Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Human Trafficking*

Article 11

3-15-2011

Community Responsibility for Runaway and Thrownaway Youth--Commentary

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Recommended Citation
Williams, Linda M. (2011) "Community Responsibility for Runaway and Thrownaway Youth--Commentary," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol2/iss1/11

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The stated purpose of the paper *Runaway and Throwaway Youth: Time for Policy Changes and Public Responsibility* is to discuss factors related to homeless youth and to differentiate between "throwaways" and runaways, the current federal response to homeless youth, and to ask whether we can "aggressively aspire to be a community where every child is healthy and safe, and able to realize his or her fullest potential." The article commences this task but, having few studies to draw upon that systematically address these issues, the article can provide only the beginning of a call for more attention to this important social problem in the U.S.

The author states:

> *Attempting to identify a specific number of homeless youth is difficult at best, but what is even more perplexing is our continued inability to effectively protect our children. We are left with a basic question framed by the fundamental tenets of justice: what is a community's responsibility to its youth who, for whatever reason, end up living on the streets or in unsafe, abusive environments?*

Certainly one can support the idea that we need to better understand the nature and extent of youth homelessness and frame a community response to the problem. A review of the available literature, discussions with service providers, and my own recent research, however, indicate that we also need to call for community responsibility directed at the onset of youth homelessness. Indeed, social neglect plays a significant role in the circumstances of children—especially the low status of adolescents.

Not only do we need a better estimate of the number of youth who are homeless and living on the streets—the thrownaways and runaways—but to accomplish this we need to look for them in all the places where they hide or are hidden and develop more sensitive methodologies for conducting a census. The article mentions youth "…living in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing…children and youth denied housing by their families…and school-age unwed mothers, living in homes for unwed mothers, who have no other housing available" relying on a definition used by the U.S. Department of Education. Youth are indeed living in these types of locations but may be found in many more venues. In the Pathways Study[1] we interviewed children who had been living in parks, doorways, public transit systems, and on the streets. Some were "couch surfing" to the extent they were able to find a place in someone's apartment or car to

sleep and could manage the safety issues such arrangements present. Many walked miles each day, expertly navigating the streets to reach the widespread locations where they could find food, occasional shelter and other resources such as laundry, access to the Internet and to other services.[2] It is important to note that many were by day "hidden in plain sight" in the parks, train stations, and on street corners. The youth encountered panhandling in the streets today is just as likely tonight to be sleeping in the doorway of the upscale clothing store frequented by many well-heeled customers by day. Our analyses revealed that these youth live in a complex multi-jurisdictional world which they traverse seeking a better life and the basics of safe shelter, nutrition, and protection from the elements. Teens often travel between towns, cities and states, crossing boundaries by which adults organize their world and provide services. Although our research was not designed to track the movements of these youth, and those interviewed were never questioned about a specific location or destination, the 61 homeless and high-risk runaway youth interviewed in Boston and Washington, D.C. spontaneously provided information about their journeys within and beyond these two urban areas. They mentioned specific locations (a street, store, neighborhood hangout); resources in a community (homeless shelter, drop-in center, health clinic); or the locations of family members or members of their larger social network. Forty-seven of the 61 interviewees made reference to locations we could map. These 47 youth mentioned connections in or travel to/from 99 cities; 32 states; and 21 countries. Further efforts to map the migrations of homeless youth are needed. For now their cross-jurisdictional journeys have important implications for understanding the challenges they face and the need for service providers and communities to consider innovative approaches to assistance for migratory youth.

In addition to understanding where they are located and the reality that most in the community look the other way so that homeless youth continue to be hidden in plain sight, we must broaden our understanding of the circumstances that result in a life on the street. Clearly there are many precipitating factors that lead to a child or adolescent no longer living in a home with caregivers and ending up on the streets as a runaway, thrownaway or, as one young woman described it, a "runaway and drop-off."

This teen had runaway as a young child (taking her coloring book with her) but returned home to continue living with her mother. She went on to describe a chaotic family life which she again fled after having located her father, with whom she went to live. At her father's home, however, it became clear to her that he did not want her around in his life

as he had a new and very young girlfriend. She told the interviewer that her father drove her over 500 miles and deposited her at the door of a women's shelter (she was 17 years old). She noted, "… he left me with $2 in my pocket and dropped me off. So it was kind of "run-away and drop-off."

Many flee violent homes. Other challenges they face include alcohol- or drug-involved parents, incarcerated parents, absent parents, or the repercussions of their own violence toward their parents. In the Pathways Study we identified a theme that reflected risk and vulnerability from intra-familial violence and led to the teen being removed from or pushed out of the home with no provision of any appropriate alternative living arrangement. In these situations the teens witness repetitive partner violence between the parents or a parent and intimate partner. In some accounts the teen attempted to intervene and accusations of violence were made against him or her. In other situations teens attempted to protect younger siblings from violence at the hands of a parent, or teens struck or pushed parents. When this violence led to a call to police, in a number of instances such a report resulted in the teen's removal or relocation to an unsafe or untenable situation. Not only parents were responsible for the child being thrown away; the police at times were also responsible, such as in situations in which a child was asked or told to leave the home with no adequate alternate care arrangements made. Especially when the teen was 16 or 17 and viewed as soon able to be independent, she or he might be informally placed with a relative or sent to another location. Soon that situation would become untenable or was no longer available to shelter and support the adolescent. The youth might stay at friends' houses, including living in the basement or in a backyard shed, until parents made them leave or helped them move on. For example, a friend's parents might scrape together bus fare so the youth could to head to another city. Eventually the teen would end up "couch-surfing" to a different location nearly every day and then would end up living on the streets or in the control of a predator pimp.[1]

While we found that a striking number of youth never were involved in the child protection system, not all slip through the cracks in this way. Some get involved with Child Protective Services or come under the control of the juvenile justice system. Many homeless youth have had serial foster care placements and find themselves "aging out" of the system—or so close to that age that the authorities, foster parents or others no longer continue to try to find them.

While life for these youth is certainly as grim as is portrayed in the article, there are some misperceptions advanced that are in need of

correction. It is true that these youth are focused on day to day survival, and "their most immediate need is survival, simply living out the day in front of them." But one might question whether, as the author states, "[f]or them the furthest thing in their lives is reaching the so-called 'American Dream.'" While the socio-economics of the U.S. today are consistent with the author's perception, in fact we found that, when asked, many homeless, runaway and thrownaway youth were able to articulate significant aspirations and dreams. For example, while many of the youth had experienced considerable difficulties with school, it was clear that for many teens these difficulties did not dampen their enthusiasm about or aspirations to complete their high school educations or attain higher degrees. Many homeless youth spontaneously mentioned school as one of the top three things that were important to them. This is significant considering the multiple challenges of survival the runaway and homeless youth faced on a day to day basis.

In addition it is clear that coping and survival is a key theme for these youth.[3] The nature of their survival is complex and to some outsiders may barely resemble "survival." However, based on their own reports, they have "survived" the extreme difficulties that violence in their families and on the streets has presented. They have negotiated life at a very young age to deal with hunger and poverty. They see this as survival. Agency staff and policy-makers need to understand how important this identification as "survivor" is in the approach they take to assisting homeless and runaway teens. The teen narratives reflect themes of harm and survival that any portrayal of homeless and runaway teens as one-dimensional "victims" or "offenders" misses. They have been victimized and, in some jurisdictions, are offenders simply due to their juvenile status. Others have violated the law. The complexity of their lives and their survival strategies often are not taken into account in common depictions of homeless youth and suggestions that society has a moral obligation to respond. The victim image (of the child we must save) may garner the support of charities and politicians but this victim label may be a great disservice to teens encountered in the field. Instead of a sorrowful "victim," police and service providers confront a strong, willful survivor. The appearance and demeanor of these "survivors" may result in being viewed as "offenders" because they do not conform to the stereotype of "victim."

Homeless and high-risk runaway youth need a safe place to stay with nutritious food and services that respect their "survivor" status and foster resilience. But often there are no services that meet their needs. Some teens see the streets as less harmful and more likely to help them "survive" than the programs offered in their communities. Teens may be

understandably reluctant to turn themselves over to adults, especially when they have found so many adults they have encountered to be untrustworthy.

Older teens need places to stay where they may be able to maintain appropriate levels of autonomy and be empowered to make the situation work. Our interviews with prostituted teens and high-risk runaways reveal a long history of highly destructive families fraught with violence and dysfunction. Many of the teens have been in numerous foster care settings or have lived on the streets or with no permanent home for months and even years. They often have little trust in the child welfare systems that they have encountered in the past. Their experiences and the evidence available about their survival-based coping skills suggest a need for the development of meaningful partnerships between youth and social services. Without partnerships that provide the youth a pathway to achieve some meaningful control over their lives (which in some cases may include freedom from their families) there is little likelihood of success.[4]

Implementing an approach that would meet the needs of high risk runaway and homeless youth requires more than moral outrage. Communities must shift the customary approach to social control of youth and to how the relationship between the states, teens and their families is viewed. The narratives of teens underscore the urgency of this need, along with the complexity of making this policy change and putting the appropriate empowering supports in place.

In summary, challenges and recommendations include:

- Homeless, runaway and thrownaway youth frequently reside in and cross multiple jurisdictions even on a daily basis. The multijurisdictional nature of the problem calls for innovative coordinated responses by all parts of the system (social, legal, medical, etc.) in multiple jurisdictions and willingness to cross jurisdictional boundaries to provide services for youth.
- Many youth have experienced complex trauma, including witnessing or suffering physical or sexual violence, neglect, and abuse, that may result in traumatic behavior responses that may inhibit their ability to reach out for, or trust in, the support being offered. Furthermore, a lack of trust or sense of worthlessness may lead teens to run away from assistance and supports. Special care must be taken to devise programs that will draw youth in rather than recreating for them the distinct feeling that they are once again

being abused, neglected or violated.

- More support is needed for programs that provide youth with a safe place to stay; nutritious food; positive support networks that address their needs and empower them to make safe choices; and intervention for trauma and behavioral issues that make it difficult for them to function in traditional settings.
- Programs require more intentional reinforcement of connections to key adults and assistance to youth in forming new meaningful connections with helpful, positive and pro-social adults. There is a need to create environments in which helpful, positive and pro-social adults can be encouraged to offer support to teens and young adults.
- Development of comprehensive programs to assist youth who are aging out of the child welfare system should be a priority.
- Increased reliance on a “Youth Development” model to maximize participation of youth, support youth autonomy and foster their strengths for survival is needed. This includes recognition of and support for youth “agency” especially through use of peer mentors.
- Identification of peer or community leaders to be involved in helping youth who live on the streets is an important next step.
- Inclusion in program development and coordination of programs and institutions (e.g., domestic violence shelters, clinics and schools) that interact with high-risk, homeless and runaway or thrownaway youth is critical.
- Development of coordinated community responses as well as multijurisdictional and national coordination is needed to provide services and support for youth whose lives span multiple jurisdictions.
- Increased community awareness is needed so more community members can provide support to high risk youth in their communities.
- Development and implementation of methods to use electronic media and social networking to reach youth and provide them with information on where to find support and how to keep in touch with program staff is a critical next step.

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