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The initiation of homeless youth into the street economy

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Abstract

Homeless youth (HY) who lack employment in the formal economy typically turn to the street economy (e.g., prostitution, drug selling) for survival. Guided by the theory of social control, the present paper explores factors influencing HY's initiation into the street economy. Eighty HY (ages 15–23) were recruited from four community-based organizations. All participated in structured interviews and 25% participated in qualitative interviews. Almost all HY had participated in the street (81%) and formal economies (69%). Five main factors simultaneously influenced initiation into the street economy: social control/bonds, barriers to the formal economy (e.g., homelessness, educational deficits, mental health problems, incarceration, stigma), tangible and social/emotional benefits of the street economy, severe economic need, and the active recruitment of HY into the street economy by others. Qualitative and quantitative data sources were congruent. Intervention efforts are needed at multiple levels of influence to promote HY's success in the formal economy. © 2008 The Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Homeless youth; Street economy; Formal economy; Mixed methods

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Homeless youth are individuals between the ages of 13 and 24 who have run away from, left, or been forced to leave their homes, generally as a result of prolonged abuse and neglect. These young people reside without parental supervision in emergency shelters, temporary situations, or places not intended for habitation (Kipke, O'Connor, Palmer, & MacKenzie, 1995; Robertson & Toro, 1999; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000). Lacking financial support from their families, homeless youth must develop strategies to support themselves. For homeless youth, similar to their typically developing peers, employment in the formal economy (that is, working “on-the-books”) is a stabilizing influence with wide-ranging positive effects on relationships, health behavior, general development, and life outcomes (Carr, Wright, & Brody, 1996; Leventhal, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Further, employment is a prerequisite for the majority of stable living situations.

All youths' paths to steady employment are shaped by the choices they make and the numerous forces influencing these choices, including social class and education level (Arnett, 2004; Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006; Hamilton and Powers, 1990). Most youth gain work experiences in adolescence, although these typically do not prepare them for future professional occupations (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Social ties that yield job placement assistance (Coté, 2000) and adult role models are critical influences during the transition to employment (Arnett, 2004). Middle-class, college-bound youth generally have substantial social ties and successful role models (Hamilton and Powers, 1990) while working-class youth and those who do not attain higher education are typically constrained in the resources available to them. In the economy of the 21st Century, higher education is required for most professional jobs (Arnett, 2004), and thus working-class and uneducated youth do not generally pursue professional careers. Instead they obtain jobs in the “youth labor market,” which is characterized by low skill, low pay, and little opportunity for advancement. For those with a high school degree or less, the unemployment rate is high, and incomes are poor (Arnett, 2004).

With regard to the transition to steady employment we speculate that homeless youth are both similar to and different from their peers in the general population. Homeless youth tend to drop out of high school at high rates (Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2007) and come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (United States General Accounting Office, 1989). In this respect they share characteristics with other disadvantaged peers. Homeless youth may differ from their peers in the general population in that their access to networks of social and financial support is extremely limited, and thus their survival needs are more pressing. On the other hand, a substantial proportion of homeless youth are involved in social services (De Rosa et al., 1999), which may provide access to social ties, material support, and role models.

Homeless youth who lack employment demonstrate a wide range of survival strategies, including panhandling, collecting refundable bottles, itinerant informal work (housecleaning, bagging groceries, manual labor, etc.), as well as sex work (also referred to as commercial or survival sex), shoplifting, selling stolen goods, mugging, and activities of the illegal drug economy (Beech, Myers, Beech, & Kernick, 2003; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Kipke et al., 1995; Weisberg, 1985). However, these activities of the “street economy” are linked to a number of adverse consequences including incarceration, trauma and victimization, HIV infection, and even death (Roy et al., 2004; Weber, Boivin, Blais, Haley, & Roy, 2002; Yates, Mackenzie, Pennbridge, & Swofford, 1991). Of these activities, sex work is the most extensively documented among homeless youth. About one-third to half – in equal proportions male and female – exchange sex for money, drugs, food, a place to stay, or other resources (Beech et al., 2003; Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993; Greene et al., 1999; Haley, Roy, Leclerc, Boudreau, &

Boivin, 2004; Weber et al., 2002). However, little is known about homeless youths' participation in other activities of the street economy or the influences that promote or impede their entry into the formal and street economies. To address these gaps in the literature, the present paper examines homeless youths' economic survival strategies and initiation into the street economy.

The present paper is guided by the theory of social control (Brownfield, Thompson, & Sorenson, 1997; Chapple, McQuillan, & Berdahl, 2005; LaGrange & Silverman, 1999; Smith & Pateroster, 1987). Social control theory emphasizes the role of youths' bonds to conventional society as deterrents to "delinquent" or "deviant" behavior (Hirschi, 1969). These social bonds have four elements: attachment to others, where an individual with emotional ties will fear disapproval from others upon deviating from standards of moral behavior; commitment, that is, the time and effort one has committed to engagement in conventional activities which would be costly if lost through a criminal act; involvement, the time devoted toward conventional activities, where an individual who is kept busy with such activities will simply not have time to commit deviant acts; and belief, a person's acceptance of the common rules and value systems of society, which condemn deviant behavior. These inter-related elements form the social bond that serves as a controlling factor, restraining individuals from committing criminal acts, including those intrinsic to the street economy. According to social control theory, homeless youth may naturally turn to deviant activities as a result of their severed bonds to conventional society.

Aims

Using quantitative data, we first describe homeless youths' lifetime work experiences and the prevalence of co-occurring adverse outcomes and behaviors (e.g., substance use and past incarceration) that may serve as barriers to employment in the formal economy, and examine gender differences. Second, using qualitative data and guided by the theory of social control, we identify and explore factors that contribute to homeless youths' initiation into the street economy. We hypothesized that youth with stronger bonds to conventional society would experience fewer barriers to employment in the formal economy, and would be less likely to enter the street economy. However, homeless youth are atypical in a number of respects, including in that their engagement in deviant activities is driven by economic need. Thus an additional goal of the study was to expand upon social control theory as needed. Further, we examine whether quantitative and qualitative data sources complement or contradict each other.

Method

Procedures

A total of 80 homeless youth between the ages of 14 and 23 were screened, recruited, and interviewed at four community-based organizations that serve homeless youth in New York City. These included one emergency shelter, two drop-in centers, and one basic center/transitional living program. Because over 60% of the population is male (Clatts & Davis, 1999), we stratified recruitment by gender. Inclusion criteria were comprised of: age between 14 and 23, emancipated minor status if age 14–17, and homeless or at imminent risk for homelessness (Rotheram-Borus,

Koopman, & Ehrhardt, 1991). Those homeless and at imminent risk for homelessness are referred to as “homeless youth” in the present paper.

Most youth screened (>80%) were eligible for participation, and approximately 80% of those eligible chose to participate. Equal numbers of females and males were eligible, and equal numbers of both genders consented to participate. After providing signed informed consent, eligible youth completed a structured interview lasting 30–45 min. The structured interview consisted of computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) and audio, computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) segments. ACASI has been found to improve the validity of self-reports because it allows the participant to enter sensitive data directly into the computer (Des Jarlais et al., 1999). In this study it was used to assess the stigmatized activities of the street economy and substance use. The interviews were conducted in private areas in the youth service centers. A randomly selected subset (25%) of participants also agreed to a semi-structured qualitative interview, performed by one of three trained interviewers. The qualitative interviews were audio-taped or recorded in notes, according to the participants' comfort level with being tape-recorded. Participants received a \$25 gift certificate to a local clothing or food establishment. The study procedures were approved by the Joint Institutional Review Board of the National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., and by the participating organizations.

Structured measures

Background and demographic characteristics

Background and demographic characteristics were assessed, including age (in years), sex (original biological sex at birth if transgender), race/ethnicity (Latino/Hispanic, African-American/Black, Bi- or multi-racial, or other), sexual orientation (heterosexual/straight, bisexual, homosexual/gay/lesbian, other, none), transgender status (yes/no), past week living arrangements (e.g., shelter, with friends, etc., and expected length of stay at this placement), history of homelessness (including whether ever ran away/asked to leave, age of first runaway episode, ever stayed in a shelter, and the total amount of time out-of-home, not including foster care or incarceration), and education status (whether currently enrolled in school and highest level of education achieved, which were re-coded into a dichotomous variable indicating current school enrollment or receipt of high school degree or higher).

Childhood maltreatment

Childhood maltreatment was assessed using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998), a 28-item inventory providing reliable and valid screening for histories of abuse and neglect before the age of 19 in five domains. Scales showed satisfactory internal consistency in this sample (α range .77–.96), with the exception of physical neglect ($\alpha = .66$). To facilitate interpretation, participants' continuous scores on each index of abuse were re-coded into a dichotomous variable indicating whether the score fell into the “moderate to extreme” level of abuse based on published norms.

Work experiences

Work experiences over the lifetime and past three-month period were assessed, including whether an individual had participated in the formal economy, informal economy (“off-the-books”), and seven different activities in the street economy. Other sources of financial support in the past three months, such as public assistance and money from friends, were also assessed. These are

dichotomous variables. Continuous variables assessed the number of jobs held and longest amount of time at a job in the formal economy (in months) and ages of initiation for each street economy activity. Data are presented as medians rather than means when highly skewed. We also created a count of the number of street economic activities youth participated in over their lifetimes.

Alcohol and drug use

We assessed the frequency of substance use in the previous three-month period across eight different substances on an eight-point Likert-type scale ranging from never to 10 times or more a day, almost every day (Des Jarlais, Friedmann, Hagan, & Friedman, 1996). The average number of drinks per week was presented as a continuous variable. The remaining substance use items were re-coded to indicate the presence or absence of alcohol, drug, regular drug (several times a week or more), daily drug, and polysubstance use (two or more substances), as well as of the two most prevalent substances, marijuana and powder cocaine.

Incarceration

Youth were asked whether they had ever been detained by the police, been in detention, jail, or prison, with dichotomous variables. The age at first custody was assessed in years with a continuous variable. The total amount of time spent incarcerated over the lifetime was assessed with a six-level Likert-type scale with responses ranging from one to seven days to 5 years or more. To facilitate interpretation, this variable was re-coded into a dichotomous variable indicating whether the individual had spent a year or more in detention, jail, or prison (yes/no).

Symptoms of depression

Symptoms of depression were assessed using the eight-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D; Huba, Melchior, Staff of The Measurement Group, & HRSA/HAB's SPNS Cooperative Agreement Steering Committee, 1995). The measure has been found reliable and valid in studies over the past 15 years (Melchior, Huba, Brown, & Reback, 1993). The measure was highly reliable in this sample ($\alpha = .87$). Scores of seven or above are indicative of clinically significant levels of depression. To facilitate interpretation, continuous scores were re-coded to indicate whether youth reported symptoms of depression at or above a score of seven.

Qualitative measure

The semi-structured interview was guided by a written list of questions, topics, and probes that interviewers followed to direct the discussion. The interview guide reviewed work experiences of the participant and their peers in the formal and street economies. It included questions about initiation, the benefits and risks of activities, where the work was done, when and why activities were started and terminated, and youths' general plans for the future.

Data analyses

Quantitative data

Characteristics of variables were examined using measures of central tendency and variability. Gender differences were examined using *t*-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for

categorical variables. The reliability of measures was examined where appropriate using Cronbach's alpha. Analyses were conducted in SPSS 10.0 for Windows (2001) (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Qualitative data

The majority of qualitative interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and interview notes were loaded into Atlas.ti (Muhr, 1997), a software program for coding and analyzing text and multimedia data. The transcripts were initially reviewed and assigned codes describing key sections of the interviews. The research team coded the interviews in Atlas.ti for a combination of *a priori* and emergent themes. *A priori* themes follow the topics and questions included in the interview guide and emergent themes were those topics that naturally surfaced from the interviews. The codes were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The results correspond to the *a priori* and emergent categories and quotations are taken from the transcripts and notes. Participants' names used below are pseudonyms and some identifying details have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Results

Participants

As expected given the stratified sampling strategy, approximately half the sample was female (Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 15 to 23 years old ($M = 19.1$, $SD = 2.3$ years) and were predominantly from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. About half (52.5%) identified as heterosexual and the remainder as homosexual/gay/lesbian, bisexual, other (for example, pansexual, queer, or declined to answer) or no identification. Females were less likely than males to identify as heterosexual, and more likely to identify as bisexual and homosexual. A total of 13.8% identified as transgender with (biological) males more likely than females to do so. Half (51.3%) were either enrolled in school or had received at least a high school diploma or equivalent. Rates of childhood trauma at moderate to severe levels were high, with some gender differences. Youths' histories of homelessness were extensive. Most (83.5%) had run away or been asked to leave their homes in the past and 92.5% had been in shelters. The average age at first runaway/asked to leave episode was 14.5 years ($SD = 2.5$ years). The mean total amount of time spent out-of-home, not including foster care or jail/prison/detention was 3.85 years ($SD = 8.26$ years). The majority had been living in shelters or temporarily with friends, peers, or family members over the past week. The average length of time at the current placement was 3.85 months ($SD = 8.26$ months). A third (32.3%) did not expect to stay at this placement for longer than another month.

Quantitative data: work experiences and adverse outcomes/behaviors

Work experiences (Table 2)

The majority (68.8%) had worked in the formal economy over their lifetimes. The median number of jobs held was three and the duration of employment tended to be short (median = 6

Table 1
Background and demographic characteristics (mean, SD or %).

	Females (<i>N</i> = 39)	Males (<i>N</i> = 41)	<i>p</i>	Total (<i>N</i> = 80)
<i>Age (range 15–23 years) (M, SD)</i>	18.79 (2.18)	19.34 (2.35)		19.08 (2.27)
15–17 years	33.3	29.3		31.3
18–20 years	43.6	29.3		36.3
21–23 years	23.1	41.4		32.6
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>				
Latino/Hispanic	38.5	31.7		35.0
African-American/Black	35.9	41.5		38.8
Bi- or multi-racial/other	25.6	26.8		26.3
<i>Sexual orientation</i>			***	
Heterosexual/straight	33.3	70.7		52.5
Bisexual	33.3	4.9		18.8
Homosexual/gay/lesbian	25.6	14.6		20.8
Other	5.1	7.3		6.3
None	2.6	2.4		2.5
Transgender	5.2	21.9	*	13.8
<i>Living arrangements – current</i>				
Shelter	61.5	53.7		57.8
With friends, romantic partner, family	10.3	31.7		21.3
Hotel, motel, SRO, transitional living	12.8	4.9		8.8
Multiple places	7.7	4.9		6.3
Other	7.7	4.8		5.8
Length of time at current placement (in mos.)	3.18 (8.15)	4.50 (8.42)		3.85 (8.26)
<i>Estimated future length of stay at placement</i>				
Less than one month	33.3	31.6		32.3
1–12 months	8.3	26.4		19.4
More than 12 months	58.4	42.0		48.3
<i>History of homelessness</i>				
Ever ran away or told to leave	92.3	75.0		83.5
Age first ran away/left home (<i>M, SD</i>)	13.97 (2.34)	14.14 (2.70)		14.05 (2.48)
Ever went to a shelter	94.9	90.2		92.5
Total time homeless, in years ^a	3.75 (3.21)	4.11 (5.90)		3.85 (8.26)
High school equivalent or higher, or currently enrolled	56.4	46.3		51.3
<i>Childhood trauma (moderate to extreme levels)</i>				
Physical abuse	84.6	41.5	***	62.6
Emotional abuse	87.2	70.7	**	78.8
Emotional neglect	64.1	68.3		66.3
Physical neglect	74.4	61.0	**	67.6
Sexual abuse	66.7	12.2	***	38.8

Note: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

^a Does not include foster care or jail, prison, detention.

Table 2
Lifetime work experiences (mean, SD or %).

	Females	Males	<i>p</i>	Total
Ever worked in formal economy	66.7	70.7		68.8
Number different jobs held (median) (range 1–20)	3	3		3
Longest time at a job (in months; median, range 1–36 months)	6	6		6
Ever worked in informal economy	48.7	46.3		47.5
Ever worked in the street economy	79.5	82.9		81.3
Ever worked in formal and street economies	53.8	63.4		58.8
<i>Street economy activities – lifetime</i>				
Stole or shoplifted from a store	61.5	53.7		57.5
Dealing, selling, bagging, or running drugs	56.4	50.0		53.2
Panhandling	51.3	39.0		45.0
Traded sex for money, drugs, food, shelter, other	35.9	31.7		33.8
Mugging or robbery	30.8	29.3		30.0
Pimping someone	28.2	12.2	†	20.0
Broke into a house or car	12.8	26.3		20.0
Number of street economic activities – lifetime	3.13 (2.49)	2.63 (1.92)		2.88 (2.12)
<i>Sources of financial support – past 3 months^a</i>				
Currently working in formal economy	30.8	29.3		30.0
Currently working in informal economy	12.8	14.6		13.8
Public assistance	38.5	34.1		36.3
Social security, disability, worker's comp	12.8	2.4	†	7.5
Money from friend or romantic partner	76.9	56.1	†	66.3
Money from family members	64.1	46.3		55.0
Sex work	17.9	14.6		16.3
Drug economy	28.2	12.5	†	20.3
Panhandling	17.9	19.5		18.8
Theft	20.5	22.0		21.3
Other street economic activities	12.8	9.8		11.3

Note: †*p* < .10.

^a Youth may have received funds from multiple sources.

months, range = 1–36 months). About half had worked in the informal economy (47.5%), and the majority (81.3%) had participated in the street economy. These activities were not mutually exclusive, as over half (58.8%) had worked in both the formal and street economies. Youth were most likely to have ever participated in theft/shoplifting, drug economic activities, panhandling, and sex work. Contrary to expectations, females tended to be more likely than males to report pimping someone, at marginally statistically significant levels. (Sex work is discussed in more detail in the [Qualitative data](#) results section.) Most youth had engaged in approximately three different street economic activities, on average (SD = 2.2). Youth reported receiving financial support from diverse sources in the previous three-month period, with females tending to be more likely than males to receive funds from governmental sources, friends/romantic partners, and the drug economy, at marginally statistically significant levels. Ages of initiation into street economy activities ranged from 13 (stealing) to 17 years (pimping someone) with no gender differences (Fig. 1).

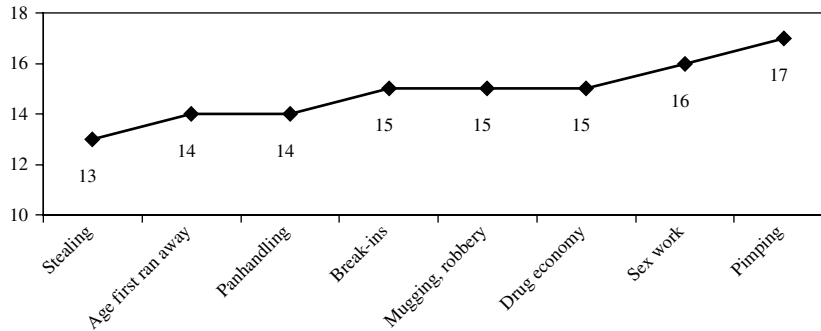


Fig. 1. Mean age of initiation.

Co-occurring adverse outcomes and behaviors (Table 3)

Approximately half of the youth interviewed (48.0%) had used alcohol in the past three months, 56.3% had used drugs, and a third (33.8%) exhibited polysubstance use. Among those using alcohol, the average number of drinks per week was 24.4 (SD = 31.1). Regular (45.0%) and daily (33.8%) drug use were common, and marijuana was the most commonly used drug, used by 56.6% of youth. Over two-thirds (76.3%) had been picked up by the police, and about half (58.8%) had been in detention, jail, or prison. Of those, almost a third (29.8%) had been incarcerated for more than a year. The mean age of first incarceration was 15.05 years (SD = 2.52). The majority (74.4%) exhibited symptoms of depression at a clinically significant level. There

Table 3
Co-occurring adverse outcomes and behaviors (mean, SD or %).

	Females	Males	<i>p</i>	Total
<i>Substance use in past 3 months</i>				
Any alcohol use	48.6	47.4		48.0
Average drinks/week (if drank) (<i>M, SD</i>)	18.11 (25.33)	30.61 (35.60)		24.36 (31.11)
Any drug use	53.8	58.5		56.3
Regular drug use (several times a week or more)	51.3	39.0		45.0
Daily drug use (about once a day or more)	41.0	26.8		33.8
Polysubstance use (including alcohol)	35.9	37.1		33.8
<i>Most prevalent drugs</i>				
Marijuana	53.8	58.5		56.3
Powder cocaine	5.3	10.0		7.7
<i>Criminal justice system involvement</i>				
Ever in police custody	69.2	82.9		76.3
Ever in detention, jail, or prison	46.7	70.7	†	58.8
Age first in custody or detention, jail, prison	15.21 (2.04)	14.91 (2.86)		15.05 (2.52)
More than one year in detention, jail, prison	22.3	34.4		29.8
<i>Mental health</i>				
Depression score ≥ clinical cut-off	79.5	69.2		74.4

Note: †*p* < .10.

were no gender differences in the substance use patterns or depressive symptoms, although males tended to be more likely than females to have been in detention, jail, or prison, at marginally statistically significant levels.

Qualitative data: initiation into street economic activities

As discussed in the following sections, initiation into the street economy was found to be a multi-faceted phenomenon. We found the social control theory of youth deviance to be a useful initial starting point. However, it did not sufficiently capture the complexity of study findings, and we therefore expanded on the theory for the present paper. As presented in Fig. 2, initiation into the street economy was influenced by five primary factors, including social control. These factors are highly inter-related, as we discuss below. Indeed, it may not be possible to identify wholly unrelated influences that shape homeless youths' economic survival activities. Each set of influences is described in more detail below, using, as illustration, the words of the youth who shared their stories and opinions through their interviews. The majority of quotes below pertain to sex work and drug dealing. These two activities were discussed in more detail than others in youths' interviews, likely because they are the most dangerous, stigmatized, complex, and lucrative in the opinion of the youth.

The relationship of social control to initiation of homeless youth into the street economy

Social bonds

Consistent with social control theory and similar to typically developing youth, sound social bonds and attachments to conventional society and supportive individuals or institutions played a role in homeless youths' becoming involved in the formal economy. For example, Keith, age 18 years, had recently found a job through a family member, and experienced his family as performing an overall protective function, in addition to helping him obtain employment.

Me and (my friend) ain't never have to play the block (i.e., sell drugs) because it was like we were somewhat stable. It was like even though we wasn't in school or really doing nothing we would always turn to our mothers and get like twenty dollars here and never really had to be out on the street. [Keith, age 18]

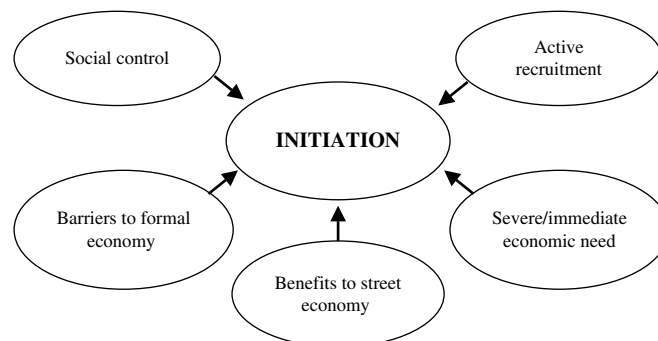


Fig. 2. Multiple influences leading to the street economy.

Attachment

Social control theory states that youths' attachments inhibit them from deviant activities due to the fear of disapproval from those individuals who are important to them. This aspect of social control theory was evident among homeless youth. Gerard, age 19, described how he attempted to balance the need to panhandle, a relatively safe activity, with the potential shame of being recognized. Notably, Gerard's attachments did not prevent him from panhandling. This may be because other factors, particularly severe economic need, overwhelm or mitigate the protective effect of attachments.

Panhandling, that's the safest way to make money but it's embarrassing...Panhandling is embarrassing because you might see somebody you know and then they see you begging for money or whatever, you know. And they'll go tell people, like, "Yeah, I seen this person. He looked all messed up and everything and he was begging for money. He looked old and he don't look as good as he used to." [Gerard, age 19]

Commitment to the conventional

The theory of social control specifies that commitment to and belief in conventional society mediate deviant behavior. We found that homeless youth involved in activities of the street economy did not necessarily reject the norms of conventional society. To the contrary, many embraced the conventional ideals of hard work, education, and self-improvement, and spoke disparagingly of others who they considered lazy or lacking in morality. Youth commonly expressed ambitious, conventional goals such as attaining a career, having a family, and achieving financial independence. For example, Mikey, a 15-year old father-to-be who had panhandled and sold drugs on the street described his vision for his future in the next quote. These themes were further echoed by Carlos, who had shoplifted, panhandled, participated in sex work, and sang in the subway for money.

I just want to be working for a company or something. Have a nice house. Own a car, with my kid and my wife. That's it. [Mikey, age 15]

I never really worked in a regular job but, you know, you pretty much have to earn your respect as an adult in life. As far as taking care of what you need to take care of...It makes you feel good about yourself, that you can get up and go to work every day and that you have a job. [Carlos, age 22]

Exclusion from the conventional

Rather than rejecting the norms of conventional society, we found many youth experienced themselves as being excluded from the mainstream. Despite contact with a number of social structures over their lifetimes, such as family, foster care, and school, homeless youth often experienced themselves as ill-prepared for membership in conventional society, including the formal economy, as the following quote illustrates.

I feel like what happens is that because any person for any number of reasons begins to feel marginalized. And so they're outside of the scope of the mainstream. And they find it very difficult to integrate into the mainstream because of the factors that influence them. And so you have to make a living somehow. And if you really truly believe that you can't do it in a legal fashion, then you'll do anything you have to do in order to make money. [Karl, age 21]

Social bonds to unconventional society

Homeless youth differed substantially from their typically developing peers in that they often maintained social bonds to conventional society and at the same time exhibited strong bonds to *unconventional* society. These bonds to unconventional norms and individuals played a significant role in their economic survival strategies. Most importantly, it was common for homeless youth to demonstrate long-standing knowledge of, and involvement in, the street economy, even going back to childhood, as the following quote illustrates.

Cause what you see is your environment. You are what your environment is. Like say if I grew up on the block and all I see is people out there hustling and all I see is prostituting, so when I get older, I'm thinking that's the life because that's what I was brought around and that's all I see. So it's mainly about your environment where you live at. So if you see it then you want to do it. [Sylvia, age 20]

We found that homeless youths' involvement in the street economy commonly took the form of a life-long trajectory of knowledge and experience rather than a discrete process by which an uninitiated or naive individual was introduced to it. Indeed, in contrast to patterns among typically developing youth, homeless youth commonly perceived the street economy as normative and the formal economy as foreign. This perception of the formal economy as alien undoubtedly acts as an additional barrier to stable employment.

Barriers to the formal economy

Homeless youth identified a range of significant barriers to entering and succeeding in the formal economy. Primary among these were homelessness itself, educational limitations (low achievement, learning disabilities, illiteracy, and innumeracy), mental health problems, perceived stigma associated with homelessness, minority race/ethnicity, and/or lesbian, gay, or transgender identity, substance use problems, and past incarceration. Further, age was a barrier, with the youngest having the most difficulties because employers were less likely to hire younger individuals, and younger individuals were less likely to have job experience. We found some youth were unable to seek employment due to these barriers. Even more commonly, they were able to obtain employment but did not retain it for a significant length of time as a result of these barriers. Conversely, these barriers did not prevent youth from entering the street economy, and may in fact have served the function of pushing youth toward the street economy. We provide more detail on a number of these barriers below. Further, these qualitative findings were consistent with quantitative results (see Table 3).

Homelessness

Youth could not obtain employment if they had no address to give employers. Moreover, they could not get housing if they were not employed, and thus found themselves in a “catch-22” situation. Further, homelessness produced a number of other barriers, such as being unable to stay clean and being too tired or hungry to concentrate, as the following quote illustrates.

Yeah, there's been plenty of times where I have not wanted to go to work or look for work because I wasn't able to wash up or there was plenty of times when I lost a job because I wasn't

able to take a shower, and I wouldn't go to work because I was on the streets, and I wouldn't find a job. But hey, you ain't got to wash your ass to sell drugs. [Nalisha, age 18]

Further, without a home address, youth have difficulty obtaining formal identification. The lack of official paperwork was described as a common barrier to employment.

They said I was never issued a Social Security card...my birth certificate only has my last name on it...and then my mother's first name is spelled incorrectly on it... I can't even apply for a Social Security number because the birth certificate that I have, they tell me that that could be anybody's birth certificate. [Claire, age 16]

Educational deficits

Homeless youth, who tend to lag behind their typically developing peers in education (see also Table 1), were acutely aware that they were competing with others for jobs, including “college kids” with more education and superior job skills. This often undermined efforts to seek work, as Trevor described.

A person can feel very depressed because they never finished high school, but they want to advance, but they tried to go back to high school, but they just been denied so many times, and their living situation could be really messed up and they're on the street. So going to a GED program and trying to feed yourself at the same time, you have to choose. [Trevor, age 21]

Discrimination and stigma

Discrimination was a common experience, particularly related to age, youthful appearance, sexual orientation, transgender status, educational achievement, homelessness, and race/ethnicity. Some of these characteristics are shared with other urban youth. However, in contrast to typically developing urban youth, homeless youth lack the protection of social systems such as family and school which may buffer the effects of discrimination. Discrimination and fear of stigma compounded homeless youths' sense of futility regarding their chances of finding employment, as the following quote illustrates.

You know some people have learning disabilities and they're afraid to go and apply for jobs because they can't read or write and they're scared to tell anybody this, because they're worried about if people would make fun of them. With your race it's harder, so if you're Puerto Rican or Black, you know, basically it's a lot harder for you to get ahead, you know, than a Caucasian person would. And then you have a learning disability or maybe you're gay and you know, so, it's just... It's strikes. So many strikes against you and you have nothing to do with it so, and you know that, so you hesitate to go in there and try to do that application. [Carlos, age 22]

Male-to-female transgender youth reported some of the highest levels of discrimination and stigma. Youth believed this to be related to strong societal biases against transgender expression. In addition, in contrast to some other stigmatized categories (e.g., homelessness, educational status), transgender status may be difficult to mask or hide.

It's very hard for transgenders to just get hired. Nobody wants to really take a chance on you because they are scared people will come in the store and like turn around and go like, “Oh.” So, it's for us to go and (enter the street economy). [Chanté, age 22, male-to-female transgender]

Incarceration

Incarceration was common among homeless youth, as shown in Table 3. It served as a serious barrier to employment, as illustrated by the following quote from José. In addition to having a criminal history, José was a youthful-looking 17-year old when he was released from prison, which contributed to his difficulties finding employment.

I came out from being incarcerated and I came straight to the (emergency shelter). So that's when I had to go to look for a job. I was a minor and I would look every day, sign applications, but it's hard because you have a felony now... I can't work in banks because [of the] felony, and I can't work in customer service spots because of my looks, so I try for little stuff. But it still didn't work. [José, age 18]

Perceived benefits of the street economy

The street economy provides critical and immediate financial support for young people in dire need. Homeless youth also fairly commonly reported that it met their emotional needs for love, attention, competence, autonomy, and self worth. This is not meant to imply, however, that they did not experience the street economy as dangerous and demoralizing. Indeed, they experienced the street economy as treacherous, as we describe below. We speculate that this dichotomy between youths' experiences of danger and emotional gratification reflect their traumatic life histories (see also Table 1), where early maltreatment experiences shape expectations of relationships and emotional strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, Coco, who was involved in sex work, described feeling empowered through these activities. This was a relatively common opinion, although expressed more frequently by young men than young women.

(Sex work) is kind of fun now. Mm-hmm. Because I really know what I'm supposed to be doing and all that, what to say, what to do, how to do it. Because like when you walk up to a car, or somebody standing there will ask you something, you know then I make a smart comment or like a sexual comment and you'll just talk and wait or whatever. And it's just fun because it makes you feel important. [Coco, age 18]

Further, independence, flexibility, and lack of accountability were perceived as additional benefits of the street economy. Findings suggested that the flexible street economy was a particularly good “fit” for those unfamiliar with and not socialized into the strictures of the formal economy, and who tended to have conflictual relationships with those in authority, as reflected in the following quote.

Prostituting and drug dealing you have your own schedule most of the time. You know, you're selling for yourself. You have your own schedule, you go out, you get to reap all the profit. You don't have to worry about calling in if you're going to be late for work or if you're too sick to go to work or things like that. It's your own time. [Jonathan, age 19]

This last quote also reflects a principal gender difference in street economic involvement: young men involved in sex work generally worked independently, without a pimp. On the other hand, homeless young women typically engaged in sex work under the control of a pimp and did not

experience the same sense of autonomy as young men did. Coco was perhaps atypical in this regard. Unexpectedly, as reflected in qualitative findings as well as Table 2, homeless young women not uncommonly became pimps to other women. Thus in some cases young women experienced the financial freedom of their male counterparts when functioning as “madams” to other female sex workers.

You dress up, you play the part, sometimes you have to dress the girls and get them situated for it. But they do all the dirty work, all the fuckin' and suckin' and dancin', and whatever it is that they do. Some are contortionists. Whatever it is that they do, they're comfortable to do it in front of these men, but I'm the one that rallies them, which means I get a percentage up front—and I get tips when I show up, whether I'm dressed the part or not. [Antonia, age 22]

Risks inherent in the street economy

Youth were acutely aware of the potential risks they face in the course of street economy participation, primary among them death, violence, sexually transmitted infections, and incarceration. Drug dealing was cited as the most dangerous activity, followed by sex work. Working on the street was commonly described as stressful, as “you always have to watch your back.” Youth also articulated emotional and moral dangers inherent in the street economy, as Antonia described with respect to her experience of pimping other women.

It leads to the deterioration of your soul. I mean, nonetheless, you know what you're doing. You can glorify it as much as you want to, but in a nutshell, that's what you're doing. It desensitizes you. You start to think, “I don't give a fuck what you're here for. Does it have anything to do with money? Nothing to do with money? You sure? Not even in the long run? Okay, I don't need to be here.” [Antonia, age 22]

Severe and immediate economic need

Homeless youth typically experienced themselves as having little choice but to enter the street economy, as a result of their pressing needs for “fast money” for food, clothing, and shelter, and because they had few other social or economic resources to tap in to. As Jason (age 17) put it, “there's a thin line between where your morals are and your pocket.” This was echoed by Nalisha (age 19) who said (youth become involved in sex work) “when those ‘dead presidents’ get offered to you when you're in a stressed-out situation.” The following quotes illustrate the experience of acute financial need.

Sometimes like when you don't have nowhere to go. I'm about to cry right now. You need the money to eat you know. You might want to make money to stay in a hotel in the night because you haven't slept in so long. You know little things like that. You need to buy a new pair of underwear, a new pair of socks, or something because you don't want to be stinking, you know. It's really hard. [Jonella, age 19]

When I wasn't getting no money, me and my little sister were staying (temporarily) with our grandfather. He was giving us, like, pocket change. Two dollars here, you know, enough money

to go to the store before school. But it wasn't enough money. I started shoplifting. To get clothes, because I needed more. [Claire, age 16]

Active recruitment by “predatory” adults and peers

As noted above, there was substantial variability among homeless youth regarding their knowledge of and attitudes toward the street economy. Those with a high level of familiarity and comfort with the street economy often actively sought it out when faced with financial hardship. For example, young people whose family members were involved in drug dealing, or who had high numbers of drug dealers in their communities, gravitated toward the drug economy when out of the home.

Others were recruited into the street economy. Results indicated that those who were younger and/or who were less familiar with the street economy were often actively recruited into the street economy by “predatory” adults, and to a lesser extent, by their homeless peers. This predatory or recruiting individual was typically someone already involved in the street economy who deliberately targeted vulnerable young people such as homeless youth. He or she then served as a sort of mentor to the young person, reaping profits for him/herself in the process. Youth reported encountering such recruiters in the vicinity of the community-based organizations and shelters where they went for services.

I can't even go to XX Avenue no more (near where a youth shelter is located) because all the people who I seen pimping told me if I'm not about money don't go out there. So I be like “okay so I guess I won't come out here,” because I won't sell my ass for nobody. [Katisha, age 18] There's a lot of pressure (to get involved in drug dealing). That's why I don't go out there no more because I feel as though, if I go out there they're gonna pressure me some more and I'm not up for that. [Angela, age 18]

Thus the fear of being recruited or pressured into the street economy also interfered with youths' abilities to obtain needed services. However, the process of recruitment into the street economy was often complex, as reflected in the following quote. Jonathan conveys a sense of liberation and excitement associated with being initiated into his first sex work experience. At the same time, however, he indicates an underlying economic/material and emotional deprivation.

I was like 16. I knew all about (sex work). Never got into it, never wanted to get into it but I knew all about it 'cause I like to be educated on anything and everything. There were a bunch of people in (gay-identified neighborhood) who were telling me (about it). I'd ask questions - I like to know about everything that goes on around me so I would ask questions all day every day about it till I had it all down pat. Then one day I was just walking down toward (a local outdoor hangout for gay identified youth). This guy stopped me and, I don't know, it was as if he knew I'd never done it before. And he just offered me, he was like: “You know, I find you beautiful, I want to take you shopping, I'll pay you this and this and this.” It was more of a companion, rather than prostituting. But it turned to prostitution I guess. Over that one day we spent like three hours together. He paid me for all three hours, including the blowjob that he wanted at the very end. Took me shopping and everything! [Jonathan, age 19]

Discussion

Among typically developing youth in the general population, the transition to stable employment is particularly problematic for those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and with poor education levels. We found that homeless youth are similar to these low socioeconomic and poorly educated peers in that the resources available to them are constrained. Moreover, they face a number of distinctive and potent barriers to the formal economy, and are simultaneously pulled into the street economy. Building on the theory of social control, five primary factors influencing initiation into the street economy were identified. We found that social control, a predominant theory of adolescent deviance and delinquency, provided only a partial explanation for the phenomenon of street economy initiation for this group of young people.

Similar to their typically developing peers in the general population, and consistent with social control theory, homeless youth with stronger bonds to conventional society experienced fewer barriers to the formal economy. However, homeless youth differed substantially from their typically developing peers in that they often had strong ties to *unconventional* society and to the street economy. Further, these ties to the unconventional were often long-standing and rooted in childhood family and community experiences. This lifetime link to the street economy is consistent with the study by Lankenau, Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, and Gwadz (2005) of street-involved young men who have sex with men (YMSM) which found that participation in the street economy was patterned according to homeless young men's experiences and relationships prior to becoming and while homeless. Homeless YMSM were found to access their "street capital;" that is, knowledge of and connections in the street economy, when they were prevented from accessing other sources of support. Although there was substantial variation among homeless youth in the present paper, their awareness of and involvement in the street economy was generally long-standing, making their involvement in the street economy more similar to a developmental trajectory than the initiation of a naïve individual. This deep familiarity with the street economy, and the sense that it is normative, has implications for intervention and treatment efforts, as we discuss below.

While social control was one important factor leading to street economy involvement among homeless youth, a number of additional potent forces were identified, including the barriers homeless youth experience to entering the formal economy (such as homelessness, educational deficits, and past incarceration), the tangible and social/emotional benefits they experience from the street economy, the pressure of severe and immediate economic need, including for food and shelter, and their active recruitment into the street economy by "predatory" adults and homeless peers.

These five sets of inter-related influences suggest numerous avenues for intervention, including at the levels of individual youth, community-based organizations that serve them, government agencies and programs, private employers, and public policy. We discuss below some examples of potential intervention targets that emerged from the present study. First, providing housing to homeless youth is a critical practical strategy that would ameliorate a significant number of barriers to employment in the formal economy. However, while such a strategy might be necessary, it is unlikely to be sufficient due to the long-standing nature of behavioral and mental health risk factors and complex inter-relationships among barriers experienced by homeless youth. For example, substance use and mental health problems, risk factors that typically co-occur, both warrant clinical treatment (De Bellis, 2002; Kessler, 1997). Further, programs to counter-act

long-standing bonds to the street and increase involvement, belief in, and commitment to conventional aspects of society are critical, including in the area of job readiness and job training (Bowser, Fullilove, & Fullilove, 1990). Moreover, the active recruitment of vulnerable youth by predatory adults may be addressed through public policy initiatives, similar to the Drug Free School Act in which drug sales near schools are actively discouraged and heavily penalized. We found that past incarceration was a critical barrier to employment, suggesting that there is utility to providing incentives to private employers to include youth with criminal records in conventional workplaces. Last, it was typical for homeless youth to have obtained a job, but the duration of employment tended to be short, demonstrating the need for both job placement and job retention services. The inclusion of cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses is needed in future research. Interventions, even extensive interventions, can be cost-effective and cost-beneficial in circumstances such as these where the potential economic consequences to society of homeless youth *not* succeeding in the formal economy, including incarceration, early parenthood, and HIV infection, are so severe (Culhane, Metraux, & Hadley, 2002; Martinez & Burt, 2006).

Sex/gender and age differences and congruence of data sources

In contrast to typically developing adolescents where males are more likely than females to exhibit “deviant” and “delinquent” behavior, we found relatively few gender differences in the present sample. Similarly, although females in the general adolescent population tend to have higher rates of depression (Eaton et al., 2006; Wade, Cairney, & Pevalin, 2002) and lower rates of drug use than males (SAMHSA, 2006), homeless youth in the present paper exhibited no such gender differences. This may be attributable to a number of factors, including the characteristics of those who become homeless in the first place, and high levels of stress and pressure to generate financial support experienced by both genders. Unexpectedly, girls tended to be more likely to have engaged in pimping over their lifetimes than boys, at marginally statistically significant levels. This may be an attempt by homeless young women to capitalize on their experience with sex work but avoid direct participation by moving to pimping (T. Nolan, personal communication, 2006). Further, male-to-female transgender individuals emerged as a highly vulnerable group mainly as a result of the multiple sources of stigma they experience, societal intolerance of atypical gender expression, and youths’ inability to mask their transgender status. Regarding the impact of age on the phenomena explored in this paper, younger adolescents generally experienced more barriers to the formal economy, and reported greater vulnerability to street economy “recruiters.” We found that qualitative and quantitative data sources were complementary and we did not identify areas of discrepancy between data sources.

Limitations

The study has a number of limitations. Given that participants were recruited from organizational settings, the sample is not necessarily representative of the entire population of homeless youth. Indeed, about half of homeless youth utilize such services infrequently; those at highest risk are the least likely to be found in service settings (Clatts & Davis, 1999). Recruitment in organizational settings may have yielded a sample skewed toward higher-functioning or less marginalized youth. Innovative approaches are needed, therefore, to engage the hidden population of

street-based homeless youth into research and services. Sexual minority youth (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) are over-represented among the population of homeless youth, partly because youth are ejected from their homes in response to sexual minority status (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). However, in this sample an unusually high proportion of young women identified as non-heterosexual (66.7%), as did about a third of boys (29.3%). This pattern is not uncommon in community-based organizations and may reflect higher levels of social acceptance for girls to explore same-sex experiences and identify publicly as lesbian or bisexual (A. Gochnour, personal communication, 2007). It is also possible that sexual minority boys are more comfortable in organizations that are specifically gay-identified. (The majority of participants in the sample was recruited from organizations that were “gay positive” but not strictly for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender youth.) Last, much remains to be learned about youths’ strategies to navigate the street economy safely, and how and why they exit it.

The present study highlighted a number of constructive qualities exhibited by homeless youth. Although the duration of employment tended to be somewhat short, particularly in the context of high economic need, a small proportion of youth held jobs for a substantial length of time. Further, through their involvement in the street economy, homeless youth evidenced qualities such as resilience, self-sufficiency, independence, critical thinking, and the ability to adapt, which could potentially translate into skills to improve their chances of success in the formal economy.

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