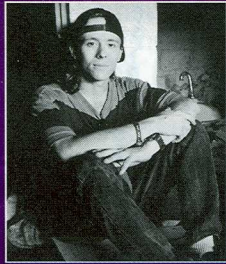


Turning Away



Corporate towers flicker against the evening sky as commuters hurry towards a subway station. At their feet, a huddled figure in a doorway begs for spare change.

Darci makes a rough sort of living through panhandling and prostitution. Blair, a former junior boxing champ, is one of the squadrons of squeegee kids who clean car windshields at busy intersections. Both have been on the street for 10 years. At 25, they have reached a pivotal age: the age at which street wisdom maintains you either get off the street or die there.

Darci and Blair come from troubled families and struggle with addiction — interviews with their parents underscore how unresolved family matters still haunt them. Together, they bear stirring witness to the hardships facing the growing numbers of young street people.

Shot over a year, **Turning Away** is a powerful look at the complex factors keeping Darci, Blair and countless others on the margins of one of the world's wealthiest societies.

Directors: Kenton Vaughan, Craig Chivers

Producers (Still Moving Pictures): Kenton Vaughan, Craig Chivers

Producer (NFB): Silva Basmajian

Produced by Still Moving Pictures Inc., in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada, in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and with the financial participation of the Rogers Documentary Fund, and the Canadian Television and Cable Production Fund.

59 minutes, 50 seconds
Order number: C9198 006



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Turning Away

Photo By/Craig Chivers



Turning Away

"Compelling...Eloquent." — *Toronto Star*



VHS

C9198 006

Turning Away

Introduction

In this powerful portrayal of two homeless youths caught in a downward spiral of self-destruction and despair, we are forced to confront the stark reality of life on the streets. To many, it would appear to be a life of entrenched alienation and isolation — one that is disconnected from family, friends and future. Blair and Darci seem to be alone in the world.

But in fact, Blair and Darci are not alone. There are thousands upon thousands of Blairs and Darcis living their lives on the streets of our cities. And the longer they are on the streets, the more likely they are to remain there.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a firm estimate of the number of homeless youths in our society. While research initiatives on the subject have intensified over the past decade, and the number of homeless youths is clearly rising, there are many practical, definitional and methodological problems involved in the study of homeless populations that limit the generalization of research findings. Given this caveat, the following are some recent estimates:

- As of 1991, there were approximately 1.5 million homeless adolescents in the US. (1)
- In Toronto, recent estimates of the number of youths living on the streets range from 4,000 to 12,000. (2)
- Homeless males outnumber females by a ratio of 2:1. (3)

Why are they there?

Some of those on the street are runaways. Some, like Blair, are 'throwaways': those who have been rejected by their families. Others have made their way to the streets following unsatisfactory placements via the child welfare system. Sometimes, like Darci, a young person has experience with all three of these situations.

- In a study of Halifax street youth, 43% of respondents stated that their parent(s) were not upset when they left home. (4)

Street youths come from every type of family background, and each young person represents a set of individual needs. But they tend to have in common the key determinant for turning to the streets: a history of family conflict and/or breakdown. For Blair and Darci, the familial history of conflict is in clear evidence in the film. Often, such conflict includes a component of physical and/or sexual abuse.

- **One study found that the main reasons given for leaving home were arguments at home, being kicked out, and physical abuse. (4)**
- **In a Canadian study of runaway adolescents, 86% reported at least one physically abusive experience. The data reported suggest that this population of adolescents had been victims of chronic, extreme abuse, experienced at a young age, and often perpetrated by the biological parent. (5)**
- **Some studies indicate that as many as 60% of homeless youth report having been sexually abused. (1)**
- **A recent study compares the accounts of runaways to those of their parents/caretakers. The study found a high level of agreement between them, and concluded that runaway and homeless adolescents accurately depict the troubled family situations that they leave. Parents/caretakers and runaway adolescents reported high levels of family violence and sexual abuse, and were also in agreement regarding the adolescents' conduct problems. (6)**

Lives under stress and at risk

By living on the streets, one set of risks is traded for another. High-risk living conditions and behaviour tend to dominate the day-to-day lives of the homeless. Through Darci and Blair, we are introduced to many of these.

Violence

- **Compared to other young people, homeless youths are at increased risk for exposure to a variety of forms of violence as both witnesses and victims. (7)**
- **One study reports that 67% of youths had been physically assaulted on the street. (8)**

HIV/STD risks

- In Toronto, 12% of males and females living on the street report having been paid for sex. (9)
- Homeless youths engage in riskier sexual behaviour than non-homeless youths; for example, they have more sexual partners; rates of pregnancy and teen motherhood are higher; and they become sexually active at a younger age than their non-homeless counterparts. (1)
- 60-80% of injection drug users did not always use a condom in the past six months when having sexual intercourse with opposite-sex non-regular partners. (10)
- The rate of HIV infection in homeless youths in the US is estimated to be 2 to 10 times greater than the rate in the general adolescent population, with an estimated 60,000 infected street youths as of 1991. This number is expected to rise. (1)

Substance Abuse

- Rates of substance abuse are substantially higher in street youth populations, even when compared to the rates of youths who live in shelters. (11) And one Toronto-based study estimates the rate of drug use among street youths to be 14 times higher than the rate among students who have never run away from home. (2)
- One study found that 71% of homeless youths could be classified as having an alcohol and/or illicit drug abuse disorder according to diagnostic criteria established by the American Psychiatric Association. (12)
- A comparison of street youths to non-street youths in substance abuse programs found that street youths in treatment had more social and drug abuse problems than did non-street youths. They were more likely to be unemployed, on welfare, and to have legal problems, as well as to experience more depression and lower self-esteem, and use more alcohol and drugs. (13)
- The street takes its toll: a California study of the homeless found that those respondents who reported no impairments when they first became homeless eventually experienced high rates of alcohol abuse, illegal drug use and psychiatric hospitalization after five years on the street. (14)



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Ann-Marie
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Original Music
Philip Stanger

Order number
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59 minutes
50 seconds

Street youths are also at increased risk for mental health problems, malnutrition, respiratory ailments, skin problems, dental problems and traumatic injury. (15)

- Street youths are at increased risk for suicide attempts. (2)

Conclusion

There are no simple solutions. While service agencies for street youths are present in our major urban centres, they are operating in a context of burgeoning need and limited resources. And, in the end, these represent 'downstream' interventions. The problems start 'upstream' with families and their communities. Confronting the underlying issues from a preventive perspective remains a major challenge for our society.

Ideas to consider:

- The concepts of choice and victimization — did Darci and Blair 'choose' the street? Can they choose to leave the street?
- The parent-child relationship — are the bonds ever broken? Can their relationships be repaired?
- The concept of separate realities — how do the perceptions of parent and child compare?
- What is 'family'?
- The concept of addiction: are these kids addicted to the street?
- Life on the street and the search for meaning
- Homelessness as an example of marginalization
- Audience gender differences in response to the issues and to the two main characters — do male and female viewers react differently?

Where to go for help

Services designed for the needs of street youths can be found in most major urban centres. Unfortunately, at this time there is no national-level clearinghouse for programs and services for the homeless. Check the local Yellow Pages, or contact your local public health office for a list of services in your area.

General Resources

Street Kids International

(416) 504-8994

<http://www.web.net/~ski>

Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse

(613) 235-4048

<http://www.ccsa.ca>

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

(416) 484-7750

<http://www.icomm.ca/cmhacan>

Addiction Research Foundation: Drug and Alcohol Information Line

1-800-463-6273 (Ontario only) or 416-595-6111

<http://www.arf.org>

Drug and Alcohol Registry of Treatment (DART)

1-800-565-8603 (Ontario only) or 519-439-0174

<http://www.dart.on.ca>

National Institute on Drug Abuse (US)

<http://www.nida.nih.gov>

Stand Up for Kids (US)

<http://www.standupforkids.org>

Suggested Audience

The suggested audience for this film includes students in a variety of college and university programs, ranging from psychology, sociology, education, and health studies through to social service, law enforcement and correctional service programs. As well, this film would be an excellent resource for ongoing staff development in schools, particularly those in the inner city, and community agencies and organizations that provide services for hard-to-reach youth.

In terms of screening this film with high school audiences, it might be most appropriate at the senior secondary level. For younger students, teachers are advised to pre-screen the film in order to determine its relevance and appropriateness for their intended audience.

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