

Legal Advocate's Report on the Findings of THE SQUEEGEE PROJECT

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Preliminary comments

In reading this report, I would like to challenge you, whether you are part of the justice system, the Ministry for Children and Families, a counselor, psychologist etc. or part of a concerned public to act on the findings presented here.

The findings I have compiled and commented upon depict a tragic tale of children falling through the cracks. We are failing to address the most basic human needs of our children and youth, things like food, shelter, education and medical services. We are failing to address the social, emotional and developmental needs of our youth. Our failure to provide a minimum standard of care and freedom from abuse is leading young people to suffer violence, fall prone to substance abuse, to sexually exploit themselves and ultimately, to suffer an unacceptable mortality rate.

Part of the drama looks at various legislative initiatives, which serve to deal with the "nuisance" of "squeegeeing" and "pan-handling." It is clear that these bylaws meet the needs of business and property owners as well as anxious citizens. However, their effect is to further marginalize youth who have precious few options. We need to work together to minimize the effects on some of the most vulnerable members of our society, children and youth who are on the streets.

It took courage for the six young people in the play to stand up and tell their stories. We, those of us who are listening, have a duty to ensure that we respond in whatever way we can. This report sets out the public's interventions and recommendations made in response to the Squeegee drama. You may have your own solutions to the growing problem of children and youth in crisis. But please, act now!

What follows is the cast's opening statement and request to be heard:
This speech was written by Rachael and read by Lisa each night before the play was presented:

"Thank you for coming tonight. We are happy to see people here who are willing to listen and open their minds. We in doing this play want you to know we are kids. Just kids. We are all different. Some kind, some not, but we deserve more than just a stereotype of "street-kid". We deserve to be looked in the eye and listened to.

We are kids who have been tossed into a corner, whose opportunities were cut off, when we decided to save ourselves from our homes. Left too long to be forgotten about.

The Squeegee Project was not created to gain people's sympathy, but so people can learn what needs to be done in preventing children from living on the street, and to accommodate the lack of support and guidance in their lives.

We are here to show you how we've been made to feel like criminals for trying to live honest lives by supporting ourselves through squeegee-ing and panhandling, instead of stealing or selling drugs, or more criminalization things.

We would like you to question the situation and not just to believe what's been presented before you."

Reported as the number #1 Issue:

Accessibility and Provision of Information and Services

Inability to find needed information around food, shelter, legal services

Inability to get access to limited services

Evidence that basic human needs for older youth aged 15 to 18 are not being met, things like food, shelter, education and medical services

Intervention #1: How to find help in the form of food and other resources and services on the streets for children and youth?

The drama lets us know how difficult it can be to find help on the street due to lack of information, scarce resources and even unhelpful peers who look at new kids as unnecessary competition. Many of the solutions presented in the play are degrading: such as combing through "dumpsters" and garbage cans for discarded food and engaging in prostitution. Even similarly situated people - other street kids - will not help those who are perceived as having other options such as going home.

Intervention #2: When a child or youth is unable to remain in the custody of the parents or "in care," with government or foster parents, finding a safe living situation and meeting one's basic needs is very difficult

The danger being presented here is that youth are vulnerable to being sexually exploited in order to obtain basic needs such as food. Squeegeeing and panhandling are growing activities because they offer the youth a legal, if unpopular means of meeting their basic needs. Many of the youth involved in these activities have no other legal or viable options - they are already marginalized and silenced due to the fact that youth on the streets are often there illegally - runaways from an abusive situation.

The majority of youth who stay away have been subjected to a variety of factors at home, including sexual, physical or verbal abuse, substance-abusing parents and other complicating factors such as poverty. All too many kids who have been in care

report that foster care is a replication of the past victimization they were hoping to leave behind.

It is not uncommon for youth in care to bounce around from caregiver to caregiver. In response to audience interventions, more than one of the actors in the play confirmed that they shared this experience. In one Ontario document *Voices from Within: Youth Speak Out* (1998), more than 57% of the young people who contributed information had had five or more placements.

Contacting the authorities under present legislation and guidelines will not ensure their health, safety or wellbeing. This is the main reason that these children and youth live outside of the system and are unable to access most forms of societal support.

Intervention #3: Critical lack of medical facilities dealing with drug and alcohol abuse for young people

Drug and alcohol abuse is a real fact for street involved youth. Although mentally, they must be extremely mature to survive, in many ways these people are just kids. Street involved youth are, by definition, at high risk to abuse drugs and alcohol due to bad role models at home and on the street. Easy accessibility of drugs in areas where street involved youth congregate adds to this problem.

Recommendations

More detox centres (and not just needle exchanges) was mentioned time and again.

Clean up the drug dealers in areas where youth congregate, particularly the "hard" drugs of heroin and cocaine and crack.

More social services for youth when they hit the streets - before they fall into even worse situations as the main character did in the play.

Prevention and education should be the first line of defense. Kids need to know that they not only have a right to be safe, but where to go and how to proceed when their families are in crisis.

Overall Recommendations re: Lack of Services and Information

More street/outreach workers making contact and directing kids to services

Utilization of peer support workers in making contact with street involved youth

More food banks for youth

More shelters and second stage (stable) housing for youth

Prevention efforts catching kids before they resort to living on the street

More medical facilities for youth which dispense a reasonable standard of care and preventative mental health programs addressing the lack of guidance and support

Listing the available services for kids who are on the street in an easily accessible place such as bus shelters and community centres

Give kids an alternative with respect to employment; if we as a society do not approve of squeegeeing and panhandling then other employment alternatives must be provided. The community, including businesses need to work together to offer some real choices so that kids don't have to work on the street including in the sex trade.

Provide counseling to address abuse and self-esteem issues

Issue #2: Responsiveness and timeliness:

Lack of response or delayed or insufficient response as in the case where abuse is being suffered and adequate intervention is not made. Result- kids end up on the street.

The play "Squeegee" was set up to deal with the problems of street-involved kids as they are, not as we would hope them to be. As the artistic director pointed out to the audience: "interventions must be based in reality, rather than based on magic." It is a reality that for many kids on the street, it is too late for them to go home. Too much has happened, too much abuse has occurred, and these children have become adults, if not in age, then in mindset.

However, all of the cast members wanted to stress the fact that the streets were no place for children. Early interventions were considered by all to be a much better solution.

Issue #3: Focus on best interest of the youth means inclusion of the young person's views where possible and creation of laws which are responsive to their needs

The main problem here is where the child or youth does not accept going back to family home or foster care because of problems associated with substance-abusing parents/guardians or past victimization. If the young person's views were taken into account, perhaps fewer children would fall through the cracks and land on the street.

Intervention #1: Change the options for kids who need to support themselves at a time when by rights, others should be looking after them.

Currently, "Squeegeeing" is a regulated activity as defined in Vancouver's municipal bylaws. However, it does not enjoy broad acceptance by the wider community. The government has a duty to provide a minimal standard of care where families are unwilling or unable to do so. The community as well as the government needs to step forward with employment opportunities that will get these kids off the street and reintegrated into society.

Intervention #2: Panhandling is not well tolerated or well understood in our community

Panhandling is not well tolerated or well understood in our society, although society and government policies have contributed to the unprecedented numbers of kids on the street who need to beg for their basic needs. The play demonstrated the response by citizens: lack of caring; the verbal abuse: "get a job;" "druggie;" and the opportunism of sexual predators - offering a vulnerable, newly arrived young woman a place to "sleep."

What this speaks to is lack of understanding as well as lack of options for these young people to meet their basic needs. Should we counsel kids to stay in abusive homes? To suffer violence as a result of substance-abusing parents and guardians? To be treated as a pay cheque by foster parents, when they are in dire need of understanding? How are these kids who are on the street supposed to get a job when they have no address, no phone, no place to clean up and no electrical outlets to plug in their alarm clocks?

The long-term ramifications of our failure to provide for these children and youth are grave. Many of the kids discussed in this report have been unsuccessful in traditional school environments and do not come to the streets with employable skills in the traditional sense. Squeegeeing is a response to the lack of opportunities and almost every evening of the play, cast members stated that they would rather be cleaning car windows then resorting to other crimes such as theft or prostitution.

Recommendations:

Governments, at all levels, need to understand the social and economic implications of their policy and legislative choices. Making squeegeeing and panhandling more difficult further marginalizes kids - pushing them to prostitution. This is unacceptable in terms of results. Other negative effects of the implementation of loitering and other bylaws include the potential increase in criminal activity such as theft and fraud. We need to consider the input of youth when making and implementing these bylaws and plan to accommodate their special needs.

Issue #4: Violence against children and youth:

Intervention 1: Avoiding unnecessary police violence

In addition to the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse, addictions and the problem of basic needs not being met, this drama demonstrates the prevalence of violence experienced by street kids at the hands of the police. Even though its not their fault

that they are on the streets, kids start to run afoul of the law - if just by reason that they are sleeping in alley ways. Disrespectful responses to police officers, stating one's rights, refusing to move on and questioning police authority can result in unnecessary violence, particularly in light of the victims' ages.

Part of the problem is that this community of people, children who are making their homes on the street, tend to be a voiceless, silent underclass. As such, they tend to be particularly vulnerable to violence from many sources, not just the police. Some of the most useful responses were from audience members who portrayed concerned citizens who were witnesses and then took an active role in the protection of these kids. This is the sort of response we would like to encourage.

A note about unnecessary police violence in apprehending street kids or maintaining the squeegee law: Many of the interventions with respect to unreasonable use of force were unsuccessful. The audience believed that stating one's rights would curtail it, however, that was not the case.

Recommendations:

Education of police officers (sensitivity training to deal with street kids) through the Justice Institute

Cop Watch, a media activism program that uses video cameras and citizen surveillance to monitor known strolls would substantiate claims (examples found in Seattle and Toronto)

Improvement of the Complaints process was stressed on more than one evening. Currently, there is great difficulty in processing a claim against an officer - the complainant is often transitory (of no fixed address), the process is too lengthy, the case often turns on the issue of credibility between the street kid and police officer's version of events and finally, the threat of reprisal for the person making the complaint

Ombudsperson or inter-community committee whose role it is to forward the complaint on behalf of the street kid in an effective and efficient manner

Printing the Officer's badge number on the uniform so that it will be visible at all times

Special Note: There was an element of disbelief amongst some of the audience as to the extent of police violence directed to kids on the street. However, each night the audience was polled and at least 15 to 20 people responded with an affirmative when asked the question: have they or someone they know experienced situations as described in the play.

Issue #5: Sexual Exploitation of Youth:

The problem is that many young people are providing for their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter by selling their bodies. In all too many cases, the young people are doubly exploited by their boyfriend/pimp for their ability to generate thousands of dollars a year. There is a lot of pressure from sexual predators for kids to sell their bodies for sex while they are engaged in other activities such as panhandling.

Street kids, we learned from this play, are particularly vulnerable due to a host of factors. Low self-esteem and lack of other viable employment options are two of the most important reasons. Many kids have mentioned that as they suffered abuse at home, at least in this situation they are getting paid for it. From an economic perspective, prostitution is the highest paying job a street kid can have, \$40 a "blow job" and \$80 a "lay" generated from each customer in comparison to \$3 to \$40 working all day pan-handling or "squeegeeing."

Finally, as demonstrated in the play, more than one of the audience members who tried to find a solution to becoming a "working girl" found it extremely difficult not to end up getting into a "john's" car. There are any number of unscrupulous people who prey on the most vulnerable members of our society, pressuring both young women and men into the profession for their own economic benefit.

Recommendations from the 1998 Report of the Office of Child, Youth & Family Advocate

For the third year in a row, the Provincial advocate recommended the proclamation of Section 9 of the Child, Family and Community Services Act, which would

Give the Ministry for Children and Families full responsibility for services for all youth under the age of 19 years

Allow social workers to form agreements with older youth to provide them with essential services, without having to take over their guardianship in order to do so

Give youth a single place in their community where they can get access to government services

Allow for the design of programs specifically meant to meet the unique needs of this age group

Mandated entitlement of older youth to financial benefits