



Pathways to Criminalization

for Street-Involved Youth who use Illicit Substances

Key Details

KEY WORDS

young people, illicit drugs, criminal justice, child apprehension, case study

POPULATION GROUP

Street-involved youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness

RESEARCH ORIGIN

British Columbia, Canada

SOURCE

Academic

“The trauma of being separated from one’s family following apprehension by the state, multiple foster care placements, failure to provide support to youth leaving care, homelessness, harsh drug laws, police profiling and ongoing social, spatial and economic marginalization all serve to increase young people’s vulnerability to police and criminal justice encounters.”

1. What is the research about?

Street-involved youth are often involved in a range of activities that are considered illegal, including: pan-handling, sex work, loitering, trespassing, and using and selling drugs. Street-involved youth have a higher likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Criminologists and social scientists argue that it is important to place these illegal activities in a broader context. For example, “young people who use illicit drugs and are street-involved are over 160 times more likely to have been in the child welfare system compared to other youth (Barker et al., 2014” (p. 531). Many street-involved youth have experienced abuse, foster care, and a range of marginalizations. This research strives to gain “a more nuanced understanding of these ‘pathways’ to criminalization” and seeks to “identify moments where more effective supports for young people and their families could make a meaningful difference to health and social outcomes across the life course” (p.531).

2. Where did the research take place?

This study took place in Vancouver, British Columbia.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about street-involved youth. Specifically, this research is a case study of two young men, one White and one Aboriginal, who are a part of a larger ongoing study exploring drug and crime patterns of street involved youth.

4. How was the research done?

This research is based on a series of in-depth audio-recorded interviews conducted with two street involved young men, Terry and Lee, from 2009 – 2012. In that time, the two research participants spent over 100 hours being interviewed. The research also draws on an arts-based project where the young men created photo essays that engaged with the idea of “place” in the city of Vancouver. The researchers read the young men’s narratives with an eye to better understanding how intersecting class, gender, and racial inequalities contribute to drug-use and involvement with the criminal justice system.

5. What are the key findings?

Intersections of race, class and ethnicity all convened to increased likelihood of criminal involvement. Foster care, mental health issues, poverty and the criminal justice system’s response to these situations create conditions that lead to the criminalization of street involved youth. The criminalization of drug use often leads to the removal of children from homes, which in turn increases a youth’s chances of involvement with the criminal justice system. Both of the youth in this study were placed in foster care at young ages,

which they say contributed to their marginalization, drug use, poverty, and criminal activity. This research supports previous research that finds children involved in the foster care system are far more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system than children who were not in foster care.

This study finds that multiple factors, including family separation, foster care, lack of transitional support when leaving care, criminalization of drug use, police surveillance, and harsh penalties for being homeless all increase the likelihood of encounters with the criminal justice system and contribute to negative social and health outcomes for street involved young people.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This research matters for youth as it provides specific examples of how systems (child welfare, justice) contribute to the criminalization of young people. By focusing on the paths to criminalization and the role the state plays in not only shaping those pathways, we gain insight into how the lack of appropriate responses pushes youth down these pathways.

Although this is a very small study, it suggests that interventions that discourage racism, and support youth and their families to prevent the apprehension are needed. This study provides two recommendations to decrease the criminalization of street involved youth: 1. eliminate harsh punishment regimes for drug offenses and, 2. address underlying social disparities that promote inequalities.

The authors call for alternative program supports that divert youth and families from the criminal justice system. Interventions should “reduce rather than exacerbate” harm. Given the increased chances that state care leads to criminalization and involvement with the criminal justice system, youth programs and youth workers should strive to provide holistic preventative and diversionary programming.



Boyd, J., Fast, D., Small, W. (2015). Pathways to criminalization for street-involved youth who use illicit substances. *Critical Public Health*, 1-12.