



A systematic review of associations between perpetration of physically violent behaviors and property offenses, victimization and use of substances among homeless youth



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ABSTRACT

Rates of substance use among homeless youth are considerably higher than those for youth within the general population. Homelessness may be associated with perpetration of offenses and victimization among young people. This systematic review examines whether associations exist between perpetration of offenses, victimization experiences, and substance use among homeless youth. Findings showed that youth most commonly report using alcohol, cannabinoids, and sedatives. Perpetrating and being victimized by physical and property offenses were generally associated with alcohol and marijuana use. Substance use may be a coping mechanism relied upon to deal with daily challenges experienced while homeless. Implications for future research contributing to the advancement of current intervention and prevention efforts designed to address the health concerns of homeless youth are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Homeless youth are a heterogeneous population group. For many homeless youth, the experience of family violence and childhood abuse, unemployment, lack of affordable housing (Bearsley-Smith, Bond, Littlefield, & Thomas, 2008), or transitioning from out-of-home care settings (Heerde, Hemphill, Broderick, & Florent, 2012) contributed to their being unable to live at their place of residence. According to recent studies (Heerde & Hemphill, 2013; Heerde, Hemphill, & Scholes-Balog, 2013; Heerde, Scholes-Balog, & Hemphill, in press), youth engage in and are victimized by various forms of property, physical and sexual violence while homeless. Definitive prevalence estimates for the number of homeless persons at any one time are difficult to achieve due to methodological variability (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 2008; Quilgars, Johnsen, & Pleace, 2008; Wright & Devine, 1992) and inconsistency in definitions of homelessness (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008; Wright & Devine, 1992). It is estimated that between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth 13–21 years old were homeless in the United States (US) (Terry, Bedi, & Patel, 2010), and approximately 65,000 in Canada (Raising the Roof, 2009) in 2009.

Although rates of substance use among homeless youth vary, it is apparent that rates of substance use among these youth are considerably higher than those for youth within the general population. In a nationally representative survey of runaway and homeless youth residing in federally and non-federally funded shelters in the US, Greene, Ennett, and Ringwalt (1997) found that rates of tobacco used ranged from 71 to 81% among homeless youth aged 12–21 years compared to 48% for non-homeless youth. Rates of alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine use were also substantially higher for homeless youth.

The purpose of this systematic review is to collate and appraise evidence from internationally published studies reporting associations between use of substances and either (i) perpetration of physically violent behavior or property offenses or (ii) physical or property victimization among homeless youth. Specifically, the review examines (1) the types and rates of substances used by homeless youth, and (2) whether use of substances is associated with either (i) perpetration of physically violent behavior or property offenses or (ii) physical or property victimization experiences.

1.1. Defining homelessness, perpetration of offenses, victimization experiences and substance use

1.1.1. Homelessness

Definitions of homelessness vary internationally. Homelessness is indicated not only by the absence of safe and suitable physical shelter, but also by marginalization, exposure to and possible engagement in crime, increased risk for victimization, and engagement in health-risk behaviors (including substance use). These elements are included in the current review and are encapsulated in the definition of homelessness in both the US and Canada (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2011), such that homeless persons include those who do not have occupancy at a suitable night-time residence, including individuals living directly on the streets or in spaces not intended for habitation, those in emergency shelters, and those who are provisionally accommodated (e.g. temporary accommodation) or at-risk of homelessness.

1.1.2. Perpetration of offenses and experience of victimization

To conceptualize the perpetration of offenses and experience of victimization as a result of others' behavior (referred to as victimization throughout this review paper), descriptions of offending behavior and victimization suggested by the US Department of Justice (Office of Justice Programs, 2014a,b) are utilized. *Perpetration of offenses* is defined as behavior which is performed by an individual(s) against another person(s) or their property without consent, including intentional and unwanted physical contact (e.g. hitting, punching, mugging, robbery, assault), threats to use intentional and unwanted force or physical contact (e.g. threats to harm using weapons, threatening gestures), accosting another person in an aggressive or threatening manner (collectively referred to as physically violent behavior), and theft (including shoplifting), vandalism, fraud, arson, break and enter, and receipt or trading of stolen goods (collectively referred to as property offenses). *Experience of victimization* is defined as the harm or threat of harm performed against an individual or their property and includes assault, being threatened with harm with or without the use of weapons, being physically harmed, and being mugged or robbed (collectively referred to as physical victimization), and theft or burglary and having ones' property damaged (collectively referred to as property victimization).

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