What was it like making friends? Can you describe how you saw yourself fitting into school?

#### *Broader School Support*

8. How would you describe the teachers at your school? Did you feel like they were supportive of you?
9. Did you ever feel as though a teacher was treating you unfairly?
10. Was there anyone in school that you felt comfortable confiding in or approaching about problems you might be having with schoolwork or things that were going on in other parts of your life?
11. Have you ever approached the school guidance counselor for support? What was that experience like?
12. Have you ever had an interaction with a school person that made you feel creeped out?
13. Can you think of any policies or school practices that made it difficult for you to attend school or want to stay in it?
14. What were some of the things in your life that you felt the school was not able to support you in?

#### *Leaving School*

15. If you chose to leave school, can you talk about why? What are some of the things that made you decide to leave?
16. Have you ever been expelled from school? Can you describe what happened?
17. What happened when you left school?

#### *Being a Young Woman*

18. What could your schools have done to make it better for you while you were there? What things might have made you decide to stay?

19. Are there particular things that you feel as a girl or young woman should be taken into consideration by schools if they are going to support you?
20. If you were going to change anything about your school, what would it be?

*Alternative Educational Programs*

21. Have any of you continued your formal education in a program based outside of the public school system?
22. What do you like or dislike about this program?
23. How did this program support you to learn?
24. How is this program different or similar to your experience in mainstream public schools?
25. What do you think this program will prepare you to do?
26. If you could change anything about this program, what would it be?

## Struggles for Access: Examining the Educational Experiences of Homeless Young Women and Girls in Canada

### Sample Interview Questions: Young Women (16 and up)

**Demographic/Background Information:** age, housing, family and neighborhood life, other relationships, addiction, health and well-being, criminal justice involvement, and parenting

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you living now? Can you describe what your living situation is like? Have you ever been in foster care or a group home? Would you be willing to talk about that?
3. Do you live with your parent/guardian? If not, when did you move out on your own?
4. Tell me about your family. How close are you with your immediate family members? Your mother? Your father? Your siblings? Do you talk to your family members about what is happening in your life?
5. What was the neighborhood/community like where you grew up (racial/ethnic background, social class of community)? Did (do) you like living there? Why or why not? Did you feel close to other people in your community? Why or why not?
6. Tell me about the people in your life that have had a big influence on you.
7. Has anyone in your family ever had any problems with drugs or alcohol? What effect did that have on you? Do you use drugs or alcohol yourself? Can you tell me about this?
8. Can you describe whether or not you think you are in good health? What are some of the things that come to mind when you think of being 'healthy'? How many of those things are you able to apply to yourself?
9. Have you ever been in trouble with the law? What was that like for you? How did your life change as a result of this? Have you ever been on probation? Can you describe how this experience affected other parts of your life such as school, work, and family connections?
10. Do you have any children? Are you the primary caregiver and provider for your child(ren)?
11. Are you in a relationship with anyone? Would you be willing to tell me about this?

### Educational Attainment and Employment/Income History

12. How far have you gone in school?
13. What did you do when you left school?
14. Have you ever had a job? Could you tell me about that? What sorts of 'work' have you been able to find to help support your living costs if you have been living on your own? Can you describe some of the ways in which you are able to support yourself financially?
15. Have you ever felt yourself to be in a dangerous situation as a result of trying to make money?
16. What kinds of things are you interested in? Where would you like to work? Do you have any concerns about finding a job in the future? What kinds of skills or education do you think would be needed to be able to do the kinds of things that you are interested in?

**Educational Experiences:** context, curriculum, purpose of education, teachers, students and social relationships, discipline and rules, administration, school support, sports and extra-curricular activities, guidance counselors – where to seek assistance

17. Can you tell me about the school you were (are) attending? How large was it? How many students? Was it a public or private school? How many students were in your classes? Is the school close to the community where you grew up?
18. Was there a big difference in your elementary and secondary school experiences? Can you describe these differences?
19. Did you feel comfortable in the school system that you were (are) in? Did you feel safe while at school?
20. Were there things that you liked about school? What are they? What are some of the things that you disliked about school?
21. What did you feel like when you were in school? Was attending school something that you enjoyed? Why or why not?
22. How did you find your schoolwork in terms of difficulty? What about it made it difficult?
23. What subjects/classes did you do best in? How about the ones you didn't do so well in, what were they?
24. What kinds of things were you learning about in school? Can you describe what you think the purpose of school is?
25. Are there things that you feel are missing from the school curriculum? What are they?
26. What were (are) the other students like in your school? Did you find it easy to make friends? How did the other students in the school treat you? Can you describe how you saw yourself fitting in with other kids at our school?
27. Were your friends male or female? Did you find it easier to relate to one or another?
28. How would you describe the teachers at your school? Did you feel like they were supportive of you? Could you approach them with problems you were having with schoolwork or issues outside of school? How did the teachers respond to you in school? Did you ever feel as though a teacher was being racist towards you?
29. What were the principal and other school officials like at your school? Did you find them to be approachable, how much contact did you have with them?
30. Is there anyone in the school that you felt comfortable confiding in or approaching about problems you might be having with schoolwork or things that were going on in other parts of your life? If so, who was this person(s) and how were they able to assist you?
31. Did you ever approach the school guidance counselor to talk about any of the things happening in your life? What was this experience like?
32. Can you think of any policies or school practices that made it difficult for you to attend school or want to say in it (truancy, probation orders and involvement with the criminal justice system, parenting)?
33. What were some of the things in your life that the school was not equipped to support you in? How was the school able to support you?
34. If you chose to leave school, can you talk about why? What were some of the things that made you decide to leave?
35. Did you ever get into trouble at school? Can you describe what happened?
36. Have you ever been expelled from school? Can you describe what happened? How did this experience impact how you viewed your educational experiences?
37. Did you ever feel as though you were being unfairly treated at school by students? Teachers? Administrators? Can you please describe an experience where this happened with any or all of the above?
38. How did the school address deal with students that were considered 'trouble-makers'? What were the disciplinary practices like?

39. Were you ever involved in extra-curricular activities (such as sports, drama/arts etc.) at your school? If so, which ones? What did you like about being involved with them, or what did you dislike? What were some of the reasons that you did not become involved in extra-curricular activities?
40. How could schools have been better organized to suit your needs? What could your school have done to make it better for you while you were there? What would have made you decide to stay?
41. Are their particular things that you feel as a girl or young woman should be taken into consideration by schools if they are going to support you?
42. If you could change anything about your school, what would it be? If you were going to change a number of things in your school, what would they be?
43. Have you ever thought about going back to school? What kinds of things would you need to return? In what ways would you find it difficult to go back?

### **Alternative Educational and/or Employment Programs**

44. Are you involved in any other kinds of educational programs that are not connected to a public school but are places where you are learning a set of skills or about a specific topic?
45. What about these programs is different from your previous educational experiences? How are they similar?
46. What do you like about these programs? What do you dislike?
47. What sorts of things are you learning about in these programs? What sorts of skills and knowledge are you acquiring? Is this useful for you? Why or why not?
48. Why did you choose to join this program?
49. What do you think the purpose of this program(s) is?
50. What are the students like in these programs? Do you feel as though you fit in with them and are able to make friends? Why or why not?
51. What are the teachers/staff members like in these programs?
52. How have you felt supported by these programs? In what ways have they not been able to support you? Can you be specific about the ways that they are helping you?
53. If you could change some things about your experience in these programs, what would those things be?