



# Individual and social network sexual behavior norms of homeless youth at high risk for HIV infection

Kimberly A. Tyler <sup>a,\*</sup>, Lisa A. Melander <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Department of Sociology, United States

<sup>b</sup> Kansas State University, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Although previous research shows that homeless youth engage in numerous risky sexual behaviors, little is known about whether or not specific rules govern this conduct within their social networks and how group norms influence subsequent sexual actions. The current study utilizes 19 in-depth interviews with homeless youth to investigate different elements of their sexual behavior. Findings reveal that their decision to have sex generally depends on chemistry and physical appearance whereas a potential partner's risky sexual history and heavy substance use discourages youth from engaging in sex. Both males and females discuss condom usage as it relates to unknown sexual history, availability, pregnancy, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Sixteen homeless youth indicate that they do not discuss safe sex practices with their partners or social network members.

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## 1. Introduction

Young people ages 13 to 24 are at high risk for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection, and within this age group, racial/ethnic minorities, females, and gay and bisexual youth are at particularly high risk (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Because many homeless youth participate in drug and sexual risk behaviors, often with their social network members and other street individuals, they are also at significantly greater risk for STIs and HIV (Kipke, Unger, Palmer, Iverson, & O'Connor, 1998; Rice, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2007; Tyler, 2008) compared to general populations.

Although quantitative studies have documented that homeless youth engage in risky sexual behaviors such as unprotected sex, having multiple sexual partners, and trading sex (Bailey, Camlin, & Ennett, 1998; Halcon & Lifson, 2004; Rew, Grady, Whittaker, & Bowman, 2008; Tevendale, Lightfoot, & Slocum, 2009), these studies do not examine the norms that exist within their social networks regarding safe sex practices. Studying peer group norms are critical because if social networks as a whole are aware of the risks associated with inconsistent condom use, the group members may practice safe sex behavior. In contrast, those who belong to social networks where the norms regarding safe sexual practices are absent may be at greater risk. We use a qualitative approach to explore perceived norms of sexual activity within homeless youths' peer groups in order to understand their views regarding safe sex practices. It is also our hope that this information

will be useful to service providers and work toward changing homeless youths' social network norms regarding safe sex through community, media, and street outreach initiatives thereby potentially reducing their risk for HIV infection.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Child sexual abuse and street survival strategies

There are several correlates of unsafe sexual behavior that are related to the lifestyles and experiences of homeless youth that are widely encountered by this population. For example, child sexual abuse among homeless youth has been linked to unsafe sexual practices (Johnson, Aschkenasy, Herbers, & Gillenwater, 1996; Rotheram-Borus, Mahler, Koopman, & Langabeer, 1996; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000) including low rates of condom usage and multiple sex partners (Bailey et al., 1998; Halcon & Lifson, 2004; Johnson et al., 1996; MacKellar et al., 2000; Rew et al., 2008; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001), both of which place youth at higher risk for STIs and HIV (Kipke et al., 1998; Rice et al., 2007; Tyler, 2008). Additionally, sexual survival strategies among some homeless youth include trading sex for food, shelter, money, or drugs (Tyler & Johnson, 2004; Van Leeuwen et al., 2004) and this behavior, along with high rates of substance use also places young people at greater risk for contracting STIs and HIV (American Public Human Services Association, 1999; Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992). Though this quantitative research has demonstrated an association between sexual abuse and trading sex with risky sexual behaviors, these studies do not reveal why some homeless youth practice safe sex whereas others do not.

\* Corresponding author at: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Department of Sociology, 717 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0324, United States. Tel.: +1 402 472 6073; fax: +1 402 472 6070.

E-mail address: [kim@ktresearch.net](mailto:kim@ktresearch.net) (K.A. Tyler).

## 2.2. Social networks

Social networks, which are generally composed of people with whom an individual regularly associates and spends the majority of their time (Tyler, 2008), have been found to influence the behaviors of homeless youth. Young people enter these groups by choice, chance, coercion, or for protection (Cairns, Leung, & Cairns, 1995; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), and the attitudes and norms of the group may be beneficial or detrimental to the homeless young person. If network norms are consistent with risky sexual behavior, then members of the group may be less likely to endorse safe sex practices such as condom usage during sex. For example, Rice, Stein, and Milburn (2008) found that homeless youth who had more network members engaging in HIV risk behaviors personally had increased sexual risk taking activities.

## 2.3. Theoretical framework

According to social norms theory (Perkins, 2002), people generally do not accurately report the frequency with which their peers engage in risky behaviors such as unsafe sex and that these misperceptions have an effect on the person's own behavior. That is, if the youth thinks the behavior occurs more frequently than it really does, the result is that s/he is more likely to engage in this behavior (Martens et al., 2006). Thus, if homeless youth believe that their social network members rarely use condoms when having sex, then homeless youth themselves are likely to engage in unsafe sex.

## 2.4. Current study

Despite the inherent risks, individuals often adhere to the attitudes and behaviors of their social networks to avoid sanctions for non-conformity (Fisher, 1988), and homeless youth whose social networks are not supportive of preventative HIV risk behavior may participate in a greater number of unsafe sexual practices. Research finds that social networks that include other homeless youth are more likely to engender risk because of the high rate of substance use and risky sexual behaviors found among these individuals (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Tyler & Johnson, 2004; Tyler, Whitbeck, Chen, & Johnson, 2007; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Moreover, homeless youth who participate in these activities generally have friends who engage in similar practices (Kipke et al., 1998). Thus, to fill an important gap in the literature and to better understand the social environment and individual decision making process of homeless youth as it relates to sexual practices and related behaviors within their social networks, we considered the following research questions: 1) What attitudes or norms influence homeless youths' decisions to have sex? 2) What are the norms surrounding condom use? 3) What are the ways in which homeless youth discuss safe sex practices within their peer group?

## 3. Design and methods

### 3.1. Sample

The qualitative data for the present study are from the Social Network and Homeless Youth Project, a larger study designed to examine the effect of social network characteristics on homeless youths' HIV risk behaviors. A total of 249 homeless youth (137 females; 112 males) participated in quantitative interviews in shelters and on the streets from January 2008 to March 2009 in three Midwestern cities in the United States. The same three interviewers conducted both the quantitative and qualitative interviews.

### 3.2. Data collection

We selected three female interviewers, with prior quantitative and qualitative interview experience with homeless youth, to conduct the

interviews because of their extensive work with homeless youth in shelter, street outreach, and research settings. Additionally, because two interviewers had previously worked at two of the sampled shelters and one interviewer was currently employed with a third agency, they were known and trusted by many of the participants. Furthermore, the interviewers routinely attended "group sessions" in the evenings with homeless youth, which further enhanced their rapport with the young people. All interviewers completed the Collaborative Institutional Review Board (IRB) Training Initiative course for the protection of human subjects in research. Selection criteria for the larger study required participants to be between the ages of 14 and 21 and meet our definition of runaway or homeless. *Runaway* refers to youth under age 18 who have spent the previous night away from home without the permission of parents or guardians. *Homeless youth* are those who have spent the previous night with a stranger, in a shelter or public place, on the street, in a hotel room, staying with friends (e.g., couch surfing), or other places not intended as their resident domicile (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999).

Participants for the *qualitative interviews* were selected from the original sample of 249 to represent different gender, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation groups using a purposive sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After the completion of the quantitative survey instrument, interviewers selected youth from these different demographic groups to participate in an in-depth interview that was conducted approximately one week later. Interviewers were instructed to oversample racial/ethnic and sexual minorities because they are at greater risk for acquiring HIV (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002a; 2002b), which was the focus of the larger research project. All selected youth participated in these qualitative interviews. Interviewers gave the youth a card with their name and phone number along with the day and time for the in-depth interview. Youth were allowed to use shelter agency telephones to contact interviewers if they needed to reschedule the appointment. They were paid \$30 for completing the qualitative interview which lasted approximately 1 to 1 1/2 h. All in-depth interviews took place in a private room at the shelters. Informed consent was obtained from all youth prior to the interview. Interviewers offered agency services or referrals to all youth (e.g., shelter, food services, and counseling). Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, and all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used to preserve confidentiality. The university IRB approved this study.

### 3.3. Interviewer guide

The guide for the qualitative interviews consisted of open-ended questions and probes that expounded upon topics in the quantitative survey where youth could list up to five people that they see or spend most of their time with as well as three people they had sexual relations with in the past six months for a total of eight social network members. The sexual partners could be people on their original network list of five or new ones not previously mentioned. In either scenario, sexual partners listed are considered part of the youth's social network. This approach has been used in past research on social networks and high-risk populations of similar age (Montgomery et al., 2002). The qualitative interviews began with the following statement: "Today I would like to talk with you in-depth about the same people that you told me about last time we did your other interview." As a reminder, youth were then given a card with the initials of the people that they discussed in the survey.

### 3.4. Data analysis

All data analyses were performed by the authors. The interview transcriptions were imported into ATLAS.ti, a data management software program (Muhr, 2004) by the second author. The first step in

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