



## Fraser, Ltd. Transitional Youth Services

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Stepping Stones Resource Center  
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## *Introduction*

Fraser, Ltd. by charter is the longest serving non-profit organization in North Dakota. Established as the Florence Crittenton Home in 1893, Fraser, Ltd. continues to meet the needs of children, adolescents and adults. Services and resources offered at Fraser, Ltd. have grown significantly since its inception to include Independent Living Supports, Residential Services, and Day Support Services for people with disabilities; Childcare Services for children who are typically developing and children with special needs; and skills training and basic needs resources for transition age youth (ages 16-26).

Established in September 2009, Stepping Stones Resource Center (SSRC) functions as a safe environment where young people can receive food, hygiene products, and clothing; find healthy and safe ways to spend time off the streets through recreational, social, leisure, and artistic outlets; and utilize desktop computers to search jobs, prepare resumes, take skill training courses, work on homework, etc. SSRC offers therapeutic case management services providing participants with the opportunity to discuss issues that hamper the health and positive outlook he/she experiences while providing a chance to set goals and work towards desired outcomes with a licensed practitioner. In addition to licensed practitioner intervention, SSRC provides supportive peer mentors who assist with locating a GED testing center, college entrance, positive peer interaction, resume development, and other basic independent living skills.

During August 2010 through October 2010, SSRC collected data regarding demographics, resource acquisition, and personal experiences of center participants. Using a convenience sampling process, center participants were approached by center staff and asked to complete a survey. Surveys were constructed using an informed consent introduction section that included required content as promoted by University Institutional Review Boards including a researcher contact name and information, the purpose of collecting the data, voluntary participation, the absence of obligation on behalf of the participant, time required to complete the survey, parameters of confidentiality, and what will happen to surveys after being entered into the database. Based on reports from center staff, none of the participants approached to participate declined to do so. The sample included a total  $n=70$ . The instrument was made up of 28 check-box events and participants were instructed to check all that they had experienced within the last 30 days of taking the survey. These data produced a frequency distribution that highlights the events that center participant's experience.

The project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What resources are center participants acquiring that assist them in meeting basic needs?
2. What traumatic events have center participants experienced in the last 30 days?

*Demographic*

Mean age:	19.9	
Female:	38	(54%)
Male:	32	(46%)
White:	36	(51%)
Native American:	22	(31%)
Hispanic:	5	(7%)
African American:	4	(6%)
Multi-race:	3	(5%)

*Raw Data*

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
I have earned money from a employer legally	24	34.3%
I have earned money from an employer illegally	10	14.2%
I have received money from friends or family members	47	67.1%
I have received food stamps	35	50%
I have received a social security payment	2	2.9%
I have received a disability payment	3	4.3%
I have sold illicit or prescription drugs	6	8.6%
I have sold / pawned my own possessions	35	50%
I have sold / pawned other peoples possessions	11	15.7%
I have sold / pawned stolen possessions	7	10%
I have stolen from my friends or family	6	8.6%
I have stolen from strangers	16	22.9%
I have stolen from a retail store	11	15.7%
I have traded sexual favors for money	3	4.3%
I have traded sexual favors for food	1	1.4%
I have traded sexual favors for a place to stay	3	4.3%
I have been physically assaulted	20	28.6%
I have been sexually assaulted	10	14.2%
I have been in a physical fight	25	35.7%
I have had a knife pulled on me	12	17.1%
I have pulled a knife on someone else	7	10%
I have had a gun pulled on me	6	8.6%
I have pulled a gun on someone else	2	2.9%
I have skipped or missed meals based on lack of resources	38	54.3%
I have spent one or more nights in a homeless shelter	19	27.1%
I have spent one or more nights on the street	20	28.6%
I have spent one or more nights in a car	14	20%
I have used services (soup kitchens, churches, or social service agencies)	33	47.1%

## *Results*

This information was collected in Fargo, ND and is not generalizable to other populations other than those who use the services of Stepping Stones Resource Center. In addition, a random survey process was not used limiting the use of inferential statistical analysis. The guiding research questions required basic descriptive statistics to shed light on the experiences of center participants. Each numerical value was determined by survey respondents checking the associated box. Although the raw data provides a comprehensive overview of what center participant's experience, the descriptive statistics can change dramatically when they are grouped in categorical experiences.

The first research question regarding center participants and the resources that they acquire that assist them in meeting their basic needs was covered by employment, general assistance, support from family and friends, and selling/pawning possessions. When the events "I have earned money from an employer legally" and "I have earned money from an employer illegally" are combined into an employment category, the results are that 30(42.9%) of residents indicate that they have earned money from an employer in the last 30 days. When the events "I have received food stamps", "I have received a social security payment", and "I have received a disability payment" are combined into a general assistance category the results are that 35(50%) of respondents received general assistance in the last 30 days. Support from friends and family had the highest frequency 47(67.1%) of responses indicating the population was accessing social supports while transitioning to adulthood. However, it is important to note that 6 of the 47(12.8%) indicated that they have also stolen from friends and family which demonstrates that at times, the help is not viewed as enough. When the events "I have sold illicit or prescription drugs", "I have sold / pawned my own possessions", "I have sold / pawned other peoples possessions", and "I have sold / pawned stolen possessions" are combined into a selling/pawning category, the results are that 37(52.9%) have sold or pawned an item in the last 30 days.

When the events "I have spent one or more nights in a homeless shelter", "I have spent one or more nights on the street", and "I have spent one or more nights in a car" are combined, the results are that 30(42.9%) checked one or more of these. The uncertainty of a safe sleeping environment contributes to multiple concerns that service providers have for this population. Though this total number is a bit overwhelming, changes in season must be taken into account. This same survey distributed in the winter months in Fargo, ND would produce different results given that it takes resources to run a car overnight to maintain the heat and a night on the street, unsheltered, would produce severe frost bite, if not death.

## *Discussion*

The degree of trauma that this population faces makes it difficult to maintain independent living skills and focus. The threat of immanent violence and the vulnerability that it produces pushes many in this population into a crisis-driven disposition that carries over into all aspects of life. With this understanding, trauma informed care is essential to support and assist those who fall into this high-risk population. The survey results from a 3 month period of early fall 2010 provide a deeper look into the experiences of homeless youth and young adults in the Fargo/Moorhead metro area. The descriptive statistics highlight a profound response that

homeless youth and young adults will endure a significant amount of trauma, risk legal status, and forego personal safety in order to survive. It is crucial that center staff are sensitive and compassionate to how this trauma may influence this population's behavior, especially how it could affect their ability to live independently. Physical violence may be a method of survival for this population, especially if sleeping on the streets. In addition to basic needs, staff should provide non-violent conflict mediation and model appropriate ways to handle anger or conflict.

This population starts each day with a simple task: survive. Service providers know that this simple task however, is anything but simple. Immediate needs become food and shelter. Had this survey been distributed during the harsh winter months, the immediate needs would also include finding warm winter gear. When the daily routine becomes securing those basic items that allow someone to stay alive and stay safe, primitive and sometimes illegal measures commonly occur. Center guests require an immediate fix to meet basic needs, and through their developed street skills they have learned that stealing and/or pawning items pays immediately. That can get them through one day. Service providers must acknowledge the means in which someone has been able to meet their basic needs. Service providers cannot expect someone who is living on the street to set up an appointment/interview, dress presentably, attend class regularly, or even take the time to explore education/employment goals when they are in survival mode. The most productive investment an agency can take is to provide those basic needs so that the homeless individual can focus on alternative options that will yield more stable, permanent results such as employment, education and independent living.

The survey was given to SSRC 'regulars' as well as individual's utilizing services for the first time. This population is often distrustful of systems that attempt to offer assistance, as they have proven unsuccessful in the past. In distributing the survey, center staff are risking participants caution in answering incriminating information. While it seems individuals were open to representing the physical violence occurring on the street, trading sexual favors for basic needs were surprisingly low. Center staff report a higher representation of individuals trading sex or staying in an abusive relationship in order to maintain current living resources like food and shelter. Center staff suggest that individuals are not as comfortable reporting this information, or labeling it as 'trading sex' in a survey as they would be (and have been) in an individual therapeutic session.

Center staff acknowledge that the problem is not the amount of resources available as it is the means in which to obtain the resources. For a homeless young adult, obtaining a job requires proper attire, clean appearance, writing skills, an address to put on the application, three credible references, prior work or volunteer experience and skills, transportation to work, state issued identification (which is only possible if the person has a birth certificate, social security card or the money in which to obtain these), a phone number to receive call back, etc. Without these items, the primitive or illegal methods of obtaining money or food seem more realistic to the population.

The survey results suggest that an alarming amount of center participants have spent one or more nights in the shelter, on the street or in a car in the last 30 days. Often these individuals left their family to escape violence, poverty or substance abuse/mental health family related trauma. Many have aged out of a supported living environment where they were under the

custody of the county, state or foster care system. These systems are not responsible to ensure individual's needs are met after the age of 18. Therefore, many of these young adults enter adulthood alone without proper skills and safety nets to overcome low income, homeless street life. Additionally, many of these young adults are part of a family system that evolved out of poverty and remains low income. Again, in order to survive, alternative methods of basic needs obtainment are quickly developed.

While the survey results may represent homeless youth as misfits of society, criminals, and lacking in morals, center staff see things differently. The history of violence, theft and unemployment are not badges of honor for the population as homeless youth are not proud or boastful about the harsh realities of their lives. The homeless youth and young adult population at SSRC represent vast characteristics of determination, resilience, creative expression and humor. Each individual has talents and skills in which to build on. Each individual deserves a chance to make choices and succeed. With this understanding, center staff are welcomed into the lives of homeless youth and lucky to have the opportunity to learn, support and encourage.

Stepping Stones Resource Center is committed to understanding the target population through surveys, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and general conversation. Areas of educational status and barriers, parenting, survival techniques, and the challenges of transitioning from foster care to independent living situations are all areas that the center will be investigating. Understanding who the population is, and what experiences they've had, will produce better homeless prevention and intervention strategies for practitioners engaged in program evaluation and development.