

Lost in the Shuffle: Culture of Homeless Adolescents

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Estimates indicate that approximately 1.7 million youth are homeless in the United States. Many associated risk factors have been identified for adolescent homelessness, including family conflict, leaving foster care, running away or being thrown away, physical or sexual abuse, and coming out to parents as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning one's sexual identity (GLBTQ). The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore the culture of homelessness for adolescents. Nineteen homeless adolescents from a major urban area in the northeast U.S. were observed and interviewed over an 18-month period. The elements of the street culture of homeless adolescents were identified by study participants' stories. For many study participants, the decision to live on the streets was a logical and rational alternative to remaining in possibly dangerous and unstable home environments. It provided a means to their generating social capital. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that existing programs and policies relative to adolescents who are at risk for homelessness or already living on the streets should be re-examined and redesigned to meet the unique needs of vulnerable youth so they do not get lost in the shuffle.

Every culture has a schema, which can be expressed as family structure; dietary habits; religious practices; the development of art, music, and drama; ways of communicating; dress; and health behavior. Literature on runaway adolescents dates back to the 1920s, but very little research focuses on the culture of homeless adolescents. Homeless adolescents exist literally on the periphery of society, often leading to exclusion and marginalization, as these youth gravitate toward isolated locations, such as abandoned areas of the city, hidden spaces in public buildings, and remote or inaccessible sites. Ultimately, they find themselves pro-

hibited from participating in society and limited in their use of societal powers and resources (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Rice, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Mallett, & Rosenthal, 2005). This study explores the culture and life experiences of homeless adolescents in a major urban area.

Life on the streets has the potential to erode the emotional and physical welfare of the abandoned child (Milburn et al., 2007; Robertson, 1998). To survive, many of these adolescents resort to drug dealing and a myriad of high-risk activities that render their life issues different from those of the general adolescent population (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Barry, Ensign, & Lippek 2002; Ginzler, Garret, Baer, & Peterson, 2007). These youth are at increased risk for a host of physical, psychosocial, and psychological problems (Alexander & Schrauben, 2006; Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers, & Glassman, 2007; Taylor-Seehafer, Jacobvitz, & Steiker, 2008).

Homeless Adolescents

Homeless adolescents, also referred to as street youth, tend to roam the streets at night in search of safe shelter and/or to avoid victimization. Because of their fear of victimization, these homeless youth try to avoid contact and interactions with the adult homeless population (Rew, 2008). Fear and the need to survive may

evolve into participation in alternative behaviors, such as selling and/or using drugs, prostitution, and other crimes that elicit disdain from mainstream society and perpetuate isolation and marginalization (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Peterson, Baer, Wells, Ginzler, & Garrett, 2006).

Adolescence is a period of profound biopsychosocial development. Identity formation, the quest for autonomy and independence, and transformations in family and peer relationships, emerging cognitive abilities, and socioeconomic factors interact and affect the adolescent's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Adolescents who no longer think they belong or feel safe at home may run to the streets in a seemingly fruitless attempt to find another place they can call home (Armeline, 2005; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2007). In effect, street youth no longer fit within mainstream social networks, and thus, tend to shy away from institutions designed to help them, including shelters and soup kitchens. For many, this hiding out behavior stems from a mistrust of the adult population, as well as the lack of privacy and personal space within institutional environments (Armeline, 2005; Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

Homeless youth's transient, invisible, and/or illegal status make it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain an accurate count (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004; Knopf, Park, Brindis, Mulye, &

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Note: The names of the youth cited in this study have been changed.

Objectives and the
CNE posttest can be
found on pages 162-163.

Irwin, 2007; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). According to the Youth Services for the Child Welfare League, most of these youth are not in the child welfare, juvenile justice, or mental health systems, and therefore, get "lost in the shuffle" (Slavin, 2001). Estimates indicate that 1.7 million youth are homeless in the U.S. (National Network for Youth, 2009). According to a report from the 2007 U.S. Conference of Mayors, unaccompanied (homeless) youth account for 1% of the urban homeless population (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). However, such a low prevalence rate is most likely an underrepresentation of the actual population. The number of homeless youth is equally divided among males and females, and most are between the ages of 15 to 17 years (Molino, 2007). Ten percent of homeless youth were reported as pregnant. It is estimated that nationally, at least 6% to 10% of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) (Alexander & Schrauben, 2006; Milburn et al., 2007; Robertson & Toro, 1998).

The term *homeless youth* is used as an overarching term connoting the many pathways through which youth find their way to the streets. (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). Thousands of youth are thrown out of their homes each year (Milburn et al., 2007; Robertson & Toro, 1998). There is no official definition of a throwaway/castaway/pushed-out youth. The parents or legal guardians have ejected the youth from their living environment, making it clear that he or she is no longer welcome back home. These youth have literally been abandoned or deserted (Armeline, 2005; Hammer et al., 2002). Some are homeless because they have simply lost track of their families, or their families are homeless and unable to care for them. Immigrant adolescents who become homeless face additional challenges, such as language-barriers, cultural conflicts, and legal obstacles to seeking help or readily integrating into the culture of the street (Van Wormer, 2003). System youth are individuals who have been, at one time or another, in the custody of the state due to familial conflicts, neglect, or abuse. Some of these youth have been repeatedly placed in foster homes and/or group homes, but eventually run away from this care (Smith, 2008). Brannigan and Caputo (1993) referred to youth who left the system prematurely as absconders from care.

Homeless adolescents have few options for services available to them because they are on the fringe of society. Vulnerable, lost, alone, and often victimized, they no longer fit society's definition of children. The official U.S. government definition for street youth is those who are indefinitely or intermittently homeless and at high risk for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, prostitution, or drug abuse (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2000). Street youth are often chronically homeless, long-term runaways, or throwaway youth. According to Hagan and McCarthy (1997), street youth sleep in locations such as doorways, heating vents, ATM enclosures, bus terminals, and railroad tunnels or platforms, and often engage in illegal survival strategies. These youth spend most of their time on the streets unsupervised and may seek shelter in abandoned buildings or makeshift camp sites in outdoor parks, under bridges, or on rooftops. Some may have intermittent contact with family, but they are usually left to their own devices for survival (Milburn et al., 2007).

Many associated risk factors have been identified for adolescent homelessness, including family conflict, leaving foster care, running away or being thrown away, physical or sexual abuse, and coming out to parents as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning one's sexual identity (GLBTQ). Much of the existing research on homeless adolescents has focused on the epidemiology of homelessness, precipitating factors, and perspectives of service providers. However, what is not well understood is the youth's perspective of life on the streets and the dynamic relationships that homeless youth form for survival. Previous research has focused intently on the problems and deficits of homeless adolescents, with little or no attention to the strengths and competencies these youth possess. Research is needed to explore the subculture of homelessness as experienced by the adolescents and described from their own perspective.

The aims of this doctoral dissertation study were to 1) explore the meaning of life for homeless adolescents, 2) examine how these youth structure their lives and how society has helped create that structure, 3) describe the cultural norms and mores of street life, and 4) understand how social, economic, and political forces within mainstream culture may influence the formation of a homeless adolescent subculture. The most appropriate

study design to meet this study's aims was ethnography.

Method

The principal investigator (O'Sullivan-Oliveira) used ethnographic data collection methods (participant observation and tape recorded interviews) to study homeless adolescents. Spradley's (1979) 12-Step Developmental Sequence Method guided data collection and analysis. The intent of the observations and interviews was to see the world through adolescents' eyes, discover what life on the streets was actually like, and understand what activities and relationships structure held in their unique street subculture. Observations by the principal investigator provided a context or background for the adolescents' stories and enriched the descriptions of their experiences (Spradley, 1980). The principal investigator conducted observations in a variety of settings, including a medical outreach van, a homeless youth drop-in center, and outdoors at two sites where street youth gathered – a metropolitan urban subway center and a public park. These observations were made in various settings over an 18-month period in 2001 and 2002 during an average of 10 to 20 hours per week, and at various times of day and days of the week. One setting, the medical van, was an outreach program staffed by volunteer social service providers, nurses, and physicians to provide first aid or basic medical care and social support to homeless individuals. The medical van traveled around the city to high-risk areas, and typically logged visits with adults and adolescents, yielding encounters with approximately 8 to 10 street youth per night.

The principal investigator noted homeless street youth's interactions with each other as well as with people from the mainstream culture, such as pedestrians, students from the surrounding universities, tourists, and other health care professionals. She observed their physical appearance, moneymaking endeavors such as panhandling (also known as *s'pang-ing* – asking people for spare change), and recreational activities. Observation dates, duration, and detailed descriptions of the social environment were documented. Field notes were written during observations, including the dates and duration of observations as well as detailed descriptions of the environment, atmosphere, mood, and

interactions that occurred. Reflective journaling was also incorporated into field notes.

Sample

Sampling for formal interviews was not pre-determined, but rather, it occurred after entry into the field. Purposive sampling was used to recruit adolescents, ages 16 to 21 years, who reported they were homeless and living/sleeping on the street or some other location not intended for human habitation. In the process of recruiting participants, it became apparent that not all homeless youth lived exclusively on the street. Some reported they were "couch surfing" (staying with friends) or alternated between living in their homes of origin during the week and living on the streets on the weekends. Although obviously at-risk, these youth were essentially flirting with homelessness, and thus, were excluded from this study.

Parents of homeless adolescents are generally unavailable. Furthermore, obtaining parental permission for the adolescent to participate in research would potentially compromise the adolescent's need for privacy around sensitive areas, and in turn, could provoke parental reprisal – emotional, physical, or economic. Researchers who have studied homeless adolescents cite precedent from state statutes that allow emancipated or mature minors to obtain health care without parental notification if such notification would be contrary to the adolescent's best interest (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, & Thomas, 2000).

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the university where the investigator was a doctoral student at the time, as well as the health care agency that had oversight for the youth drop in center. Participation in the study was voluntary and involved minimal risk. Particular attention was paid to the need to maintain privacy. In keeping with the study aims, and the recommendations cited in the Office for Protection from Research Risks, Code for Federal Regulations (1996) Article 46.407, as well as the Society for Adolescent Medicine's position paper on adolescent health research (Santelli et al., 2003), the investigator requested and was granted an IRB waiver of parental consent. Informed consent was obtained from the adolescent participants who selected a pseudonym for their interview. In appreciation for their time, participants were given a \$20 gift card.

Nineteen street youth (15 males and 4 females) were interviewed. The sample included 1 Latino, 2 bi-racial (Caucasian and African American), 1 African-American, and 15 Caucasian participants. Caucasian youth were more likely to be sleeping on the streets. According to anecdotal reports from homeless youth and from service providers, this may be attributed to a lack of extended family members for Caucasians as compared with minority youth. Although most African-American and Latino youth who "hung around" on the streets may not have been living with their family of origin, they did not sleep on the street. They were couch surfers, staying with extended family members or friends, and therefore, were excluded from the study. Although the 4 female participants said they considered themselves bisexual, at the time of the study, they were all in heterosexual relationships. Fourteen of the 15 males described themselves as heterosexual. One male identified himself as bisexual.

Interview questions explored the experiences of informants and elicited information about emerging themes. There were no preconceived notions about the outcome of the research. Some questions were formulated before the actual fieldwork to help guide the research (Morse, 1991). However, the youth were very informative without the use of these guided questions. Audio taped interviews conducted by the researcher began with this introductory probe: "I am a Martian, a being from another planet, and I do not know anything about your civilization. I landed here. Tell me about your life on the streets." This usually led to the youth's talking about their daily lives, and then the researcher's following up with questions as needed. Immediately after each interview, the researcher recorded field notes as well as observations pertaining to the appearance of the participants and their environment.

Analysis

Although the process of data collection and analysis was intertwined, Spradley's (1979) 12-Step Developmental Sequence Method was followed. These steps were 1) entering the field and locating informants, 2) doing participant observation, 3) making a record 4) asking descriptive questions, 5) analyzing the interviews, 6) creating domain analysis, 7) asking structural questions, 8) performing taxonomic analysis, 9) asking contrasting questions, 10) performing

componential analysis, 11) doing a theme analysis, and 12) writing the findings.

The domain analysis identified the rich and thick descriptions that were central components of the homeless culture. In the domain of the "Pit rat," homeless street youth used labels that signified the clique with which they identified. These groupings were akin to tribal names of a larger group. Within the larger culture of homeless adolescents, a variety of self-identified subgroups were based on qualifications these youth deemed important, such as aesthetic style (Goth), spiritual or religious belief (Wiccan), mode of travel (hitchhiker), or residential identification (squatter kids). Domains found in this study included the aesthetic styles worn and coveted by youth and their accompanying symbols, rituals and behaviors, codes/law and ethics, drugs, ways to earn money, place/location – home away from home, and daily routines. A major theme within these domains was the importance of relationships for survival. Ironically, it was because they did not fit in so well elsewhere that these youth felt they fit in with each other. No matter how disparate their backgrounds, their desperate and immediate need for survival bound them together. This need transcended differences that can cause serious social problems in mainstream society. Their strategy for survival was the formation of a subculture that lived on the margins of mainstream culture.

Taxonomic analysis was used to examine the relationships among terms within a domain. In the process, relationships among certain domains became apparent. Taxonomies were developed as these domains were placed under a larger umbrella of organizing domains.

Componential analysis focused on identifying the unique characteristics of terms within a domain (Spradley, 1979). For example, within the domain of supportive techniques for surviving life on the streets, most participants were ambivalent about their relationships with systems, including helping professional agencies. Instead they related to individual outreach clinicians outside the agency proper. A thematic analysis integrated the domains and components of the subculture of homeless adolescents.

Credibility or internal validity was a strong point of this study because the participants and the researcher developed relationships. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), three activities can increase the probability of

credible findings: 1) prolonged engagement, 2) persistent observations, and 3) triangulation. Prolonged engagement with study participants sensitized the principal investigator to multiple contextual factors influencing the phenomenon being studied. Persistent observation allowed the most salient features of the adolescents' culture to emerge. Triangulation of methods (such as participant observations, interviews, and reflexive journaling) was designed to ensure credibility. Other strategies used for credibility as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were peer debriefing, referential adequacy, and member checking.

On-going data analysis was shared with a peer-debriefer, who was a fellow doctoral student. In addition, interview transcripts and field notes were shared with the first author's (O'Sullivan Oliveira) dissertation committee chair (Burke) and her two dissertation committee members, who all had extensive experience working with vulnerable and marginalized populations. Referential adequacy was used to keep some raw data aside, unanalyzed, until after themes emerged. This was done with one follow-up interview for each teen. The data were then brought back into analysis for comparison and confirmation of the emerged hypothesis. Member checking was accomplished by checking the accuracy of statements and conclusions with the participants in the study. Three participants, Casper, Chains, and Elizabeth, were interviewed as member checkers, and they confirmed the findings.

Confirmability was assessed to ascertain whether the findings were grounded in the data. This was done through the audit trail, by examining a sample of findings and tracing them back to the raw data (such as interview and journal/field notes).

Findings

Culture can be defined as a set of guidelines that individuals inherit as members of a particular society (Helman, 2000). According to Spradley (1980), when ethnographers study other cultures, they must deal with what people do (cultural behavior), what people know (cultural knowledge), and what people make (cultural artifacts). The elements of the street culture of homeless adolescents were identified by the study participants' stories.

Environment

Typically, homeless youth found one another at the *Pit*, a Mecca to homeless youth. This sunken plaza was adjacent to the subway stop across from a major university. A variety of individuals could be found at the Pit, including musicians, rebellious teens (with and without homes), students, and tourists. The environment provided a cultural center and a place to belong.

Religion and Rules

Cultures are made up of customs, mores, and ethos that are based on a belief system. The roots of these youth were grounded in the practice of Wicca. The ritualistic religion of Wicca emerged in almost every participant's interview. Religion, particularly Wicca (a pre-Christian pagan religion), was one of the strongest threads holding these street youth together. Wicca's major influence was on the rules of conduct and ethics of their culture. These youth felt a connection with pagan rituals that were inclusive and provided a sense of family and community. Experienced members tutored those who were new to the streets in the ways of Wicca. This became an important bonding process and a factor in whether the new member would be accepted into the street family.

For Bam-Bam, as for many others living on the street, religion (whether mainstream or alternative) played a significant role in homeless "family" ties. Bam-Bam stated he had been practicing Wicca for over 8 years. In presenting a portrait of Bam-Bam, the practice of Wicca was reported as a central component to the structure of the subculture of these homeless adolescents. Divorced from families of origin and mainstream society, these youth have foraged for a sense of structure and organization. Bam-Bam's religious beliefs in Wicca, as with many of his fellow homeless adolescents, provide a mirror into this culture. Quoting Bam-Bam:

There is a large community around the "Pit," and many of the members in the "Pit" are part of one joint community family. Our family is Wicca/Pagan. We have our parents. We have kids. We have aunts and uncles. Being Pagan, our family is definitely different from most other families. Most of us in the family believe that we have been around for many centuries on earth or whatever people want to call it, this planet, this rock. You have to be part of our energy circle where we

transfer energy between one another. Then we will fill you in on some history of our family

Wicca is an old Celtic religion, which took on New Age philosophies in the 1980s. We all have been around for a long time. We have a high council of members of the family that have been in the family the longest, that know all the functions around the family, the rules of the family. How things are supposed to be done the right way and on council, where I'm the eldest son. So I am next in line to help protect my family. We all like to protect each other, make sure everybody is safe at all times. There are always other members in the family around at all times if there's ever an emergency or something like that.

On the street, most come to Wicca because it means family, community, and commitment. Wicca beliefs and practices arose from a sense of community just like the street family, within the early clans. To "go it alone" was not a traditional Wicca value. We believe in following our own intuition and own personal code of ethics and morality. Wiccans look within, perceiving themselves to be both student and teacher at the same time. A lot of it is street family, but we tie in Wicca. Most of the family members are Wicca.

We have one member, the newest member of the family; she's fairly new to the Wicca and Pagan religion... we are slowly bringing her in and letting her know what is going on. We are doing it so it is not overwhelming or scary. We are just slowly showing her this is what happens. I feel that in some way, everybody is Wicca or Pagan because there is always energy transferred no matter what, human or inhuman. (2/02)

Street Families

Although these youth had run from or been abandoned by their families of origin, they had not, in fact, abandoned the cultural ideal of a family unit. To survive on the streets, they formed new street families complete with pseudo parents, siblings, and other extended family relationships. A street Mom and Dad in their 30s and former homeless youth helped scout out squats for sleeping and were instrumental in resolving conflicts. In this street family unit, there were two

family factions headed by elder sons who were designated because of their length of time living on the streets. Bam-Bam and Casper were regarded as elders and initiated new homeless youth into the family. These street families provided the homeless youth with the resources and social support needed to survive the danger, boredom, poverty, challenges, and frustrations inherent in their transient and fragile existence.

"The best thing that has happened to me since I began life on the streets is the making of my street family" (Jade, female, 1/02). During each interview, a repetitive theme surfaced about life on the streets and the formation of "street families." What most professionals would regard as a negative experience was described positively by many of these youth. The adolescents had either run from or been abandoned by their original families. This left a void in their need for family ties. Their street families took alternate forms, as evidenced by both Bam-Bam's and Jade's accounts, and for these vulnerable youngsters, such ties were as important as food and water. These youth felt they finally belonged because they had established a family bond and found unconditional acceptance. They now had a family upon which they could depend, and this generated feelings of security. Some of these youth stated this was the first time in their lives they could "act like a kid," while others said they were discovering their lost childhood and finally felt part of a family, a community, a society, and a culture.

Street Brands

Language is the primary symbol of each social group and is fully understood by its members. In this group, the language was hip-hop or street-slang. The study participants were a diverse group of adolescents who identified themselves as freaks, grunge, taggers, Goths, punks, skinheads, hippies, wannabe thugs, vampires, hitchhikers, or squatters. They congregated in relative peace and harmony. There was an unspoken pact of live and let live, despite their use of different clothing, hairstyles, hair color, tattoos, and other accessories to distinguish themselves.

Thugs, for example, tended to wear big, baggy clothing, while Freaks donned chains, leather coats, spikes, patches, black boots with white laces, and long hair. Within the larger group of Punks were subgroups, such as Skank Punks, Skin Punks, and Nazi Punks. Punks wore every color of hair

and proclaimed their unity through their common interest in punk music. They viewed themselves as a social group, accepting and welcoming peer obligations with a sense of family and respect for the elders. Vampire Wannabes dressed in full-length black clothing, distinguishing them from others as they listened to heavy metal rock music.

Music

Music was reported by participants as an important, if not *the* most important, component of their culture. Though they owned very few material goods, they owned their music. Most youngsters possessed a portable compact disc (CD), Walkman, or a musical instrument. For adolescents in general, music and musical artists are a big part of their lives, and this was especially true for these homeless youth. Music was a way to bond with peers.

Various categories of music, with specific themes and symbolic meanings, provided each a place within the street family. Punks saw their music as a cry for social change. Hip-hop music represented freedom of choice and a form of permission to smoke drugs or have casual sex. Music also helped maintain strong bonds within street families. Specific lyrics and compositions bonded these youth together for physical, emotional, and economic safety and comfort. The lyrics of a popular rap song was a particular favorite and represented the violent maternal abuse that a youth had endured through Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy.

Street Economy

Within this group, drug dealing was regarded as a sporadic occupation used to supplement panhandling/spare changing (s'panging). Bam-Bam said:

Drug transactions, that's where people can make a lot of serious money...I live on the streets, making my money and doing it honestly. Selling drugs may be illegal, but I'm working. I'm earning what I'm making."

Individuals who sold drugs sporadically said that although the main purpose of selling drugs was to earn enough money to eat, it also helped support their own drug use.

There is a familiar hierarchy within the street culture. Leaders usually set up the business, take care of the big deals, and hire other homeless youth to distribute and sell smaller amounts.

Most admitted they sold small amounts of marijuana to their inner circles or to others wanting to buy drugs.

Several individuals who smoked marijuana did not consider it to be a drug. Many said they had been smoking "weed" since they were 8 or 9 years old. Marijuana was a common substance used in their homes and communities of origin. When asked if they believed they had a drug problem, they insisted they did not, even though they smoked pot all day long. Marijuana use was considered a cultural norm among homeless youth in this study. It played a significant role in their communal life. It was something they used recreationally, as well as for self-medication for anxiety, depression, fear, hunger, and sleep.

The code "420" is a euphemism for smoking marijuana and is widely known by adolescents. There are differing renditions of oral history that relate to the origin of the term 420, but these youth agreed that the term originated in California. Some believed it was a California police code for marijuana smoking or that it was a criminal code number. There is no evidence to support these claims. Anecdotes were offered in support of an urban legend that the term 420 had originated on the West Coast in 1971 with some California high school students. The youth often met after school to smoke marijuana at 4:20 p.m. each day. Whatever the origin, the term was entrenched in this homeless youth society. A blunt, an inexpensive large marijuana cigarette, would serve the entire group during a smoke-out session every day at 4:20 p.m. This activity was reminiscent of a peace pipe smoking ritual in the Native American tribal culture. The smoke-out session was an incentive to attend street community meetings. Several Internet sites had developed as part of the 420 culture, and they were popular among these homeless adolescents. One participant, Bat, described the use of marijuana in this way:

I smoke pot because it's fun. I've done it for years, and it's a way to relax and kind of...like how the college professor goes home at night and has himself a brandy and a cigar. That's just my way of...chilling out.

All participants reported using some drug or alcohol. Individuals who reported having previously been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) said cocaine-based drugs calmed them down, similar to methylphenidate (Ritalin®) pre-

scribed when they were younger. Heroin was affordable and readily available on the streets for as little as \$4.00 per bag. They reported they had begun by using opiates with more expensive prescription pain medications, such as oxycodone (OxyContin®) (8 mg pill – street value \$80.00 per pill). Within a few months, they advanced to snorting heroin and rapidly progressed to intravenous (IV) use. Heroin was the least expensive and purest drug used on the street. The average daily dose of heroin was 10 to 20 bags per day. However, the end result of this spiraling addiction was often death by overdose.

Participants reported witnessing the ravages of IV drug addiction earlier in their lives when their parents died of AIDS or hepatitis C. Several were orphaned to the streets as a result of their parents' drug-related deaths. Poly-substance abuse was common among the youth, all of whom reported some form of substance use prior to living on the streets. In fact, some reported using more substances when they lived at home because parental/guardian substance use allowed easier access to both money and drugs. The most sought after drugs on the street were benzodiazepines, such as clonazepam (Klonopin®) (street name "pins"), which were taken to alleviate anxiety. Youth reported obtaining prescriptions from psychiatrists at hospital emergency rooms. Participants also reported overdoses and hospitalizations due to mixing different types of drugs.

Another drug fad reported by these street youth was abuse of over-the-counter Robitussin® cold tablets (DXL), referred to as "robo tripping." One participant reported that ingesting 18 Robitussin cold tablets "made you feel like you were acid tripping." These over-the-counter medications were somewhat costly, and thus, shoplifting was often the means of obtaining them. These youth were not only endangering their health by abusing this medication, but were also breaking the law by shoplifting, and thus, risking an arrest.

Summary

Findings revealed that homeless adolescents fashioned a defined culture of unprecedented freedom and baffling complexity that is neither seen nor imagined by mainstream society. It is a culture with rules but little structure, with values but questionable morality, and with codes but not much consistency. Although street life may generate social capital, it can also be

dangerous because of youth's engagement in multiple risk activities, such as drug use and survival sex.

Limitations

The limitations of this study involve the areas of self-report and generalization. The risk of bias is always present in self-reporting. People sometimes tend to romanticize answers to questions while telling life stories. As previously described in the "Methods" section, the principal investigator conducted observations in a variety of settings over an 18-month period during 2001-2002. This study was conducted among a small group of homeless youth ($n = 19$) in a particular city during a particular time frame. Although these youth travel, there is no evidence to support that this study's findings reflect populations of homeless youth in other cities, and therefore, should not be generalized to them. Nevertheless, recent national reports about homeless adolescents describe similar characteristics and issues (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008; National Runaway Switchboard, 2008). As an ethnographer, the principal investigator's (O'Sullivan Oliveira) active participant observation was limited because of personal safety issues. There had been a rash of violent crimes and victimization against the target group during her study, and the youth expressed concern for her safety if visiting outdoor campsites or squats. Drug-related activities were also off limits. Although the principal investigator spent a considerable amount of time with the youth, she was not present during drug dealings or drug use, and relied upon participant information through informal and formal interviews.

Discussion

By understanding how homeless youth fit into the broader picture of society and their subculture, one can begin to understand some of the ways in which their situation differs from those of other adolescents. Much of the current literature on street youth focuses on them as victims who lack any agency or choice. In this study, however, many of the homeless youth revealed that their decision to live on the streets was a logical and rational alternative to remaining in a dangerous and unstable home environment. This study sample of homeless adolescents ages 16 to 21 years is probably more typical of today's street youth as compared to Coleman-Lundy's (1995) study that focused on

transvestites and prostitutes over age 18.

The youth in this study felt better cared for on the streets than at home because of the camaraderie and nurturing within their subculture. Therefore, they were not necessarily opting to be homeless per se, but were selecting a safer and more welcoming environment. The street community offered tangible support through shared resources, such as food, shelter, money, and other basic necessities.

These homeless adolescents also formed nationwide networks that they referred to as a community or family, and whose members were cultivated through Internet communication. They accessed the Internet via computers at public libraries or social service centers, exchanging email addresses and communicating with each other as they traveled across the country. They sought out companionship and acceptance from other youth who came from similar backgrounds, and this spawned a sense of belonging to this street family culture. The more these youth felt embraced by their street family, the longer they remained on the streets.

Homelessness among adolescents is recognized as a social problem of increasing magnitude. Social capital theory provides a useful way to understand the pathways taken by communities to survive and flourish. Social capital refers to positions and relationships in groupings and social networks, including memberships, network ties, and social relations that enhance an individual's access to opportunities, information, material resources, and social status (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000). In the lives of people who are not homeless, personal contacts and networks are sources of social capital used to find jobs, get apartments, locate daycare, and find reliable medical care. The homeless adolescents in this study displayed relationships that emphasized survival and resilience through trustworthiness and exchange of social capital.

Social capital was one of the many resources or types of capital used by these homeless adolescents in daily life. Mobilization of social and human capital occurred most often in the informal economy that operated as part of their street life. Informal economic activities (such as s'panging) were essential to the survival achieved by youth and their street families. Their relationships included street family members who provided social and economic capital, replenishing

the capital that had been absent or lost from their mainstream culture. These findings are consistent with what Ferrell and Hamm (1998) described as the phenomenon of street youth capitalizing on a street culture to generate social capital, even though the means to that end entailed illicit activities. As Taylor-Seefers et al. (2008) noted, "Youth who wind up on the streets are, at times, the strength of the families, as demonstrated by their visions of a better life, conviction that they do not deserve maltreatment and abuse, and ability to pursue and achieve a life with resources, connections, and dreams" (p. S86). Successful coping promotes positive self-esteem that in turn strengthens resilience in homeless youth (Kidd & Shahar, 2008).

Findings from this study indicated that well before their exodus to the streets, these homeless adolescents were engaged in multiple risk activities that were harmful to their health and well being. Clearly, every clinician's encounter with an adolescent is an opportunity for teaching risk/harm reduction. Because homeless youth rarely seek assistance, use of outreach-street workers has been shown to be the most effective way to access these high-risk adolescents. Reaching out to street youth is not an easy task. Many mainstream social service agencies encourage youth to leave the street families/culture and enter into traditional programs. However, some of these youth reported that street life was less menacing than remaining in their homes, where they tended to be more fearful. The street may have been the only positive family unit they trusted, and thus, they were reluctant to leave.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is needed to form networks of care that stimulate positive changes through access to health care, housing, education, and recreation. For some of these youth, survival sex was a means of revenue, which carried a number of physical and mental health risks. Non-judgmental reproductive health services should be available to these youth, including screening for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and easy access to condoms and birth control. In regard to substance use and other risk factors, there is a need to explore the effectiveness of harm reduction/harm minimization programs rather than focusing exclusively on zero tolerance programs for homeless adolescents (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Single, 1996; Stimson, 1998; Wodack, 1999).

Motivational enhancement techniques can be used to help homeless adolescents explore their ambivalence about change (Baer, Garrett, Beadnell, Wells, & Peterson, 2007; Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Peterson et al., 2006).

Homelessness interferes with healthy youth development. Adolescents in general are negotiating new roles to become socially competent. Without appropriate adult guidance, they are at increased risk for engaging in life-threatening behaviors. Homeless youth face multiple risks, including mental health disorders, violence, self mutilation, suicide, homicide, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases (Rew, Chambers, & Kulkarni, 2002; Rew, Grady, Whittaker, & Bowman, 2008; Solorio, Milburn, Andersen, Trifskin, & Rodriguez, 2006; Van Leeuwen, Rietmeijer, LeRoux, White, & Petersen, 2002; Whitbeck et al., 2007).

Health care providers need to be able to recognize and use social capital in the community to help support families and youth in turmoil. Pediatric nurses play a key role in prevention and outreach. Disenfranchised youth who drop out of school lose their primary connection to mainstream society. Thus, truancy is a red flag for possible behavioral or social issues, and may be the first place to intervene in preventing homelessness in the adolescent population. There is a critical need for alternatives for adolescents who run away, are thrown away, or simply age out of the public system of care. If an adolescent is on the streets, especially during winter months, then it is a good indication that something is wrong at home. Family problems can include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect.

Homelessness exacerbates common pediatric health conditions, such as asthma, seizure disorders, anemia, skin problems, and obesity, to name a few. However, nurses and helping professionals must keep in mind that high-risk adolescents may initially resist overtures for help and outreach interventions because they are coping with fears from unsuccessful past experiences. Adolescents who leave home because of rigid family rules or harsh parenting practices may avoid structured programs that they perceive as exerting authority and expecting conformity. However, youth living on the streets need ready access to health care and services, such as housing/shelter (options for those under 18 years of age as well as youth-friendly environments), educational opportunities (for acquiring high

school diplomas or a GED), job training, food, and facilities for personal hygiene (showers and laundry).

Some youth in this study verbalized plans to eventually leave the streets. Although many of their goals for career and property acquisition seemed unrealistic, they were similar to the goals of domiciled adolescents who live in mainstream society. Adolescents in general tend to be optimistic or somewhat naïve about achieving their goals, and homeless youth were no exception. Of note, however, is the fact that these homeless youth did have personal goals, including a desire to leave the street. Considering their difficult circumstances, the level of optimism that many homeless adolescents had about life was both surprising and impressive.

Conclusion

Assisting homeless adolescents in successfully managing the transition to adulthood is both a challenge and an opportunity for professionals (Osgood et al., 2005). There is no one right approach and no absolute intervention that guarantees success. There are, however, many possibilities. These must be grounded in an authentic human connection focused on genuine caring, mutual respect, enduring patience, and a willingness to work together to create a safe environment in which to learn from life experiences.

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