california homeless youthproject
voices from the street

SPECIAL TOPICS

COMPARING WHITE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN HOMELESS YOUTH IN SAN FRANCISCO: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Homeless youth are not a homogenous group. The needs of this population vary based on geographic location, demographic characteristics, and homelessness history. Some research indicates that racial and ethnic minorities are over-represented among homeless youth; other studies find that homeless youth generally reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of their local community. While researchers continue to identify the characteristics of homeless youth, it is important to understand the unique needs of all homeless young people. Research from the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine, and the University Of California Berkeley School Of Public Health reveals important differences between white and African American homeless youth living on the streets in San Francisco.[2] These differences may have significant implications for policy and programs to address and prevent youth homelessness in California. [3]

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. White and African American youth have different trajectories into homelessness.

"Oh I grew up fast man... When you got certain family members on drugs, you can't do nothing but have to go. That's the same way some of us grew up. Crack took over the household so what can you do? Just learn how to hold your head, how to make something happen for yourself."

– 17-year-old African American male

Both white and African American youth described similar and significant family dysfunction, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect and abandonment; and parental drug abuse in their childhood homes. They were of similar ages (15 years old on average) when they first became unstably housed.

However, African American youth were more likely to report they had been removed from their homes and placed in foster care than white youth (61 percent versus 23 percent). They were also much more likely to describe their housing instability as a consequence of poverty, substance abuse, and the failure of social services. White youth were more likely to report they left home on their own due to family conflict.

2. White and African American homeless youth have different degrees of contact with their families.

African American youth reported continued, if compromised, relationships with their immediate and extended family members. When asked about "family", they typically described an extended network of kin dispersed throughout the Bay Area. African American youth were significantly more likely than white homeless youth to have received shelter from relatives in the prior month (27 percent versus 8 percent). They often described the streets as a "vicious, nasty" place one would want to escape.

"A lot of the street kids will take on the mother and father role, you know. 'That's my mom' or, 'That's my dad,' you know? There's a lot of like, 'That's my brother and this is my sister' too."

– 21-year-old white female

In contrast, few white youth described relationships with their families that consisted of more than occasional phone contact. Their lives were most often geographically, functionally, and emotionally separate from their immediate and extended families. Their lives had often become so separate that when asked about their "family", they frequently described relationships forged on the street rather than biological relatives. In addition, white homeless youth commonly called the streets "home."

3. White and African American homeless youth experience "homelessness" differently.

"I be everywhere. I don't live in a stable environment. I be place to place. That's how it goes down in the hood. I stay mostly family to family, like little cousins, you know younger generations, maybe let me stay over. I stayed on the street for a minute, not a long time. I went to group homes. It's all good though."

– 18-year-old African American male

African American homeless youth often moved from place to place; many had stayed with family members on a recent night. However, most did not have a consistent place to sleep. Strategies for dealing with a night without shelter included staying up all night walking the streets, riding public transportation, napping at a fast food restaurant, finding sexual partners who would provide them with shelter, and "hustling up" enough cash for a room.

White homeless youth were more likely to be "literally homeless," meaning they were more likely to have stayed in a place not meant for human habitation or to have stayed with a stranger. The majority spent most of their nights sleeping outdoors, often in a park or a vehicle. Some reported occasional couch surfing, sleeping in squats, or exchanging sex, drugs or companionship for a place to sleep.

4. White and African American homeless youth use somewhat different strategies to survive on the street.

While both African American and white youth emphasized the importance of "hustling" to survive on the streets (both groups sold drugs, particularly marijuana), there were also differences in the youths' survival strategies.

The African American homeless young men interviewed reported selling drugs as their primary means of income, with pimping or profiting from the exploitation of girlfriends or other young women the second most common. African American homeless youth viewed downtown San Francisco as a place with better opportunities for making money than the nearby housing projects, but noted the constant threats of violence and law enforcement involvement.

None of the young women reported engaging in freelance sex work without a pimp. Several African American homeless youth described the time right after being released from incarceration as a particularly vulnerable time to be on the streets. African American homeless youth shunned panhandling, selling crafts, or dumpster diving because they perceived them as activities "a homeless person would do."

White homeless youth employed a wide range of strategies for making money, getting food, or acquiring drugs and alcohol. They were much more likely than African American youth to engage in survival activities associated with homelessness, such as panhandling (63 percent versus 17 percent) or selling items on the street (35 percent versus 20 percent). Survival sex was often described as the lowest and least appealing way to make money, although white homeless youth engaged in it as frequently as African American youth. It was common for white homeless youth to engage in survival sex without having a pimp.

5. White and African American homeless youth identify and present themselves differently on the street.

African American homeless youth typically did not identify themselves as "homeless." They expressed a strong sense that homelessness was shameful and to be hidden at all costs. They also commonly asserted the importance of appearing financially prosperous (in dress, for example). When asked, the African American youth were much more willing to identify themselves as having "unstable housing" than as "homeless."

White homeless youth, while recognizing that homelessness was stigmatizing in society at large, did not necessarily reject the label of "homeless." Many youth appeared to actually embrace it, generally looking the part (in dress, hygiene, tattoos, and piercings) that marked them as "outsiders."

6. White and African American homeless youth have different patterns of drug use on the street.

African American homeless youth reported widespread use of marijuana and alcohol. Ecstasy and powder cocaine were described as acceptable, if less common. However, injection drug use, heroin, crack cocaine, and speed were highly stigmatized and universally shunned by these youth.

White homeless youth commonly reported using marijuana, alcohol, speed, cocaine and heroin. Though stigmatized, injection drug use was accepted as a fact of life. Lifetime injection drug use rates were significantly higher for white homeless youth than their African American peers (44 percent versus 1.7 percent). This difference was reflected in higher rates of self-reported Hepatitis C infection among white youth; none of the African American youth reported being positive for Hepatitis C, whereas 14 percent of white youth did.

7. White and African American homeless youth have somewhat different patterns of using services.

Interviewer: "Would you ever consider staying in a shelter?"

Participant: "Hell no. I got too many ways to come up to just be sleeping in somebody else's shelter, man. I mean, if I really got down bad, I could run up [rob] in this store before I be dead homeless. I'd be in jail getting fed by the man before I be dead homeless."

– 20-year-old African American male

Both African American and white homeless youth shunned homeless shelters, although for different reasons. African American youth rejected staying in a shelter because it identified them as homeless; white youth rejected it because of safety concerns and rules regarded as overly restrictive.

White homeless youth often relied on services targeted toward "homeless youth" and most could recite information about available services (such as drop-in centers and outreach). White youth were much more likely to have accessed drop-in or outreach services in the prior three

months than African American homeless youth (51 percent versus 18 percent).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings may have a number of important policy implications for preventing and addressing youth homelessness in San Francisco (and elsewhere in California). Clearly, African American and white homeless youth represent two distinct populations of homeless youth, requiring different approaches for intervention. Understanding the specific characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors of these youth is also critical to providing effective supports and services to assist them in finding and maintaining stable housing.

Interventions need to be tailored to address the different ways in which poverty and family dysfunction contribute to homelessness in African American and white youth populations.

Effective interventions to prevent and address homelessness among African American youth must address the poverty, lack of economic opportunities in their home communities, and failed institutional interventions that resulted in them being on the street. Since many African American homeless youth reported continued contact with family, including spending nights with family members, providing resources for the youth's family may be one of the most effective approaches to keeping these youth stably housed.

On the other hand, effective interventions to prevent and address homelessness among white youth must address the family dysfunction that resulted in these youth becoming runaways. Interventions must include family assessment and support to determine if it is possible for these youth to return home safely. In cases where it is not, interventions must include the range of services necessary to support these youth in establishing and maintaining stable housing independent of their family.

Services targeted at "homeless youth" may miss African American youth who do not identify themselves as "homeless."

While services targeted at "homeless youth" may attract white homeless youth and engage them effectively, these services are unlikely to attract and engage African American homeless youth. Services targeting African American youth must not require these youth to identify themselves as homeless and should instead emphasize the assistance they provide in finding and maintaining housing stability or vocational services.

Since both African American and white homeless youth tend to avoid homeless shelters, additional research is needed to understand how to effectively provide emergency and transitional housing for both populations.

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[2] 54 qualitative interviews were initially conducted to understand the nature and circumstances surrounding the homeless experiences of these youth. Quantitative surveys were then distributed to a sample of 205 youth (70% white, 30% African American; 65% male, 33% female, less than 1% transgender).

[3] Hickler B., C. Auerswald CL. The worlds of homeless white and African American youth in San Francisco, California: A..., Social Science and Medicine (2009), doi:10.1016j.socscimed.2008.12.030

For more information about youth homelessness in California, please visit us at http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/.

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