



Predicting illegal income generation among homeless male and female young adults: Understanding strains and responses to strains



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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender differences among homeless young adults' engagement in illegal economic activity (i.e., panhandling, selling drugs, survival sex, gambling, theft). A purposive sample of 601 homeless young adults (ages 18–24) was recruited from three U.S. cities (Los Angeles, CA [$n = 200$], Austin, TX [$n = 200$], and Denver, CO [$n = 201$]) to participate in semi-structured interviews. General strain theory was used to identify predictors of illegal economic activity, including strains (childhood abuse, street victimization, length of homelessness, transience) and responses to strain (deviant peer associations, substance use, post-traumatic stress disorder, arrest history). The full hypothesized path models for males and females separately were tested using observed-variable path analysis. Among females, a greater variety of illegal income sources was reported by those who had experienced greater street victimization and who had used a greater number of substances in the past year. Among males, a greater variety of illegal income sources was reported by those who had more deviant peer associations, experienced greater street victimization, and used a greater number of substances in the past year. Findings have implications for research and preventive interventions to address engagement in illegal economic activity among male and female homeless young adults.

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1. Introduction

Homeless youth are reportedly more likely than their housed peers to be involved in illegal activities to generate income, such as theft, prostitution, and drug possession, use, and sales (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). Prior research has described their illegal income generation as a survival mechanism associated with situational factors or strains related to their homeless experience (e.g., childhood abuse prior to leaving home, victimization once homeless, transience, and extended homelessness; Baron, 2004; Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2012; Whitbeck, 2009). In contrast, other research has identified their involvement in illegal activities as a maladaptive coping response to these challenging life circumstances, along with deviant peer associations, substance use, mental illness, and criminal activity (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, & Matsueda, 1993). In both cases, participating in illicit economic activities can result from homelessness strains as well as responses to these strains; yet to date, it remains unclear how strains and responses to strains interact to influence illegal work.

The extant literature also identifies gender differences in the types of illegal economic activities in which these youth participate. Previous studies suggest males are more likely to earn income through criminal activity whereas females are more likely to work in the sex trade economy (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Robinson & Baron, 2007). Although research indicates that males and females participate in different illegal activities to generate income, to date it also is not clear which specific risk factors contribute to their decisions to engage in illegal work. At present, questions remain as to whether male and female homeless young people follow different trajectories in their homeless experiences that ultimately culminate in their involvement in illegal economic activity. Understanding these factors might inform customizing employment interventions for this population that acknowledge the interactions among strains and responses to strains and that transfer their illicit survival behaviors to safe and stable formal employment. Thus, the purpose of this study was to use general strain theory to understand the processes through which male and female homeless young adults in three U.S. cities engage in illegal income generation.

2. General strain theory

General strain theory claims that life presents individuals with various strains and stressors, which can result in negative emotional responses that can lead to engaging in criminal activities (Agnew, 1992).

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Specifically, this theory focuses on negative or inequitable relationships, such as those produced by childhood abuse and neglect, and how these strains contribute to involvement in criminal behaviors (Baron, 2004). The frequent dysfunctional and abusive families of homeless young people constitute highly negative and inequitable environments that may result in emotional responses of anger, aggression, and resentment (Baron, 2004; Whitbeck, 2009). It is likely that such life strains contribute to these youths' decisions to initially leave home (Thompson, McManus, & Voss, 2006).

General strain theory also claims that individuals possess aspirations and expectations of achievement and that criminal behavior can result from discrepancies between their internal expectations and actual achievements (Agnew, 1992). When individuals cannot attain goals they have internalized—in particular when such goals are reinforced by societal or cultural norms (e.g., educational achievement, employment)—they also experience strains. These individuals might in turn choose to engage in illicit activities to accomplish their goals (when legal means fail) or to cope with their inability to accomplish such goals. With respect to homeless young people, they often have low educational levels and limited employment skills, which can make it difficult to attain socially reinforced educational and employment goals (Whitbeck, 2009). To meet their subsistence needs, these youth might instead turn to informal sources of income (i.e., survival behaviors), which can be both legal (e.g., selling their blood/plasma, possessions, and recycled items) and illegal (e.g., prostitution, theft, and selling drugs; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

The theory further suggests that some illegal activities function as coping strategies in response to life strains. Examples of such maladaptive coping responses include illegal drug use and violent behavior, which serve to relieve or minimize the emotional or legal severity of strains and provide a means of distraction and/or retaliation for strains (Agnew, 1992; Baron, 2004). Homeless young people experience myriad strains—many of which are chronic—including childhood abuse, victimization, food and shelter insecurity, and transience. These stressful experiences can lead many youth to develop maladaptive coping strategies such as associating with deviant peer groups for kinship and protection, using illegal substances, and participating in criminal activity that might lead to arrests (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999).

In the case of homeless youth, this theoretical understanding highlights a constellation of interacting strains (e.g., childhood abuse, street victimization, extended homelessness, transience), which can lead to negative reactions (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and other mental health challenges), and the development of maladaptive coping responses (e.g., deviant peer associations, substance use, and criminal activity), which might ultimately result in illegal economic activity. Although extant research indicates that homeless youth experience myriad strains (Baron, 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 1997), few studies have used causal models to examine the relationships between and among variables derived from general strain theory (i.e., strains and responses to strains) and how they collectively influence illegal economic activities. To fill this gap, this study used observed-variable path analysis to examine illegal income generation among male and female homeless young adults in relation to various oft-cited strains and responses to strains. The strains include childhood abuse, street victimization, extended homelessness, and transience. Such strains might lead to responses to cope with strains, such as associating with deviant peers, using illegal substances, manifesting symptoms of PTSD, and developing an arrest history. These strains and responses to strains are each discussed below.

2.1. Strains

2.1.1. Childhood abuse

Considerable evidence indicates that serious childhood maltreatment and family discord occur within families of runaway and homeless youth (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, &

Yoder, 2006; Stewart et al., 2004; Whitbeck, 2009; Whitbeck et al., 1999). Homeless youth often leave home to escape maltreatment (Kim, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Huang, 2009; Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006). Approximately 84% of homeless youth screen positive for either physical or sexual abuse prior to becoming homeless (Fisher, Florsheim, & Sheetz, 2005; Keeshin & Campbell, 2011), whereas 42% screen positive for both (Keeshin & Campbell, 2011). As a history of physical or sexual abuse is a strong correlate of criminal behavior (Baron, 2004), it is likely that this highly vulnerable group of maltreated young people would engage in illegal behaviors to earn income.

2.1.2. Street victimization

Research suggests that once on the streets, youth who remain for longer periods of time are at greater risk for victimization (Tyler & Beal, 2010; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). Strains from living on the street are commonplace among homeless youth, especially experiences of various types of assault and victimization (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001). In one sample, as many as 83% of homeless youth reported experiencing direct physical or sexual assault, such as rape or assault with a weapon (Stewart et al., 2004). Homeless youth, especially females, are highly susceptible to street victimization (Kushel, Yen, Gee, & Courtney, 2007), as they often live in precarious and dangerous situations.

2.1.3. Length of homelessness

The longer young people remain homeless, the more they become entrenched in a street lifestyle characterized by inequitable and abusive relationships and interactions (Tyler & Johnson, 2006). Engaging in street life, combined with disengaging from societally valued expectations (e.g., academic and employment achievement, economic self-sufficiency), is associated with illegal behavior (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997). Increased exposure to and interactions with homeless peers facilitate acculturation to the streets and greater involvement in the street economy (Fest, 2003). As a result, homeless youth who are embedded in inequitable relationships and who remain unstably housed may turn to illegal economic activities for survival or to cope with the daily stressors of a street lifestyle (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Whitbeck et al., 1999). Extended homelessness constitutes a strain in homeless youths' lives as it influences their identities, needs, and goals while distancing them from the norms and expectations valued by traditional society (Baron, 2004).

2.1.4. Transience

High levels of transience may be related to engaging in varying degrees of illegal activity, given that geographic mobility prohibits stable employment and housing (Ferguson, Bender, & Thompson, 2013). Transient youth, by virtue of repeatedly moving from place to place, may be less likely than more stably housed and homeless youth to establish relationships with traditional institutions or to adopt traditional values. The lack of connections with trusted peers and adults, combined with negative interactions with street-involved individuals, may lead to an inability to provide for daily needs, resulting in engagement in the street economy to meet those needs (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Constant relocation may also exacerbate strains associated with homelessness, including food insecurity, precarious housing, and hyper-vigilance concerning personal safety and belongings. Traveling homeless youth must locate safe places to sleep, supportive peers, and resources in each city (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Thus, the strains associated with greater time homeless and high transience are likely associated with engaging in illegal behaviors.

2.2. Responses to strains

2.2.1. Deviant peer associations

Homeless young people are commonly involved with "street families" comprised of their peers, who provide each other with physical

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