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Children and Youth Services Review

Understanding organizations for runaway and homeless youth: A multi-setting quantitative study of their characteristics and effects

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1. Introduction

Runaway and homeless youth (RHY) are young people between 13 and 24 years of age who have run away from or been forced to leave their homes, who reside without parental/guardian supervision in temporary situations, places not intended for habitation, or emergency shelters (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000). Although precise figures are lacking, as many as 2.8 million youth are estimated to be homeless in the U.S. each year (Cooper, 2006; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). Many of these young people return home within a week, but a substantial proportion remain out-of-home for substantial periods of time, or even permanently (Tevendale, Comulada, & Lightfoot, 2011).

It is well documented that RHY experience high rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, other traumas, and chronic stress throughout their lifespans. However, they have only minimal involvement in the systems and settings that typically foster and protect young people, such as supportive families, pro-social peers, safe communities, and schools (Bao, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000; Gwadz et al., 2009; Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2007). As a result, RHY evidence high rates of serious relational, mental health, physical health, psychosocial, and behavioral problems. These problems, in turn, place them at grave risk for adverse long-term outcomes, including chronic unemployment, entrenchment in the street economy (e.g., drug dealing, transactional sex/being trafficked), hazardous substance use, incarceration, adult homelessness, unstable relationships, poor health, and even early mortality (Cleverley & Kidd, 2011; Gwadz et al., 2010; Tucker, Edelen, Ellickson, & Klein, 2011). African American/Black and Hispanic young people, those with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual sexual orientations, and individuals with transgender gender identities are over-represented among RHY compared to the general population (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014). These minority group statuses influence youths' patterns of risk, in part due to aspects of the larger environment, such as youth from these minority groups facing a greater likelihood of being stopped by police among compared to their White, heterosexual, and/or gender normative peers (Himmelstein &

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Brückner, 2011; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). Additionally, these minority group statuses affect RHY's treatment needs (Keuroghlian et al., 2014).

Yet in the context of these serious risk factors, RHY evidence resilience—the capacity to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten an individual's stability, viability, or development (Masten, 2011). For example, leaving home is a type of coping response, and surviving out-of-home requires resourcefulness and adaptability (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001). Resilience can be fostered among those suffering adversity through structured interventions and close, supportive relationships (Ungar, 2013; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Moreover, experiencing or perceiving oneself as resilient is a potent correlate of persistence, resourcefulness, self-efficacy, and resultant positive behavioral and mental health outcomes (Sapienza & Masten, 2011). Among RHY, perceived resilience is associated with less suicidal ideation (Cleverley & Kidd, 2011) and fewer life threatening behaviors, such as attempted suicide (Rew et al., 2001). Perceived resilience may be vital for RHY because they lack the social and organizational resources available to typically developing adolescents.

1.1. Settings for RHY

Across the U.S., a network of specialized programs has emerged to locate, engage, house, support, and treat RHY. These include the Basic Center Program to provide short-term programs (30 days or less) for RHY under 18 years of age, as well as long-term programs, including Transitional Living Programs (TLP) and Drop-in Centers (DIC) (New York State Office of Children & Family Services, 2014). TLPs are supported residences where RHY can reside for up to 18 months. TLPs typically provide counseling in basic life skills, interpersonal skills building, educational advancement, job attainment skills, and physical and mental health care (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2016). DICs tend to take a "low-threshold" approach, providing a safe and supportive space that is easy to access. In DICs, RHY can socialize and rest, and receive tangible services (food, laundry, showers), mental health counseling, health services, and street outreach. DICs are appropriate for RHY who are not ready to or uninterested in entering residential or higher threshold programs, or who are waiting for a residential placement to become available. Importantly, DICs seek to engage street-based RHY who do not present for services elsewhere. Both TLPs and DICs foster the ultimate goal of preparing RHY for successful future independent living (The National Network for Youth, 2015). Yet RHY providers report funding levels for RHY programs are generally insufficient to meet need, particularly regarding housing for RHY, and further, funding levels tend not to be either stable or predictable over time (The National Network for Youth, 2013; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2016). These types of fiscal factors and constraints complicate settings' efforts to meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

In light of the grave challenges to psychosocial development RHY face throughout their lives and the difficulties inherent in engaging and treating them (Slesnick, Meyers, Meade, & Segelken, 2000), the importance of these specialized settings cannot be overstated (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010). Yet the empirical literature is scant on settings for RHY, and on settings' effects on RHY's behavioral and psychosocial functioning (Karabanow & Clement, 2004). A body of work exists on specific behavioral interventions conducted in RHY settings (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater, & Wolf, 2010; Slesnick et al., 2016), and some research has described individual programs, or a small set of programs (Altena et al., 2010; Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Pollio, Thompson, Tobias, Reid, & Spitznagel, 2006; Woods, Samples, Melchiono, & Harris, 2003). However, almost no research to date has sought to understand the characteristics of settings that serve RHY more broadly, or how settings may influence RHY's behavioral and psychosocial functioning. Yet settings for RHY are commonly called upon to demonstrate the efficacy of the specialized services they provide (Kidd,

Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007). The present study addresses these gaps in the literature.

1.2. Conceptual model

RHY programs are authorized by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, Pub. L. 93-415, Sept. 7, 1974, 88 Stat.1109 (Title 42, Sec. 5601 et seq.) (Levesque, 2011; Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009). Consistent with guidance in this Act, most RHY settings are guided by the Positive Youth Development approach (Levesque, 2011), a strengths-based model for encouraging resilience and self-sufficiency among youth, emphasizing the importance of youths' engagement in their own development and goals (Eccles & Appleton-Gootman, 2002). The Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) model (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, DuBois, & Ji, 2011; Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fischer, & Shinn, 2009) has emerged from the Positive Youth Development approach, and it provides a framework for conceptualizing and assessing the quality of out-of-school settings (e.g., after-school programs) that promote constructive development among youth. The YPQA model (Fig. 1) frames program quality into two broad categories: offering-level and organizational-level characteristics. Offering-level characteristics refer to the social processes and interactions that youth experience when they are engaged in the setting (e.g., a sense of safety or belonging). Organizational-level characteristics include expectations, policies, practices, and accessibility that support the production of high-quality youth experiences (e.g., whether policies and practices are youth-centered). The two domains correspond to the structure of the typical youth-serving organization: offerings within an organization.

1.3. The current study

This study has two main aims. First, we describe the overall quality of settings for RHY, grounded in the YPQA model. Second, we explore whether RHY in higher quality settings evidence superior functioning in a number of key behavioral and psychosocial domains, to better understand both whether RHY settings foster positive outcomes among youth and whether setting quality plays a role in RHY's outcomes. The present cross-sectional study focuses on long-term settings for RHY in a large, discrete geographical area, New York State, and on RHY aged 16 to 21 years old, referred to as "youth" and "young people" in the present paper.

As noted above (Sections 1 and 1.1), RHY tend to develop along an atypical path, and settings vary in size, structure, geographical context, and programs offered. The present study examines three behavioral outcomes critical for RHY's positive development that are also typically prioritized in long-term RHY settings: involvement in school, training, and/or work; reduced frequency of substance use; and prevention of involvement in the street economy (e.g., drug dealing, being trafficked/transactional sex, burglary). We also examine psychosocial outcomes; namely, RHY's perspectives on whether settings help them in these domains, as well as perceived resilience. We speculate RHY's perceptions that settings are helpful may have long-term beneficial effects on their engagement in other settings and relationships with professionals, and therefore, on their adaptation, and functioning. Moreover, perceived resilience is critical for the population of RHY, as described above. We hypothesized that RHY in settings of higher quality would have more favorable behavioral outcomes in these domains, be more likely to report the setting helps them achieve positive outcomes, and have greater perceived resilience. This is because, as suggested by the YPQA model, higher setting quality allows organizations to not only meet RHY's basic needs, but also move beyond these to provide higher order program offerings that engage, motivate, and build relationships with RHY, as shown in Fig. 1.