



Psychosocial characteristics and service needs of Canadian suburban male youth at risk for homelessness



Julie L. Wershler, Scott T. Ronis*

Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick, 38 Dineen Drive, Keirstead Hall, Fredericton, New Brunswick E3B-5A3, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Homeless youth represent a tremendously underserved population. Using participatory research methods, a self-report needs assessment was conducted with 187 male, suburban youth (16 to 18 years old) who were homeless or were vulnerable to homelessness. Over half of the participants indicated that they had been or currently were homeless, and generally reported serious problems regarding mental health, self-esteem, delinquency, substance use, family relationships, traumatic experiences, and scholastic achievement. Approximately one-third of the participants reported no service use (despite endorsing a variety of needs). The most common type of service used was therapy or counseling, particularly for those individuals who had been on probation. Implications of research findings, including recommendations for services to address the needs of the study population, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Youth homelessness is a widespread and substantial problem for affected individuals as well as for society more broadly. Specifically, estimates in Canada indicate that approximately 65,000 youth are homeless during a given year (Raising the Roof, 2009) and that one in five people who are homeless is less than 18 years old (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter & Gulliver, 2013). According to a recent estimate in the United States (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012), 380,000 individuals under the age of 18 experienced homelessness for at least one week during the previous year. Furthermore, it is important to note that these figures are likely underestimates of the actual incidence of homelessness among youth due to the substantial challenge in identifying youth who may not live on the streets, stay in homeless shelters, or access community services, but who still have unstable or transient living situations (e.g., couch surf, stay in temporary housing). This may be particularly apparent in non-urban communities that have few or no specialized services for homeless youth. To decrease rates of youth homelessness, it is imperative to understand the characteristics and needs of this often hidden and underrepresented population.

Research has increasingly focused on understanding the course of youth homelessness (e.g., Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2012). However, given the challenges in identifying homeless youth (Carlson,

Sugano, Millstein & Auerswald, 2006; van den Bree et al., 2009), it has been difficult to understand possible predictors and sequelae of homelessness. Despite these challenges, mental health problems, substance use, experiencing abuse or other trauma, negative family relationships, and academic difficulties have been identified as risk factors for homelessness in the research literature (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2012; Hyde, 2005; Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys, 2005; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Youth transitioning out of the foster care system may also be at specific risk for experiencing homelessness, often due to limited financial and social supports to help them live independently (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2012). Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005), youth homelessness is most likely to occur when a combination of individual (e.g., genetics, personality, individual adjustment) and environmental risk factors (e.g., family relations, peer relations, academic performance, social and cultural norms, governmental policies) interact.

Youth who are homeless are at risk for substance dependence, victimization in multiple forms, and internalizing and externalizing problems (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Dadds, Braddock, Cuers, Elliott & Kelly, 1993; Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2012; Keeshin & Campbell, 2011; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). Furthermore, homelessness is associated with poor academic achievement, poor physical health (e.g., sexually transmitted infections), and involvement in the criminal justice system (Cameron, Racine, Offord & Cairney, 2004; Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2012). These difficulties often have long-term residual impacts, which are compounded by the fact that few homeless youth seek help for their concerns (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2012). When considered in combination with the high financial costs to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 506 458 7804; fax: +1 506 447 3063.
E-mail address: sronis@unb.ca (S.T. Ronis).

society of homelessness (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; McLaughlin, 2011), there is a clear rationale for identifying at-risk youth and targeting risk factors to prevent homelessness.

1.1. Service utilization of homeless youth

The limited research on service utilization of homeless youth suggests that many individuals use available services, particularly shelters, drop-in centers, street outreach, primary health care, and food services (Dawson & Jackson, 2013; DeRosa et al., 1999; Kort-Butler & Tyler, 2012; Pergamit & Ernst, 2010). However, this research has focused predominantly on the experience of older youth living in urban settings. A “service gap” has been noted as often existing between child and adult service systems; specifically, this refers to a lack of continuity between the types of services available to youth and adults, and a lack of assistance to youth as they transition between these systems (Davis, 2003). In some cases, due to arbitrary age cut-offs, youth between the ages of 16 and 18 years are not able to access child services, but are not yet old enough to be served through the adult system. This is of cause for concern because it places older adolescents at risk to fall through the cracks, and not receive needed services. It is likely that the “service gap” is greater in suburban settings where there are fewer available services (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Richard, 2008).

1.2. The present study

The general purpose of the present study was to conduct a descriptive needs assessment with suburban, male youth 16 to 18 years old who had been or who were vulnerable to homelessness. Specifically, the three objectives were to identify: 1) potential needs of male youth who have experienced homelessness or who are vulnerable to homelessness; 2) services typically used by these individuals; and 3) additional services perceived to be of benefit. Due to the difficulty in finding and recruiting a sample of this nature, and to capture youth who may not access traditional services, a participatory (action) research methodology was used. Consistent with an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), we examined individual factors (e.g., psychological problems, substance use), family relationships, peer relationships, social support, traumatic experiences, school performance, and use of community services. Based on previous research with at-risk youth in urban centers, it was hypothesized that youth in the present study would endorse difficulties across a number of key domains. No specific predictions were made in terms of service utilization patterns or desired additional services, due to the limited research on service needs of homeless youth in general, particularly in suburban settings.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Consistent with the U.S. Department of Education (2000) guidelines on youth homelessness, individuals were classified as homeless if they were: living in shelters, on the streets, or in abandoned buildings or in other facilities unfit for human habitation; without an adequate home base (stable, with appropriate shelter and amenities) that serves as a permanent home; or living with friends or relatives because they cannot stay at home. In addition, consistent with the literature on youth homelessness (e.g., Cameron, Racine, Offord & Cairney, 2004; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Keeshin & Campbell, 2011), individuals were considered to be vulnerable to homelessness if they: had previously been homeless (based on the previously mentioned guidelines); had a history of running away from home; had a history of abuse; or were involved in serious criminal activity.

In total, 187 male youth, aged 16 to 18 years ($M = 17.12$, $SD = 0.74$), participated in the study. Participants were Caucasian (73.1%), First Nations/Metis (14.3%), Black (3.8%), and other race (8.8%), which is

disproportionate to the predominately Caucasian population of the study location (Fredericton, New Brunswick). In regard to current employment, the majority of the participants (59.1%) were unemployed, followed by part-time (32.2%) and full-time (8.8%) employments. The participants reported coming from families where their biological parents were married (40.0%), divorced or separated (24.2%), never married (24.8%), widowed (7.3%), cohabitating (2.4%), or remarried (1.2%). Reported parental unemployment rates were 36.3% for mothers and 22.4% for fathers. When asked about vulnerability factors, a significant proportion of the participants endorsed experiencing current or prior homelessness (50.5%), running away from home (64.3%), prior or current involvement with Child Protective Services (18.2%), and being on probation (59.8%), with the majority of the participants endorsing multiple factors. In addition, 12.5% of the participants indicated that they had dropped out of school.

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Participatory research

This study utilized an approach known as participatory (action) research, which focuses on involving members from the target population (i.e., vulnerable male youth) in the research process. This approach has previously been used with some homeless youth populations (e.g., Farrin, Cheers, Jones & Venning, 2004; Garcia, Minkler, Cardenas, Grills & Porter, 2014) and has been acknowledged for its ability to empower youth, as well as to substantially inform research findings by more accurately capturing the experience of youth (Jacquez, Vaughn & Wagner, 2013). In addition, research partnerships with youth increase the chance that the research will be considered relevant to target youth populations (Jacquez, Vaughn & Wagner, 2013). In the present study, three members of the study population were utilized to help recruit participants and collect data. These youth Research Assistants (RAs) were recruited through community organizations and completed one week of training (i.e., 20 h) in basic research methods and interviewing skills prior to beginning data collection. In addition, ongoing supervision and training was provided in the field on a daily basis. To compensate them for their work (approximately 15 h per week), RAs received a bi-weekly stipend (\$175), in the form of gift cards to local stores. They also received a monthly bus pass for the duration of the project.

2.2.2. Recruitment

The study was advertised online and by posters in the community. In addition, staff at various youth-oriented organizations in the area were asked to refer eligible youth. However, the overwhelming majority of the participants were recruited by the RAs through word-of-mouth and by approaching them in the community to discuss the study. Potential participants were screened by either one of the researchers (for participants recruited through the advertisements or community organizations) or one of the RAs (for participants approached in the community) to verify that they met study inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria included being male, 16 to 18 years old, and endorsing either current or past homelessness (based on the definition of homelessness provided in Section 2.1) or one of the other vulnerability factors (i.e., history of running away from home, experiencing abuse, or serious criminal activity). If an individual was deemed eligible to participate, the study protocol was discussed and informed consent was obtained. Although parental consent is typically required for individuals under 18 years of age, it was recognized that this would not be appropriate for all members of our study population, due to highly conflictual or estranged family relationships. Therefore, although all the participants were asked if the researchers could seek parental consent, individuals were able to provide their own consent. This procedure was approved by the institutional Research Ethics Board.

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