Homelessness Research Institute

Building and Disseminating Knowledge

The Heterogeneity of Homeless Youth in America:

Examining Typologies

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Annual prevalence estimates for homeless youth in the U.S. have ranged as high as 1.6 million among those aged 13-17 (Ringwalt et al., 1998). Robertson and Toro (1999) concluded that youth may be the single age group most at risk of becoming homeless and, yet, this group is the least studied of the three major subgroups among the overall homeless population (i.e., homeless adults, families, and youth). The existing research has documented many of the characteristics of homeless youth and identified a wide range of deficits (see Robertson and Toro, 1999; Toro, Dworsky, and Fowler, 2007). However, studies find rather different profiles of homeless youth, depending on sampling strategies, target age groups, gender balance, measures used, and other methodological factors. For example, it has been noted that studies targeting older youth (sometimes up to age 25), males, and youth from the streets tend to find more problem behaviors, such as substance abuse, mental disorders, risky sexual behavior, and conduct problems (Haber and Toro, 2004; Toro et al., 2007).

A few studies have examined the differences between homeless and housed youth. Homeless youth have less social support than their housed counterparts (Menke, 2000) and experience many hurdles and hardships while in school (Ziesemer, Marcoux, and Marwell, 1994). Furthermore, homeless youth are often victims of various forms of parental maltreatment (Wolfe, Toro, and McCaskill, 1999) and are at an increased risk for various mental disorders, including depression, conduct disorders, and substance abuse (Kennedy, 1991; McCaskill, Toro, and Wolfe, 1998; Unger et al., 1998).

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A Review of Prior Research on Typologies of Homeless Youth

The heterogeneous population of homeless youth contains a wide spectrum of experiences, backgrounds and trajectories. Common attempts to categorize these youth have included distinctions between *runaways*, who have left the parental home, sometimes due to abuse experienced in the home; *throwaways,* who have been kicked out of the home by their parents, often due to parental dysfunction and/or youth behavior problems; *street youth*, who can be found in various street settings and often engage in prostitution, drug dealing, and other dangerous and/or criminal behaviors; and *systems youth*, who, after spending time in foster care or other formal systems of care, "fall through the cracks," and end up homeless. Unfortunately, such classifications are usually not based on sound empirical data and much overlap between the categories exists, especially when they are considered in a longitudinal context (Haber and Toro, 2004).

Early typologies
Attempts to define typologies of homeless youth began in the 1960s. Shellow, Schamp, Liebow, and Unger (1967) chose to divide the homeless youth population into those running away from something and those running toward something, while Haupt and Offord (1972) divided institutionalized runaways into those who were really running and those who ran as a cry for help. In 1972, English compiled interview data from over 300 runaway youth in Ann

Arbor, Michigan and qualitatively grouped them into *runaways, floaters, splitters,* and *hard road freaks*. While perhaps interesting or even entertaining, these proposed categories do little to aid this vulnerable population.

Moving toward empirical classification, quantitative typologies have more recently been attempted. In their 1976 paper, Dunford and Brennan categorized homeless youth using data from 53 interviews based on measures of alienation, powerlessness, stigma, parental support/rejection, self-esteem, access to social roles, delinquency, and interparental conflict. Although 6 exclusive categories were statistically distinguishable, such labels as "self-confident and unrestrained runaway girls" and "young, highly regulated, and negatively influenced youth" may not be practically useful in application.

Typologies based on family relationships
Groupings of homeless youth often involve categorization based on characteristics of familial relationships or housing status at the time of sampling. The former often consists of groups such as *accompanied youth, unaccompanied youth, throwaway youth,* and *systems youth,* while the later includes such categories as *shelter youth, disconnected youth, hotel/motel youth, couch surfers, doubled up youth,* and *street youth* (Tierney, Gupton, and Hallett, 2008; Toro, Dworsky, and Fowler, 2007; Wayman, 2010). One effort to integrate these two approaches identified *runaway youth, episodic and traditional homeless youth, shelter-using youth,* and *street dependent*

youth (Wayman, 2010). Categories based on family relationships are difficult to define because these distinctions are often based on youth's subjective interpretations of what led to their homelessness (asking parents, for example, could well yield very different interpretations). Furthermore, dividing homeless youth based on housing status is problematic because research suggests most youth transition in and out of various types of living conditions (Braciszewski, Toro, and Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2011a; Cauce et al., 2000; Maitra, 2002; Tyler and Johnson, 2006; Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Yoder, 1999). Wagner, Carlin, Cauce and Tenner (2001) studied 272 homeless youth and found that, in the week prior to the interview, 22 percent had stayed in more than one housing environment such as a shelter, on the streets or with a friend/relative. Thus, if one considers a reasonable time-frame rather than a specific point in time, categorization becomes very difficult.

Typologies based on reason for homelessness

Others have attempted to empirically categorize homeless youth based on the presenting reason for being homeless. Ringwalt, Greene, and Robertson (1998) distinguished youth who ran away from homes from those who were asked to leave their homes. In their sample of 1,400 youth, these researchers found that about half fit each category. Similarly, Cherry (1993) used discriminant function and cluster analyses to categorize interview data from 258 homeless youth and found four groups: thrown-out youth, running-from youths, running-to youths, and forsaken youth. Boesky,

Toro, and Bukowski (1997) identified three subgroups: runaways, throwaways, and intervention seekers in their sample of 122 homeless youth (ages 12-17). Heinze, Jozefowicz-Simbeni, and Toro (2010) used cluster analysis to classify 103 youth receiving services at six urban homeless shelters based on their self-stated reasons for becoming homeless. The five categories were: lacks resources/family support, abuse/safety, pregnancy, conduct/rules, and partnered. Despite their commonsense appeal, distinctions based on reasons for homelessness may be problematic because youth often endorse multiple explanations for their situation, including abuse, poverty, parental substance use, and parental rejection. It can be difficult for the researcher to identify the primary reason and we have little data on the utility of these categorizations to inform policy and service development.

Typologies based on abuse and neglect history

Another approach to categorizing homeless youth is to group them based on abuse and neglect histories. Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas and Yockey (2001) found that 47 percent of their sample of homeless adolescents had been sexually abused. Rew (2002) separated homeless youth into housing types and found that those who lived on the streets and were ingrained in street culture had experienced more sexual abuse than those who relied on shelters or lived with friends or relatives. This suggests that, within the homeless youth population, there may be distinct subgroups of youth with more

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extensive abuse histories. Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Yoder (1999) examined the relationship between abuse histories and negative outcomes in 225 homeless youth and found that those leaving abusive families showed more risky sexual behavior, substance use, deviant subsistence behavior, and association with deviant peers. Exposure to abuse and neglect has also been shown to predict an earlier runaway age and an increased likelihood of being victimized on the streets (Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck and Yoder, 2006). However, other researchers have found no relationship between histories of abuse and neglect and behavioral outcomes (Powers, Eckenrode, and Jaklitsch, 1990). Given that abuse is often underreported and homeless youth show multiple areas of need, policy- or clinically-driven provision of services targeted to this sole characteristic may not be the most efficacious in holistic treatment of homeless youth.

Typologies based on mental health status

Homeless youth may also be categorized based on mental health problems. Emotional distress is commonly reported by homeless youth (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer,and Thomas, 2000; van der Ploeg, 1989) and such distress can develop into clinically significant psychiatric disorders (Wormer, 2003). Research suggests homeless youth experience higher rates of anxiety (Kidd, 2004), developmental delays (Kidd, 2004), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Unger et al., 1998), depression (Kennedy, 1991; Unger et al., 1998), and conduct disorder and substance

abuse (McCaskill et al., 1998). Improved mental health screening measures, in combination with knowledge of abuse histories and other characteristics, could prove to be a useful foundation from which to base typologies and subsequent services.

Typologies based on age cohort

Some studies suggest that age may be a useful factor by which to group homeless youth. Boesky et al. (1997) found higher rates of drug abuse and dependence, more sexual abuse, more stressful life events, and more time spent homeless among older as opposed to younger youth (age range: 12-17). Cauce (2002) suggests that children who leave home at different ages may have different pathways to becoming street dependent and this way of categorizing homeless youth may help lead to preventive interventions for different age groups. Furthermore, Cauce and colleagues (2000) suggest that different kinds of youth become homeless at different ages, perhaps as a function of how long they can cope with difficulties in their personal or home lives.

Recent typology research

More recent research has focused on new ways for creating typologies among homeless youth. Focusing on pre-homelessness characteristics, Rukmana (2008) found deprivation in the former residential area of the youth was a weaker predictor of youth homelessness than the presence of domestic violence in the area of residential origin. This new direction in typology research suggests that interpersonal factors may outweigh economic factors when categorizing

homeless youth. Another new approach to developing typologies involves personal characteristics of homeless youth, such as self-esteem. Among homeless youth, self-esteem was found to be a key factor in predicting risk and resilience (Kidd and Shahar, 2008), suggesting programs targeting self-esteem may buffer homeless youth from certain negative outcomes. Recent studies also have suggested that dividing homeless youth into those who are newly homeless (homeless for 6 months or less) and those who are more chronically homeless can provide two distinct groups which differ in age, school attendance, substance use, sexual risk taking, service use, and suicide attempts (Mallet, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, and Rotheram-Borus, 2004; Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Rice, Mallett, and Rosenthal, 2006).

In a study of recently homeless adolescents, Milburn et al. (2009a) used cluster analysis to classify youth based on a number of protective and risk factors. Risk factors included emotional distress, risky sex, and substance use, while protective factors included having a peer group that engages in positive behaviors and being enrolled in school. Results indicated three clusters of youth: those with more protective factors who do well outside the home, those at risk, and those with more risk than protective factors, who tend to do worse outside the home (also see Milburn et al., 2009b).

A Promising Three-category Typology: (1) Transient but Connected; (2) High-risk; and (3) Low-Risk

In order to examine the longitudinal impact of an empirically-derived multivariate typology of homeless youth, Braciszewski, Toro, and Jozefowicz-Simbeni (2011b) used a probability sample of 250 initially homeless youth from throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. Youth were recruited from several different agencies providing services to homeless adolescents, including shelters, outpatient and inpatient substance abuse treatment programs, and psychiatric facilities, as well as some street settings. At baseline, the average participant was 15.3 years old (range 13-17). Youth were interviewed again 0.5, 1.0, 2.0, 4.5, 5.5, and 6.5 years after baseline (ages at last follow-up ranged 20-24). Follow-up rates at these time points were 58, 38, 59, 82, 75, and 83 percent, respectively (for further details on the methodology of this research project, see Ahmed, Fowler, and Toro, 2010; Fowler et al., 2008, 2011; Hobden et al., 2011; Tompsett and Toro, 2010; Urberg, Goldstein, and Toro, 2005).

A wide variety of initial characteristics were used to differentiate the sample into subtypes. These included resilience factors (e.g., family cohesion, self-efficacy, employment, school achievement/performance) as well as negative outcomes (e.g., frequent homelessness, sexual abuse, risky sexual behavior, mental health diagnoses/symptoms). Latent class analysis identified a three-class solution that described youth as either

In order to examine a promising typology of homeless youth, a probability sample was used. Youth were differentiated into subtypes based on resilience factors and negative outcomes. Analysis identified a three-class solution that described youth as one of the following: (1) transient but connected, (2) high-risk, or (3) low-risk.

Across all groups, most youth did eventually find stable housing. These findings suggest that targeted interventions can be created for homeless youth.

(1) transient but connected (*n*=55), (2) high-risk (*n*=46), or (3) low-risk (*n*=149). For the transient but connected youth, mental health and substance use issues were not prominent; however, as the class label suggests, these youth were nonetheless unstable in terms of both housing and school connections. They showed the most extensive histories of homelessness. However, compared to the other two groups, they reported relatively high cohesion in their families and the most sexual partners. High-risk youth were more likely to have dropped out of school, reported more sexual abuse, more sexual partners, and struggled more with depression, conduct, and substance abuse problems. They also showed substantial housing mobility and histories of homelessness. The low-risk group showed low levels of all the problem behaviors mentioned above, as compared to one or both of the other groups. They showed the least extensive histories of homelessness and housing instability. The low-risk group included more males and younger adolescents. Males were also more likely to be classified as high-risk, as were Caucasian youth. Girls were more likely to fall in the transient but connected group.

Housing trajectories differ across groups

Class membership was then used to predict long-term housing trajectories over the 6.5-year time period using hierarchical linear modeling. As expected, low-risk youth experienced the least homelessness over time and were often in secure living environments. Transient but connected individuals continued an alternating pattern of being homeless and housed. Overall, they tended to experience homelessness the most of the three groups, with respite coming only after 5.5 years. High-risk youth showed a trend toward stable housing during mid- to late-adolescence. However, as they entered young adulthood, these youth experienced a spike in homelessness (43 percent experienced some homelessness between the 18-month and 4.5-year follow up), before returning to levels similar to the other classes. Across all three groups, most did eventually find stable housing during the last two follow-up time points (5.5 and 6.5 years).

Implications

Taken together, these findings suggest that targeted interventions can be created for homeless youth, given key characteristics found while they are homeless during mid-adolescence (e.g., mental health, substance use, connection to stable schooling). In addition, it is useful to know that many of these youth eventually gain stable housing; thus, even for youth who are experiencing a number of difficulties early on, positive outcomes are often achieved ultimately. Such findings suggest that most homeless youth are "resilient," at least in terms of their long-term housing outcomes. Similar "positive" findings showing growing housing stability over time were obtained in a recent two-year follow-up of newly homeless youth in Los Angeles and in Melbourne, Australia (Milburn et al., 2007) as well as in longitudinal studies of homeless adults and families (Stojanovic, Weitzman, Shinn, Labay, and Williams, 1999; Toro et al., 1997, 1999).

Gender influence may also be important during this developmental period, as females were more likely to be in the "transient but connected" group (but less likely to be in the other two groups, one doing well initially, one having significant problems in many areas). Such findings are not altogether surprising, given the nature of available services for homeless youth and young adults. Many shelters allow for adolescent females to remain with their families and/or mothers, while male teens are filtered out of all-female facilities. Furthermore, girls in our culture are typically "trained" to be more family-oriented and boys to be more independent. Continued exploration of differential male and female trajectories is warranted in future research, especially with regard to such wide ranging outcomes for males.

Recommendations for Future Research and Intervention

Despite evidence that homeless youth vary in a variety of important ways, including service use, educational experiences, social support, mental health problems, and risk taking behaviors, Wayman (2009) points out that many studies fail to address this diversity and simply refer to the group at large as either "homeless youth" or "runaway youth." This lack of distinction between different subgroups of homeless youth has led to a body of literature which may not be addressing the problems and unique experiences of homeless youth that would be most beneficial in designing and disseminating policy and services. While several recent studies have offered typologies which may prove to be useful for service delivery and/or policy development, there is still much need for new, empirically driven and useful typologies. Below we list some recommendations for future research involving typologies and for related intervention and policy development.

1. Rather than continuing to use the old distinctions among subtypes of homeless youth (e.g., runaways vs. throwaways), we recommend new multivariate and data-driven typological approaches, such as that developed and longitudinally validated by Braciszewski et al. (2011b) and that of Milburn et al. (2009a). Such new approaches should be considered by those developing interventions and policy, as well as by researchers. Given that such typological approaches are only just beginning to be available, it is suggested that, for now, service providers pay attention to need areas directly identified by the homeless youth being served (e.g., mental health, family conflict, stable housing, substance abuse, education, job-training and placement).

2. Research should consider obtaining large representative samples of all homeless youth in order to allow the creation of valid and generalizable typologies. For example, focusing only on street youth, who show the most serious array of behavior problems, limits the range of outcomes and limits the ability to identify subtypes.

3. It has been noted that few interventions to assist homeless youth have been formally evaluated (Toro et al., 2007). In addition to developing careful evaluations of existing programs and establishing evidence-based interventions, we should begin

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to use empirical classifications of youth to determine if certain interventions have better outcomes for certain types of youth. In addition to provision of stable housing, results from Braciszewski et al. (2011b) suggest that programs targeting school stability and prevention of alcohol and other drug use may also provide substantial aid.

4. Distal outcomes for youth, after their initial homelessness, can be used in developing useful typologies, rather than focusing solely on their current and past circumstances. Such longitudinal typologies for other homeless groups have been identified, including adults and families (Stojanovic et al., 1999; Toro and Janisse, 2004). In a two-year follow-up of 265 youth who had aged out of foster care (typically around age 18), Fowler, Toro, and Miles (2009) used the trajectory of housing status experienced throughout the follow-up period (including time spent homeless and precariously housed) to classify youth into four distinct subgroups. The *Continuously Stable* subgroup (n=152, 57 percent) remained housed for most of the entire follow-up period. The *Increasingly Stable* (n=29, 11 percent) had instable housing initially, but experienced increasingly secure housing over the follow up period. *Decreasingly Stable* (n=31, 12 percent) youth experienced housing stability immediately upon exit from foster care, but precarious housing and literal homelessness later on. Finally, the *Continuously Instable* youth (n=53, 20 percent) bounced between literal homelessness and precarious housing situations. Housing instability was related to emotional and behavioral problems, physical and

sexual victimization, criminal conviction, and dropping out of high school. Fowler, Toro, and Miles (2011) have recently extended this approach, using the same sample of 265 youth who aged out of foster care, to consider longitudinal outcomes in three domains at once (i.e., housing, employment, and education). They identified three subgroups: (1) Stable-Engaged (41 percent) who experienced secure housing and increasing connections to both education and employment over time; (2) Stable-Disengaged (30 percent) who maintained housing but reported decreasing rates of education and small increases in employment; and (3) Instable-Disengaged (29 percent) who experienced chronic housing instability, declining connection to education, and a failure to attain employment. The Instable-Disengaged showed worse mental health compared to the other two subgroups. Such approaches could well be used to classify the longitudinal outcomes for samples of homeless youth. With such information in hand, service-providers and others would have a firmer foundation on which to base their planning of interventions and policies affecting homeless youth.

5. Girls and boys might have different outcomes, especially based on where resources are generally allocated. On the one hand, girls may more easily be able to stay with parents or other relatives (or boyfriends), thereby preventing homeless episodes or reducing their length. On the other hand, if girls lose such social resources, they may have fewer options to maintain themselves in independent stable housing. The "training" that boys receive in being

independent may help at least some of them to achieve real stability, but may leave others with few social or service supports. Continued exploration of gender differences is certainly important.

6. Protective factors may be a promising avenue of research which could lead to meaningful typologies. Good, early examples of such approaches include the work described above by Milburn et al (2009a) and Braciszewski et al. (2011b).

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About the Authors

Paul A. Toro is Professor of Psychology at Wayne State University in Detroit. He was President of the Society for Community Research and Action (Division 27, Community Psychology, of the American Psychological Association) in 2003-04. He and his Research Group on Homelessness and Poverty have conducted a wide range of studies on homelessness over the past 25 years, including studies on homeless adults, families, and youth. His studies have compared homeless to

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THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS is a non-partisan, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The Alliance is a leading voice on the issue of homelessness. The Alliance analyzes policy and develops pragmatic, cost-effective policy solutions. The Alliance works collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help communities achieve their goal of ending homelessness. We provide data and research to policymakers and elected officials in order to inform policy debates and educate the public and opinion leaders nationwide.

THE HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE, the research and education arm of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, works to end homelessness by building and disseminating knowledge that drives policy change. The goals of the Institute are to build the intellectual capital around solutions to homelessness; to advance data and research to ensure that policymakers, practitioners, and the caring public have the best information about trends in homelessness and emerging solutions; and to engage the media to ensure intelligent reporting on the issue of homelessness.