

# **URBAN FEMALE YOUTH AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH PUBLIC SPACE**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Whether the use of public space positively or negatively affects the development of youth is a long-standing debate in urban development. Those youth whose behaviour does not conform to the status quo of how space 'should' be used are often viewed as troublemakers. This paper examines how and why a group of marginalized female youth use public space. Through personal interviews with 10 female youth, aged 15-22, their physical and emotional use of public space is explored. When the youth experienced instability in their personal lives, they could find social support and a sense of community through their interactions in public places. As the stability in their personal lives increased, their use of public space decreased. Their use of public space was shaped by issues of proximity, presence of adult authority, safety, and acceptance and belonging.

**Keywords:** female youth; marginalized; public space; community acceptance; adult authority; Vancouver

To my family Lily, Brian, Joy, Olivia, Tim, and Ollie — thanks for all your love and support.

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## GLOSSARY

- Alternative High School** For students who are not suitable for the regular public school setting. Classes are small usually 10 students, 2 teachers and 3 youth workers/counsellors (Ministry of Children and Families (n.d.).
- Foster Home** Child or youth lives in the home of an individual/family who is hired by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). The social worker is the child's legal guardian (Ministry of Children and Families (n.d.).
- Group Home** A group of children/youth live in a house provided by an agency with paid staff usually funded by the MCFD (Ministry of Children and Families (n.d.).
- Probation** Probation is an order issued by a Youth Court Judge. A Probation Order allows a youth who has a criminal offence to be held accountable for their unlawful behaviour while residing in the community (Stevenson, Tuft, Hendrick, & Kowalski, 1998).
- Youth Agreement** A legal agreement between MCFD and a youth between 16-18 years old where there is no parent or other person willing to take responsibility for the youth or it is unsafe to return to the family home. The purpose of the agreement is to help the youth gain independence, return to school, and /or gain work experience and life skills. The agreement lets the youth live independently while providing on-going emotional and financial support. (Youth Agreements n.d.).

# 1: INTRODUCTION

A vibrant urban centre is one full of life. Ideally, there is a mix of commercial, residential, and public places where social interactions occur and where people feel safe, welcome, and a sense of belonging to the larger community. In a perfect city, all people would have equal access to the many public spaces that it has to offer. In reality, this is not the case. Youth are often discouraged or excluded from occupying public places, whether through the influence of negative social perception or by the law, and therefore when youth do occupy public spaces, conflict can arise. However, it has been argued by social theorists that the public realm of the street actually has much to offer youth when it comes to their social and emotional development.

Youth is often associated with nonconformity. There is a public perception that youth who do not conform to the status quo of how space “should” be used are seen as troublemakers. Although non-conformity does not necessarily equate with unlawful behaviour, violence, or negativity, it is often images and commentary from the media that associate these with youth. Bombarded by images of youth involved in street racing, illicit drug use, teen pregnancy, and teen prostitution, the general public has become accustomed to the idea of youth as a group of individuals who are out of control (Owens, 2002). These stereotypes are further aggravated by popular trends with respect to fashion, make-up, body piercing, and tattooing in many youth circles. These expressions

of individuality are easily misinterpreted as those of rebellion by some adults. The end result of these social misunderstandings and misinterpretations, is that youth often encounter a good deal of distrust when they interact in public spaces (Owens, 2002).

The relationship between teenagers and public space is ambiguous; too old for playgrounds, but too young to have the same rights and access to places as adults, it can be difficult for youth to find their 'place' in the larger collective. Merchants do not see youth as consumers, and homeowners often assume that the presence of youth will lead to trouble, asking them to disperse even if they are not engaged in any inappropriate behaviour at the time (Owens, 2002). Research shows that when groups of youth are gathered in public places they are more likely to be perceived as a threat, even dangerous, based solely on the fact that they are in a group (Childress, 2004). Indeed, regardless of what kinds of activities or behaviours a group of youth are engaging in while in a public place, often the first reaction by adults with authority, such as police officers, security guards, or shop owners, is to move them along before any trouble can occur.

Lees' (2003) study of youth and public space in Portland, Maine discovered that objections and concerns about youth using public space came from a variety of sources. Merchants were the most vocal complainants, but there were also concerns from visitors to the city, as well as average workers in the area under study. Amongst business owners, the central complaint was that many of the activities associated with youth were detrimental to business. Public

drunkenness, skateboarding, panhandling, noise, mock sex acts, and graffiti around a storefront were all identified as factors which impeded consumerism. Understandably, merchants felt this was not fair to their business. Moreover, Lees also identified a concern in the larger community regarding a perceived lack of respect shown by youth towards public spaces in general. Behaviours such as throwing cigarette butts on the ground and littering were viewed as symptomatic of a deeper contempt towards acceptable social norms (Lees, 2003).

This is a notable point. Lees' (2003) study established that merchants are the driving force behind moving youth away from public streets because it impedes consumerism. The safety of youth comes second to consumerism. The fault lies not with the business owners but with a city as a whole where safe places for non-conforming youth are not considered. When there is a group of youth congregating in a residential or business area, the police are expected to disperse the group. As we will see, when the police move youth along they very rarely go home but just move to another outdoor public location. It appears that the priority is not the safety of youth but the concerns of adults.

Malone (2002) suggests that in order to be welcomed in public places there are expectations of behaviour. It is assumed that if you are choosing to be in a public place then you have also chosen to conform to the social norms associated with that location. Hanging around in groups, talking, playing, and people watching for long periods of time, are generally viewed as behaviours inappropriate within the structured order of what is expected to take place on city streets. Malone argues that negative stereotypes of youth create more than fear

among citizens. She points to the many cities that are adopting a more aggressive approach towards discouraging and penalizing loitering by youth. Surveillance, security guards, curfews, and a heavy police presence are increasingly common means used to discourage youth from spending time in public places and physically dispersing them.

Curfews have been used for centuries to regulate people's behaviour in public spaces. They have been used to control civil disorder, protect public parks, ensure national security during times of war, and more recently to keep young people off the streets (Collins & Kearns, 2001). Historically, in the late nineteenth century in North America, curfews were set for immigrant families because it was believed that migrant parents could not control their children (Lester, 1996). There were also concerns amongst the upper classes that if order was not controlled amongst the working class children, chaos would erupt in the neighbourhoods. This trend continued during the Second World War, as there was fear that youth would engage in inappropriate behaviour in increasing amounts because they were unsupervised by their parents who were involved in the war effort (Lester, 1996).

These three situations demonstrate the need some adults have to control youth's activities in public space. They do not trust youth to make good choices when left alone, and have little confidence in their ability to control themselves. The wide spread use of youth curfews did lessen from the 1950s to the 1980s but has resurfaced in recent years in the Western World as an answer to the increase of gang activity and juvenile crime (Collins & Kearns, 2001).

Criminalizing the way youth use public space reinforces the notion that adults have control over youths' spatial freedoms and that public spaces are for adults. Curfews are a way to keep youth off the streets but this tool ignores the real problems of why they are there in the first place; criminalizing the symptoms while ignoring the cause is doing society an injustice.

As legal minors, youth do not have the same rights and freedoms as adults, and do not have the same level of access to places. As a result, they must find ways to create space to occupy. This is a difficult task given that there is virtually no physical land space that has been specifically claimed for adolescents. This means that they do not have rights to own, modify, or even rent space (Childress, 2004). The only right that they do have is the choice of which publicly and privately owned spaces they wish to occupy (Childress, 2004). Childress argues that youth are actually the most frequent users of public space. Since they cannot control private space, such as their homes, schools, and communities, they must appropriate, or symbolically claim, public space in order to gain a sense of control for themselves.

Lieberg (1995) discusses the concept of ownership and rights in what he calls a "backstage space". He contends that adults can withdraw to these backstage spaces because they have connections to the workplace, residences, organizations, restaurants and even coffee shops. Teenagers do not have the same access to backstage spaces. They often have nowhere to go when they want to be by themselves or to interact with peers; public spaces are their only option. Not surprisingly, teens are generally attracted to those places where

adults do not want to go. They tend to seek out places that are isolated and not under surveillance (Lieberg, 1995). Backyards, stairwells, parking lots, basements, and the like are not uncommon destinations for youth's social interactions to occur. Their choice of spaces that are undesirable for the mainstream and adult population feeds into the public perception that Owens (2002) refers to when she says that the teenage years are associated with nonconformity.

Once a group of youth has chosen a public place to occupy, they can take further 'ownership' of the location by marking it in some way. Graffiti is a familiar tactic used in this temporary ownership. Youth also claim space by using the objects and furnishings inherent to that environment in their own unique ways (Lieberg, 1995). Some examples of this would be youth sitting on the curb instead of the bench provided, or using a child's playground climbing apparatus to sit on and socialize with friends rather than for the physical activity it is intended for.

There are a few differing perspectives of the appropriateness of youth occupying public spaces. The appropriateness of youth occupying public spaces has long been a contentious issue in moral and legal discourses. Some theorists hold that children need to be protected from the dangers inherent to modern urban environments. They contend that city streets are dangerous in many ways, and that it is the duty of the larger society to ensure the physical and moral safety of those most at risk. There is both car and pedestrian traffic that children and youth need to be protected from but there are also the dangers of interacting

with individuals with ill intentions towards children. However, Jane Jacobs' (1961) progressive yet logical thinking about children and youth and city streets is as relevant today as it was in the 1960s. From Jacobs' observations of her own neighbourhood in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, she argues that the urban street is actually a safe environment for children. However, as we will see, not all theorists feel the same way.

The idea that youth need to be protected from the dangers of the street is not a new one. Concerns regarding the physical and moral safety of children in an urban environment have been an influence in urban planning. Perhaps influenced by the dominant moral codes of the day, urban planners in the 1960s felt that the best way to protect children from the street was to provide them with a safe and morally secure play environment. The result was the construction of interior enclaves well removed from the 'adult' infrastructure of the city (Jacobs, 1961). One of the problems with these child-friendly enclaves was that they were only interesting to children under the age of six; older youth had little to no interest in them. The real issue, however, was these enclaves took children away from the natural supervision that takes place when children play on a neighbourhood street. Jacobs contended that in order for children to develop into healthy individuals they need opportunities to engage in physical activities and sports, but they also need "an unspecialized outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world" (p. 81).

Jacobs' (1961) observations show that the children playing in her urban neighbourhood streets had the "eyes" of the adults in the community. Whether it

was a parent, shopkeeper, or random citizen passing by, someone was always watching. When children knew their neighbours, streets, and local merchants, they felt a sense of belonging and connectedness to the larger community. In many instances, constructs like the enclaves previously mentioned actually had effects directly opposite to what urban planners had intended. In the case of Jacobs' New York neighbourhood, for example, the youth admitted to hanging out in the interior enclaves when they wanted to engage in antisocial activities. They knew that in those secluded locations they would not be under the watchful eye of adults and therefore did not have to be accountable for their behaviour.

As an example of the contrary perspective, Sahlin (1991) believes that youth need protection from the street; he feels that when youth are not under the supervision of adults they can learn and develop asocial and antisocial behaviours. Sahlin believes that if youth are spending time on the street they must be bored, and should be encouraged to become involved in organized activities that will enrich their lives and make them better citizens overall. If youth have no focus in life, the argument goes, their boredom has the potential to turn into acts of vandalism, graffiti, and hooliganism, which can make the city an unwelcoming place for others.

Jacobs (1961) is not the only scholar who believes playing or hanging around on the street is a positive experience for youth. Lieberg's (1995) study of adolescents in Lund, Sweden discovered that teenagers have two types of needs with regard to public space. Lieberg describes these as, "places of retreat and places of interaction." Teenagers need to be able to withdraw from the world of

adults to be with their peers, but they also need to meet and confront the adult world by putting themselves on display. They need to both see and be seen. Lieberg (1995) explains that, even though these two types of interactions fulfil different developmental needs, they both can only occur in public places.

Facilitating the emotional development of youth is only the beginning of what the street has to offer, argues Worpole (2003). He argues that spending time in the public realm is an opportunity for children to learn many social rules, such as those surrounding street safety and play. Youth learn appropriate ways to interact with strangers and adults that they meet in public places. Architecture, the locally built environment, topography, and even learn the effects of the weather on the natural environment are all encountered, and examined, by city youth. Moreover, Malone (2002) suggests that spending time in public places allows youth to observe and consider the social and cultural capital of their communities; their interactions with peers and other citizens are opportunities to learn about conflict resolution and social negotiations. Although, not mentioned specifically in Worpole's (2003) or Malone's (2002) research, it is fair to say that interacting with people from differing cultures and ethnicities, as occurs on the streets of a multicultural city such as Vancouver might increase racial tolerance. The street has much to offer in helping youth to understand the world in which they live.

Owens (2002) suggests that access to public places, or lack thereof, can either support or prevent the emotional and social development of adolescents. She further suggests that adolescents as individuals must build their own self-

identity and self-esteem, and that the public environment helps them to do this by encouraging interaction with others, building relationships, and developing their identity within the community. Malone (2002) also believes that the street helps youth to construct their social identity. Youth use the street as a stage to perform for their peers and other members of society; they can adopt an identity that either conforms with, or stands in opposition to, the larger community.

Some youth, through dress and behaviour, fit into the dominant cultural norms: maintaining a clean appearance, using polite language, or wearing school uniforms. On the other end of the spectrum are youth that oppose the dominant culture by choosing not to fit in. Presenting a messy appearance, engaging in loud or obnoxious behaviour, smoking, and displaying overtly sexual behaviours are all examples of how some youth can celebrate non-conformity. Malone (2002) feels that, in the minds of such youth, their visual expressions of nonconformity are a way of saying that they have won the use of that space away from the dominant culture.

This idea of claiming public space is not new. The notion that 'home', the 'private', is a women's space and therefore 'the public' realm is a man's space, has limited women in both Western and non-Western cultures from using public spaces alone, such as streets and parks (Fenster, 2005). This restriction of use of public space for women has come under scrutiny from Feminist critiques. They further the argument by saying that the public realm is for white middle-upper class, heterosexual males (Fenster, 2005). This classification also entirely leaves out youth's access to public space. The 'home' is idealized as being a

stable, safe, and reliable place for women. In actuality, this is not always the case and dismisses the occurrences of domestic abuse. The same safety concerns are present for children and youth. As youth take ownership of public spaces for their use they are also challenging the notion of who has access public spaces.

For some youth, there is comfort in the consistency of the street. City centres, shopping malls, transit loops, and other commercial areas are places often frequented by youth because it is the meeting with friends that they value (Owens, 2002). Youth like to be where they know their peers will be, and also where special events can happen. They also want to spend time in public places that have unique and interesting physical and spatial qualities (Lieberg, 1995). As well, there are some youth who really have nowhere else to go (Malone, 2002). Feeling unwelcome at home, they can find comfort from their peers in the familiarity of the streets.

Many social theorists still argue that the street is a negative environment for youth. Questions regarding the safety of children and youth routinely come to the forefront of many urban planning discussions. As Jacobs (1961) pointed out, there is a misguided opinion among adults that children need to be protected from the harmful effects that can occur in the streets. Traditionally, urban planners have designed public places for youth to occupy under the influence of these opinions. Yet, because the training and practise of most planners is focused on adult use of public space, they often have little understanding of the relationship young people have with their physical environment and society.

They therefore do not always plan with the needs of youth in mind (Freeman & Riordan, 2002).

City planners creating areas for youth away from high density public space is what Malone (2002) calls the “not seen and not heard” strategy. To many it seems like a perfect solution. The community provides a specific space for young people to congregate, where they will be free to engage in their own activities, and as result, they will not be using public space where they might interfere with the legitimate users of that space (Malone, 2002). While there has been some success in this kind of planning, it ignores that youth sometimes want to hang out in a public space where there are other people. They do not always want to be excluded from the happenings of daily life or adult supervision. This reinforces Lieberg’s (1995) theory that youth want to be where the action is and that youth use public spaces as “places of interaction” to see and be seen.

Although youth are often grouped into one generic group by urban planners, the way males and females define, use, and need public space is very different. When male and female youth occupy the same space, at the same time, they often engage in different types of activities. Arnesen and Laegran (2003) discovered that male youth tend to engage in physical activities in public spaces, and that their involvement in these activities determines whether they will be accepted by other males. Female youth tend to engage more in conversation, and will be accepted because of their ability to negotiate relationships through these conversations (Arnesen & Laegran, 2003). The public realm, then, is a place for youth to safely learn about and try out appropriate gender behaviours.

From Malone's (2002) study of Australian youth, it was discovered that female youth think about their own personal safety more than males. The female youth preferred to be in public areas that are brightly lit, highly populated, and where they were familiar with the people present. Arnesen and Laegran (2003) point out that public space is rarely planned with the needs of youth in mind, and it is even more uncommon for it to be planned with youth gender differences in mind. Often youth-specific places tend to be "planned for" youth rather than "planned with" youth (Freeman & Riordian, 2002). Whether adults are planning space to protect youth, or planning space to keep youth away from public places, adults are telling youth where and what to play.

There are many public places in which youth are encouraged to spend time: libraries, sporting facilities, and community centres to name a few. Many local community centres have drop-in programs specifically for youth. As well, there are often open gym times for youth to engage in a variety of physical activities. Many youth choose to take advantage of these opportunities. However, Lieberg (1994) made an interesting discovery when he studied the youth in Lund, Sweden. He asked the youth to put in order the public places that they preferred to spend time in, as opposed to which public places they actually spent the most time in. He discovered that while youth in his study accessed everything from libraries, to shopping malls, to bus stations, to tennis courts, to parks or green areas, to friends' homes, to recreation centres, the place that they sited the highest preference for was the streets (Lieberg, 1994).

Along with the logistical reasons that youth use public space, such as

comfort, safety, supervision or surveillance, there is a common theme that presents itself across all of these studies: youth seek out the social interaction that takes place on the street. These interactions are not only with friends, but with anyone they encounter in an urban environment. They can be positive or negative in nature.

There is a wealth of literature which discusses the notion of increased legal regulation of public space (Mitchell, 1997). In efforts to, 'clean up the streets,' regulatory laws are routinely imposed on people that use public places in ways deemed undesirable. Space regulation laws are reshaping the way average citizens use public space, and youth are in no way removed from this equation. Indeed, for some youth, their use of public space is altogether guided by such regulations.

Youth do occasionally engage in dangerous activities in the public realm and the media is quick to perpetuate the negative stereotypes that stem from their behaviour. "Teenophobia" ensues (Lucas, 1998). The belief that youths' behaviour is deviant creates the idea that youth do not belong in public places. This raises the question of whether parents or the law are responsible for monitoring youths' use of public spaces. Laws are implemented to keep youth off the streets through curfews or "move along" by-laws and if these laws are broken then the youth can end up being incarcerated in youth correction facilities (Jefferies & Smith, 1996).

This is not to say that all youth using public space will be punished, but it does add credence to Mitchell's (1997) discussion on who has the rights to the

city. If people use public space in an 'appropriate' way - waiting for a bus or having a picnic in a park - then they will not be bothered. If they are using the space in an 'inappropriate' way, they may be accused of loitering and can be punished. The laws for monitoring youth are similar. If youth are using public space in an appropriate way, they will not be bothered, but if they use the space in a way that does not fall within the limits of normal behaviour, they can be punished.

No matter how much youth are excluded from, or discouraged from using it, they will continue to claim public space for their social and emotional needs. The stereotype of youth in the public realm as out of control, immoral beings who refuse to conform to the dominant cultural norms is pervasive, but in actuality, youth need the street to learn about themselves and how they fit into the larger community and the world around them. Since youth do not have the same rights as adults when it comes to ownership of private property, they have learned how to redefine public spaces to fulfil their own needs and gain a sense of control over their own environment. Access to public place, and space in general, is essential in youth development.

As previous research has demonstrated, the use of public space by youth can be beneficial in their social and emotional development, but from the perspective of many adults, city planners, and business owners, the presence of youth in public places is less than desirable. Most youth use public space in a socially acceptable manner. They are using public space to travel between school, home, part time jobs, library, after school activities, shopping, and

restaurants or coffee shops. They are using public space as a city intends it to be used.

In some instances, 'disruptive' youth behaviour in a public space is both accepted and expected. For example, most people would tolerate a group of high school students on a bus at 3:30 in the afternoon, even if they were engaging in loud and obnoxious behaviour, because it is expected that youth are in transition at this time. There is less tolerance for youth using public space in a way that is not considered 'normal' or acceptable by the larger community. It is this second group of youth that are the focus of this study.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of urban female youth and their relationship with public space. Female youth are the target population for this study. The female participants in this study have all been involved with social services providers and are clients of the Non-profit organization PLEA Community Services Society of BC. Clients of PLEA have been identified as being vulnerable to crime, drug abuse, and sexual exploitation. Generally, these incidences for youth occur in public places. Understanding why and how female adolescents use public space is thus all that more imperative in insuring their personal safety. Their relationship with public space will be understood through the respective paradigms of supervision and surveillance, safety, acceptance and belonging, transportation and proximity, and place design.

In this paper, I seek to understand how a group of at-risk, and marginalized, female youth use public space, what meaning they hold to these

spaces, and what the implications of using the spaces are for them. These female adolescents are at-risk of crime, sexual exploitation, and substance abuse. And their marginality reflects the notion that they have lower value in our society. They are a group which often faces intersecting oppressions that create physiological and emotional as well as literal barriers to service access, pushing them to the outside perimeters of normalized society. From discussion, and through analysis, I seek to bring the attention of city officials and academics, the way in which these girls use public space and for what purposes. In addition, I will explore possible solutions of how to accommodate the needs of this target population of female youth to fit into and be accepted within the larger community while reducing the risks of failing this fragile population in their development, and losing their potential future contributions to the city and society.

## **2: RESEARCH DETAILS**

The females targeted for this study have struggled with illegal substance mis-use and abuse, have had criminal charges against them, been put on a Probation Order, attend or attended an alternative high school, lived in foster care or a group home, or lived independently through a Youth Agreement. This is a very specific group of young women, and the findings will speak directly to their circumstances. A clear understanding of the target group of female youth in this study needs to be presented. These girls are not homeless youth; they all have homes. Their choice to spend time in public places is not because they do not have a physical residence. They do not have control over their own private space and therefore must create their own spaces.

For the interviews, participants were recruited from various programs at the non-profit organization PLEA Community Services Society of BC. PLEA is an organization that supports children and youth that are experiencing challenges in areas of education, employment, addictions, criminal involvement, and independent living. PLEA has functioned in the Lower Mainland of BC for the last 30 years. Historically, PLEA has focused on youth who have been involved with the Youth Justice System. As the needs of the community, the youth, and the law have changed, the programs at PLEA have been adapted to better serve the clients. Clients can be referred to, and be active in, more than one program

at a time. For example, a female youth may be attending an alternative high school and be court ordered to have a one to one youth worker for a 6-month service plan to help her through her probation period.

Clients either reside with their biological family members, or are under the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Under the MCFD guardianship, children and youth can reside in group homes, foster care, or have a Youth Agreement where they live independently with on-going support from a youth worker and social worker. PLEA clients are not homeless, but all of the clients referred to PLEA programs have been recognized by a professional, such as a social worker, probation officer, counsellor, or other helping professional, as in need of additional support to overcome their personal challenges.

The definition of youth by the United Nations for statistical purposes is 15-24 years old (Youth and the United Nations, (n.d.)). The city of Vancouver youth programming is 13-18 years old (Vancouver Youth, 2010) whereas, BC government's Youth Justice Services are for youth ages 12-17 (Stevenson, Tuft, Hendrick, & Kowalski, 1998). With so many varying definitions of youth, the decision to exclude participants younger than fifteen and older than twenty-two had to do mainly with the ages of the clients referred to PLEA, but also to discover what, if any, changes in use of public space occur from teenager to young adult. For the purpose of this paper, the terms youth, teenager, and adolescent will be used interchangeably to describe the participants in this study.

### **3: METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on findings from semi-structured interviews with ten female participants between the ages of 15-22 years old. One participant is 15 years old, one is 16 years old, two are 17 years old, one is 18 years old, three are 19 years old, and two are 22 years old. Participants were giving an honorarium of a gift card worth 20 dollars and transit tickets for their time. Five participants live in East Vancouver, one lives in Burnaby, one lives in New Westminister, one lives in Surrey, and two live in Port Coquitlam. The female youth identified with various ethnicities, however ethnicity will not be explored here. The focus will be on the youth's age, gender, and current living situation.

The interviews examined and explored the way in which these female youth use, think about, and understand public space. Questions frequently resulted in discussion that was much more emotional in nature than I had anticipated. This development will be discussed later. The participants learned about my study from posters at PLEA offices and from their individual youth workers. If the youth were interested in this study, they would call or text message me. I would then set up a time to meet them, or if under 19 years old, would acquire the contact information of their legal guardian to consent to their involvement. Interviews were conducted in the community at different coffee shops and restaurants. On average, interviews lasted 30 minutes and were all voice-recorded. Upon review

of the recorded data, findings were coded and analyzed. All participants were given the option to be voice recorded; one youth did not feel comfortable with being on tape.

The interviews consisted of eight open- ended questions. Although these teenagers volunteered themselves for my study, in some cases it was very difficult to encourage the girls to talk openly about their experiences. Gaining the trust and respect from some of the girls took longer than others but overall, the girls were happy to talk and share their experiences and ideas. Given my interest in how youth's use of public space is being enforced, a probation officer was interviewed to provide a clearer picture of the legalities of youth and public space.

The first two questions asked the participants to define public and private space. The next two questions asked them to talk about which public places they hang out in and why, and the physical attributes of that location and their social and emotional attachments to the place. The next two questions asked if they came up against any resistance from the police, storeowners, or people passing by when they occupy public spaces. The last two questions asked what kind of space they would create to frequent in if they could design it.

## **4: PROFILES OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

I feel it is important for the reader to understand the varying backgrounds of the participants. All participants' names have been changed for their protection and anonymity. These following details are based on the information that was shared with me during the interviews. Some participants felt more comfortable disclosing their personal circumstances than others, but overall it provides a good representation of who they are.

This group of female adolescents has experienced unique circumstances. Their circumstances are not ideal and although this is a small sample I feel it is safe to say that there are many other female youth in Vancouver that have similar experiences. The findings can only speak to their personal situations but understanding how they use public space is important because the girls are vulnerable to crime, sexual exploitation, and addictions and these incidences generally occur in the public realm. If we can get a better understanding of the needs of these female youth then we will be better able to support them.

Anna is a 22-year-old female. She was born in Vancouver and has not had a relationship with her mother since she was a toddler. She lived with her father until she was 12 years old when she was removed from his care due to neglect. After this, she lived with her aunt and paternal uncle and five cousins for three years. During this time, they lived in seven different residences. At age 15, her legal family moved away from Vancouver. She did not want to go with them so

she was placed in a foster home. Since she was still a minor, her father had to give up legal guardianship of her so at the age of 15 and she became a ward of the MCFD. At age 17, she moved out on her own and began to receive social assistance. She attended an alternative high school but “aged out” at 19 years old, before she was able to complete all the requirements needed to graduate. She has never been involved in crime or drugs. She currently lives in New Westminster with her boyfriend and receives social assistance.

Betty is also a 22-year-old female. She came from a two-parent family. There has always been tension between her and her parents. Her parents were dealing with many emotional challenges during her childhood, and as a result, there was very little supervision or communication in her home. She was charged with a criminal offence and served a probation order. She now lives independently and has been working full-time since she was 18 years old. She has graduated from high school, and this year enrolled in a post-secondary institution. She currently lives in Vancouver and has very little contact with her parents.

Carla is 16 years old. She moved to Vancouver from Vancouver Island three years ago. She has struggled with substance mis-use and has considerable learning disabilities. She attends an alternative high school and lives in a rented apartment in Burnaby with the financial assistance of her Youth Agreement. She has no contact with her immediate family except her stepsister, and their relationship is volatile.

Donna is 19 years old and comes from a middle-class family. She attended

a public school and excelled academically. Her mother routinely physical abused her during her adolescence. At age 16, after an abusive incident, the police became involved, and was eventually offered both financial and emotional support from MCFD. She currently lives alone in Vancouver and is in her second year of university.

Eileen is also 19 years old. She grew up in Ottawa and moved with her mother to Vancouver last year. Within a year of being in Vancouver, she committed and was charged with a criminal offence and spent time at the Youth Correctional Centre (YCC) located in Burnaby, BC. Currently, she resides in Surrey, BC, with her boyfriend. She is eight months pregnant, and plans to move back to Ontario once her baby is born.

Fiona is 18 years old. At this time, she lives with her mother in Vancouver but has been in foster homes throughout much of her childhood. Currently, she is attending an alternative high school and is struggling with substance abuse. She has criminal charges for assault and recently has multiple breaches of her probation.

Gail is 16 years old. She lives in Vancouver with her mother and attends an alternative high school. She is currently on probation, with only a few more community service hours to complete.

Holly is 19 years old. She grew up and lives in Port Coquitlam. She has struggled with substance mis-use and lived in and out of foster care her whole life. She was accepted into a program at a post-secondary institution for 2010 and currently lives by herself.

Ivy is 17 years old and lives with her father and stepmother in Port Coquitlam. She has an estranged relationship with her father, and a lot of conflict at home. She intends to move away from BC as soon as she graduates from high school.

Janet is 15 years old. She lives in Vancouver with her mother. She does not attend school mainly because she continues to breach her probation order and is repeatedly in and out of YCC. She currently struggles with substance abuse and her criminal charge is for assault.

The Child, Family and Community Service Act explains the system, services, and standards for children and families involved with MCFD. To give some clarity to the reader, I will provide a general idea of what happens to a child or youth once they become involved with the Ministry. The purpose of the MCFD is to provide the province's children and families with opportunities to have the best chances to succeed and thrive. There is a Five-Pillar commitment to BC's children and youth. It consists of: prevention; early prevention; intervention and support; the Aboriginal approach; quality assurance (Strong Safe and Supported, n.d.)

According to the BC's Five-Pillar approach, prevention focuses on preventing vulnerability in children and youth by providing strong supports for individuals, families, and communities. Early prevention focuses on providing services to vulnerable children and youth within their families and communities. Intervention and support provides services based on the assessment of individual needs. The Aboriginal approach supports Aboriginal people to take

jurisdiction in delivering child and family services. They are supported to develop models of service intervention that meet the needs of their own communities and families. Quality Assurance focuses on providing and maintaining the highest quality of services by monitoring and evaluating programs and services to ensure that the highest standards for care are maintained (Strong Safe and Supported, n.d.)

The general responsibilities of the MCFD include: child protection and family development; adoption; foster care; early childhood development and child care; child and youth mental health; youth justice and youth services; special needs children and youth. Their mission is, “to promote and develop the capacity of families and communities to: care for and protect vulnerable children and youth; support healthy child and family development to maximize the potential of every child in BC” (About Us, n.d.). All decisions made for children and youth are done under the guiding principles of their “best interests.” Several factors must be considered when deciding the outcome of a child’s situation. Those factors include: the child’s safety; the child’s physical and emotional needs and level of development; the importance of continuity in the child’s care; the quality of the relationship the child has with a parent or other persons and the effect of maintaining that relationship; the child’s cultural, racial, linguistic and religious heritage; the child’s view; and the effect on the child if there is delay in making a decision.

One of MCFD’s stated principles, is that each individual’s situation should be reviewed differently. The same procedure should not and does not apply to

every child; decisions are made based on the child's unique circumstances, keeping the best interests of the child in mind at all times. If a child experiences neglect or abuse in the home from their biological parents they can be removed out of the home and the care of their parents. At this point, the assigned social worker becomes the child's legal guardian and they are placed in a foster home, a group home, or with extended family members. The child and parent have potential access to one another through supervised visits and other forms of mediated contact. It is possible for the child to return home to live with their biological parents if the social worker feels that the home environment is safe and the parents have followed the appropriate measures.

Children can also be removed from the home because the biological parent recognizes they need support caring for their child; this is referred to as a 'voluntary care agreement'. This is usually a temporary placement, with regular visits between child and parent. The child protection process is often extremely complicated and social workers work closely with clients to ensure that everything is dealt with in a fair and respectful manner. When children are younger, they are placed in the best possible living situation. However, as children get older and have more independence, placements can become more challenging. Five of the young women in this study had been granted a youth agreement, as they had not received adequate care from their parents, but were almost at the age of majority at the time, making placements more difficult. Most youth services are discontinued when the youth reaches 19 years of age, for older teens, then, a youth agreement can be helpful in teaching them

independent living and life skills.

The MCFD provides services to both children and families in crisis. These services include counselling for crisis, grief, and abuse. If needed, addictions services, housing, and financial support are also available. Services are provided by various non-profit and government organizations, and can be accessed as long as the child and parents are actively participating in the programs. Usually, there are waitlists and funding restraints on services, so those individuals not willing or capable to participate in the programs can lose their privileges.

Alternative school programs are available for youth having a difficult time with the mainstream system. As we know, everyone has different styles of learning and some young people with challenges, either academic or behavioural, are unable to learn at the same level as their peers. Alternative school programs have small class sizes and a high adult to student ratio. Although the educational curriculum is the same as mainstream public school in order to graduate, the daily structure is set up with a little more flexibility to accommodate the needs of the students. Enrolment in alternative school programs is normally from social worker referral.

Addiction programs are available for youth who are struggling with substance abuse and mis-use. Detox programs are available to address the immediate addiction problems. Long-term day treatment programs are also available and are aimed at dealing with the underlying issues surrounding drug use. Drop-in centres, with youth workers and addiction counsellors on site to engage youth, are also common. Again, enrolment in these programs is usually

social worker referred and there are wait lists.

When a youth commits a crime, there are a number of ways they can be dealt with depending on their age and the severity of the crime. There are programs through the Vancouver Police Department where they work with the young person for restitution rather than charging them criminally. However, if a youth is charged under the Youth Criminal Justice Act there are always terms and conditions they must meet.

A Probation Order is issued by a Youth Court Judge and it allows a youth to remain in the community, as opposed to incarceration, if they are found guilty of unlawful behaviour (Stevenson et al., 1998). A youth can be on probation for up to two years for one or more offences if heard at the same time in Youth Court. If a youth is found guilty of another crime while on probation they can be given another Probation Order and the combined period of probation can be more than two years but may not be more than three years. Probation Orders come with a set of rules or conditions that the youth must obey to stay on probation. If they do not meet their conditions, a warrant will be issued for the youth's arrest, and they could be charged and required to appear before the Youth Court.

The conditions handed down by a Youth Judge are intended to assist the youth in staying out of trouble, while still holding them accountable for their unlawful behaviour. Some examples of probation conditions are: abiding by a curfew; attending school; looking for a job; having no contact with certain people; residing in a particular place; and attending counselling or treatment for identified

problems. The youth is required to report to an assigned probation officer. The youth can also be assigned to a community youth worker to help them to abide by the conditions of their probation Order.

A variety of social service professionals become involved in a child's life when they are under the care of the MCFD. Unfortunately, a child may live in numerous foster care placements, attend multiple schools, be assigned to several different social workers consecutively, and have brief or long-term encounters with counsellors and youth workers. This inconsistent relationship within the world of social service generally occurs while the youth deals with their own personal challenges. At times, the instability of these children's lives is overwhelming and disheartening; the consistency of their interactions on the street, and the security that stems from this dependability, is another reason why they are drawn there. The complexities of the legal and social services systems are far larger than can be touched on here, but hopefully this brief overview gives the reader an idea of the situations and circumstances that have occurred in the lives of the female youth in this study.

## 5: FINDINGS

### 5.1 Space defined

Since the definition and understanding of public space varies with the individual, I first wanted to see what definitions the youth would offer. To this extent, I also asked them to provide examples. I discovered that none of them had a full understanding of public space and that there was a remarkable degree of consistency in their responses

A private space is like your home and a public space is like anywhere that is open to the public... like a coffee shop or a park.  
(Donna, age 19)

A public space is anything that is not privately owned ...like a mall, the street, or a bus.  
(Betty, age 22)

A public space is somewhere that you can't do whatever you want cause there are public rules...in a private space like your home you can do whatever you want.  
(Anna, age 22)

Anywhere that is like open to everyone like it's not your own or it's not anyone else's. Like a street corner cause no ones owns a street corner, or a sidewalk, or a park cause no ones owns that. It's different than my [apartment] building, you know? Anywhere that is open, really.  
(Eileen, age 19)

Outside on the road, in a park, somewhere that isn't someone's home or business.  
(Holly, age 19)

Anywhere outdoors where people go.  
(Ivy, age 17)

For these girls, definitions of public space varied. They seem to understand public space as something that is not owned, or does not belong to someone specifically, but many of their examples were of privately owned locations. Although these locations might be accessible to the public, they have rules and regulations associated with them. These rules are socially defined and, more often than not, youth are not included in having access to the space. Nevertheless, many of the actual places they described as public are in fact privately owned, such as coffee shops, malls. Since it is unclear to them as to what qualifies as a public space, this could explain why they engage in a variety of activities while in the public realm

## **5.2 Living Situation**

The majority of the spaces frequented by the teenage girls in my study would be considered public, but the reasons for occupying them varied widely based on their current living situation and age. In the interviews, the older girls reflected on where and why they spent time in certain places when they were younger and noted that the locations they most commonly frequented had changed as they aged. Often, these changes coincided with the acquirement of jobs. Employment gave them the financial means to engage in different types of activities. And hence, allowed them to hang out in public places dependent on monetary status.

Where the youths have lived, and their current living situations, has much to do with where, when, and how often they spend time occupying public spaces.

The youth under 18 years old who were living on their own told me that they often went out because they felt lonely and wanted to be around people.

Conversely, those over 19 years old, spent less time in the public realm because they already had personal space in the form of their apartments that they could occupy.

You can't stay home forever. You have to go out sometime. To socialize, seek attention and company. Sometimes it is more comfortable [to be out]  
(Anna, age 22)

I don't hang out at my house [she is on a youth agreement] I just go there to sleep and stuff but rather be out to hang out with my friends.  
(Carla, age 16)

The girls that live with their biological families - but do not have a positive relationship with them - spend more time in public places than those who are happy with their home environment.

Some kids would choose jail over going home. And for some, jail is home. At least you get three meals a day.  
(Betty, age 22)

She [mom] had a general idea [of where I was] but I didn't report to her and she never asked where I was going so I don't tell.  
(Donna, age 19)

[When I was younger] My parents didn't really approve of the people that I was hanging out with so we never hung out there [at my home].  
(Betty, age 22)

### **5.3 Acceptance and belonging**

Given the similar backgrounds and life challenges experienced by the youth, it is not surprising that they have grown up frequenting the same locations.

The corner of Commercial Drive and Broadway in Vancouver was an area that everyone mentioned in their interviews, and all their reasons for being there have similarities.

When I moved here... my stepsister hung out at Broadway and Commercial like everyday. And I didn't know anyone so she introduced me to everyone. But those kids got me into the wrong choices... they were a rough crowd. But they made me feel welcomed.

(Carla, age 16)

Broadway Station is huge and it's still huge [a very popular and common place for young people to hang out at]. And I don't understand it, at all. But no one had cell phones or couldn't afford cell phones so it would just like be a meeting spot. Like everyone just knew to meet there. And if they weren't there they would all be at the park [Pandora Park]

(Betty, age 22)

When I used to get in trouble, I would hang out at Broadway Station. For a year and half but then it became my red zone [based on her probation order conditions she is not allowed to be at that location at any time]. It is boring there now. People I knew there and met new people. But now I hang out mostly at friends houses or the new community centre. I tell them that it is still my red zone so they don't bug me about hanging out there.

(Gail, age 16)

That's where my friends and family hung out. You can meet people. A place where you know everybody and you know that people will be there most all of the time. If you are looking for someone you know they will show up. If you want to borrow money you can do that.

(Anna, age 22)

All the girls talked about Commercial and Broadway as being a meeting place. It is somewhere that offered a consistent and secure environment. They knew who was going to be there, and what was going to happen. The youth that occupy this space have created a community where social interactions occur and information can be shared. It is a place where they feel accepted, and it gives

them a sense of belonging when they have no where else to go. From my understanding, it has been this way for many years.



**Figure 1 North East corner of Commercial Drive and Broadway Avenue (photo: Hala Nugent)**

Until recently, Anna (age, 22) routinely frequented the area around Commercial and Broadway and it has been part of her social life for many years. She talked about finding support from her friends there, and the sharing of resources that would occur. For example, if she needed to borrow money or go to the food bank with someone, there would always be someone to help her. All of them talked about the consistency of the environment. If they did not have a phone, or their friends did not have phones, it was a mutual meeting place. They knew that eventually the people who they wanted to see would show up there. When they had no money it was a good place to just hang out.

Other locations around the city had similar meanings of acceptance and belonging in the eyes of the youth:

I hang out at the art gallery and we don't even know each other's last names where we live or anything like that. But when I go there I know I am going to see people I know and I am the youngest of the group so they all treat me like a little sister.

(Janet, age 15)

Maybe I wouldn't normally hang out with those kinds of people but if things were rough at home I'd go out and all I'd have to say is, "I can't be at home" and everyone knew and would just let me hang out.

(Donna, age 19)

## 5.4 Daily routine

Public spaces that serve the social and emotional needs of the girls in this study, like the corner of Commercial and Broadway, are in no way stagnant; they have changed for the youth over the years. In the specific case of Commercial Drive and Broadway, it was a place many of the girls enjoyed when they were younger, but as they grew older their hobbies and interests changed, to the extent that they no longer satisfied their life needs. Often their use of the corner was dependent on their home lives. Carla (age, 16) told me that she would spend time on the corner because she had nowhere else to go. When she was granted the Youth Agreement order, and acquired her own apartment while settling into an alternative school program, she stopped spending time there. Now, she lives in Burnaby, is involved in school sports, and has new friends. While she felt that she had outgrown that particular location, she also noted that she appreciated that there was a place for her to go where she felt welcomed and accepted by her peers when she first moved to the city.

Gail (age, 17) said she does not spend time on the corner of Commercial and Broadway anymore because it is, "boring and all you do is stand there all day." According to her, the novelty of the space just wore off, but I suspect there are additional factors at play. She told me that she has recently started working-

out at the new Mount Pleasant Community Centre, because her youth worker gave her a year long free pass. From three to six pm everyday there is drop-in basketball for youth that she enjoys. Although she did not specifically mention that her spending time at the community centre corresponded with her spending less time at Commercial and Broadway, it seems a plausible conclusion.

Betty (age, 22) told me a similar story; she stopped frequenting the area around Broadway Station when she went back to school. She had dropped out of school for a year when she was struggling with her parents and life at home. She did well in school but having a home life that was not supportive of her made it difficult to maintain a regular daily schedule. She told me that many times she would come home to find herself locked out of the house. At 17, after being charged with a criminal offence and subsequent involvement by the MCFD she was placed in a foster home. It was then that she went back to school and completed her grade 12 year. After graduation, she moved out on her own and has been working ever since.

Further evidence, to support the idea that youth engaged in the community are less likely to be drawn to the streets, can be found in the case of Fiona (age, 18) Currently, she is in a substance treatment day program. Evidently, she has been finding it difficult to stay in the program, leaving her days wide open. She says she hangs out at Commercial and Broadway until she can meet up with friends when they are finished school. Because she feels she has nothing else to do, spending time at Commercial and Broadway becomes the only part of her daily routine.

## 5.5 Safety

Pandora Park in East Vancouver is another notable place that is frequented by the girls in my study. In contrast to the corner of Commercial and Broadway, however, Pandora Park is associated with being unsafe and “dirty.”

The photos of Pandora Park are quite different from the dark and dirty images that the girls conjured of the area. On the sunny day that the photo was taken, there were children playing, and people sitting on benches reading. The park appeared well-kept and clean which is a clear contradiction of how the girls thought about the park. The girls mainly frequented the park after dark, which would explain their different perception. Fiona (age, 18) talked about not hanging out there anymore because she had a violent interaction with a female peer. Betty's (age, 22) major police interactions occurred in that park. Perhaps it was not the physical state of the park that made them perceive it as dirty and unsafe but the emotional incidences that occurred there. Since Commercial and Broadway is highly populated with people and traffic, the girls did not express the same concerns about their personal safety. Safety was a topic that came up frequently in the interviews. The girls often talked about avoiding certain areas because they had felt unsafe or uncomfortable.



**Figure 2 Pandora Park East Vancouver (photo: Hala Nugent)**

Physical conflict was mentioned as an event that routinely occurred during interactions in public places. Holly (age, 19) and Ivy (age, 17) explained that often physical fights occurred amongst their friends when there was alcohol involved. Mostly, it was guys fighting with each other to impress the girls, but girls also fought for a variety of reasons. Their personal safety around this issue was taken into consideration when deciding where to spend their time. All of the girls in this study mentioned that they do not go to secluded places alone when they know it to be a rough area. When I asked them what was meant by a,

“rough area,” they elaborated by saying it had to do with the number of homeless people and older men in the parks, but also had to do with whether they knew other girls would be there that wanted to, “beat them up “(Fiona, age 18).

## 5.6 Transportation

When the youth were talking about the corner of Commercial and Broadway, they all referred to it as, “Broadway Station.” That they all defined it this way led me to believe that transportation, mostly in terms of accessibility, was an important factor in where they spend their time. This was not the case. When asked about the need, or the importance of, public transportation in decisions about public space their responses were generally indifferent.

Mostly, it was just walking. Transportation wasn't a priority. But most of my friends lived close and then we would just walk places.  
(Betty, age 22).

I just go wherever I want I don't care about the bus or Skytrain. But then again, I don't go to Surrey. I don't like Surrey.  
(Fiona, age18).

I don't really think about it but I guess the bus and Skytrain can get you anywhere.  
(Janet, age 15).

I usually stop there [Commercial and Broadway] when I am on [the bus] going somewhere else to say hi to people.  
(Anna, age 22).

Although public transportation is something they all use, it does not appear to be a major factor in what public spaces they choose to frequent. I got the impression that if they need to get somewhere, they find a way through whatever

means is necessary such as walking, catching a ride from someone with a car, or using public transit.

## **5.7 Proximity and Location**

The proximity of the youths' homes to the public spaces they occupied was an important factor in how much time they spent there, especially for the younger teens and the girls from areas outside of Vancouver. Many of them mentioned spending time in the evenings at their schools, neighbourhood parks, or even back alleys. Hanging out close to home was convenient when the youth have friends that live in the same neighbourhood or attend the same school. However, those girls that do not attend a regular school program often have to search for social networks in alternative, and generally more public, locations. This might explain why the corner of Commercial and Broadway has become a hang out for youth not involved in regular social activities.

## **5.8 Supervision and Surveillance**

Another commonality shared by the girls in my study was that they used different public spaces for different kinds of activities. The corner of Commercial and Broadway was used to socialize or organize with others for social events, but they chose secluded locations when they wanted to be out of view from the public. They disclosed that they engaged in illegal activities, such as drinking, or doing drugs, or fighting in such places.

Usually just kind of where everyone can meet in the middle usually is the most convenient place. I found that like when I was younger it was always elementary schools because it was like a covered area, everyone generally knew where it is cause it is a big landmark, and usually there's lights outside, and playground cause you're always drunk and you can play on the playground...nobody else around, no adults, kind of a little bit away from everything.  
(Holly, age 19).

It [park] was close by first of all, but at the same time it felt private, there wasn't a lot of people in the park and there were areas in the park where my boyfriend and I could go and be alone. For free.  
(Donna, age 19)

Public parks... to be honest, I liked ones that were covered so I could like do the bad things. Where you can only see what is going on if you walk through there not if you drive by. There can be houses and stuff like that but as long as no one drives by they can't see what you are doing.  
(Eileen, age 19)

Every youth in my study talked about using public parks when they wanted to escape the eyes of the community, particularly those of adults in authority. This pattern of behaviour is exactly what Jacobs (1961) talked about in the 1960s, with her description of the hidden enclaves designed to keep children safe. Generally, when youth frequented such locations, they were engaged in two types of activities. Sometimes they used the privacy of a park to get away from home or school. This type of use occurred during both the day and the evening. As adolescents do not always have access to their own private space, it makes sense they would seek locations of solitude in the public realm. That said, my interviews revealed that the girls were rarely completely alone. Generally, they would spend times in groups or with a single friend.

'Partying' is the other activity that these female youth engage in while using public parks. They all admitted to seeking out the privacy of the parks when they wanted to engage in illegal or risky activities. Granted, there is nothing new about rebellious teenagers finding places away from adults and police to socialize with their friends. Traditionally, in rural and suburban areas, teens would retreat into the woods to have what was referred to as, "bush parties." In an urban centre, where public parks are the closest thing to woods, teens could be said to have, "urban bush parties."

All of the girls talked about involvement with the police. At some time in their lives, they all interacted with police in public places. What differed, was how they talked about this police involvement. Holly (age, 19) and Ivy (age, 17) had differing opinions about what to do when the cops came to where they were spending time. Ivy told me if you just talk to them they will be nice to you. Holly told me she always runs away from them regardless of whether she is doing anything illegal or not.

Seven out of the ten study participants either currently had a probation order or had had a probation order in the past. A probation order, ruled by a Judge in Juvenile Court, can include a No-Go or Red Zone area. These are areas in which the youth are not allowed to go to, usually because that is where they had committed a crime. If the police catch them in those areas, they can be charged with breaching the order of their probation. This has a number of negative consequences. The corner of Commercial and Broadway is, or was, a No-Go area for four of my participants. Although a small example, it shows that

the authorities are aware of areas in the public realm where youth congregate. Pandora Park is another common No-Go area for youth.

Enforced No- Go or Red Zone areas are shaping where youth spend time in the city. The Red Zone locations are intended to keep youth off the street, but since the authorities do not provide them with alternative space, youth just find other public places to frequent. Eventually, the police discover the new youth hang outs and make those the new No-Go areas. Constantly moving, or pushing, youth around the city without providing resources or support is not going to solve the problems associate with youth frequenting public places.

## **5.9 Law Authority**

The relationship that the female youth had with Vancouver police officers, and by extensions the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) as a whole, offers a fascinating insight into the complexities of law enforcement as it pertains to youth.

The cops were always nice to me at Broadway Station. Even when it was my red zone they [police] were okay. One time, they saw me there and said we're just going to ask you to leave. One time they drove me home. Not all police are as understanding but for me it shows that there is a kind of relationship that is taking place.  
(Gail, age 16)

On a regular basis [I would see the cops]. Like the Youth Squad knew and would try to be find people that were breaching their probation or bail and arrest them. The thrill of the chase? I Knew I shouldn't be there but did it anyway and would ran away when the cops came.

I liked them [cops]. Kind of like family. I wouldn't know them now to recognize them but back then we knew the car numbers, knew the social worker and the probation officer. Half of us would be involved with them.

They knew you by first name you knew them by first name. They would give people breaks. Like one time, it was like late, and it was past my curfew and the cop was like have we given you a break yet? We'll just drive you home and I said, honestly, if you bring me home I'll just leave again. My dad and I were fighting. Just take me to jail I would rather sleep there tonight.  
(Betty, age 22).

## 5.10 Place design

I was interested to learn where the girls would spend time if they had a chance to design the space in question. Curiously, many of the youth talked idealistically about places with activities resembling those currently provided by community centres.

A pool, a pool table, a big screen TV, a place to lounge in, big couch, a gym, just a place to chill with my friends.  
(Gail, age 17),

A play structure, a gym, a lounge room. So you can do whatever you want. If you want to be active then you can or if you want to chill and be lazy then you can.  
(Eileen, age 19)

They seemed to want a place to socialize that also offered recreational activities, but very few hung out in community centres because they did not feel like they belonged or accepted there because of their behaviours.

A place to go somewhere after they are 'burnt out' [tired from smoking marijuana]. A place to go where you won't get kicked out for being 'high'. Too many places they don't let us hang out when we are high but it should be about the safety of us kids not always kicking us out.  
(Eileen, age 19)

Youth centres where you can watch TV and there are youth workers there. I hung out there [community centres] when I was younger like in middle school not in high school. I felt that there were welcoming but I feel that there is a bad stigma attached to going to a rec centre because I find that

a lot of children or youth with challenges are usually going there and a child without challenges wouldn't have the motivation to go to a place like that there so there is a stigma attached.

(Holly, age 19)

Mostly like, at that point in my life we were all involved in like illegal like stuff we shouldn't be doing like we all smoked, drank, did drugs. So we're not going to go to a community centre to a place like where there are adults when we are hammered [inebriated from alcohol consumption] or like, on e [Ecstasy. An entactogenic drug and an illegal substance].

Mostly authority that we had a problem with but you can't have an organized place for youth without adults there.

(Betty, age 22)

## 6: DISCUSSION

The focus of this paper is how a specific group of female youth uses public space. When thinking about studying this population of youth and their activities in public space it seemed generally straightforward: ask them what public places they hang out in, what they do in those places, and why. However, what I discovered is that these youth did not have a clear concept of what public space is. Many quasi- public environments such as, malls, transport facilities, and community centres are open to anyone. But when youth are behaving inappropriately in these places these same spaces are then considered to be private and the youth's access to them becomes limited (Collins & Kearns, 2001). This explains why the girls' definitions and understanding of public space was unclear. They all understood that a private space is something that is owned by someone. However, their definitions of public places included spaces that are privately owned. If their access to and acceptance in public places is dependent on their behaviour, this explains why their definitions were blurred.

Anna's (age, 22) definition of public space indicated that she understood that there are certain rules that should be followed in the public realm but since the actual public places are unclear, it can be argued that those public rules are also unclear. Since most youth do not have access to their own private places and therefore use the public environment to assert their rights of freedom and expression should they be penalized for their illegal behaviours in these places?

If this is to be the case, then the lines between public and private, and acceptable and unacceptable, should be more concrete.

Sahlin (1991) claims that when youth are idle and have no focus, boredom can lead to inappropriate behaviours and poor choices. His claims were right for the youth in this study. All the girls talked about hanging out in public places when they had nothing else to do. They searched out social interactions from the street because that is the only place where they could get them. However, for these girls their idleness was not always by choice. Because of their personal circumstances of being involved with the MCFD their reality is that they are reliant on external people to provide basic needs. For example, Carla (age, 16) and Betty (age, 22) were both waiting for resident placements with the MCFD in either foster care or group homes. Once there was stability in their lives, they were able to make better choices about where they spend their time and with whom.

For some of the girls, their idleness is due to their inability to participate in any programs that would create stability. As mentioned above, through the MCFD youth are given opportunities and provided with services to assist them in their lives. If the youth are unable to, or choose not to, take advantage of these opportunities then they will become idle. Fiona (age 18) is a perfect example of this. Because of her current struggle with substance abuse she is unable to attend mainstream programs, such as school, nor is she ready to undertake her treatment program. The only consistency she currently has is her time hanging out in public places. Because of her circumstances, she does not have access to

anywhere else. She is not in a financial situation where she can spend time in malls or restaurants and her home situation is not one that is supportive of her choices and therefore she cannot spend her days there.

Ultimately, Fiona (age, 18) uses the street interactions in a way that 'normal' youth would use school, home, extracurricular activities, or part-time jobs for their social interactions. Malone (2002) believes that the street allows youth to construct their self-identities. The street provides a stage to try out different styles, behaviours, and attitudes. Usually, this is in conjunction with the other places in youths' lives but for the population of girls in this study, the street may be the only place and opportunity to form their self- identities and to give them a sense of belonging and community.

The community that the youth has created to support each other is actually quite remarkable. Also, there is a level of acceptance and belonging that the girls talked about that they get from their interactions with their peers. Many of the girls talked about finding comforts with their peers in public places when they moved to the city, when things were rough at home, and during transitions in their personal lives. Anna (age, 22) talked about going through phases of hanging out at Commercial and Broadway from the ages of 15- 22. There is comfort and consistency that she knows she can find from her peers in that public space and she uses it to her benefit.

Some people may say that exploring and forming self- identities from only street interactions could be problematic. There is the notion that the streets are filled with evil and children need to be protected. And it could be said that some

of the activities and behaviours of the female youth in this study contribute to the negative image of the street being an unsafe place to be. Despite this, maybe it is the case that youth need to be protected more.

Personal safety was a factor in deciding where and when to hang out. The concept of safety was relative to the individual situations of the female participants. The girls talked about their own personal safety in two ways. The first was safety from dangerous looking older men and generally unsafe street environments. For example, they mentioned not walking alone late at night through dark and secluded locations or being aware of areas that are known to be dangerous. The second was safety from violence from their female peers. In both situations, there was a calculated effort to avoid places where violence can occur and where their personal safety was at risk.

Sahlin (1991) states that children need to be supervised by adults to keep them from getting into trouble and to keep them accountable for their behaviour. On some level, children and youth want to be supervised by adults. Knowing that someone cares about you makes a person more accountable for his or her behaviour and fosters self-worth. This corresponds to Jacobs' (1961) belief that when children know the people in their daily public environment they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness. If the parents in the lives of these girls are not providing suitable or sufficient supervision, then it is the adults that the girls interact with in public places that provide supervision for them. This would explain why the girls talked about forming relationships with police officers. The role that the police officers play in their lives is parental in nature.

This goes back to the question posed by Collins and Kearns (2001) about who is responsible for youth. If parents cannot, or do not, take responsibility for their children does the law have authority to take over? This fundamental question can be argued exhaustively. Nevertheless, in the lives of these girls, I believe that the supervision has been good for them. Betty, now 22 years old and in a better place in her life, said that today she probably would not recognize any of the police, probation officers, or social workers from the Youth Squad police car. However, when she was 18 years old she and the police knew each other by first name, they knew her favourite hangouts, and she knew that they would drive her home and look out for her.

Though their need for social and emotional stimulation was behind much of their public space use, sometimes their motivations were less than altruistic. Sometimes they just wanted to get high. During the course of our interviews, the girls mentioned several different activities – drug use, petty crime, and physical conflict – that they routinely took part in public settings. These sorts of behaviours often determined what public space they chose to occupy; when they wanted to be hidden from the larger society they frequented dark secluded parks, alleys, or parking lots. For my paper, the before mentioned activities fall under the category of anti-social behaviour.

According to a youth probation officer who I interviewed, who worked for 3 years with the Police Youth Squad in Yankee 10 (the Police Youth Squad car. Formally Car 278) their goal is to protect youth by keeping them off the street, and preventing conditions that would encourage anti-social behaviours. There

are two main ways in which a youth can have a No-Go area assigned to them. The first pertains to literal factors: A No-Go condition will be applied to whatever area the youth has committed a crime in. According to the probation officer, it is never black and white. There are many factors involved in assigning the No-Go areas. Both the safety of the charged youth and the larger society is taken into consideration - especially if there is a victim involved. If a youth assaults a peer at their school, the high school will become a No-Go area to protect the victim. The youth can still attend classes on the condition that they immediately leave the school grounds at the end of the day. This is to prevent further negative interactions between the victim and perpetrator. Another factor that determines a No-Go area for a youth is if they breach their probation conditions in a public place. For example, if a youth is found intoxicated in a public park, that park will be added to the probation order as a No-Go.

Police officers often have the most direct contact with the youth on the street; they are the ones who will investigate, arrest, and charge the young person. It is then the probation officer, after consultation with the police officer, who will express to the Youth Court Judge the reasons why conditions should be applied to the youth. There are predetermined rules to these conditions. For example, a 14-year-old youth's curfew is generally nine pm on weekdays and ten pm on weekends. Barring against extenuating circumstances, this will remain constant for 14 year olds. The probation officers recommendations are highly influential in the Judge's decision. Youth Court Judges respect the fact the police and probation officers are working front line with the youth. Having the

knowledge and experience to make fair suggestions, their opinions often guide court rulings.

The overall intention for No-Go areas is not to stop anti-social behaviour - although that would be ideal - but to try and keep the youth from congregating in one area. In theory, this will make the streets safer for everyone. The No-Go orders are intended to encourage youth to spend time in places that will encourage pro-social behaviours. As one might predict, this is rarely what occurs. Instead, a youth with a particular No-Go zone will generally just move to another area to do the same anti-social activities. It is a temporary solution for a long-term problem. One might ask: If the police are just moving youth from one public space to another, how does that solve the problem of at-risk youth engaging in illegal behaviour? The answer is that it does not; a fact that Law Enforcement are well aware of.

From the perspective of the Youth Probation Officer, the main goal is to disperse the youth who engage in anti-social behaviour so that they do not congregate together in one area. Of course he has concern for well-being of the youth he interacts with, and he understands the importance of building rapport and trust with the young people. He also feels that more can be done to help young people with criminal offences, and he understands that the behaviours he sees are indicative of much deeper social problems, but from the standpoint of the law, the youth who engage in illegal acts should be charged. It is the safety of society as a whole that must be addressed first.

I discovered that the concrete and tangible features of public space were not as central for the girls when deciding where to hang out as I would have expected. Although proximity, place design, and transportation were all components that the youth touched on in the interviews, it was the subjective uses of public places that were prominent. The concrete components did not seem as essential as the subjective uses of public place. Spaces were being used to fulfil needs that the youth were not otherwise filling. It was the social interactions, the consistency, belonging, acceptance by a peer group, freedom to explore and form their self- identities (through dress, language, even drug use), and adult supervision from police and passers-by that they were seeking because they were not getting it in a conventional way.

From the ten categories that emerged from the interviews there were three major themes that answer the questions of how, why and where these female youth are using public space. Why they hang out in public space is shaped by their living situation: they cannot be at home or they do not want to be at home. Why they hang out in public space is also shaped by whether they have a daily routine and by their need for acceptance and belonging to their peers and to the community.

Where they hang out in public spaces is shaped by legal supervision, in the form of No- Gos and probation ordered curfews. Proximity to their homes and their neighbourhoods, hidden from the watchful eyes of adults through supervision and surveillance, personal safety, and transportation all shape where they hang out in public spaces. How they hang out in public spaces is shaped by

the physical space design and their personal definitions of public space, specifically the understanding that there are certain expectations of behaviour in the public realm.

All findings were very telling of how the female youth use public space but it is evident that some categories are more significant than others are. I started out to learn how the girls use public space and I discovered that the actual physical places did not matter as much to the youth as the social interactions and sense of belonging that occurred while frequenting public spaces. The literature, and my research, has demonstrated that there are both positives and negatives for these girls' use of public space. I believe that because of the at-risk and vulnerable positions that these girls are in, or have been in, it would be best for them to be supervised at home. The reality is that this is not always possible and therefore spending time in public spaces at any time of the day when there are people for them to interact with is necessary for their social and emotional development.

I feel it is important to acknowledge the creativity and resourcefulness that these female youth possess. What they have created is actually quite amazing. I think it is fair to say that these girls have been dealt a raw deal with their family and personal situations, yet they have found ways to fulfil their emotional and developmental needs. The urban environment has made this possible for them.

## **7: RECOMMENDATIONS**

Within the female youth participants in this study, I feel there are two groups that emerged. Half of the girls I would consider to be currently involved in at-risk behaviours. They are using drugs, on probation, not attending school or other day programs, and their home life is unstable. The other half are currently not facing the same challenges.

Betty (age 22) stated that she would rather go to jail for breaching her probation curfew than go home. This is quite powerful and telling. Court ordered curfews are intended to keep youth off the streets, to stay away from trouble and to keep youth safe. There is an assumption being made that home is a safe place to be. Valentine (1996) suggests that moving kids off the street to keep them away from harm and trouble is ignoring the fact that domestic violence and neglect occurs in the home. To imply that home is a 'sanctuary' from the evils of the street is an ignorant and uninformed belief. For Betty to choose jail over home suggests that her home was not a sanctuary at all. And I feel it is safe to say that these circumstances are not unique to her.

If the goal of court ordered curfews is to keep youth off the streets, away from harm and trouble, but home is not the best environment, there should be somewhere else the youth can go. The working hours of PLEA youth workers are until 8 pm. The idea is to keep the youth occupied in recreational activities with a responsible adult and out of trouble. Some curfews are as early as 8 pm but

most are later in the evening and this leaves a window of time where the youth remain in public places where there is always the possibility of engaging in anti-social behaviours. Also, as noted by a few of the girls, they often did not obey their curfew time or would just leave home after checking in.

If there was somewhere the youth could go after their curfew that was safe and supervised this would keep them off the streets, out of trouble and away from harm. Currently, there is a youth drop-in program in Vancouver that is open all night. It is called Directions Youth Services (formerly Dusk till Dawn) run by Family Services of Greater Vancouver, and it provides services, such as showers, laundry, counselling services, and information and referrals to youth in need (Red Book, 2010). This is a great service and program, but is directed at supporting street entrenched and homeless youth. As the adolescent girls in this study all have homes, they expressed that since they did not need to access the types of services Directions offers they would not hang out there.

A program that was open from 8 pm- 1 am where youth on probation could go to after curfew would keep them off the streets. The youth would have to have approval from their probation officer to participate in the program. They would have to abide by the program rules and respect the staff and other youth to remain part of the program. A key factor in making this program work would be transporting the youth to the program facility and to their homes in the late evening.

This could be a place to socialize with friends, play pool, or watch TV, and they would have access to adult staff for counselling and information, if need be.

Many of them talked about wanting the amenities of a community centre but very few of them go to community centres because they did not feel that they belonged. This program would focus on their needs while keeping them off the streets and out of trouble. Of course, there are many logistics to work out and there is the question of funding. Also, an after hours program would not improve the home lives of these youth but it would give them somewhere to go other than the streets and they would not be breaching their probation orders.

It would be great to include the girls in a round table discussion about the physical environment of the public spaces they hung out in. As noted above, when I asked the girls about the physical attributes about the places they occupied they had a difficult time identifying aspects. They had never thought about it and no one has ever asked them. This is not surprising, as Freeman and Riordan (2002) point out, planners generally plan for the needs of adults not youth. However, I feel that they would be a wealth of information and experts on what makes a place a good place or bad place for youth to hang out in. Since this group of girls do not use public spaces anymore for their main source of personal socialization they can reflect back in way that can be objective. This first hand experience and information could be very useful to city planners. From my experience, the female youth that I spoke with were all very happy to talk about their experiences and the self- confidence that they gained from feeling like their opinions matter was invaluable.

For city planners, the information gathered about the two locations mentioned by the girls is valuable. If the goal is to create safe places for youth to

hang out in it should be noted that they look for places that are within the city, with covered areas, lights, and generally something for them to sit on. Normally, spaces are not created with the needs of youth in mind except in Hampshire, England where the planning for youth has been quite successful.

The driving force behind creating spaces specifically for youth was from the Hampshire Police Authority (Worpole, 2003). 'Youth shelters' have been erected in public parks, in residential areas, and other locations of key meeting points of youth. The 'youth shelters' are small, simple, round seating areas with a covered roof but open on all sides. As youth are congregating in public areas already, Hampshire decided to provide them with a dry, lit, space to occupy. The police know where the shelters are and have a good view of who is using them. If these shelters are in a location desirable by the youth they will be used. However, it is important to keep mind that what works on one street corner may not work on another. Worpole (2003) discovered if youth are included in the planning of the shelters they are more likely to use them.

The idea of making the streets safer for youth is not universally popular with adults (Worpole, 2003). In Vancouver neighbourhoods, the same kind of resistance to youth shelters could occur but this type of planning is something that Vancouver city planners could draw from.

In East Vancouver, there is an example of planning with the needs of youth in mind. There is an old highway tunnel that is no longer used and has not been active for many years. It is a covered area that is out of the way of businesses and at the far end of a residential street offset from any houses. The

area is frequented by skateboarders and graffiti artists. Ten years ago when I first learned of the place, the space itself was dark and dingy. The skateboarders had brought a homemade plywood skateboard ramp that would be considered unsafe by most. The next time I saw the spot, many years later, proper, permanent skateboard ramps had been installed and the overhead lights had been activated.

In response to the youth's occupation of this space the city could have shut the area up and blocked it off for any further use but instead the space was made safer. By acknowledging that the youth were using the space and then planning for their needs demonstrates to the youth that they are members of society. This positive response of planning for the needs of youth can be used as a model for future planning.

As mentioned, outdoor spaces are rarely planned for youth. For younger children, playgrounds are aimed directly at their physical developmental needs. As demonstrated in the research, the girls are seeking social interactions from the public realm to fulfil their emotional developmental needs. The city could do something to make youth feel like they are a recognized group of citizens and make them feel like they are an equal part of the community. For example, on public transportation there are reserved seats for the elderly, people with disabilities, or mothers with strollers and these seats are at the front of the bus. Generally, teenagers sit at the back of the bus. Why not make the seats at the back of the bus reserved for teenagers?

My research discovered that the girls would use public places as a general meeting place with peers. As Betty (age 22) pointed out, if she or her friends did not have phones they would know to go to a certain place, mainly Commercial and Broadway, to find each other. They would meet there but then make plans to go somewhere else. The city could mount a large blackboard or some type of bulletin board for the girls to post notes for each other. This would serve different needs. It would be an outdoor design for youth and specifically for this vulnerable population's needs. It would address the concerns of the business owners and the police. By leaving a note for their friend, they would not have to spend so much time lingering in the area. These are small and simple changes but would send a strong and positive message to the youth population.

## **8: FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study focuses on female youth's use of public space. Conducting this study with male youth from the same kind of marginalized backgrounds would be an obvious benefit to gain a deeper understanding of gender differences and similarities of youth's use of public space. A longitudinal study of youth's use of public space would also give a broader picture. I discovered that age did make a difference when it came to where youth spend time. For the girls in this study, as they got older they acquired jobs which kept them off the streets but also provided them with the financial means to engage in different activities. A longitudinal study would also reveal how youth's use of public space change with the stability of their living situations, daily schedules, and probation orders.

The participants in this study were of varying ethnicities, although ethnicity was not a factor in this study focusing on specific race groups could reveal essential information about use of public space, as well. Since the role of probation orders with conditions of curfews and No-Go areas played a large role in shaping how the youth use public space further studies on the effectiveness of the Youth Criminal Justice System's use of curfews on youth staying off the streets would be worthy of note. All of these additional studies would give a more comprehensive look at how this target population of youth use and understand public space.

## **9: CONCLUSION**

This paper examines how a group of marginalized female youth use public space. As such, the analysis has shed light on a unique group of young women and the different developmental, social, and emotional needs that are filled when occupying public spaces. The theoretical debate about whether the public realm is a positive or negative place for children and youth will no doubt remain but it was discovered that these girls used the public realm for their own personal developmental needs. As they experienced inconsistency in their daily lives they were able to find the social supports and networks from their interactions in public places. As the stability in their lives changed, so did their level of use of public space. Their choice of location was shaped by proximity, adult authority in the form of legal curfews and No-Go areas, safety, and acceptance and belonging. It was also discovered that as the girls aged, their priorities shifted and so did their attitudes and use of public space. Physical planning and program planning that address the needs of this population of youth would help protect this vulnerable population and help guide them to be productive citizens.

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