Exploring the Relationship Between Homelessness and Delinquency: A Snapshot of a Group of Homeless Youth in San Jose, California

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Abstract This paper reports the findings of an exploratory study examining the relationship between homelessness and delinquency in adolescents. Researchers collected data from interviews of 42 homeless youth contacted through a drop-in center in San Jose, California. Participants responded to a structured interview as well as two vignettes describing situations in which crimes were committed. The most striking findings are that (1) reported rates of delinquency are higher than expected based on past research, and (2) despite the high rates of delinquency, answers to a "three wishes" question describe wishes and ideals that are largely consistent with mainstream societal values. This paper provides a survey of existing research on homeless youth and delinquency, a comparison of our findings to those of previous studies, and two detailed case studies that highlight the patterns we observed in the broader survey.

Keywords Homeless adolescents · Delinquency · Incarceration · Wishes

Introduction

Previous studies have shown that homeless youth are disproportionately involved in delinquent activity (Brennan et al. 1978; McCarthy and Hagan 1992; Whitbeck and

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Hoyt 1999); however, little progress has been made toward understanding the relationship between homelessness and delinquency among youth. The present study on the relationship between homelessness and delinquency in adolescents focuses on the lives and perspectives of a group of homeless teens in San Jose, California. Based upon a review of the literature, it was expected that the homeless youth interviewed would have high rates of delinquent activity when compared with recent surveys of housed youth. Using the qualitative responses to a "three wishes" question and two vignettes describing crimes, our goal was to broaden our understanding of the descriptive data provided by the participants and investigate how homeless youth view themselves in relation to the broader mainstream culture. As prior attempts to apply existing theoretical explanations for delinquency to the homeless youth population have not quite fit the data provided by the population, this exploratory study attempts to identify new directions for research that will bring more clarity to the connection between homelessness and delinquency among youth.

Literature Review

Homeless Youth

A brief look at what is known about the broader population of homeless youth will provide context for the current study. Although estimates of the exact number of homeless teens nationwide vary greatly (estimates range from 300,000 to 1 million homeless youth per year), researchers seem to agree that growing numbers of youth are living on the streets or in shelters (Institute for Health Policy Studies 1995; McCarthy and Hagan 1992; Paradise and Cauce 2002; Ringwalt et al. 1998; U.S. Conference of Mayors 1998).

Definitions of homeless youth vary as much as the estimates of their prevalence. "Runaways," "throw-aways," and "street youth" are just some of the terms used by researchers to define and differentiate the various characteristics of this population. Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) assert that any definition of homeless youth must take into account the "dual criteria" of being *unhoused* and *unsupervised*, commonalities that appear across various categories of homeless youth.

Studies indicate that homeless youth face significant obstacles in life, both in terms of their day-to-day existence and their experiences prior to leaving home. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (1999), most young people leave home due to disruptive family relationships, and as many as half are asked to leave by their parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1995). The literature reveals that large numbers of homeless youth experience physical, sexual and psychological abuse prior to leaving home (DiPaolo 1999; Kufeldt and Nimmo 1987; Wolfe et al. 1999). Recent studies found rates of sexual abuse ranging from 17% to 35%, and physical abuse rates ranging from 40 to 60% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1997). Paradise and Cauce (2002) state that across recent studies, the most commonly cited reasons for leaving home include parental drug and alcohol use, family violence, neglect, and abuse. Two studies closely matched homeless and housed youth on background and demographic variables, and

found that homeless youth consistently reported more dysfunction, instability and violence in their home environments than did the housed youth (Wolfe et al. 1999; McCaskill et al. 1998).

Homeless youth often leave extremely difficult circumstances at home only to face severe challenges living on their own. High rates of mental illness, poor nutrition and health, increased rates of victimization and exploitation, high levels of drug abuse and dependence, and increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and are among the challenges with which homeless youth must contend (Forst 1994a, b; National Coalition for the Homeless 1999; Paradise and Cauce 2002; Schweitzer and Hier 1993; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999, p. 8–10). Attending school becomes problematic because of requirements of legal guardianship and residency, as well as lack of access to transportation. Because of their age, homeless youth have few legitimate options for supporting themselves financially; often as a means of survival youth turn to illegal activities to obtain money for food, clothing and shelter.

Homeless Youth and Delinquency

The few studies that have collected data on homeless youth and crime indicate that homeless youth "are involved in a substantial and disproportionate share of crime (McCarthy and Hagan 1992)." In a study of over 600 homeless youth in the Midwest, Whitbeck and Hoyt (1999) found that 22% had engaged in theft, 14% in burglary, and 30% had sold drugs. Of those who had sold drugs, most (85%) had done so more than once. McCarthy and Hagan (1992) surveyed 390 street youth in Toronto and found that 46% made drug sales, 49% had stolen, and 27% broke into homes or businesses. In a recent ethnographic study, Finkelstein (2005) interviewed and observed 50 street youth in New York City. She found that 60% admitted to "engaging in stealing, including shoplifting, boosting (stealing merchandise from one store and selling it to another), and pulling scams (conning people)," p. (81).

Some homeless youth turn to the sex trade as a means of obtaining money, food, or shelter, although measures of the extent of this survival strategy vary widely. In Whitbeck and Hoyt's sample, 6% of the young men and 3% of the young women reported having traded sex for food or shelter. In studies of street youth in New York and Los Angeles, between a third and a half reported trading sex as a means of meeting one or more of their basic needs (see Paradise and Cauce 2002 for review).

Past research has linked delinquent behaviors with various aspects of teen homelessness. Whitbeck and Simons (1990) reported that "deviant subsistence strategies" (selling drugs, shoplifting, burglary, robbery and prostitution) were associated with a history of abuse for males and with time spent with a deviant peer group for females. Frequency of running away was positively associated with deviant subsistence strategies for both males and females. Brennan et al. (1978) found that among a sample of Colorado street youth, rates of stealing and selling drugs were positively associated with time away from home and with the number of times the youth had left home in the past. In one study that compared a sample of runaway youth with a sample of housed youth with moderate to severe psychopathology, the only significant difference found between groups was that

the runaway group had higher rates of delinquency, indicating an important link between periods of homelessness and delinquent behavior (Rohr 1996).

Some studies have attempted to explain delinquency among homeless youth using theoretical models from the broader research on delinquency. For example, one well established finding in studies of juvenile delinquents is a relationship between low (or "immature") levels of moral reasoning and greater involvement in delinquent activities (Nelson et al. 1990). Gregg et al. (1994) found that both female and male delinquents' moral judgment was less advanced than their non-delinquent peers. Tavecchio et al. (1999) compared homeless youth and housed youth on measures of delinquent activity and moral reasoning. While the homeless youth reported a much higher rate of delinquency than the housed youth, "this difference could not be attributed to the level of moral judgment." Tavecchio et al. (1999) suggest that homeless youth fall outside this well-established pattern connecting delinquency to low levels of moral reasoning because they lack the social supports necessary to reinforce their existing moral reasoning skills.

One theory attempting to explain criminal behavior argues that low self-control is the main cause of crime and even leads to the social circumstances (e.g.: unemployment, homelessness, association with deviant peer groups) that are associated with criminal activity. Baron (2003) examined the relevance of this theory in understanding delinquent behavior in a sample of homeless youth. In his study of 400 homeless youth in Vancouver, Canada, low self-control predicted a range of criminal behaviors, and also influenced association with deviant peers, length of unemployment, and length of homelessness. However, he found that a number of social circumstances also had an effect on criminal behavior (even when the researchers controlled for the variable of self-control), "lending support to other theoretical models," specifically those that look to external factors as the primary causes of criminal activity.

McCarthy and Hagan (1992) found the effects of external factors on delinquent activity to be particularly relevant among homeless youth, where situational stressors tend to be extreme. They found that delinquent activity among homeless youth was most closely related to specific survival needs; for example, youth tended to steal food when hungry, etc. McCarthy and Hagan (1992) point out that studies of delinquency have largely moved away from examining the role of external factors in contributing to delinquency, and now tend to attribute delinquency to internal or developmental factors. Contributing to this trend is the tendency of researchers studying delinquency to overlook homeless youth (who are facing more severe external pressures than "normal" youth) in the data collection process.

In summary, past studies indicate that delinquent behavior among homeless youth cannot be attributed to low moral reasoning nor solely to low self-control. Research also suggests that social circumstances and external factors influence the delinquent behavior of homeless youth. However, existing research leaves many questions unanswered. For example, how do the moral decision-making skills of these youth come into play in the face of extreme situational stressors? How do homeless youth, often described as having a distinct subculture with its own norms and values, understand and relate to the broader society? What kinds of interventions would reduce criminal and other maladaptive behaviors in this population, and ultimately lead to more stable living conditions? The surveys we

undertook were designed to address these questions by identifying the reasons why homeless youth are disproportionately involved in delinquent activity, and to identify appropriate directions for further research regarding homelessness and delinquency.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study using qualitative research. Convenience sampling and brief interviews were used. Most interview questions were open-ended, but a few required simple yes/no responses or other brief demographic responses, and one question was multiple choice.

Sample

The youth participating in the qualitative interviews had all accessed some level of services at a comprehensive daytime drop-in service center for homeless youth located in downtown San Jose, California. Homeless youth that come to the service center, called "Our House," can find a place to shower, do laundry, get a hot meal, or hang out with their peers. The youth are also encouraged to access case-management services such as employment assistance, educational assistance, transportation assistance, and referrals.

The researchers in the present study contacted the youth through a mobile clinic known as the Teen Health Van that provides free comprehensive primary health care services for uninsured youth. This clinic is owned by Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford and funded by grants and gifts obtained through the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. The Teen Health Van visits Our House twice each month. The youth can take advantage of the services of a nutritionist, social worker, nurse, nurse practitioner, and physician. Both researchers who conducted the interviews (MS and HKS) were employed as social workers for the Teen Health Van.

For the purpose of this study, homeless youth were defined as not living with families but rather on their own in a shelter, on the streets, or in an unstable living situation (for example, living with a different friend each night). Of the 42 youth interviewed, all were currently homeless and accessing some level of services at Our House. The youth's ages at the time of interview ranged from 14 to 21 with a median age of 19. Fifty-two percent of the participants were female, and 48% were male. Thirty-one percent were Latino, 29% were African-American, 29% were White, 9% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% were Native-American.

Data Collection

Each of the two social workers conducting the interviews recruited subjects for the study by individually approaching groups of youth at Our House. The social workers were familiar to many of the youth, and a sense of trust had been established with

some of the youth. This trust allowed those who did not know the social workers to also consider participating when they saw the ease of their peers with the social workers. The interviews were held in a semi-private location available at the time of the interview, such as a bench or a stairwell.

Before and during the qualitative interviews, the subjects were told of the confidential nature of the interviews and provided with a consent form. For those subjects under the age of 18, the interviewer consulted a case manager at the daytime service center to ensure that to their knowledge the youth would be appropriate to participate. The youth interviewed for the study were homeless and without a caregiver at the time of the interview, therefore the participants were able to self-consent to take part in the study. In the state of California, a minor 12 years old or older can provide consent for him/ herself as long as she/he is living separate from and not supported by his/her parent or guardian. All of the minors in this study fit this description. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the youth, signatures on the consent were not required. A full waiver of consent was deemed appropriate by both the researchers and the Human Subjects Review Board as parents or guardians were unreachable and the research presented no more than a minimal risk. The signed consent would be the only record of the subject's identity, and it was additionally determined that this protocol was an instance where signed consent could increase the potential risk to the subjects. Examples of increased risk to the subjects would involve their admitting that they committed a crime or their illegal drug use.

The interview for this study began by reading two brief vignettes. Each vignette was followed by a series of questions. The first vignette, which was about stealing, was taken from the work of Colby et al. (1983), although the names were changed. The researchers conducting the present study created the second vignette about a rape situation (see Appendix for both vignettes). The questions asked about the vignettes included the youth's feelings about the main characters, some of whom were victims and some perpetrators. They were asked about their own history of stealing as either a perpetrator or a victim. Demographics such as age, current living situation, work/school status, and race/ethnicity were collected. Study participants were also asked about delinquency activities, whom they turn to for support, what their three wishes would be, and to select one of five descriptors to describe their childhood environment. Since many of the answers to the questions were short statements or yes/no responses, each interview was brief, lasting between 5 and 7 min.

Case Studies

Frequent changes in housing, caretakers, and schools can prevent the formation of stable relationships and lead to a lifetime of struggle for survival. As described in the literature review, many homeless youth, in their efforts to survive, engage in illegal activity. For many of these youth their involvement in illegal activity appears to wax and wane with their circumstances. Most experience some periods of stability and progress toward self-chosen goals, such as finishing school or keeping

a job. However, a lack of emotional, financial and social supports make any experience of stability fragile for these youth, and returning to the street and to old (and often delinquent) patterns of survival for periods of time is not uncommon.

In this section we describe the life events of two representative adolescents who participated in the present study. These case studies provide two examples of how patterns of delinquent activity and homelessness interact in the lives of youth. Identifying information has been changed to protect the confidentiality of the youth described.

Victor

At the time of the interview, Victor was a 17-year-old Latino male who would occasionally come by Our House for a meal. He was well known to some of the case managers at Our House. Victor grew up in San Jose with parents who were chronically homeless and tended to move around from motel room to motel room. His father drank heavily, couldn't hold a job for long, and was described by Victor as angry, mean, and aggressive. Victor's mother, also an alcoholic, supported the family by working full-time in a department store. By the time of the interview, both had contracted Hepatitis C, and were still drinking heavily. Victor moved from motel to motel with his parents, who often neglected to supervise him. By the time he was in his adolescence, he was running away regularly, without much effort on his parents' part to find him. He stayed in youth shelters, with friends, or on the streets. He had been in and out of different schools due to truancy problems, and although his intelligence was described as above average, he eventually dropped out of high school. He was picked up by the police numerous times for charges such as trespassing, minor drug use, and shoplifting. At one point he spent time in juvenile hall after robbing a convenience store with a friend. He was never arrested for assaultive or violent behavior. Victor struggled with depression and was hospitalized twice for suicidal ideation. Throughout this time, Victor maintained varying levels of contact with Our House staff, utilizing counseling and active case-management services when he was more stable. At 16, Victor and his girlfriend moved to Oregon for a fresh start. They both held jobs and rented an apartment for a few months. When the relationship ended, Victor came back to San Jose. Shortly after he returned, he was living on the street again, using and selling street drugs. Although he complained of "mental problems," he refused to be seen for counseling or consider psychotropic medications. He began coming to Our House only for food and rarely spoke with case managers.

Elisa

Elisa was 18 at the time of the interview, and described her ethnicity as a mix of African -American and Caucasian. She had been known to Our House staff since the age of 12 and throughout her adolescence utilized the help and support of case-managers. Her parents had never married, and both drank heavily and used drugs. Elisa's father was illiterate and worked as a gardener. Elisa was the

youngest of four siblings, and was often in trouble during her childhood for disruptive and aggressive behavior. At age 11, her parents felt they couldn't handle her behavior and sent her to live with grandparents who were physically abusive toward Elisa. Soon after she arrived, Elisa was hospitalized for suicidal behavior. After her hospitalization, she continued to get into physical fights, started running away from home, using alcohol and marijuana, and was often arrested on charges related to drug use and fighting. Between the ages of 12 and 14 she was in and out of juvenile hall multiple times. At the time of the interview, she had not been arrested since the age of 15. At a young age, Elisa started having sexual relationships with older men in their 30's or 40's, some of whom were physically abusive. She worked in convenience stores and also sold drugs on the street. She had two children before the age of 16, both of whom were removed from her care by social services as soon as they were born due to her history of arrests and drug use. When Elisa was 16, her mother died of AIDS. At that time, Elisa was pregnant with her third child. She had stopped using drugs and was in a stable relationship with the baby's father, who was close to Elisa in age, and not abusive toward her. Although social services tried to remove the baby from his parents' care, the judge presiding over the case allowed Elisa and her boyfriend to keep their son because they were in more stable circumstances. They lived together in an apartment and Elisa's boyfriend had a stable job. After about 9 months, Elisa's boyfriend left her. She lost the apartment and started living with her son in shelters and with relatives. She started, and then stopped attending community college. She began using and selling drugs again and was hospitalized twice for depression. With support from extended family, she maintained custody of her son. She checked herself into a rehabilitation program in an effort to stop using, but left after a conflict with another resident.

Results

At the time of the interview, 38% of the participants were living in a shelter, 34% were living temporarily with a relative or a friend, and 28% were living on the street or in a motel. In terms of living situation, this sample appears to closely represent the larger population of homeless youth in the country. Recent statistics released by the National Coalition for the Homeless (2002) estimated that 35% of homeless youth lived in shelters, 34% doubled-up with family or friends, and 23% lived in motels.

   The participants in this study appear to have little exposure to institutional, family, or personal sources of stability and support. Forty-five percent of the participants in the current study were neither working nor attending school at the time of the study. This compares to 8% of teens in the general U.S. population, according to a survey of 16–19 year-olds published by KIDS COUNT (2003). When asked to choose from five possible childhood descriptors, the majority of the youth (54%) chose "very difficult." Another 29% chose "difficult at times," 10% chose "neutral," and only 2% chose "pleasant" or "extremely warm." Five percent chose not to answer. These responses are not surprising given the prevalence of abuse and

family conflict reported by homeless youth, which has been well documented in the research (see literature review). Finally, when asked who they turn to for support, 40% of the youth said they turned to themselves, which was the most common response. Thirty-four percent named a family member, 24% a friend, and 2% named a counselor. These results indicate that large numbers of homeless youth, including youth such as Elisa, are isolated from the primary sources of guidance, structure, and support afforded teens in our society—school and work environments, family, and stable peer and adult friendships.

Eighty-eight percent of the participants reported some form of current drug and alcohol use, with the most common substances being alcohol (76%), tobacco (76%), and marijuana (69%). Significant numbers of participants reported using metham-phetamines (26%), LSD (23%), cocaine (10%); mushrooms, ecstasy, heroin, and Vicodin were also listed. Compared to a sample of high-school students (Monitoring the Future 2004), levels of substance use in our sample were at least twice as high as that reported by the high-school students, except for levels of alcohol use (current use for high-school seniors was 48% compared to 76% in our sample).

Of the youth interviewed, 96% reported police contact (as was true for both case studies), with 40% reporting frequent police contact, and 74% said they had previously been incarcerated in Juvenile Hall. Thirty-one percent of the youth interviewed were gang affiliated. Seventy-three percent reported having stolen from a store or person. In a sample of high-school students (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2003), only 8% had ever been arrested and taken to a police station, and less than one-third had ever "taken something not belonging to them." The levels of incarceration, stealing, and police contact in this sample were higher than anticipated by these researchers based on the numbers reported in prior studies of homeless teens (see literature review).

Despite the levels of isolation and illegal activity reported by the teens in our sample, the bulk of their responses to the "three wishes" question reflect mainstream values and norms (see Table 1). Seventy-two percent of the wishes described involved a desire for stability (a job, home, money, or car), positive family changes, or increased happiness. There was only one wish given that was related to an illegal activity, which was "an unlimited supply of pot." Two respondents chose not to answer this question.

Table 1 Responses to "Three Wishes" question

Fantasy (i.e. rock star, ability to fly, world peace)	21%
Own my own home	14%
Money	14%
Improved family relationships	11%
A positive lifestyle (i.e. be happy, a stable home)	11%
A job	9%
Start my own family	8%
Go to school	7%
Be safe and healthy	5%

The first vignette described a situation in which two crimes were committed: "Alex" stole $500 from a store, and "Joe" deceived an elderly man into giving him $500 before "skipping town." When asked to compare the two crimes, 57% of the youth felt that Joe's actions of deceiving the elderly man were worse than Alex stealing from the store. When asked how the store owner felt, most youth said that he probably felt "used" (69%). When asked about the feelings of the elderly man, the youth gave more diverse responses, including feelings of betrayal (26%), anger (21%), foolishness (21%), disappointment (19%), and hurt (13%). Clearly, the youth felt a wider range of feelings for the elderly man than for the storeowner. However, 53% of the youth responded that Alex should have more time in prison than Joe should, while 13% responded that Joe should have more time, and 34% stated that they should have the same punishment. As reported earlier, 71% of the youth reported that they had stolen from a store or person, and 90% of the youth reported that they had been stolen from in the past.

The second vignette described two incidences of rape in the same park: One victim ("Susan") was an 18-year-old, female college student who was jogging at the time the rape happened, and the other victim ("Karen") was an 18-year-old homeless woman who had been sleeping on a park bench at the time of the rape. The youth described a wider range of feelings for Karen than they did for Susan, indicating that the youths' ability for perspective-taking is greater when they are able to identify with the victim. Interestingly, of the one-third that thought one or both of the women had made a mistake in judgment that led to the rape, most commented that Karen should not have slept on a bench. Fifty-five percent of the respondents reported that their own experiences influenced their answers regarding this vignette.

Discussion

As reported in the results, the findings of this study reinforce a growing body of literature documenting the many hardships faced by homeless youth both prior to and after leaving home. This is clear in both vignettes—prior to Victor becoming homeless he had chronically unstable living situations and alcoholic parents; Elisa was physically abused and both of her parents used drugs and alcohol. However, the results include a noticeable deviation from previous research in the higher levels of delinquent activity reported, warranting more extensive and broad-based research regarding rates of delinquent activity among homeless teens. Responses to the "three wishes" question and the two vignettes provide important information about the perspectives of homeless youth and how they view themselves in relation to the broader mainstream culture.

What society defines as "delinquent" stems from a commonly held set of basic values and norms for behavior. The youths' responses to the "three wishes" question not only imply an understanding of the values of larger society, but some level of identification with those values. Their "wishes" clearly reflect the American dream of owning a car and house, having a stable job and a supportive family. Evidence of this can be seen in both case studies—Victor left a lifetime of homelessness with the plan of working and living with his girlfriend in an apartment; Elisa took refuge from

homelessness while she had a stable job, a boyfriend, a child and an apartment. The desire for a mainstream life is also evident in Elisa's effort to raise her son in stable housing with both of his parents.

A study by Carroll et al. (1997) found that delinquent and at-risk youth attached greater importance to goals associated with law-breaking activity, freedom from adult control, and work avoidance. By contrast, in the current study, despite the high levels of law-breaking activity reported, the youths' wishes convey an interest in attaining mainstream ideals. Similarly, in another study of homeless youth, Kufeldt and Nimmo (1987) found that a majority of the youth interviewed wanted to return to school, and that "most did not see themselves as bad, immoral or deviant." It appears that, at some level, the majority of homeless youth still subscribe to mainstream ideals. Yet the past behavior of the youth in this study would indicate otherwise—one-third reported gang affiliation and almost three-quarters have been incarcerated at least once.

The youths' responses to the vignette also point towards a discrepancy between their perceptions of society's norms and their own evaluations of what is right and wrong. At first glance, it is puzzling that the majority of the youth stated that Joe's actions are worse than Alex's, when a majority also responded that Alex should get more time in prison than Joe. It may be that while the youth are aware that in the criminal justice system, stealing from a corporation would likely be punished more severely than stealing from an individual (and answered the question "who should get more time in prison?" based on this awareness), the value system of their own street culture would judge differently, as indicated by their evaluation of which crime was "worse."

Homeless youth have been observed to have their own street culture with values and norms that differ from mainstream culture (Barry et al. 2002; Fest 1999). One of the authors (EB), a long-time case-manager for homeless youth, recalls a holiday party game (initiated by staff) in which each youth opened a gift and then was given the opportunity to take a gift from another youth instead of keeping the one they had opened. The group sat silently for several minutes until one youth spoke up and said, "I can't do this. I don't steal from my friends. I'll steal from stores and strangers, but not from family." The group agreed and the game ended with each youth keeping his or her own gift. Fest (1999) describes the occurrence of "situational honesty" among street youth: while stealing from a store may be viewed as a means of survival on the streets, taking things from individuals, especially other street youth, is viewed as immoral.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy between the youths' seeming identification with mainstream values and their involvement with deviant subsistence strategies (and development of their own value systems) lies in the glaring lack of social connection and support to which they have access. It may be that without regular reinforcement of mainstream ideals from supportive adults and stable peers, a homeless youth must see her wish for stability as just that—a wish. Other researchers have pointed to the importance of relationships with supportive adults in increasing the adaptive functioning of at-risk teens. Tavecchio et al. (1999) postulated that the moral decision-making skills possessed by homeless youth are more likely to be applied to daily decisions when social supports are in place. Paradise and Cauce (2002) assert that the only intervention empirically shown to

improve day-to-day functioning among homeless youth "hinges on the development of another relationship," specifically, case-management by a supportive adult. One study of adolescent resiliency found that among 770 urban youth who were interviewed, those who reported having a supportive relationship with an adult mentor were less likely to smoke marijuana and engage in delinquent behavior, and more likely to have positive attitudes about school (Zimmerman et al. 2004). Given that 40% of the youth in the current study named themselves when asked who they would go to for support, it is clear that at least in this sample, increased social support should be a major target of intervention.

McCarthy and Hagan (1992) hypothesize that homeless youth turn to delinquency when (1) socially acceptable goals become unreachable due to impediments, and (2) the youth have little source of supervision or "weak social bonds." They describe these forces as "push[ing] youth toward delinquency as well as free[ing] them for it." Youth such as Victor experience a low level of supervision even with parents present. In the absence of the opportunity and social reinforcement needed to achieve the socially prescribed goals expressed in the youths' responses to the "three wishes" question, these youth are likely to turn to means of survival that damage, rather than contribute to, the larger society. These youth may consider their wishes to be unattainable ideals, and instead turn to the opportunities and value systems that are readily available to them, even if that means they must deviate from their ideals.

The youths' responses to the second vignette raise further questions about the self-perceptions of homeless youth in relation to the broader society. While the youth showed more sympathy for the rape victim who was homeless, many of the youth indicated that she was partially responsible for her victimization because she was sleeping on a park bench. One possible explanation for this reaction might be that homeless youth, facing situations in which they often feel powerless and are prone to victimization (like having no place to sleep), maintain a sense of control by "blaming the victim," believing that by making strategic choices they will be able to avoid victimization. One respondent commented that he would trade sex for a place to sleep before choosing to sleep on a park bench. The choice to sell sexual favors puts a youth at risk of victimization, as does sleeping in a park. It may be that, just as many youth would rather choose exposure to possible victimization on the street than an abusive home, once on the street, homeless youth attempt to gain a sense of control over the dangers they face on the street by "choosing" which risks they will expose themselves to. Whitbeck and Simons (1990) postulate that for many homeless youth "the process of learning to survive in the hostile environment of life on the streets actually serves to increase the probability of further victimization." With little access to safe environments or safe relationships, survival for these youth is often a matter of choosing which risks to incur, whether those risks are immediate or long-term.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study involved a relatively small number of participants and was limited to one service provider in one area of the country, impacting the generalizability of the

data to homeless youth as a whole. In addition, the mean age of the youth was 19, and the results may over-represent the experiences of older teens. Whether older teens make up a larger portion of homeless youth in general is difficult to determine from previous literature. However, it is possible that the strong representation of older teens in the study may have contributed to the high rates of police contact, stealing, and incarceration in juvenile hall, since older teens have had more years of potential experience with delinquent activity than would a group of predominantly younger teens. Finally, this study did not use standardized instruments in assessing the responses of the youth. The use of a broader research design and analysis using standardized instruments would likely bring more clarity to some of the compelling themes highlighted in this exploratory study.

More research comparing homeless and housed youth on reports of goals, wishes, and delinquent behavior would further develop our understanding of how the youth view themselves and their decisions in relation to mainstream society and broad social values. By using the perspectives of homeless youth as a starting point in efforts to understand the relationship between homelessness and delinquency, rather than trying to apply existing approaches to delinquent youth, researchers may be able to develop theoretical approaches and applications that accurately address the needs of this struggling population.

Research that further explores the types of interventions that would successfully build lasting social connection and support for homeless youth would also be valuable. It seems clear that without significant efforts to better address the needs of these youth, and specifically to help them build connections with supportive adults, it will be very difficult for them to feel a sense of belonging in society and to lead successful and productive lives.

Implications for Clinical Practice

This research study highlights the importance of identifying at-risk youth and increasing their social supports before they leave home as well as after they leave home. Many of these youth have experienced relationships with adults in which they were consistently disappointed, neglected, abused, or manipulated. As a result such youth often develop a strong hesitancy to trust adults and access supports, which presents particular challenges in working with this population. Similarly, the transient and turbulent nature of homelessness makes it difficult to connect with these youth and in particular to form lasting, supportive relationships with them. Adapting outreach efforts to the norms and values of youth street culture and allowing for a range of contact—from getting clean clothes or toiletries, to "checking-in" with an outreach worker, to more formal counseling sessions—would allow for youth to build trust gradually. Likewise, clinically understanding the perspectives and values of the youth, as well as how they relate to the values and norms of mainstream society, is crucial to their future survival and well-being. Asking for input from youth informally, or through focus groups, brings greater insight into program design and clinical work. Efforts to understand the perspectives and values of homeless youth will

assist in the difficult work of building bridges for them to safer relationships and more stable environments.

Appendix

Youths' reactions to different crimes were evaluated using their responses to two vignettes. Each vignette was read aloud to each subject to remove reading comprehension as a factor in the responses.

Vignette #1

Two young men, brothers, had gotten into serious trouble. Because of this, they were secretly leaving town in a hurry and needed money. Alexander, the older one, broke into a store and stole $500.00. Joe, the younger one, went to a retired old man who was known to help people in town. Joe told the man that he was very sick, and he needed $500.00 to pay for the operation. Really, he wasn't sick at all, and he had no intention of paying the man back. Although the man didn't know Joe very well, he loaned him the money. So Joe and Alex skipped town, each with $500.00 (Colby et al. 1983, p. 83).

Vignette #2

Susan is an 18-year-old woman who is jogging in a nearby park for her morning exercise. It is a routine she has had for the past three years since she began running on her high school track team. She is now in her first year of college and she hopes to become a software engineer. One morning while running she was attacked by a group of boys, beaten and raped. The following week an 18-year-old homeless woman named Karen is sleeping alone on a bench in the same park. Karen has been homeless since she was fifteen when she left home because of her abusive parents. She has been drug-free for 2 months and is on the waiting list for transitional housing. She was also badly beaten and raped by the group of boys.

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