



Homeless youth, strain, and justice system involvement: An application of general strain theory



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ABSTRACT

Using Agnew's (2006) general strain theory as a guide, we seek to identify some of the key events and experiences that place homeless youth at high risk of justice system involvement. By expanding and elaborating on the particular types of strains and stressors that are relevant to homeless youth, we identify several key (and understudied) strains that may help to account for their high risk of justice system involvement and that may also place them at risk of persistent homelessness. These strains include experiences of polyvictimization, experiences of discrimination and violent victimization that result from an LGBT identity, and a variety of failures and setbacks associated with multiple system involvement. The implications of this work for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Prior studies have linked youth homelessness – especially persistent homelessness – to involvement in various types of street crime, including property crime, violent crime, drug crimes; and to general levels of criminal activity (Baron, 2004, 2006; McCarthy & Hagan, 1992). Studies have found that between 71.8% and 78% of homeless youth 18 to 24 years old have been arrested (Ferguson et al., 2011; Yoder, Bender, Thompson, Ferguson, & Haffejee, 2014), and 60% have gone to jail (Yoder et al., 2014). In contrast, approximately 12.6% of 18 to 24 year olds in the general population have been arrested (Howden & Meyer, 2011). As these statistics indicate, the unaddressed needs of homeless youth can carry high costs for the individual and society vis-à-vis justice outcomes because these youth are unable to reach their full potential.

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the key characteristics and experiences of homeless youth that place them at risk for justice system involvement (note: in this article, justice system involvement refers to involvement in either the juvenile justice system or the adult criminal justice system). The identification of these factors is important

because knowledge of such factors may help to guide the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies. We begin by defining the problem. Next, using Agnew's (2006) general strain theory as a guide, we identify several key strains that are especially relevant to homeless youth, that may help to account for their special risk of justice system involvement, and that may also place them at risk for persistent homelessness. Then, we discuss key federal policies that address homeless youth. Finally, we conclude our article by discussing the implications of this work for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Defining the problem

2.1. Pathways to homelessness

This article defines homeless youth as individuals who: (1) do not have a permanent stable residence of their own, (2) are between 16 and 24 years of age, and (3) are living independently without consistent parental, guardian, or familial support. Some key terminology describes distinct pathways to homelessness among youth. When youth reside on the street for an extended period of time without using shelters or other services they are sometimes referred to as *street youth* (Bureau of Primary Health Care, 2001). *Runaways* are homeless youth under the age of 18 who have left their homes without permission, or if they were already away from home, chose not to return (Gary, Moorhead, & Warren, 1996). Youth are referred to as *throwaways* or *throwaways*

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when parents or other adults in the household force youth to leave their home and do not allow the youth to return (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Molino, McBride, & Kekwaletswe, 2013). Youth who have become homeless after being involved in formal systems of care, such as foster care, are referred to as *systems youth* (Toro, Lesperance, & Braciszewski, 2011). *Undocumented unaccompanied minors* are youth who have come to the United States from another country by themselves (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2012). These pathways to homelessness are not mutually exclusive; over time youth may fall into multiple groups (Toro et al., 2011).

2.2. Estimates of homeless youth

Estimates of how many youth are homeless range from tens of thousands to over a million (Pergamit et al., 2013). These estimates vary widely both because of the difficulty counting this largely hidden population, and because sampling and estimation techniques vary (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). Two examples of attempts to quantify the problem of homeless youth are (1) the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMA-2), and (2) the annual point-in-time counts of homelessness conducted on behalf of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). For the first study, NISMA-2 conducted telephone interviews in 1999 of adult caretakers, youth (between 10 and 18 years old), and staff from juvenile facilities (i.e., juvenile detention centers, group homes, residential treatment centers and runaway and homeless youth shelters), using a national probability sample of households and computer-assisted methodology. This study estimated that 1,682,900 youth had runaway or throwaway episodes. Most of these youth were between 15 and 17 years old (68%) and the gender composition was evenly split. The racial/ethnic composition of these youth was 57% White, 17% Black, 15% Hispanic, 11% identified as other, and less than 1% did not provide that information. Most of these youth were gone between 24 h to less than a week (58%) (Hammer et al., 2002). First time runaway or throwaway youth who are gone for shorter periods of time are more likely to stay in runaway and homeless youth shelters than youth who have spent more time on the street (Burt, 2007; Toro et al., 2007).

For the second study, HUD conducts a point-in-time count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals each year on a single night in January. In 2014, 45,205 unaccompanied homeless youth were counted; these youth accounted for approximately 8% of the homeless who were counted. Most youth (86%) were between 18 and 24 years old. However, it is important to note that HUD's efforts seriously undercount youth homelessness because they exclude youth who are unsheltered (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010). In addition HUD does not collect demographic data on the homeless youth who participate in the count, however other studies have found that unsheltered youth are mostly male (Toro et al., 2007). Racial/ethnic characteristics of street youth have been found to be representative of the communities where they reside (Burt, 2007).

Although not mentioned in either study, homeless youth are also more likely to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Prevalence estimates of homeless LGBT youth range widely from 20 to 40% of homeless youth, even though estimates of the LGBT population are only between 3 and 5% of the U.S. population (Ray & Berger, 2007).

2.3. Child maltreatment and street victimization

Among homeless youth, maltreatment is often the impetus for leaving home (c.f. Ferguson, 2009; Kim, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Huang, 2009; Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Yoder, 2006). Furthermore, rates of maltreatment among homeless youth are higher than those in the general population (Thrane et al., 2006). Bender, Brown, Thompson, Ferguson, and Langenderfer (2014) conducted a study of 601 youth ages 18 to 24 who had spent at least 2 weeks away from home in the month; the

youth were recruited from homeless youth-serving agencies in Los Angeles, CA; Denver, CO; and Austin, TX. Bender et al.'s (2014) study found that 93% of study participants had experienced at least one form of maltreatment before leaving home, and 30% reported experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse before leaving home. Participants who reported all three forms of abuse had more than double the odds of post-traumatic stress disorder and increased odds of depression. In addition to the victimization experienced before leaving home, homeless youth often experience further victimization while living on the streets (Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauze, 2001; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2007). Bender et al. (2014) found that 28% of participants had experienced two or more forms of street victimization (12% had been physically assaulted and robbed, 8.8% had been physically and sexually assaulted, and 6.3% had experienced robbery, physical assault and sexual assault). Experiencing street victimizations more than doubled the odds of meeting the criteria for depression, and increased the odds of meeting the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. It is no surprise, then, that Ferguson's (2009) qualitative study found that homeless youth felt emotionally distressed, insecure, powerless, and hopeless.

2.4. Discrimination

The literature regarding discrimination among homeless youth is sparse, but two prior studies have found that homeless youth experience the following forms of discrimination: racial or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and homelessness. Milburn, Ayala, Rice, Batterham, and Rotheram-Borus's (2006) study of 262 homeless youth (12–20 years old) in Los Angeles County found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth reported more discrimination than heterosexual youth, including discrimination from peers, family, and the police. This study did not find a significant relationship between race/ethnicity and discrimination. Gwadz et al.'s (2009) study of 80 homeless youth (14–23 years old) in New York City found that homeless youth reported experiencing discrimination associated with their age, sexual orientation, gender identity, educational achievement, homelessness, and race/ethnicity. Unlike urban youth who remained at home, family and schools do not buffer homeless youths' experiences of discrimination. Such discrimination may hinder homeless youths' participation in the workforce and may contribute to illegal behaviors for survival (Gwadz et al., 2009).

2.5. Multiple system involvement

Although understudied, the risk of homelessness may be amplified among youth who are involved in multiple systems, either simultaneously or over time, because such involvement can indicate complex service needs that are difficult to address (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & van de Vijver, 2013). For example, Thompson and Hasin (2011) found that homeless youth who had been in foster care were nearly nine times as likely to have been in substance abuse treatment compared to youth who had not been in foster care. It is also well documented that youth with mental health needs frequently are involved in multiple systems including child welfare, juvenile justice, and substance abuse treatment (Garland, Hough, Landsverk, & Brown, 2001). Unfortunately, service providers have traditionally worked in silos, which make them unaware of other systems that are serving youth (Wright, Anderson, Kelly, & Kooreman, 2007). Thus, service providers who do not coordinate with other service providers may be unaware of multi-system involvement.

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. General strain theory

General strain theory (Agnew, 2006) highlights both homelessness and victimization as key factors in the generation of youth crime and

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