Success on the margins: Exploring what success means to marginalized youth in neoliberal times

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

Marginalized youth must negotiate a neoliberal ethos in which they are expected to make 'responsible' decisions and work hard to become independent people, but at the same time experience social oppressions and structural inequalities that limit their ability to achieve success. As a result, many struggle with homelessness, poverty, addiction, abuse, and criminal justice involvement, and are constructed as 'failures' by society and themselves. This study addresses the following questions: how do marginalized youth define success? How do those definitions compare to dominant, neoliberal definitions of success? How and why do youth accept neoliberal definitions? How and why do youth challenge them?. I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with marginalized youth. Interviews were analyzed using a largely inductive approach that started in the lived realities of my participants, paying attention to the intersections of gender, age, class, and racial oppressions. First I analyzed youth's basic definitions of success, and second, I analyzed what achieving these goals would mean to youth on a deeper level. I analyzed the ways in which youth challenged and accepted neoliberal definitions within their own. These youth often understood how structural barriers limited their ability to achieve success, but ultimately believed it was up to them to overcome those barriers and achieve success. I conclude by reflecting on *why* youth bought into neoliberalism, and the effects that doing so has on their ability to achieve success. This research suggests several ways to empower youth to achieve their dreams that both respects their beliefs and challenges the systems that hold them back. Especially in an era of reduced social services and policies that discriminate against young people, it is critical to highlight the perspectives of young people who face the harshest effects of these processes. I will argue that doing so can challenge structural barriers and oppressions and empower these youth to achieve their ambitious dreams.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Sydney Sheloff. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: "Success and meaning on the margins: Exploring the voices of marginalized youth as they pursue success in neoliberal times," No. Pro00082070, November 22, 2018.

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Introduction

"Edmonton has completely turned their back on the homeless population," argued one marginalized young woman, and homeless and otherwise marginalized youth face this lack of care in distinct, harmful ways (Muzyka, 2018). This is most evident in the recent changes in policy instated by the United Conservative Party (UCP) provincial government. UCP leader Jason Kenney argued that "the majority of people who receive the minimum wage are dependents or in households with other sources of income, we're basically talking about teenagers with entry-level jobs," and proposes to make a lower minimum wage for youth in order to incentivize businesses to hire them (Clancy, 2019). This sentiment completely ignores marginalized young people who have left their family home and have to fend for themselves. This policy came into effect in June of 2019, and now youth who can barely survive day to day are worried that these policies will make it even harder to support themselves and make their way out of poverty (Wyton, 2019).

This thesis aims to explore what success means to young people who have struggled with issues such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment, addiction, and victimization. The new youth minimum wage did not come into effect until well after my interviews and a significant portion of the analysis was completed, so I was not able to ask youth how they thought these policies would affect them. Yet these policies make the results of my study much more salient. Young people on the margins of society often have very ambitious dreams for their future, yet social oppressions and structural inequalities make it difficult for them to actually achieve what they want to. Lowering the youth minimum wage will likely make it even harder for youth to do so. It is important to note that the minimum wage policy affects youth under the age of 18, and all youth I interviewed were over 18. However, these youth started experiencing hardship at a

much younger age, some leaving their homes as young as fourteen. Starting their independent lives at a disadvantage makes it extremely difficult for marginalized youth to get ahead and achieve their dreams.

'Youth' is classified as a time period in which young people are expected to learn and explore different life paths so they may develop capacities to become productive, independent, and responsible adults. 'Youth' is not a static category but rather, a process, and young people in different historical times, places, and social locations experience becoming an adult in very different ways (Wyn & White, 1997). Of particular importance today, and to this thesis, is the ways in which definitions of, and transitions into, successful adulthood are shaped by neoliberal ideologies. Neoliberalism is a social, political, and economic regulatory system that calls for limited government involvement in the market and social life in order to promote individual responsibility and freedom. The idea of successful adulthood as being productive, independent, and responsible is largely constructed by these neoliberal frameworks. However, by reducing the amount of support marginalized people can get, these frameworks actually make it harder for youth to achieve what society expects of them. This research investigates how young people who have been marginalized by certain social processes experience and conceptualize this transition into adulthood. That is, how do youth who have been marginalized by race, class, age, and gender inequalities understand successful adulthood and their path towards it?

When young people are made responsible to create a successful life, but are simultaneously denied the support and services that would help them do so, many 'fail.' For example, young people from impoverished homes often face extreme family conflict and abuse, forcing them to leave home. But once out of the house, an insecure labour market, lack of access to affordable housing, a lack of support, and now a lower minimum wage, means that these

youth cannot access the resources needed to become 'responsible' for themselves or achieve independence. Rather, they are blocked from any meaningful opportunities and forced onto the street. These frameworks then frame these young people as lazy or unmotivated for not getting a job, and failures for becoming homeless (Farrugia, Smyth, and Harrison, 2016; McLoughlin, 2013). Their homelessness, unemployment, and addictions are constructed as the result of their 'poor choices,' completely ignoring how those choices are shaped by the larger economic, social, and political processes these youth must navigate.

This thesis explores what success means to youth who experience poverty, homelessness, addiction, interpersonal violence, and/or criminal justice involvement. I want to learn what it means to achieve success in a neoliberal ethos when structural barriers, systemic oppression, and a lack of support limits one's ability to do so. In particular, this thesis aims to uncover the ways in which youth understand, accept, and challenge dominant, neoliberal depictions of themselves and what success is. Do youth buy into dominant depictions of success and see their fate as their responsibility, or do they understand it in different ways? How do youth negotiate between neoliberal and competing ideologies as they pursue their dreams? I address these concerns through qualitatively interviewing marginalized young people who are accessing street-level resources and attempting to work towards a successful future.

In chapter one I explore the literature related to neoliberalism, marginalized youth, and the ways in which neoliberal polices and ideologies affect young marginalized people. First, I conceptualize what 'youth' means, and advocate for an understanding of 'youth' as a process that is grounded in larger social, political, and economic circumstances. Second, I describe what neoliberalism is, and show how neoliberalism is accepted and contested in the Albertan context. I ultimately argue that neoliberalism prevails as the social, political, and economic system that is

used to govern this province. Third, I show how neoliberalism affects youth, and especially youth in marginalized social positions. I focus on how neoliberal ideologies, although they were designed to encourage success, actually serve to further marginalize young people. Fourth, I look at how youth can be understood in relation to larger social processes. I focus on how oppressive and unequal processes within housing, employment, and education limits youth's ability to succeed in those domains. Lastly, I address some ways that youth on the margins of society can be empowered.

In chapter two, I outline the methodology used for the study. This research involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with nine young people who access street-level services to deal with issues such as homeless, addiction, unemployment, and criminal justice involvement. First, I describe the population I interviewed, and then describe the methods used to recruit them. Second, I describe the actual interview process. Third, I outline the difficulties I faced in the research process, focusing mainly on recruitment difficulties, and reflect on how it may have affected my project. Fourth, I describe my methods for data analysis. I used a largely inductive method grounded in the everyday realities of the youth I interviewed, paying particular attention to the intersections of race, gender, and class, and how those characteristics influence youth's understandings of particular topics. I also utilized the constant comparative method, meaning that I constantly compared different levels of analysis at every stage of data collection and analysis, constantly going back and forth between raw transcripts, codes, emerging categories and themes, and the actual writing of my analysis. Fifth, I conclude this chapter with a reflection on the ethical considerations I took throughout the process.

In chapter three, I analyze how youth define success on a basic level. I begin by examining youth's current realities on the streets in order to contextualize their dreams for the

future. I describe the daily troubles of life on the street, including youth's struggles with meeting their basic needs, experiences with violence, a lack of support, and how those issues contribute to mental health difficulties and addictions. Youth often described success in relation to their current realities and past experiences of marginalization, by which I mean they largely wanted the opposite of what they have now. Second, I describe youth's most immediate goals. The study takes a relatively holistic approach, and looks at what youth define as successful in terms of housing, employment, school, leisure activities, relationships, physical health, mental health, and addictions. The youth I spoke to wanted to get off the streets and get an "easy" service sector job so that they could meet their basic needs, and then pursue goals such as finishing high school, getting involved in hobbies, creating more supportive relationships, and dealing with their mental health. Lastly, I explore youth's goals for their future, and describe what their ideal, successful futures would look like. In many ways their ideal futures were an extension of their immediate goals. I also explore how some youth entrenched in marginalization have difficulty envisioning a life in which they are successful.

In chapter four, I analyze the significance that achieving their goals has for these youth. I argue that the meaning of success lies in these deeper understandings rather than in the basic definitions themselves. In this chapter, I also examine the ways in which youth accept and challenge dominant definitions of success within their own definitions. I highlight how these youth exhibit a complex negotiation between multiple, seemingly contradictory ideologies. First, I explore how youth understand their marginalization, and how this understanding influences how they perceive success. I investigate how youth see their social position as their fault, how they understand certain structural issues, how they understand the interaction between their choices and larger social processes, and how they ultimately see achieving success as their

personal responsibility. Second, I explore some of the deeper meanings behind success, such as: the strength gained from coming up from adversity, the desire to belong to society, the desire to make the world a better place, proving people wrong, and feeling proud of themselves. Within each of these definitions is a complex negotiation between accepting and rejecting neoliberalism. They often accept neoliberalism in the ways that they denigrate their peers and their street life, and in how they construct their success as an independent endeavour. They simultaneously challenge neoliberalism in the ways they show their collective mindsets, and in the ways they describe the values they found in their street life.

In the conclusion, I bring these chapters together in order to answer my original research questions. I describe how youth define success, and then delve deeper into how youth reinforce and challenge neoliberalism within their definitions of success. I then explore the significance that doing so has for marginalized young people. Throughout the previous chapters, I outlined the ways in which youth buy into or challenge neoliberal ideologies, and in the conclusion I reflect on *why* they may do so. In analyzing why youth buy into and challenge neoliberal ideologies in their definitions of success, I show why these definitions matter. I reflect on how buying into seemingly harmful ideologies can have a positive impact on youth. I further argue that youth's understandings of social issues, but belief that they need to overcome them through their own hard work, ultimately serves to limit their ability to achieve what they want to. I end by reflecting on how this thesis contributes to the literature and proposing how it can be practically applied to help marginalized youth, reflecting on the limitations of my research, and finally, suggesting some directions for further research.

<p align="center">**Chapter One:**</p>

<p align="center">**Literature Review**</p>

Conceptualizing 'youth'

This study aims to understand what success means to marginalized youth. In order to do so, it is important to understand what the term 'youth' means. The Youth Criminal Justice Act defines youth as people between the ages of 12 and 17, however, many sociological definitions expand this age range into the mid-twenties (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009). For the purposes of this research, youth are considered young people between the ages of 14 and 24 because that is the average age range used by many youth serving agencies in Edmonton[1] (Dolson, 2015). However, youth is much more than simply an age-bound category. 'Youth' is considered a time period wherein young people are expected to learn and explore different life paths so they may develop capacities to become productive, independent, and responsible adults (Wyn & White, 1997). In the context of this study, I will use the term youth[2] to refer to young people who are currently experiencing this time period.

Wyn and White (1997) argue that traditional youth research assumes that young people make up a "separate and significant category of people" (p. 8). Historical researchers such as Rousseau and Hall depicted this as a time of crisis and turbulence. Youth are in a time of "oscillations and oppositions" between ideas such as inertness and excitement, self-confidence and humility, selfishness and altruism, society and solitude, and sense and intellect. Youth are depicted as unstable and not 'completely human' yet (Koops & Zuckerman, 2003). Later

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[1] Old Strathcona Youth Society, the organization from which all participants were recruited, uses this definition.

[2] I will use 'youth' in single quotation marks to refer to the time period, and youth without quotation marks to refer to young people

research about youth focused on the notion that 'youth' represented a time of flux wherein individuals had time to experiment with ideas and identities as well as the actual routes they may take through life. In other words, youth were not unstable and conflicted, but rather, exploring the world and their place in it (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013; Koops & Zuckerman, 2003).

However, Wyn and White (1997) argue that the assumption of youth as a distinct category should be reassessed, and 'youth' should instead be considered a process. Treating 'youth' as a category is insufficient because this approach is ahistorical and static. It treats young people as if they were a homogenous group, and often takes the masculine, white, middle class experience as the norm. Furthermore, it ignores the role of institutions and changing economic and political circumstances and their impact on youth, treating their behaviours and attitudes as if they were inherent to them rather than shaped by social processes.

Seeing 'youth' as a process allows one to see how larger social processes influence youth, and allows ones to investigate the diversity within youth who experience those social processes in different ways (Wyn & White, 1997). Jones (1988) argues that the focus on youth should not be on the inherent characteristics of young people themselves, but on the construction of youth through social processes. In this model, youth can only be understood in relation to the specific social, political, and economic conditions that they interact with. In addition, it draws attention to how different groups of youth may experience these conditions in different ways (Wyn & White, 1997). This research will take this latter perspective, focusing on how youth are constructed through different processes. This approach is particularly useful for investigating how youth become marginalized by social processes. The former perspective would argue that youth experience unemployment, homeless, and addiction because they are inherently deviant.

The latter, on the other hand, focuses on how youth become marginalized because of social, economic, and political processes (Wyn & White, 1997).

Both perspectives see 'youth' as a transitional period wherein young people are learning how to be an adult (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013; Koops & Zuckerman, 2003; Wyn & White, 1997). However, the ways in which they conceptualize this 'becoming' is very different. The categorical perspective treats this transition as if it were inherent to youth themselves. That is, 'youth' is a time of either crisis or exploration, and the process of overcoming this time period and becoming an adult is the same for all young people (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013; Koops & Zuckerman, 2003; Wyn & White, 1997). Treating 'youth' as a process allows one to see how the process of becoming an adult is *not* the same for all youth, and draws attention to the ways in which social processes and specific social, political, and economic conditions influence how youth experience transitions to adulthood. Of particular importance to the current research, youth who experience class, race, and gender oppressions, along with structural inequalities and barriers, become an adult in much different circumstances than those who grow up in middle class households. Thus, their conceptions of a successful adulthood, and their experiences achieving that adulthood, are very different.

Marginalized young people have a much different experience of 'youth' than their mainstream counterparts. Gatez (2014) explains that homeless youth must transition into adulthood and adjust to its responsibilities and challenges in a truncated time frame. Youth in stable homes with familial support have the luxury to learn, practice, and take chances as they figure out what they want to do with their lives. Marginalized youth who have left home and/or do not have familial support are forced to become independent and responsible for themselves in a significantly shorter time frame. At the same time, they are denied the opportunity to

participate in institutions that are designed to help them navigate the transition into adulthood. Through my research, I will draw attention to how youth in marginal social positions experience becoming an adult, and investigate what successful adulthood looks like to them.

Conceptualizing neoliberalism

As mentioned in my Introduction, this research takes as its starting point the impact neoliberalism has on youth living on the margins of society and their transitions into successful adulthood. Neoliberalism is a social, political, and economic regulatory system that calls for limited government involvement in the market and social life in order to promote individual responsibility and freedom (Harvey, 2005; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009; Turner, 2014). In the context of this study, 'responsibility[3]' refers to the ability for individuals to make 'good' decisions that will lead to a successful future, such as securing a good job, pursuing an education, and obeying laws and social norms. Essentially, being 'responsible' entails conforming to dominant societal expectations. Neoliberal policies involve the privatization of public resources and services, the reduction of government regulations, and the shrinking of government involvement in welfare projects in order to push people to become independent and accumulate capital (Harvey, 2005; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009; Turner, 2014). The impact of this system has been harshest on marginalized people, making it difficult for many people to maintain a basic standard of living. Neoliberal beliefs, along with the reforms that developed out of them, have led to a decrease in access to government-regulated employment insurance, social assistance, and social services under the assumption that individuals should be responsible for themselves (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009; Tuner, 2014). In addition, it has led to a more

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[3] Single quotation marks are used to denote the constructed nature of certain terms. Terms such as 'responsible' and 'risk' are quoted to indicate that these terms are defined through dominant ideologies and reflect very particular ways of thinking about individuals.

precarious labour market: fewer government regulations have allowed an influx of jobs that are temporary, low paying, and lack benefits. Combined, these processes make it difficult for people in marginalized social positions to access the resources needed to be 'responsible,' yet they are blamed when they fail to do so (Harvey, 2005).

Thus, one can see that neoliberal ideologies are inherently paradoxical. The reduction of social assistance and services, rather than pushing people to achieve success, actually serves to entrench marginalized people's status. For those who already face economic instability, a lack of social support makes it difficult for them to meet their basic needs, and pushes them further into poverty (Minkaer & Hogeveen, 2009; Tuner, 2014). Social services have become the responsibility of communities and non-profit agencies rather than the government. In order to secure funding, agencies are forced to focus on measuring the outcomes of their work rather than serving their clients. In addition, they must spend considerable time writing grants, leaving less time and resources to deliver programs and services (Harrison & Weber, 2015). By diverting blame from the state for perpetuating social inequality, neoliberal beliefs also divert the responsibility to individuals marginalized by society to become 'responsible' (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009; Turner, 2014).

Neoliberal ideologies manifest differently in different times and places, therefore, it is important to analyze how neoliberalism operates in the Albertan context. It is important to note that neoliberalism is not an all-encompassing force, and elements of previous welfare regimes continue to operate in the Albertan context. Brooks and Manza (2007) argue that many countries still provide welfare services because the public still values and wants it. For example, in Canada, the various levels of government still provide services such as public health care, education, social housing, and old age security. In addition, Alberta continues to provide social

assistance to people who cannot work (Wood, 2015), suggesting that Albertans to some extent support welfare. Brooks and Manza (2007) further suggest that, despite the neoliberal shift, welfare spending is not significantly declining. However, *how* welfare provision is being spent is changing. That is, money is being redirected from some domains into others. Thus, while Canada, and Alberta in particular, still overall support providing welfare to its citizens, how that support is allocated is changing, and marginalized citizens face the harshest effects (Soron, 2005).

In discussing how Alberta provides welfare to citizens, I will focus on the example of provincial income assistance. Albertans can access financial assistance through two main programs: Alberta Works and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH). AISH is a program that gives financial support to those who cannot work due to a permeant disability that limits their ability to work. Alberta Works on the other hand, gives financial support to people who temporarily cannot work. Alberta Works has three subsections: Expected to Work are people who are looking for work, working but not making enough, or temporarily unable to work; Barriers to Employment are people who cannot work due to chronic illness or multiple barriers; and Learners are people who need academic upgrading or training in order to work (Wood, 2015). Whereas AISH is seen as a permanent form of income assistance, everyone on Alberta Works is expected to eventually become 'responsible' and get a job so that they can fully support themselves (Wood, 2015).

These programs show that there is a difference between those the government believe *deserve* assistance and those they believe do not. People on AISH are seen as 'deserving' of support because they have a legitimate barrier to employment. On the other hand, those on Alberta Works are often seen as 'undeserving' and leeching off the system (Faid, 2009; Wood,

2015). This shows neoliberal tendencies creeping into welfare provision. By insisting that individuals are responsible for their own situation, neoliberalism creates this dichotomy between the deserving and non-deserving poor (Harrison & Weber, 2015). People using Expected to Work are often deemed lazy and irresponsible because they are viewed as simply not working; the social and structural barriers that limit their ability to work are not seen as legitimate (Dolson, 2015; Wood, 2015). It is also important to note that AISH has very strict eligibility criteria. In order to qualify for AISH, a person must have a "severe handicap that substantially limits their ability to earn a living," this handicap must be permanent and there can be no training, rehabilitation, or treatment available that would help the person work (Wood, 2015). By extension then, there are strict eligibility criteria to be 'deserving' of assistance.

The mindsets behind each of the programs, and the purposes of the programs, shapes how much support the people who use them can get. Those on AISH are given over double the amount of benefits compared to their Alberta Works receiving counterparts, and have more generous exemption limits. This is likely because those on AISH are expected to rely on income support for their entire lives, their disabilities and inability to work are outside of their control, and they are thus more 'deserving' of receiving enough support to survive. Alberta Works recipients are not supposed to be 'relying' on their support, they are seen as in control of their circumstances and supposed to be using that money to become self-sufficient. By giving Alberta Works recipients less money, they are attempting to push them to find employment. A person cannot survive on Alberta Works income assistance alone, they must become 'responsible' and find employment in order to make enough money to live. Furthermore, they have to prove they are being 'responsible' and looking for a job in order to continue to receive payments (Wood, 2015).

Tightened eligibility and lower benefits were instated in order to make welfare a "less attractive alternative" to employment. This logic has several problematic assumptions. First, it is assuming marginalized people are 'choosing' social assistance rather than employment. This serves to delegitimize the barriers certain people face in finding employment (Faid, 2009). Second, it assumes that simply becoming employed is enough to get oneself out of poverty. In reality, the majority of people who exit social assistance and enter the workforce end up in low skilled, unstable work with low wages and a lack of benefits. The people in these jobs continue to experience poverty, despite the fact that they are working (Faid, 2009; Woolford & Curran, 2012).

Chunn and Gavigan (2014) argue that the neoliberal shift in government makes it so that *no one* is deserving of welfare. Everyone on social assistance is seen as a temporary recipient who must demonstrate their willingness to work in order to receive welfare, and must ultimately use the social assistance they receive to gain employment. Chunn and Gavigan (2014) investigate the experiences of women who have been denied welfare, and show how women's unpaid work in the domestic sphere does not count towards the work needed to prove they are deserving of welfare. I argue this can be applied to youth as well. As I will discuss later, marginalized youth must put in considerable work to survive every day, and many engage in informal work such as panhandling in order to do so (Karabanow et al., 2010). But this work does not count towards their welfare eligibility, they must prove they are looking into school or looking for formal work in order to 'deserve' their assistance (Dolson, 2015). Thus, as welfare and neoliberal ideology compete with one another, youth struggle to get adequate support while at the same time proving their ability to not need support.

Within Alberta, many programs and initiatives aimed at helping marginalized citizens involve a complicated negotiation between neoliberal and more welfare-oriented ideologies. Housing First is a prime example of this. Housing First is a form of programming that provides homeless individuals rapid access to permanent housing, separate from treatment services. On the one hand, it challenges neoliberal ideology in that it promotes the idea that all people deserve housing and basic human dignity regardless of how 'responsible' they are. That is, people do not have to 'earn' their housing, or comply with moral conditions such as sobriety or strict treatment plans in order to prove their worth and responsibility. On the other, Housing First "aligns with neoliberal understandings of homelessness as a problem rooted in individual pathologies which impose unacceptable costs on society" (Evans, Collins, & Anderson, 2016, p. 251). Housing First initiatives are promoted because housing people will reduce their use of emergency services, healthcare, and the criminal justice system, which will save the government and taxpayers money (Evans, Collins, & Anderson, 2016). Baker and Evans (2016) further argue that, in focusing on the pathologies of the chronically homeless, Housing First initiatives may divert attention away from the structural injustices that cause homelessness in the first place.

Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison (2016), following Foucault (1985), examine how notions of personal responsibility and self-governance are central regulations through which individuals construct and conduct the self. They argue that "performing responsibility is a moral imperative of neoliberalism, which delegitimizes collective identities and explanations for social life and positions self-governance as a condition for meaningful subjectivity" (p. 240). As a result, "subjects who lack the material and cultural resources to mobilize and perform personal responsibility and self-governance become morally devalued. Unrecognizable as moral subjects, they become public symbols of disorder, failure, and misconduct" (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison,

2016, p. 24; see also Farrugia, 2010). In other words, neoliberal frameworks posit that individuals must act as independent, 'responsible' citizens, and those who do not have the means to do so are excluded from society. Through my research, I aim to gain an understanding of the impact these frameworks have on the way that young people understand their world and themselves. In particular, how do these frameworks shape marginalized youth's perception of, and ability to achieve, 'success?'

People who are unable to overcome structural issues and become responsible citizens are seen as 'at-risk'. That is, individuals who are 'irresponsible' are 'at-risk' of becoming homeless, becoming addicted to alcohol and/or drugs, developing mental health issues, or becoming involved in the criminal justice system. Although these 'risks' derive from unequal social situations, under neoliberal paradigms, they are translated into individual deficits (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Myers, 2017; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2007; Wyn & White, 1997). For this reason, I will not use the term 'at-risk' to describe youth in subordinated social positions, but rather, I will use the term 'marginalized.' 'Marginalized' implies that young people are not solely at fault for being 'irresponsible' and failing to achieve success, rather, the term assumes that structural inequalities and systemic oppression in Canadian society are largely to blame for youth's social position and adverse life circumstances (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2007; Wyn & White, 1997).

In addition, treating youth as 'at risk' buys into the categorical assumption of youth described above. Constructing certain youth as 'at risk' assumes that the majority of youth are transitioning into adulthood in an appropriate way, and those who are not are a problem. The assumption that an identifiable group of young people are 'at risk' gives credibility to the notion that all other youth are the same (Wyn & White, 1997). By reframing these youth as

'marginalized,' I can show how youth's lives are framed by class, race, and gender inequalities and oppressions. Furthermore, by investigating different levels of marginalization, I can highlight the diversity of youth and how social processes affect their transitions into a 'successful' adulthood.

In my research, I will not focus on any specific subgroup of marginalized youth. Some authors have argued that looking at a broad group of marginalized youth is ineffective because, by placing diverse youth in the same category, one can only come to very broad conclusions (for example, see Wyn & White, 1997). On the contrary, I believe that by analyzing the viewpoints of diverse youth, I can draw attention to the ways in which class, race, and gender inequalities, and the different levels of marginalization those inequalities produce, influence how youth think about themselves, their worlds, and success. For example, Wyn and White (1997) argue that placing black teenage mothers and white impoverished young men in the same category is not useful because, although they both experience marginalization, their routes towards a successful adulthood are likely to be very different. However, I believe that by comparing these two very different people, one can learn how issues of race, gender, and class, along with larger economic and political processes, influence how young people view their future. Furthermore, marginalizing characteristics such as addiction, poverty, homeless, and criminal justice involvement tend to co-occur, so to focus on one element would artificially separate out otherwise deeply interwoven issues.

Neoliberalism in the lives of youth.

Neoliberalism has particular consequences for youth, and especially youth in marginal social positions. 'Youth' is a time period wherein individuals are expected to accumulate personal capacities to become productive, independent, and responsible adults (Wyn & White,

1997). In other words, 'youth' is seen as the passage from irrationality and unruliness to rationality and personal sovereignty. Young people in marginal social positions characterized by social disadvantage often do not have the means to become 'responsible', 'rational', or 'productive', and are thus seen as failures and a threat to the social order (Farrugia, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Mallet et al., 2010).

Youth who are unable to become productive and independent are often viewed as at fault for their position; they are seen as lazy, unmotivated, or unwilling to work. However, this view ignores structural factors that severely limit youth's ability to become responsible (Farrugia, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Mallet et al., 2010). Social conditions such as an insecure youth labour market, high levels of youth unemployment, and a housing market that is hostile to young people make it extremely difficult for youth to accomplish certain goals that neoliberal society expects of them. This is especially salient for youth who have been deprived of familial support due to conflict, abuse, and poverty (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016). For example, McLoughlin (2013) found youth who left home during school years faced difficulty negotiating labour and housing markets, especially when faced with a lack of state and familial support. Dhillon (2005) found homeless and street-involved young women have limited access to safe and affordable housing, and that school fees and certain attendance and address policies limit their ability to attend school. Thus, one can see how young people's lives are shaped by social forces outside of the realms of personal choice and individual responsibility. Following McLoughlin (2013) and Dhillon (2005), my research will explore how youth make sense of the interaction between perceptions of personal shortcomings and broader structural barriers to create notions of success.

Marginalized youth's family lives are often characterized by instability in terms of family transitions and living arrangements. Many youth in marginal social positions experience multiple family transitions, such as family breakdown in the form of parental separation and divorce, parents finding new partners and cycling through multiple partners, and youth cycling between various homes. These transitions affect youth in multiple, negative ways. First, family breakdown may lead to feelings of stress, anger, and other mental health difficulties, and may work to erode youth's relationships with their parents (Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; McLoughlin, 2013). When parents have multiple partners, youth's home lives can become unpredictable and unstable. Second, youth often have difficult, and even violent, relationships with parents' new partners. New partners bring new rules and expectations for youth, and these new expectations often challenge youth's place in the family. These conflicts become more pronounced when youth's biological parents take the side of their new partners rather than their children (Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Mcloughlin, 2013). Lastly, cycling through multiple homes and alternative care means youth face extreme unpredictability in terms of when and where they move, the support they have access to, and their sense of 'family' or 'home' (Parker & Mayock, 2019; Samuels, 2009). In many cases, youth completely lose these things, meaning they do not have a place to stay, do not have support, and do not have a family.

Marginalized youth's familial relationships are often characterized by conflict, and this conflict may lead to violence. Mallet, Rosenthal, and Keys (2005) argue that this conflict often occurs because youth and their parents have fundamentally different expectations of one another, which leads to constant arguing. However, this is a relatively simplistic explanation. When youth come from impoverished and chaotic homes, their parents often grew up in similar homes themselves, and did not have the opportunity to learn the skills or gain the resources needed to

parent in 'positive' ways. Thus, when conflicts arise between parents and children, neither have the resources to deal with conflict, and it can escalate quickly. In addition, marginalized youth's parents may have faced a lot of conflict and hurt themselves, and reflect this back onto their children. Conflict becomes more pronounced when youth's parents struggle with addiction. First of all, many youth believe that when parents struggle with addiction, they do not give youth the support they need. (Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Mallet et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2013). This makes it difficult for youth to emotionally connect with their parents, contributes to a stressful home environment, and may lead youth to resent their parents. Second, parents who struggle with addiction may engage in violent behaviour towards their children, leading youth to feel constant fear and insecurity (Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005). Many youth on the street were abused before they left home (Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Mallet et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2013).

Samuels (2009) discusses how marginalized youth face an "ambiguous loss" of their families. Ambiguous losses do not have "clear boundaries, endings, or societally recognized rituals for grieving the loss" (p. 1230). The first type of ambiguous loss occurs when a person is psychologically but not physically present. In the context of marginalized youth, this includes children being taken away from their homes without fully understanding why. The second type occurs when a person is physically but not psychologically present. This includes when a youth's parent struggles with mental health and/or addiction issues, and is not psychologically 'there' to meet the youth's physical and emotional needs. In both cases, the youth question their identities as members of their families, their relationships with their parents, and the possibility of ever having a 'real' family. The possibility of becoming a family is always on these youth's minds, so they do not have the opportunity to deal with any pain caused or heal from the loss. On the

contrary, the constant hoping that their family will be reunited, and disappointment when that does not happen, continues to inflict harm on the youth (Samuels, 2009; Parker & Mayock, 2019).

Youth in marginal social positions often do not have the financial or emotional supports parents are expected to provide, which makes it extremely difficult for them to 'manage' their situations (Barker, 2916; McLoughlin, 2013). For example, an insecure labour market means that young people often only have employment opportunities in low wage, insecure work, and without family resources they often cannot afford to support themselves (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; McLoughlin, 2013). Farrugia, Smyth, and Harrison (2016) note that middle-class young people are supported by their families to move out of the home when they are ready to do so. Marginalized youth, on the other hand, are deprived of familial support due to conflict, abuse, and poverty and are therefore excluded from 'normal' youth transitions. That is, youth are often pushed out of their homes due to family conflict, and then do not have the financial or psychological support to find a home.

Home leaving is a positive and rational choice for many youth, as they often do so to escape homes characterized by addiction, poverty, conflict, and abuse (Kidd, 2003; Mallet et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2013; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009), yet these same youth are judged for making 'poor choices' that led them to the street. Through neoliberal frameworks, youth are blamed for their marginal social position and are responsiblized to govern an almost ungovernable social environment in order to be considered 'good' citizens (Farruiga, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Myers, 2017). However, when youth make choices to govern their situation, they are seen as making the 'wrong' choices. The above research shows that youth are not responsiblized to govern their lives *per se,* but they are

responsiblized to govern their lives in a very particular way. I hope to add to this literature by investigating how youth understand the choices they make when they are expected to take responsibility for elevating their social position and overcoming associated 'risks.'

A similar argument can be made regarding crime. Shifting industries, a changing organization of work, globalization, and the outsourcing of labour have all led to a decrease in jobs available to impoverished and low-skilled people (Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson, 2010). This impacts youth more harshly, creating an unstable youth labour market, and leading to high rates of youth unemployment (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Mcloughlin, 2013). Thus, many youth must engage in informal – and even illegal – work to support themselves. In other words, when youth are made 'responsible' to support themselves in a social environment that limits their career choices, many young people engage in sex work, theft, and drug dealing to make ends meet. Engaging in criminal activity is not an 'irresponsible' choice youth make, rather, criminal activity can be the result of a lack of choice. Under the circumstances, it can even be a rational one (Karabanow, et al., 2010).

Indigenous youth are disproportionately affected by poverty, criminalization, substandard housing, and school leaving, thus it is important to examine the particular social oppressions they face and how this affects their ability to become 'responsible'. The unique issues faced by Indigenous youth are rooted in histories of colonization. Dislocation from traditional territories, forced assimilation and destruction of cultural traditions, and rampant abuse continue to have adverse effects on Indigenous people today (Hansen & Hetzel, 2018; Shantz, 2010). The legacies of these practices greatly limit Indigenous youth's ability to live up to neoliberal standards of success. For example, conditions of extreme poverty, abuse, and cultural genocide imposed by colonialism, as well as individual and systemic racism often drive Indigenous youth out of

school. Subsequently, without a high school degree, it is nearly impossible for youth to attain a job that will give them the resources needed to be 'responsible' and 'productive' citizens (Dhillon, 2005; 2011). The lived reality of poverty, violence, and racism have serious mental health consequences for Indigenous youth and may lead them to (ab)use drugs and alcohol to escape negative life circumstances (Hansen & Hetzel, 2018; Shantz, 2010).

My research will expand on these studies by examining how youth's social position and experiences pursuing certain goals influence how they see their futures. In particular, I want to investigate how youth's limited opportunities in their day-to-day lives affects the types of futures they envision for themselves. Neoliberal ideology describes a reduction in government intervention under the assumption that it will push people to be independent (Turner, 2014). However, as the above studies illustrate, neoliberal policies actually limit marginalized youth's opportunities (Karabanow et al., 2010, McLoughlin, 2013). Marginalized youth are forced to negotiate a complicated terrain wherein they are expected, and may expect themselves, to be independently successful, yet are in social situations that severely limit their ability to do so. How do youth negotiate this contradictory terrain in order to define and pursue a future for themselves?

First, it is important to analyze *how* youth come to internalize these neoliberal frameworks. Neoliberal responsiblization frameworks are often perpetuated by social science research, and subsequently by the social programs that use said research to guide their programming. By constructing youth as 'at-risk', a large portion of sociological research positions individual youth as at fault for their status, and responsibilizes these youth to overcome their 'risk' and achieve 'success' on their own (Goddard & Myers, 2017; Mallet, et al., 2010). For example, Abelev (2009) suggests that youth need four main traits to advance out of the

category of 'at-risk' and into the category of 'resilient': social capacity, problem solving skills, a sense of purpose, and autonomy. However, by positioning youth's ability to achieve success in their individual characteristics, Abelev (2009) ignores the social and structural barriers that limit youth's choices. Barker (2013) suggests that the 'negative' cultural capital marginalized youth use to negotiate their experiences of marginalization actually serve to reinforce their social status. For example, youth often used violence and theft to assert agency and build their reputation, but this made them become involved in the criminal justice system. He blames youth for coping in 'problematic' and 'self-destructive' ways, and suggests they must develop 'positive' cultural capital through going to school or getting a job in order to change their social conditions. Both authors responsiblize youth to overcome barriers that are deeply entrenched in their lives by developing better personal characteristics, rather than addressing those barriers that define and limit youth's choices (Abelev, 2009; Barker, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that I interrogate and unpack how youth make decisions and work to understand what I suspect is a complex interaction between individual decision making and powerful social frameworks and barriers.

The effects of neoliberal risk paradigms have serious consequences when they are translated into youth programing. Framing youth's lives in terms of 'risk' greatly limits what we can do to help them. Support tends to focus on individualized programming rather than addressing the unequal and oppressive social situations that influence youth's behaviours. Youth are encouraged to develop skills to alleviate their risk, but then are thrust back into social institutions and situations that create and perpetuate that so-called risk (Goddard & Myers, 2017; Woolford & Curran, 2012). In light of this, it is easy to see why many marginalized youth continue to experience homelessness, criminal justice involvement, abuse, mental health issues,

and addiction as they transition into adulthood. Many youth are unable to envision an alternative future outside of their immediate circumstances (Bryant & Ellard, 2015) because risk frameworks encourage them to make the best of their marginal life situation rather than changing the social institutions that produce marginality in the first place (Goddard & Myers, 2017; Mallet, et al., 2010; Woolford & Curran, 2012).

Explaining youth's lives in terms of risk leads many youth to not recognize the ways in which oppression and structural barriers have shaped their lives, instead many internalize these neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and blame themselves for their social position (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Harter et al, 2005; McLoughlin, 2013; Watson & Cuervo, 2017). Nichols and Braimoh (2018) found youth came to define themselves as 'other' through their participation in public sector interventions meant to address poverty and community safety. For example, one young person in their study explained that he came to learn that society does not want and does not like people like him and his peers. Young people on the margins of society often describe feelings of worthlessness, shame, public denigration and stigmatization, and narrate their social position as the result of bad choices. Youth often communicate a lack of self-worth, because they see their position as a result of personal failure (Farrugia, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Kidd, 2007). They often (ab)use drugs and alcohol to escape these feelings, which is then conceptualized as yet another 'risk' factor that further denigrates them (Kidd, 2003; Thompson et al., 2016). Furthermore, the stigma connected to certain 'risky' labels may make youth hesitant to seek out services (Harter et al, 2005; McLoughlin, 2013; Kidd, 2003), when these labels are attributed to personal defects, marginalized youth may fear they will be judged for 'irresponsible' decisions. Thus, rather than encouraging youth to make 'good' and 'responsible' choices, neoliberal risk ideologies actually serve to further exclude and marginalize

young people. My proposed research project will challenge these paradigms by inviting youth to share their views and experiences with success. I hope to, through these discussions, gain insight into their understandings of personal responsibility as well as their experiences living on the margins of society.

Alternative conceptions of youth on the margins

Youth in marginal social positions face a variety of structural barriers that limit their ability to conform to neoliberal principles of personal 'responsibility' and 'independence.' Yet these same frameworks blame youth for their 'failures' and depict them as 'at risk' for a variety of social problems. In light of this, it is essential that I problematize these neoliberal structures, and show how youth's social positions are more heavily rooted in inequality and oppression than in their personal characteristics. Furthermore, I want to highlight how youth's supposedly negative personal characteristics are shaped by larger social and structural processes. I want to challenge stereotypes of youth as lazy and unmotivated, and show how the structure of Canadian society, along with popular ideology, influences their worldview and opportunities. I aim to explore what marginalized youth want to get out of their future, and how the structure of society influences their ability to achieve it.

Many homeless youth want stable jobs, but find it difficult to engage in formal work because of their homeless status, lack of proper housing, physical and mental illness, a history of criminal justice involvement, their age and education level, and a lack of legal documentation. Even when youth do find work, not having a stable place to stay leads to feelings of anxiety, a lack of sleep, and a limited ability to clean up between shifts, which can lead to poor work performance (Karabanow, et al., 2010). Thus, being unemployed and homeless are not 'bad choices' that individual youth made – many youth actually want to make good choices and

comply with neoliberal ideas of responsibility, productiveness, and independence – rather, their social circumstances are embedded in structural issues in Canada that limit their ability to succeed.

For example, Dhillon (2005; 2011) found that homeless and street-involved young women wanted to attend school as a means out of social, political, and economic forms of deprivation, yet when they attended school they felt judged and harassed by their male teachers and peers. They also pointed to a lack of 'fitting in' due to their impoverished social status, and Indigenous young women in particular discussed experiences of overt and institutionalized racism. Letkemann (2009) as well found that, although Indigenous girls valued school, they felt excluded by their non-racialized peers. The young women in Dhillon's (2005; 2011) and Letkemanns' (2009) studies reflect that: 1) many youth do recognize they need to comply with neoliberal ideas in order to be successful, and 2) youth recognize that social and structural inequalities limit their ability to achieve that success. Thus, these studies suggest that solutions to ameliorate marginalization lie in social change.

Many youth recognize that their social position is not solely their fault, and recognize they need state intervention and better social programs to achieve success. Miller, Donahue, Este, and Hofer (2004), in a study of homeless youth in Lethbridge and Calgary, found youth emphasized structural issues when asked what they needed to achieve success. They wanted easier access to financial help, so they could put a down payment on a place to live. They also wanted employment opportunities in the form of job training, guidance in seeking a job, and opportunities for stable and high-paying work. Lastly, they wanted affordable housing that was in good condition and in good areas (Miller, Donahue, Este, & Hofer, 2004). Many marginalized youth are aware of the ways in which social policy circumscribes their choices, but still desire a

better life. Thus, it is important that I examine what it means to achieve success in a neoliberal state, and how youth can become empowered to do so.

Empowering youth on the margins

While it is imperative to recognize the culpability of the Canadian state in the marginalization of certain youth, depicting marginalized youth solely as passive victims of an oppressive state may lead to stereotypes of youth as powerless (Letkemann, 2009). Therefore, I want to consider different avenues for the empowerment of young people on the margins. I do not want to approach this project with the assumption that youth become empowered *in spite of* their marginal status. Rather, I will be open to the notion that marginalized youth can be empowered *because of* their marginal status. I want to privilege the voices of youth because living on the margins gives youth a unique perspective on life, which allows them to critically examine the ways oppressive structures shape their lives. Subsequently, they have the power to question these structures and re-work neoliberal ideologies.

For example, Thompson et al. (2016) found that youth learned to respect themselves through their capacity to survive hardships. Taking care of oneself in times of adversity led youth to feel confident in their ability to overcome any situation. In contrast to literature that suggests marginalized youth have maladaptive traits (ex. Abelev, 2009; Barker, 2013), Thompson et al. (2016) show how experiences associated with marginalization can actually produce 'positive' characteristics, such as resourcefulness, strength, and belief in oneself. Adapting to street life requires 'street smarts', which involves using sophisticated critical thinking skills to make complex decisions (Harter et al., 2005). Kidd (2003) also found experiences on the street made youth feel stronger, allowed them to learn about themselves, allowed them to learn and appreciate what is important in life, and made them more confident to deal with future hardships.

Youth who face adverse life circumstances often have hope for a better future, combined with the strength and knowledge gained from their experiences, this hope can be transformed into action (Bryant & Ellard, 2015).

Research shows that the solution to empower youth to achieve success does not lie in individual responsibility, but rather in the social structures that produce and perpetuate marginalization. For example, McLoughlin (2013) proposes the solution to youth homelessness is to create alternative local, social, physical, cultural, and economic spaces that better enable young people to negotiate and secure a home. This can be applied to other forms of marginalization; we need a new way of thinking about youth, risk, and responsibility in order to empower youth to negotiate the multiple oppressions in their lives and elevate their social position. Watson and Cuervo (2017) suggest approaches to homelessness should not only focus on the distribution of resources, but also on issues of subjecthood, empowerment, and self-determination. In other words, purely economic solutions can only go so far, what is needed is a reworking of dominant ideology. My proposed project will add to this literature by expanding on how neoliberal ideology, along with the social structures that are guided by it, can be reworked to empower marginalized youth to achieve success.

Marginalized youth are a very diverse group, so solutions must be tailored to the unique experiences of individuals in different social circumstances. For example, Dhillon (2005; 2011) suggests that homeless and street involved young women should have access to female-only educational programs with female teachers. Violence and trauma experienced on the street and the consequences those experiences have on young women's ability to elevate their social status must be addressed in order for them to become successful. In the particular instance of Indigenous youth, schools should include First Nations content in the curriculum, and schools

should address the violence and racism within them (Dhillon, 2005; Dhillon, 2011). Hansen and Hetzel (2018) suggest addiction programming for Indigenous youth should address how legacies of colonialism contribute to youth's addictions and include traditional cultural principles in the healing process. These solutions would not only empower young marginalized people to achieve success, but they would also force institutions to recognize their culpability in creating 'risk'. Institutions and policy makers need to learn how their policies have shaped the lives of marginalized young people in order to move forward and create spaces for empowerment. My hope is that the findings of the proposed research will contribute to these discussions.

Many studies show that the best solutions to alleviate oppression and achieve success come from the youth themselves (Dhillon, 2005; Dhillon, 2011; McLoughlin, 2013; Watson & Cuervo, 2017). For example, it was the young women in Dhillon's (2005; 2011) studies who suggested schools need female-only programs and Indigenous content added to the curriculum. Therefore, it is important to include marginalized youth in the discussion about how to help them. Policies and programs that are created by outside forces will continue to perpetuate neoliberal paradigms; marginalized youth need to have the ability to make decisions about the policies and programs that affect their lives (Watson & Cuervo, 2017). By asking youth what they want to achieve, and what social oppressions limit that ability, researchers and policy makers can better recognize how social policy needs to be re-worked to empower marginalized citizens. In order to challenge dominant paradigms as I conduct my research, I will treat youth as experts and constructors of knowledge, and use my privilege as a researcher to bring their voices into the conversation about how to improve policies and programs in order to serve and empower them.

Empowering youth also requires the re-working of what a successful outcome is. While many marginalized youth do believe in neoliberal ideals of success and want a 'normal' life (Bryant & Ellard, 2015), when success is defined as becoming completely independent, responsible, and productive, many youth in subordinated social positions are destined to fail (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Myers, 2017). As one youth in Watson and Cuervo's (2017) study suggests, just finding a stable place to stay can be considered success. Neoliberal ideologies also delegitimize aspects of marginalized youth's lives that they may view as 'successful', such as the strength and knowledge associated with 'street smarts' (Harter et al., 2005). Success should not be gauged based on guidelines imposed from above, but rather be defined by what particular youth want at a particular time. Thus, through my research, I intend to learn what 'success' is for youth who live on the margins of society.

Research Questions

Above I described many ways that young marginalized people struggle as they attempt to navigate the neoliberal ethos and achieve a successful adulthood. But little research has addressed what success even means to youth. While this research shows how difficult it is for marginalized youth people to live up to neoliberal expectations, it does not address what youth think of those expectations. This research attempts to fill that gap by asking marginalized youth how they define success for themselves, and what achieving that would mean to them. In doing so it seeks to understand how youth conceive of neoliberal ideas. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1) How do marginalized youth define success?
2) How do these definitions compare to dominant, neoliberal definitions of success?
   a. How and why do youth accept neoliberal definitions?

b. How and why do youth challenge neoliberal definitions?

Chapter Two:

Methods

Population

Between December 2018 and March 2019 I interviewed nine marginalized youth. Typical age definitions of 'youth' range between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009; Wyn & White, 1997), however, for ethical reasons this study only involved interviews with youth between the ages of 18 and 24. Marginalized youth often have conflictual relationships with their families, in fact, seven of the nine participants told me that they currently had a damaged or non-existent relationship with their parents. It would therefore be very difficult to gain parental consent for underage youth so they were excluded from the study. I interviewed seven male youth and two female youth. While I originally aimed for an equal gender division in my sample, this split was relatively representative of the demographic makeup of the youth service I recruited from. Past research has found 63% of youth shelter users are male, and 37% are female (Gaetz, 2014). Three youth claimed an Indigenous ethnic background, although two said they did not identify with their Indigenous culture.

For the purpose of this study, marginalized youth refers to youth who are accessing street level services to tackle barriers they have faced difficult dealing with on their own, such as poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, interpersonal violence, and/or criminal justice involvement. I did not choose to focus on any specific sub-group of youth because that would rely on my own preconceived notions of what 'barriers' or 'negative' life circumstances are. In addition, these factors tend to co-occur so focusing on one would artificially split the sample. By including a diverse range of participants in my study, I can draw attention to the ways in which different marginalizing characteristics intersect and influence how youth view

themselves and their world. At the time of the study, seven youth were currently homeless, seven were unemployed, seven did not have a high school degree, eight discussed struggling with addiction, seven discussed involvement in the criminal justice system, and six discussed being victims of violence. See Appendix A for a summary of each participants' demographic characteristics and present life circumstances. All participants will be referred to with pseudonyms. I gave participants the opportunity to choose their pseudonym, but most said they "didn't care," thus, all pseudonyms were chosen at random from a list of popular names.

Recruitment process

All participants were recruited through the Old Strathcona Youth Society (OSYS), located just off Whyte Avenue in Edmonton. OSYS's mission is "to provide purposeful resources and create a safe and supportive environment that fosters youth empowerment and development" (Old Strathcona Youth Society, 2015). It is a drop-in service open during afternoons – when most other youth services are closed – that provides resources such as clothing, food, referrals to other services, and other support youth may need. On specific days, they provide access to nurses, legal services, and recreation activities. For example, on the days that I would go, nurses would come in during the afternoon to provide STI testing, and in the evenings youth were given the opportunity to play video games. In the harsh winter weather, it most importantly provides a safe and warm space where youth can access physical and emotional support.

I first had a discussion with one of the directors of OSYS in order to determine the safest and most effective way to do research for both myself and the youth who used OSYS's services. I 'dropped in' to the service on a weekly basis; meaning that I hung out in the common areas, participated in activities, and introduced myself and my research to the youth who were also

hanging out. I would then invite youth to volunteer for an interview if they were interested in my topic. At the same time, youth workers would ask youth if they wanted to participate. This was an important component of the recruitment process, as some youth seemed apprehensive of me, so involving people who the youth trusted allowed them to feel more comfortable. In addition, the youth workers helped me to recruit specific youth when I had trouble fulfilling the demographic categories I had envisioned. For example, I had trouble recruiting young women, so I asked a youth worker to speak to some of them on my behalf and ask if any were interested. When I was not doing interviews, I would engage in casual conversation with the youth and workers, and participate in activities such as playing video games. This allowed me to develop rapport with the youth, and made them more comfortable to volunteer for an interview.

Youth who wanted to participate would approach me, and we would immediately start the interview. All interviews took place in private offices at OSYS. OSYS was deemed to be the ideal location to do interviews because it was a convenient and safe space for all parties involved. It was convenient for the youth because they were already there and would not have to expend any personal time or resources to get to the interviews. It was also convenient for me because, since interviews commenced immediately, the chance of no shows was eliminated. It was also a safe space; if youth became upset during interviews, they would have immediate access to trusted people – both youth workers and their friends – to talk to afterwards.

The interviews

I engaged the youth in semi-structured, qualitative interviews. The research consisted of nine interviews, each lasting forty minutes to an hour. I obtained consent in writing from each participant before the interview commenced (see appendix C). The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed afterwards. I used the constant comparative method (see Data

Analysis section), which meant that I reflected on each of my interview questions after the interviews, asking myself if the youth seemed to understand my questions in the same way I did, and if the questions truly got at the topics I was interested in. Questions were slightly adjusted between interviews based on these reflections. No significant changes were made, I only made adjustments to language to make my questions clearer.

The interviews addressed three main areas. First, I asked questions about youth's past in order to contextualize their dreams for the future. Second, I asked youth what they wanted to achieve in their lives. These included questions about their immediate goals, as well as their 'dream' future later in their lives. Third, I asked questions to determine why it was important and what it would mean to achieve everything they wanted to. See appendix B for the full interview guide. I aimed to understand how they understand success, how they envision themselves getting that success, and what it means to achieve success in comparison to their lives of marginalization.

Methodological obstacles

Along the way, I faced many obstacles in the research process. The first was finding an organization that was willing to work with me. I first contacted one youth service[4], exchanged several emails, and met with an administrator to discuss the possibility of doing research with them. At first it seemed like they would be willing to help, but shortly after they told me they could not accommodate my research. The organization was very concerned with protecting the vulnerability of their youth, and felt like the youth would not be comfortable with the topics I was interested in. Afterwards, I contacted several other youth organizations around Edmonton, I sent dozens of emails to the organizations as well as to people I knew worked there, I did not get

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[4] I will not name any services to protect their confidentiality

any responses from any of them. I suspect this occurred because many of these youth services are understaffed and overworked, and my research inquiries were not their priority. Then, one day, a volunteer came to my house to promote a fundraiser for the Old Strathcona Youth Society. Although this organization had been on my radar, I had not yet tried to contact them. I took this event as a sign and decided to send them an email, and within a week they had agreed to work with me.

The second struggle was finding youth who actually wanted to participate. On the first day I introduced myself and my research, one youth told me I was in the "wrong place." He seemed to be implying that talking to marginalized youth about success, especially the street-involved youth who used OSYS, was pointless. This youth was pretty popular at OSYS, and his comments made other youth hesitant to talk to me. In fact, the first few youth who I interviewed were not connected to him. They were either newly homeless and had not connected with that group, or were part of an older cohort of youth. As I spent time at OSYS, engaging youth in casual conversation and playing video games with them, the youth became more comfortable with me, and I was able to recruit a sufficient number of participants. However, the first youth never spoke with me.

Another struggle was finding female youth to speak to. As I mentioned earlier, of the 9 youth I interviewed, only 2 were female. One reason for this was that there were just not that many young women who went to OSYS, the gender split of my project was relatively representative of the gender spilt of the organization. Another reason is that the young women who used OSYS were much more reserved than the young men. When I addressed the room and asked if anyone would like to participate, a few male youth would raise their hands and seemed excited to participate, but the female youth always hung back and would never volunteer. I

needed the intervention of a youth worker to approach a few young women and ask if they were

interested. Other female youth were quite confrontational, when I addressed the room once, a

young woman challenged me, saying I was "too quiet" and that she would not talk to me if I just

"stood there staring at her." Much like the aforementioned example, I believe once this young

woman challenged me, others who may have been interested became afraid to approach me.

After a while, I began seeing the same youth over and over, and none were interested, so I

decided it would be unproductive for me to continue to try to recruit female participants. I

attempted re-contacting a few organizations I had earlier, and contacted a few new ones I had

learned about, but none were able to accommodate me.

Data Analysis

I qualitatively analyzed my results using a largely inductive approach, meaning that my

findings came directly from what my participants said, rather than attempting to fit their complex

stories into a pre-determined framework. However, I did not use a purely inductive approach,

because participants may reinforce dominant ideologies by constructing themselves and their

experiences by the very frameworks I am attempting to contest (Chunn & Menzies, 2014). In

fact, as will be discussed later, some youth did blame themselves for their social position, and

others stressed the importance of achieving success independently. Therefore, the results were

critically compared to previous literature with a similar theoretical focus to draw attention to

common themes that permeate the lives of marginalized youth, as well as recognize the ways in

which dominant ideology and structural oppression have shaped my participants' views

(Creswell, 2013).

My research is inspired by standpoint methodologies, meaning my analysis begins in the

actualities of people's lives as they experience them, while acknowledging the

interconnectedness of social relations of gender, age, class, race, sexual orientation, disability, and related axes of subordination in shaping the lives of my participants. In other words, I paid particular attention to how the intersections of different subordinating characteristics affect how marginalized youth understand the world, themselves, and success. This serves to challenge the structural inequalities that produce that subordination (Chunn & Menzies, 2014). Standpoint theory originated as a feminist methodology, and given the large number of males in my study, one could argue this method is not useful. I, however, argue that standpoint methodologies can be used to analyze the lives and viewpoints of all genders. Standpoint theory takes as its starting point the knowledge created by people who have been marginalized by intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, without privileging any one characteristic (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2002). Thus, it follows that standpoint theory can be used to investigate the lives and knowledge of young people who have been marginalized by a myriad of social and structural oppressions, not just by gender inequalities. Young men, while they are not oppressed because of their gender, may have a standpoint grounded in class and race inequalities. In addition, constructions of masculinity shape how they understand and experience their daily lives. Nichols (2008), for example, used standpoint theory to analyze the life of one young man. Using standpoint theory to investigate young marginalized people means that "the analysis is anchored in the material conditions of young people's ordinary daily and nightly experiences" (p.686). For both men and women, their experience and knowledge of the world is a function of where and how they are materially grounded in it (Nichols, 2008).

I analyzed my data using the constant comparative method, I constantly compared data, codes, and categories – both within an interview and between interviews – at every stage of data collection and analysis by writing memos. For example, I would begin transcribing interviews as

soon as possible after I completed them, and as I transcribed I would write notes about any insights that I developed during the process. I would then probe for those insights in subsequent interviews in order to understand if and how other youth thought about those topics, and begin to develop themes. I also began coding my interviews as soon as possible after transcribing using a line-by-line, initial coding method (Saldana, 2016). By coding at the same time I conducted later interviews, I was able to use insights from my coding to probe for emerging themes in the interviews, as well as use insights gleaned from the interviews to inform coding. Once I finished conducting, transcribing, and coding my interviews, I conducted a second pass of coding in which I refined and organized my original codes. This prompted a very cyclical method of data analysis, I began analyzing my codes using various charts and maps, and writing analysis memos. These analysis techniques led to new insights and prompted me to re-code certain themes, which then led to more refined analyses. I constantly went back and forth between the raw transcripts, codes, emerging categories and themes, and the actual writing of my thesis chapters. These methods allowed me to construct and pursue the most salient themes, and subsequently formed the basis of my final analysis (Charmaz, 2014). These research methods privileged the knowledge of youth, and allowed me to gain a deep understanding of how they negotiate dominant discourses to construct meanings of success.

Ethical Considerations

Marginalized youth, on account of experiencing gender, age, race, and class oppressions, are a very vulnerable group (Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009), therefore, there are several important ethical considerations to take into account when conducting qualitative research with them. First, youth may feel emotionally distressed if and when they discuss experiences with marginalization (ex. abuse, addiction, poverty, mental health). Therefore, I installed several

safeguards into my methods to both reduce the level of distress felt in the first place, and to deal with any distress the youth felt. Youth did at times get emotional during interviews, so I utilized some of these safeguards. When youth seemed hesitant to talk about a topic, I reminded them that they are allowed to not answer questions they felt uncomfortable with, and allowed them to choose whether or not they wanted to answer the question. In addition, when I knew the question I was about to ask involved a sensitive subject, I would preface it by asking "would you be comfortable talking about…" Several youth took this opportunity and chose not to answer certain questions. Two of the youth I interviewed got quite emotional and had tears well up during certain topics. When this happened, I first asked the youth if they were feeling okay and willing to continue with the interview, and if they said yes I changed the topic to a more positive one. While I did ensure the presence of trusted people for youth to talk to if they felt distressed and provided a list of outside resources to direct youth to (see Appendix D), no youth needed or wanted to access them.

Second, several of the youth had lower educational backgrounds because a) they had left school at a young age, and b) some claimed that when they were in school they weren't doing well. Therefore, they may have had trouble understanding the consent process and jargon (Warren, 2001). I explained consent in a manner everyone can understand by writing my consent forms at a grade eight reading level and reading the form out loud (see Appendix C). I also gave youth the opportunity to ask questions about the form and what they were agreeing to. I only continued with the interview when I feel the participant fully understood consent and could make an informed decision. In addition, I reminded youth throughout the interview that they had the right to not answer any questions they felt uncomfortable answering.

Third, power differentials exist due to my different social class and my position as a researcher (Warren, 2001). At the onset of this project, I was conscious of the fact that this could make youth feel pressured to answer questions they did not feel comfortable answering. However, as I engaged in the research I did not find this to be an issue. First of all, I made the consent process very clear so the youth knew they could choose not to answer questions they did not want to. Second, I also believe this occurred because, while the youth understood I was in a more privileged social position, they did not seem to see me as an authority figure. I am very close in age to the youth, and I spent time 'hanging out' and developing rapport prior to the interviews. However, if youth did not take me seriously as a researcher, they may have not fully considered the consequences of divulging personal information to me. That is, if I became too friendly with the youth, they may have shared sensitive information without realizing that information could be analyzed and published. I did thoroughly explain my position as a researcher, the project, and consent prior to the interview, and all the youth seemed to understand how their information would be used. A few of the youth asked me on later dates how my analysis of their interviews was going, so it was clear they understood the research process.

It will be important for me to continually reflect on my position as a researcher, the social position of my participants, and how my particular worldview may influence my research. Briggs (2007) argues that, by conducting interviews with subordinated groups, researchers can project the idea that minorities are included in national conversations, but in reality those groups face significant barriers that limit their participation. He also argues that native-born, middle class whites naturally seem to be part of the dialogue, and subordinate groups need the mediation of researchers to make their voices be heard. This is a salient issue to my own research, as I am both middle-class and white, and my participants were marginalized by several different

minority statuses. As I conducted and analyzed interviews, I constantly reflected on my position

through the process of memoing, and was wary of the ways in which it could have perpetuated

the very social situations and power dynamics I am trying to shed light on. While one of the aims

of my research is to give voice to traditionally subordinated people, it is important that I do so in

a non-paternalistic way. By using direct quotes from the youth, I hope to privilege their voice

and viewpoints throughout the research process.

Chapter Three:

How do Marginalized Youth Define Success?

My literature review highlighted the struggles youth face when they try to achieve success in a neoliberal ethos that both responsibilizes youth for their future and limits their ability to transition into a successful adulthood. However, it is important to analyze what youth actually want. Do youth want to achieve a 'typical,' middle-class lifestyle, or do they desire something else? Do they buy into the neoliberal idea that they must become independent, responsible and productive? First, I will analyze youth's perceptions of their current realities in order to contextualize youth's dreams for the future. Second, I will analyze what youth want to achieve. This will be broken into two subsections: their immediate, most pressing goals, and then how they perceive their ideal future.

Current Realities

Before I describe what youth want to get out of life, it is important to analyze what their lives are currently like. Youth's visions for their futures are often defined in relation to their experiences entrenched in marginalization. Many youth talked about how life on the street allowed them to reflect on their priorities, and they often aim to gain what they do not currently have. This reflects Kidd's (2003) findings that street life allowed youth to learn about themselves and their priorities and to appreciate what is important in life. For example, Alexander, a participant in my research, argued that "in order to value something you have, you have to be without it."[5] His experiences living on the street allowed him to learn how important it was to have a home. As I will discuss later, many youth discussed that they wanted to achieve a life that

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[5] Single quotation marks will continue to be used to emphasize how certain terms have very particular meanings constructed under dominant ideologies, whereas double quotation marks will refer to youth's direct quotes and in-vivo terms.

is essentially the opposite of what they have now. Being marginalized and being successful are not discrete stages of one's life, but rather, are intertwined in complex ways. In order to fully understand what youth want out of life, it is important to understand the experiences that informed and motivated them towards those goals.

The youth I interviewed struggled with meeting their most basic of needs. One of the most important of those is sleep. Most of the youth interviewed were currently staying at a local youth shelter, however, the sleep they got there was insufficient. According to Alexander "you go to bed around midnight, you get up at like seven," and Madison expanded on this by explaining that if you stayed too late you would not be allowed back the next night. In addition, the sleep they can get is far from deep. Aaron explained how he had been robbed during the night at the shelter, so whenever he uses it he's anxious he'll get stolen from again. This fear and anxiety make it extremely difficult to get a good night's sleep. When the shelter is closed, or when youth are restricted from the shelter, they face considerable stress finding a safe place to sleep. Alexander explained how it was hard for him to function on limited sleep, and how he was more "susceptible to [his] emotions" and "less in control of [his] thoughts and feelings." He regularly feels sad and angry, and these emotions get in the way of doing what he needs to do.

While lack of sleep is one of the biggest issues youth discussed, there were many other needs youth claimed were not being met on the street. Marginalized youth who live on the streets often do not have access to nutritious food. Youth services do often provide youth with meals, however, according to Madison the food is "processed crap." That is, the food is not nutritious, and often makes her feel sick rather than equipping her to take on the day. These youth also lacked the resources to engage in basic hygiene practices. Emily spoke about the lack of showers available to her, and how washrooms are closed after a certain time. Jack also spoke about how

he struggled with hygiene on the streets. In addition, youth discussed how they and their friends at times lacked weather appropriate clothing. While youth services do provide access to clothing, given that it all comes from donations, it is not always appropriate for youth's current needs.

These issues are especially troubling when compounded by harsh weather conditions. I conducted my interviews during a very severe cold snap, with temperatures between negative twenty and thirty degrees Celsius on the days I conducted my interviews. Most youth made passing complaints about how cold it was, yet it was clear the cold weather greatly affected them and their ability to do what they wanted to do. Youth find it harder to sleep while cold, especially if they do not have access to a shelter. In addition, cold weather may push youth to use shelters when they otherwise would prefer not to. Michael, for example, explained that he would rather be sleeping "in a park or something," but in the winter he was forced to go to the shelter. Emily discussed how she had been banned from the local youth shelter, so on cold nights she was forced to go to the much more dangerous adult shelter. Aaron expressed his frustration at the fact that he often had to wait out in the cold when services were closed. Most of the youth lack weather appropriate clothing, many do not own winter jackets or boots. On especially cold days, I could sense a change in the behaviours of the youth who used OSYS' services. Some were irritable and quick to anger, some were loud and energetic, others were quiet and sullen. It is clear that being cold constantly puts youth into more extreme moods and makes it harder for them to "function," to use Alexander's terminology.

Another issue that keeps youth from going after their goals is a lack of safety. Life on the streets is characterized by constant danger and insecurity. This issue was especially acute for Aaron. Aaron explained how:

> On the streets like, it's like kill or be killed, and I, I don't fight, I don't like to fight because I've been abused growing up, I feel like nothing should cause physical pain but,

whenever anybody has a problem with you, they're like, even if they don't have problems with you, just cause they know you don't like to fight, they just like to push you.

Aaron feels constantly threatened on the streets, he cited multiple times when he had been assaulted in just the past few weeks. This makes it hard to get on with his life for several reasons. First, he explains how if he is in the same building, such as a shelter or resource center, as another youth who "has a problem" with him, they will follow him outside and beat him up. He described how he has had to miss important meetings because he was too scared to go outside. Even if there is no immediate threat to him, Aaron explained how some youth "always find reasons" to fight. Thus, Aaron is constantly afraid, constantly looking for danger, and under these conditions he "can't get shit done."

Alexander too explained how he was always dealing with people who "had problems" with him and wanted to fight. Unlike Aaron, however, Alexander enjoyed fighting and the status it gave him. He has come to understand lately that his aggressive behaviour is not getting him anywhere. Yet he cannot distance himself from violence because violence is part of his everyday reality on the streets. He still regularly runs into people who have "beef"[6] with him, and he does not have the resources to deal with this conflict in a non-violent manner. In addition, the anger he experiences as a result of dealing with the physical realities of homelessness (i.e. lack of sleep, poor nutrition, constant cold) makes him react aggressively to frustrating situations and confrontations. Although he does not want to be violent anymore, the realities of homelessness limit all other options.

Marginalized youth's lives are often characterized by a lack of support. Often these youth come from very conflictual families, they had parents who struggled with addiction, were

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[6] A complaint or grudge (Thorne, 2014)

abusive, and/or did not provide the support these youth needed to succeed in life. These youth discussed having parents who struggled with addiction and did not give them the care and support they needed. Emily explained that her parents "don't always give me my needs," in particular, her mother "doesn't really care about her kids, doesn't think about them, she just, herself." Others, like Aaron, Alexander, and Michael, discussed having parents who physically and/or verbally abused them. Daniel and Jack had been taken from their families and put into foster care, and while some of the homes they stayed in were "decent," to use Daniel's term, others were abusive. Regardless of their level of decency, constantly moving meant that these youth did not get the opportunity to form supportive relationships. As Jack explained "most of the people that I've met, I barely get to know, cause I've been moved around so much." Almost all of the youth I spoke to experienced cycling in and out of various housing arrangements, including parental and other familial homes, foster home placements, friends' homes, and the street. Thus, these youth's support systems were incredibly unstable, if not non-existent.

Too often, parent's trauma influences their children, perpetuating cycles of addiction, poverty, and violence. For example, Thomas discussed how his father had struggled with alcohol addiction; he argued his father used alcohol as a "tool" to deal with the "hard truths" in his life that he was not able to talk about. This affected his ability to parent and care for Thomas, leading Thomas to experience trauma himself and not having the support or resources to deal with that trauma. Thomas saw how alcohol affected his father's life and chose not to use it, yet he ended up using drugs to deal with his own "hard truths." Alexander grew up witnessing his stepfather physically abuse his mother. Alexander eventually decided to defend his mother by "beating up" his stepfather, but she took the side of her husband. Alexander was sentenced to jail because of this event, and has spent the last few years cycling in and out of jail. Growing up witnessing

abuse led him to believe violence is the only way to deal with problems. In jail, he got involved with more violent people, and he described how his violence "escalated" during these times. Even as he tries to distance himself from that violent lifestyle, he never had the support to deal with issues in any other way.

Youth often leave homes characterized by addiction, abuse, conflict, poverty and neglect (Kidd, 2003; Mallet et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2013; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009), in fact, all the youth I had interviewed described at least one of these issues in their childhood. They then move into street environments which just perpetuate these issues. They are surrounded by people who struggle with addiction, and may struggle themselves, they experience abuse from their marginalized peers, and they are neglected by society and wider structures. Homeless youth must deal with and attempt to heal from the trauma of the past while at the same time deal with new stresses and hardships on the streets. Youth can often find connections with and support from youth who had similar experiences to them, however, these relationships are often characterized by mutual alcohol and drug use. That is, these relationships simultaneously help youth heal from trauma and reinforce 'problem' or 'risky' behaviours.

All of these issues work to erode youth's mental health. Life on the streets is inherently bad for youth's mental health. I discussed how struggling to meet their needs every day made youth feel anxious. That is, trying to find where to sleep, what to eat, and looking out for violence, are very stressful activities. Furthermore, a lack of sleep, poor nutrition, harsh weather, and a lack of support make it hard to cope with the trauma they experience. Thus, many youth ended up having "emotional breakdowns" in which they lash out in anger or get very sad. Many of the youth talked about struggling with mental health issues, some explicitly discussed how they struggled with depression, while others made more implicit comments about struggling with

their "mind" or "head space." Many youth connected their mental health struggles with their experiences of marginalization. Madison, for example, explained that "when I did meth I just felt down about myself all the time." At the same time youth deal with the stresses of the street, they must also deal with the trauma and hardship that led them to street life in the first place. These issues become more pronounced when youth see their social position as their fault, they feel bad about themselves for 'failing' at life.

Several youth discussed how they had used drugs to cope with their mental health issues. Jacob, for example, told me that he started using to "numb the depths of [his] despair," and Thomas explained that he "picked addiction over actually being happy." Jacob and Thomas, like many other youth, had experienced incredible hardship in their younger years, including poverty, abuse, neglect, and familial addiction. Given that they grew up in these environments, they did not have the opportunity to learn the skills or gain the resources needed to deal with those hardships, so they used drugs to cope with their hurt. Other youth stated they started using drugs because of peer pressure. However, as Aaron explained:

> I just didn't give a fuck about my life anymore, and, tried what everyone else was doing [meth], you know, go, started chilling with the homeless people, when that happens you start doing what, what they do, especially when you're young, right

Aaron was abused growing up, and smoked a lot of weed to cope. When his dad eventually kicked him out, the trauma of his home life greatly affected his mental health, and made him more susceptible to peer pressure. He started using meth because he was never supported before and wanted to belong to a community, as well as numb the negative feelings he felt. Drug use is a mental health issue, and a direct response to dealing with the harsh realities of marginalization.

Youth's discussions of their successful futures are directly related to these experiences of marginalization. That is, youth who are homeless and struggle to survive day to day want to get

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off the street and be able to meet their basic needs. Those who experience violence want to feel safe and secure. They all essentially want to break cycles of poverty, abuse, and addiction that have characterized their home and street lives and achieve a better future for themselves. In the following section, I will explore what youth want to achieve in their lives, what an ideal successful future looks like, and how these understandings are shaped by their previous experiences with marginalization.

<div align="center">**Youth's Immediate Goals**</div>

Getting off the Streets

For many youth involved in street life their foremost concern is to get off the streets. As Aaron stated, the most important thing is for him to "get the fuck off the streets, can't do anything 'till I do that, right." As stated in my methods section, seven out of nine of the youth I interviewed were currently homeless. The physical realities of homelessness make it nearly impossible for youth to pursue their dreams. Every day, marginalized youth who are involved in street life must contend with a lack of sleep, lack of access to nutritious food, harsh weather conditions, and the constant threat of theft and violence. They spend a large portion of their time and energy dealing with these issues, and subsequently have nothing else to pursue any other concerns they may have. Thus, youth must become housed before they can have the material and mental resources required to have a successful life. Watson and Cuervo (2017) also argue that homeless youth need a safe and affordable home in order to access the resources needed to improve their condition.

Youth believe that getting off the streets will allow them to overcome all the issues they face in their daily lives and empower them to move on with their lives. Several youth spoke about how having a home will allow them to sleep better. They explained how having a home

means they know they will have a place to sleep at night, thus reducing a huge source of stress. They can get more sleep because they are not constrained by hours. They can also have better quality sleep, they feel much more safe and secure in a home because they do not face the fear of violence or theft. All these things help youth in two major ways: 1) having a good sleep allows them to "function" better, and 2) the security and stress-reduction associated with having a home allows them to spend more mental energy on other things.

Sleep is not the only thing a home provides, youth need a comfortable place to call their own, a place that they can go after a stressful day and just relax. Life on the streets is marked by a general lack of comfort; youth are constantly looking out for danger and trying to meet their basic needs. They do not really have anywhere safe to call their own that they can just go and relax after a stressful day. While places like OSYS have couches and leisure activities to help youth relax, these places are not youth's own. For one, they have to share these places with other youth who they may or may not get along with. In addition, several youth made comments about how these places are usually loud so they cannot really have quiet time. Thus these places do not give youth as much comfort as they would like. As Alexander puts it: a place "would mean stability, it would mean home, it would mean, a place to put my head down." Michael also explained that a home is where "you feel comfortable going every night, that you enjoy going every night." With their own stable place, they have the opportunity to just be on their own and relax, they can choose what they do with their leisure time, and can make their space comfortable for them.

Getting off the streets will also allow youth to meet their other basic needs. They will have regular access to food because they will have a place to store and prepare that food. Life on the street greatly limits youth's choices. As I explained above, youth often do not have much

choice in what they want to eat, and are forced to eat "processed crap" from the shelter that can make them feel sick. Having a home gives these youth the opportunity to *choose* what they eat, and they can access healthier foods if they wish to do so. This will not only improve their health, but will also allow them to assert some degree of agency and control over their previously unpredictable lives. They will also have access to a bathroom so they can maintain their hygiene and 'presentability.' In addition, they will have somewhere to stay warm in the cold winter.

Having a home also means safety and security. Alexander explained how a home is important because "I don't have to run into people I have problems with constantly cause I can tell them to 'go fuck yourself, I'm calling the cops' when I'm at, when I'm at my door." In other words, getting off the streets allows Alexander to avoid violent confrontations and distance himself from the violent lifestyle that characterized his past. He, and every other youth I interviewed, would not have to live with the constant fear that they could be victimized at any moment. Having a secure place to stay allows youth to let their guard down and relax. This also includes security of one's belongings. Aaron explained how if he had a home he "could actually have things and not have to worry about [them] being gone." Again, this means youth do not have to be constantly on alert, they can feel at ease with the knowledge that their belongings are safe.

Most importantly, getting off the streets gives youth the resources to do more. That is, when youth have their basic needs met, can maintain a healthy lifestyle, and feel safe and secure, they have the ability to create a better life and go after their dreams. Emily, for example, believes that she will be able to do more in a home because:

> Think about it, so you go to your house, you can be organized with like, you can take your work home, you could, I don't know, you have clothes, you have a roof, you have a shower, instead of sleeping outside, and just, be cold, there's like, washrooms are locked at night and stuff, and you don't have access to many things as you are in a home.

In other words, when youth can access these basic necessities, it makes them better equipped to deal with the other things they want to do with their lives. Having a better sleep, warmth, and access to nutritious food allows youth to "function" better. That is, reducing the stress of where to sleep, where to find food, and watching out for danger frees up mental energy for youth to focus on other tasks. Furthermore, the sense of agency that comes with being off the street may make youth feel empowered and more capable to pursue their other goals. Combined, the resources that youth can access in a home allow them to improve their lives and pursue their dreams. These dreams will be described in the following section.

Getting on their feet

Once youth get off the streets, the next step is to get on their feet. As discussed above, when youth are living on the street, their daily lives are focused on finding food, finding clothing, dealing with victimization and violence, dealing with the natural elements, and coping with associated mental health issues. In this situation, youth do not have the time or the energy to do anything else. Activities such as going to work, going to school, or participating in hobbies is next to impossible. Getting off the streets gives youth the mental and physical resources to get on their feet and engage in activities that will create a better life for them. In other words, many youth believe that once they have a secure place to sleep, access to healthy food, safety from violence and theft, and shelter from the cold, among other things, they will be able to focus their energy on tasks such as getting a job, going to school, getting into hobbies, and creating a healthy social circle.

Most of the youth that I interviewed said that, at the moment, they would be happy with any job. They just want to be able to afford rent and food. Because of the pressures they face, they do not really have the luxury of being selective about their jobs, they will take whatever

they can get. Some examples youth gave me were working as a barista, cashier, or working in fast food. However, these jobs are seen as an interim job to get them on their feet so that they can become more prepared to pursue a more lucrative job in their future. Most of the youth I spoke to have a lot of goals they want to work on, so getting an "easy," low-skilled, job allows them to focus their energy on other tasks. They want to go back to school, get back into old hobbies or try new ones, work through mental health and addiction issues, and work on their relationships. By getting an easier job, they have the ability to explore all the activities they want to while still being able to pay the bills.

A few of the youth I spoke to have done a lot of research into how they can balance their more immediate concerns with their long-term goals. One of these ways is to utilize social assistance so that they may survive while pursuing more complex dreams. For example, Michael is planning on getting income assistance while he goes to school to become a doctor. He does not want to work a lot through school because he wants to be able to focus on his degree, but still needs to make money to pay for rent and other basic needs. The government will not pay him enough to survive, so he has done research to find the maximum amount of money he can make in an "easy" job while still getting income assistance payments. Neoliberal ideologies would assert that people who rely on social assistance are lazy, and their lack of independence makes them unmotivated or undisciplined people (Chunn & Gavigan, 2014; Faid, 2009; Woods, 2015), but Michael challenges this stereotype. He shows how using social assistance can be a strategic way that young people can survive while working towards their more ambitious goals. By using income assistance, he can work less and focus on his school work. And ultimately, rather than being forced into unskilled, precarious work, he can get a high-paying job that will not only improve his life, but will also help people and contribute more to the economy. On the other

hand, he is reinforcing neoliberal ideologies because he is using social assistance for the purpose it is designed for: to become independent and responsible (Chunn & Gavigan, 2014; Faid, 2009; Woods, 2015).

Getting on their feet also entails going back to school. Seven of the nine youth I interviewed did not have their high school degrees, and going back to school and getting those degrees was very important to them. They had left school at young ages because they did not have the mental or physical resources needed to do well in school, Thomas for example, explained that he "wasn't really in the right mind space to hit the books properly." For these youth, the ability to go back to school is both an indication they are in a healthier place in their lives and a means to make their lives even better. Emily explained that "if I have my grade twelve education I can do a lot more than what I can do now." Essentially, youth want to finish school because it will give them more opportunities as they transition into adulthood. Some youth, such as Aaron, do not necessarily need a high school degree for their career goals, but want the degree so they can have a "plan B." That is, if their career aspirations do not pan out, they will not be forced onto the street again, they will have the credentials to pursue different jobs. A few of the youth I spoke to had ambitious dreams for their futures, for example, both Madison and Michael want to be doctors, and will eventually need university degrees. Thus, they need a high school diploma to pursue their dream futures. In all cases, youth wanted to pursue a high school degree so that they could expand the opportunities available to them.

Getting on their feet also involves dealing with criminal charges. When marginalized youth have limited career options, many engage in illegal activities to make ends meet (Karabanow et al., 2010). Several youth discussed how they had to shoplift their basic necessities such as clothing and food. Others engaged in criminal activity because it was what "everyone

else was doing," and they wanted to fit in and find community. Others were forced to engage in violent criminal activity in order to defend themselves. Regardless of the exact reason, youth engage in criminalized activities in order to make life on the street easier. Yet once youth get a criminal record, their ability to get off the street and achieve a successful future is much more limited.

Several youth were involved in the court system at the time of the interviews, and were worried about the impact a criminal record would have on the dreams they were pursuing. Jack, for example, was pursuing a career in construction, but knew that if he were found guilty of the charges he was dealing with, he would not be hired by many construction companies. He believes that getting these charges dropped is essential for him to have a successful future. Madison had recently had some charges dropped, and is now being very careful about her behaviour so she would not get any criminal charges that would impact her future. Emily provides an interesting counter example. She is currently in the process of dealing with some criminal charges, but is optimistic that those charges will not affect her career goals.

Enjoying Life

Most youth do not want to make enough to *just* cover their bills, several youth talked about wanting to "actually enjoy [their] life" (Aaron). For example, Aaron explained how he wanted a job:

> so I can actually, be able to afford shit, not just rent and shit but like also shit I want, I can't, like, you know, when you're homeless, you go up to store and you're like, oh fuck that looks good, that looks nice, or I wish I had that, you know, if you have a job and you have your own money, it's not, I wish I had that, [it's] oh let me buy that, you know.

In other words, having a job, even just an "easy" interim job, allows him to buy stuff that he likes and would make him happy to own. Life on the streets is marked by having next to nothing, so being able to buy things that he likes and wants is important. Emily is currently employed as a

dishwasher at a local coffee shop. She told me a story about how, after her first paycheck, she decided to have fun and went to the West Edmonton Mall Water Park. Experiencing the harsh realities of homelessness on a daily basis makes youth stressed, sad, and angry, so getting the opportunity to have fun and escape for a while is incredibly important for their mental health.

Another important element of becoming successful is getting involved in activities or hobbies. Emily spoke a lot about how she wanted to get into aerial arts. She had started taking classes when she was younger, but due to the instability of her life, she was forced to quit. Getting back into aerial arts would give Emily a fun and fulfilling hobby to do. Madison also spoke about wanting to get back into gymnastics. She was "really good at it" and "top of [her] class" and was encouraged to go on a competitive track. However, she had to quit because it was expensive, and she had gotten injured. Today, she is not involved in any activities that make her feel good about herself, and explained how being on the streets made her feel like "shit." Getting on her feet would mean being able to get back into an activity that made her feel happy and boosted her self-esteem.

Being Supported

As discussed above, youth on the street often lack support. They often come from homes that are characterized by abuse, conflict, poverty, addiction, and/or neglect (see also: Mallet, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Mcloughlin, 2013), and once they end up on the street they may find themselves in relationships that perpetuate these issues. However, youth's relationships on the street are not solely negative, and friendships can serve to mitigate the harsh realities youth face. Much like Werdal and Mitchell (2018) found, by hanging out with friends, youth manage to create and find little pockets of happiness in order to cope with the hardships they face every day. As Alexander puts it:

I try to hang around friends, try to keep my mind off of being homeless, and I try to think of it as, you know, I'm just hanging out with friends, and not, I have somewhere to go later on tonight, hopefully.

In other words, Alexander hangs out with friends to distract himself and pretend that he is a 'normal' young person. He can take his mind off all the things that stress him out, and just have fun with his friends. Aaron also stressed the importance of having friends who "don't act fake or, you know, stab you in the back and shit like that, it's just, good to have around, it's just people you can actually talk to, you know." In other words, it is important for marginalized youth to have friends they can discuss the challenges they face with, and get emotional support from.

Youth can also get help from, and help their friends, physically cope with their marginalized realities. Several youth discussed how they and their friends would help each other get food, clothing, and find shelter. Madison discussed how she does not want to shoplift because she is afraid of the impact a criminal record would have on her future career goals, but her friends who regularly shoplift will get her food and clothing that she needs. In return, she will give away her clothing to people who need it. Alexander also talked about how he will give sweaters to friends in need. In addition, a couple youth mentioned having what I refer to as mainstream friends who would occasionally let them stay at their place. Werdel and Mitchell (2018) and Karabanow et al. (2010) also found that youth shared resources in order to survive on the streets.

Support is one of the biggest things youth want, and one of the most important things that will help youth achieve their other goals. While youth value the help they get from friends on the street, they desire a different type of support that will help them to get off the streets, on their feet, and make a better future for themselves. For example, Aaron stressed the importance of getting a new friend group once he gets off the streets. As he explains it:

> Once I get off the streets, I don't have to stay at shelters, and I should just, right there, the difference in the people that you chill with, cause, you can't ask for your life to go good when you're with people like that, you know, it's, once you got your own place and you distance yourself, that's when, and like, you meet other people that, good friends or whatever, you know, that's when you can actually do shit.

In other words, Aaron wants mainstream friends who also want to achieve a successful life so they can support him with his own goals. He believed a lot of his homeless counterparts were too concerned with "partying" and therefore could not really help him achieve his goals, he wanted friends with similar goals to him so they could support each other towards them. Emily and Madison also spoke about how they want to surround their selves with friends who are also trying to make their lives better so that they may help each other out. Emily explained that there was a certain reciprocity to these relationships, because they "better you and it betters them."

Part of being supported is also distancing themselves people who do not support, or people they believe may drag them backwards. Werdel and Mitchell (2018) found that many street-involved youth want to move on and distance themselves from associations with lifestyles or behaviours they found problematic. To go back to the example of Emily, she also told me that she wanted to cut off contact with her peers "who don't really give two flying craps about anything." Distancing yourself from friends who are still entrenched in street life is seen a very effective strategy to overcome one's barriers and go after one's goals. For instance, as Madison is recovering from her addiction and trying to stay clean, she explained how it was important to be very selective about who she spent time with, as spending time with people who still used drugs could trigger her addiction and cause her to relapse. Madison is in a complicated position because, on the one hand, she loves and values her friends, but on the other, she is afraid that if they continue to use drugs and engage in criminal activity, associating with them will keep her on the street. Other youth discussed how some street peers actively pressured them to use drugs

or engage in violence, so they had to distance themselves for their own well-being. However, this strategy is loaded with moral judgments about youth who 'choose' to stay on the streets. For example, some youth explained to me that they believed the other youth on the streets were only concerned with doing drugs, and that they were one of the few who wanted to get their lives better. They seem to be buying into the neoliberal belief that people 'choose' to either stay on the street or make their lives better. These other youth were viewed as inherently bad because of the choices they made, and the youth did not want them in their lives.

Youth also stressed the importance of family. Madison told me "I don't feel like I have a family," by which she means she does not feel like she has anyone who supports her. She was kicked out of her home for her drug use, and currently is not even allowed to visit her family. Getting to live back with her family is extremely important for Madison. First, she explained how if she were to get a room to rent, go back to school, and prove she could "be consistent," her father would let her move back home. Thus, getting her family back is proof that she is on a successful path. Second, she believes that getting back with her family will provide support she needs to pursue her long-term goals. Jacob had been kicked out after his drug addiction led him to lie and steal from his parents. However, now that he is "clean" he has repaired that relationship and seems to be very close with his father again. This has proven to be instrumental in helping Jacob pursue his long-term goals, as his father has supported him with university applications, introducing him to a new supportive friendship network, and giving him emotional support.

It is important to note that not all youth wanted to get back with their families. Several had been hurt too much, and believed it would be better for them to just move on. As discussed above, Emily explained how her mother had struggled with addiction, and believed her mother

did not care about her, she only cared about herself. Emily has no desire to reconnect with her mother, and would rather create a new support network with "good" people who will actually support her. Alexander spent his entire childhood watching his stepfather abuse his mother, and being verbally abused himself. He has no desire to reunite with his family. He explained how his stepfather had attempted to reconnect with him, but the damage was irreparable. Now that his girlfriend is pregnant, Alexander would rather focus on supporting his new family and giving his child the support that he never had.

Becoming Healthy

I have already touched on how getting off the streets will give youth access to things that may help them maintain their health. Having access to a kitchen will allow them to store and prepare healthy food, having access to bathroom will help them maintain their hygiene, and having access to warmth and comfort will help their bodies recuperate from stress and illness. However, being healthy goes beyond these basic practices, and many youth place a lot of importance on becoming healthy. Madison had a very holistic understanding of getting healthy:

> recreational smoking weed like bare, like once in a while, not smoking meth, I have my own place, I can live at home with my parents, or just have my own place, get all the negative people out of my life, and um, just like finishing my school and stuff, and like, gain my weight back, do like physical activities, get into like something like, gymnastics or like, soccer or something, and like eating healthier

Thus, being healthy is about one's whole lifestyle, it includes physical health, mental health, and making life decisions that support a healthy lifestyle. Getting a place is seen as part of a healthy life because it will allow her to eat better, and ending relationships with negative people will allow her to distance herself from drug triggers. Madison explained that she wanted to "stay healthy so I can have a better life." Thus, a successful life is a healthy one.

There were several specific things youth wanted to achieve in order to become healthier. Madison, who had lost a lot of weight due to her addiction, found it important to eat healthier, gain back the weight she had lost, and get back to her old self. She explained how "now that I gained it [my weight] all back I feel so much better and healthier." Emily also discussed wanting to eat healthier because she was not getting nutritious food on the street. Several youth also wanted to become more active and physically fit. I discussed above how some youth wanted to get into hobbies such as gymnastics, aerial arts, and martial arts because it boosted their self-esteem and gave them something fun to do. But these activities have an added bonus of keeping these youth physically fit. A few of the youth I interviewed value fitness and being active, but do not have the opportunity to do so on the streets. Being successful means they can engage in physical activity. Alexander talked about how he wanted to get into construction so he could build muscle. For him, though, becoming muscular is about becoming physically intimidating to people who have "beef" with him.

Being healthy is not just about keeping the body healthy, it is also concerned with the mind, mental health and associated addictions issues. I discussed above how these youth struggled with their mental health both because of past trauma and their current realities on the streets which add to and perpetuate those issues. They often coped with these issues through drug use. To them, having a successful life means they have better mental health, and can quit using drugs. First, many feel like they need to be in a better "mind" or "head space" in order to be prepared to do everything they want. That is, they have to deal with their past trauma and the stresses of their lives before they can be mentally prepared to pursue their goals. Thomas, for example, discussed how his father had used alcohol to cope with the "hard truths" of his past that he was never able to speak about, so today he has learned to recognize and deal with his own

"hard truths" so he can improve his "head space" and quit his addiction. Several youth discussed seeing therapists or counsellors to deal with their past traumas. Others had more informal coping methods, such as doing yoga, meditating, recreational weed smoking, creating art and music, and talking to friends. Furthermore, just getting off the streets and having their needs consistently met will help eliminate a lot of the stress that occupies their "head space."

Second, they believe that achieving their goals will make them feel happier and improve their self-esteem. These youth described feeling bad about themselves and the decisions they've made, often describing themselves as unintelligent or failures. They described their past lives as being overwhelmingly unhappy, and drug use as a way to artificially give them a sense of happiness. They believe that achieving things such as getting a house, finishing school, and getting a good job will make them feel real happiness and fulfilment for the first time in a long time. The youth hoped that all this will improve how they see themselves, help develop their overall mental health, and allow them to quit drugs.

There are other health issues that develop as a consequence of drug use that these youth will have to deal with for the rest of their lives. Madison discussed how meth "rewired" her brain, and she now has trouble with her memory. At the moment, she uses her friends as "calendars" to remind her of appointments and important dates. Madison hopes to go to school and be a doctor, which will require strong memory skills. In order to have a successful life, Madison will have to develop tools to deal with her memory loss. Aaron also discussed that he struggled with insomnia, which he believes is a consequence of his past drug use. At the moment, he smokes weed to help him sleep at night, and believes he will have to do this for the rest of his life. These examples show that there is not really an end goal in which youth can

claim they have achieved healthiness, rather, healthiness and success are on-going projects that youth will have to work on for their entire lives.

Youth's Long-Term Goals

Dreams for the Future

Many of the youth I interviewed do not want to just get on their feet, most have very ambitious dreams for their futures. As I briefly mentioned in the preceding sections, the immediate goals youth described were often spoken about as a stepping stone towards a more lucrative future. For example, at the moment, Michael just wants to get an 'easy' job such as working at McDonalds, but he wants to do this so that he can support himself throughout school and eventually become a doctor. Youth's immediate goals of getting a place to stay, going to school, getting an easy job, getting into hobbies, and finding support systems are all accomplishments that will give youth the physical and mental resources they need to pursue their long-term goals.

One of the reasons youth strive for higher status jobs is financial. Having a low-wage job, while it would be an accomplishment, would mean these youth are pretty much just surviving. They would be living pay check to pay check, and in this situation, they would be one misstep away from becoming impoverished and possibly homeless again. Emily, for example, has a job, but does not make enough to pay rent and support herself. These youth do not want to simply *survive*; they want to *thrive*. Thus, many youth want jobs that are high-paying and have security. Madison and Michael both wanted to be doctors; Thomas, Alexander, and Jack planned to get into high-paying trades; Jacob is pursing school to be a youth worker; Aaron wants to be a pilot; Daniel wants to join the military; and Emily wants to open a salon.

However, finances are not the only thing that pushes youth into these careers. Youth described a plethora of reasons for pursuing the careers they want. Some youth, Like Madison and Aaron, wanted to get into a career they had wanted since they were little kids. Others, like Jacob, learned what they wanted to do with their lives through their experiences on the street. Some youth highly valued helping people, and wanted to get into careers where they could help others. Some wanted to get into careers they already had experience in and knew they could do well in. Many said they wanted a career they could continue to learn and grow in. All the youth I interviewed described some combination of the career motivations I listed, but one thread that runs through them all was that youth wanted to have a career they could feel proud of. After years of feeling like failures, they want to *feel accomplished.*

I described above how many youth's experiences with marginalization shaped their goals for their future. This is particularly evident in their dream jobs. Madison, for example, had wanted to be a doctor since she was a little girl, however, as she grew older and the oppressions and inequalities in her life manifested in harmful ways, those dreams became lost. That is, once she started struggling with addiction and left school, her goal to become a doctor became out of reach. Becoming a doctor is still important to her because "I just want to be able to reach something that I've always wanted to do." Thomas also explained how, "growing up I thought I was gonna be super successful by now," but that never happened. These youth want to fulfil the promises they made to their younger selves and to achieve the things they thought they had lost.

For some youth, however, their dreams were literally lost to them. Jacob wanted to become a police officer when he was younger, and had even begun training to pursue this career. However, Jacob had a child and young adulthood filled with extreme hardship, and after one particularly bad incident that resulted in a violent altercation, he got a criminal record and was

sentenced to jail, closing any opportunity to become a police officer. He described this as part of a series of events that sent him into the "depths of [his] despair," which subsequently sent him spiralling into a life of drug addiction and homelessness. However, experiencing addiction and homelessness led Jacob to a new career path. He now wants to become a youth worker so that he can help youth in similar situations to him. He believes he has learned a lot through addiction and homelessness, and wants to impart that wisdom on future generations in order to make a "perfect world."

In a similar vein, youth do not simply want to get off the street, but want a stable and comfortable living environment. Youth do not want to just rent homes, they want to own homes. Many of the youth mentioned wanting to have a stable home in their futures, but Michael took it one step further to explain the significance of home ownership. He explained how rental properties, while they do provide a roof over their head, do not actually offer the security that youth need to have a successful life. He argued that a landlord could make up lies to "screw you over" and kick you out, or charge you more than the apartment was worth. Essentially, in a rental property you are at the mercy of your landlord. Owning a home gives youth control because "if you're buying a home, you can't get kicked out of that house, cause you own it." Street involved youth are acutely aware of the pain that comes with being kicked out of somewhere, and want to ensure that they never have to experience it again. Owning a home gives youth security that they will always have a home, always have somewhere safe to sleep, and gives them the resources needed to build their perfect life.

Most of the goals I described as youth's immediate goals continue into their long-term futures. Goals such as enjoying their life, being supported, becoming healthy, and working through mental health and addictions issues continue into their ideal futures. For example, most

of the youth I interviewed discussed wanting to start families once they were in a more stable

position. Both Michael and Jacob stressed the importance of finding a wife, raising a family, and

breaking cycles of poverty, addiction, and abuse that characterized the families they grew up in.

They wanted to create and foster 'good' relationships with 'good' people who could continue to

empower them throughout their lives. They wanted to continue to work on their physical and

mental health, and continue to engage in activities that helped to support their "head space." This

includes having a stable job and home to reduce their anxiety, surrounding themselves with

supportive people, and engaging in fun activities.

These descriptions go to show that youth have very holistic understandings of a

successful future. That is, success is the combination of a diverse array of goals that interact in

complex ways. Having a well-paying job, for example, would not only mean they will not have

to worry about meeting their basic needs, but also provides more opportunities to engage in new,

healthy, and fun experiences that foster their well-being. Madison discussed her ideal future as:

> being a doctor, going to work every day, making money, drinking coffee with my
> husband, and going shopping whenever I wanted, going to Starbucks whenever I wanted
> cause I had the money to go to Starbucks, doing all the shit I want to do, go travelling,
> like, I want to go everywhere in the world.

Madison believes that getting a job as a doctor will give her the opportunity to do everything else

she wants with her life, give her the chance to do things she never could before, and finally be

able to enjoy her life. Success is not just about getting a stable, well-paying job, but creating a

new lifestyle. However, it is important to note that these holistic understandings of success

reflect dominant definitions of a successful future. In other words, the lifestyle Madison and the

other youth I interviewed desired is largely a middle-class lifestyle. In the next chapter, I will

analyze the significance that accepting dominant definitions of success has to these youth.

Dreams do not always have to be big in order to be valid, and several youth had relatively modest visions for the future. Watson and Cuervo (2017) suggested that success can be as simple as finding a stable place to stay. Jack explained how he was trying to have a "better" life, by which he meant "not having criminal charges or being in and out of jail kind of thing." Success for Jack is not about being wealthy or having luxuries, it is about not being in jail. Daniel wanted to improve his image so that his children did not think he was just a "drug dealer on the street." He was not interested in the goals the other youth discussed, such as going back to school, or accumulating wealth and possessions, he just did not want to be perceived as a "bum" anymore. For these youth, success is not about conforming to middle class standards, but rather, just getting out of poverty and their street entrenched lifestyle.

With success comes sacrifice, in that youth need to make sacrifices in terms of their immediate comfort in order to pursue their long-term goals. Many of the youth discussed how they engaged in certain activities to give them immediate happiness in the face of all the adversity they experience on a daily basis. However, they need to stop doing these things in order to ensure comfort and happiness later on in life. Thomas discussed how drugs "steal happiness from tomorrow, feel better today," meaning that drugs just made him feel happy in the moment, but negatively affected his long-term happiness. He had to quit this immediate source of happiness so that he could work on his "head space" and feel happier permanently. Jacob does not need to access the resources at OSYS anymore, but still occasionally visits because "I get depressed and then I remember this [OSYS] is where all my joy was," it gives him perspective on his life "because it reminds me of where I could be to where I am now," and gives him a source of happiness to draw on as he tackles his challenges. Jacob wants to volunteer at OSYS as he goes to school to become a youth worker, but has to stop accessing it for two years before he

can volunteer. That is, he has to stop accessing a source of happiness and comfort for himself in order to go farther in a career that will hopefully give him a sense of long-term happiness and fulfilment. Alexander discussed how friends had suggested he take out a line of credit so he can afford the things he needs, but he explained "it's a good idea, for the time being, but, it bites in the ass later on." He does not want to jeopardise his credit because he wants to buy a home when he is older. Thus, all of these youth are sacrificing their immediate comfort needs so that they can have a comfortable life later on.

Unclear Dreams

Some of the youth I interviewed are still figuring their situations out and have pretty unclear ideas of what they want their future to look like. Thomas, for example, explained that he could not picture his perfect life, all he knew was that it had to be "new." He saw his life as a series of bad decisions, so he could not imagine a life wherein he made 'good' choices and had a 'good' life. He wanted a life that was the opposite of what it was now. While he did not know what a successful life looked like, he believed it involved making good, responsible, decisions. Thomas shows how attempting to find success in a neoliberal ethos that responsiblizes people to find success while simultaneously limiting their opportunity to achieve that success (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Meyers, 2017; Mallet et al., 2010) affects their perceptions of the future. That is, when youth are constructed as 'failures' for not complying with neoliberal imperatives, many only see themselves as a failure, and cannot imagine being any different.

Some youth had even less clear perceptions of what their futures would look like. When asked what they imagined their future would look like, a couple youth said that they did not know. This, I argue, can be attributed to the fact that these youth are so entrenched in marginalization, so focused on surviving day to day, that they cannot picture any life outside of

their current reality (Bryant & Ellard, 2015). It is difficult for youth to imagine what they will be doing in ten years when they do not even know where they will be sleeping on a given night. Jacob described how it felt "unreal" to be doing well because "when I was an addict I never seen myself, uh, hopping on the wagon again, once you're underneath, you know, an avalanche, *you don't ever feel like you're gonna get out*." While this quote was related to quitting an addiction, it can be applied to success in general. If these youth do not believe that they will have a successful future, picturing a future is a pointless and unproductive activity.

While these youth may not be able to picture their future at the moment, they believe that as they achieve more those goals will become clearer. Once these youth are in a home, have their basic needs met, and are in a comfortable financial situation, they can focus their time and energy on thinking ahead. Emily, for example, had a list of potential career paths, including being a hairdresser or tattoo artist, and even opening a salon, but had not yet decided what exactly she wants to do. She is still very young, she is only eighteen, and not ready to commit to a career. She wants to try out new experiences and explore her options so she can choose the one that will make her the happiest and most fulfilled. Alexander had a very vague picture of his future. He had only recently become sober, and was focused each day on surviving. As I argued earlier, these youth need resources and a healthy "head space" to do this exploration. If they are stably housed, have a steady income from an "easy" job, and have a support system, they will have the physical and mental resources they need to explore all their options.

These youth are still very young. Many mainstream young adults of the same age do not know what exactly they will do in their futures, so it seems unfair to expect marginalized youth to do so. Yet mainstream and marginalized youth decide their futures in very different contexts. Mainstream youth are often surrounded by supportive people and have a lot of resources to help

them along the way. If mainstream youth 'fail' they can likely move back home and start over. Marginalized youth have little to no support and few resources to help them towards their goals. If marginalized youth fail they could end up further entrenched in poverty. Marginalized youth face significantly more pressure to find a career than mainstream youth, since failing to do so keeps them on the streets, yet have much less help (Gaetz, 2014; Wyn & White, 1997). For some, this pressure becomes debilitating. There is so much riding on one decision, that they just cannot make it. Thomas explained how he needed to be sure he was in a career he was passionate about, because otherwise he would "abuse" that opportunity by spending his paycheck on drugs and partying. He has placed a lot of pressure on himself to find the "right" career, so it is hard for him to commit.

What is Success?

Up until now, I have described a wide array of goals youth want to accomplish, yet I have not given a definitive answer about what success is. The short answer would be that success for marginalized youth is to get everything described above. That is, success would be getting off the street, on their feet, finding a support system, getting healthy, and then achieving their dream life. However, it is not as simple as that. Success has very profound and complicated meanings for marginalized youth, especially in comparison to their experiences with addiction, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, abuse, and criminal justice involvement. In the next chapter, I will explore what achieving all the things youth want to actually *means* to them, that is, the significance that achieving their goals will play in their lives, their perceptions of themselves, and their perceptions of the world. In doing so, I will also explore the ways in which neoliberal ideas of marginalization and success are accepted, challenged, and negotiated within these definitions.

Chapter Four:

What Do These Definitions Mean?

In the previous chapter, I described how youth literally defined success. Youth thought they would be successful if they achieved goals such as owning a home, having a well-paying job they were passionate about, enjoying life, having a supportive social network, and/or becoming healthy. Overall, youth wanted to get into a comfortable position in which they could "actually enjoy [their] life" (Aaron). These goals have highly significant meanings for youth, and I believe that success is associated with these meanings rather than the goal itself. For instance, owning a home is not what makes a youth feel successful *per se*, what makes youth feel successful is that they came up from adversity or proved their haters wrong. In this chapter, I will analyze these more symbolic meanings that youth associate with achieving success. I will analyze how youth accept, challenge, and negotiate neoliberal ideas of success within these definitions. My objective is to come to a holistic understanding of how youth understand success and the significance that success has to them within the neoliberal ethos.

What does marginalization mean

Before I discuss what achieving success means to youth, it is important to unpack what marginalization means to them. In the previous chapter, I explained that youth's experiences with marginalization, and in particular street involvement, often shaped their future goals. Therefore, in order to understand the deeper meanings behind certain accomplishments, it is important to first understand the deeper meanings behind marginalization and the impact that it has on their lives. First, I will explore the ways in which youth understand their marginalization in neoliberal terms. In other words, how youth see their marginalization as their fault, and subsequently see their future as their responsibility. Second, I will explore the ways in which

youth understand how wider social processes have led to their marginalization. In other words, how inequalities and oppressions have shaped their lives, limited their opportunities, and how their success will require social change. Youth often do not fall into one camp or the other, rather, youth's conceptions of marginalization involve a complicated negotiation between neoliberal and welfare-oriented ideologies. Youth often do recognize how structural issues, inequality, and oppression have shaped the choices available to them, yet ultimately buy into the idea that their fate is their responsibility. In other words, while many youth do understand their choices are limited by forces outside of their control, they believe they need to make the 'right' choice out of the options they have.

Buying into neoliberalism

The youth I spoke to often talked about homelessness and addiction as if they were choices. They seemed to believe marginalized people 'choose' to be in the circumstances they were in, and the youth largely blamed themselves for their marginalized social position. Almost every youth I interviewed made reference to the 'bad,' 'dumb,' or 'unhealthy' decisions they made in the past and seem to believe that their current impoverished social position is a consequence of these poor decisions. Madison believes that she "pretty much fucked up [her] life completely," meaning that she believes her addiction, homelessness, experiences with violence, and alienation from her family were all her fault. Thomas too explained that he "picked addictions over being actually happy," and believed that his default setting was to make bad decisions, which led him to his current social position. The youth I spoke to largely conceived of their lives as a series of poor choices.

Many youth discussed the oppressive and unequal social and structural conditions they were in when they made these supposedly 'bad' decisions, but did not seem to be aware of the

ways in which those conditions circumscribed their choices. For example, Alexander discussed

witnessing violence at a young age, interacting with unsupportive, judgemental, and alienating

services, and cycling in and out of the criminal justice system, all of which were experiences that

reinforced and shaped Alexander's own violent behaviour. Despite all this, he equates his violent

behaviour to being a "dumbass." He is not fully aware of the ways in which the oppressive

circumstances he grew up in limited and shaped his choices. This is not to say that Alexander,

and other youth like him, are not smart enough to recognize these how these issues shape their

choices, rather, years of being influenced by neoliberal ideology taught them to individualize

their issues and the solutions to them (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Myers,

2017; Mallet, et al., 2010; Woolford & Curran, 2012)

Many of these youth also understand the social structures that they interact with as a

given. Thomas, for example, explained that it was important to "[not] complain and get what you

get, and be happy, and that's, that's what I'm doing now." In other words, he has taken the

oppressive social structures and inequalities that he faces as fact, and believes he just has to learn

to deal with them. These structures are unchangeable, and since they cannot be changed, drawing

attention to inequality is reduced to complaining. Rather, youth just have to deal with the

consequences of oppression on their own. Alexander too explained that:

> Being homeless is ah, it can be a challenge, but it's only a challenge if you make it a
> challenge, if you sit here and bitch and moan about it, of course it's gonna be a challenge,
> it you sit here and you don't bitch and moan about it, try to work your way out of it, it's
> not difficult.

These youth take their lived realities of homelessness for granted in that they do not seem to

recognize how social and structural influences have contributed to their social position.

Subsequently, they believe their experiences of homelessness are determined by their own

personal decisions within this taken for granted space. These youth have a history of interacting

with programs guided by risk frameworks that have taught them to make the best of their marginal life situation rather than changing the social and structural circumstances that produced their marginality in the first place (Goddard & Meyers, 2017; Mallet et al., 2010; Woolford & Curran, 2012). Thus, these youth were not empowered to investigate how larger social forces have contributed to their social position, and instead spend their efforts managing that position.

These youth not only depicted their own marginalization as a result of poor life choices, but also believed all other homeless people 'choose' their social position. They often imposed moral judgements on other homeless and addicted people because of this perception that they 'choose' their life. Interestingly, youth often paint other homeless people with a harsher brush than themselves. Emily, for example, discussed that she believed "people who do drugs and choose their life to be that low life" were not "good people." Aaron discussed how the "older" homeless people "gave up," that they had gotten "lazy and they want to stay on the streets." Emily and Aaron also discussed themselves as different than all the other homeless and addicted people they associated with. They believed they were making 'good' choices and trying to get themselves out of their situation. Emily believes that, unlike the rest of her peers, she is "one of those people" who are "trying to do things with their lives." Older homeless people were often depicted as people who had completely given up on life, and people the youth I interviewed were actively trying to not be like.

In much the same way these youth argue people 'choose' to stay on the street, they also argued people have to 'choose' a better way of life. Aaron and Emily explained that, unlike their peers who had 'chosen' to just use drugs and stay on the streets, they had 'chosen' to make their lives better. On the one hand, these youth drew attention to the importance of being able to choose where they go after a history of being pushed around by forces outside of their control.

But on the other, by not acknowledging how choices are continually shaped by those same forces, they fall into the neoliberal trap of believing that one's fate is up to individual choice. For example, Jacob discussed how it felt "unreal" to be "choosing sobriety" after being "taken over" by addiction. He thought his addiction was not a choice, but his sobriety was. However, in framing sobriety as a 'choice,' he ignores the ways in which the social forces that contributed to his addiction in the first place continue to influence his decision-making. Growing up in an impoverished home and experiencing abuse were some of the factors that traumatized him and led him to numb those feelings with drugs, a fact that he acknowledges. However, he was then adopted into a supportive, middle-class family, and does not acknowledge how that family, and the material and psychological resources they have provided him, has allowed him to continue to 'choose' sobriety.

In buying into the idea that their marginalization is their fault, they also buy into the idea that they must then find success on their own. Alexander explained that "at the end of the day this [getting off the streets] is *up to me* and no one else." Furthermore, he explained that "I want to do this completely on my own because I don't earn independence if I don't do it." Thus, Alexander, and many youth like him, buy into the idea that success has to be 'earned' through individual hard work. Aaron also explained that he wanted to "get *myself* out of this shit," implying that he believes he must get out of homelessness on his own. Many of these youth seem to believe their success will come through individual hard work. Madison explained that "I'll have a lot of work to do to like make it [my life] better, but, I'm willing to do that work to make it better." Madison thinks that, in order to become successful and have a better life, she'll have to do a lot of hard work on her own. Almost all the youth I interviewed discussed their journeys to success in this way, arguing that they had to do "the work" on their own to achieve their goals.

Related to this belief they have to achieve success on their own, many youth discussed their dislike of getting help. They seemed to believe getting help was weak and diminished the value of what they achieved. Alexander also talked about how he is willing to ask for advice, but does not want "handouts" because he will not value those things and therefore will not "stick to them." He argued that if he were just "handed" a place he would just "abuse it," but if he earned a home through his own hard work he would respect it more. He seems to be implying that only things that are 'earned' hold any value. He further argued that he does not "want to ever owe anyone anything." Many youth who were accessing help felt bad for using it. Thomas called himself a "leech" because he just hung around youth centres and was relying on income assistance. Emily, who was staying at a family friend's house, said she felt "bad for staying there so much." Emily tried to mitigate this bad feeling by buying them snacks, but these youth ultimately want to get out of their situation, so they no longer have to "leech" off others.

Overall, many youth believe that becoming successful is becoming responsible. Through neoliberal ideologies, 'youth' is constructed as a time period in which young people are expected to become independent, productive, and responsible members of society. Yet for youth who have experienced poverty, abuse, a lack of support, addiction, mental health difficulties, and extreme instability, this transition is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Neoliberal frameworks reduce the amount of support given to marginalized people, under the idea that doing so will push people to make more responsible decisions. Yet this only serves to limit youth's opportunities, and actively contributes to them experiencing the issues listed above. At the same time, youth are blamed for their 'failure' to meet neoliberal standards of responsibility (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Meyers, 2017). The young people I spoke to seem to have internalized the idea that their marginal social position is their fault because of the 'irresponsible'

decisions they have made, and they therefore see themselves as 'failures.' They believe that success involves becoming 'responsible,' making better choices, and doing hard work on their own.

Understanding social issues

While the youth did buy into neoliberal ideologies about themselves, many also understood the ways in which larger social processes shaped their lives and the choices they made. Many youth discussed their struggles navigating complicated services, the lack of opportunity available to them, and how living on the streets made it difficult to do the tasks they needed to do. Thus, they understand the circumstances in which they live limit their ability to have a successful life. Even if they believe that they have to make 'good choices' and have to do the work more or less independently in order to be successful, they also understand how social and structural issues limit their ability to actualize their choices.

Age interacts with other social processes in order to produce a very specific set of oppressive circumstances for young people. Youth tend to be more vulnerable than adults because of their lack of opportunity for stable employment, discrimination in housing and lack of affordable housing, and a lack of support to navigate these challenging systems (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Karabanow et al., 2010; Mcloughlin, 2013). Youth in unstable homes are not afforded the resources needed to become 'responsible' and 'independent,' yet when they leave home they are nonetheless expected to do so (Gaetz, 2014). Aaron, for example, discussed that when he left home he was dealing with trauma, did not have access to a formal income or place to stay, and had no support to deal with all that. When he was given the opportunity to use drugs, he was in an extremely emotionally and economically vulnerable place, wanted a community to support him, and thus 'chose' to "do what everyone else was doing." The other

youth too discussed their social and structural barriers in ways that show these barriers are unique to youth. Since youth often lacked the opportunity to develop the skills they needed to live independently, when they face issues such as discrimination and trauma, they do not have the tools to deal with them.

Youth often found difficulty navigating a complicated social services system. Emily is in the process of finding a group home, and expressed her frustration at navigating social services in order to do so. She must deal with the service she is currently using over the phone, however, Emily does not own a personal phone. She must use the phone at OSYS, but they often call when she is not around, meaning that Emily must call them back and leave a message, and then wait for another call days later, hoping they will call when she can actually answer it. This process is extremely long and frustrating for Emily. Michael also commented on how his experience trying to get a place through social services was long, frustrating, and not sensitive to his personal needs. He is trying to get funding and housing through government services, and claims the service "doesn't listen, they kinda do whatever they want." Thus, these two understand their inability to become housed is not fully their fault, but rather, largely due to complicated social services that they do not have the knowledge, support, or resources to deal with.

McLoughlin (2013) found that young people faced difficulty understanding and navigating a complicated housing market, and I found this was true for the youth I interviewed as well. In particular, they found it difficult to find affordable housing (Dhillon, 2005). Emily explained that "I was supposed to get a house but I'm not making enough … so I'm staying on the streets now." Therefore, she is going through social services to help secure housing, although, as described above, that process is also frustrating. Aaron and Madison also discussed how they could only afford to rent a bedroom. Alexander was in an apartment shortly before our

interview, but he had an unreliable roommate who had gotten evicted, and caused him to get

evicted as well. These examples go to show that these youth have very limited housing options

available to them, and those that they can access are uncomfortable and unstable. Thus, their

housing instability is not understood as fully their 'fault.' Rather, they understand how their

personal choices are limited by larger social and structural forces.

The youth I interviewed also understood how certain structures limited their ability to

find a job. Legal documentation is a significant barrier for some youth (Karabanow et al., 2010).

Aaron, who immigrated to Canada at a young age, recently lost his citizenship card, which has

greatly limited his ability to achieve his goals. Without his card, he cannot get his Social

Insurance Number, which means he cannot get a job or a place to stay. Thus, he knows his

homelessness and unemployment is not due to his laziness, but to the structures in place that

make it impossible for him to find a place to stay or a job. Many youth also talked about how

their lack of housing made it impossible to find employment. Alexander discussed how he found

it hard to get adequate sleep while homeless, and this lack of sleep made it hard to "function." He

knows he does not have the mental capacity needed to maintain a job while dealing with the

issues he faces on the street.

These youth also understood that their 'problem' behaviours were not entirely

characteristic of them, but rather, shaped by larger social and structural forces. Alexander

explained how he had been diagnosed with a myriad of behavioural disorders throughout his

childhood which he had been getting professional help with. However, "at the end of the day all

[my doctor] did was try medicating me, he didn't look at my actual problems, which were not

my medications, they were the people I was living with," and when those treatments did not

work, his doctors blamed him. Thus, Alexander points to two large processes that influence

youth's so-called 'problem behaviours.' First, youth's behaviours are often influenced by the social conditions in which they grew up. Alexander grew up watching his stepfather abuse his mother, so he a) learned that violence is normal, and b) likely experienced a lot of emotional harm. Daniel, an indigenous young man, also discussed how he had been raised in an abusive and racist foster home, and how he would "misbehave" because he was so unhappy there. Thus, youth's 'bad' behaviour is not something that is inherent to them, but rather a reaction to the oppressions they deal with on a daily basis. Second, Alexander draws attention to the ways in which dominant systems – such as the medical system – can reinforce and even intensify youths' issues. Not only did he not receive the help he needed, the way the doctor interacted with him made Alexander feel terrible about himself and led him to act out more. Thus, Alexander understood the systems he accessed to help him instead made his problems worse.

Youth also discussed how structural issues affected their ability to go to school. Michael and Madison both discussed how they did not have anywhere conducive to doing schoolwork. Michael, who is doing outreach schooling, explained that he did not have access to a quiet place to do his school work, so doing well on his assignments was difficult. Madison had not yet started school, and was hesitant to start because she knew the lived realities of homelessness would make it difficult to do well in school. For example, lack of access to transportation made it difficult for Madison to get to outreach centers. Emily, who was not in school but was planning on starting in the fall, explained that, without a home, she would have nowhere to keep her books or any school work. Thus, while these youth did want to go to school, they understood that the conditions they lived in limited their ability to succeed.

Since these youth locate the source of their problems in structural issues, they realize the solution is not to just 'work harder,' but the system has to change to give them more

opportunities. These youth believe they were making the right 'choices' to work towards a more successful life, but understand that social and structural issues surrounding them made it difficult to actually do the work to actualize those choices. For example, Emily believes she is making the right choice to find proper housing, but also realizes that, no matter how hard she works, factors outside of her control limit her ability to achieve that goal. She recognizes that the structures she is accessing need to be easier to navigate, more efficient, and more sensitive to her unique needs. Aaron wants to make the 'right' choice and get a job, but cannot due to structural issues regarding his citizenship card. Housing is a barrier that came up in almost every interview, many youth want to make the 'right' choices and work hard to get to their dream futures, but realize that, without a stable place to stay, it will be impossible to achieve these goals.

While these youth do understand how structural inequalities and oppressions limit the opportunities available to them, they still seem to believe it is ultimately up to them to make the right decisions and do the work to achieve success. Although Aaron understands he cannot pursue any of his goals without his citizenship card, he repeatedly said he had to "get *myself* out of this shit," meaning that he believes he needs to overcome the structural barriers in his life on his own. As I described above, Michael explained how the government program he was accessing services through often did not listen to his personal needs and just did whatever they wanted to. One of his biggest complaints was the length of time it took for the government to fulfil a request he made. However, instead of expressing a desire for the *system* to change, he described the ways in which *he* learned to overcome the system's shortcomings through his own actions. Thomas understood that the social and structural circumstances he is immersed in contribute to his 'bad' decisions, but his solution is to move away and hope to find a better

environment. Thus, these youth are making themselves responsible to deal with structural inequalities and systemic oppression.

What Does Success Mean?

'Youth' is often conceptualized as a time period wherein individuals are expected to reach milestones such as finishing high school and going on to higher education, securing employment, and moving into an independent home so they can become independent and productive members of society. However, for many marginalized youth, social oppression, structural barriers, and a lack of support severely limit their ability to achieve these goals (Gaetz, 2014; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Wyn & White, 1997). While many youth do recognize how these structural inequalities and oppressions have limited their ability to achieve all the goals they want to, they still have dreams beyond what has been constrained by their marginalized realities. Bryant and Ellard (2015) found that marginalized young people strived to have a 'normal' life. Similarly, Thomas, explained that he wanted "the house, the, the job, the car," and Jacob wanted a "wife, couple kids, steady career, and a clean house." These youth want to achieve what everyone else has. However, for youth who previously had struggled with homelessness, poverty, addiction, abuse, and a lack of support, these 'typical' life goals take on a whole new meaning.

One could argue their desire for middle-class goals derives from the fact that they have internalized middle-class, neoliberal, ideologies and definitions of what a successful life is. However, by analyzing these definitions through their histories of marginalization, one can see that their desire for a middle-class life is distinct from middle-class people who have the same goals, and achieving those goals have significant impacts on their lives. Marginalized youth take pride in the fact that they came up from rock bottom. Achieving normative goals makes youth

feel like they belong to a society they were previously excluded from, and allows them to contribute to society. It allows them to prove their capability to people who doubted them, and empowers them to develop a sense of confidence and self-worth,. Thus, achieving what everyone else has is not simply reaching a normative life stage, but rather, has radical influences on how youth think of themselves.

Coming up from Adversity

As I have shown throughout this analysis, the youth I interviewed faced extreme instability in terms of their housing, relationships, mental health, and addictions; social oppression based on their age, gender, class, and race; victimization and abuse; an overall lack of opportunity, and lacked the support to deal with these issues. Youth often spoke about experiencing a certain moment which gave them clarity about how bad their lives had gotten, and inspired them to change. For example:

> I went to remand and I saw men twice my age still doing the same thing, still don't have it figured out, and I refuse to be that guy, because that's twice my age and half as much time wasting his life on stuff that I'm trying to figure out now … it's something I have to deal with and get out of my system obviously, cause I don't, I don't want to be that guy, I refuse to be that guy (Thomas).

> My ex beating me up, that definitely fuck, fucked me up for a while, I was in the hospital for almost three weeks, cause of him, and, I don't know, it was pretty, it was kinda like a reality slap to me, and, I just, realized I don't want to do this anymore, look what meth did to you (Madison).

> The people I used to chill with, and do it [meth] with, they seen that I had the iPhone 6, Samsung S5, two Samsung tablets and laptop, and, they straight put me in the hospital, tortured me and shit, and just for that, that's when I was like, 'K, yo I keep doing this shit I'm, I'm just gonna be, gonna end up like them,' you know, I don't, I don't want my life to be like that, I just quit, cold turkey (Aaron).

Success for these youth is about experiencing tremendous hardship and rising to the top. It is not about gaining success in spite of these negative experiences. On the contrary, I argue that these youth would not have gained the empowerment, inspiration, and strength they need to make a

successful life if not for these experiences. Youth placed a lot of value in finding success after struggling. Both Madison and Jacob explained that they did not "regret" struggling with addiction because they learned a lot through their experiences. Michael also appreciated the harder times in his life because "I wouldn't be who I am without what happened." Thus, these youth's struggles were precisely what made their successes important. Michael discussed the importance of being able to say, "I actually fought through it." Thomas explained that he can put his past in his "rear view" but it will still always be there, and "eventually I'll look at the whole path I had and be like, yeah I got it all." Their experiences with marginalization will always factor into their perceptions of themselves and their lives, and will therefore always factor into their perception of their successes. That is, success takes on a very particular meaning when compared to their lives entrenched in marginalization.

While youth cited these experiences as moments that inspired them to get out of their circumstances, it is important to analyze what actually happened from these experiences. Aaron discusses getting badly assaulted as a turning point that inspired him to quit meth. Aaron did succeed in quitting meth; at the time of the interview he was three years clean. Thomas and Madison, however, are still struggling to achieve what these moments inspired them to strive for. Madison, claims she is "still struggling staying clean," and has used meth since she decided she did not "want to do this anymore." Thomas explained that he's still trying to "figure out" what he has learned from this experience. This is not to say the Aaron is somehow stronger than his peers. First of all, Aaron's clarifying moment happened approximately three years ago, whereas Madison and Thomas' happened within the past year. Therefore, Madison and Thomas have not had the time to work through their realizations yet. Second, Aaron explained he had moved in with uncles back in his home country, where it was really difficult to access drugs. Therefore he

had familial support and resources to draw on, and environmental conditions which helped him achieve his goals. Thomas and Madison, on the other hand, currently do not have any support to draw on, and are still entrenched in environmental conditions that limit their opportunity. These examples show that, with enough support, clarifying moments can empower youth to strive for a better life.

Many youth discussed wanting to "better" their lives and "better" themselves. Aaron explained that "at this point I'm just focusing on myself, you know, trying to get myself better." Daniel wanted to join the military because "it'll set me on the right path … it'll better me, you know." Emily also discussed how "I hope things change so it betters my life instead of just making it go more downhill, and change it so I can accomplish things in life and just do what can be life changing." While these youth all want to improve their lives, they each describe distinct ways in which they want to "better" themselves. Aaron is suggesting a fairly neoliberal method of self-improvement, in that he is trying to better himself through his own actions. Daniel thinks he has poor character traits, or at least lacks 'good' ones, and believes he needs to become a "better" person. Emily, in contrast, seems to be suggesting that some social and structural changes need to happen in order for her to "better" herself. She thinks she is making good choices with her life, and believes herself to be a good person, but also understands the circumstances she is in limits her ability to accomplish what she wants to. Thus, in order to "better" her life, the social and structural circumstances in which she is trying to do so need to change.

In discussing that they wanted to come up from adversity and "better" their life, many of these youth describe that they want a life that is essentially the opposite of what they have now. On a basic level, this means if they are homeless they want a home, if they are impoverished they

want to be financially secure. Aaron described how his life has "always been shit," so he wants it to not be "shit" anymore. However, often this also means these youth want to be opposite people. I discussed above how many of the youth I interviewed believed their social position was the result of them making bad choices. Many youth integrated this into their conceptions of themselves, believing that they were a person who made bad decisions, or a "dumbass" (Alexander). Thus, in wanting an opposite life, many youth also wanted to be opposite people. Thomas explained that success required "seeing the difference that I want to be and just following through," implying that *he* has to change. As I described above, Thomas described himself as a person who always made bad decisions. He explained that, when it comes to the decisions he makes, "if it's awkward to me, yeah, that's probably the direction to go." He wants to be a *different* person who makes good decisions so that he can achieve an opposite life.

Jacob had one of the most extreme examples of this. In the depths of his addiction, Jacob overdosed and was deemed legally dead. He recalls that, after he died, he saw someone he knew who "pushed" him back because "I wasn't meant for the afterlife." He explained that "I figure that my life was very, unpleasing and, you know, not really worth gratification for after passing through." He believed his life was so bad, that *he* was so bad, that his life was not worth anything. He is now trying to live an opposite life, to be a "better" person, and to "earn" a place in the afterlife. While these youth gained strength from rising from the bottom, doing so involved stigmatizing and denigrating their past lives and selves. That is, they bought into neoliberal assumptions that people at the bottom were bad people, and thought success meant becoming the opposite.

Many youth explained how achieving their goals would make them feel complete. Jacob explained that he wanted a "wife, couple kids, steady career, and a clean house" and that

achieving that "would mean everything, I wouldn't, I wouldn't have to work on anything anymore, I'd have everything I needed, everything I set to, to accomplish, challenge complete." Marginalization and street life are a lot of work, both in terms of surviving day to day, and getting out of it to have a successful life. Youth under these conditions face a lot of pressure and stress, and many come to think they will never get to "the other side." Accomplishing everything he set out to do, would mean Jacob "made it" past this tumultuous time and had achieved what at one point in his life seemed so overwhelming. Without the weight of everything he needed to do to get out of marginalization pressing down on him anymore, Jacob believes he will finally be able to relax and appreciate his life. He can feel complete.

Belonging to society

Being marginalized necessarily means that these youth are excluded from mainstream society. Issues such as poverty, addiction, and homelessness are largely caused by structural inequalities and systemic oppression, yet those who experience it are blamed for their position and pushed to the margins of mainstream society (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Goddard & Myers, 2017; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2007; Wyn & White, 1997). After a history of exclusion, many marginalized youth just want to belong. Jacob, for example, explained that he wanted "to become part of the real society," and Thomas discussed wanting to find his place in society. These examples show that these youth recognize they have been excluded from mainstream society, and success to them includes becoming a part of it.

This is not to say that marginalized youth do not belong anywhere, in fact, several youth discussed belonging to a community of street-involved youth from which they gained a lot of support. However, belonging to these communities is often stigmatizing, and many youth felt that, while their friends supported them with their street-level needs, belonging to these

communities was restricting their chances of a successful future. Youth want to become part of a *new*, more socially acceptable community. Jacob explained how, now that he's housed and pursuing university, he keeps his friends to a "one hand decimal," meaning an amount he could count on one hand, of university-educated peers who:

> actually frown at the fact that I used to have a weird street life but also accept it because I'm still a human being and, they really, they really support me, really get it in, in the way that friends should.

In this quote, one can see that Jacob is actively trying to distance himself from his previous street community and is finding connections in mainstream, "real" society. By saying that his new friends support him in the way that friends *should,* he is implying the support he had previously gotten from his street peers was not the 'right' kind of support.

Aaron and Emily also discussed the importance of distancing themselves from street peers who just wanted to do drugs and waste their lives away and find mainstream friends who were more 'responsible' and wanted to achieve similar goals to what the youth wanted. I discussed in the previous chapter how youth believed changing their peer relationships could help support them towards achieving their goals, but in this section I want to draw attention to how their desire to find mainstream peers is part of their desire to belong to mainstream society. By forming relationships with people who belong to dominant society, by extension they become closer to belonging to that society. Their mainstream friends represent who they want to become and where they want to be in terms of their social position. In turn, forming connections with those people brings them closer to those goals. In the same way, distancing themselves from their street-peers distances them from their connections with street life and any associated characteristics and subsequently allows them to come in from the margins. I described above how many youth wanted to become an opposite person from who they are now. Many believe

that mainstream, middle-class friends are the opposite of their current friends, so changing their friend groups can help them become that opposite person.

I described above how many youth described that they wanted what "everyone else" has. I argue that underlying this is a desire to be like everyone else and subsequently belong to a society of those other people. In other words, if they want to belong to middle-class society they must conform to middle-class standards. Previous research has also found that homeless and street involved youth want to attend school and find stable, well-paying jobs as a way to get out of social and economic marginalization (Dhillon, 2005; Dhillon, 2011; Karabanow et al., 2010) and that youth just wanted a 'normal' life (Bryant & Ellard, 2015). Getting out of economic marginalization is important because it gives youth the ability to meet their needs, as well as the opportunity to buy luxuries and have fun. However, I want to emphasize the significance of getting out of social marginalization. By social marginalization, I mean that these youth have experienced a history of being judged, degraded, and otherwise excluded from mainstream society. These youth want to be accepted and included. Unfortunately, for many youth this does not mean being accepted as they are, but rather, changing and conforming to middle-class, neoliberal standards of 'normality' so that they may be included. Thus, many youth described their futures in very middle-class terms, as by achieving a middle-class life, they would be accepted into middle class society and no longer feel judged by people above them.

Making the World a Better Place

Part of belonging is having the ability to contribute to society. Several youth I talked to wanted to make a better world not only for themselves, but for the world as well. Thomas was very concerned with environmental issues. He spoke a lot about reducing his carbon footprint and repairing the world. Before he was homeless, Thomas was working in the trades; he has seen

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the environmental impact his work had done, and as he heals himself he wants to heal the world as well. For example, one career path he is considering is to "plant trees in the summer and kinda reciprocate the logging mess that has been created by my industry, you know like, it's stemming from my past so I feel like its gotta be reciprocated." Even if he does not pursue this particular career, Thomas believes in caring for the environment in his everyday life. He discussed using more sustainable food practices such as hunting for his own meat or becoming a vegan, and trying to reduce his carbon footprint. It seems like to Thomas, his journey to success requires that he repairs some of the harm he caused the earth, and in turn a successful life would mean he has the resources to engage in environmentally conscious practices.

Thomas discussed the conflict he feels between his desire to make the world a better place and his desire to become independently successful. He believes that his environmentalism is directly tied to the conflict he feels between his Inuit half and his French half. His Inuit half believes that "it's all gotta be a circle," he has to use products "properly" and give back what he takes so the earth will be there in the future. But his French side is more aligned with neoliberal ideologies that have conditioned him to believe he should be more concerned with his own self-interest. This illustrates a conflict I believe a lot of the other youth feel. One side of them has seen the harsh impact that neoliberal and capitalist frameworks have had on the world, and want to play a role in making the world a better place. The individualistic nature of success that emphasizes personal wealth and the attainment of possessions has caused large income inequalities and led to the oppression of those who are marginalized by that inequality. And while the youth may not explicitly attribute their social position to inequality, they are very aware of the effects of it. Many discussed that they want to help others because they do not want

anyone to experience what they have experienced. But the other side seems to buy into neoliberal ideas that they have to achieve success and be independent.

Many of the youth I spoke to, when discussing their ideal successful futures, stressed the importance of helping others. I argue this particular aspect of success is directly related to the ways in which they interact with their peers on the street. These youth's survival strategies on the street were largely collective in nature. That is, marginalized youth who are involved in street life rely on each other to meet their basic needs and survive daily life. As I described in the previous chapter, youth often shared items such as clothing and food with peers in need. It seems like the collective environment they live in influenced how they viewed a successful future, as these futures tended to have collective elements to them. Some were very explicit, such as Jacob wanting to become a youth worker and helping youth in similar situations to what he had been in. Others stressed that they wanted to live a life wherein they placed importance on helping others. Jack claimed that "helping people is one of the things I like doing most," and stressed the importance of helping people who are in a position similar to what he used to be in. Michael discussed wanting to help people "fight through" their hardship because "everyone relies on everyone, so no one can do anything by themselves." These youth lived in social conditions in which they had to rely on each other on a daily basis in order to survive, this taught them the importance of helping others, and influenced them to want to continue to help as they improved their social position. Many of these youth even integrated their values of helping others into their identities, claiming they were helpful people. As they improve their social position and gain more resources, they will be in an even better position to help others and actualize this important aspect of their identity. For example, now that Jack is housed and employed, he will often buy food for homeless people he sees.

Many of these youth wanted to help their friends because they know how hard it is to be homeless, and genuinely do not want anyone else to want to suffer through it. Alexander explained that "I know what it's like to have nothing sometimes, it fucking sucks." This mindset has inspired Alexander to want to give people something whenever he can. Madison also explained:

> Seeing people that are homeless, that are really homeless, I'll, if I have a jacket, I don't need it, I can get another one, like my blanket, I'll give to someone if they need it, like a lot of people sleep outside, out in the winter time, and I know how that is, I've slept outside in the winter time, it's not fun.

Youth are very willing to support their peers by giving them material goods while on the street, and this mindset seems to extend into their ideal future. Madison explained how, if she were to become housed, she would invite her boyfriend to move in with her, and would let close friends stay the night if they needed shelter. Alexander discussed how he was particularly inspired by an experience in which a youth had given his bed in a shelter to someone else because she "needed it more." For him, being homeless is precisely what led him to value helping others. Youth gained perspective on the harsh realities of homelessness as they have struggled with it themselves, and are acutely aware of the hardships that come with it. They do not want anyone else to feel the pain they have felt, and want to help alleviate other people's struggles the best they can.

However, some youth, in their discussion of how they wanted to help others, still emphasized very neoliberal thought processes. For example, Alexander said:

> I'm a very giving person, when I get my money from the government every month I usually look at my friends and I go, you know, help my [friends] out, I'll throw them forty bucks, here you go, it's better than nothing, get on your feet, *if you're smart* you'll invest that money.

Alexander values helping his friends, but believes his friends should be "smart" with the help that he gives them. He is not just giving them help for help's sake, he expects them to use the money he gives them in a 'responsible' way so they can "get on [their] feet." This reinforces the idea that

marginalized people are only 'worthy' of assistance if they are trying to become independent. For instance, Albertan social assistance frameworks promote the idea that marginalized people should only get support if they can prove they are 'responsible.' They must be actively looking for work to get their check every month (Dolson, 2015; Harrison & Weber, 2015; Wood, 2005). Some youth who are on provincial assistance seem to have internalized this framework and believe that their peers need to use their help in a 'responsible' way.

The neoliberal underpinnings of these youth's idea of help does not negate the fact that they are very empathetic towards others who experience homelessness and do genuinely want to help their peers. It could be argued that, because the help these youth receive is often guided by neoliberal frameworks, they begin to internalize neoliberal ideas of how help should operate. However, there are elements within these youth's beliefs that challenge neoliberal service frameworks. For example, although Alexander made the comment that his friends *should* be "smart" with the support he gives them, he does not believe they *have* to be. In other words, he would not deny support to a friend in need because they were not 'responsible' enough. He discussed giving sweaters to people who "needed them more" without any conditions attached. Michael also discussed how "everyone relies on everyone," showing how he has a very collective mindset, and that everyone deserves support.

This aspect of success for marginalized youth reflects a mindset that challenges notions of personal 'responsibility.' Comments such as "I don't think anyone should really be sleeping on the street" (Emily) suggest that these youth recognize there is something wrong with the system. Many youth made comments about how specific services failed to help them find adequate housing or other support they need, suggesting that they understand homelessness is not entirely a person's fault. Furthermore, their desire to help people in need shows that they do not fully believe

in the idea that people have to 'earn' what they get or that people need to achieve their goals completely on their own. They believe that everyone deserves a basic level of human dignity. Youth understand certain services are not giving marginalized people the support they need, so these youth have taken it upon themselves to help those in need. Werdal and Mitchell (2018) suggest that the sharing of resources between marginalized youth helps to fill some of the gaps in youth services. In addition, help from friends tends to be more consistent and trustworthy than the resources accessed through complicated and impersonal social services. However, neoliberal ideologies still spill into these youth's comments. For example, while they do recognize the system has let them and their peers down, they do not advocate for changes in the system. Rather, when they use sharing activities to fill gaps in services, they have essentially responsiblized themselves to manage the shortfalls in those services and care for their peers themselves. In other words, they have responsiblized themselves to overcome issues that are rooted in systemic inequality and oppression.

Making the world a better place is also about helping their families and breaking "chains" of violence, addiction, and poverty to ensure a brighter future. As Jacob explained, "life's not all about yourself, it's about the ones you love as well." Jacob puts his young daughter ahead of everything else, explaining: "even if my life fell to a complete halt, like if my life's squashed, I'd make sure my daughter's never did, you know, if I had no way of supporting myself, I'd still find a way to support my daughter." I had mentioned in the previous chapter that, to youth like Thomas and Michael, success meant giving their children a different life than they had. Thomas' family had a history of trauma and addiction, and he explained that he wanted to "break the chain," and that his eventual children will "learn from my rich past." That is, he wants to ensure his children will have a good, supportive, upbringing, and also learn about the harsh realities of

inequality and oppression without having to experience them firsthand. Michael also wanted to "raise a family and not have them raised like, or, like, how I was raised, not, like, ah, they would actually have a family when they grow older." Thus, for these youth, "success" is about empowering future generations of their family so that they do not have to experience poverty, addiction, abuse, or homelessness.

Proving Characterizations Wrong

A theme that turned up again and again was proving people wrong. In proving people wrong, youth were trying to prove negative characterizations and stereotypes about themselves wrong. Youth in marginal social positions, especially those involved in street life, are often blamed for their social position. That is, youth who are unable to become productive and independent through getting a job have 'failed' at life, and are viewed as lazy, unmotivated, or unwilling to work (Farrugia, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Mallet et al., 2010). These youth tend to internalize these characterizations of themselves, and as a result lack self-worth (Farrugia, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Kidd, 2007). Several of the youth I spoke to discussed other's denigrating comments. For example, Alexander told me that his mother called him "worthless," and his doctor told him he would "be dead by the time I'm sixteen or in jail." Aaron told me his father never believed in him, and would criticize his dreams. Michael explained that people often told him that he would never be able to quit his addiction. Thomas believes that if he saw one of his friends from his past they would tell him to "get a job." These examples show that many youth on the margins of society are explicitly told that they are lazy, that they are incapable, and that they are worthless.

It is interesting to see the ways in which youth receive and evaluate these messages. Thomas agrees that he just needs to "get a job" and that at the moment he is being lazy and a

"leech." He has internalized this message that it is his fault he is still on the street, he believes that if he were to just "pick up [his] feet" he could achieve his goals. For some, these comments became somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Alexander's doctor told him he'd end up in jail, and he did end up cycling through jail in his early teen years. The way people characterize these youth influences how they see themselves and how they see the futures available for them. In other words, if others, and especially others in authority positions, tell these youth they are failures, they begin to believe so, and then engage in behaviours that reinforce these characterizations.

Other youth believe it is important to prove these negative characterizations wrong. Alexander told me that, at the time, those comments were degrading and devaluing, but "when you look at it later in in life and you use it as a strengthening, well you know what, fuck these people." He is proud of himself because "I know I've made it past all of those [comments]." Alexander repeatedly stressed the importance of showing the world that he can "make it." Aaron also explained that his father always criticized his desire to be a pilot, telling Aaron he could never achieve it. Today, it is important for him to prove his dad wrong and achieve that dream. Lastly, Michael explained that:

> just people in general, they say you can't do something it's like oh yeah well watch this, so yeah, it's just, I don't like when people tell me I can't do this, so I'm like of yeah, well really I'm gonna show you wrong.

For many of these youth, it is incredibly important to show the people who doubted them, the people who hurt them, that they were wrong. They want to prove they are capable, that they are worth something. In doing this, these youth are challenging the neoliberal assumptions that marginalized youth are failures, lazy, and unmotivated.

However, in a way, these youth's desire to prove people wrong buys into the very neoliberal ideologies that denigrated them in the first place. First of all, while they may be challenging neoliberal assumptions, they are doing it on an individual level. That is, they are proving that *they* individually are not a failure, they do not seem interested in proving *all* marginalized youth are not failures. In fact, several youth I interviewed seem to believe their peers who are not trying to improve their lives are lazy and unmotivated, and see themselves as better. For example, Emily explained that:

> Me and my boyfriend, we came here [Edmonton] together and we've noticed everybody's having their life, they'll do drugs, go to [local shelter], and repeat that, and then me and him, we spent the entire first month of being here just handing out resumes.

In other words, Emily believes that other homeless youth are lazy and unmotivated, and she is trying to prove that she is not like them. Aaron too, explained that all his homeless peers were "just thinking about doing drugs and shit, and having fun and partying" but he was trying to "get myself out of this shit." Thus, while these youth want to prove to people who have doubted them that they are not like the street youth stereotype, they still seem to believe everyone else is. Farrugia (2011) also found that homeless youth tended to describe their homeless peers as irresponsible or failures and depicted themselves as different, suggesting that this is an effort to distance themselves from the prevailing stereotypes associated with being homeless.

As I described earlier, many marginalized youth's desire to distance themselves from their street-involved peers is a means to distance themselves from marginalized street culture and join mainstream society. Positioning themselves as different than other street youth is part of the process of distancing themselves from that culture. Many of the youth I interviewed believe they used to fall into the street youth stereotype in that they believed they were lazy or made a lot of bad decisions, and that their social position was their fault. They want to prove that they have

changed and are becoming an *opposite* person than who they used to be. By grouping all other

homeless youth in a specific class with specific characteristics, these youth can prove to others –

and to themselves – that they are not a part of that group anymore and therefore do not have

those characteristics. Subsequently, they can prove that they can be a responsible, independent

member of moral and 'mainstream society. They do not seem interested in proving that

neoliberal ideologies are wrong, or call for a recognition of the ways in which social factors have

influenced their position. They still very much believe that people's social position is their

responsibility, and want to prove that they, individually, can change their social situation.

Second, their attempts to prove themselves are done through very individualistic means.

Alexander believes that in order to prove people wrong he has to do everything on his own:

> I'm gonna make it from here to exactly where I want to be, and I'm gonna do it in a way
> that I can shove it in everyone's face who told me I couldn't do it, I don't want help from
> other people, I want to do this completely on my own because I don't *earn independence*
> if I don't do it.

Alexander believes that in order to prove his capability to others, he has to achieve what

everyone said he could not on his own. These youth seem to buy into the idea that they need to

earn their status through individual hard work, and that getting help would somehow diminish

their achievements. For example, Alexander was essentially told that he would never amount to

anything. If he were to get help finding a place to stay or a job, that would simply reinforce the

idea that he cannot do it. He needs outside help to reach his goals and is therefore still incapable

himself. But if he were to find a place and a job completely on his own, that would prove that he

was capable. Many youth seem to believe that, after years of being constructed as incapable, the

only way to prove their capability is to achieve things on their own. However, insisting on

tackling their goals completely on their own ignores the ways in which structural conditions limit

their ability. Alexander insisting he has to find a place on his own in order to "shove it in

everyone's face" ignores the ways in which young people are discriminated against in housing, or his limited access to affordable housing (Dhillon, 2005; McLoughlin, 2013).

On the other hand, I argue this desire to do things on one's own may come from a history of hurt and a place of mistrust. Alexander had extremely negative experiences with people who were supposed to support and help him. His mother, who is supposed to unconditionally support him, verbally abused him and made him feel worthless. As I described above, his doctor, who was supposed to help with his behavioural and mental health issues, just "medicated" him without addressing his real-life issues, and then denigrated him when the treatments did not work. Thus, it is easy to conclude that Alexander does not trust others to help him, he may be afraid to seek support because those people may just hurt him more. Past research has found that 'risky' labels and the associated stigma may make youth hesitant to seek out services (Harter et al, 2005; McLoughlin, 2013; Kidd, 2003), in much the same way, the stigma associated with Alexander's behavioural issues has made him hesitant to seek help. By doing things on his own he can avoid that hurt, while at the same time showing the people who hurt him that they were wrong.

Feeling Proud

Many of these youth, despite their ambitious views of the future, seem to doubt their ability to actually achieve those views. Several youth, in discussing their future plans, made passing comments that implied they were unsure of their ability to achieve those plans. Comments such as "hopefully I'll stick to that" (Madison) or "as long as I keep it up," (Emily) suggest that some part of these youth believe they are likely to give up before they meet their goals. Emily explained that "things don't always go exactly how you want it to," suggesting that she had 'failed' at plans before, and this made her doubt her ability to actually achieve the goals

she had set out for herself. These youth have seen themselves as failures for so long, it is hard for them to imagine themselves actually achieving something.

Others seemed very hopeful about the future, but seemed to believe the social and structural conditions in which they must pursue their goals will get in the way and limit their ability to achieve what they want. Emily, for example, explained that:

> Things have gone on, it could affect my future, but like, I, I'm not gonna let it hold me back, so like the police for instance, and just being homeless, like, I wanna get out of it so, I'm gonna keep trying, and I'm not gonna let like my past get in the way.

In other words, although Emily feels confident about her ability to achieve her goals, she understands her past, such as her criminal record and experiences with homeless, could limit her ability to achieve those goals. Thomas also explained that he was "hoping for sunshine and preparing for rain," meaning that he hoped his plans would go the way he wanted to, but is conscious of the fact that those elements of his life that led him to addiction and homelessness in the first place could come back and hurt him. He discussed the importance of "knowing the risk and seeing the fall, and doing the, the footwork." He feels like he has to understand his own 'risks' and learn to deal with them so that he will actually achieve what he wants to.

As I already discussed above, although youth seem to recognize that social and structural issues could limit their ability to achieve their goals, they believe it is *up to them* to overcome those issues. For instance, When Emily says she is "not gonna let the past get in the way," she is saying that she will have to overcome the structural barriers that limit her chances herself. The structural barriers and systemic oppressions youth must contend with on a daily basis seem to erode youth's self-esteem and confidence. Since youth responsiblize themselves to overcome structural issues, they feel bad about themselves when they fail to do so. That is, they do not see

the structural barriers as the main barrier to achieve success, but rather their ability to deal with those barriers.

Achieving goals, proving their capability, and finding their place in society will help these youth develop this sense of confidence that they are lacking. Many youth discussed what I refer to as a snowball effect of confidence. As Michael explained, working on his goals is:

> hard at first but then if you get them accomplished you feel good about yourself and then that motivates you to get all your other stuff done, and then the more you get done the more it motivates you to get other things done.

What are conventionally perceived as relatively small goals can have a huge impact on marginalized youth's lives. Madison explained that "it's been like too caught up in drugs for me to even try to make a resume, but I'm, yeah, I'm ready to make a resume." Madison has not even begun to make her resume, but the fact that she's "ready" to make one after being so entrenched in street life is a huge accomplishment for her. Alexander explained how he was in the process of looking at apartment listings online, "those are the little things that I'm trying to do, they're small, but good goals." These youth also discussed how they believed that achieving small goals would help boost their confidence and empower them to go after more ambitious goals down the road, which in turn would boost their confidence more. For some youth, just going through the process of pursuing their goals helps them feel more confidence and faith in their ability. Madison, for example, explained that "knowing I'm working towards something makes me less depressed."

Getting back into hobbies and activities they love will provide an important space for youth to develop their confidence. Emily had been enrolled in a variety of sports when she was younger. She loved being in aerial arts because "it's just relaxing in a way, but at the same time a lot of work," it was a hobby that allowed her to be active while at the same time allowing her to

showcase her creative, artistic side. She also loved martial arts because "it was something that I was good at." Madison too explained how she was in gymnastics when she was younger, and was really good at it. These activities provided a place where youth could develop a positive image of themselves. When these youth were forced to quit these activities, they lost a part of their lives that allowed them to showcase their capability and develop their self-esteem. These youth still believed they were good at these activities, but were not able to affirm their beliefs regularly. Compounded with all the other hardships in their lives, they started to lose belief in themselves, and developed a low sense of self-esteem. Restarting these activities would remind youth that they are good at something, and allow them to improve how they see themselves. This will have long lasting effects on their mental health.

While developing self-esteem is important in-and-of itself, it also empowers youth to strive for, and believe they can achieve, more. Many of the youth I interviewed had ambitious dreams for their future, yet doubted their ability to achieve it. Becoming involved in activities they are good at would allow youth to showcase their ability, and subsequently will empower them to believe in that ability. For example, if Madison got involved in gymnastics again, it would remind her how talented she is, would give her outside affirmation, and would give her the "good feeling" that comes with doing something she is proud of. As youth struggle to pursue their long-term goals, having this outlet that improves their self-esteem may allow them to feel more capable to do what they are trying to do. That is, if they see that they are capable at one thing (like gymnastics) they may start to believe they are capable at others.

Michael explained that "it feels good, that I can actually accomplish the career goals that I want to accomplish." While "good" on the surface seems like a simple term, it is loaded with complex meaning for these youth. For one, youth feel "good" about themselves and their ability.

That is, they see themselves as capable, strong, and talented. For another, it makes them feel "good" psychologically. They feel happy and content. Perhaps most importantly, it makes youth feel proud of themselves. Emily explained "I like knowing I did something that I can be proud of." These youth have, for a considerable amount of time, felt like *failures,* and have conceived of their lives as a series of mistakes and poor decisions. So to feel like they are making the right choices, and to feel proud of the accomplishments that result from those choices, make youth feel successful, happy, and proud for the first time in a long time.

What is Success?

Throughout this chapter, I've discussed a myriad of factors that contribute to success, as well as the forces that influence those factors. Within these conceptions, youth negotiated a tough terrain between neoliberalism and challenging ideologies, between blaming and responsiblizing themselves for their position and recognizing structural inequalities, between denigrating their marginalized life and feeling proud of themselves and what they have been through. Youth gained strength from the fact they had come up from adversity, but at the same time judged their past lives and selves. Youth wanted to belong to a society they were previously excluded from, they gained strength from their experiences in marginalization while at the same time stigmatized their street life. They valued making the world a better place, and wanted to do so in ways that both reinforced neoliberal conceptions of marginalization and success, but also challenged them and reflected a collective view of the world. They wanted to prove negative characterizations of them were wrong, that they had changed from their marginalized selves and could achieve everything they wanted to. These youth wanted to feel proud of themselves for the first time in, for some, their entire lives. But the question still remains: why does this all matter,

what is the significance that these definitions have on marginalized youth's lives? These

questions will be explored in the conclusion.

Conclusion

Marginalized youth are in a very precarious social position. Neoliberal ideologies posit that individuals should be 'responsible' for themselves and their own well-being, yet the reduction in social supports that come with these ideologies actually limit youth's ability to achieve those goals. Youth are forced to negotiate a contradictory terrain in which they are expected to gain independence, yet are barred from opportunities to do so. Thus, it is important to understand how youth negotiate this complicated landscape in order to define and pursue a future for themselves, and why they choose to do so in particular ways. I interviewed marginalized youth in order to answer the questions: 1) how do marginalized youth define success, and 2) how do those definitions compare to dominant, neoliberal ideas of success? How and why do youth buy into neoliberal definitions? How and why do youth challenge neoliberal definitions? In this chapter, I will answer these research questions, highlight the significance these definitions have on youth's lives, and show why understanding youth's conceptions of success matters.

Negotiating between competing definitions of success.

The first question asked how youth defined success. On a surface level, youth define success as getting off the streets and building a better life for themselves. They wanted to get stable but easy jobs in the interim but eventually get stable, well-paying and fulfilling jobs in their future, go back to school and/or pursue higher education, create and maintain a supportive friend network, start families, become physically healthy, improve their mental health, and quit their addictions. Success is more or less achieving the *opposite* to their current lives entrenched in marginalization. Fundamental to their conceptions of a successful life is a desire to be stable. Street life is marked by instability; on any given day youth do not know where they will sleep,

how they will meet their basic needs, or what dangers they may face. These youth want to be able to consistently meet their needs, and feel stable, safe, and secure. Once they become stable, they will have the mental and physical resources needed to pursue their more ambitious goals.

Some youth had very ambitious dreams for the future, and wanted to do more than just get off the street. They wanted stable, prestigious, and high paying jobs. These ambitious goals were often connected to their marginalization. Since youth were often taught that they would never go anywhere, they wanted to go as far as they could. Many youth wanted to achieve things they had dreamed of since they were children but had seemed out of reach when they were pushed to the street. These youth now want to show they can gain control of their previously chaotic lives and achieve their dreams. Others formed their ideas of a successful future directly through their experiences on the street and the lessons they learned. Success was understood as an entire lifestyle. Youth wanted a life that was stable, enabled them to have new and fun experiences, and fostered their emotional well-being. Yet others still had trouble envisioning a future for themselves. These youth had been entrenched in poverty, homelessness, unemployment, addiction, and violence for so long they could not picture their lives being any different. Some wanted the chance to explore different paths in order to create the life that would make them feel happy and fulfilled.

Achieving these success markers would have profound impact on how youth see their place in the world as well as see themselves. Youth believe that achieving everything they want to will make them feel happy and accomplished, feelings many had never experienced before. Being successful means being able to come up from adversity, and to make a meaningful future from all the hardship they faced. It means belonging to a society from which they were previously excluded and being accepted into middle-class culture. It means having the ability to

make the world a better place, and help others who are suffering. It means proving people who doubted them wrong, and showing their personal strength and responsibility. Lastly, it means feeling proud of themselves and confident in their ability for the first time.

The second questions addressed the ways in which youth accepted or challenged those dominant definitions. The youth I interviewed negotiated between competing definitions in complicated ways. One way they accepted dominant definitions was with the actual goals they sought to achieve. They wanted to achieve what "everyone else" has, describing goals such as a nice house, well-paying job, fancy car, or a nuclear family arrangement. In other words, they often aspired to achieve a very middle-class idea of successful adulthood. Similar to findings by Bryant and Ellard (2015), after years of marginalization, disadvantage, and instability, these youth just wanted a 'normal' life. However, in their discussions of what success meant to them on a deeper level, they accepted and challenged dominant ideas in much more complex ways.

In their discussions of what achieving success meant to them, the youth bought into neoliberal discourses in two major ways. First, they often denigrated street life and their street-peers by describing them in ways that show these youth bought into neoliberal ideas of what makes a 'good' person. They argued that their fellow street peers just wanted to party and had no ambitions to make their lives better, which serves to construct their peers as lazy, unmotivated, and unwilling to be 'responsible.' They also often depicted their past selves in the same light, but argue that they are now being responsible and making better choices so that they can be successful. Second, they often described their paths to success as a solo journey. They believed that they would have to do a lot of "hard work" and do it "on their own," and rejected most forms of help. They believed they had to "earn" success through their own hard work and responsible decision making.

At the same time, they also challenged neoliberal ideology. This was most evident in their discussions on how important it was to help others. Many youth discussed how homelessness "sucked" and that no one deserved to experience it, and these youth often used collective efforts to alleviate each other's suffering on the street. They shared goods with people in need and were confident that their peers would also help them if they needed it. Their successful futures also had collective elements in them in that they wanted to use their success to help others. Youth also challenged neoliberal assumptions of street life and people by demonstrating the value of their street lives. Living on the streets allowed youth to reflect on their world and gave them perspective on what is most important to them. Many youth believed that experiences with homelessness shaped who they are today, and were often thankful for the lessons they learned on the street. They gained a lot of positive traits from street life, such as resourcefulness, personal strength, and compassion.

One particularly interesting theme that highlights this conflict between accepting and challenging neoliberalism is their understanding of social issues. Many youth recognized that structural barriers limited their ability to achieve their goals. They discussed issues such as: lack of access to affordable housing, complicated and inefficient social services, insufficient access to basic resources, and the ways in which street life affected their mental health and well-being. The most common theme was the recognition that it was next to impossible to do anything without a stable home. These youth recognize that simply working harder is not enough to meet their goals because these issues will continue to limit their opportunities and make it difficult to make the 'right' choices. Yet these youth still ultimately believe they need to make 'good' decisions and achieve success on their own. While they recognized that their social position limited their opportunities, they thought the solution was to do a lot of hard work so that they

could move up the social ladder rather than advocate for a dismantling of those oppressive structures. They have essentially responsiblized themselves to overcome these deeply embedded inequalities and barriers through their own actions.

The significance of youth's definitions

Above, I discussed *how* youth bought into or challenged neoliberal ideology. However, it is also important to analyze *why* they do so because, in learning why youth buy into or challenge neoliberalism in their definitions of success, we learn why these definitions matter. Throughout this thesis I have argued that neoliberal ideologies overwhelmingly harm marginalized young people because they keep them entrenched in marginalizing circumstances. Yet I have also shown that youth largely accept it. To say that the ideology marginalized youth believe in is wrong does a disservice to these youth, and essentially characterizes them as misguided or unintelligent. Youth do not believe in neoliberalism because they are not critical enough to think otherwise, but because they have found meaning in these definitions. Therefore, it is important to analyze the significance that believing in neoliberal ideologies has on their lives.

One reason why marginalized youth may accept neoliberal definitions of success is that it is the only way to survive in modern society. As I described in my literature review, neoliberal frameworks limit the support marginalized people can get under the assumption that doing so will push those people to become 'responsible' on their own (Harvey, 2005; Minaker & Hogeveen, 2009; Turner, 2014; Woods, 2015). Many of the youth I spoke to discussed how the social assistance they received was not enough to survive on, and that the services they attempted to access were complicated, inefficient, and not sensitive to their personal needs. With little support available, these youth essentially have to do it on their own in order to get anywhere in life. In addition, neoliberal societies reward 'independence' and 'responsibility,' so youth need to

exhibit these qualities in order to get ahead. On the one hand, this is exactly what neoliberal policies are designed to do, reduced services *are* pushing marginalized youth to become responsible on their own. Not only that, but these youth seem to think this is normal. On the other, it shows how neoliberal policies are doing a disservice to marginalized people. While many youth are trying to achieve their goals on their own, the lack of support ultimately makes it very difficult to do so. Youth are not doing things on their own because neoliberalism has 'empowered' them, but because they have no other choice.

Youth do not want to simply survive; they want to have a meaningful place in society. Farrugia, Smyth, and Harrison (2010) argued that "performing responsibility is a moral imperative of neoliberalism" (p. 240) and those who are unable to be 'responsible' become morally devalued, and are seen as symbols of disorder, failure, and misconduct, and subsequently excluded from mainstream society. Being excluded and devalued on a daily basis takes a toll on youth's mental health, as youth often internalize these beliefs and judge themselves as well. Youth want to become *valued* and *accepted,* and feel like they have a place in society. In a neoliberal society, the dominant way to be accepted is to conform to, and accomplish, neoliberal ideals of 'good' people. Neoliberal ideologies assert that people achieve success through their own hard work and responsible decision making. Through this framework, marginalized youth come to see themselves as deviant, the reason they do not belong in mainstream society is because they made irresponsible decisions or did not work hard enough. Thus, these youth believe that, in order to have a meaningful place in mainstream society, they have to be more responsible and work harder. They have to 'earn' their place.

As I described throughout my analysis, street life is very collective in nature, and by extension, youth involved in street life tend to have more collective ideologies. Youth shared

clothing and food with people who needed it more, and these youth seemed to work together to make sure that their peers could survive. That is, youth tend to redistribute their possessions to ensure everyone has what they need. However, the culture that they want to belong to is very individualistic in nature, and contrasts with the way they had been living for years before. This presents an interesting dilemma for youth, as they have to reconcile their collective identity with the individual identity they want to achieve. On the one hand, it seemed like youth did not want to abandon their collective values, and mentioned wanting to help people as they became successful. Some wanted to get into a career in which they could help others, and some just wanted to use the resources they would gain from a successful life to give to others. On the other hand, youth wanted to distance themselves from the collective community they had belonged to. Many youth discussed wanting to cut off contact with their street-level peers, even though these peers were essential to their survival on the street. They further wanted to form relationships with people who belong to middle-class society and likely have neoliberal ideologies. Thus, youth occupy this liminal space in which they value collectivity and individualism at the same time.

Believing in neoliberalism may also give youth a sense of agency. Youth's adverse life circumstances are often the consequence of larger social oppressions and structural inequalities that are outside of youth's control. Yet youth often do not fully understand these issues, and instead blame themselves for their homelessness, unemployment, and addictions. Understanding the larger structural forces that circumscribe their choices may lead youth to not blame themselves as much and subsequently improve their image of themselves. They would no longer see themselves as failures, but instead, appreciate how the system had failed them. At the same time, understanding that their fate is largely shaped by outside forces may lead youth to feel hopeless or helpless. If a youth were to understand that his poverty was the result of things he

couldn't control, how could he imagine he would ever get out of poverty? Believing that they can achieve success through their own hard work may make youth feel in control of their lives. Furthermore, youth gain a sense of strength when they do something on their own.

In these ways, believing in neoliberalism is not an uncritical deference to dominant ideologies. Rather, marginalized youth believe in it because of the significance it has on how they understand themselves, the world, and their futures. Yet at the same time, believing too strongly in neoliberal definitions of success ultimately sets youth up to fail. While believing in neoliberalism gives youth a sense of agency over their chaotic life, that agency is not total. That is, while youth believe they are in control of their choices, their life and the decisions that make are continually shaped by larger social and structural forces. Bryant and Ellard (2015) argue that marginalized youth who take up ideas of individual responsibility and self-determination may have an exaggerated belief in their agency. As I have described earlier, marginalized youth negotiate between contradictory ideologies in which they believe that their fate is up to them and must be achieved through hard work and responsible decision making, but also understand that some structural inequalities and barriers limit their ability to make those choices. Thus, youth must come to an understanding of how much of their lives are due to their own agency, and how much is shaped by outside forces. Youth buy into neoliberalism because it allows them to feel a sense of agency and control over their lives, but in also understanding structural barriers, they can see the limits of their agency. And while empowerment can be found in this negotiation, I argue that many youth fall too heavily onto the neoliberalism side, and this ultimately harms them.

While youth do understand some social and structural issues, and challenge some neoliberal assumptions, they largely believe in neoliberal ideas of success. They believe they

have to be responsible, work harder, and that their fate is the result of the choices they make. They ultimately want to become "self made" successes. I suggest that this belief actually serves to make it hard for youth to live up to their ambitious dreams. Youth believe they need to overcome social oppressions and inequalities on their own, but since these issues are so deeply embedded in Canadian society, this task is next to impossible. When youth 'fail' to meet their expectations, they blame themselves. They believe they were too weak to overcome the structural barriers that surround their lives rather than problematizing the structures themselves. This process perpetuates cycles of disadvantage for these youth, as they continue to try and subsequently, fail. And when youth stop trying because of the constant disappointment, they are perceived to have given up. Thus, youth's desires to conform to neoliberal citizenship may just entrench them further in poverty.

While I would argue the solution to youth's marginalization is to dismantle and rebuild the whole system so that everyone has equal opportunity, that is unlikely to happen in these youth's life span. For the foreseeable future, marginalized youth exist in the neoliberal ethos, and have to find success in this ethos. I have argued that believing in neoliberalism ultimately limits youth's opportunity, but at the same time believing in neoliberalism is the only way these youth can survive, find a meaningful place in society, and gain a sense of agency. As long as neoliberalism circumscribes their lives, youth will have to accept neoliberal ideals in order to achieve success. At the same time, it is important that youth understand how their own agency interacts with the social and structural circumstances that limit their opportunities so that they can have realistic expectations of their futures. Under the circumstances, it is the best they can do.

Wider society has to understand this negotiation as well. While the system cannot be dismantled, it can be challenged. By showing how youth have ambitious and meaningful goals for the future, and illustrating how youth's ability to achieve those goals is circumscribed by wider social and structural processes, this thesis challenges the idea that youth are lazy or unmotivated. Furthermore, it shows the need to alleviate the structural barriers that limit youth's opportunity so that they can achieve everything they want to. This thesis adds to the growing conversation that suggests governments and policy makers need to create better policy and initiatives to empower young people to achieve success in the ways that they want. If young marginalized people want to do it on their own, we can change social and structural circumstances to enable them to do so.

Contributions

While much previous research investigated the hardships youth faced as they negotiated the neoliberal ethos, little actually investigated how youth understood this ethos, and what it would mean to find success within it (For example, see: Farrugia, 2010; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016; Mallet et al., 2010; McLoughlin, 2013). This research highlighted the ways in which youth accept and challenge neoliberal ideologies, and the significance that doing so has to youth. In addition, much past research has investigated what marginalized youth want to achieve and what support they need to achieve it (For example, see: Dhillon, 2005; 2011; Miller, Donahue, Este & Hofer, 2004), but little research asked what it would actually *mean* to these youth to achieve those goals. Furthermore, little research has looked at how desired achievements are shaped by larger social and structural processes, and the meaning that different definitions have on their lives. This research helps to fill those gaps by asking youth how they define success for themselves in a literal sense, and what those definitions mean to them on a

personal level. In doing so, I investigated how those definitions compare to dominant

conceptions, as well as how accepting certain definitions affects how they understand themselves

and their lives.

This research also raises interesting contributions to research on the future thinking of

youth. Similar to this thesis, Bryant and Ellard (2015) found that young marginalized people

wanted to achieve a 'normal' life that they defined in contrast to the struggles they face

entrenched in marginalization. However, they argue their future thinking is relatively vague, the

youth in their study wanted employment but did not seem concerned with what the work was,

and wanted a secure home but did not discuss if they wanted to rent or own. My thesis found that

although youth just wanted "any" job at the moment to help get them on their feet, they had very

specific and ambitious goals for future employment. Most youth I spoke to had a specific job

they wanted in the future, and those jobs they wanted had deep personal meanings to them.

Second, one youth explained that the security of a home is directly related to whether one owns it

or not, that is, only houses that are owned are secure. Farrugia (2010) also found many youth

wanted to own their future home. My thesis suggests that marginalized youth may have more

specific ambitions for their futures than previously thought.

This research further contributes to literature about the power of hope. Bryant and Ellard

(2015) for example, argue that hoping for something better can be a way that young people assert

agency over their lives. They argue marginalized youth often understand that their choices are

limited by their homelessness and addiction, and as a result many became resigned and do not

actively plan for their futures. But these youth nonetheless hoped for a better life, which the

authors asserted was their way of asserting agency. Te Riele (2010) argues that hope is an

important means to empower marginalized youth. She argues hope should take into

consideration both individual agency and the social structures that enable and constrain agency. The things youth hope for must be conceptualized as attainable, and should be ethically sound. These theories of hope go to show that if youth can hope for a better future, and consider the ways in which their ability to achieve that future is shaped by larger structural issues, they can be empowered to reach that future.

In a practical sense, integrating hope into youth work involved several things. First, as I have argued elsewhere, we should move away from conceptions of youth as 'at risk.' Te Riele (2010) argues that conceptions of 'risk' draws our attention to what is *wrong* with a person and leads us to ignore what is *right.* Alternatively, we should focus on youth's potential. Second, te Riele (2010) argues we should focus on 'possibility' and give marginalized youth the opportunity to try things outside of what we expect they can do. People in power often have low expectations for marginalized young people, these young people need to opportunity to prove them wrong. Third, hope needs to be encouraged in greater society as well. Marginalized youth may not receive the resources they require to achieve success because greater society doubts their ability, and believes investing money in them would be a waste of resources. If society is hopeful towards youth, they will give youth the resources and encouragement they need to succeed. Lastly, hope requires critical reflection regarding a) the attainability of youth's goals, and b) how larger processes and institutions support or impede youth's success.

This research also highlights the importance of street communities. As I described throughout my thesis, these youth often shared goods with one another so that everyone could meet their basic needs, and helped to fill gaps in services. They spent time together to distract themselves from the hardships they faced and have fun in the face of adversity, but also talked through their problems and gave each other emotional support. Similar themes were found by

Werdel and Mitchell (2018). This research suggests more attention should be given to youth friendships. Friendship is extremely important because it essentially ensures the material and emotional well-being of young people on the street. In a practical sense, Werdel and Mitchell (2018) suggest that rather than finding alternative sources of care to empower marginalized youth, street-level friendships should be promoted in youth programming to encourage youth's well-being and future success. Many youth I spoke to discussed that they needed to get "new" friends who belong to mainstream society to help them achieve their goals. I suggest that youth are already getting a lot of support from their street-level friendships, and the positive aspects of these friendships need to be accepted as a valid source of empowerment and encouraged to help youth achieve what they want to.

At the same time, the fact that these youth are using their friends to meet their basic needs suggests that programming and policy is failing to serve youth in a way that does them justice. Youth are giving their homeless peers warm sweaters because the government is failing to provide adequate support to those who want to get off the streets. Youth are helping their friends find food and shelter because they have few institutionalized options to draw from. Youth may also choose to get support from their friends because they do not trust or feel alienated from government and community services (Werdel & Mitchell, 2018). Youth have responsiblized themselves to fill gaps and shortcomings in services, therefore, these gaps need to be filled. Below, I suggest a few practical solutions to fill gaps the youth noted, and to help youth achieve success in the ways they want to.

As I described in my literature review, youth programs are increasingly guided by neoliberal principles, which often serve to hurt youth. Support tends to focus on individualized programming rather than addressing the unequal and oppressive social situations that influence

youth's circumstances and behaviours. Youth often cannot overcome these deeply embedded

social oppressions on their own, and thus often cannot get out of poverty (Goddard & Myers,

2017; Mallet et al., 2010; Woolford & Curran, 2012). It is important to improve programming to

serve the immediate needs of marginalized young people, but it is essential that policy changes in

order to deal with the widespread oppressions and inequalities that bar marginalized young

people from achieving success. I had also highlighted the importance of including youth's voices

in the conversation about how to improve programming and policy in order to better serve them.

Through this research, I aimed to gain an understanding of how the voices of youth could be

integrated into the improvement of programs and policy, and used their concerns to reflect on

what is most important in terms of youth policy.

For example, youth largely discussed the importance of Housing First programs. Many

youth made a comment about how they could not do anything they wanted to without a stable,

safe, and comfortable home to go to. These youth seemed to be implying that a Housing First

approach would do well for them. However, as Bakers and Evans (2016), as well as Evans,

Collins, and Anderson (2016) highlight, the ways in which Housing First programs operate in

Edmonton have problematic implications. While Housing First initiatives do posit that all people

deserve housing and basic human dignity, through focusing on individual 'risk,' and

emphasizing the cost saving to taxpayers, they still characterize homeless people as 'other' and a

costly burden to mainstream society. Thus, I argue that Housing First initiatives should continue

to operate, but the ideology behind them has to be adjusted. Youth need fast access to safe and

secure housing, because a home is necessary for youth to do anything else they want to. The

ideology behind these initiatives should shift so that homeless people are not constructed as

costly burdens on society, but rather, as human beings who are worthy of support. In addition,

the similarities between homeless and housed people need to be emphasized in order to promote empathy. Gaetz (2014) also suggests that housing first initiatives can be a useful way to end youth homelessness as long as programs are geared towards youth's unique needs. For example, he emphasized youth Housing First programs should emphasize youth's choice and self-determination in terms of the type of housing they get and the supports and services they access. Many of the youth I spoke to echoed this sentiment when they discussed the importance of "choosing" where they go in life and the types of support they get.

Many youth often discussed how difficult it is for them to access the programs they needed to pursue their ideas of a successful future. For example, some youth were frustrated with the length of time it took for them to get the support they needed. Some believed services were not sensitive to their personal needs, but instead gave support based on what was best for the service itself. Some believe that certain programs had inconsistencies in terms of service delivery, arguing some workers treated some youth better than others, and some workers were too serious whereas others did not care. Therefore, this research suggests that program makers should work to make their programs more efficient, accessible, and sensitive to ensure that youth can get the care they deserve.

I suggest that youth should be consulted when creating policies and programs designed to help them, and have the ability to voice concerns when things are not working. For example, Woolford and Curran (2012) argued that non-profit services have become increasingly guided by business principles, and their focus has shifted away from caring for the people who use their services and towards being accountable to their investors. Several youth reflected this when they argued services did what they wanted rather than listening to the youth's personal needs. This research suggests that non-profit services need to shift to a more person-centered approach that

puts the needs of the youth at the forefront of their practices. Youth who use non-profit services have acute insight into the ways in which programs and policy do and do not work. They need to be taken seriously as experts and have a voice in program and policy development. Young people also had strong opinions about the lowered youth minimum wage (Wyton, 2019), they should be consulted when the government make polices that directly affect them. Doing so may help to change structural conditions so that youth can actually achieve all the ambitious goals they want to.

Limitations

This study is limited in that I was only able to interview nine youth. Due to marginalized youth's heightened vulnerability and general distrust of others, it was difficult recruiting youth who were willing to speak with me. In addition, the majority of my participants were male, thus the results could be biased towards more male-centered experiences. The study was also limited in that all participants came from the same youth service. One day while I was 'hanging out' with the youth, a new youth had dropped in for assistance and a fight started between him and a group of youth who regularly accessed OSYS. The group of OSYS young men asked the newcomer if he was new to be being homeless because he had apparently broken a street rule. The newcomer said he had come from a downtown shelter, and a particularly vocal member of the OSYS group said: "welcome to the south side," in a confrontational way. This interaction led me to conclude that there was a very particular street culture in the Whyte Ave area compared to downtown. Thus, my research could have been biased towards ideas of success that came from this Whyte Ave culture, and youth from the downtown area could have different ideas of success.

Having a very specific group of participants is not necessarily a bad thing. If I had too many diverse subgroups, I would not be able to make any definitive arguments. That is, if I had samples from multiple youth services and had multiple distinct demographic categories from each service, each group would only have a limited number of youth in it and thus be too small to make any conclusions about. Given that my group of participants is quite homogenous, I am confident that my results reflect their particular world view. Some may argue that the particularity of my group would mean the results cannot be applied to other populations. However, my results largely reflect findings by other researchers, suggesting that, while there would certainly be context-specific variances, some of my themes could be applied to other groups of youth in different places. This research was very exploratory in nature, so it is reasonable to not have generalizable results.

In addition, given that youth volunteered to be in the study, it is important to reflect on *who* volunteered and who did not. It is possible that the youth who volunteered had different characteristics or life circumstance than those who chose not to. As I discussed in my methods section, on the first day I introduced my research and asked for volunteers, one youth told me I was in the "wrong place," suggesting that he believed that the youth who used OSYS's services were unsuccessful, and interviewing them would be a waste of my time. Even as I spent time there and developed rapport with the youth, that one youth never spoke to me. Combined with insights gained from the results of my research, it is likely that only youth who had an interest in success volunteered for my project. Youth who wanted to achieve success and/or felt like they were on a good path may feel excited to share their thoughts and stories with me. Likewise, youth who did not feel like they would ever be successful, were deeply entrenched in marginalization, or were really unhappy with themselves and their lives, may not have wanted to

talk about success because it would make them feel bad about themselves. The results of my

thesis could, therefore, be biased towards a more optimistic viewpoint.

Directions for further research

In the late stages of doing my research, Alberta went through a contentious provincial

election, transitioning from a government led by the New Democratic Party (NDP) to one led by

the United Conservative Party (UCP). With this change in government came dramatic changes in

policy, and especially relevant to this study were changes in youth policy. As I discussed

throughout my study, youth are in a very precarious economic position due to an insecure youth

labour market and high levels of youth unemployment (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016;

McLoughlin, 2013). Minimum wage in Alberta is $15 an hour, already much lower than the

suggested $17.59 living wage needed for a single person living on their own to meet their basic

needs (Holmgren, 2018). Shortly after the UCP came into office, the youth minimum wage was

reduced to only $13. Advocates in Alberta are worried about how this change in policy will

affect young, marginalized people who are trying to make ends meet. As I made clear throughout

my thesis, many marginalized youth are struggling to survive on a day-to-day basis. What will

happen to these youth when their already low wages are cut further? How could a young person

possibly pay for rent, utilities, groceries, and other necessities on only $13 an hour? Policies such

as these actively discriminate against young people, and will likely propel already marginalized

youth further into poverty. Future research should take into consideration how discriminatory

policies such as these will affect marginalized youth's opportunity and future life chances.

An interesting avenue to pursue would be a longitudinal study of marginalized youth and

success. As I have shown throughout this study, marginalized youth often have very ambitious

dreams for their futures. It would be interesting to follow youth as they navigate their youth and

early adulthood, and see if they actually achieve what they set out to. Many youth stated that they could not really imagine how it would feel or what it would mean to them to achieve everything they dreamed of, so it would be enlightening to follow youth until they accomplished everything they set out to and learn how these meanings change over time. Through longitudinal research, one could gain a deeper understanding of what it means to achieve success after a history of oppression, inequality, and adversity. It could also be interesting to see if and how youth's ambitions change over time. For instance, earlier I described the 'snowball' effect of success, if youth begin to achieve some of their goals, will their ambitions for the future grow? As they gain access to a middle-class world, will their ambitions change? In a similar vein, if youth continue to face oppression, inequalities, and barriers that block their ability to achieve their goals, will their goals diminish?

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that young marginalized people have critical insights into social inequalities and structural oppressions and barriers. Their voices shed light onto what it means to attempt to live up to societies' expectations while simultaneously being denied opportunities to do so. Thus, research with marginalized youth – and marginalized populations in general – needs to continue to be done. Given that they face the harshest effects of oppression and inequality, their voices need to be included in conversations about those issues. These youth had strong opinions about the barriers that limited their ability to achieve their dreams, and how policy and programs that were designed to help them were not actually working. Thus they need to be included in discussions on how to improve policy, programs, and society in general. Listening to, respecting, and acting on marginalized youth's stories is the only way we will be able to enact widespread social change.

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Appendix A

Participant Summaries

	Thomas	Alexander	Jacob	Aaron	Madison
Age	24	18	24	18	18
Ethnicity	Inuit and French	Metis, non-status	Caucasian	Muslim	Caucasian
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Housing stats	Homeless, sleeping in shelter	Homeless, sleeping in shelter	Housed in independent home	Homeless, sleeping in shelter	Homeless, sleeping in shelter
Schooling	Left school, hasn't gone back	unknown	Graduated high school, has applied to university	Expelled, hasn't gone back	Cycled in and out of school, expecting to return soon
Employment status	Unemployed, receiving social assistance	Unemployed, receiving social assistance	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed
Addiction status	Struggling with addiction	'Clean' for 3 months	'Clean' for 1 year	'Clean' for 3 years	Recently 'clean' but struggling
Criminal Justice Involvement	Has criminal record	Has criminal record, cycling in and out of jail	Has criminal record	Unknown	Recently had charged dropped

	Daniel	Michael	Jack	Emily
Age	n/a	18	20	18
Ethnicity	Cree	Caucasian	Caucasian and Black	Caucasian
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female
Housing status	Homeless	Homeless, expecting government housing soon	Housed in group home	Homeless, living with friends, expecting group home
Schooling	Dropped out	Left school, currently enrolled in outreach program	Graduated high school, enrolled in trades program	Left school, expecting to return to school
Employment status	Unemployed	Unemployed, receiving social assistance	Employed full time	Employed in casual work
Addiction status	Struggling with addiction	'Clean' for 7 months	'Clean' for unknow period of time	Has never used drugs
Criminal Justice involvement	Unknown	Unknown	Currently involved in court system	Currently involved in court system

Interview Guide

1) Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

   a. Can you tell me about your life growing up?

   b. Probe for demographic information:

      i. Growing up, did you identify with any group?

      ii. Growing up, did you identify as _____?

   c. When you were younger, what did you enjoy doing?

   d. When you were younger, what did you imagine your grown-up life would be like?

   e. What do you enjoy doing?

2) What are your major goals now?

   a. What sort of things do you want to do?

3) Is there anything you feel pressured to do?

   a. Who pressures you to do that?

   b. Do you actually want to do that? Why? Why not?

4) Of everything you want to do with your life, what is most important to you?

   a. Why is that so important?

   b. How would doing that change your life?

5) What inspires you?

   a. Are there any specific people who inspire you?

   b. Are there any experiences that have inspired you?

6) Are you working on anything (any goals) right now?

   a. [if yes] Why are you working on that?

b. What are you doing to achieve that?

c. [if no] why not?

7) What are your biggest challenges?

a. Do you have any trouble accessing services that could help you?

b. Do you have trouble accessing support?

c. Do you have any personal challenges?

d. How do those challenges affect your ability to work on what you want to work on?

8) Do you have any plans to overcome those challenges?

a. Can you describe your plans to me?

b. Do you plan to access any resources or support to help you?

9) What is it like to work on things you want to achieve?

a. How does it feel when thinking about your past experiences and challenges?

10) Have you done any of the things you wanted to do?

a. [if yes] how did that feel?

b. [if no] why not?

    i. How does it feel to not be able to work on those things?

    ii. Have you taken any steps to be able to do those things?

11) Is there anyone in your life who you think is successful?

a. What makes that person successful?

12) Can you imagine what it would feel like to do the things you want to do?

a. Picture your perfect life. What does it look like? How does it feel?

13) Is there anything else you want to tell me?

14) Do you have any questions for me?

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Success and meaning on the margins: exploring the voices of marginalized youth as they pursue success in neoliberal times.

Research Investigator	**Supervisor**
Sydney Sheloff	Dr. Jana Grekul
Department of Sociology	Department of Sociology
University of Alberta	University of Alberta
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Background
- You are being asked to be in this study because I want to understand your experiences as a youth, especially your experiences of pursuing your goals and overcoming life's challenges.
- This research will be used in the support of my master's thesis.

Purpose
- The purpose of this research is to discover what "success" means to youth who have struggled with poverty, relationship issues, mental health issues, addictions, and/or stigmatization. I want to know how youth define success and what success means to them personally. I want to hear youth's stories about their journeys, successes, and difficulties of achieving their goals. Most importantly, I want to know how it feels to achieve success in the face of social challenges.

Study Procedures
- Should you choose to participate, you will take part in a one-on-one interview in which I will ask you questions about things you want to accomplish, experiences of doing those things, and your feelings about those things.
- The Interview will take approximately one hour.
- Responses will be recorded and typed out. If you wish to review the typed out interview, please let me know and I will give you a copy once it is complete, you will have one week to change or remove any information said.
- Your quotes may be used in the final research paper. If quotes are used, all names and identifying information will be removed.
- Please feel free to ask any questions about the procedure and goals of the study and your role as a participant.

Benefits
- You will receive a $10 gift card to Tim Hortons as a thank you for participating in this research.
- In addition, by participating in research, you may gain a better understanding of your own experiences and feelings, and gain a better sense of how you see your future.

- This data will be used to better understand the experiences of marginalized youth and their ideas and feelings surrounding success.

Risk
- There is minimal risk to you; however, there is the potential that the questions I ask you may cause emotional discomfort.
- You may choose to not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable with no penalty.
- If you feel any distress I will immediately direct you to appropriate resources to help you.

Voluntary Participation
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate you have the right to answer only those questions you are comfortable with, you are under no obligation to answer all questions.
- You have the right and may request that the audio recorder be turned off at any time.
- Even if you agree to participate in this study you may change your mind and withdraw at any time without any penalty.
- If you choose to withdraw during the interview you may do so at any time. If you choose to withdraw, your data will be destroyed and not included in the study.
- If you choose to withdraw after the interview is completed, your right to withdraw from the study will be held until one week after the interview is completed, and your data will be destroyed and not included in the final report. After this date some analysis of the data may have already occurred, and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.
- Your decision to participate will not affect any services you receive from Old Strathcona Youth Society.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
- This research will be used as part of a project undertaken for a master's thesis.
- Your data will be kept confidential, only the primary researcher and supervisor will have access to the data.
- Your data will be completely anonymous, and you will not be personally identified in the analysis of the research.
- The audio file with the recorded interview will be immediately transferred to a password-protected computer and the audio file on the cell phone will be deleted. The audio file will be typed out into an encrypted word document and stored on the password-protected computer. Only the primary researcher knows the password to the computer. Data will be kept for 5 years and then destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality.
- You may request to receive the final results and a digital copy of the final report by contacting the primary researcher.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact the primary researcher using the contact information at the top of page one.

"The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615."

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____   _____

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

_____   _____

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Mental Health Resources

If youth seem distressed during the interview, I will immediately end the interview and refer them to one or more of the following resources:

General Mental Health Resources:

1. Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

2. Mental Health Children's Response Line: 780-427-4491

3. Mental Health Adult Crisis Reponses Team: 780-482-0222

4. Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton: 780-423-4121

5. Distress line: 780-482-HELP (4357)

6. The Support Network: 780-482-0198

Specific Mental Health Resources:

1. If the participant has a youth worker or counsellor they regularly see, I will encourage them to call that person.

2. I will refer youth to a worker within the organization I used to contact them.

3. If organization has an on-site mental health professional, I will refer the participant to that person.