

Youth Street Level Survey in London Ontario, October 2013

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Approach

During the progression of the project there has been a lot of focus on what can be offered to make the services better, many great solutions have been suggested to those using the services but we also needed to consider those individuals "NOT" using services. This prompted the idea to go to street level to ask for reasons why youth weren't using services and factor them in when designing future workshops and programs.

The week of October 15th - 18th we went to the downtown core (London) and began surveying our target group (Male youth 18-25). We quickly realized it was going to be harder than it seemed. It soon became clear that we would have to adjust our approach – walking up to groups with a clipboard wasn't working. Youth would see us coming and turn and walk in the other direction. There were at least five other people with clipboards walking around the downtown core, trying to collect feedback or sell something. We decided to put our pens down and just have conversations with the youth.

After many hours over this week we travelled to several locations throughout the city including :

- the Food Bank
- Daily Meals (provided by a church)
- the parking lot at Labour Ready (temp agency) during the early morning registration period
- the men's shelter
- outside the library

I was able to connect with at least 80 young men that fit our target profile. Some had no interest to participate in the survey so I had to alter my approach. I started with general conversation and lead up to the survey. I kept sticking to groups in hopes to draw in one or two for a more in-depth conversation. Through a breakdown of Anne Marie's series of questions, Sheila (Employment Counsellor: Fanshawe College) and I were able to draft a set of our own questions separating them between employment and education to which ever applied to the youth at the time. After the conversations finished, I suggested useful agencies (ones to which I am aware of) that are available to assist them with choices, if there were any, and to answer any questions they may have.

Findings

Youth Background

The majority of the males I had spoken to come from a lower income class family. They were raised on O.W. with very little income in the home. They grew up with survival instinct, "**My bro has my back**" and when the conversation led to employment history I was given the look like I had asked the color of their skin, with a confused answer "**Like a real paying job?**" Criminal records are common among them, anything from trafficking to robbery, to the lesser of shoplifting, to possession of stolen property- many combined with various sorts of assaults. A lot of whom I had talked to discussed children- some step children and some biological and in a couple cases they were father to multiple children with women they called "**Baby Momma.**" They weren't too concerned with paying support for these children due to the fact the mothers were on assistance also and therefore had money to take care of the children. The idea of having a vehicle and driver's licenses seem to be the furthest from the minds of those we talked to. Some grew up with a vehicle at home but never had access to it. It seems insurance rates and the graduated license system has been the reason for this. Since they had very little money, they felt that the luxury of a car was a far off dream, and "vehicles are for the rich kids."

They grew up in single parent homes and generally speaking, a home with an absent father, so they assumed the role of male figure. They had to provide for those in the home once they were able to work. Commonly, once they became 17 years of age, they left school. In many cases this was with a push from their mothers. The mothers would lose the financial benefits for them once they turn 18 so the youth needed to start earning money ASAP. With the lack of income, the family's money would be getting tighter. The youth had a choice to drop out of school for work in hopes to pick up more hours at a part time job they may already have. Needing more money they continue to look for something else. They get overwhelmed trying to balance jobs to make full-time money with part-time work. They might quit a job before having something else in place. Tension at home over money leads to quick action (illegal) and a life with a criminal record starts and the rest goes from there.

With very little to no family support they turn to friends, their new found family (with familiar background stories). Without family support at home they create a tough exterior which shows no respect towards authority and hides a sense of worthlessness and a feeling of being unnoticed. In one case, I had a youth tell me he grew up like those in his group. He feared they wouldn't accept him in the group because he had never been in trouble with the law let alone seen the inside of a jail. Yet, he just felt safe with them.

The youth responded confidently when asked what they wanted to do with their life or asked what options they felt they had. However they were unable to give examples. Often they became defensive when asked to give examples so I had to quickly jump to potential answers for them. When I described maybe going to agencies for help, or classes where they could learn “hands on,” they gradually began to ask where they could go if they wanted to do that. They became interested in what is available so long as one of the buddies was going to check it out.

Many youth had only grade 10 education level. Interestingly, their initial excuse for leaving school was to support their child and but they quickly avoided the subject after realizing they left school to support a child they aren't supporting.

Exploring Assumptions

These youth think they are looked at as lazy, unqualified, pot smoking criminals and that they aren't very dependable. When they were asked if they were bondable, they froze up. They minimized their crimes, saying, “I was young and foolish. It's not like we are 45 years old.” They feel employers don't want to take the time to train them and because of their lack of experience they are overlooked. "**No point applying I'm not going to get the job anyway**" and "**To get in somewhere you need to know someone**". They have quit before they have started.

Motivation to change/participate in a program

Lack of motivation seems to be a BIG problem as it's a social thing. They surround themselves with others that are in the same or very similar situations, and they all feed off each other's negativity. Unless their friend is out looking for a job it's not something they are interested in doing. One would assume they would work together to overcome barriers (such as sharing transportation or sharing food costs) but they don't. They tend to blame the society for why they are in the position they are in and in some cases racial/sexist concerns become their focus. They blame other cultures and the opposite gender for why the jobs are lacking.

The hours used on average looking for a job widely differ. They only look for work when they are in desperate need of money. They look for under-the-table jobs or temp work (most common Labour Ready...paid that day). Many of the gentleman I spoke to have casual work but are not claiming it – an extra \$100.00 cash hardly seems worth claiming in their eyes. The thought of being on OW is acceptable from their view as long as you hang around others who are also on it. It's a shallow confidence that they have guaranteed money each month with benefits. No one is insulting or degrading about it since they are all receiving it. A few of the friends I was talking to are living together.

They collect assistance from OW for each of their part of the rent. Their home sounds more like a drop-in centre for other friends to come and go as they please, especially the younger tilt of the age scale. This poses the problem of sleep, or lack of, as someone is always up with company and makes it hard to sleep. They are too tired to think about getting up in the morning for work or school. They seem to struggle to get any sort of schedule in order, especially if travelling by bus. They are always running out of time in the day between the priorities of finding a stable place, going to appointments with counselors and in some cases making court appearances and showing up for probation appointments (to which their fate of freedom is in question.) I talked to one young man about the community service hours he was putting in. He has so many hours to get done that it's virtually impossible to get work right now.

For the most part they sign OW Participation Agreements for the promise to get money, benefits, and a bus pass and any start-up money they may be entitled to. They only go so far as to pick up a phone book and grab a few names and numbers out of the book to put down as places they submitted a resume, yet if you called these places, there wouldn't have ever been any attempted contact. The biggest concern they have about this lifestyle is losing OW support. They need benefits for medication. They need a bus pass not only for appointments but to meet up with their friends. They barely have enough money to cover rent with very little left over for food. Those that smoke are begging for cigarettes on the street. (Being a smoker I know how hard it is to quit and any medical aid that could help me quit is too costly to maintain and not covered by benefits.) In some cases they take from their rent to get more food in hopes something comes up with extra money.

Aside from friends, their supports are scarce. They aren't sure what some people's intentions are. For example, they think their OW Worker isn't doing anything other than trying to find them the quickest way off the system, even if it's a dead end job. Family supports have failed them before. They often fear going back to family so they continue to move forward.

Many jobs ask for certain qualifications - the most common one is grade 12 and these gentleman simple scroll past it. School or programs are time-consuming. They can't afford the time to go back to school or take a program unless there was a reassurance of money. They NEED money. The jobs that are posted with **training provided** catch the eyes of most. There is a lot of talk of how they wished they had participated in co-op programs during their time in school as they felt they would have had better opportunity to find full-time work.

Finding the program

When discussing the subject of the Employment Agencies there seemed to be a huge misunderstanding about what employment agencies are and what employment services are. They often thought that places like Fanshawe Job Connect and Goodwill Career Centre, as well as YOU, were temp agencies. They thought Fanshawe was only available to Fanshawe students. Finding out about these services seems to be a challenge as these youth don't really have access to television and in some cases not even internet. Being at a couple of shelters, I didn't notice a single sign advertising employment and learning programs. YOU is located at the market alley rear entrance to which is blocked off by construction. This blocks thru traffic. No signs were seen letting youth know of YOU's location or existence other than a laminated paper on a door leading to the alley. In general, there isn't an understanding of where literacy and employment agencies are or what they do.

My thoughts

A summary of what I understood from these conversations was that advertising is a huge part of the challenge. If these youth are using other agencies (shelters, temp agencies and so on) and have workers on hand, the workers could refer youth to employment and learning agencies. These youth are part of the statistics of unemployment even if they are homeless or recovering addicts. They qualify for the use of these services equally in some cases (OW is paying for their stay at shelters.) They are placed on probation and ordered to obtain work or attend school. So a good place to advertise might be at probation and parole offices. Attendance could be part of the participation agreement. Parts of the workshop we develop can entail a part on confidence and self-esteem. These youth demonstrate feelings of failure and they need a boost. Incentives could be issued to draw in a person with a friend. It's more likely the attendance will be more consistent if they are with someone instead of being alone. It also improves their chances of participation in group work.

Challenges and suggested next steps

1. Challenge

Youth are unaware of the literacy and employment services that are available to them.

Suggested next steps

- Consider promoting programs to people who work with youth such as probation and parole officers or CAS
- Consider putting information booths outside the probation office
- Have more of a visual presence
- Remember that word of mouth is effective way to promote services with youth

2. Challenge

They only do things that their friends will do.

Suggested next steps

- Consider using a buddy system in programming; maybe offer an incentive for youth to bring someone else. This also helps to increase their social interactions.

3. Challenge

They lost interest in school but are interested in learning through a hands-on approach.

Suggested next steps

- Consider developing a co-op program, where they can learn, work hands-on and earn money at the same time.

4. Challenge

The youth are not easily approachable and are not very trusting of people they don't know.

Suggested next steps

- When doing surveys and focus groups let them lead the conversation while (secretly) listening for the answer to your questions. The more comfortable they are the more they will talk. Don't take a pen and paper to the conversation. As much as we might have stereotypes about youth, they also look at us with stereotypes.

5. Challenge

These youth have low self-esteem and feel like “just a number” especially since they might belong to several “systems.”

Suggested next steps

- Consider including things to boost their self-esteem and confidence
- Use programming that recognizes them as individuals, so they don't feel like just a statistic

Submitted by

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November 2013