



Gender, coping strategies, homelessness stressors, and income generation among homeless young adults in three cities



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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender differences among homeless young adults' coping strategies and homelessness stressors as they relate to legal (e.g., full-time employment, selling personal possessions, selling blood/plasma) and illegal economic activity (e.g., selling drugs, theft, prostitution). A sample of 601 homeless young adults was recruited from 3 cities (Los Angeles, CA [$n = 200$], Austin, TX [$n = 200$], and Denver, CO [$n = 201$]) to participate in semi-structured interviews from March 2010 to July 2011. Risk and resilience correlates of legal and illegal economic activity were analyzed using six Ordinary Least Squares regression models with the full sample and with the female and male sub-samples. In the full sample, three variables (i.e., *avoidant coping*, *problem-focused coping*, and *mania*) were associated with legal income generation whereas eight variables (i.e., social coping, age, arrest history, transience, peer substance use, antisocial personality disorder [ASPD], substance use disorder [SUD], and *major depressive episode [MDE]*) were associated with illegal economic activity. In the female sub-sample, three variables (i.e., *problem-focused coping*, *race/ethnicity*, and *transience*) were correlated with legal income generation whereas six variables (i.e., *problem-focused coping*, *social coping*, *age*, *arrest history*, *peer substance use*, and *ASPD*) were correlated with illegal economic activity. Among males, the model depicting legal income generation was not significant yet seven variables (i.e., *social coping*, *age*, *transience*, *peer substance use*, *ASPD*, *SUD*, and *MDE*) were associated with illegal economic activity. Understanding gender differences in coping strategies and economic activity might help customize interventions aimed at safe and legal income generation for this population.

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Research on homeless young people's employment has grown over the past decade resulting in greater knowledge of their economic activities (Ferguson et al., 2012; Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002). These young people commonly earn income via combinations of formal and informal sources, the latter of which can be legal (e.g., selling self-made items, possessions, and blood/plasma) or illegal (e.g., selling drugs, theft, and prostitution; Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002). In light of cited gender bias and segregation within the formal and informal labor markets (O'Grady and Gaetz, 2004), one limitation of extant research is the lack of attention to differential effects in how male and female homeless youth generate income.

In the few studies examining the gendered nature of homeless

youth's involvement in legal and illegal economic activities, finding reveal that although male and female youth did not differ in employment status, females reported holding fewer concurrent positions and having lower incomes than males. They were also involved in different types of economic activities than males. For instance, males were more likely to report a greater number of positions at one time, higher weekly earnings, and being employed full-time—findings that are consistent with housed youth as well (Gabriel and Schmitz, 2006). Males were also more likely to earn income via criminal activity as well as through manual-labor positions. Conversely, females were more likely to work in customer service positions and in the sex trade economy (O'Grady and Gaetz, 2004; Robinson and Baron, 2007).

Although these findings highlight gender differences in homeless youth's economic activities, it remains unclear why some male and female youth engage in legal income generation whereas others choose to participate in illegal work. Prior research suggests

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that homelessness stressors (e.g., food and housing insecurity, mental illness, and limited employment skills) constitute barriers to formal employment (Dachner and Tarasuk, 2002) and are associated with illicit forms of income generation (Ferguson et al., 2011). Yet many youth experiencing these stressors participate in the formal labor market (Ferguson et al., 2012; Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002; O'Grady and Gaetz, 2004) and do not engage in illegal work.

What then buffers homeless young people from the stressors of homelessness to enable them to obtain and maintain safe and legal economic activity? Likewise, are males and females protected by different factors? Researchers studying the impact of homelessness strains on criminal behavior suggest that individual coping mechanisms might help explain why particular youth engage in illegal activity (Baron, 2004). It might be that the strategies male and female homeless young people use to cope with these stressors help explain differences in the types of economic activity they seek. To explore this supposition, this study used the risk and resilience framework to examine correlates of legal and illegal income generation by homeless young adults in three U.S. cities and how these factors vary by gender.

1. Theoretical framework

The risk and resilience framework is useful for explaining how intrapersonal and environmental risk and protective factors inhibit and promote positive youth development including the pursuit of employment. Intrapersonal and environmental risk factors increase the likelihood of problem behaviors and negative outcomes. In contrast, protective factors refer to the individual and environmental conditions that decrease the likelihood of problem behaviors or that buffer the effects of risk (Fraser et al., 1999).

Risk and protective factors are important concepts for homeless young people since many of their background factors contributing to homelessness and their ensuing experiences once homeless are associated with negative outcomes. Conversely, that many of these young people left home to avoid dysfunctional environments suggests that they possess resiliency despite surrounding adversity (Rew et al., 2001). Once homeless, they often adopt survival behaviors to cope with and adapt to their daily stressors as well as to generate income to meet their subsistence needs (Greene et al., 1999). Understanding how risk and protective factors interact in male and female homeless young adults can help them better navigate homelessness and make decisions that enable them to achieve employment and make successful transitions to adulthood.

1.1. Risk and protective factors associated with income generation

One consequence of homelessness stressors and economic marginalization is the attraction to informal (often illicit) economic activities (Baron and Hartnagel, 1997; Greene et al., 1999). Often due to labor exclusion, homeless young people engage in various informal means of legal and illegal income generation (i.e., survival behaviors) in particular the longer they remain homeless (Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002). Income generated this way might be more readily available for this transient population since survival behaviors can be used in any city, require fewer commitments and relationships with institutions, and offer immediate income (Ferguson et al., 2011). Similarly, homeless youth's involvement with substance-using peers is also a correlate of informal and illegal income generation. These networks of like-minded peers endorse substance use as a coping mechanism and commonly engage in illicit behaviors. Such illegal activities often take place in unsupervised and unsafe locations, expose homeless youth to dangerous adults and peers, and increase their risk of exploitation, trauma, and victimization (Ferguson et al., 2011; O'Grady and Gaetz, 2004).

Further, mental illness and substance use are barriers to formal employment (Bond and Drake, 2008) and correlates of illegal activity among homeless youth (Baron, 2004). As individuals with mental illness (e.g., depression, mania, and personality disorders) become disconnected from mainstream services and treatment, they can be prone to illegal acts (Silver, 2000).

In contrast, income generation from formal and legal informal sources can be protective. Homeless youth's involvement in formal employment is associated with various positive outcomes, such as stable housing and mental health treatment (Ferguson et al., 2012). Employment is particularly important to this population since it contributes to their identity formation, links them to conventional institutions, and provides income that facilitates economic self-sufficiency (Gaetz and O'Grady, 2002). Similarly, safe and legal informal work can provide them with daily income to meet their subsistence needs (O'Grady and Gaetz, 2004) as well as access to supportive peers and resources.

1.2. Coping as a protective factor

How homeless young people cope with adversity in ways that are adaptive or maladaptive can shape how they experience homelessness, including how they make money to survive. Literature examining coping and resiliency in this population suggests that they rely on varied coping strategies such as problem-focused coping (i.e., attempts to address the problem or stressor itself), avoidant coping (i.e., problem and emotional avoidance), and social coping (i.e., use of social support and social withdrawal; Kidd and Carroll, 2007). Prior research indicates that homeless youth who used problem-focused coping strategies experienced positive health and mental health outcomes (Unger et al., 1998), whereas use of avoidant or disengagement coping strategies was associated with greater rates of both mental illness (e.g., depression) and behavior problems (Votta and Manion, 2003) as well as suicidal ideation (Kidd and Carroll, 2007).

Gender differences have also been noted in homeless youth's coping methods, with females and males using different strategies to deal with suicide risk (Kidd and Carroll, 2007). For instance, social withdrawal coping was associated with feeling trapped or helpless for females but not for males. Likewise, avoidant coping techniques (e.g., sleep) were associated with feeling trapped or helpless for females but not for males (Kidd and Carroll, 2007).

2. Research questions

It is evident that homeless young people encounter myriad stressors that vary by gender. Their ability to cope with these stressors contributes to positive overall health, mental health, and behavioral outcomes. Despite the recognition that coping strategies are an important protective factor for this population, prior research has not examined how these strategies influence their economic activity or whether strategies differ by gender. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine homeless young adults' risk factors (i.e., homelessness stressors) and protective factors (i.e., coping strategies) related to legal and illegal income generation as well as to determine how these correlates vary by gender. Three research questions guided this study: 1) how do males and females differ in their sources of legal and illegal income generation, 2) what coping strategies are associated with income generated from legal and illegal sources controlling for homelessness risk factors, and 3) how do these factors vary by gender?

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