One afternoon, in a park next to City Hall, more than eighteen youths are captured in a photograph. Everyone pictured regularly visited Planet Youth, a local First Nations teen drop-in center and gathered here on day when the center was closed.

When the faces are unfamiliar, the photo is a snapshot of teenage street life. For some, it pictures a gang of delinquent youth that takes over at the center of town before usually being dispersed by police. Letters to the local newspaper often call these teens “drunk and violent,” expressing the local stereotypes of First Nations peoples. For the youth themselves, however, it’s a picture of their family.

These pictures provide an opportunity to move past stereotypes and take a second look. A chance to ponder over a girl sticking out her tongue, a young man sprawled on the grass, and the humorous ruckus in the left corner. For those teenagers who often feel kicked aside or ignored, the photographs are an opportunity to be seen.

Photo-elicitation is gaining attention as a research method for collaborating with participants and as a way to express their experiences. Here, youth, ranging in age from 13–18, were given digital cameras and asked to take photographs of the city through their eyes. Black and white photography was selected to reflect a street photography style, but the youth were given no instruction on composition or photographic theory. All of the images here were taken by the youth and express their perspectives.

For many, the image of the boy curled up in the circle is a favorite because “it just looks cool.” However a new meaning is produced when you identify the circle as an entry into a traditional First Nations Longhouse. One elder viewed the image and was saddened because the boy “could not enter our ancestor’s knowledge.” While the boys had not thought of this meaning when they took the picture, the photograph has come to symbolize the youths’ common liminal experience of urban post-coloniality.

Every teen described Planet Youth as a family and most referred to the place as a second home where they felt safe and welcomed. Some would joke that it was a “dysfunctional family” but a family nonetheless. While all a part of multigenerational biological families, the youth prioritized taking care of friends. It is why they chose to take pictures of each other; their family of peers.

In fact, youth actively refer to each other as a “street family.” They often call each other mom, dad, aunt, or uncle based on the close relationships they have with their friends. They have even mapped the 40 plus members on a fictional family tree. New members are constantly invited to join the family and find a place among the nephews, nieces and spouses. While extraordinary, the street family titles are actually a continuation the First Nations practice to formally publicly acknowledging interpersonal relationships, but in a new contemporary form.

Why would the youth feel the need to formalize their friendships in kinship terms? It is a question the youth and I explored in the production of the film “For Our Street Family” (2008). In the 34 minute film the youth share both their street family and their personal experiences with racism, abuse, violence and foster care. The youth tell their shared experiences of tragedy and hope.

They all know what it is like to be called a “dirty Indian” by classmates, only to go home and be scolded by their elders because they would rather plug into their Ipods than listen to origin stories. They all learn to clean and salt fish in a culture sustained by salmon, but having grown up on hot dogs, many youth struggle to
“...their greatest understanding and support comes from each other; their street family.”

Jennifer Wolowiec is a PhD Candidate at the University of British Columbia. She received her Masters from the same university and graduated from San Francisco State University with a BA in Film Production and a BA in Anthropology. Originally from Northern California, her research explores the affective nature of First Nation youths’ social networks and how film can be used to create new representations of those usually only represented through a criminalizing gaze.

She twice received the American Anthropological Association’s Society for Visual Anthropology Award for Best Student Work. Most recently for her film “For Our Street Family” made with the Prince Rupert Friendship House and the youth who attend its teen drop in center. These photographs are a part of that project. She returns to Prince Rupert in 2011 to continue her PhD work following a cohort of First Nations teens as they transition into adulthood.

When she’s not elbow deep in books or keeping her eye behind a camera, she’s also an avid road cyclist and triathlete, having successfully made a swimming escape from Alcatraz. The youth she works with call her lyra-clad escapades insane, but it’s part of the reason they like her.

Explain to disappointed community members that they don’t like the taste. They’ve all felt the destruction caused by a stranger banging on the door and the removal of children because parents have been deemed unfit. It is an experience directly related to Canada’s history of colonialism and yet also unique to this generation’s particular engagement with urban western culture. It means their greatest understanding and support comes from each other; their street family.

Faces, identities, and personalities are captured here in frozen moments that reveal slices of these youth’s complicated histories and immense experiences. The pictures call us to wonder about their lives and how the meanings of these photographs change if we actually know their stories of death, foster care, abuse, rehabilitation, friendship, love, and acceptance. For the youth, the project allows them to choose how they want to be represented instead of how they are judged. The result is a collective self-portrait of a group of youth frequently noticed, stereotyped, and governed by bureaucracy, but hardly looked at and rarely listened to.

Design: Eric O’Connell & Eva Crawford