

Best of the NETWORKER

Feature Articles from Past Issues

The Northwest Youth Networker; newsletter of the [Northwest Network for Youth](#), edited by [Jerry Fest](#) of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#)

March 2010, Issues 95-98

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What We Can Learn About Street Youth from the Chilean Earthquake

By Jerry Fest

CHILEANS PROTECT, FEED THEMSELVES AFTER QUAKE
LOOTERS BURN CONCEPCION STORE
CHILE SURVIVAL STORIES AMID LOOTING, DESPERATION
IN 2 CHILE TOWNS, LOOTERS A 'HUMAN EARTHQUAKE'
FIRES, LOOTING PLAGUE QUAKE-BATTERED CITY
STREET LOOTING BRINGS CURFEW IN CHILE
MAYHEM IN POST-QUAKE CHILE

These are just a few of the headlines from news accounts of a wave of lawlessness, looting, and criminal behaviors sweeping the quake-ravaged areas of Chile. In the aftermath of last week's 8.8 earthquake, many Chilean people are stealing, robbing, vandalizing ... even murdering. But here's the important question to answer: why weren't they behaving this way *before* the quake?

Every population has a percentage of people who engage in criminal behaviors regardless of social structure or law enforcement; generally estimated at about 10%. The remaining 90% do not engage in criminal behaviors, not because of law enforcement (the police and military are always far outnumbered by the general population), but because they are good people who want only to live in peace, take care of themselves and their families, and contribute to their community. This describes the Chilean people, as well ... but something happened as a result of the earthquake. The social order was disrupted. Lines of communication were disrupted. Supply distribution was disrupted. Their sense of safety and protection was jeopardized. The quake placed them in a circumstance where their very survival was in question ... and these good people who never dreamed of being violent, looting, or vandalizing became -- nearly overnight -- violent looters and vandals.

So what's this have to do with street youth?

In my book (*Street Culture: an epistemology of street-dependent youth**) I make the following observation:

In their desperate effort to survive they exhibit behaviors that we, viewing them from the safety and comfort of our non-life-threatening legal and moral codes, judge as 'criminal,' 'delinquent,' and 'incorrigible.' The problem is that street-dependent youth are not living within the safety of our legal and moral guidelines; they are living in a life-threatening world on our streets.

The Chilean people are not behaving not as the "Chilean" people behave, but as *people* -- *any* people, *human beings* -- behave when they find themselves in a life-threatening situation. They are behaving as *you* would behave in a similar situation. As we read the headlines coming from Chile we need to remember that these are *not bad people*. They are *good people* desperately trying to survive a *bad situation*.

And as we pass judgments on the behaviors of youth on our streets, maybe we should cut them the same kind of slack.

NOTE: The Global Agency link in this Networker's heading is for an organization that works with street kids in Chile. In light of the earthquake, I'm sure they could use donations.

* Street Culture is currently out of print, but is being re-released in an updated version in June 2010. Information is available [HERE](#).

Welcome to Streetadelphia: *Not* a nice place to raise our kids.

By Jerry Fest

In a recent post at the [InterNetwork for Youth's Facebook page](#), I identified that the cities of Anchorage, AK; St. Paul, MN; Toledo, OH; and Pittsburgh, PA each have populations that are approximately equal to the estimated number of



street-dependent youth in the United States alone (in excess of 300,000¹). If these young people were all gathered into one “Streetadelphia” city, it would rank by population among the top 70 cities in this nation.

The needs of this city would be enormous. Up to 80% of the population would have histories of caretaker neglect; 60% histories of sexual abuse; and up to 50% would *currently* be experiencing physical assault on the streets. Nearly 100% of the population would be using or impacted by drug use, and *no one* would have a safe or stable living situation. The city’s economy would be based on sharing resources, selling blood, spare changing, shoplifting, dealing drugs, theft, and survival sex. In

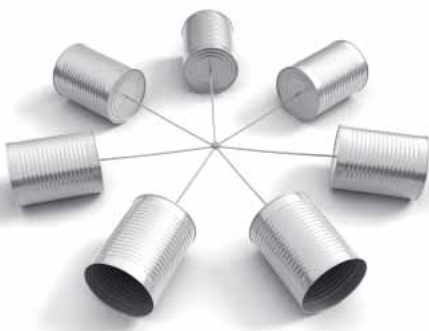
addition, Streetadelphia would be a city of *children*, with as much as 2/3rds of the population under the age of 18, and most of the population operating at a developmental level well below their chronological age.

The most current [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#) report is that the 2006 teen death rate was 64 deaths per 100,000 teens, for a total of 13,739 deaths. The top 5 causes of teen death are (in order, 1-5) accidents, cancer, suicide, congenital disorders, and homicide. We are alarmed by these causes -- and rightly so -- dedicating resources to addressing and raising awareness of teen driving, teen suicide, teen violence, and teen health issues. But where is our alarm, our sense of urgency, our *awareness* over the existence of the not-so-mythical city of Streetadelphia? The total number of teen deaths by *all causes* represents a population *less than 5% the size* of that under-served community.

I realize that with *Networker* readers I am likely preaching to the choir, but even among those of us who work with this and other youth populations I sometimes feel that we lose our perspective. If Streetadelphia were a real city it would be considered a national crisis and a national shame, and our current efforts to help would make Katrina look like a model for disaster response. The city of Toledo, Ohio ... the closest in terms of similar population size ... has a 2010 operating budget of roughly 575 million dollars -- nearly *5 times the amount of funding* proposed for runaway and homeless youth programs *nationally* in the President’s 2011 budget -- and Toledo has not nearly the needs that exist within the city limits of Streetadelphia.

And here’s the point: Streetadelphia *is* a real city. Its denizens are walking its streets right now, within miles of where you live and work. They cannot wait for government to help, or policy to change, or awareness to grow. They need *you* and *everyone you know* to do whatever you can do *now*. Streetadelphia is not a place for our children to be growing up.

For ideas on how you or people you know can help, Visit the InterNetwork for Youth’s [“How You Can Help”](#) page.



Introducing a NEW service from the Northwest Network for Youth -- Conference Calls with Jerry and Gary

Next week the Northwest Network for Youth will be sponsoring the first of what we intend to be an on-going series of topical conference calls. To ensure maximum benefit and participation, each call will be limited to no more than five participants and will focus on a specific topic of concern to youth work staff and/or administrators. The calls will only require 30 minutes of your time and participants will have the opportunity to be equal contributors to the discussion.

The first of these calls will be held on **Friday, March 26, at 11AM PDT (2 PM Eastern)**. Our intention is to host weekly conferences and we will be testing the format and topics as we go. Questions and discussion points will be posted in advance, as well as pertinent papers. Participants are asked to review these materials prior to the call in order to maximize their contribution to and benefit from the 30 minute timeframe.

¹ Identified as “chronic” runaways in Mental Health and Emerging Adulthood among Homeless Young People, by Les B. Whitbeck -- available at the InterNetwork for Youth’s [Suggested Reading](#) page.

To join the group, email Gary at gary@nwny.org. *The first 5 participants* to email will be provided with the conference call-in number and access code. We are looking forward to providing this unique training and technical assistance approach as a timely and inexpensive (free is about as inexpensive as you can get) support.

-- The topic for the first conference will be: **The Drop-in Dilemma Revisited**

Jerry Fest authored an evocative paper in 2007 entitled “The Drop-in Dilemma: Low Barriers or High Expectations” that bears careful study by agencies considering or currently operating a drop-in center. Conference participants are asked to read this paper [HERE](#).

Discussion points will be:

- What questions, concerns, or thoughts did the Drop-in Dilemma raise for you?
- What should be the goal of a drop-in center?
- What successes or failures have participants experienced with current or former drop-in programs?
- What is the future of the drop-in model?



Creating Safety for Young People

By Jerry Fest

We all know how important it is to ensure young people’s safety. Maslow’s “pyramid” of needs identifies safety as being second in importance only to physiological needs (air, food, water, etc.). But when we talk about safety for youth, particularly in our communities and our schools, we tend to focus our attention on their *physical* safety; protecting them from harm. But that’s only half of the equation. Of equal importance is *emotional* safety.

Here’s a ‘checklist’ of what makes young people feel emotionally safe. It’s not exhaustive, but it provides you with some food for thought when examining the environment and the means by which you guarantee physical safety to see if emotional safety is also being addressed.

Emotional safety is derived from:

- A sense of belonging, of being welcomed and valued; being treated with respect and dignity; acceptance
- Permission to fail, make mistakes, forget, or need additional practice
- Having one’s own unique talents, skills and qualities valued, recognized and acknowledged
- Understanding and clarity (about requirements and expectations); predictability (consistency, being able to predict how people may react or what may result from actions); a lack of ambiguity and arbitrariness
- Freedom to make choices based on personal needs and preferences
- A right to have (and express) one’s own feelings and opinions without fear of recrimination

Personally, I feel that these things are at least as if not more important than efforts to create physical safety, because if young people feel *emotionally* safe they become partners in creating and maintaining physically safe environments, as they will feel less need to protect themselves physically. By planning for *emotional* safety we can greatly increase the *physical* safety of our youth.