

Research & Advocacy Digest

Linking Advocates & Researchers

Homeless, Runaway & Throwaway Youth: Sexual Victimization and the Consequences of Life on the Streets

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Letter From The Editor

JANET ANDERSON, ADVOCACY EDUCATION DIRECTOR

Homelessness among young people is a serious and complex issue. On any given night, the National Runaway Switchboard estimates that there are approximately 1.3 million homeless, throwaway, and runaway youth living unsupervised on the streets, in abandoned buildings, in shelters, transitional housing, with friends, or with strangers. The problem of homeless youth should be viewed as a social justice issue with its underlying roots based in all forms of oppression (including racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism and able-bodism), victimization, poverty and limited access to needed and necessary resources.

The intersection between sexual victimization and homeless youth has been well documented, both as an antecedent for running away and as a consequence of doing so. Sexual victimization emerges prominently as a cause of homelessness in several studies contained within this Digest while others illustrate how sexual victimization becomes a prevailing feature of life on the streets. Instead of finding the refuge they seek, once on the street, they are further exposed to a multitude of risks including rape, sexual victimization, prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation enterprises. Because they are disconnected and disenfranchised from community and lack access to schools, health care and other support systems, many are forced to turn to survival strategies including engaging in survival sex or the trading of sex to meet basic, substantive needs, leading to increased risk for HIV, STDs, unwanted pregnancies and other physical health issues. To deaden the pain of their existence on the streets, many homeless youth turn to substance abuse; engage in self-harm, or suicide, all with potentially life-threatening consequences.

The picture I paint is a bleak one but not one without hope. Every day there are countless dedicated individuals, outreach workers and institutions working to eradicate the problem of homeless youth and sexual victimization on a

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Interview with Dr. Ana Mari Cauce, Ph.D

PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON @ SEATTLE

WCSAP: Can you tell me how you became interested in the field of homeless youth?

AMC: I've been interested in adolescence since the beginning of my career. Adolescence is a very important transitional time and a time when people begin laying down the patterns and habits that they will carry out for life. Most adolescents make it through this period just fine, but many don't. Many experience extreme challenges, and the consequences of not dealing with those challenges have life-impacting implications. When I moved to Seattle, there was a very visible homeless youth population. I became involved through an agency known as Youth Care. With my interest in adolescence to begin with, it became natural for me to want to try to explore what was going on with these youth, their lives and their families. I recently saw an article that asked the question which had more influence on the lives of adolescents, peers or families. I thought, "if you want to see how important families are, then look at homeless youth, because the family has a tremendous impact on their lives."

WCSAP: Can you talk about the connection you have found between sexual assault and homeless youth?

AMC: Study after study supports two things: 1) that a high percentage of homeless youth have been sexually abused prior to their becoming homeless and 2) once on the street, they become vulnerable to further sexual exploitation, rape and sexual assault. We estimate that 60% of the females and 25% of the males have been sexually assaulted prior to leaving home. I do want to stress however, that not all of it was perpetrated by a family member. Although it's important not to get into parental blame since so much of this is intergenerational and complex, I do want to stress that there were usually conditions in the family that placed these youth in vulnerable positions to be sexually assaulted. For example, neglect, lack of protection, alcohol and drug abuse, the parents being sexually assaulted themselves when they were younger, etc. Although not all these youth come from "bad" homes per se, the majority were in homes that did not allow them to flourish. So, what you have in the majority of the cases is a complex

intergenerational issue. We also see a connection between early foster care placement, sexual assault and runaway youth.

After leaving home these youth then become vulnerable to high levels of victimization while on the streets, both by adults and by other youth. It is often difficult for them to talk about becoming involved in survival sex or overt prostitution or sexual assault because they don't want to see themselves as victims and need to see themselves as powerful, but what happens to them is still sexual exploitation nonetheless. One of the interesting things we have found is that the age at which youth left home is directly related to sexual victimization on the street. Those who left at younger ages, say 13, 14 or 15 were more likely to be sexually victimized than those who left at 17. It appears that younger youth lack maturity and often don't know how to create a structure around themselves to minimize their risks. Please know that when I say this, it is not about victim-blaming but rather about coping strategies, "being street-wise," or something almost undefined. In addition, perpetrators believe the myth that the younger the youth, the less likely they are to have STD's, HIV, etc., which is not always true. Those who have stayed home longer before leaving seem to be able to create structures or put themselves in better positions to defend against victimization. So, it was striking how age played a significant factor in sexual victimization.

WCSAP: That leads me to my next question. What are some of the most profound results you have found as a result of your research?

AMC: First, it's striking how little we do as a society on behalf of our most vulnerable youth and their families. For families who are having a really difficult time, our service structure is pretty horrible. It continues to hit me over and over how ill-equipped and unwilling this society is to deal with those who are most vulnerable. And when you think about it, it has so much to do with oppression and the continuing divide between the "haves" and the "have nots" and those with access to power and privilege and those without. Second, the thing we find over and over is the cyclical and intergenerational nature of this issue. If we don't do something to break this cycle, it will

keep going. And third, this issue is extremely complex and intertwined. As researchers we like to isolate issues into little boxes and study a single phenomenon at a time, like studying depression, or physical abuse, or sexual abuse separately, but it really doesn't work that way. They are all interconnected and we need to see the entire picture in order to truly address the issue. I have begun to see the futility of breaking things down into little boxes.

WCSAP: When gathering articles, I had a difficult time finding research pertaining to those who are traditionally marginalized from our society, like people with disabilities and people of color and was wondering if you could address that. Also, can you talk about the connection between oppression and homeless youth?

AMC: Homelessness cuts across all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, class, etc. but many people feel more comfortable thinking it occurs “over there,” which is not the case. But to address your question, part of the reason that more research isn't done on marginalized groups has to do with how the youth choose to categorize themselves, how they form sub-cultures on street and where you go to get your samples. Those factors make it difficult sometimes to trace their backgrounds. In terms of oppression, this goes back to how poorly our society deals with those who are marginalized to begin with, the lack of access to power, and the complete lack of safety nets. We see this on a policy level. We want “them” to become less visible. Where are the jobs, where are low-cost housing options, where are the training and educational programs? I could go on and on.

WCSAP: What recommendations do you have, either for prevention specialists or for direct service providers?

AMC: We need to improve services to families who are barely making it before things get so out of hand. Some believe that family reunification is the answer but it is a difficult issue, and although it is tough for these kids on the street, for some they are almost better off there. No matter how good prevention programs can be, we have to provide better continuum of care. We need to

address homeless youth as a social justice issue. We need more transitional services, more beds, GED programs, programs for pregnant teens, etc. Just having a bed reduces the rate of sexual victimization for some since they are off the street longer. Another recommendation I would have is to develop a better case management model. Although Seattle is considered a national model, we still don't have enough services.

Another recommendation I would have is to not view these youth as all alike. We need to see them as individuals. Some have disabilities, some are LGBT, some come from the African American community, etc. The term homeless is just an umbrella. I think it is important to understand that they are individuals who possess amazing strengths, resiliency and are often incredibly sensitive, caring young people who have been given a bad break in life but given the chance and services can rise above their current situations.

“ I think it is important to understand that they are individuals who possess amazing strengths, resiliency and are often incredibly sensitive, caring young people who have been given a bad break in life but given the chance and services can rise above their current situations.”

WCSAP: Thank you Dr. Cauce for giving me the time and opportunity to come and talk with you about this difficult topic.

AMC: I was honored to be asked by the Coalition and I thank you as well.

CONTACT DR. ANA MARI CAUCE AT CAUCE@U. WASHINGTON.EDU OR CALL 206-685-9660 FOR MORE INFORMATION.

Homeless Youth and Their Exposure To and Involvement in Violence While Living on the Streets

KIPKE, M.; SIMON, T.; MONTGOMERY, S.; UNGER, J.; & IVERSON, E. (1997). JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH, 20, 360-367.

Four hundred and thirty-two homeless youth living in the Hollywood area of California were surveyed to determine if they had ever: 1) witnessed violence (including sexual assault), 2) experienced violence, and 3) perpetrated violence (not including sexual assault) and to determine how those variables impacted their fear of crime. The ultimate purpose of this survey was to enhance more general research that examines the prevalence of drug use and HIV risk behaviors among youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The survey found that 85% of the youth surveyed had witnessed some sort of violence; 24% of those surveyed had witnessed someone being sexually assaulted, 16% of which had occurred after they had begun living on the streets.

“24% of those surveyed had witnessed someone being sexually assaulted, 16% of which had occurred after they had begun living on the streets.”

70% of the youth surveyed had experienced some kind of violence. Of those that reported experiencing violence, 32% reported having been sexually assaulted, 15% after living on the streets. The youth surveyed were not asked about sexual assault perpetration behavior.

When asked about their fears of victimization, 44% of homeless youths responding to the survey indicated that they were fearful of being sexually assaulted, molested, or raped.

“Of those that reported experiencing violence, 32% reported having been sexually assaulted, 15% after living on the streets.”

Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization Among Male and Female Homeless and Runaway Youth

TYLER, KIMBERLY; WHITBECK, LES; HOYT, DAN; & CAUCE, ANA MARI. JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE (2004) 19(5), 503-520.

The purpose of this research was to examine risk factors associated with sexual victimization for homeless males and females and to explore the relationship of the perpetrators (stranger or friend/acquaintance) to the homeless youth.

The authors set out to prove several hypotheses:

- Adolescents who leave home for the first time at an early age and those who leave numerous times are at greater risk for sexual victimization by a stranger. (Supported)
- Homeless youth who engage in deviant behaviors, associate with deviant peers, have high rates of drug use and engage in survival sex are more likely to be sexually victimized by both friends/acquaintances and strangers. (Not Supported) The study demonstrated greater sexual victimization by a friend/acquaintance).
- Youth with well-groomed appearances would be more likely to be sexually victimized by either a friend/acquaintance and/or a stranger. (Not supported) – This variable was associated with stranger victimization.
- GLB youth will more likely be sexually victimized by both strangers and friends/acquaintances compared to non-GLB youth. (Not supported) – GLB youth were victimized more by friends/acquaintances.

For females, 41% reported sexual victimization most often by a male acquaintance, 39% by a male stranger, and 23% by a male friend. 95% were victimized by men. For males, 58% reported sexual victimization by strangers, 32% by acquaintances and 12% by friends. Although the majority of perpetrators were male, it is interesting to note that 29% of all sexual perpetrators of young men were female.

“Although the majority of perpetrators were male, it is interesting to note that 29% of all sexual perpetrators of young men were female.”

For females, age, first run away and higher rates of hard drug use were predictors of sexual victimization by strangers. On the other hand, deviant survival strategies, participation in survival sex and being physically well-groomed significantly correlated to being victimized by friends or acquaintances. For males, survival sex and well-kept grooming significantly correlated with higher rates of stranger sexual victimization. Males who identified as gay or bisexual were 5 times more likely to be victimized by a friend/acquaintance.

Citing some potential explanations for these results as well as the limitations of this study, the results have potential implications for those who work with homeless and runaway youth, particularly in terms of service design and outreach strategies.

The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Later Sexual Victimization Among Runaway Youth

TYLER, K.; WHITBECK, L.; & CAUCE, A. *JOURNAL OF RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENCE*, (2001) 11: 151-176.

A survey of 372 homeless youth in Seattle was conducted to examine the impact of childhood sexual abuse. The researchers found significant rates of sexual victimization, as well as subsistence strategies that included engaging in “survival sex,” meaning the use of sexual relations to obtain necessities such as food and shelter.

Overall the youth surveyed indicated that over 36% had experienced some form of sexual victimization – 28% identified as female and 12% male.

The model created by the researchers indicated:

- Sexual abuse was negatively associated with age on own- meaning that the adolescents who experienced abuse were likely to run away at earlier ages.
- A history of sexual abuse was also associated with the youth creating deviant peer relationships including trading sex and having multiple partners.
- Those youth that sold sex were more likely to have been victims of sexual assault.
- Early sexual abuse had a significant indirect effect on later sexual victimization.

Event History Analysis of Antecedents to Running Away From Home and Being on the Street

YODER, K.; WHITBECK, L.; & HOYT, D. (2001) *AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST*, 45, 61-65.

The researchers point out that while much has been documented about the consequences and negative experiences incurred as a result running away from home, little is known about the initial causes of leaving home. This research proposes several reasons that youth choose to run away from home by using sample of homeless and runaway youth from four Midwestern States.

The survey consisted of interviewing 602 runaway and homeless adolescents in various shelters, streets and drop-in centers in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska. The majority interviewed was 60% female and identified as white. In addition, 24.1% identified as African Americans, 3.3% identified as Hispanic, 2.5% identified as Native American, and 10% identified as biracial, multiracial or other.

The study examined two concurrent issues: 1) running away and 2) time spent on the streets for the first time. In terms of initially running away, the research suggests that age and a history of neglect and sexual abuse were significant predictors. In terms of time spent on their own, males and whites spent more time on their own compared to females and non-whites. Of particular note, neglect was more predictive of running away than was physical abuse, indicating that being ignored and feeling unwanted may be more influential than the actual act of maltreatment.

The authors note implications for this research. Efforts to keep youth off the street should be especially targeted at males and white youths, and prevention programs should target youth who live in homes characterized by sexual abuse and neglect.

Prevalence and Correlates of Survival Sex Among Runaway and Homeless Youth

GREENE, JODY, M.; ENNETT, SUSAN, T.; & RINGWALT, CHRISTOPHER, L. AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH (1999) 89(9) 1406-1410.

This research focused on the prevalence rates and factors associated with survival sex amongst a nationally representative sample of shelter and street runaway and homeless youth. Survival sex is defined as the selling of sex for shelter, food, drugs, or money.

Shelter (n=640) and street (n=528) youth from various cities were recruited and interviewed. 61% of the shelter sample was female, 41% black, 31% white, and 29% other. 61% of the street sample was male, 49% white, 25% black, and 25% other. 46% of shelter youth had been away from home longer than one month compared to 78% of street youth.

“27.5% “street youth” had engaged in survival sex compared to 9.5% of “shelter youth.” Of the shelter sample, participation in survival sex was more common among males, among whites and those of “other” races.”

Background characteristics, victimization, criminal behavior, substance use, STDs, pregnancy and suicide attempts were examined as correlates to survival sex. Sexual orientation and risky sexual behaviors were not examined because the study was precluded by the federal government from asking questions about sex other than survival sex.

27.5% “street youth” had engaged in survival sex compared to 9.5% of “shelter youth.” Of the shelter sample, participation in survival sex was more common among males, among whites and those of “other” races. Engaging in survival sex increased for those whom had been victimized, participated in criminal activities, those with suicide attempts, those with STDs and those who had been pregnant. Intravenous substance use had the greatest correlation to increases in survival sex.

This study underscores the pressing need to create intervention strategies to decrease the necessity of youth engaging in survival sex to meet basic, economic needs and highlights that the dangers associated with survival sex has serious repercussions for homeless youth.

“Engaging in survival sex increased for those whom had been victimized, participated in criminal activities, those with suicide attempts, those with STDs and those who had been pregnant. Intravenous substance use had the greatest correlation to increases in survival sex.”

Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Homeless Adolescents With Their Heterosexual Counterparts

COCHRAN, B.; STEWARD, A.; GINZLER, J.; & CAUCE, A. AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH (2002) 92(5), 773-777.

The authors set out to compare the differences in the pathway to homelessness, victimization, substance use, mental health issues, and sexual behaviors between GLBT and heterosexual homeless youth ages 13-21. Eighty-four heterosexuals were matched by gender and age with eighty-four GLBT youth. Of the GLBT youth, 71 identified as bisexual, 4 as lesbian, 8 as gay and 1 as transgender.

Although both groups left home for similar reasons, GLBT youth left home more often (12.38 times) than their heterosexual counterparts (6.69 times). GLBT youth were more likely to leave as a result of physical abuse, alcohol use in the family and conflicts with family over their sexual orientation. In terms of victimization, sexual minorities were physically and sexually victimized on average by seven more people than heterosexual homeless youth. Regarding substance abuse, with the exception of marijuana, sexual minorities reported using 11 of 12 substances more frequently. In terms of mental health issues, GLBT youth reported higher levels of depression, withdrawn behavior, somatic complaints, social problems, delinquency, and aggression than their heterosexual counterparts. In the domain of sexual behaviors, 94% of both groups reported having voluntary sex; however sexual minorities had twice as many sexual partners than did heterosexual homeless youth. Both groups reported having unprotected sex.

“GLBT youth not only experience difficulties living on the street, as do their heterosexual peers, but are more susceptible to homophobia, stereotyping and discrimination, increasing their susceptibility to problems within these domains.”

This study revealed negative outcomes in all the domains for GLBT homeless adolescents. GLBT youth not only experience difficulties living on the street, as do their heterosexual peers, but are more susceptible to homophobia, stereotyping and discrimination, increasing their susceptibility to problems within these domains.

The results speak to the need for developing prevention programs that assist families in dealing with adolescent sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, service providers must address the role that homophobia plays in exacerbating conditions place GLBT youth in vulnerable, life-threatening and risky situations.

Self-Mutilation and Homeless Youth: The Role of Family Abuse, Street Experiences, and Mental Disorders

TYLER, KIMBERLY, A.; WHITBECK, LES, B.; HOYT, DAN, R.; & JOHNSON, KURT, D. JOURNAL OF RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENCE, (2003) 13(4), 457-474.

This study examined the prevalence of, and factors associated with, self-mutilation among homeless youth. Self-mutilation was defined as an act of deliberately harming oneself, causing minor to moderate injuries, but not intended as a suicide attempt.

The authors hypothesized that:

- Family abuse (sexual & physical abuse & neglect), street exposure (age of first run and having ever stayed on the street), street experiences (victimization, deviant survival strategies) and mental health disorders would yield a greater number of self-injurious acts. (Supported).

Interviews were conducted by experienced outreach workers with 428 youth (187 males and 241 females) ages 16-19. 59% of the sample was European American, 22% were non-Hispanic African American, 5% were Hispanic and the remaining 14% were self-identified as American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander or biracial. Approximately 15% identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. 25% reported being sexually abused on at least one occasion and 95% had been physically abused or neglected.

The findings indicated that self-mutilation was extremely prevalent amongst this group with 69% reporting that they had engaged in it at least once. There were no significant differences between males and females in regards to the number of self-mutilation acts engaged in, however differences by gender were seen by the types of acts committed. One noteworthy finding is that that older youth and

gay, lesbian and bisexual youth reported the greatest numbers of self-injurious acts. In addition, those having a history of sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, those victimized on the streets, and youth who engaged in deviant survival strategies also had higher rates of self-injury.

“The findings indicated that self-mutilation was extremely prevalent amongst this group with 69% reporting that they had engaged in it at least once.

There were no significant differences between males and females in regards to the number of self-mutilation acts engaged in, however differences by gender were seen by the types of acts committed.”

Because the literature on this topic is basically non-existent, this study is an important one in that it identified important risk factors for self-mutilation among this population and can be useful for prevention and intervention strategies in the future.

HIV-Risk Behaviors Associated with Homelessness Characteristics in Youth

ENNETT, SUSAN; FEDERMAN, E. BELLE; BAILEY, SUSAN; RINGWALT, CHRISTOPHER; HUBBARD, MICHAEL. JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH (1999), 25: 344-353.

A survey of 288 homeless youth living in the Washington DC area was conducted to determine if there was a correlation between the self-described characteristics of homelessness and HIV-risk behavior.

The review of literature in the survey notes that about 7.6% of youth between 12-17 have run away from home. Yearly, this equates to approximately 1.6 million youth who have run away from home or been homeless. Additionally, the researchers point out that sexual abuse has been identified as an important and common reason for youth to leave home.

“Importantly, males and females who had been sexually victimized reported substantially more HIV risk behaviors compared to those not victimized.”

In the survey, youth were asked about the circumstances which rendered them homeless, including their experience with sexual abuse. Thirteen youth surveyed indicated that sexual abuse was the primary reason for their leaving home, however one-third of the young women and one-tenth of the young men reported having been victimized. Importantly, males and females who had been sexually victimized reported substantially more HIV risk behaviors compared to those not victimized. The authors note that

“had traded sex for money drugs, food or shelter, and only slightly fewer reported no or inconsistent condom use.”

“The authors note that “alarmingly, almost half of the youth surveyed had traded sex for money drugs, food or shelter, and only slightly fewer reported no or inconsistent condom use.”

Predictors of Self-Reported Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among Homeless and Runaway Adolescents

TYLER, KIMBERLY, A.; WHITBECK, LES, B.; HOYT, DAN, R.; YODER, KEVIN, A. JOURNAL OF SEX RESEARCH, NOVEMBER 2000

Surveying 602 homeless youth, the goal of this study was to identify potential risk factors for sexually transmitted diseases among homeless youth. The variables hypothesized to be predictors include: family abuse, amount of time spent on their own, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors (survival sex, multiple partners, and condom use) and associating with friends who sold sex.

The hypotheses included:

1. Family abuse would be related to the amount of time youth spent on their own. (Supported)
2. Family abuse would be related to higher levels of substance abuse and with youth spending time with deviant peers who trade sex, thus creating risk for STDs. (Supported)
3. The amount of time youth spent on their own would be positively related to higher rates of substance abuse (Not supported). The author suggests that these youth were most likely engaging in substance abuse prior to leaving home.
4. Spending more time on their own would be associated with engaging with friends who sold sex (Supported).
5. Those spending more time on their own would be at higher risk of engaging in risky sexual behaviors and having multiple sex partners (Supported).

6. Substance abuse would be related to risky sexual behaviors (Supported).
7. Youth who associate with friends who sold sex would be related to engaging in risky sexual behaviors themselves (Supported).
8. Youth who traded sex and had multiple sex partners increases risk for health-related problems, including STDs (Supported).

In sum, family abuse significantly correlated with all the variables hypothesized and were viewed as predictors for risk of STDs. Substance abuse was related to associating with friends who sold sex, with risky sexual behaviors and consequently with higher rates of STDs. Finally, having friends who sold sex increased the likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors themselves, resulting in higher rates of STDs.

“In sum, family abuse significantly correlated with all the variables hypothesized and were viewed as predictors for risk of STDs.”

Correlates of Resilience in Homeless Adolescents

REW, LYNN; TAYLOR-SEEHAFER, MARGARET; THOMAS, NANCY Y.; YOCKEY, RONALD D. JOURNAL OF NURSING SCHOLARSHIP (2001) 33(1) 33-40.

This study had two purposes: 1) to identify the reasons that youth leave home, and 2) to examine the role resilience and connectedness play as a protective factor against risk for homeless adolescents.

Resilience was defined as the capacity of individuals to cope successfully with significant change, adversity or risk. Loneliness was defined as being disconnected from meaningful social relationships. Life-threatening behaviors included such behaviors as suicide and attempted suicide. Connectedness is related to social support and a belief that people care about your well-being.

“Results indicated that 51% left home because of being thrown out, 37% left because their parents disapproved of their drug use, and 31% left home because of parental abuse. 47% indicated that they were sexually abused with females reporting significantly higher rates than males.”

Using a battery of scales that measured resilience, loneliness, hopelessness, social connection, and life-threatening behaviors, the researchers sampled 59 homeless youth ages 15-22 of which 38 were male, 20 were female and one did not identify gender. 38% identified as gay, lesbian, homosexual or bisexual.

Results indicated that 51% left home because of being thrown out, 37% left because their

parents disapproved of their drug use, and 31% left home because of parental abuse. 47% indicated that they were sexually abused with females reporting significantly higher rates than males. Those who reported sexual abuse had significantly higher loneliness scores. Findings also indicated that a lack of resilience significantly related to feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, engaging in more life-threatening behaviors and low levels of connectedness. In other words, those with resilience tended to feel less lonely, less hopeless, and engage in fewer life-threatening behaviors.

Although resiliency was considered a protective factor against risk, unexpectedly, it was also related to feelings of isolation and loneliness. The authors postulate that although resilient, these adolescents learn to be extremely self-reliant leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation. They also consider the idea that resilience in homeless youth may be a different phenomenon than for youth who are connected with family and other social institutions, leaving room for more formal research to be done on this topic.

“Those who reported sexual abuse had significantly higher loneliness scores.”

How Runaway and Homeless Youth Navigate Troubled Waters: Personal Strengths and Resources

LINDSEY, ELIZABETH W.; KURTZ, P. DAVID; JARVIS, SARA; WILLIAMS, NANCY R.; & NACKERUD, LARRY. *CHILD AND ADOLESCENT SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL* (APRIL 2000) 17(2) 115-139.

The authors note that while there is a vast body of research analyzing the reasons for, and consequences of, youth homelessness, less is known about how some are able to overcome those challenges and make the transition into successful adults, thus becoming the focus of this study.

With the assistance of focus groups, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed that included questions regarding demographic information; past hardships, ways they overcame those hardships, turning points in their lives; current situation; definition of success; and future hopes and plans. To be eligible, participants had to be between the ages of 18–25, and had to have stayed in a youth shelter, group home, or other alternative living arrangement as an adolescent, but not within the past two years.

“Most notable was the recognition of how their own personal strengths and internal attributes served as key factors to successful transition as well as the importance of developing a sense of spirituality.”

The major factors for successful transition included: changing attitudes/behaviors and learning new things about themselves and learning from the resources and help given received by others. The new attitudes and behaviors perceived to be important were self-confidence, self-care strategies, learning to love and respect who they are and goal-setting. In relation to learning from others, being more considerate, taking

responsibility for their actions, distinguishing right from wrong, getting along with others, learning to trust others, accepting help, learning from past mistakes, becoming better judges of character and avoiding bad influences were influential contributors. Most notable was the recognition of how their own personal strengths and internal attributes served as key factors to successful transition as well as the importance of developing a sense of spirituality.

Although the authors cite some inherent limitations of this study, overall, it was an interesting one, in that it outlined how former homeless and runaway youth effected positive changes in their lives. Additionally, recognition and internalization of their own personal strengths and internal power can become the basis for continued successful transition. Lastly, understanding these “strength-based” characteristics has implications for intervention and prevention strategies for other homeless youth.

Did You Know That...?

- 1 in 7 youth between the ages of 10 and 18 will run away. (National Runaway Switchboard. www.nrscrisisline.org).
- Some will return within a few days, others remain on the streets never to return. (National Runaway Switchboard. www.nrscrisisline.org).
- 1.3 million youth are on the street every day. (National Runaway Switchboard. www.nrscrisisline.org).
- 75% of runaways are female. (National Runaway Switchboard. www.nrscrisisline.org).
- The National Runaway Switchboard handles more than 100,000 phone calls each year. (National Runaway Switchboard. www.nrscrisisline.org).
- On a national level, approximately 39% of the homeless population are children (Urban Institute 2000).
- 46% of runaway and homeless youth reported being physically abused, 17% reported being sexually exploited and 38% reported being emotionally abused. (US Department of Health and Human Services).
- 162,000 homeless youth are estimated to be victims of commercial sexual exploitation in the US (Estes, R. & Weiner, N. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico." University of Pennsylvania, 2001).
- 30% of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation. (Estes, R. & Weiner, N. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico." University of Pennsylvania, 2001).
- 12 - 14 is the average age of entry into prostitution for girls under 17. (Estes, R. & Weiner, N. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico." University of Pennsylvania, 2001).
- 11 - 13 is the average age of entry into prostitution for boys under 17. (Estes, R. & Weiner, N. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico." University of Pennsylvania, 2001).
- The US is one of the countries of destination of women and children trafficked for the sex industry, with estimates ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 per year. There are between 90,000 and 300,000 prostituted minors in the US.
- Girls between 13 and 18 years of age constitute the largest group within the sex industry. 1 to 2 million women and children are trafficked each year, from less developed to industrialized countries.

Sources for Trafficking Data: USCCB Office of Pro-Life Activities, USCCB Office of Migration and Refugee Services, Stop Trafficking! Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter, JPIC Trafficking in Women and Children Information and Workshop Kit, UNICEF, UN Commission on Human Rights

Additional Resources

Websites

National Coalition for the Homeless
1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, #600
Washington, DC 20005-3471
Phone: 202.737.6444 | Fax: 202.737.6445
Email: info@nationalhomeless.org

National Alliance to End Homelessness
1518 K Street NW, Suite 206
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 638-1526
naeh@naeh.org

National Runaway Switchboard
3080 N. Lincoln Ave.
Chicago, IL 60657
773-880-9860
info@nrscrisisline.org

Books

Running for Their Lives: Physical and Sexual Abuse of Runaway Adolescents: Children of Poverty by Lesley A. Welsh, Francis X. Archambault, Mark-David Janus, Scott Brown
Garland Publishing; 1995

Understanding Survivors of Abuse: Stories of Homeless and Runaway Adolescents
by Jane Powers and Barbara Jaklitsch: The Free Press, 1989

The Impact of Multiple Childhood Trauma on Homeless Runaway Adolescents by Michael DiPaolo: New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1999.

Runaway Kids and Teenage Prostitution: America's Lost, Abandoned, and Sexually Exploited Children by R. Barri Flowers, Praeger Paperback; (June 30, 2001)

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state, national, and systemic level. In addition, I chose to include two articles that focus on resiliency and other characteristics that enabled some of these youth to make the successful transition into adulthood.

During the course of gathering research for this Digest, it should be noted that I was unsuccessful in securing research focusing on promising approaches or best practices for prevention strategies or research documenting how this issue pertains to disenfranchised communities including people of color and those with disabilities, leaving their voices and experiences unheard. This lack of research indicates that there is still much more work to be done. I was successful however, in finding research pertaining to the GLBT community as this community comprises a disproportionately high rate of the homeless population.

Although this Research and Advocacy Digest provides only a brief snapshot of the issues, I hope that it will provide you with a broader understanding and perspective into this complex problem and that it will help inform your work as advocates, therapists and prevention specialists working to end sexual violence for all people in all its forms. Good luck and keep on fighting.

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