

Street youth trained in student's study on homelessness

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Kitchener street kids protesting against youth homelessness should avoid disrespectful tactics that upset the adults they are trying to reach, a new study recommends.

And politicians and other adults dealing with these youthful activists should try harder to understand their cause and avoid showing paternalism, the study says.

The study of activism among young people who were homeless or at risk of being homeless was completed this week by Nadia Hausfather, 25, a community psychology student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo.

For the two-year study, Hausfather, who has worked with Nicaraguan street youth, trained and paid about a dozen homeless young people to conduct interviews and help organize surveys.

She met the street kids at local agencies that work with homeless youth and at Out of the Cold shelters operated every winter by churches in Kitchener and Waterloo.

One of Hausfather's recommendations is that Kitchener council investigate the possibility of financing activist programs within the system.

As an example, she said, street kids could make a documentary about homelessness for use at school and community events to educate people about the issue.

Hausfather said the study doesn't say how many local young people are homeless or at risk of being homeless.

But she pointed to a 2001 regional report estimating about 1,500 people in Waterloo Region -- 25 per cent of them young people -- are usually without housing or at risk of being homeless.

She said her study was partly motivated by the resentment she noticed in the community when youth activists staged protests to boost awareness of homelessness or to get more money for affordable housing.

The resentment is sometimes caused by the tactics used by activists, she said. Some don't make enough effort to research their cause and communicate the reasons for their protests.

Pointing to several tent-city events organized in Kitchener to shed light on the problem of homeless youths, Hausfather said tactics used by demonstrators were "sometimes disrespectful to others . . . with loud music late at night that turns people off."

"There were lots of misunderstandings . . . and lots of unnecessary, paternalistic attitudes by adults that have to change. Both sides have to learn to work together more."

Hausfather said adults expressed concern about young people abandoning education opportunities and getting into trouble with police as they became part of the protest movement.

But she said the study shows young activists are mature enough to make decisions.

The study shows youth and adults benefit from the homelessness protests because they become better educated about an issue that affects the lives of hundreds of young people.

Hausfather did the study -- her university thesis -- with the help of a scholarship from Kitchener's Centre for Research and Education in Human Services. The centre is a non-profit organization that does community-based research on social issues.

The \$1,500 scholarship formed part of the Helmut Braun memorial award created by the centre and a Waterloo Region self-help group that helps people coping with mental-health issues.

Braun, a Kitchener advocate for the rights of the mentally ill, struggled with schizophrenia before killing himself in 2001.

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[Illustration]

Photo: MATHEW McCARTHY, RECORD STAFF / Nadia Hausfather just completed a thesis on activism by homeless youth protesters. She believes there's potential for young protesters and adults to work together for change.

Credit: RECORD STAFF

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